

MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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What does “media construct reality” mean?

From an ontological to an empirical understanding of construction.

It has very quickly become textbook wisdom: “media construct reality.” But what does that mean? Did they always do that? Or are they doing it more and more? Or even both of those? Which level are we talking about? Does reality construction mean a factual statement within a theory of knowledge? Or a conscious strategy? Is it simply that we (journalists as well as percipients) *cannot not* construct or can one decide for or against the construction of reality?

The discussion about “reality construction” has become, in the meantime, inflated 2 – and not only throughout the entire arts, social and cultural sciences but also in disciplines such as mathematics, biology, physics or architecture. It appears as if it is a central discovery of postmodern science that more or less ‘everything’ is constructed – space and time as well as xenophobia; sex and gender as much as the reality of mass media.”

One can only understand the fascination of the catchword “reality construction” when one realises which thoughts are meant to be replaced by it in the first place: reality so-called. By and large it concerns a new version of the discourse in Western philosophy which has been going on for the last two thousand years as to whether the world ‘out there’ really is ‘there’ or is only constructed by us. In the history of philosophy there are many ‘isms’ which are connected with this discussion: essentialism and nominalism, materialism and idealism, and of course recently, realism and constructivism. In all of these schools of thought the concern is with the basic question whether an agent or unit X (this can be a person, an observer, a brain, a social system in various forms, the entire culture, the whole society, the media as a whole etc.) that believes that it knows reality has created it or only depicted it.

Realism starts from the position that it is *more likely* that it is reality or it is only reality which has an effect on the agent (and not the reverse); while constructivism asserts that it is more likely or only the agent that, in the act of perceiving reality, creates it.

The differing agents that generate realities are bound up with the different currents of constructivism:

Table 1 Constructing agent/ unit	Varieties of Constructivism
Brain	Neurobiological constructivism (representative: Gerhard Roth)
‘Cognitive system’ ‘Observer’	Constructivist bio-epistemology (representative: Humberto R. Maturana)
‘Social system’, Communication	Auto-poietic system theory (representatives: Niklas Luhmann, Peter Fuchs et al)
Culture	(Constructivist) Culturalism (representative: Peter Janich)
Media (individual media and mass media systems)	Media-cultural constructivism (representatives: Gebhard Rusch, Klaus Merten et.al.)
Cognition, communication, media and culture	Socio-cultural constructivism (representative: Siegfried J. Schmidt)

As the table shows, various constructors dedicate them selves to various constructivisms: thus for brain researcher Gerhard Roth it appears indisputable that the brain is the ‘mother’ of all reality construction: even the imagination and reflection on (self)consciousness or ‘self’ is a constructive product of the brain, as neural ‘labelling’ as it were. (cf. Roth 1996, 44 et. seq.) 3 Other thinkers either focus on primary communication, culture or media as the reality-generating agent while only advanced constructivism in the variation propounded by Seigfried J. Schmidt attempts to observe all agents equally in a ‘closed circuit’.

Most variations of modern constructivism, especially those developed within the German-speaking scientific discourse, consider themselves to be a counterposition to realism (whether in the guise of naïve, moderate or even radical constructivism) which is still the dominating intellectual model in scientific work, to the mimetic way of thinking and speaking or, as the case may be, to the paradigm of reality depiction which—constructivism alleges—is either latently or manifestly advocated by the majority of scientists. Accordingly, the constructivist way of thought reads as the antipode of the realistic field of terminology.

Realistic terminology (= mimetic way of thinking)	Constructivist terminology (= poietic way of thought)
Semantic field “depiction”	semantic field “construction” 5
Depicting	Making
Representing	Constructing, generating
Copying, imitating	Planning, designing, producing, creating (re)producing
Reflecting, projecting	Embodying, producing, building (up)
Discovering (?)	Inventing (?)

