

# Swedish Media Research in the Service of Psychological Defence During the Cold War?

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## Abstract

In this article, we address the history of Nordic media research through a case study of the formation of media research in Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s and the role that The Board for Psychological Defence played in the formation of Swedish academic media research during the Cold War era. Based on archival research, we find that the impact of the psychological defence on Swedish media research was mainly concentrated to one Swedish university, and that the impact on the theoretical and methodological development of the discipline has been rather limited. This distinguishes the Swedish case from what has been argued in historical research on the development of media and communication research in the US.

**Keywords:** research funding, Sweden, mass communication, propaganda, psychological defence

## Introduction

Studies of the history of Swedish media research and of the development of the field of media studies in Sweden – both from within and outside the field of media studies – have highlighted various aspects of this history in Sweden. One part of the picture yet to be understood more clearly is the role of military and defence interests in the development of media research as a field. It is clear that psychological defence and the fight against propaganda was a key issue during the Cold War, and that this spurred attention to and research into the growing field of mass communication during this period. Marie Cronqvist (2019) started revealing this story in a recent article; here, we further develop the analysis of the role played by Swedish psychological defence – organised by the Beredskapsnämnden för psykologiskt försvar [National Commission for Psychological Defence] (BN) – in the formation of media research in Sweden. The analysed material overlaps to

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some extent with Cronqvist's (2019), though we aim to focus on the early period of the 1950s and the origins of this strand of media research, which Cronqvist only covers in passing. We also aim to give some possible explanations of why the influence of psychological defence on the formation of Swedish media research remained somewhat limited, in comparison with the US, for example.

In 1948, a public investigation was launched into how the Swedish state should organise its information activities in times of war. The immediate political motivation was the political unrest in the world – more specifically the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état and the initial phases of the Cold War – but also mistrust of the media and the state due to the censorship and political pressure exerted on news organisations during World War II. Consequently, in 1953, the former Minister of Internal Affairs Eije Mossberg presented a public inquiry into the matter (SOU, 1953). Propaganda, defined following Paul Linebarger as “organised persuasion without the use of coercion” [our translation] (SOU, 1953: 16), was a key issue in this report and it was understood to be an area in which more research was needed, specifically as it might have significant effects on morale and a readiness to defend the country among the population. This inquiry was the foundation for the new public agency BN. The board was not a part of the military, but a civil agency under the Ministry of Defence. It had military representation within its management but was headed by a civilian, and its directorate included politicians, journalists, public officials, and academics.

In international research, the Cold War period and its influence on the social sciences has been given considerable attention (Erickson et al., 2013; Solovey & Cravens, 2012; Wolfe, 2018). Parts of this research concern more particularly how military interests have been important to the development and structure of media research. Especially in the US, the importance of military interests has been emphasised. From the critical writings of Herbert Schiller (1969) in the 1960s and onwards, the so-called military-industrial complex has been understood as important not only for the financing and development of the media per se, but also for research within this field. The links between military interests and media and communication research have been considered both direct and indirect. The dominant strands of mass communication research in the post-World War II era in the US have been accused of indirectly legitimising imperialist and military interventions by the US in various parts of the world, for example via the so-called modernisation theory (Maxwell, 2003). More directly, critical research has also shown the many links between military agencies and media and communications departments and researchers.

Christopher Simpson's (1994) and Timothy Glander's (2000) books on the origins of mass communication research and its relation to the Cold War period are two notable examples of studies that attempt to identify the roots of mass communication research in the Cold War context of American society. Simpson and Glander both argue that the social, political, and economic pressures of the time had a significant effect on the newly minted academic discipline of communi-

cations research. They argue that the questions asked – and perspectives adhered to – in this period were closely connected to the interests of the military-industrial complex in Cold War–American society. Glander in particular argues that the researchers who were leading the way with respect to the institutionalisation of communications research in the US (e.g., Bernard Berelson, Wilbur Schramm, & Paul F. Lazarsfeld) worked directly for governmental and military agencies. He also argues that their research to some extent had a “hidden agenda”, for example in how they consciously shifted the discussion from using words like “propaganda” to a more neutral terms like “mass communications”, while still aiming for a better understanding of how to persuade populations in the developing media society of the post-war period.

Swedish – and, more broadly, Scandinavian – media research is in many ways deeply interconnected and dependant on Anglo-American perspectives and developments. When it comes to theoretical developments and debates, as well as methods and research interests, there is a constant inflow and import from the US. This in particular was a main contribution of BN, since they – systematically and for a long time – imported, translated, and introduced American mass communication research to the Swedish research community. An overview from 1981 shows that a third of the books in BN’s library were about mass communication, and through their report series they often publicised summaries and translations of articles and books authored by leading scholars of mass communication, such as Katz, Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, and Schramm.

