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**MEDIA DISCOURSE AND MATERIAL GAPS IN ST. PETERSBURG
AND STOCKHOLM. FINDINGS AND PROSPECTS**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the background and objectives of a project that is studying the media discourses on material gaps in Stockholm and St. Petersburg. How do the media illuminate and explain individuals' uneven material resources? How do the news agenda, popular culture and advertising interplay with people's attitudes towards the social order in which they are positioned? The analysis is based on some crucial findings from our previous research project (2006-2009) comparing the inhabitants' behaviours and attitudes as regards media, society and leisure in St. Petersburg and Stockholm, which, i.a., showed that material gaps among different groups in society – both between and within the two cities – are strongly related to people's well-being and trust in the major political and social institutions.

Key words: media discourses, news, popular culture, material gaps, Stockholm, St. Petersburg

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The interdisciplinary research project “The Role of Media for Identity and Democracy” led by myself and Peter Petrov was funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Sweden, between 2006 and 2009. The project comprises several sub-studies. The aim has been to illustrate the role of media in people's perceptions of the social world, their cultural identity, experience of democracy, and values and behaviours in different social environments.

The choice of cities for the project, Stockholm, Sweden, and St. Petersburg, Russia, was motivated by the fact that both are cultural capitals with similar geographical location, at the same time as they have very different historical, economic, political and cultural conditions. Thus, a comparison of people's perceptions of media, society and leisure in two cities was expected to contribute to more stable empirical and theoretical conclusions than a study based on only one place could do.

Among other things, the project compared middle-aged and teen-aged inhabitants in St. Petersburg and Stockholm by means of comprehensive questionnaires (corresponding to more than 570 variables) as well as lengthy focus groups following up the answers in the filled-in questionnaires. The findings as a whole portray two very different cultures – that, however, also show certain structural similarities. The empirical data are extremely rich. We have tried to illuminate the complex characteristics of people's lives in the two cities from a range of perspectives in our book *Use and Views of Media in Sweden & Russia. A Comparative Study in St. Petersburg and Stockholm* (von Feilitzen & Petrov, 2011).

In this paper we will bring out only a tiny but utmost important part of the findings – namely, the fact that material divides in society, both between and within the two cities – are strongly related to people's notions of media, society and their personal lives.

In line with the objectives of our recently started new project “Media Discourses on Material and Ethnic Gaps” (also financed by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies) 2012 to 2014,

we will also ask in this paper – however not yet give any reply – if the media, in interplay with other political, economical and cultural factors, might contribute to people's perceptions of the material gaps in society as well as their perceptions of whom are responsible for individual's prosperity or lack thereof.

Thus, narrowing our perspective from the original project to only a few crucial findings related to people's material sources, we found, as expected, big differences between the Swedish and Russian inhabitants generally in terms of material resources. By material resources we mean everything that concern the individual's material existence, primarily her/his household economy, and that in today's society are measured by means of economic indicators. Unlike Sweden, where adaptation of the national institutions to global changes after the 1980s has taken place continuously in a context of relative economic and political stability, Russia has since the 1990s undergone a radical change in its political system, followed by economic and social crises in which the media system, too, has radically changed (as regards access, ownership, content and structure of the audience), something that has had considerable impact on the life conditions of people living in Russia and their conception of social reality.

Although our samples in the two cities were very similar as regards the distribution of education, the questions how people regard their possibilities to manage food, clothes and other necessities for living, very clearly reflect international statistics, according to which people in Stockholm are generally much better-off than people in St. Petersburg and the material divides among population groups are much bigger in St. Petersburg than in Stockholm.

A FEW ECONOMIC INDICATORS FOR RUSSIA AND SWEDEN

An important fact is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s, the political and economic Russian elites have to a high degree merged into each other, and corruption is today regarded as one of the prime problems of Russia. During the same period, the population share below the poverty line increased markedly in Russia (Kivinen, 2009), although it has also decreased pronouncedly during the 2000s. According to Russian opinion polls over time, in 2009 approximately 40 per cent of the population says that they barely make ends meet – i.e., some 10 per cent meaning that there is not enough money even for food, and a third that they have enough money for food but that buying clothes is a serious problem (Levada, 2009). Another statistical figure from the World Bank's official estimates and valid for the end of the first decade of the 2000s, indicates that still 12 per cent in the Russian Federation live on less than US\$5 a day (The World Bank, 2012). Our findings from 2007 concern St. Petersburg only but point to material divides in line with these figures.

