RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Do the Media Fail to Represent Reality? It Depends Martin R. Herbers

« 7 » Third, the authors argue that there is no objectivity "without parenthesis" and criticize the normative implications based on ontological assumptions. I completely agree with them but could not help wondering: So what? The authors mainly show us how not to do it, and not how to do it. If we follow a constructivist approach and argue that journalists take an active part in constructing media reality, we consequently have to ask how they do it and what the influencing factors are. Unfortunately, the authors restrict themselves to suggesting "further research… (e.g., surveys among journalists)" and do not mention any specifics. In our own empirical research on climate communication, my colleague Michael Brüggemann and I follow two main approaches: the first is rather sociological in nature and conceives climate journalists as embedded in interpretive communities where they negotiate meaning by means of professional socialization, journalistic co-orientation, and networks of sources (Brüggemann & Engesser 2014); the second is mainly inspired by psychological research and explores the cognitive frames of climate journalists and how those are reflected in their articles.[2] Both approaches can be combined in a multilevel model that helps us understand how climate journalists (and journalists in general) construct realities.

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[2] Our article "Mapping the minds of the mediators: The cognitive frames of climate journalists in five countries" is currently under review at *Public Understanding of Science*.

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>Upshot · The commentary aims to amend Völker and Scholl's argumentation. Some points should be reconsidered, such as the object of communication research, types of media that are scrutinized and a broader theoretical background.

« 1 » Julia Völker and Armin Scholl provide a compelling argument: the analysis and normative critique of (science) journalism by communication scholars should not focus exclusively on a mere comparison between an ontological reality, a scientifically constructed reality and a journalistically constructed reality. The resulting detection of a media bias thus should not be regarded as normatively wrong or a failure of journalism. Rather, it should be seen as an expression of a construction mechanism that is inherent to any autonomous social system, such as journalism or science, and that constitutes an independent reality.

« 2 » Although thorough in their argumentation, the authors omit two highly influential points in their course of arguments, which need elaboration in order to provide a broader critique of mediated construction of reality, and not only of journalism. The first point concerns the underlying understanding of the object of communication research, which is a comparison between mediated reality and non-mediated reality, as Völker and Scholl propose in §1. Based on this assumption, the authors focus on news media as one of the dominant modes of providing relevant information for society. Within this course of argumentation, this choice is only logical, as biased news media fail to fulfill their social relevant task. Nevertheless, news media are just a small part of the media system. Entertainment media communication, which is left out here, should be taken into account too, as it is not only a vital part of the media system, but is able to provide societally relevant information as well – only in a differ-

ent mode of presentation. The second point thus focuses on the types of media in which climate change is communicated.

The object of communication research

« 3 » The distinction between an ideally exact depiction of reality and a necessarily selective constructed mediated depiction of reality is one of the main topics in communication science. Even though the "paradigm" of a mediated construction of reality is a more recent phenomenon, it is of tremendous analytical impact: Winfried Schulz (1989) compares it to the Copernican Revolution in astronomy. This impact can be felt in the application of Niklas Luhmann's (1984) theory of social systems to questions of (mass) communication, which peaked in the German communication science community in the mid-1990s (for a summary of several approaches to this application with regard to journalism, media and communication, see Görke & Kohring 1996).

« 4 » With the advent of the notion that any social reality is necessarily constructed, realistic approaches to mass media and accompanying analyses diminished, although some theoretical approaches, such as the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 2001), are still based on this assumption. While the task of communication science – to uncover media bias – is among the tasks of communication science, it is not at its core. As the self-description of the German society for Communication Science (DGPuK) points out, their approach is to analyze the "social constituents, consequences and meanings of mediated, public and interpersonal communication."[3] Recent textbooks state that the analysis of *public communication* is at the heart of communication science (Bonfadelli, Jarren & Siegert 2005: 10). Therefore, placing emphasis on critiquing media bias created by news media, without the backdrop of theories of public communication and the public sphere, leaves out other forms

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[3] "Die Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft beschäftigt sich mit den sozialen Bedingungen, Folgen und Bedeutungen von medialer, öffentlicher und interpersonaler Kommunikation." Retrieved from http://www.dgpuk.de/uber-die-dgpuk/selbstverstandnis on 20 October 2014, my translation.

of public communication that contribute to the public discussion on climate change as well.

