

**Three intergenerational conversations
Postcolonial critique, data colonialism,
and methodological diversity in global media studies**

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Partly inspired by Lars Von Trier and Jørgen Leth's *The Five Obstructions* (2003), this article compiles excerpts from three distinct conversations centred on a series of academic texts that have influenced us in various ways. Spanning more than three decades, the texts bring together insights from global studies, journalism studies, media studies, and communication and social change, reflecting some of our research interests and expertise.

The first conversation focuses on authors that were particularly influential during our formative years as researchers. Academic articles by Jan N. Pieterse (1994, 2009) and Toussaint Nothias (2018, 2020) serve as a springboard for discussing postcoloniality and globalisation, examining how our understandings of these concepts have evolved over time. Thereafter, we focus on the relevance and resonance of data colonialism, a concept proposed by Couldry and Mejjas (2019, 2023), for contemporary researchers in global media studies. Looking ahead, the last dialogue engages in a discussion about methodological developments to advance the field. It includes work by Cristina Archetti (2017, 2022) on incorporating creative methods, alongside the introduction and epilogue of Wildermuth and Ngomba's (2016) book, which suggests delving into quantitative (big) data.

These dialogues represent intergenerational reflection on key research themes related to international and global perspectives in media studies. Past *MedieKultur* issues focused on Europe (nr. 25), Latin America (nr. 10), and Asia (nr. 62), highlighting the journal's dedication to incorporating global perspectives into Nordic media debates. The dialogues presented here undergird some of the journal's more global viewpoints, such as how changes in media environments play a role in reconfiguring power relations between state, market, and civil society (nr. 52), or the relevance and implications of all-encompassing crises like migration (nr. 77). In light of this robust body of work, our aim here is to encourage fresh insights and continued scholarly dialogue in the field. What follows are selected excerpts from all conversations, edited for clarity and cohesion.

Postcolonial critique, globalisation, and hybrid cultures

Norbert: Maybe you can start by telling me why Toussaint Nothias has been important for your own development into becoming a researcher.

Cecilia: The criticism towards Western media's bias and stereotypical tropes, we had heard before. But Nothias' (2018) reading is more nuanced. He is trying to explain something that for me is very important, namely this fine line between what is a problematic simplification and stereotypification of the postcolonial world, and what is more symptomatic of how news operate worldwide. And some of these ways of working, like the news values of negativity and conflict, or trying to select and highlight an example, occur in the news all over the world. However, they bring different connotations and challenges when they are about Africa, like in this case. In the 2020 article, Nothias reviews formative postcolonial literature in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and communication

more broadly, and points out how it is a nascent trend to incorporate postcolonial theory in studies of journalism.

Norbert: In the 1970s and 1980s, there was certainly a lot of concern about asymmetric flows. Whether it is Annabelle Sreberny and Kaarle Nordenstreng and colleagues (1985), Tapio Varis (e.g., 1976), or the Seán MacBride Commission (1980) with its demand for a New World Information and Communication Order. I remember early work from Armand Mattelart (1976), who examined this ideology critique into Western media content, which led to this whole debate about cultural/media imperialism and to the critique of this perspective, that it's too deterministic, too narrow an interpretation. So, coming myself from media studies and communication studies, in recent years I have noted, with some surprise, the revival of perspectives of cultural imperialism and of the classics of postcolonial theory: Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1994), Said (1978), and Fanon (1961).

Cecilia: Why do you think that could be so?

Norbert: Critical theories have their time. When we first meet them, they're often like an eye-opener. We understand certain relations, we see them in a new light. But then that sinks in and their significance fades, though the relations they pointed at have not necessarily changed. That's not saying that their perspective is no longer relevant. But, over time, theories go through transformations and become criticised, developed, or relativised. Some get debunked and others get widely acknowledged, at which point they diffuse in broader society, into other disciplines, to practitioners. I think it's interesting, in the second article from Nothias (2020), when journalists are starting to reflect on those critiques and internalise them, or make them a part of articulations of their own practices. Thus, they gain broader visibility in society. It becomes commonplace almost.

What I really liked, turning to Nothias' second article (2020), is when he points to a certain instrumentalisation as cause. We now have corporate entities, NGOs, civil society organisations, and individuals who are fighting for a place in the sun, and the postcolonial critique provides them with a very strong argument about guilt. This trend of dualistic simplification also has some political trajectory. The big problem with postcolonial theory is, thus, that it provides an easy excuse for your own failings. Obviously, it can be used as a classical scapegoat theory.

Cecilia: Yes, something else I have seen in my few years in journalism studies is that the concepts of self-reflexivity and positionality – discussions that have been central for a long time in anthropology and other disciplines – have recently become more important. However, they also end up, you know, sometimes being a little instrumentalised, in, for instance, talking about limitations of our research. And Nothias (2020) mentions this in relation to the journalists as well, the acknowledgement that we have these limitations, and we should do something about them. However, we never get to that next step.