In comparison, Sweden is on average a very rich country with an internationally estimated GNI (Gross National Income) of US\$ 49,930 per capita in 2010. Comparative figures are 47,930 for the U.S. and 9,910 for the Russian Federation (Unicef 2012). Neither are income divides in Sweden as wide as in most other countries: The percentage of total income received by the 20 per cent households with the highest income in Sweden is estimated to 37 percent during the first decade of the 2000s, while the 40 per cent of households with the lowest income received 23 per cent of the total income – see Table 1 that also presents corresponding figures for the Russian Federation and the U.S.

However, although almost no one in Sweden officially is living under the internationally absolute poverty lines, income divides in Sweden are augmenting: After World War II, increasing employment and social political steps had the effect that the income differences between households in Sweden levelled out during three decades till 1981. This trend was then interrupted and income divides started

increasing again. The share of persons with relatively² low disposable income has after that heavily increased during the following three decades, meaning that income increase has been bigger the higher up in the income layers one comes. Also private capital and property has spread unequally. In 2007, for example, one tenth of the Swedish population stood for 71 per cent of the total assets (SCB, 2012a, b). In parallel during the 2000s, the share of the relatively poor people in Sweden, have increased from slightly more than 8 per cent of the population to slightly more than 13 per cent. Among children this share has increased during the same period from 11 per cent to 15 per cent. And the corresponding share of single persons living with children was 11 per cent in 1999 compared to 30 per cent in 2010 (SCB, 2012 c, d).

Table 1: Income divides in Sweden, Russia and the U.S. 2000-2010

	Share of total household income 2000-2010	
	Percentage of total income received by the 40 per cent of households with the lowest income	Percentage of total income received by the 20 per cent of households with the highest income
Sweden	23	37
Russian Federation	16	49
U.S.A	16	46

Source: *The State of the World's Children*. Unicef, 2012

As in many countries, example of groups who on average have a clearly lower economic standard than the average person are in Sweden (i.e., SCB, 2012 e): persons retired before their time (due to handicap or other conditions), retired persons living alone, single mothers and their children, homeless people, beggars (who, however, hardly are included in the official statistics), persons ill for a long time, and unemployed persons – not least young people and immigrants/refugees who are continuously more discriminated on the labour market than people born in Sweden.

THE IMPACT OF MATERIAL RESOURCES ON PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

The following section discusses some findings from Petrov & von Feilitzen (2011).

Our analyses showed that middle-aged people in St. Petersburg, who have experienced radical societal transformations, deviate pronouncedly from young people in St. Petersburg and from both middle-aged and young people in Stockholm as regards attitudes and behaviours. The middle-aged people in St. Petersburg not only state most often of the four groups that their household economy is poor but also constitutes the group that identifies itself least with successful and affluent people. Moreover, these middle-aged persons in St. Petersburg emphasise "economic prosperity for all" as the most essential characteristic of a democratic society while the overwhelming majority of our Stockholm respondents have marked "freedom of expression" as an essential characteristic of democracy. A large

² If choosing an absolute measure of economic vulnerability (i.e., a fixed level of Swedish crowns or US\$), the share of poor people in Sweden is diminishing. However, using a relative measure recommended by the European Union, the risk of poverty increases over time in Sweden. Such a measure implies, somewhat simplified, that persons who have a disposable income lower than 60 per cent of the median income, risk economic vulnerability (SCB, 2012a, b).