The ongoing inflow of ideas from the US into Swedish media research has often been successful, though sometimes with troubling results. Theories, assumptions, and research agendas do not necessarily fit, or have traction, in a society that in many ways (politically, economically, socially, and culturally) is both distant from and different than American society. When it comes to the history of the field as such, it would be even more unfortunate to directly translate American history and assume that the relation between military interests and the development of media research would be the same in Sweden or that the relation between military interests and media researchers would take the same shape and form and have the same meaning in Sweden as it does in the US. Thus, we set out in this article to not only describe the relationship between the development of psychological defence in the Cold War era and Swedish mass communication research, but also to reflect on the specific nature of this relationship and its meaning within a Swedish context and to map the importance that this relationship came to have in the Swedish context.

The material for this article has been gathered by means of archival research at the Swedish War Archive, and we focus here especially on the early phase of BN’s attempts at formulating a research agenda for studies of media and communication in the 1950s and 1960s. This article is based mainly on two types of documentation. First there are internal documents from BN, including minutes from the directorate and working groups within BN and annual

reports. Second, there are public research reports and a series of public “messages” whose intended audience was people within the military, government, and media organisations involved with, or otherwise interested in, questions of psychological defence.

### *Previous research into the history of the field in Sweden*

One of the earliest attempts to systematically describe the field of media research in Sweden is Kjell Nowak’s (1963) inventory of its early phase, in which he divided the research according to which medium had been studied and which part of the communication process was of primary interest (production, output, or audience). In more recent attempts to describe the formation of media studies as a discipline, the formative years during the 1970s has often been highlighted: the formation of the Swedish Association of Media Research, the founding of Nordicom, and the struggles of the “pioneers” in the field (mainly at universities in Stockholm, Lund, and Gothenburg) have been highlighted (Westlund, 2006). In these internal histories of the formation of Swedish media research, its strong grounding in a multidisciplinary environment, the combination of humanistic and social scientific perspectives, and its long prehistory within the field of literary studies and journalism have been brought to the fore (Bolin & Forsman, 2000). Some explanations for the characteristics of the field and the paths taken in its formation have also been sought outside the field itself; for example, the growth of the media industries in a post-industrial society (Westlund, 2006) and the role of public agencies such as PUB, the research department at the Swedish public broadcasting company. A more recent attempt to explain the historical formation of Swedish media research is seen in the book *Massmedieproblemet* [*The Problem of Mass Media*], in which the role of the state and the politically motivated investigations of the “problem” of mass media in the 1960s is interpreted as a key instance for spurring a field of Swedish media research (Hyvönen et al., 2015). Others have pointed to international impulses (Carlsson, 2007) and a “cultural turn” within the social sciences more generally (von Feilitzen, 1994) when exploring the history of media research in a Nordic context. Common to these histories of the field is that the 1960s and 1970s are seen as the starting point for a modern form of media research (even though Bolin & Forsman, 2000, also point towards the longer prehistory of media and communication research from the nineteenth century). In this article, we look at the immediate post-war context in the 1950s, as this is the period when Swedish psychological defence was initiated. This also means that we will contribute to the previous histories by exploring the role of military and defence interests in the formation of the field of media and communication research in Sweden – a path that has been followed in an international context, but not yet been given sufficient attention in the Nordic countries.

## BN and early Swedish mass communications research

The inquiry that initiated the Swedish psychological defence noted that during World War II, the warring states had spent considerable resources attempting to influence public opinion during the war, both at home and abroad, and thus argued that Sweden should learn from these operations and from the organisation of wartime information activities in other countries. However, for a small country like Sweden, it was not realistic to think that it could influence international public opinion or public opinion in other countries. Nor was it opportunistic, considering Sweden's neutrality in international politics. State-organised information activities in preparation for and during war should thus not be directed primarily at psychological warfare, but at psychological defence, as the author of the public inquiry concluded.

BN held its first board meeting in 1954, with board members representing the world of politics, the military, and the media industry. The meeting was chaired by the political scientist Professor Gunnar Heckscher.<sup>1</sup> The main task the Swedish government and parliament gave BN was to make preparations for a wartime organisation of information activities. A large part of this task consisted of training and educating people within media and cultural organisations – press, television, cinema, and theatre – and people with military and political roles, as well as civil society agents, such as Swedish popular movements and unions. It also consisted of practical tasks such as making logistical plans and sourcing adequate equipment. Among BN's secondary tasks, however, were following international developments within psychological warfare and studying and analysing foreign propaganda, as well as Swedish public opinion in defence-related matters. It was in the fulfilment of these secondary tasks that BN came to have a certain influence on the development of early media research in Sweden.