Norbert: Aligning yourself with a broadly acknowledged theory can be an easy way out. I think Nothias (2020) brings this out nicely. But, of course, as we know, the hard thing is to walk the talk. In Nothias' first article (2018), I see a good attempt to look at the

deterministic myth of cultural/postcolonial imperialism and at the empirical evidence and discuss that, as he does. And while that is a very good step, I personally still see essential shortcomings of postcolonial theory. Yes, it works as a literature critique, but if you project this critique indiscriminately, if you make it into a grand theory and try to explain other phenomena – political structures, economic structures, twenty-first century globalisation – by it, you fail. Because postcolonial critique cannot account for, for example, the role that China plays on the African continent. Are the Chinese colonised or are they colonisers? And thus, when Nothias (2018) says that he acknowledges the theory's validity and significance in general, though it needs some corrections, I would go a step further. I'd rather discuss whether postcolonial theory still contributes to our understanding of global media systems or whether it confuses it.

Cecilia: I agree that binaries are not necessarily helpful. When we talk about the Global North and Global South, Western and non-Western... Those categories are helpful as a starting point, but I think they fall short in dividing the world and making grand claims. So, moving on to Pieterse (1994), one of the quotes I like is when he talks about overrating "the homogeneity of Western culture" (p. 169). That specific sentence resonated with me. Saying "the Western world" or "Eurocentric" without also acknowledging that the same way in which we criticise Western news media of generalising Africa and talking about it as if it was a country, we do exactly the same in the opposite way. And I wonder to what extent that is helpful for understanding the complex world we live in. But I wanted to hear why you selected these texts and how have they been formative for you. Especially now, coming back to them several years later, what do you take away?

Norbert: The 1994 Pieterse article was important for me in trying to develop a theory of hybridisation, because it spoke to the complexities that I was looking at in my PhD on the boom of Indian cable and satellite television in the 1990s – to say what is Indian and what is Western. When you start to dig into it, it becomes very difficult, because even the caste system has been shaped by a colonial understanding. So, Pieterse (1994) appealed to me a lot with the "hybridization of hybrid cultures" (p. 180), which means that there is no clear-cut West and East, South and North. It's basically challenging essentialist understandings of cultures which is my critique, again, directed at the postcolonial, which reinforces the colonised and the former colony powers as homogenous blocs. If I reread Pieterse (1994) now, I of course see the publication from a different perspective. It was shaped by the 1990s, maybe with a greater optimism that those hybrid cultures would somehow become the norm. It has underestimated cultural nationalism, essentialist backlashes, the resistance to and criticism of hybridity. But, at its core, this idea that no culture is pure remains significant.

Now, Pieterse's later work (2009) is another attempt to approach foreign journalism, and maybe more relevant for the present time, in its power to explain things. So, does it convince me? No, again. I can already see now, some years later, that it's strongly influenced by the financial crisis in some of its outlooks. Maybe you would rewrite it at the present

time, like where Pieterse is pointing to an increasing acceptance of sovereign wealth funds, state money from China and other places, the Middle East, Arab countries ...

Cecilia: Yeah, I think it connects very nicely with Nothias' work, because it's two different interpretations and different approaches of how Western media represents other regions of the world, standing from a European perspective. But there are some questions I would have for Pieterse (2009). I think he's missing a discussion on what he refers to when he talks about the "media". I think he writes about the media in very broad terms and lacks a little nuance of what is he actually referring to, because a lot of the examples that he brings up are from traditional news organisations, like the *Financial Times*, etc.

Norbert: Maybe that was also one of the reasons why I selected Pieterse (2009), because he's talking about systems theory – he is looking at the macro. Nothias is almost the opposite. You know, we always need both. At the same time, we often try to understand the macro through an assemblage of micro studies, because we can only look at it punctually. How we then bring those punctual observations into a bigger picture is also methodological. How far can you come with textual analysis? How far can you come with political economy analysis, or with a critical discourse analysis? This is, again and again, the challenge as a scholar. I think Nothias (2018) has a very important point when he says that maybe a lot of studies have confirmed it because of where they look and what they look at.

Cecilia: There are some common threads throughout the four texts. Pieterse (1994) is the only one that doesn't talk about the media directly. However, it resonates with the criticism of stereotypical and biased representation, the enduring influence of postcolonial legacies and dynamics, and how that shapes the way we understand globalisation, standardisation, etc. Also, there is a very strong critique of homogenisation and generalisation, be it in the way we understand globalisation or be it in the way that the news media deals with the coverage of different international topics. Moreover, something that both Pieterse (2009) and Nothias (2020) bring up are market forces, right? Understanding how the market and the economic situation of Europe and the United States in 2008 shaped a little bit how we talk about the "rise of the rest" (p. 57). Then, Nothias (2020) also says that part of this postcolonial reflexivity, as he calls it, is partially influenced by the Western media in a time of crisis trying to get a broader piece of the cake, so to speak, by trying to gain audiences in other parts of the world. I think it's interesting to see how texts that span three decades talk to each other ...

