

JMG:

journalism research

at University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

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Introduction

The Department of journalism, media and communication (JMG is an acronym for “Journalism and Media studies in Gothenburg”) is a nationally leading centre for journalism and media research and education in Sweden. Established in 1990 through a merger between the School of journalism and the Section for Mass Communication at the Department of Political Science at University of Gothenburg, JMG pursues a broad research agenda with journalism research at its core. By 2012 the department had five full professors: Kent Asp (focusing on journalism and democracy), Monika Djerf-Pierre (journalism, gender, and media history), Mats Ekström (political communication, journalism, media discourse and social interaction), Bengt Johansson (journalism and political communication), and emeritus Lennart Weibull (media history, structure and audiences). In addition there are five associate professors, several assistant professors, lecturers, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral candidates making up a staff of circa 50 employees.

The history of JMG

Although JMG is a fairly young department, the University of Gothenburg has served as a center for teaching and research on journalism and media in Sweden since the 1950s. The creation of JMG and its development into a research department has dovetailed with the institutionalization of journalism and mass communication as a specific academic discipline in Sweden and internationally. This development can be traced to the initial formation of a section for mass communication research at the University of Gothenburg in 1980, continuing with the founding of a department combining journalism and mass communication in 1990 and finally to the drop of the “mass” prefix and the name change of the department to “journalism, media and communication” in 2010.

Journalism and media research at University of Gothenburg thus began already in the late 1950s when the then professor of political science, Jörgen Westerståhl, commenced large-scale empirical research on the role of the mass media in politics. Westerståhl was influenced by the Columbia school in the U.S. as he introduced quantitative content analyses and large surveys of elections to Swedish political science. Much indebted to professor Westerståhl’s pioneering work, the Section for mass communication was established within the political science department and in the mid- 1980s a PhD program in Mass Communication was launched.

With regard to journalism and media education, the first journalism school – the Journalist Institute – was set up in Gothenburg in 1959, initiated and organized by the media industry (Ghersetti & Weibull, 2009). In 1967 the journalism school was integrated into the academic system as a university college (“Journalisthögskolan”) and in 1977 it became a university department. In 1990 it merged with the Section for mass communication, and thus opened up new opportunities for journalism research and for

the start of a PhD program in journalism as well. The first PhD graduated in 1990 and since then more than 40 PhD dissertations in journalism, media and communication have been awarded at JMG.

In the early years the political science approach to journalism and media studies dominated at the department. In this vein, Westerståhl conducted systematic studies on the objectivity in the media in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Westerståhl, 1983). Other key areas of scholarship included newspaper research (e.g. Høyer, Hadenius, & Weibull, 1975) and research on news media consumption. The latter was mainly carried out in the uses & gratifications tradition, pinpointing the interaction of media structures with the needs and motivations of audiences as explanatory factors to news media use (Weibull, 1983, 1985).

The first professor and chair of Mass Media research in Gothenburg was, however, not a political scientist but a sociologist recruited from Lund University. Karl-Erik Rosengren who arrived in post in 1982 was a strong proponent of quantitative, empirical research, publishing extensively on the socialization and mass media use among children and adolescents (e.g. Rosengren, 1994; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985). In a co-authored article in *Communication Research* 1983, Westerståhl and Rosengren stated that the mass communication research in Gothenburg is characterized by “a tendency to (1) combine the micro and macro perspectives; (2) combine mass media data and other societal data; and (3) pay a great deal of interest to the role of time in mass communication matters” (Westerståhl & Rosengren, 1983, p. 286).

In 1989 Lennart Weibull succeeded Rosengren as chair and in 1992 the first professor and chair of Journalism at University of Gothenburg, Kent Asp, was appointed. Weibull and Asp both received their PhDs in political science from the Gothenburg department, but both advocated the development of media and communication research as a separate academic discipline, pursuing different research agendas; Asp focusing on journalism and democracy, studying media effects and the role of the news media in elections (e.g. Asp, 1983; Asp, 1986, 1992, 2003, 2007a) and Weibull conducting research on mass media use, specifically newspaper readership, media policy and media structure (e.g. Gustafsson & Weibull, 1997; Weibull & Nilsson, 2010). Both displayed a keen interest in the long-term developments of journalism, media and audiences and common to both was the empirical approach based on a collection of mass data.

