

Open Peer Commentaries

on Julia Völker & Armin Scholl's

"Do the Media Fail to Represent Reality?"



Communication and Media Studies in Crisis

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> Upshot • The present commentary is not intended as a criticism of the arguments presented in Julia Völker and Armin Scholl's target article. I very much agree with these arguments. I only wish to draw attention to the fact that Völker and Scholl are not writing about global warming or climate change; their article suggests that communication and media studies are in a state of crisis.

The journalistic concept of objectivity and its basis

« 1 » The necessary facts for garnering a better understanding of the target article are as follows. Journalism arose as an independent profession at the end of the 1800s. The first university programme for journalism education was offered at the University of Missouri from 1879–1884. Between these two dates, the first basic theoretical conceptions of the press and the media began to emerge. Journalists and publishers, as practitioners, needed a theory that would help them make sense of their actions and rationally operationalise the concepts related to these activities.

« 2 » As was appropriate for this era, these perceptions were based on the positivism founded and described as a scientific theoretical school in the first half of the 19th century by Auguste Comte. Positivism defines itself as a common-sense approach to

knowledge. It assumes that all knowledge is based on the "positive" data of experience. All that we know is what we can immediately know via our senses; therefore, the only way to reach knowledge is through our senses. When certain knowledge has been achieved, this knowledge acts as a building block in the total sum of human knowledge.

« 3 » In the positivist tradition, communication is regarded as the transportation of messages (and later information) from one point to another. That linear and mechanistic approach assumes by default that there is a simple and clearly defined epistemological situation. Outside of us is absolute reality, independent of us; we perceive this reality and transmit the experience with the help of language to other people, who use the acquired information to act in a manner suitable to the situation. According to this notion, the knowledge that emerges in the cognitive process is seen as more or less a picture-like (iconic) correspondence with the real world; accordingly, messages conveyed in communication reflect things that already exist in reality. Hence arises the naive belief that "newspapers write about it for a reason," or "I saw it on TV with my own eyes, so that's that!"

« 4 » Due to these basic assumptions, the (positivist) concept of objectivity is central in everyday journalistic practice as well as in communication and media studies: our judgments or the media messages are either objective or subjective. As is typical of the epistemological realism, there is no third option. To be objective is to say that one's judgment or message is content to present that which is not affected by one's assessments; it contains only facts. Facts are what can be experienced directly, that which others may experience in the same way. Being

subjective means that someone's own evaluations affects knowledge. When someone communicates facts, by definition he or she is being objective. A sharp distinction between news and opinions clearly emerges from the positivistic concept of objectivity. News, which is, or at least should be, objective since it provides the facts, is more important than opinions. However, entertainment as an escape from reality, as escapism, is seen in the eyes of traditional mass communication research as something less valuable and unassuming.

Why is the position of objectivity so strong?

« 5 » Such a concept of journalistic objectivity, derived mainly from positivism a century and a half ago, is obviously inconsistent with the basic assumptions of constructivism: the well-known formula of the genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget that the mind organises the world by organising itself (Piaget 1971: 311); in the theory of cognition of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980, 1998), that the neural system is an "operationally closed" and internally determined system and can only be characterised with reference to itself; Heinz von Foerster's second-order cybernetics, which emphasises the autonomy of the consciousness system and cognition, self-organisation and the active role of the (human) observer in the construction of models of systems and other observers (Foerster 1970: 47); Ernst von Glasersfeld's theory of knowledge (1995), which describes knowledge as conceptual formations in the experiential world; and with many other ideas necessary for better understanding of the world. The positivist concept of journalistic objectivity is also contrary to the key positions of social

constructionism as a theoretical orientation, as the latter similarly invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us – to an objective, unbiased observation of the world – and argues that reality is socially constructed (Burr 2003: 3).

