Afterword

Addressing the Challenge of the Present Continuous

Oscar Hemer and Thomas Tufte

The hype over social media has largely passed. Hardly anyone talks about Facebook or Twitter revolutions anymore. The euphoria of 2011, when the Arab Spring evoked expectations similar to those of the Eastern European revolution of 1989, has given way to disillusion and despair over the humanitarian disaster and deadlock in Syria; a "backlash" that also may bring to mind how the horror of the wars in the dismantled former Yugoslavia soon overshadowed the celebration of the end of the Cold War.

The challenge of the present continuous, as media anthropologist John Postill (2012) has called it, or the tyranny of the imminent, becomes particularly conspicuous in the social sciences' attempts at keeping pace with the rapid technological development and transformation of the media environment. Just as the post-modernity debate of the 1980s made modernity aware of its own historicity, we ought perhaps to evoke a 'post-globalization' examination to put the recent global transformational processes into historical perspective.

This anthology can be regarded as part of one such endeavour. It is the direct result of a productive encounter between academics, artists, activists, master students and communication practitioners at the second *Örecomm Festival* in September 2012, under the headline *Reclaiming the Public Sphere – Communication, Power and Social Change*. But it is also the fruit of almost 15 years of cross-border collaboration in the field of Communication for Development and Social Change, centred around the master programme in Communication for Development (ComDev) at Malmö University and the research and

consultancy work in the field carried out by scholars based at Roskilde University and Malmö University and Communication for Development practitioners in the region. This essentially inter-personal collaboration was formalized and institutionalized through the establishment in 2012 of the *Örecomm Centre for Communication and Glocal Change.*[1]

The Örecomm cross-border group of researchers and practitioners has to date organized three thematic Örecomm Festivals, addressing some of the current challenges within the field of Communication for Development and Social Change (CDSC). The first Festival (2011) *Agency in the Mediatized World – Media, Communication and Development in Transition,* focused on agency and mediatisation. The theme of the third Festival (2013) was *Memory on Trial – Media, Citizenship and Social Justice.* The overarching aim of the Festivals has been to constitute communication for development and social change (CDSC) as an interdisciplinary academic field, not by narrowing its focus, but on the contrary, by engaging in dialogue with neighbouring fields of research and enabling new cross-disciplinary approaches. It is moreover in the deliberate bringing together of all relevant stakeholders in CDSC, including public intellectuals, artists, media practitioners, development cooperation consultants and others, that we best explore, for example, as in this volume, how art, technology and public pedagogy connect to communication, power and social change.

The three festival themes are closely related, yet it is obvious that the notion of the public sphere is crucial, as the arena for cultural and political agency, as well as for the exploration and articulation of individual and public memory. And, even though, in a historical perspective, there may at the end of the day be little new under the sun, there is no doubt that our conception of the public sphere has profoundly changed in the course of the last few years

The twin phenomena of globalization and mediatization are posing interesting challenges to our understanding of participatory democracy and political action. On the one hand, the national frame is largely being replaced or at least supplemented by transnational communications and cultural flows; on the other hand the mass media, which have formed the backbone of the public sphere, are now losing ground to new social media and other forms of what Manuel Castells (2009) has defined as "mass self-communication". An often-quoted editorial in *The Economist* (7 July 2011) even suggested that the era of mass media is coming to an end, bringing us "back to the coffeehouses".

But what are the implications of this on-going shift? Who are the new players in the public arenas of the present? What processes of power brokering are taking place? How do the communicative practices, the negotiation of power and the formation and negotiation of social relations all come together in and around the public spheres? And how do public spheres relate to public *space* – be it physical cityscapes or virtual environments? These were the questions posed in the concept note of the Festival and hence to the authors in this anthology.

At the IAMCR congress in Istanbul in 2011, at the height of the social mobilizations that took both media researchers and Middle East "experts" by complete surprise, it became obvious to us that the sudden explosion of academic interest in the relation between social media, civil society, civic action and social change was surprisingly not associated with CDSC. In other words: *While the crucial role of media and communication in processes of social change and development at last becomes evident, it is paradoxically not correlated with the field of communication for development and social change* – with a few exceptions, not even by the development agencies themselves, that were equally startled by the unleashed force of spontaneous civic engagement.

This observation is cause for grave concern, and for self-critique and reflection. Therefore, complementing the reclaiming of the public sphere as a subject area, which is at the core of this book, there is another process occurring, that of reclaiming core questions and concerns which have been at the heart of CDSC throughout its existence. In the aftermath of the social uprisings of recent years, we have experienced an explosion in the research and publications dealing with the dynamic relations between social media and social change (see e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2013, Gerbaudo 2012, Hands 2011, Kleine 2013, Lievrouw 2011, Milan 2013). However, most of these publications emerge from within studies of political communication, media sociology, media activism and anthropology, with very limited connection to the history and development of CDSC as this has unfolded as a discipline. The role of the public sphere is often times contested, but remains a key concern throughout these studies.

Reclaiming the public sphere may seem like somewhat of a hyperbolic statement that ought to be followed by a question mark. The statement implies that there once was a public sphere, in singular, that we have once 'possessed', or at least to which we have had access. That is, obviously, a truth that needs qualifying. The coffeehouses were not for everyone. The bourgeois public sphere comprised a privileged minority. Even the Habermasian ideal arguably secluded certain categories. Moreover, the public sphere has been intrinsically connected to the notion of a *national* culture and most often a nation-state. We need only to look a few years back in time to remember the heated debate about the perceived threat to the singular national public sphere by satellite dishes that enabled immigrants to watch TV from their "home" countries. There is a certain amount of nostalgia attached to the perception of the public sphere as this shared frame of reference, as *collective memory*, in Scandinavia symbolized by the not too distant past of one public service TV channel which everybody

watched. But that is hardly the public sphere that most of us would want to reclaim. Rather than retrieving *the* public sphere in a Habermasian sense, the new means of communication and political action, are obviously shaping and constituting new public spheres in the plural. Yet there is a paradox at play here. The proliferation of public spheres will undermine and at some point eventually dissolve the very idea of a public sphere, that is, a common arena for public debate (and participatory democracy).

While demonstrating the communication power of the new media and ICTs, recent events, such as the Utøya massacre in Norway in July 2011 and former CIA employee Edward Snowden's revelations of the extent of global surveillance in 2013, have drawn our attention to the "dark side" of the internet and global connectivity, with its propensity for enhancement of narrowness of thought on the one hand and corporate or state control on the other. The blurred borders between our private and public selves in the new social media certainly add a new dimension to the notion of the *public* sphere.

The present is a moment of transition, and the challenge for us, as researchers and practitioners in the broad field of Communication for Development and Social Change, is to take a step back and reflect, analyze and understand, rather than impose recipes or strategies for change. Taking a step back thus implies (temporarily) escaping the tyranny of the present continuous.

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[1] Örecomm was officially launched at the IAMCR congress in Stockholm in 2008, but attained legal status as bi-national centre in 2012.