In the following years, the research department at BN commissioned and published a number of studies on public opinion in Sweden, and more specifically its willingness to defend the country, in the event of war. Studies of the locations of Västerås, Kolsva, Malmö, and Brålanda were conducted and published before the end of 1959. With the exception of the first study, most of the early studies are the result of a collaboration between the sociologists Bo Andersson and Ola Melén. Even though they were at first mainly interested in public opinion and the “will of defence” as such, they found that there was a lack of research into *how* public opinion is formed, and in particular the role of the media in this process. *Personal influence* by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) then became highly important in this respect, and Andersson and Melén were among the first to introduce their work to the Swedish audience. In empirical studies commissioned and funded by BN, they showed, for example, not only the importance of local union leaders in guiding public opinion, but also that the media were more important in forming public opinion in larger communities, such as Malmö, than in smaller communities.<sup>2</sup> The reports and their results often not only prompted lively debate in

academic circles but also public debate and editorial commentary, not least due to the fact that they were interpreted as a new and modern form of scientific study – research into mass communication and its effects on society. That the researchers at BN shared this view is evident from a report written in 1962 by Ola Melén, then head of research at BN, which among other things summarises the new field of mass communication research in a way that identifies the research team at BN as a key institution within this emerging field (Melén 1962). In numbers, this also seems to be the case; BN published at least eight major research reports on mass communication in the 1950s and 1960s (Törnqvist & Kronwall, 1977), and in their popular publication series (the “messages”) aimed at a broader public, 45 of the first 100 messages were about mass communication research (Törnqvist & Edberg, 1983).

BN’s role in instigating early media research mainly took two forms: either, as described above, by commissioning research and recruiting researchers that worked directly on meeting BN’s need for knowledge, or by funding research and researchers who worked relatively independently of BN. While the first kind of research clearly dominates in terms of availability of resources and published results, BN’s role in financing media and communications research in its early phase should not be underestimated. The department of political science at the University of Gothenburg in particular was a beneficiary of BN’s research funding, and they received regular contributions during the first years of BN’s operations.<sup>3</sup> This funding was applied for and channelled via Professor Jörgen Westerståhl, who also served on the board of BN from 1954–1985.

Westerståhl is also the only person involved in BN’s pioneering operations within media and communications research who is now recognised for his significant contribution to the development of the field. Although mainly a political scientist, Westerståhl is perhaps as good a candidate as anyone for the role of one of the “founding fathers” of Swedish media and communications research. His most lasting contribution to the Swedish social sciences is his research relating to elections, voters, and voting, though in connection with this he was also interested in trying to determine how the media influence voting behaviour. Westerståhl conceptualised this as a question about propaganda, and one of his early studies in this area was completed with funding from BN and involved the influence of government information on attitudes towards Swedish defence (Westerståhl et al., 1958). In the development of media and communications research, however, his research on objectivity in the news possibly played a more important role – not only for the theoretical development of the concept of objectivity as such, but even more importantly, for the establishment of quantitative content analysis as the preferred method for analysing the output of media organisations.

Quantitative content analysis played an important role in many countries during the war, particularly in the US, as a way of using enemy propaganda in order to identify the enemy’s strategic objectives and to measure changes in the mood of foreign populations (George, 1956). It is not surprising, therefore, that

BN employed this method and developed it for use in a Swedish context. Westerståhl, together with Bo Särilvik, were the first in Sweden to introduce quantitative content analysis as a method in political science through their study, *Propagandaanalys* [*Propaganda Analysis*], which was carried out under the auspices of BN in 1956 (Petersson, 2011: 138). Quantitative content analysis eventually became seminal both in the work of Westerståhl and in the research carried out by BN, both of which were for a time intimately intertwined. A notable example is Westerståhl's analysis of the media coverage of Sweden's role in the UN operation in the war in the Congo in 1961; the analysis was ordered by the Swedish government via BN and motivated by suspicions that foreign propaganda had influenced Swedish media coverage. Westerståhl's position at the University of Gothenburg, together with his ability to attract funding from BN, meant that propaganda analysis using quantitative content analysis became "the big subject for the political science department in Gothenburg" and that it was "the needs of psychological defence that decided the research questions" (Petersson, 2011: 144). Later, a unit for mass communication research was founded within the department of political science in Gothenburg – a unit that has since played an important role in the development of media and communication as a discipline and research field in Sweden.