The strong legacy in the social sciences and the preference for quantitative methodologies have contributed to making JMG the national leader among communication departments when it comes to survey based research. The research at JMG is also persistently dedicated to play an active role in society, promoting interaction and dialogue with the professional organizations, the industry and society at large. The cultural turn has, however, also affected JMG and from the 1980s onwards the influence from political science gradually weakened providing space for more cultural and qualitative approaches (e.g. Jansson, 2001; Reimer, 1994; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2011). Still, journalism and media research in Gothenburg is recognized for its social science profile and its empirical focus. It is held in high regard for its long-standing research programs on journalism and democracy, media audiences and public opinion.

The current research agenda

A key characteristic of research at JMG is its longitudinal approach that targets the transformative changes of the media system and their impact on production processes, the professions and media workers, audiences, and media organizations – from the deregulation of the broadcasting system in the 1980s to the expansion of the internet and the media convergence in recent years. Much research is conducted through continuous and meticulously collected empirical data examining and explaining longitudinal developments over time.

The current research agenda at JMG draws on its previous achievements and traditions while seeking to renew and expand its research profile. An internal survey of the publication patterns among the research staff at JMG in 2012 showed a consistent and productive research output in three interrelated fields: journalism, audience- and reception studies and political communication. Other significant areas include gender and journalism, environmental risk and crisis communication (Djerf-Pierre, 2012; Ghersetti & Andersson Odén, 2011; Sandstig, 2010), media and cultural industries, and media history. Journalism research does, however, often serve as the focal point of most of the research activities at JMG, regardless of area.

The *Swedish Journalist Survey (SJS)* is a flagship of the department. SJS consists of a series of surveys of Swedish journalists carried out in collaboration with The Swedish Union of Journalists. The SJS surveys have been conducted approximately every fifth year since the start: the first study of Swedish journalists was undertaken in 1989, the most recent in 2011/12. The surveys target representative samples of practicing Swedish journalists, providing a unique database for examining the trajectories of the profession; the professional values and ideals, the working conditions and practices, ethics and news values, and the political opinions and party preferences of journalists over a 30-year period (Andersson, 2009; Asp, 2007b, 2012; Weibull & Asp, 1991; Wiik, 2010).

The *Media-election studies program* is another major undertaking by the department in the area of longitudinal empirical research. The program is led by Kent Asp and is part of the ongoing research on the mediatization of politics (Asp, 1986). Since 1979, surveys and content analyses have been used to explore the election coverage in press, radio and TV, with a focus on the media representation of political parties during election campaigns and its impact on the election results. The program provides a wealth of data supporting a broad range of research questions related to political communication, elections and the news media. In conjunction with the national elections, research reports on the quality of the media coverage have been published regularly.

Adding to the prolific vein of large scale survey research, JMG also manages the *SOM Institute*, which is a national center for research focused opinion studies. The institute conducts research on the longitudinal changes of public opinion and opinion formation among the Swedish population. Since 1986, the *SOM Institute* has annually surveyed representative population samples to collect information about various aspects of attitudes, values and behavior in relation to society, politics and the media. The analysis of the changing patterns of news media use, conducted by JMG researchers, is an essential part of the SOM-surveys (e.g. Bergström & Wadbring, 2010; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2012; Wadbring & Weibull, 2000; Westlund & Färdigh, 2011).

The department's long-running *Newspaper research program* ("Dagspresskollegiet") is closely linked to the SOM Institute. The program was launched in 1979, headed by Lennart Weibull and funded by the Swedish Newspaper Publishers' Association. Examining a broad range of issues with regard to the structure, content, organization and readership of newspapers (e.g. Bergström, 2010; Sternvik & Weibull, 2005) it was prompted by the introduction of local radio in Sweden and thus of a new potential competitor to newspapers on the local markets. Although the funding of the program was discontinued in 2011 the specific research area remains of key interest to scholars at JMG, now offering studies on how digital media transform audiences and research on the business and management side of media organizations in response to new media technologies (e.g. Bjur, 2010; Westlund, 2010). The current research aims at targeting the overall transformations of audiences and media markets in relation to cultural, structural and technological changes in society. The study of innovation in media organizations and of how media industries and managers deal with institutional change, historically and in relation to

contemporary digitalization and convergence, is part of this approach (e.g. Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2011; Ohlsson, 2012; Westlund, 2012; Wikström, 2012).