proportion of the adults in St. Petersburg are also discontented with the on-going democratic processes in Russia. They consider, as well, more often than the other groups in our study that the economic gaps between different social strata are increasing, and state less often than the other groups that they have a possibility of influencing the social processes. They also disagree more often than the other groups with the statement "By reading newspapers I get a correct picture of the situation in society" and "Ordinary people can make their voices well heard in the media", while they agree more often to the statement "Media contents are controlled by a few powerful persons". Moreover, the respondents from this group most often claim that they are dissatisfied with the way their life goes. Furthermore, although most of them trust the President, they have a more critical attitude than the Stockholmers to a large number of social institutions, such as the legal courts, the health care and the police. Many more in St. Petersburg (half of the respondents) than in Stockholm (a quarter of the respondents) also dissociate themselves from the party-political system (find that no party suits them or are undecided about which party would best represent their interests). The majority of the habitants in both cities agree with the statement that "The state ought to help the weaker and less capable to live a life fit for human beings". However, at the same time there is a pronounced difference in that approximately 65 per cent of the inhabitants in St. Petersburg, compared to 25 per cent of the Stockholmers, agree with the statement: "The individual's prosperity should wholly depend on how well she is taking care of herself and her family."

Moreover, the majority of St. Peterburgers considers that it is "work" rather than "leisure" that "makes life worth living", while the reverse relation is true for the Stockholm respondents. In Baudrillardian terms, this can be interpreted so that consumption in West has become a societal duty and work has become a privilege for certain people with high education and responsible jobs.

The Stockholmers, on the other hand, have more often than the inhabitants in St. Petersburg trust in other people and in the major social institutions (such as daily newspapers, medical service, legal courts, police, banks, multi-national corporations), and think more often that they can affect societal development in one way or the other. (Little was revealed in the study, however, if this latter belief really corresponds to civic or political action on part of the Swedes.) It is also obvious that the respondents in Stockholm are much more often satisfied with the way their life goes than the inhabitants in St. Petersburg are.

At the same time, such positive attitudes are stronger among Swedish persons with more material resources than among Swedes with less such resources. Better household prosperity is also positively related to a number of opinions implying that the development of the country is ameliorating (for example, that the individual's possibility of expressing her/his opinions is improving, and that the economic divides in society are diminishing), as well as with the belief that democracy functions in the country generally and/or has improved during the latest decades.

One important observation is that similar differences between Stockholm and St. Petersburg dependent on persons' material resources are also discernible within the cities. For instance, the belief that democracy functions in the country and/or has improved during the latest decades is valid among people with better material resources in both St. Petersburg and Stockholm. And in both cities the tendency to connect democracy with "freedom of expression" is more common among people with better material resources, while poorer people in both cities instead mention more often than well-to-do people "economic prosperity for all" as an important characteristic of a democratic society. Likewise, affluent persons in both cities consider more often than non-affluent persons that their country lives up to the UN Conventions on Human Rights and on the Rights of the Child.

Moreover, in both cities economically successful people consider more frequently than poor people that membership in a political party or other organisation is important for expressing one's opinion. People with better material resources in both cities also agree more often than the poorer that

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privatization and open market economy is good for Sweden/Russia, that ordinary people can make their voices well heard in the media and that they can influence the societal development. In addition, rich persons in both cities more often feel glad and appreciated and are more often satisfied with their lives than poorer people who, in their turn, more often surrender to depression and anxiety. Being satisfied with one's life is at both places positively correlated with having trust in political and welfare institutions, as well as with a more consumption-oriented attitude and lifestyle pattern.

All in all it appears that in a Durkheimian (1897) spirit one can say that people with better material resources are also better integrated in the prevailing social order and into society in general. This is evident also from their general lifestyle pattern (i.e., they visit more often restaurants, theatres, and the like), at the same time as their household economy is not correlated with interest in high culture (such as classical music, jazz, modern art), which, on the other hand, in both cities instead is associated with higher education and possession of legitimate cultural capital in general (cf. Bourdieu 1979).

In sum, people's ideas and behaviours are intertwined with their perceptions of media, society, politics, democracy and welfare, which in their turn are positively correlated with people's material resources.

One issue to be focused on in future analyses is then how media represent groups with different material resources, who are differently positioned on the social ladder and who have different trust in the social institutions.

MEDIA DISCOURSES ON MATERIAL GAPS

Our recently started project "Media Discourses on Material and Ethnic Gaps" analyses, among other things, the discourses in mainstream media on material gaps in the two cities. How do the media illuminate and explain individuals' uneven material resources – structurally (referring to state or market), collectively (referring to countries, organisations, social strata, different groups, etc.) or individually (referring to single persons)?

