

## **Five decades of local media theory Responding to globally changing media and communication systems**

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## Introduction

Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously used the lightbulb to illustrate his dictum that “the medium is the message.” For McLuhan, electric light encapsulated the insight that a medium “shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan, 2001, p. 9). Media create social spaces which otherwise would not have existed, and it is these spaces that are the subject of media and communication research – and of a wide range of theories proliferating across the decades.

What Kierkegaard had to say about life (in his *Journals*, IV A 164, 1843) applies equally to theory: Media theories are best understood backwards, even if they must be articulated forwards, as new media come to the attention of the humans using and studying them. Media theories have continuously responded to practice – to historically changing technologies and institutions of communication – in shifting local and global research environments. This article addresses the understanding of media prevailing in Danish media and communication research at two pivotal moments – 1981 and 1996 – adding a diagnosis of 2026 and a prognosis for coming generations of colleagues to better understand media and theories when looking back to the 2020s.

Media and communication research has grown out of an engagement with multiple disciplines, fields, and traditions. We first focus on the early influences of critical theory and cultural studies, highlighting an opening turn of the field from the texts of mass culture toward practices of participatory culture. We next record how the internet entailed a digital turn with new degrees of attention and sensitivity to the technological conditions of communication. In conclusion, we reflect on the breakthrough of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which signals yet another likely turning point for media theory and research. To highlight our complementary perspectives on the past five decades, each section is divided into two parts with the initials of the two authors as headings.

## 1981: From critical theory to cultural studies

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Max Horkheimer, one of the key scholars of the Frankfurt School, served as an important reference point for early media studies via his distinction between traditional and critical theory. The latter was meant to be normative and transformative of society, aiming to liberate rather than merely understand and explain humans as social beings. The critique was particularly directed at mass culture, as seen in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/2002) or Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/1969). Media were understood as both channels for and co-creators of mass culture. The masses, by contrast, were not seen as agentic, but rather as passive elements in a culture manufactured by the profit-driven logic of the culture industry (Celikates & Flynn, 2023).

Although Frankfurt scholars emphasized and promoted the *critical* perspective, it was equally the other half of their philosophy – the much-praised *theory* – that shaped media studies in Denmark in the early years of the field. With a mainly theoretical approach to mass culture and “the world out there,” media were primarily treated as texts, i.e., artefacts and thus objects of critique. Textual analysis, which originated naturally from literary studies, became a central approach in media studies. Media texts were assumed to provide insight into the masses, and critique added an understanding of the media’s place and function in 20th-century society. Especially the second generation of the Frankfurt School, represented by Jürgen Habermas with his influential volume, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1991), demonstrated the influence of critical theory on media studies, defining the field as the study of public culture and communication.

As society evolved over the next several decades – through globalization, the spread of television, and an increased orientation toward popular culture, it became increasingly clear that media were nonetheless more than drivers of mass culture, and that culture was more than a construct manufactured top-down for the masses. As proposed by another school of thought, cultural studies, which had evolved in parallel with the second generation of critical theory, most notably at the University of Birmingham, culture was to be defined as a dynamic and complex set of social processes.

This perspective gave rise to an increased orientation toward *practices*, which highlighted the other side of media texts, i.e., their viewers, readers, and listeners – and their practices of consumption. In Denmark, this meant that audience and reception studies were added to the vocabulary of media studies through a renewed interest in people as more than passive recipients of culture. As indicated by Stuart Hall’s (1981, p. 13) rejection of the Frankfurt-type notion that people who consume culture are “cultural dopes” living in a “permanent state of ‘false consciousness,’” audiences were now perceived as active participants in a media culture. Thus, the turn toward practice was equally a cultural turn, characterized by cross-disciplinarity and influenced by a range of theories and theorists, from Raymond Williams to John Fiske and Judith Butler. Later, the focus on media practices – rather than “effects” – was broadened beyond audience studies, as illustrated by Nick Couldry’s (2004, p. 129) open question: “what range of practices are oriented to media and what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices?”

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Though the very first issue of *Massekultur & Medier* [*Mass culture and media*], soon to be renamed *MedieKultur*, was entitled “politics of *communication*” (Andersen et al., 1981), the self-evident objects of theoretical and political analysis, from the 1970s into the 1990s, were *media*, specifically the mass media, with television as a central cultural forum (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983) and a special focus of attention for scholarship as well as policy and public debate. The tenor of academic television studies long remained Frankfurt School critical theory (Jay, 1996), calling out the representational and communicative

mechanisms by which ideologies of class and cultural difference were being perpetuated throughout Danish welfare society. At the same time, both researchers and policymakers recognized that television was about to be reconfigured through the introduction of satellite and cable systems across Europe during the 1980s, complemented by Danish experiments in local broadcasting and, in 1988, a second public-service television channel. The year following the first issue of *Mediekultur*, *TV i USA* [*Television in the United States*] (Giersing, 1982) summarized the sort of incessant flow (Williams, 1974), particularly of fictional genres packed with commercial breaks, coming soon to television screens in Danish homes.

