

MEDIA CULTURE RESEARCH PROGRAMME 1999–2002

Memorandum
Helsinki 1998

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Preface

The Research Council for Culture and Society appointed on 27 February 1998 a working group to discuss preparations and draft a memorandum for a media culture research programme. Professor **Hannele Niemi** from the University of Helsinki was appointed as Chair. The other members of the working group were Research Director **Antti Hautamäki** from the Finnish National Fund for Research and Development, Professor **Kaisa Häkkinen** from Åbo Akademi University, Professor **Ullamajja Kivikuru** from the University of Helsinki, Research Director **Kristiina Laurila** from the Technology Development Centre, Professor **Jaakko Lehtonen** from the University of Jyväskylä, Professor **Hannu Nieminen** from the University of Turku, Professor **Antti Paasio** from the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, **Ismo Silvo**, Controller of Strategic Planning at the Finnish Broadcasting Company, Professor **Liisa Uusitalo** from the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration, Professor **Tapio Varis** from the University of Tampere, Professor **Mauri Ylä-Kotola** from the University of Lapland, Scientific Secretary **Raija Matikainen** from the Academy of Finland and, as expert consultant, researcher **Risto Kunelius** from the University of Tampere.

The Board of the Academy of Finland decided on 9 June 1998 to launch a media culture research programme. The Research Council for Culture and Society accepted the programme memorandum on 18 September 1998.

Chair

Aili Nenola

**MEDIA CULTURE RESEARCH
PROGRAMME 1999-2002**

1. Background

On the eve of the millennium, our way of life in western industrial society is increasingly permeated by *media culture*. Communications media and the messages transmitted by the media have an ever greater presence in and impact on our everyday life. The media are all around us; at home and in the workplace, at school and in leisure.

The study of media culture involves more than just studying social and cultural phenomena from a media perspective or with an accent on the media. It also involves studying the media, the way they work and their impacts and contents in their *cultural* context. We need to know more about what the media give and what they take in the everyday contexts in which they are used by individuals, citizens, professionals and communities.

The media culture research programme will be looking at how communication in modern society is framed, on the one hand, by major structural factors; and how, on the other hand, the cultural meaning of media is also shaped and influenced by everyday uses of media. In other words although media culture in western (post)industrial society is in many ways the outcome of global trends in development, the research programme recognizes that in order to reach a deeper understanding of Finnish media culture, we need to do concrete research and experimentation in this particular cultural context, i.e. in Finland.

At least the following trends are relevant to the study of media culture and need to be better understood:

From an *economic* point of view, the closer involvement and growing influence of commercial and market forces in traditional mass communication seem to have a dual effect. On the one hand it seems that media ownership is becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of ever bigger, international corporations and conglomerates. On the other hand, the intertwining of media contents with marketing strategies seems to be leading towards smaller audiences and increasingly tailored products, with closer synchronization between the audience's way of life and media products. As the market becomes more and more competitive, we may also expect to see changes in media production structures as well as in principles of regulation.

Many of the most obvious challenges and opportunities for media culture have been thrown up by the ongoing technical revolution. The development of communication technology has created and facilitated new ways of distribution and consumption, new contents and new environments for encounters between the media and people and amongst people. Increasingly interactive

media, hypertextual message types, virtual learning environments, etc. are still very much in the experimental stage. Key questions in the future will be the development of these media and their contents from the vantage-point of users' interests and needs of better controlling their everyday life.

We also know far too little about what the messages transmitted by the media and the use of different media actually mean to people. It is only by looking at people's interpretations, consumption habits and uses of media that we can gain some indication of the direction in which the means and contents that have been created within a technical and economic framework *could* be developed. This also requires an understanding of the historical development of media and the symbol environment they maintain.

Another quite common approach to the notion of media culture is to say that the 'media' have become an increasingly important institution in terms of *exercise of power* and decision-making in society. The media have become more and more important to both traditional and new, evolving institutions in modern society: the school system, politics, the family, popular movements. Opinions vary widely on the independent importance of the 'media' institution and its role in determining other relations in society.

