

# The Reality of Media Research

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## *I The Reality of Media Research*

Of course, the title of my speech is ambiguous: On the one hand the reality of media research that is the reality of academic and non-academic institutions which engage in this field of research, the reality of their staffs and students, researchers and scientific communities, their routines, topics, methods – and, sometimes, their ambitions and obsessions. In short, from this perspective we are talking about the status, the current situation of and the challenges for media research. And then, on the other side, the reality of media research that is all that which is produced within this framework. In short, from this perspective we are talking about the sense-making, all that which appears to be real, factual, provisionally true (at least not false) with reference to the media.

Obviously these two realities are closely connected – for the observed reality depends on the reality of the observer. This, of course, is not the exclusive fate of researchers only but of every observer in general. Though it might help, one does not necessarily have to be a constructivist devotee to acknowledge that at least here media research is on common ground with the object of its observations. As Hans Mathias Kepplinger (2001) – who, for sure, is no constructivist proselyte – has recently stated: The represented world in the media is an effect of the representation of the world by the media. Accordingly, I argue, the reality of media research, understood as all that which appears to be real and factual concerning the media is an effect of the current situation of media research. In this speech I will focus on three major “arenas” of the contemporary debate – namely on topics, theories and empirical experience of media research. I will enter into this discussion from the perspective of one major academic discipline in the field of media research: *communication science*.

## *II Additional Topics and Disintegrated Theories*

As Martin Löffelholz and Thorsten Quandt (2003) have pointed out, the situation of communication science in Germany may best be characterized by two complementary developments: Expansion and differentiation. The discipline has grown continuously ever since the tradition was established in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Leipzig (1916) and in Münster (1919) and then, a couple of years later, in Munich (1924) and in

Berlin (1925). Of course, this early tradition is characterised by a strong focus on newspapers and journalism. Meanwhile media research in general is being offered under many different labels at more than 50 academic institutions in Germany. Growing media markets, especially induced by the commercial television and radio in the 1980s and new information and communication technologies in the 1990s, of course, fostered this development as well as the fact that ‘media’ and ‘communication’ still are buzzwords that fire desires. Irene Neverla (2003: 59) has recently speculated kindly that despite of this breathless dynamic communication science frequently demonstrates its affectionate inclination for self-reflection. After all, she assumes, that’s what makes this discipline so warm and human. “What do we do?” “Who are we?” “Where do we go?” “where do we come from?” – questions like these are somewhat notorious, the answers, however, are changing.

Round about four years ago the German Communication Association (DGPK) (2001) presented a declaration in which it outlined its self-conception. This declaration, the so called “Identity-Paper”, was published under the ambitious title “Media Society and its Science”. I will recurrently return to this paper in order to use it as a reference to mark differences. I would like to put emphasis on the fact, however, that this paper was elaborated by two members of the scientific community (Anna M. Theis-Berglmair and Günter Bentele) collectively and it was published for many, indeed: over 700, members of this scientific community. It is meant as the least common denominator of an expanding discipline, and therefore, you will hardly find any institute in Germany, any approach or school, that can fully subscribe to it.

Almost all areas of social life are penetrated by the media and – thus the declaration goes – communication science has assigned itself to describe and to explore this complex and certainly ongoing process. Obviously, this declaration is ambitious because media research thus assumes responsibility for almost all areas of social life, which triggers a massive proliferation of psychological, sociological, political, economical and many other problems with regard to media and communication. The scope of this challenging engagement is mirrored reliably by the many different labels and makes under which media research is conducted. And, of course, these divergent labels and makes also mirror the fact that the wide range of problems calls for specialisation. Professionals and of media research are highly specialised experts and this, of course, also explains why identity papers and identity commissions are necessary at all. Given the ambitious call for responsibility, of course, a wide variety of new research topics and new problems pour into the field of media research. Digital and interactive media, of course, pose new problems; popular-culture is a challenge to the discipline, just alike youth culture and subculture, fictional media products call for recognition; visual communication, of course, is up-and-coming, organisational communication just alike, research in public relations is doing fine, yet we have to intensify our efforts, and son on – this, indeed, can be called a breathless dynamic!

The argument usually goes thus: Research in the fields of A, B or C is up-and-coming because the discipline cannot credibly assume responsibility for the so called media society and at the same time fail to deal with one of its most present, influential, relevant, compromising, promising symptoms as A, B or C. Without any doubt one of these research fields which are up and coming, yet widely neglected by communication science is advertising research. To illustrate the argument let us have a closer look at this field of research and the respective discussion within the scientific community.

In General the German Communication Association states: “Through the dynamic expansion of the media system a range of additional areas of relevance to society have developed, for which the subject offers a practically orientated competence: for example, problematic media content (e.g. advertisement, or the portrayal of violence in video films or on television)”. This notion precisely mirrors the stand of advertising as a research object within communication science in Germany. Advertising is a *new, additional and problematic* form of media product that, above all, poses *practical* problems – all four notions, of course, are off the mark.