From the outset, Danish media and communication researchers had looked south, to Frankfurt and Paris, for theoretical and methodological guidance. Critical analyses of the broad and deep effects of media on citizens were largely substantiated through textual analyses building on literary and linguistic models, epitomized by the work of Roland Barthes (e.g., Barthes, 1964/1967). The first Danish anthology on *Mediesociologi* [*Media sociology*] (Andersen & Poulsen, 1974) contained only passing and dismissive reference to empirical audience studies, as pursued in the United States, Sweden, and several other countries. As the 1980s unfolded, however, scholars started looking west as well, initially to the United Kingdom and its tradition of cultural studies (Hall et al., 1980). The year before the first issue of *MedieKultur*, Dave Morley (1980) had published *The 'Nation-wide' Audience*, which delivered a prototype for a wave of qualitative empirical studies of the surprisingly diverse decodings of mass-mediated fact and fiction by remarkably active audiences, consolidated locally by two Danish doctoral dissertations (Drotner, 1988; Jensen, 1986). Even television flows, it turned out, lent themselves to highly variable viewer flows (Jensen, 1994). The turn to reception studies represented a first step in a gradual differentiation, internationalization, and professionalization of Danish media theory.

## 1996: From texts and audiences to technological infrastructures

### **MBJ**

The early decades of media and mass communication studies were shaped by an ideological outlook, as illustrated by the neo-Marxist traditions of both critical theory and cultural studies. The impact of such theories was further echoed in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose less deterministic yet distinctively economic language came to influence much theory development within media studies during the 1990s and 2000s. In 2015, *MedieKultur* even published an issue dedicated entirely to Bourdieu, "Bourdieu and the Media."

However, the advent and popular spread of the internet during the 1990s brought an increased orientation toward technology. Although technology was always at the core of media studies, as indicated by McLuhan's lightbulb image, fast-paced technological

developments now forced media studies to direct attention to data and computer science. The complexity of internet-based communication processes required media scholars to incorporate a technical understanding of digital infrastructures and affordances in order to grasp its social, political, and cultural consequences. Combining data studies with perspectives from the social sciences and humanities, the interdisciplinary field of internet studies became firmly established during 2000s, both as a research domain in its own right and as an important dimension of media studies (see Dutton, 2013).

The internet brought yet another “structural transformation of the public sphere” as well as a restructuring of social interaction, both of which were addressed in *MedieKultur*’s earliest issue on the topic in 1997, entitled simply “Internet.” In turn, the new developments prompted a reconfiguration of media studies, especially following the many communicative “revolutions” of the mid-2000s, whether defined as Web 2.0, social media, digitalization, or platformization (see Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Now, media studies were also digital media studies, social media studies, and platform studies, highlighting the many different aspects of this new mediated world.

Convergence and cross-mediality challenged key concepts in media studies (Lomborg, 2021); audiences, producers, texts, and genres were decreasingly fixed categories, and the growing importance of “data” changed the very logics governing media culture (Altheide & Snow, 1979; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). *MedieKultur* covered this development and its implications in several issues: from a genre perspective in 2011, “Challenging Genre – Genre Challenges. New media, new boundaries, new formations,” and from a methodological perspective in 2016, “Researching cross-media communication: Methodological approaches.”

Internet technologies reshaped the cultural diffusion of information in ways that (re-)introduced a range of discussions about modernity (Finnemann, 2002; Rosa, 2014), politics, democracy (Persily & Tucker, 2020), and other key components of our self-understanding. Although dedicated to rethinking such existential questions, media studies never deviated from the practice-oriented perspectives introduced by the cultural studies tradition. On the contrary, methods from disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography were becoming increasingly relevant parts of the effort to understand, for instance, how democracy was being transformed through communicative practices – without losing sight of human involvement. Avoiding media- or technological determinism, methods like digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2017), netnography (Kozinets, 2019), and more broadly defined paradigms of digital methods and computational methods (see Rogers, 2024) were successful in balancing technological sensitivity with a core interest in the mediated social practices of human beings in a digital world.

While philosophical versions of media studies had long been interested in how media not only enable and constrain human action, but also how media possibly redefine what it means to be human (de Mul, 2003; Floyd & Katz, 2016), this very question – of human distinctiveness – has only become more urgent with a dawning age of AI.

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Whereas Danish media and communication research had originated from the humanities (Hjarvard & Søndergaard, 1998), technological and institutional developments, from the 1990s, challenged the field to reconsider its interdisciplinary identity. The growing quantities and diverse qualities of information being communicated through digital networks did not lend themselves well to close analyses of “contents” or far-reaching inferences concerning “ideological effects.” To conceptualize a new category of medium – the digital computer – media theory had to look deep into its technology and wide into economic and other social forces driving the emerging infrastructure of an information society (Beniger, 1986). Across humanities, social sciences, and computer science, a common denominator suggested itself: Computers are semiotic machines extending “the life of signs in society” (de Saussure, 1916/1959, p. 16) in innumerable flows of information and interaction crisscrossing stationary and mobile screens, in public and private contexts.