One of the most important challenges for cultural and social research today is to look at the future options opened up by ongoing cultural changes, to weigh the consequences of those different options and to influence decision-making between those options. Research must be able to shed light on these ongoing changes from the point of view of different theoretical traditions. The purpose of the media culture research programme is indeed to throw light on the Finnish media landscape and its relations on the eve of the millennium. Its aim is to produce new information about new media and their meanings. At the same time, however, the programme also challenges the scientific research community to maintain and develop our cultural memory and to ask which of our old thoughts, concepts and theories are still applicable in the new situation and how they should be revised. It must also be possible to call into question the programme's baseline description of the current situation and its underlying assumptions.

2. Themes

Four broad themes have been extracted from the recent trends in development for closer scrutiny in the media culture research programme. These themes are here used to highlight the specific questions that shall be at the centre of attention in the research programme. The themes are by no means mutually exclusive, but in many cases they point towards similar subjects, even though the specific emphases may vary. Likewise, the themes and questions discussed here do not exclude other possible combinations of research problems.

The four themes are as follows: *Media culture and the individual's competencies* addresses key questions of media culture from the individual's point of view. *The media industry and markets* introduces the economic perspective into the programme. *Media contents, forms and meanings* focuses

on the role of communications products, both old and new, in media culture. Finally, *The media, power and community* raises challenges of a more social and societal nature.

The descriptions given below of these four themes are not intended to set out the terminological confines within which research projects are supposed to operate. Rather, each individual project is expected to tackle and interpret the themes in relation to the questions and concepts that are most relevant to the discipline and approach concerned. It is expected that research plans are broad and coherent. They may be either multidisciplinary or based on a single discipline or approach.

The research programme will start up in autumn 1999 and run for three years. Research projects selected to take part in the programme are expected to produce information and generate discussion that will retain its relevance in the communication environment of the next millennium.

2.1. Media culture and the individual's competencies

A proper understanding of the media and communication at the turn of the millennium calls for research which takes a broad view on the relationship between media culture and the individual. It is important to find out how different forms of communication, different media and contents shape and influence people, their everyday life and environment. In particular, the role of the media needs to be studied from the point of view of their end-users, i.e. individuals and citizens. From this vantage-point we may identify at least five important and closely related subjects that could be tackled within the programme.

Identities. People's self-image and understanding of others is largely shaped through and by the media. Identities are shaped not only by traditional journalistic contents, but also and increasingly by a media supply that is very much dominated by fiction, entertainment and different kinds of games. What sort of identities are associated with the use of certain contents, programme genres or media? What sort of identities do media consumers create for themselves out of the images and elements produced and transmitted by the media? What do these identities mean in situations of everyday life, in human interaction?

Media competence and media education. As far as individuals are concerned new communication technology offers in principle endless opportunities for the acquisition, consumption and reworking of information, art and entertainment. Living in this kind of media culture also entails an opportunity and indeed the need for life-long learning. What kind of learning environments do the media offer today? What are the skills that people need in order to search, assess and analyse the flow of images and information generated by new channels and in order to produce their own media contents? How are these kinds of media competencies taught, or how could they be taught? What are the skills that the school system regards as important and is teaching; what

about the skills needed in the workplace? What sort of skills are the media themselves teaching consumers?

Media in the everyday context. The contents, forms and media of communication are interpreted by end-users in the everyday context in which they use the media. These uses and meanings of different media are bound to change with the evolution of media culture. Different media may take on new roles and find their way into new everyday contexts. For what sort of purposes have people used media? In what way are different media and contents bound up with people's everyday life and its needs and expectations? In what direction should the media move to better meet people's interests?

Interactivity. One of the most interesting aspects of new media technology is its interactivity. It seems that the old 'receiver' is now in a position to influence the format and contents of messages to such an extent that active readers are themselves becoming writers. What kind of new concepts of media contents or forms does this opportunity generate? How will this influence the opportunities of individuals to control their own lives? What kind of skills are needed in an interactive communication environment? How activating or restrictive are different forms of interactive media?

Communication revolution, concepts and values. Recent developments on the media front have also influenced the environment in which people go about their daily lives, the culture and values of individuals and citizens. The changes taking place in the media scene today have an impact on the very foundations of culture, and indeed they have been compared to the social and cultural revolutions that followed with the development of the art of printing. At the level of culture as a whole, it is important to consider the impacts of new communication technologies on our language and values, for instance. Will the growth of interactive communication lead to greater empathy in our culture? And how will the changes in the mediated interaction environment influence human interaction in general? Will new media technology create new forms of interaction, or will our mediatized culture become increasingly privatized?