Through the example of BN, we can see that small steps were taken in the 1950s towards developing a research agenda centred around the role of mass media in Swedish society. This is about the same time that communications research is given an institutional basis in American universities, and some years before the emergence of the "media problem" in the 1960s and the research that ensued as a consequence. BN eventually went on to become a major funding body for media research in Sweden and over just a few years it became the fifth largest funder of Swedish media research (Kronvall, 1976). During the 1970s and 1980s, several well-renowned media researchers contributed to BN's report series, though by 1985, BN had merged with two other government agencies and changed its name. However, it is the early years that are of interest here, and in the next section we consider the eventual importance of BN to media research in Sweden during its formative years.

## The relative (un)importance of BN in the development of media research in Sweden

As we have demonstrated above, it is clear that government funding and government interests in psychological warfare and propaganda during the 1950s played some role in the development of media and communications research in Sweden. However, this raises two questions, firstly regarding the extent of the government's – and more particularly BN's – influence on the direction of media research and, secondly, the nature of this influence. Critical scholars such as Simpson and Glander claim that the American military and government had significant

influence on the development of American communication research through their extensive funding programmes, but also in more covert ways by selecting which researchers were heard and listened to. Furthermore, they argue that this government and military influence ensured that mainstream communications research developed in a particular direction that furthered government interest, for example by regarding top-down communication organised on an industrial scale as a norm, rather than an historical exception and a characteristic of the US in the 1950s and of its role as a global empire. Although it seems obvious that Swedish government interests in propaganda did not play such a crucial role in the development of Swedish media and communications research, the question remains concerning the exact role played by military and defence-related interest in this development.

Research instigated and funded by BN did arguably play an important role in terms of how research into media and communications developed within the department of political science at the University of Gothenburg. This research direction was later carried over to the media and communications department as it developed into an independent department under the umbrella of political science. In more concrete terms, this meant that the media were approached primarily from a social science perspective with a primary interest in the nexus between politics, media, and the public, and a methodological preference for quantitative methods such as content analysis and survey research. However, outside the University of Gothenburg, BN did struggle to make connections with and attract prominent researchers interested in the media. Researchers who were at some time connected to BN during the 1950s and early 1960s had affiliations with the universities in Lund, Uppsala, and Stockholm, but most of these researchers had not yet received their doctoral degrees and also failed to make any memorable contributions to media and communications research in the following years. The extent of BN's influence on media and communications research in Sweden thus appears to be rather limited and mainly concentrated to one Swedish university.

Another question that should be answered, at least provisionally, has to do with the nature of BN's influence on media and communications research. How did military and defence-related interests influence the kind of research that was carried out and the theoretical and methodological perspectives that were deployed? The primary purpose of BN was to make preparations in the event of war to ensure that primary societal communication functions remained operational; rumours and panics were quenched; and the will to defend the country was not diminished. These tasks were conceptualised as the construction and maintenance of a Swedish psychological defence. In contrast to the US, Sweden thus had little or no intention of making preparations for psychological warfare, or at least this was not a task that was entrusted to a civilian public authority. The official version of BN's operations was to avoid anything resembling government propaganda. Instead, it was emphasised that even during war the public needed access to independent journalism and objective reporting.

Sweden's political neutrality, combined with its geographical position between the two power blocs, meant that Sweden's geopolitical interests were unique. Even though historians have eventually pointed out that Sweden in fact had close ties to the Western bloc during the Cold War (Bastiansen & Werenskjold, 2015), it was still imperative to maintain neutrality as Sweden's official position. Historians of science have also pointed to the fact that questions of neutrality, objectivity, and autonomy were central to post-war science (Solovey & Cravens, 2012). As a consequence of the social pressure to aid in rebuilding society after the war, and in the progressive spirit of the time, as well as in the war between the two power blocs, the neutral eye of science became more important than ever, but also an area with conflicting opinions and conceptual confusion. Neutrality, objectivity, and autonomy became, in fact, both a way for scientists to escape political pressures and a way to comply with them, since their alleged neutral position imbued their advice and policy proposals with an extra sense of gravitas (Porter, 2012). We might speculatively view Westerståhl's theoretical and methodological developments in measuring the objectivity of news reporting in the light of this conflicted terrain of neutrality, objectivity, and autonomy.