The “media” terminology still stuck, with a key specification: The digital computer constitutes a meta-medium (Kay & Goldberg, 1977/1999), which enables the re-presentation or simulation of all previous historical media forms, from writing through printing to broadcasting, while adding open-ended repertoires of social media, chatbots, and more to come. Two Danish doctoral dissertations captured, respectively, the distinctive and overlapping features of embodied human cognition and computational information processing (Finnemann, 1994/1999) and the embedding of cognition, computation, and communication in the cooperative practices of organizations (Andersen, 1990). Compared to previous media, the computer afforded highly flexible forms of agency, at and beyond its interfaces, which were summarized in an influential typology of interactivity that promoted media and communication research as a central intersection of human and social sciences with computer science (Jensen, 1999). Media and genres had become much more than ways of representing things, further supporting ways of doing things, through machines and with other humans (Miller, 1984).

**2026: Toward artificial intelligence and beyond****MBJ**

With the launch of ChatGPT in 2022, the current AI boom accelerated into a cultural phenomenon situated at the very top of global agendas. Human-machine communication became an integrated part of many people’s everyday lives (Guzman et al., 2023), and most of our social institutions became subject to an anticipated fundamental restructuring – if not immediately, then in the near future. During this “AI spring,” when a range of AI-based media became mainstream, it has become clear that technology-centered approaches to theorizing AI is insufficient to grasp its vast and potentially radical impact on culture, and on humanity as such. The AI revolution *prompts* media and communication scholars of all traditions to find new ways of understanding media, “the extensions of

Man” (McLuhan, 1964). A useful starting point is to revisit some of the core questions of media studies, which are now being raised across society.

According to Henry Kissinger, who co-wrote *The Age of AI* a few years before his death (Kissinger et al., 2021), “AI could be as consequential as the advent of nuclear weapons – but even less predictable” (Kissinger quoted in Schizer, 2021). Although not a media scholar, Kissinger made a comparison as potent as McLuhan’s (1964) comment about the lightbulb. Not unlike electric light, the nuclear bomb created a new world and altered the human condition by changing our capacity for destruction. And not unlike the nuclear bomb, AI pushes the boundaries of arts and creativity, politics, and, fundamentally, what it means to be human. It creates a new domain of agency by “reassembling the social” (Latour, 2005) and represents yet another extension of Man into territories of life yet to be fully mapped and explained by media and communication theories.

Thus, in the years to come, AI will continue to play a decisive role in the development of new theories about the role of media in society, whether addressing the pressing issues of the day, from polarizing culture wars and rising extremism (Johansen, 2025; Petersen & Johansen, 2025) to geopolitical crises and diplomacy (Taher et al., 2025), or the long-term effects of climate change (Schäfer, 2025) and different visions for the future of our planet.

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By 1996, media-centrism had already become theoretically questionable. Following the release in 1991 of the protocols of the World Wide Web, and the introduction of graphic browsers from 1994, the internet was positioned to take center stage in an all-purpose communication system (Jensen & Helles, 2023) rather than a dedicated legacy media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). In 1996, accordingly, the IAMCR – the association to which Danish media researchers first globetrotted – renamed itself the International Association for *Media and Communication Research* (previously *Mass Communication Research*). Also locally, the changing objects of analysis prompted historical and theoretical stock-taking, signaled by the first volume of a *Dansk mediehistorie [Danish media history]* (Jensen, 1996) situating media in wider communicative and cultural practices.

Twenty years on, the all-purpose communication systems of 2026 incorporate social media and mobile services along with chatbots, an industrial Internet of Things (IoT), and public administration systems. While media and communication research has been taking an infrastructural turn (Hesmondhalgh, 2022), the jury is still out deciding on a concept for capturing the 21st century to date, whether mediatization (Lundby, 2009), datafication (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), platformization (van Dijck et al., 2018), or communicative AI (Coeckelbergh & Gunkel, 2025).

At the dawn of media theory, McLuhan (1964) had suggested that media are extensions of humans, carrying information, enabling communication, and facilitating agency across space and time. Humans used to communicate *through*, first, media, and next, meta-media (in computer-mediated communication, or CMC; Lipschultz et al., 2022).

Increasingly, humans also communicate *with* machines (in human-machine communication, or HMC; Guzman et al., 2023), *to* which intelligence and agency are being delegated. Among received, robust, and seemingly sustainable theories of communication, Carey (1975/1989, p. 23) in particular reminded the field that, more than transmitting factual and fictional representations, media provide shared resources for producing, maintaining, and, importantly, repairing the reality we inherited and have transformed (Frankopan, 2023), and which we will be passing on to colleagues and others in a position to respond and act.

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