Platforms and data colonialism

Norbert: I marked one quote where Couldry and Mejias (2019) say:

What is missing in the insightful recent accounts of Big Data is a wider frame to make sense of the whole social process under way. That frame is colonialism, used here not as a mere metaphor, nor as an echo or simple continuation of historic forms of territorial colonial-

ism, but to refer to a new form of colonialism distinctive of the twenty-first century: *data colonialism*. (pp. 336-337)

That resonated with me, boiled it down to a point. Because I realised that over the years ... there have always been grand theories from other disciplines that have inspired and framed our understanding of the more narrow, analytical, empirical view on processes of mediated communication. Those meta theories have the advantage that they offer us a generic perspective on the “small”. But, at the same time, one also experiences that they can become kind of unduly universalised and generalised, that we can become deterministic in our interpretation. So, when I first read Couldry and Mejias (2019), the new perspective they had developed had a profound effect on me, the way it related to some older theoretical perspectives which I had subscribed to – like postcolonial theory – but also taken a step away from, realising the shortcomings. Couldry and Mejias come back to some of those positions, but in a smart way.

There has been a need of renewal. I think we’ve been overtly obsessed with media content and representations, criticising them and forgetting that in a perspective like theirs, it almost doesn’t matter. It’s not so much what you consume and how it influences your worldview or values, but it is the mere fact that you are tracked, that the data is extracted and that this creates a system of governmentality. But I also have to admit that, as with all grand theories, to my experience, it becomes difficult when you try to apply them to the concrete. So, for me, it’s really more like an inspiration, a challenge to how I look at things, a theoretical frame to keep at the back of my mind. I think it was Couldry (2005) who said that every good media theory is linked to a social theory. And I think that is true in the sense that we can study phenomena, whether it’s on a textual level, on the level of consumption/reception, or on the level of media systems, with our methods and approaches. But we need that kind of perspective which comes from other disciplines, like sociology, history, political science, or literary criticism, to frame our understanding in a holistic way.

Cecilia: I think their argument is very compelling. They’re very clear in why we should call what is going on with data and data relations “colonialism”, and where the parallelisms and differences with historical colonialism are: with the extraction, the disposition, the justification. It’s for civilising, or it’s for progress, or it’s for efficiency. As we discussed the last time, we tend to talk in binaries. And Couldry and Mejias (2019, 2023) complicate this and refer to at least two poles. They talk about data colonialism going externally to the rest of the world, but also going to internal populations, so those binaries are not helpful any longer. We have the social quantification sector, as they call it – Google, Meta, data analysis, and brokerage firms – as the colonisers. The colonised are everybody else. And they do acknowledge that it doesn’t happen the same way to everybody else; it deepens inequalities. However, they leave it there. And so, while they complicate this notion of the binaries well, they do not necessarily offer any convincing alternatives.

Norbert: My experience is, when you work with phenomena in the Global South, we sometimes get feedback from our colleagues who work in Europe or North America, like: “Why should that be relevant for us, for our understanding?” And I think it would be a shame if Couldry and Mejias’s perspective is again put in a box, because of the oversignified term, “colonialism”, used in data colonialism. That suggests it explains to us how the Global South is dominated in a datafied way by the Global North, which is not what they do. Then there is the question of what Couldry and Mejias’s work means in relation to mediatisation theory. Not so much in relation to the political communication, institutional perspective, but especially to the tradition that studies how individuals get mediatised ... When I see girls on the street filming each other for some TikTok dance, that’s also mediatisation. And I think it makes the link to Couldry and Mejias’s thinking. Have we understood that what they write about is about each of us – that we’re all the colonised subjects? That is what I like about Couldry and Mejias’s take.

Cecilia: Yeah, this is colonialism of a different scale, it’s colonialism that involves everybody. As individuals, but also media organisations, we are all embedded in the logics of data extraction, data analytics, etc. I think that is where the power of Couldry and Mejias’s work really is. They also talk at the end of both articles about decoloniality – that the way out of this is to fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of colonialism, either historical or data colonialism. So, there is this underlying argument that appropriation of data is the natural way of human development. If we do not have that core, then we cannot get away from this state of data colonialism. That is obviously very inspiring in some ways, but then I question: Right, okay, then how do we do that? Or how do we go from there as researchers in global media?