« 6 » Despite the fact that the traditional discourse on objectivity has been heavily criticised, neither journalism nor communication and media studies have abandoned the positivist concept of objectivity and the resulting perceptions. However, it is understood that a zero-degree unbiased or objective account of reality out there is impossible and that objectivity cannot be considered simply as a given set of facts that can be objectively represented. The position of objectivity in the eyes of journalists, as well as the audience, has been unflappable, especially because the legitimacy of the media is largely based upon the idea that it is able to present “true pictures” of reality. Nobody would trust the media if journalists or publishers stated that the messages offered by them do not correspond to reality. Furthermore, the presence or absence of objectivity is an indicator that signals the existence of journalistic independence (Lewis 2004: 302). The concept of objectivity in Western liberal democracies is seen as the “cornerstone” of journalism (Deuze 2005: 448; Lichtenberg 2005: 216); it is a sort of nodal point or a benchmark that differentiates good journalism from bad. Objectivity is a central organising concept in the newsroom, in the management of media organisations and in media policies (Schudson 2001: 150). Furthermore, society has developed its normative expectations towards the media from the positivistic way of understanding objectivity.

« 7 » In this situation, media researchers have made numerous attempts to get around the traditional notion of objectivity or to re-define the concept of objectivity. Those efforts cannot, of course, be described adequately in a few paragraphs. Let it be noted that their attempts have been made by defining objectivity as adherence to certain norms or standards (for example *truth*, *relevance*, *balance* and *neutral presentation*, *non-partisanship*, etc.) (Shaw, McCombs & Keir 1997: 303; Schudson 2001: 151; Fox & Park 2006: 37, etc.). However, all attempts to

measure, e.g., the impartiality or relevance of media messages have led to the inevitable return of positivism because no matter how intricate the dodging one has performed, the media’s representation of reality with actual reality will eventually be compared.

« 8 » The norms under discussion are in turn divided into two categories: “norms as prescriptive rules” and “norms as prevalent practices” (Schudson 2001: 151; Tumber & Prentoulis 2005: 216, etc.). The first constitute a theoretical imperative underpinning reporting, while the latter are something like a strategic ritual that protects journalism from critical interferences. Based on the same logic, the political philosopher Ernesto Laclau (2000, 2005) has distinguished between “Objectivity-as-a-value” and “Objectivity-as-a-practice,” the first being universal and the second being particular.

What can be done?

« 9 » Völker and Scholl’s article on the relationship between media coverage and reality is a first-class indication that numerous attempts to free media research from positivist thinking and its concept of objectivity have failed. Even more, the target paper shows that media researchers as well as journalists continue to utilise a positivist concept of objectivity. In other words, journalism and positivism have remained close not only under the influence of everyday thinking, but also of a large part of the scientific work. With the help of a second-order research strategy, Völker and Scholl uncover these basic assumptions on which the comparison of media coverage with reality is based and they criticise the normative implications derived from these assumptions. Although the media coverage of climate change is specifically under observation, the conclusions of the authors of the article are relevant to the practice of social scientific research in general as well as communication and media studies.

« 10 » Basically, Völker and Scholl draw attention to the fact that the core concepts and reigning metaphors of communication and media studies, and with them the notions of reality and media relations, are out-dated. They originate from the middle of the 19th century, express the beliefs and practices of their time and do not allow for understanding of many phenomena that are

important for us. Furthermore, the level of sophistication of the positive notion of communication has increased much faster than its explanatory ability, the latter indeed being rather diminished. Signs of this sort indicate that communication and media studies are in a state of crisis.

« 11 » I do not consider this a Kuhnian crisis, which has emerged from the fact that scientists encounter anomalies that cannot be explained by the universally accepted paradigm.

« 12 » According to Kuhn, a paradigm consists of an interlinked set of beliefs about the appropriate subjects for investigation, the appropriate methods for investigating them, the criteria of a good theory, the concepts to be used (and their meanings) and the primary theories explaining them (Kuhn 1970: 10). In my opinion, different approaches to communication science are based on the various basic assumptions that express (a) diverse epistemological positions about the nature of knowledge and how to gain knowledge, and (b) different attitudes towards the individual. These, in turn, result in the different attitudes towards communication. These implicit assumptions, “theories-in-use,” are shared by some groups of researchers and are therefore mutually reinforced; these are the ones that actually guide the behaviour of scientists and tell group members how to perceive, think and feel about the phenomena under observation. The methods of research are also based on these basic notions.

« 13 » Different approaches are selected primarily on the basis of the basic assumptions, and one or another approach is abandoned because an integrated set of such assumptions ceases to be taken for granted as the only correct way for group members to see the world. Völker and Scholl indicate in their article that the hidden assumptions of communication and media studies are hopelessly out-dated, and the normative conclusions drawn from them are ill-founded. There is only one place where I argue against the authors of the target article. In §3, they say that by applying a second-order (meta-) analysis they want to uncover the ontological premises of the two studies. But the talk is not about ontological premises, as constructivism, just like realism, implies the existence of a reality independent of the ob-

server. Constructivism and realism occupy different positions in the realm of epistemology.