Media forms, languages, new sensuality. Different kinds of media speak to individuals in different ways in terms of the forms, interfaces and language they use. The impacts of the ongoing media revolution on culture are largely mediated by forms of narration and active reception. Indeed an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the media and individuals requires a close analysis of forms of sensuality and aesthetic questions. How, for instance, do different flexible interfaces affect people's relationship to their own body, gender or cultural identity? In what way do the different forms of communication influence our customs and our ability to assimilate new knowledge? How, for instance, is visual or hypertextual communication assimilated, and how could these forms be put to better use? How could and how should information that is important to individuals be mediated by new media and languages, i.e. other than those which we are used to?

2.2. The media industry and markets

One of the factors with a key influence on how our media environment will shape out in the future is the economy of the media system, which has seen some major changes in recent years both nationally and internationally. The media industry has become an increasingly open business sector, with major players emerging on both the production and distribution side. On the other hand, there remains strong confidence in the commercial potential of smaller, 'independent' units and new operators and in their ability to maintain a varied programming structure. It is crucially important to follow and understand these trends if we are to gain a full picture of the development of media culture. The research programme will be aiming to increase our understanding of at least the following media industry themes.

Funding and ownership. The equation of commercial funding, public funding and payment for media products is changing. Research is needed into the competition between media funded from different sources and their contents. One of the difficulties in this area of study is presented by the unclear borderline between mutual communication among people and commercial (mass) communication. The trend in media ownership seems to be towards concentration and ever larger conglomerates, involving investors who do not necessarily have much experience in the media industry. What does the current ownership structure look like, how has that structure developed in recent years and how can it be expected to develop in the future? What kind of impacts will the ownership structure have on the contents of communication? How will the relationships between bigger and smaller players in the media industry develop? In what way will the new evolving market relations influence the needs, means and foundations for regulation?

Production structures. Not only ownership but also production structures are in flux. Media companies operating in the open market need to find more flexible ways of covering their costs. What kind of impacts will subcontractors for media companies or arrangements of internal entrepreneurship have on major media companies? What kind of new production structures can be expected to develop? What are the impacts of these new structures on professional cultures in the media industry and on the contents of messages?

Distribution systems. Distribution systems will also be profoundly affected by new communication technology. It is still unclear exactly how tailored services (in terms of contents or time) the markets will produce with the new technology. What sort of services will be developed for whom or for what kinds of audiences? What kind of audiences will be created and served? What kind of new competition will unfold?

Consumers' active choices and interpretations. In an open market environment it is also important to study consumers' choices and behaviour. In what ways do people choose media products today, how will they choose them in the future? On what sort of grounds do they make these choices? In what ways are people socialized as consumers of new media or new media contents? Are people satisfied with the media products they are consuming? How do different audience segments consume different products and how do the markets serve different audiences (i.e. whom do the markets serve)?

2.3. Media contents, forms and meanings

The contents of media is an increasingly important subject of research. Analysis of messages, their forms and contents and the meanings attached to messages in different contexts -- in the 'subcultures' of both production and reception -- should add to our understanding of the dynamics of media culture. Under this theme the aim is to shed light on at least the following issues:

Integrating media and the new modes of communication. New communication technology integrates traditional media and obscures the borderlines between them. This often implies a more or less complete reformulation of the question of 'contents'. What, for instance, could be the new virtual spaces where people could meet one another? What are the distinctive features of the increasingly visual or increasingly 'game-like' media contents of the future? What sort of worlds, what sort of spaces or situations should be simulated for that to make sense from a commercial, aesthetic, educational, journalistic or democratic point of view? How do integrating media influence the interaction and coordination of our senses? How does the development of new forms of art, journalism or entertainment shape and change the technology applied in these forms?

The history of the public symbol system in Finland. An area that has received only fairly little attention in the study of media contents is the history of public symbolic contents. Studies have been done on the institutional past of the print press and electronic media (the Finnish Broadcasting Company), but it would also be important to find out how public opinion, discourses, entertainment genres, their stereotypical characters etc. have changed or persisted over the decades and centuries. All these elements combine to form the culturally shared terrain for today and for the next millennium. How, for instance, have representations of politics, the family, genders, young people, children, violence, other cultures, etc. changed and how have they been preserved in the history of Finnish media? In what ways have the languages used in and by the media changed? Whose language do the media speak? What sort of common genres, contents or content characteristics remain in our media landscape which is segmented by markets. What sort of identities, images and idols have people been offered?