Communicating climate change in different types of media

« 5 » The mediated construction of reality is not confined to a single type or genre of mass media, such as the news. Any mediated communication offers a certain media reality, which differs with regard to the underlying constructing principles. News media offer a different perspective on a certain topic than, e.g., entertainment media.

« 6 » The focus on news media thus excludes a great amount of media communications and accompanying constructions of reality that are relevant to the public discussion of social and political issues such as climate change (Göttlich 2009; Göttlich & Herbers 2014). This can be regarded as a normative setting in communication science, which values research on news media more than research on entertainment media (Görke 2003: 69). The problem intensifies when hybrid media, consisting of entertaining and informational aspects, are taken into account. As Andreas Dörner (2001) discusses with regard to "politainment," mixing entertaining modes of presentation with informational aspects becomes a dominant mode of presentation for political information. It is easily accessible, even for audiences that generally avoid political information, and tends to add content of everyday life to the "hard facts" of the issues presented. However, this subverts the idealized separation of informational and entertaining communications and forms a new kind of mediated reality.

« 7 » To overcome the analytical obstacles that derive from the obstacles from media and their accompanying media realities, Alexander Görke (2003) proposes to "take a step back" and to choose a new standpoint in the systematic analysis of mediatized communication, based on Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. As Görke points out, certain social or political issues are reported differently, depending on the type of media. To stay in the example of Völker and Scholl, the issue of climate change can be the topic of a newscast, an episode of a television series or even a feature film. The modes of presentation may differ but the underlying issue remains the same. Luhmann (1997) argues that this is a result of selections that constitute the communication process. He thinks of communication as a process that necessarily involves three types of selections. A "communicator" performs the first selection, called information, and picks a topic from the "pool" of all possible topics. The second selection, which Luhmann names "message," puts emphasis on the mode of presentation. It is possible, as we have shown, to communicate a certain choice of topic differently, for example as a newscast or as a television documentary. The audience performs the third selection, named "understanding." In this model, understanding is not to be confused with a cognitive process but is the receiver's task of distinguishing between the selections of information and the message performed by the communicator. The form is separated from the content and processed, including feedback to the communicator that this task has been performed or not, leading to a self-referential construction of communicated reality.

« 8 » Based on this, Görke (2003) proposes that analytical emphasis should be placed on the interplay of the first and second selection of the communication process, performed by the communicator. As there is no direct connection between a topic and a certain mode of presentation, Görke (2003: 68f) argues that the communicator has the possibility to select a certain mode of presentation as he sees fit. Thus, a continuum between the idealized types of "purely" informative communication, which is based on hard facts, and "purely" entertaining communication, which prefers form to content, is formed. In an act of so-called "operative displacement," the communicator is able to choose a certain mode of presentation deriving from this continuum.

« 9 » Based on these selections of content and form, Görke points out that if these selections are performed on a regular basis, they form specific genres and fixed modes of presentation, which eventually evolve into systematic entities. With regard to the end points of the proposed continuum, Görke calls these "journalism" and "entertainment." Both systems are able to provide society with certain content, only in different modes of presentation. They fulfill the same function for society, nevertheless: they provide information and through this allow societal self-observation and synchronization. Görke (2003: 59–69) thus defines journalism and entertainment as so-called service systems ("Leistungssysteme") for a functional social system *public sphere*.

« 10 » The public sphere in the sense of Görke thus contains different forms of reality constructions by different media. With regard to the self-description of the DG-PuK, the task of communication science is now to analyze the different forms of reality construction rather then to perform a comparison between mediated reality and non-mediated reality, as Völker and Scholl point out in §1.

Conclusion: The media fail to represent reality, but that is not the problem

« 11 » The mediated construction of reality is an all-encompassing process, which does not stop at news media. Any public communication, ranging from news to entertainment media, can be held responsible for presenting, but not re-presenting, reality in a certain way. Therefore, the construction of a media reality around a scientific issue is necessarily "biased," i.e., highly selective. Rather than asking if this construct is correct in a factual sense, the questions for communication scholars could be: How are these mediated realities constructed? and: What is the contribution of these constructed realities to the public sphere? This would lead to an appreciation of the underlying principles of selection with regard to any kind of media and to the inclusion of broader questions of social order and shared construction of reality through the application of theories of the public sphere.

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