And the classic questions between realism and constructivism are thus: **Is reality a discovery or an invention? Do media reflect reality (exactly or distortedly) or to they construct it in the first place? Is the world a projection or a design? Do we represent something or are we (and always have been) constructs? Do we depict reality or build it up?**

One does not have to be an expert in constructivist discourse to understand that the majority of constructivist have become involved in these philosophically crucial questions and have reacted to the realist generalisation—“everything is depiction”—with a constructivist generalisation—“everything is construction”. The majority of constructivists nowadays (unfortunately) propose that the constructive nature of our reality and world is the *conditio sine qua non* of knowing. In other words: Man cannot not construct, one ‘always’ has done that, ‘we’ always come too late and can’t decide for or against construction as a precondition and mode of knowing. I would like to call this form of constructivism—which is to be persistently found in all the above-mentioned variations of constructivist though—ontological constructivism. At first that sounds as if it would be a contradiction in terms because how can constructivism as a theory of the active processes of knowing ever be ontological, that is claim the unalterable existence of a fact?

The assertion “everything is construction” becomes caught in the well-known logical dilemma of the infinite regression: if “everything” is construction, then this sentence is also etc. etc.—but what knowledge of value does the sentence contain in addition? If I take the constructor of reality out of the constructed reality in order to avoid exactly that contradiction (as Gerhard Roth does), then I land in another paradoxical ontology again in that the brain is the constructor of reality outside of the constructed reality, that is, it sits ‘out there’ in the real

world. But how can we ever know if reality is constructed by the brain? Who has ever seen (and with what) brains in a (non-constructed, real) reality?

One might object that an ontological constructivism which regards the constructed nature of the world as an unalterable fact is almost never proposed. A few quotations from the literature will serve as a refutation. Thus Gebhard Rusch, for example, in his critical discussion of my variation of constructivism wrote that one cannot compare realistic procedures and processes with constructivist ones “*as if within the framework of a constructivist approach there was an alternative to cognitive-social constructiveness*” (Rusch 1999, 9). If there is no alternative to cognitive-social constructiveness, then at least more (or less) constructiveness? It is not difficult to realise that every attempt at gradual empiricism is repulsed. Often the ‘fact’ of constructiveness is not represented as a result but rather as a pre-condition. The journalism researcher, Alexander Görke, who is oriented on systems theory, writes in an article with the subtitle “On the Reality of Mass Media” with the following as the first sentence: *Talk about the functional system of mass media is based on the observation that also mass media and journalism too [...] construct reality sui generis. For theoretical considerations of the system this raises the question of how this specific form of creating social order is possible and that means how the mass media system distinguishes itself from its surroundings.*” (Görke 2001, 55).

Here, too, the observation of the constructiveness precedes theory formation; the assumption of the construction of a different reality by each social system becomes the presupposition of the debate on how systems differentiate themselves from their surroundings. Any further examination of this “reality sui generis” or with the terminology of constructing which is used does not take place.

A third example comes from Siegfried J. Schmidt himself. He writes:

“Reality construction of actors are subject-bound but not subjective in the sense of arbitrary, intentional or relativistic. And that is because in the construction of reality individuals [...] are always too late. Everything which becomes conscious first assumes the unattainable neuronal activity of consciousness; everything which is said presumes an already unconsciously acquired mastery of language; how things will be talked about and with what effect. All of this pre-supposes socially regulated and culturally programmed discourses within the social system. In this respect these processes organise the reality construction of themselves and thus create their own ordering of reality(y)ies.” (Schmidt 2000, 47 ff.)

Once again constructivism appears as an ontological theory offering no alternatives: constructiveness was always there, whether one wants it or not.⁶ Why is there this notorious disregard of *conscious will* as an instrument of reality construction? The answer is right in front of our eyes: German language constructivism was always concerned with removing the term ‘construction’ from any connotation of planning—intentional or strategic production⁷—and move it towards an unconscious, unintentional, arbitrary production of reality. In the process it is forgotten that there is no logically compelling reason why constructivism should not observe *both*⁸. Here the unconscious, non-arbitrary construction of reality (in a neuronal sense and well as in the sense of our pre-existing systems of inherited abilities, socialisation and [native] language, that is to say, those constructions which ‘we’ cannot control actively and consciously or if, then only partially) and there the conscious, arbitrary construction (in the sense of a conscious construction of the world as, for example, in tabloid journalism through the power of the imagination, by using certain linguistic techniques and styles of discussion etc.). To recapitulate more precisely and to apply it to the media complex: the statement “media construct reality” can be understood as “media construct reality” per se and *always* have because it is not possible to do anything else, because the relationship of