Methodological reflections

Cecilia: In the first text, Archetti (2017) talks about using poetry for data analysis. How do you engage with data analytically from a more creative standpoint, apart from then also disseminating in a different way? Then, in the second article, Archetti (2022) discusses using creative methods with participants, and she also does it herself. So, there’s three layers here. One is using creativity yourself as the researcher, another one is using it with participants, and the third one would be using it for dissemination purposes. I am also inspired by videographic criticism and video essays from film scholars. Engaging with data in creative ways, coming up with different or new ways of engaging analytically with the material.

Last year, I did a workshop with journalism students where we used photography and collage-making. We used creative interventions to get away from established or predefined answers. For instance, we asked students about their relationship with nature and how it shapes the way they could report on the environment. Maybe if I ask them in a traditional interview what their relationship to nature is, they’ve never thought about

it before. But, if they spend a day going around the city and trying to take a photograph that represents that relationship to nature, creativity is a way into thinking about what I actually want them to talk about. But what were your own impressions on these texts?

Norbert: Archetti (2017) has described how after the interviews she is writing these short poems. I'm not even sure I would call them poems, we could also say she's taking some notes, some immediate impressions after the interviews. But are they affecting the interviews? Archetti is arguing for it, because as she says, it leads to a greater reflexivity on how she is asking and allows her to ask other questions in the next interview. Her main argument is thus the transformative effect. It's not just about what you do with the interviews and with the additional material that has no space in conventional analysis. Approaching our data analytically in a different way, does it also change the creation of the empirical data? I understand her like that. And I'm tempted to compare this claim to my own experience when, for instance, I observed changes in the interview data that I have created, after I started to use a video camera instead of just an audio recorder. This is not so much in interviews with professionals, but more with ordinary people, where interesting things happened in consequence, and they became more conversational and interactional.

Cecilia: So, they opened up more in the video conversations?

Norbert: Yeah, I think so. Especially if you keep the technological side very low-key. I have a small camera, I put it on my knee, no tripod, no lights. There is the argument that respondents will be more reluctant when a camera is directed at them. But in my experience, after two minutes they forget about the camera and the situation becomes, in a way, more performative, because they feel not just heard, but also seen, for example, young Brazilians living in favelas showing me around their neighbourhood. But bringing it back to international and global mediated communication, what could be Archetti's specific relevance? Is she making an argument which is productive across all research fields in the social sciences and humanities?

Cecilia: Something I like about our conversations is exactly that. I bring my very journalistic approach to international media studies; you bring your own ... But, at the end of the day, they both add up to this bigger umbrella of international and global media. I think, from the point of view of creativity, I know it has relevance and impact in our field. My first step was including it in how I work with my participants and how I try to interact with them. I think that is something that could be applied in several different fields, right? The way we discuss journalism in international contexts has been what Perry Parks (2020) calls a "self-replicating field". We keep talking about how journalism has been done, we critique it, then we end up in the same place. For me, it's more an invitation to think about how we can open new lines of discussion. In a way, it's also what you talk about in the epilogue of the book, from a different point of view. There's a very established methodological tradition, and that's great because it defines the field well, but it keeps us within the same structures of thinking and doing.

Norbert: I was asking myself, when we wrote the epilogue: Where are our blind spots and how can they be addressed? The answer goes in both directions. In line with Archetti, we can seek to expand the qualitative approaches more radically and follow new methodological ways and explore them in depth. But, at the same time, as we argue in the end of the epilogue, we seem not to engage with the data that is out there, generated by the platform economies, all the data that is generated and harvested. In principle, it is there, but it still needs interpretation. If you leave it to the data scientists – and that is our main argument – then they will interpret the present, the global media landscape, and tell us, for example, what the role and meaning of social media in Africa is. We have to take the outcome seriously, because it determines who is in the position to define the realities of international media. We need to strengthen our quantitative side, to be able to engage with datafication and knowing the user and audience. Otherwise, our theoretical understanding of international and global mediated communication will be lost, while people from other disciplines will bring their theoretical and epistemologies into the game. So, our plea was kind of a wake up call. Wake up, there is something to fight for.

I think the methodological discussion that we have had today raises a central point: Which dimension of international and global mediated communication do we have in mind? That term covers so many things. It's global media studies on the systems level, it's communication for social change, global journalism studies, and much more. There are no clear disciplinary boundaries. It's a vast body of research and, in consequence, we do not have a consolidated methodological tradition. How could we, if international and global mediated communication covers everything from the global macro phenomena of platform economies and tech companies to the micro processes of a young person in an African village changing media repertoires. Thus, at best, we can thrive in each subfield, to reflect on our strengths, but also our limitations and blind spots and where it is necessary to consolidate and define how we work methodologically and analytically, without it becoming a straitjacket.

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