From a discourse analytical perspective the project is focusing a number of issues, such as: Who are portrayed as victims, who as villains, who as heroes? Who are pointed out as responsible for the material gaps, that is, who are accused: politicians, CEOs and managers, we all, the rich or the poor themselves? The media discourses are constructions that are produced and reproduced in different contexts, periods and at different places. One assumption is that if the individual responsibility is emphasised, then structural causes to material inequality are under-emphasised. Popular culture and advertising – such as TV series and talk shows – often idealise individual prosperity and luxury, romanticize heroes and successful persons and make unrealistic dramas out of social differences. Might such discourse prevail also in the news programmes and in the press? Which is the dominant ideology in the many-voiced media? Are existing power relations reproduced?

We are, thus, carrying out discourse analyses of contents in daily press, television and blogs on the internet, primarily focusing on mainstream media.

While Swedes, internationally seen, still read traditional newspapers to a great extent (even if free of charge papers such as *Metro* have become extensive in big cities like Stockholm), the post-Soviet societal structure have brought about that Russia has transformed from a paper reading to a TV viewing nation. Even if internet is more spread in Sweden than in Russia, internet access and use is fairly high in the big Russian cities, for instance in St. Petersburg.

Our material consists of newspapers with the highest circulation (also taking their political orientation into account); a systematic sample of television news, debate/talk shows and drama (films, series) in a

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couple of the most viewed channels (public service/state controlled and private); as well as a sample of popular blogs).

We will also strategically sample people in different social positions for focus groups in each city, and discuss with them if and how the media – compared to their own life experiences and perceptions of the political discourse – may have contributed to their understanding of, among other things, the material gaps in society.

Little research has tried to analyse the media discourses on – and their connections to people's perception of – inequality in terms of material resources and divides, including the reasons for such inequality.

At least in Western countries, research on media and economy has primarily studied the economy of media production and media market, as well as the cultural “experience industry”. Furthermore, there is a great deal of studies on business communication and marketing. A few studies have implied discourse analysis of, among other things, the global justice movement (e.g., Ekman, 2011). Important research has also been performed by the Glasgow Media Group starting in 1976 and showing, among other things and over time, that TV news are biased in favour of powerful forces and actors in society and against less powerful groups such as the organised working class (The Glasgow University Media Group, 1976).

Furthermore, there are content analyses of TV characters' social class, not least in drama, and how the audience perceives this. For instance, a Swedish study found that TV viewers most often do not think of the TV characters as belonging to social classes (Ross, 2011).

Bourdieu's theories serve as a frame of the project. His view on the language as a tool for symbolic power (1982) is related to Foucault's theories on the discourse as a structuring factor that produces “truth” and social reality (1997). Relevant parts of Van Dijk's (1998) and Fairclough's (1995) works on media discourse and ideology are also used.

Our strategy is to make reviewing content analyses and then illuminate the discourse by analyzing fewer media contents in-depth.

In the following, we present some preliminary comments regarding newspapers in Stockholm.

Some notices on the Stockholm newspaper discourse on material gaps

Mainstream newspapers in Stockholm with high circulation are the two morning papers *Dagens Nyheter* (the News of the Day) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (the Swedish Daily), the two evening tabloids *Aftonbladet* (the Evening Daily) and *Expressen* (the Express), as well as *Metro* free of charge, and the business paper *Dagens Industri* (the Industry of the Day).

Economy generally is a subject that is high up on the agenda of mainstream media in Sweden, and national economy, business economy, economy in different countries, and world economy is treated much more extensively in the Swedish mainstream press than issues related to material gaps among individuals, households or socio-economic strata.

Nevertheless, a search in the Swedish newspaper database Media Retriever suggests that during the latest three months, the concepts of “poor” (“fattig”), “poverty” (“fattigdom”) and their derivatives are common in the papers selected. However, at least as much is written about poor people and poverty in other countries and the world as about poverty in Sweden. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the voices of the relatively poor people in Sweden are not often heard and these persons are seldom depicted. It is in the Swedish press more common with images of poor people in other countries, such as in Greece (in connection to the Euro crisis), in Egypt (in connection with the recent election), in

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Azerbaijan (in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest) and in Ukraine (European football championship). There are also visual reports on refugees recently arrived at Sweden.