world and media is, in itself, constructive. This is the position of so-called *radical constructivism* that, in my critical revision, is really an *ontological constructivism*. It leads to the old philosophical stalemate between realism and constructivism – and to the well-known question as to whether the person who has just had a blow delivered to the head is in real or constructive pain. May the philosophers take one position or another and argue it for the next two thousand years as well! Whoever proposes a radical i.e. ontological constructivism on the level of knowledge theory does not, a priori, deny the possibility that there could be another constructivism but in general it is the philosophical all-encompassing generalisation of constructionism itself which is advocated.

The statement “media construct reality” can, however, also be supplemented by: *more and more* or *less and less*. This would be a **processual or empirical variation of constructivism** that would appear substantially more plausible. The objection of the orthodox, ontological constructivists is that an observation like this is logically incompatible with constructivism and leads back to realism. **And in point of fact, the statement that “media construct reality more and more, more frequently or more often” more in keeping with realism since construction is more likely to be understood as a conscious strategy.** Would the possibility of differentiating between *construction* (as an ontological pre-condition of knowing) and *constructiveness* (as an empirical +/- trend) offer a way out of the dilemma? Theoretically this would be possible though it is, however, almost impossible to maintain looked at from a pragmatic linguistic standpoint. It appears to me to make more sense not to bind processual or empirical constructivism—as I understand it—epistemologically either on realism or on constructivism but rather on an alternative to both these currents of epistemology: on non-dualistic philosophy, that wants to leave the question of depiction or construction behind it. One might see a trend to this non-dualistic way of thought in the development of Siegfried J. Schmidt’s constructivism (cf. Schmidt 2002) although Schmidt starting out from non-dualism only to land even more definitively in an (at least remainder of) ontological constructivism. 9

Empirical constructivism is thus concerned with *constructiveness as an empirically measurable trend on the basis of a non-dualistic epistemology*. But what does that mean? Non-dualism (according to Mitterer 1992 and 2001 as well as its use in Weber’s media theory 1996) reconstructs realism and constructivism as the results of a particular philosophical technique of argumentation, viz a dualistic way of speaking: only when there is a difference between the observer (subject, instance...) and the observed (world, reality) in the first place can the question as to which of the two parts is more ‘weighty’ be asked. Is it the agent that creates the world (= constructivism) – or is it the world that affects the instance (= realism)? Non-dualistic philosophy in the version of the Austrian philosopher Josef Mitterer means in the first place ‘only’ the critical analysis of this discourse in philosophy. Dualism is to be made transparent in to arrive, in a second step, at an epistemological theory which does not depend on differentiating observer and observed (in my terminology; according to Mitterer’s it would be called ‘description’ and ‘object’). **Applied to media it means nothing more than not to assume the dualism of media (as a reality generating and/or depicting agent) and reality (as the product and/or precondition for media reporting) without questioning it** i.e. to ontologise it.

Let us look at the example of the reporting of the terrorism of 11.9. Of course I can assert that the camera pictures *per se* construct reality and so at this level I can argue an ontological constructivism. At the same time I can also determine that increasing chronological distance to the events meant *increasing* construction – therefore processual or empirical constructivism! What has to be taken into account simply that both levels (here the epistemological-generalising theory; there the practical-empirical) have to be separated from each other in the discourse, without that leading to entrenched dualism once again. In my