Given all this, it is interesting to note that the kind of media and communications research carried out under the auspices of BN would eventually represent only a small portion of media and communications research by the time it had become institutionalised in the 1980s. Although public relations, propaganda, audience surveys, and so forth were and are part of media and communications research, these topics and research perspectives did not form the nucleus of the emerging discipline, nor did they form an equally dominant paradigm as in the US. What instead became more important were the public investigations into the "media problem" during the 1960s, the cultural policies during the 1970s, and the research department at the Swedish public broadcasting agency. During the 1960s, film studies was established in Swedish universities and also contributed to the development of media research in Sweden. Media research was also taken up at several Swedish universities in this period, with the multidisciplinary environment at the EFI-institute at the Stockholm School of Economics acquiring importance (Weibull, 1992). BN and the government interest in media and communications research for defence purposes were perhaps too early to make an impression on the discipline when it was finally given an institutional form. By the time Nordicom was formed in 1972, and with the publication of the results of the public investigation into mass media research in 1976, the field of media research was already diverse, and the research carried out at BN was only one small part of a larger puzzle. The fact that media and communications research in Sweden has, to a considerable extent, incorporated theoretical and methodological perspectives from the humanities, is probably a consequence of the institutionalisation process occurring a couple of decades later in Sweden than it had in the US, when the social scientific grip that was characteristic of the Cold War academic climate had somewhat weakened. Kronvall's (1976) influential overview of Swedish

media research, concluding that the dominant strand in Swedish media research is humanistic research and perspectives, is testament to this difference between the Swedish development and the situation in, for example, the US, as well as confirmation of the rather limited influence that psychological defence came to have on Swedish media and communications research.

## Conclusion

As we have shown, it is important to consider the Cold War and government interests in scientific approaches to media and communications in military and defence-related matters in order to be able to understand the history of the development of media and communications research in Sweden. Except for Cronqvist's (2019) recent contribution, this is an aspect of the institutionalisation process of media and communication research in Sweden that previous historical research has mentioned only in passing. It is without doubt true that BN was one of the first institutions that systematically, and with some longevity, carried out and commissioned media research. They were one of the main sources for introducing and translating (mainly American) mass communications theory into Swedish and for introducing the scientific community to concepts and questions from this research tradition.

Despite this, we argue that defence-related interests have played no more than a peripheral role in the development of Swedish media and communications research. The political climate during the Cold War did not mean that media and communications research received enough prioritisation from state and military interests to turn into a major research subject at Swedish universities, nor did such interests have a major impact on the continued development of the subject. If anything, this article can then be read as a reminder that we must be cautious about translating histories of the field from one national context to another. Even though Swedish and Nordic media and communications research has imported much of its intellectual foundations from the US, its development and trajectory as a field is in many respects different; and here, more research is needed, especially concerning the early stages prior to institutionalisation of the field (in the 1970s) of Nordic media and communications research.

The other Nordic countries had or have organisations with similar functions to those of BN in Sweden: in Finland, this is the Advisory Board of Defence Information [Planeringskommissionen för försvarsinformation]; in Denmark, it was the Defence Agency of Information and Welfare [Forsvarets Oplysnings- og Velfærdstjeneste]. Norway has no authority responsible for defence information, as this responsibility instead falls directly upon the military organisation. Jerntoft (2015) has, however, documented the work of the Norwegian Coordinating Committee of the Joint Committee on National Security, which bears some similarities to the Swedish BN. There is no doubt that more research is called for on the histories of these organisations and their involvement with academic media and communica-

tion research. We believe such research to be necessary, since a better understanding of where we came from as a field opens new possibilities for seeing where we are headed, and perhaps what routes we should avoid. For example, what will be the role of Nordic media research in relation to the current new political and military investments in a “modern” psychological defence that are motivated by increasing activities in informational warfare directed towards the Nordic countries?

## Notes

1. Beredskapsnämndens protokoll, 1954, 1, Beredskapsnämnden för psykologiskt försvar. 0965/Ö/A 1a/1 i Krigsarkivet (KrA). [Board minutes from the National Preparedness Commission, 1954, 1, National Preparedness Commission for Psychological Defence, 0965/Ö/A 1a/1 in The Swedish War Archive].
2. Beredskapsnämndens rapportserie, 1957–1959, 0965/Ö/B 2a/1 in Krigsarkivet (KrA) [Reports from the National Preparedness Commission, 1957–1959, 0965/Ö/B 2a/1 in The Swedish War Archive].
3. Beredskapsnämndens protokoll, 1954, 1, Beredskapsnämnden för psykologiskt försvar. 0965/Ö/A 1a/1 i Krigsarkivet (KrA). [Board Minutes from the National Preparedness Commission, 1954, 1, National Preparedness Commission for Psychological Defence, 0965/Ö/A 1a/1 in The Swedish War Archive].

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