This scholarly examination of the long-term institutional changes in the media includes research on the history of the press, radio and television, all with a clear focus on journalism history. A major undertaking for the department in this area is participating in the largest research program on the history of broadcasting ever conducted. The program is a collaboration between the broadcasting industry and Swedish universities and in total over 40 research volumes have been published, several of which by JMG researchers (e.g. Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001; Esaiasson & Håkansson, 2002; Reimer, 2002). The research output is published in Swedish, but the most recent project aims at producing an edited volume on key aspects of the Swedish history of radio and television, targeting an international audience (Ekström and Djerf-Pierre eds., to be published in 2013).

The department also pursues new directions for political communication research promoting more qualitative methodologies. The current research in this area draws on a multi-disciplinary approach, bridging the traditional political communication approach with cultural, historical, and discourse analyses of democracy and journalism (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2008; Ekström, 2012; Ekström, Eriksson, Johansson, & Wikström, 2012; Ekström & Johansson, 2008; Ekström & Patrona, 2011; Grusell & Nord, 2010; Johansson, 2008; Strömbäck & Johansson, 2007).

The bridging approach also applies to the critical study of gender and journalism where the department has a strong publishing record (e.g. Djerf-Pierre, 2011; Djerf-Pierre & Löfgren-Nilsson, 2004; Edström, 2011; Löfgren-Nilsson, 2010; Melin, 2008), as well as to research on public relations and strategic communication (Fredriksson, 2009). Discourse analyses focusing on a variety of communicative practices in journalism and broadcast production are also part of the new research agenda. This includes research on institutionalized forms of interaction such as news interviews, audience orientation in live media talk, and historical changes in news discourse as well as other media genres (e.g. Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011).

Future challenges and opportunities

The increasing emphasis on international publishing provides both opportunities and challenges for the future of JMG. JMG has previously been very successful in “exporting” many of its PhD graduates to other universities in Sweden, but also abroad. The research agenda has, however, often been typically national and “Swedish”, particularly with regard to the research objects. In the years to come JMG will strive to expand the scope of the internationalization efforts, recruiting PhD candidates and new senior members of staff from abroad and initiating more comparative research. The research output from JMG has always been high, but with regard to international publishing JMG was a slow starter. The department’s publishing record has, however, seen a rapid transformation in recent years. All doctoral dissertations are now published in English, and in just a few years the research staff has transited from mainly publishing in Swedish to predominantly publishing in English. To JMG the challenge is to embrace this transition while at the same time keeping and maintaining its prominent national role in the Swedish media sector and Swedish society.

In developing the future research agenda JMG aims to continue to build on its strong traditions whilst strategically developing new directions for research. In the tradition of examining the long-term changes of media audiences the *Media Generations* program is developed to promote innovative research in an area where the University of Gothenburg is already a national leader. JMG researchers also partake in

Political Socialization and Human Agency, a longitudinal interdisciplinary program in which young people's civic engagement is explored in relation to various forms of media use and other aspects of everyday life (Ekström & Östman, 2012).

In the area of crisis communication, JMG researchers participate in *Opti-Alert* which is an interdisciplinary, comparative research program on the uses and efficiency of various forms of media in alerting the population in times of crisis, funded by the EU. In addition, the project *Crisis Communication 2.0* was launched to contribute to the analysis of crisis journalism and the role of new ICTs in crisis communication.

In the area of journalism and democracy, the trajectories and consequences of mediatization, the critical analysis of public relations and strategic communication, and the role of media in governance provide interesting tasks for theoretical and empirical exploration. JMG will continue its research on the short- and long-term changes in journalism, focusing on institutional structures as well as concrete practices; identities, values and ethics; content, representations and forms of communication in multi-media contexts. The department's broad experience and expertise in historical media analyses, large-scale survey research, ethnographic research, and micro analyses of discourses and social interaction – developed in close collaboration with international colleagues – provide unique opportunities to develop new multi-methodological approaches.

Another key area of research aims at bridging the professional and theoretical aspects of journalism research and education, creating mutually beneficial collaborations and promoting innovation and quality in journalism. The ambition to combine research with high quality teaching has always been a hallmark of JMG. The Gothenburg department has a long-standing reputation for teaching excellence in both Journalism and Media & Communication; indeed, the journalism program is ranked as number one in Sweden, rewarded with a mark of excellence in the most recent government review in 2012. The research at JMG is predicated on the firm conviction that *good journalism is possible*, despite current structural and institutional constraints, and that it is a key task of the department to pursue a research agenda that provides theoretical and practical means to this end.

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