view empirical constructivism allows one to break talk about constructivity down to the praxis of current media communication. Constructivity 10 is no longer simply a conflictual term or an empty empirical place-keeper but a concrete trend that might be thought of as embedded in other **macro-trends of increasing media permeation** such as **the process of transforming everything into entertainment or fiction, acceleration, commercialisation/economisation** etc. Revealed forgeries such as Kujau's Hitler diaries, Michael Born's feature film fakes or Tom Kummer's invented interviews under the "faction journalism" label are, however, only the tip of the iceberg within the framework of a trend towards more and more constructivity. I am thinking here about the increasingly broad interpenetration of journalism and entertainment (most recently "militainment" is making a name for itself i.e. reality TV in Hollywood guise 'live' from the campaign theatre of operations 11) or about the construction of reality in real life soaps. The good old quote from Walter Benjamin seems more pertinent than ever:

"... in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign body of the equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology." (Benjamin 1963, 35).

As can be seen here with little difficulty, Benjamin is also proposing an empirical constructivism although from the quote itself the epistemological origins from which the observation took place are not clear. The idea that the alleged real reality appearing to us on the screen is as unfiltered and unvarnished as possible and requires the highest degree of mechanical artificiality in order to appear real, still—and repeatedly—seems important to me. The other way round: less, more amateur or low-tech use of media is one of the factors which increases the impression of the images being constructed. 12 – All of these observations, however, are only possible within an empirical understanding of constructivity. Particularly the last-mentioned reversal ('the clearer real reality is suggested the more constructivity there is behind it') offers enormous potential for media criticism and media education. Of course this theory should not be ontologically transformed (in the sense of "*in reality* there is more constructivity behind it"). But the self-relativisation in a discourse cannot be over-emphasised.

In an era of info-tainment, edu-tainment and also milit-ainment, of real life soaps, docu-dramas, faction journalism and extreme TV, of gender-swapping and avatars it would appear that an **empirical constructivism** which considers constructivity as a trend towards more fictionalisation is **more necessary than ever**. I would like to emphasise once again that I am not suggesting a culturally critical pessimism in the sense of a loss of the reality 'out there' or a distancing from one reality and proposing a reality of nasty (post)modern media hybrids. It is much more that the question about *the* reality, *the* truth or reality *in itself* are revealed as philosophical detritus, as systematically misleading and therefore as wrongly framed. At the level of empirical media praxis it concerns the **observation of the process** and, therefore, the modalities of reality construction which are becoming increasingly more **refined, technically advanced and economically motivated**. So what is interesting is both the aspect of the reversal of classical reality ascriptions (fictionalisation and dramatisation of journalism vs. the increase in virtual 'reality depiction' in entertainment, cf. Weber 2001) as well as the tendency to hybridisation which questions dualist differentiations (infotainment as the intersection between information and entertainment, faction journalism as a balancing act between fact and fiction, infomercials as the intersection between journalism and advertising and not forgetting PR journalism in the disguise of journalism). In other words: numerous

phenomena in current media communication (from reconstructed scenes in reality TV to PR screeds in daily newspapers – the latter camouflaged under such captions as “reader services”) offer examples for analysis in the light of empirical constructivism. The concluding systematology attempts to give an overview of current as well as classical phenomena, genres and forms in degrees.

Table 3

Current modalities of reality construction in the (primarily audiovisual) mass media – distinguished by reference to reality (proximity to reality decreases from 1 to 8)

1. *Reality TV / Realtime TV / Eyewitness News* (real deployment of firemen, ambulance, police etc. with accompanying camera, with live broadcasting when possible).
2. *Classical information journalism* (world events with only a short time lapse, usually almost no reconstructed scenes as well as almost no direct media intervention in events) [this too is becoming increasingly doubtful!]
3. *'Narrative Reality Television'* ('real' events are reconstructed as in “AktENZEICHEN XY”, “Emergency” etc. programmes).
4. *Entertainment and tabloid journalism* (increase in media staged and constructed stories as well as an increase in conscious media agenda-setting)
5. *PR journalism* (conscious and intentional image and brand bias of the reporting, increasing lack of labelling)
6. *'Performative Reality Television'* ('actors in the context of staged action and thus within the paradigm 'game'. Examples: “Big Brother”, “Taxi Orange”, “Outback” etc.
7. *Faction Journalism, Journalistic (feature)film fakes*, inter alia, escalation of the constructive principle in journalism. (Michael Born, Tom Kummer etc.)
8. *Classical Entertainment formats* (Daily soaps, feature films etc.) and *Advertising*.