« 14 » So, what can be done? The primary task of the constructivist-minded communication scholar should obviously be the further development of constructivist communication and media theory. Replacement of the old positivist and behaviourist prejudices by an approach orientated at individuals and their cognition allows for better understanding of communication as well as the emergence of social orders and dynamics of social systems, since we can only treat the social world as a universe that emerges and develops in a symbolic exchange and in the accompanying process of self-organisation.

« 15 » One of the key challenges in the application of constructivism in communication science is re-thinking the relationship between media and reality and redefining the concept of objectivity. That does not mean replacing objectivity with intersubjectivity; in line with Maturana and von Glasersfeld, the key to the solution is the problem-solving capacity of the concepts and theories. Both in face-to-face, as well as in media communication, it is the consequences of personal and social constructions that decide whether they foster the ability of the individuals and social entities to cope with their environment or not.

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Why We Need a Pragmatic View on Reality and the Media

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> **Upshot** • In their paper, Völker and Scholl use one of my studies as an example of an objectivist research strategy, which they criticize. In this reply, I am trying to introduce a pragmatic perspective on the comparison of real-world indicators and media content. Moreover, I explain how my study was already guided by that perspective.

« 1 » The idea that every description of reality is biased by the observer's subjective perception clearly holds true, but is also relatively trivial. The question rather is how to deal with that knowledge. The constructivist approach puts it at the center of its worldview and consequently assumes that there is no right or wrong description of reality, or no reality at all that one could describe. But obviously this consequence is far from how we behave in everyday life. In fact, we see a doctor when we feel ill because we assume that his diagnosis is a better construction of reality than what we or other lay people suppose. Moreover, we prefer a legal system in which lawyers and not lay people decide about the degree of penalty because we trust them to find a better decision due to their expertise. We do this despite knowing that doctors' and lawyers' perceptions are also biased and, therefore, sometimes wrong, while lay people are sometimes right. All of us have experienced several times that these are quite helpful assumptions. At the same time, we clearly expect others to inform us correctly when we depend on their information. And we expect others to quote us correctly when they talk about things we said. This holds true even if we know that others do not always understand us correctly. For example, if in this commentary I stated that Julia Völker and Armin Scholl's target article speaks against a constructivist approach in communication science, the authors would clearly not take this for a different construction of reality (the "commentary reality") but feel wrongly quoted. Obviously, in ev-

eryday life we are used to dealing with the idea that reality cannot be described objectively in a pragmatic way. We know that no description of reality is absolutely right but do not assume that, therefore, each description of reality must be right or wrong to the same extent; with that premise, human co-existence and even survival would be almost impossible. The idea that we are not able to describe reality completely objectively is, therefore, in its abstract form a noteworthy fact. However, it has absolutely no practical consequences for everyday life.

« 2 » How are these considerations connected to the question of whether we can and should compare media content to real-world indicators? If we followed the constructivist approach, not only this comparison but every kind of empirical research would consequently be senseless because it would not be able to claim to lead to better descriptions of reality than individual perceptions of any lay people. So why spend a lot of money on it? The question is whether we should accept those serious consequences or try to find a pragmatic solution for the problem – just as we do in everyday life. In my view, the question of whether the mass media present scientific facts correctly (as they have been detected by scientists we can consider as experts, in contrast to journalists that we can consider as scientific lay people) is one of the most relevant questions in communication research. Therefore, the chance to answer that question should not be dropped recklessly. As Völker and Scholl (§5) state, news reporting is based on facts and not fiction. But this, in my view, should not be considered to be a kind of lip service, as the authors do (§16). Instead, the premise that media content is a more or less correct portrayal of scientific (and other) facts is a constitutive condition providing journalism with its public legitimacy. If we do not expect more from journalism than we expect from internet blogs and publications of interest groups or conspiracists, journalism will not be able to survive. Of course, journalists share their own selection criteria, which may be the main cause of differences between real-world indicators and media content. But those criteria are not a natural law, as the authors seem to suggest. They do not inevitably lead to a "media reality" that has necessarily to be different from scientific