Media production cultures and production processes. In order to understand the contents of media we have to research the professional cultures that generate them. Data on producers and production conventions should be collected now, in the situation where the production environment is changing. Research should look at these changing production cultures (their values, principles and modes of action) but also seek to make them more transparent and reflexive. It is important for the value of present-day and future media culture that the people involved in production are willing and capable of talking about their work in public. It is also clear that the values of both journalists and other media professionals, their world-views and understanding of their own tasks today and in the future are important sources of information about changes in media culture and provide interesting openings for debate. Discussions in media ethics link up the study of

professional culture with the evaluation of the contents, forms and production processes of concrete messages. How will production cultures and the economic relations in the media field influence one another? What, for instance, will happen to the ethical principles of journalistic culture or to everyday rules in the workplace if the traditional job contract is transformed into a process of bargaining over the price of individual stories?

2.4. The media, power and community

Communication and mass communication in particular has always been closely interwoven with the exercise of power in society: with decision-making, decision-making resources and the control of those resources. The changing communication environment also challenges us in many ways to reassess our traditional notions of the relationships between the media, democracy, civil society and people's self-control. The perspective of the media, power and community links together, with a somewhat different emphasis, many of the issues that have already been discussed earlier.

The growing social significance of the media. The first important question is this: to what extent is the idea of 'mediatization' in society and culture true? If it is true, then what does this mean in terms of the exercise of power in society? Will power be decentralized, and will it be increasingly difficult to control social processes (on the basis of a given set of interests)? Or do the right communication skills actually make for more effective control of these processes? What are the key resources in mediatized society, how are they distributed? How should the development and distribution of these kinds of resources be promoted so that the media could grow and develop on the basis of a healthy and viable civil society.

Control of publicity. A key issue in the relationship between media and democracy is traditionally that of publicity and controlling public discussion. This question can and should be approached from the angle of both media contents, media production cultures and ordinary citizens. We still need more information and debate about the conditions on which public debate is waged at each point in time. In our mediatized society it is not enough simply to look at what the media professionals are doing. There are more and more media professionals who are involved in different kinds of public relations and publicity control professions, but the study of these jobs has hardly got off the ground, let alone generated any serious discussion. What sort of attitude do officials in public administration, for instance, nowadays take towards publicity? What about scientists? What sort of publicity does science get today? What is the position of activists in civic organizations or PR people in business companies, what is their stance towards publicity? Where have they learned their skills of new management and their notions of publicity? What do they think of media professionals proper? Developing this line of inquiry and its methods would also help to produce better quality critiques of the standard of public debate. From this point of view the question of the language used in the media, the concepts employed and other tools of thought suggested certainly gains added weight. Are the problems raised and debated in public those that ordinary citizens would like to talk about and on which they need to know

more? How easy is it for them to bring new subjects into the public domain, what kind of obstacles do they face in trying to do so? What sort of potentials for participation are associated with different media and what kind of genres, techniques and professional skills can help to make these opportunities more real than is presently the case?

The future of the public (sphere)? The opportunities opened up by new media technology and the media economy's logic of segmentation also raise questions about the future of publicity. Is the idea of a 'common (national, regional) public sphere', as an essential forum of democracy, disappearing or losing its significance (because audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented or because supranational issues are gaining in significance)? What could take its place? What sort of concepts and theories could help us to better understand our new kinds of public spaces and situations? Does new communication technology offer new opportunities for participation in new kinds of publicities? For whom, for what purpose and on what conditions do these opportunities emerge -- indeed do they emerge at all? What kind of media skills (linguistic, technical, etc.) are required for this kind of independent control? Where are they learned, who teaches them? What kind of new media contents, programmes, techniques, genres, etc. would help to revitalize and enrich civil society in the next millennium?

Media as a resource for communities and civil society. Our existing mass media systems and the publicity they have created are closely interwoven, at least in principle, with representative democracy and citizen enlightenment. In future the challenges of continuous participation by individuals and communities will gain increasing urgency. The relationship between media and citizens is no longer only about self-enlightened citizens, but media will (or may) become a means and a resource for different kinds of communities and civic groups. The media do not only offer individuals rewarding experiences of participation, but they can also open up opportunities for different kinds of communities to get involved and to have a greater say. What kind of professionals and professional skills are required in these media? How do different financial arrangements (public service, commercial solutions, etc.) fit in with these challenges? What kind of ethical challenges does this new kind of setting involve?