I want to mention once again the media influence of supposedly ‘real reality’ can definitely be observed constructively. In this area there are already tendencies to be seen in conscious constructivism – such as when police, firemen etc. or journalists orient themselves on the camera teams and intentionally exaggerate events. 14 Finally, a general assumption of constructivism – understood as a situational, critical reading methodology that is always aware of the media observer – is appropriate at this stage. But constructivism, as enunciated above, should not limit itself to generalising. Apart from that, it is worth noting that the proposed gradual continuum of reality construction unifies journalistic and entertainment forms of representation. This was unusual in communication sciences up till now. Empirical work that started from the proposed system would be able to prove that with its help a better understanding of current media-generated reality construction would be possible.

Footnotes:

1) The author received support from the Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften under APART [Austrian Programme for Advanced Research and Technology].

2) For a razor-sharp criticism of the ‘slogans’ of “social construction” cf. e.g. Hacking 1999.

3) Thus Gerhard Roth would never say that I, the person or actor, constructed a reality, but only their brain.

4) Greek: *poiein* = create, make, form.

5) Alternatives worth mentioning would be “fabrication” and “creation”.

6) S.J. Schmidt, in his contribution to the present *Medienimpulsen* (2002, manuscript p.2), also writes: “That in the discourse within identities and realities, a discourse outside of them can be asserted is beyond question; but the latter discourse is constructed by actors in the former.” Once again construction appears as established fact without an alternative – but how can we know with any certainty that it is so? (In endophysics it is said, paraphrasing, if the whole world is made of rubber then it does not matter if we say “world” or “rubber”). Curiously even Josef Mitterer ends his book “*Das Jenseits der Philosophie*”—which concerns the development of a non-dualistic way of thinking—with the sentence: “The objects of understanding are also self-fabricated.” (Mitterer, 1992, p.111). Apparently Mitterer wanted distance between himself and the constructivists and thus avoided using the word (self) constructed – semantically, however, he is in line with them (see table 2) and with this he, too, has formulated an (undeniable?) generalisation.

7) The philosopher Hans Lenk also sees an obstacle in the term ‘construction’ which, in common speech, indicates “a conscious, systematic design” (Lenk, 1995, p.12).

8) A similar, reflex-like rejection of an intuitive enlightening meaning has happened with the term ‘medium’: in countless writings it is stressed that the term ‘medium’ does not refer to the technical, materialist apparatus but rather much more its use within a socio-cultural context (which then even—as with Roland Burkart, for example—leads to a differentiation between bare, ‘technical infrastructure’ and ‘real’ medium – see Burkart, 1999, p.63 et.seq.) It is very often forgotten that logistically there is nothing to be said against using the term medium in both these meanings: for the technology and its use.

9) “Our relationship to the world is constructive” is the way S. J. Schmidt also puts it.

10) Actually, the word ‘constructivisation’ would suggest itself, although that is a linguistic deformation.

11) Cf. in this respect, the very informative contribution “*Der Militär-Unterhaltungs-Komplex. Militärtechnologie von der Modebranche und Reality-TV von der Front*” in “*Telepolis*”, <http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/co/12221/1.html> [03. 04. 2002].

12) Neither should this be understood as a generalisation because there are prominent counter-examples such as “*The Blair Witch Project*”. In addition the Benjamin quote related to film and not to television news, for example.

13) The continuum does not include the reality construction in and through web media that represent a further evolutionary step and which is linked with strategies of conscious ‘ego design’. Key terms would be: fictive web identities, avatars, gender-swapping, virtual beings etc.

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