For Sweden generally, there is a relatively frequent talk in the newspapers about, for example, poor suburbs, poor unemployed persons (not least youths), immigrants from poor countries, poor pensioners, poor single mothers with children, and poor children. A great deal of these news and editorial material, not least those on the increasing child poverty in Sweden, is supported by statistics. The victims are clearly the poor people mentioned, while the Prime Minister, the Minister for Finance and the government are accused as responsible for this situation and development. In connection with the increasing child poverty, for example, the government's answers avoid the heart of the matter and point out that the cited statistics are valid for relative poverty, not poverty in absolute terms, since all people should have got something more in their wallets. That is, the ministers say that in principle no one has become poorer in absolute terms.

Expressions such as "economic gaps", "social gaps", "social differences" and "exclusion vs. inclusion/integration" are also common in the sample of papers. For example, heated arguments on the growing social and economic differences or gaps concern the worsened social health insurance in Sweden (the insurance ends after a certain period even if the illness continues), and a report from an authority about increasing school segregation (due to families' and pupils' possibilities to choose schools themselves, why the more privileged families avoid schools with under-privileged children).

In these contexts, some debaters suggest that the traditional socio-economic concept of "classes" ought to be used instead of "social differences", and the like. There are signs in the press that "class hate" against the rich and affluent strata in society is increasing.

Many articles take up embezzlement-like phenomena. For example, civil servants employed for administering one public pension fund were found to have privileges in the form of gratis alcohol, better and more speedy health care than ordinary people, access to limousine service and luxury hotels. Another news piece tells that state money given to an international Swedish-based institute of democracy with the aim to contribute to democratic processes and develop independent election procedures in the world, has been used instead for extremely high consultants' fees and directors' salaries. Other groups accused in the news flows are the expensive "pension consultants" on the private market, as well as the pension unit trusts, who make profit on high fees. Scandals have sprung up about neglect and mismanagement of elderly people at private health institutions, where the owners lined their pockets at the mismanaged old "clients'" expense and then moved their profit to tax paradises abroad. Now and then statistics are presented on sky-high salaries and bonuses among CEOs in Sweden.

In these cases, the civil servants, pension consultants, owners of elderly care, CEOs, etc., are regarded as villains who exploit ordinary people and the country. As time goes by, new press analyses of these revelations emerge, often with political undertones, where most often the present right-wing governmental alliance is said to be responsible, since it continuously sells out and privatize schools, hospitals, child and elderly care, etc.

On the other hand, the news and editorial material in the press also give space to "rich", "wealthy" and "well-to-do" people (and corresponding nouns and derivatives) in a positive sense. Instead of talking about destitute people, the unemployed, the groups who have a low disposable income, and so on – in which cases people are mainly treated *collectively* – rich people are often portrayed *individually*. Besides facts such as that there are more and more dollar millionaires in Sweden and that sales of expensive villas and apartments set up new records, there are, for example, lists of names of who in Sweden earn most money and portrayals of rich entrepreneurs. Similar individual portraits are then

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multiplied in the sections of culture/entertainment and sports, where rich and successful artists, models, celebrities, businessmen and sport stars are honoured on pictures and in the texts.

In a rich country with developed market economy such as Sweden, economy and material divides also implicitly permeates great parts of the rest of the newspapers. A typical issue of the leading morning paper *Dagens Nyheter* (The News of the Day) also has special pages with economic advice addressed to common people, for example, how to get the right price for gold, how to save and loan money and invest in shares and unit trusts, or how to save and invest for getting a higher pension. Approximately a quarter of the paper consists of – often full page – advertisements (plus the weekend special lifestyle supplements) focusing on glamorous consumption products such as expensive apartments and furniture, banks, cars, petrol, fashion, health, vacation travels, amusements, gambling and lotteries. All in all, only ca one fourth to one third of the paper is left to domestic and foreign news and societal reports.