3. Implementation of the programme

The duration of the media culture research programme will be three years (1999-2002). Applications for funding under this programme are invited during autumn 1998. The application procedure involves two phases. Decisions on project funding will be made before summer 1999, and the appropriations granted will be available as from **1 August 1999**.

During the first phase of applications researchers and research teams interested in the programme are invited to submit to the Research Council for Culture and Society a plan of intent. Within the space of 5-8 pages, these plans should briefly outline the research problem, the aims of the research and its methods as well as state the members of the research team and give the budget

of the project. More detailed instructions for the preparation of a plan of intent are given below. The deadline for plans of intent is **30 November 1998**.

During the early part of 1999 the Research Council for Culture and Society will select out of all plans of intent submitted those on which research plans proper will be invited. These plans should be written in English. Plans selected to write these extended applications will be given further instructions about the details and schedule of the second round.

In choosing the plans for the second round, special emphasis is placed on the scientific merits of the plan. At the same time further steps will be taken to coordinate the division of labour between the Media Culture Research Programme and the second phase of the Information Research Programme. The projects selected for the second phase of the application process will be evaluated by international experts, and the Academy of Finland will make its decisions on granting appropriations on the basis of these expert evaluations. While deciding on the funding, the Academy emphasizes

- * the scientific importance and quality of the research
- * the national and international connections of the projects and the way in which these connections allow further scientific output of the projects
- * the importance and quality of possible researcher training of the project.

Research projects that are in line with the aims of the Media Culture Research Projects may also apply for applied research grants from the Technology Development Centre; deadlines for these applications will be given later. These projects shall meet the criteria set by the Technology Development Centre and be drawn up using the Centre's own forms for applied technical research grants. Further details are available at www.tekes.fi.

Projects may also apply for external funding from other sources such as foundations and private companies.

The Programme will recruit a part-time scientific coordinator to promote cooperation between different research teams and to develop contacts between researchers involved in the research programme and other Finnish and international research communities. In addition, the research coordinator will compile a monograph on the results of the different projects for international distribution.

The call for applications, instructions for preparing a plan of intent, this programme memorandum, application forms and the Academy's Guide for Applicants can be obtained from the registrar's office of the Academy of Finland, postal address
POB 99, FIN-00501 Helsinki, Finland,
street address Vilhonvuorenkatu 6,
tel. +358 9 774881, fax + 358 9 7748 8299,

e-mail keskus@aka.fi.

All the material regarding the research programme can also be obtained from the Academy's WWW-pages at <http://www.aka.fi>. For further details, contact Scientific Secretary Tiina Vihma-Purovaara (tel. +358 9 7748232, email: tiina.vihma-purovaara@aka.fi).

Instructions for preparing a plan of intent for the media culture research programme

The purpose of a plan of intent is to provide a brief overview of a proposed research project. It is on the basis of this plan that the Academy of Finland Research Council for Culture and Society will decide whether or not to invite a full research plan.

The plan should be printed using a font size no smaller than 12 points, and it should be between 5 and 8 pages in length. The plan shall be addressed to the Research Council for Culture and Society. There should be 20 copies of the plan.

There is no strict format for the plans of intent. The following information should, however, be given on the covering page of the plan:

- 1.** Title: MEDIA CULTURE RESEARCH PROGRAMME
- 2.** Researcher in charge of the project (name, date of birth)
- 3.** Site(s) or location(s) of the project
- 4.** Contact information (address, phone, fax, email)
- 5.** Which theme(s) of the programme are addressed
- 6.** The topic of research
- 7.** The schedule of the project
- 8.** Funding (presented year by year)
- 9.** If the application is part of a consortium, other applications of the consortium must also be named (topic, researcher in charge, contact information)

The research plans should also provide the following information:

- a)** Background of the study
 - * background and relevance
 - * earlier research in the subject area
- b)** Aims and methods
 - * aims
 - * research problem and methods
 - * timetable
- c)** Results
 - * applicability of results
- d)** Researchers
 - * research team and details on the possible breakdown of the study between different sites or locations
 - * account of how the project is related to other work by the researchers

* national and international cooperation

* aims in researcher training

e) Funding

* funding applied for via research programme (total sum and breakdown by year)

* other sources of funding

6. Signature of person in charge of the project