So whereas the mainstream press in Sweden constructs a seemingly reasonable picture of the materially marginalized Swedes, the papers simultaneously focus on luxurious consumption and thus give mixed messages, a discourse that obscures the material gaps and the reasons for them. A longer period of time will be analysed also to find out which groups are not at all included.

The Swedish media's discourse of material gaps, poverty and wealth in other countries will also be included the analysis. The first review of the six papers indicates that poverty and material divides during the last three months are often mentioned in connection with the European Union and its monetary cooperation – the Euro. This news reporting is much more dramatic and sensational in its character than the news on material gaps in the Sweden and it is repeatedly called a “crisis” or “dept crisis”.

This is also the “dept crisis” that the United Nations in mid-2012 regards as the biggest “threat” to the world economy:

Despite scattered signs of improvement, the world economic situation and prospects continue to be challenging. After a marked slowdown in 2011, global economic growth will likely remain tepid in 2012, with most regions expanding at a pace below potential. In the face of subdued growth, the jobs crisis continues, with global unemployment still above its pre-crisis level and unemployment in the euro area rising rapidly. The risks to the global outlook are tilted to the downside. The euro area debt crisis remains the biggest threat to the world economy. (United Nations, 2012).

Several scholars have considered the fact that the way in which media construct dangers, risks and threats, contribute to and are tightly intertwined with political decision-making in Western society. Media are generally more and more engaged in disseminating fear messages and speculative, future threat scenarios (for instance, regarding the war on terror, environmental problems, pandemics) something that also many times implies a construction of “politicized” fears of “the Others”, thus constructing national identities, as well (Nohrstedt, 2010). One reason for this augmenting media trend is that the consequences of many risks and threats can be regarded as more far-reaching than in historical times because of the development of information and communication technologies and also because of increased migration, trade (of food, money, etc.) and tourism across borders which have accelerated the so-called globalization processes. According to Furedi (2006) this expanded risk concept cultivates a “culture of fear” which in turn contributes to “crises of democracy”.

Nohrstedt (2010) puts forward the idea that when a risk is politicized, it tends to be formulated as a threat. Furthermore, he puts forward the thesis that the rhetoric of threats and how they shall be managed become a precondition for legitimately exercising political power. Such threat politics are also related to the construction of identities and identity conflicts by the proliferating of other people

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as potential threats – which may produce or reproduce intensified conflicts between different social strata and ethnic groups (cf. the politics of the George W. Bush's administration regarding the proclaimed War on Terror).

Also in Sweden, there are similar instances. One is that the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2011) recently at the initiative of the European Union for the first time has identified and made a joint collection of all risks that Sweden can be hit by. Despite the title on risks of the publication, which presents 24 risks, the word “threat” is frequently used in combination with or synonymously with the word “risk” in the running text.

The political discourse is reinforced by the media discourse – both in news media and popular culture. Cottle (2009) claims that this mediatization process implies that problems or dangers also often are created by the media, tending to sensationally redefine the problems into “global crises” or “threats” in order to attract a broader audience for creating consensus for one or another political action. In this dramatization, as in drama mostly, media construct a conflict with villains and heroes. That is, media also more or less explicitly indicate who is responsible for the threat, thus creating a situation of “Us” and “Them”. This is, for instance, evident in the Swedish newspapers' treatment of the EU or Euro crisis, recently focusing on Greece. Beside emphasizing material divides and poverty in Greece, the analysing journalists accuse several institutions and groups of persons as possibly responsible for the crisis – the banks, the people, all of us in Europe, the consuming lifestyle in West, and so on. However, there are also journalistic statements or hints that the Greeks themselves are wasteful and (unlike us) are not able to handle their economy.

CONCLUDING WORDS

As mentioned, the share of poor people in Russia has diminished during the last decade, that is, the welfare of the Russian population has increased. At the same time, the number of very rich persons in Russia has multiplied. An interesting fact in this context is that political protest movements recently have emerged.

The possible contribution of media to such processes is not simple or straightforward but full of nuances. Discourse analyses of media contents can reveal how truths effects are shaped, by which consensus might be achieved for political actions regarding important societal issues. Such conclusions from media discourses will be more stable in a comparative perspective, not least by a comparison of media in two cities with very different historical, societal, cultural and economic conditions.

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