Promotional media offers are at least as old as editorial media offers, they are neither produced nor distributed or received additionally because they are an integral part of the media system, and they are not problematic by themselves. Finally advertising does not pose only practical but also hard theoretical problems. Yet, in the light of communication science advertising belongs to the, so to say, *noisy interferences* which contaminate the premium messages exchanged between transmitters and receivers. No wonder, that we dispose of a wide variety of concepts that explicate why and how people manage to get around advertising: *Switching, Flipping, Channel Hopping, Grazing, Jumping, Arrowing, Leaving* und certainly *Zapping*. Yet there seems to be ample evidence for the fact that advertising serves a *function* within the program: As well as media offers in general structure daily routines; advertising in particular structures reception routines. Advertising invites for comments on the media-program and offers visual distraction. Focussing on radio advertisements Ernest Dichter, one of the most prominent, yet controversial protagonists of the early advertising research who, by the way, collaborated with Paul F. Lazarsfeld in Vienna, coined the term ‘rhythmical complementation’, which is to say, that advertising plays a vital role within the flow of broadcasting. Media research as it is conducted under the roof of communication science has widely neglected these functions of advertising, however, we would be able to acquire a much deeper understanding of how the media work for us, if we accounted for these widely neglected, yet vital functions of supposedly noisy interferences.

To sum up the argument once again: Despite of an ambitious call for responsibility neither all relevant aspects of the media, nor all relevant forms of media products are sufficiently covered by media research as it is conducted under the roof of communication science. This, of course, is due to the fact, that the call for responsibility may rather be understood as a *prospective* call. If, however, we take a closer look at the logic of this prospective call for responsibility, I propose, the word ‘additional’ hits the mark of the problem.

One of the core problems within the discipline, to me, seems to be that, for obvious reasons, the discipline is expanding, yet it proliferates by adding new research fields, whereas, the practice we are concerned with, works on a completely different logic of proliferation. If one considers the topics media research has to deal with this becomes very obvious: Wherever media researches come together the integration of TV, radio, the press, the internet, online, landline and mobile phones is on the agenda. Of course, media research is concerned with international networks and global players within the media industry, with multimedia and cross-media. Wherever media researchers come together they talk and write about these phenomena on the basis of the assumption that no new medium simply adds up to any given media system, nor simply replaces older media but leads to a structural and functional redefinition of the media system (cf unavoidably Riepl 1913). The underlying logic of these processes, of course, is not an additive but an

*integrative logic*, this is what we are concerned with: integration by difference management. Yet, which efforts do we take in the practice of media research to cope with an integrative media practice? The ambitious call for responsibility, I propose, will avail only if we dispose of theoretical tools that enable us to integrate the proliferating perspectives within our expanding field of research. The Constructivist approach to media research, I propose, has offered some of the respective theoretical tools.

### *III Reflexivity*

On the timeline the point of origin to this approach to media and communication research lies at the end of the 1980s. In that time Klaus Merten, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Siegfried Weischenberg edited a wide variety of contributions to media research in the “Funkkolleg Medien und Kommunikation” which were later published in the anthology *Die Wirklichkeit der Medien (The reality of the media)* (1994). Let us skip through the table of contents: “The reality of the Observer”; “The social Construction of Reality”, “The evolution of communication Media”; “The cultural History of the Media”; “The Effects of Communication”, “Journalism as a social system” and so on – what unites the wide variety of contributions to this anthology comes to a head in a profound doubt towards the traditional stocks of the discipline, and this doubt roots in a more general epistemic doubt concerning our capability of perceiving *the* reality as such.

Let us take a closer look at the roots of these doubts and begin with one of the central concepts of our discipline: communication. Here the German Communication Association, as one of major institutional players within the field of media research states: “Central focus of the subject is the indirect public communication transmitted via mass media. The associated production, distribution and reception processes constitute the key area of interest of the subject. [...] Purely interpersonal communication is only of interest as far as it constitutes a basis for processes of public communication. That means, for example, that no linguistic analys[e]s are produced and no individual talks are being analyzed. Yet, the role of interpersonal communication while watching a television show or during online-communication is definitely of interest and thus being analyzed.” (DGPUK 2001). Even though it appears to be rather difficult to handle all problems of the discipline on the basis of this definition, the production, distribution and reception of mass media offers are for sure core topics of the Constructivist approach to media research, and thus, from this perspective, we could subscribe to the first part of this notion.

However, on the basis of a Constructivist approach to media research we would definitely insist on a more decisive second part of the notion. In short: purely interpersonal communication, is of interest *not only* as far as it *accompanies* mass communication, it serves as a general model, and thus, both modes of communication are based on the same principles. The outset of all communication processes, Klaus Merten (1977) has maintained repeatedly with reference to Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann, is the fact that we are observed observers. This notion, of course, has been worked out repeatedly by many scholars, just as an early example I would like to name Georg Simmel’s (1908) well known approach to a sociology of the senses. By first sight it is not that easy to apply these premises on processes of mass communication because one of the points of general agreement in the German community of media research is the way Gerhard Maletzke (1963) has modelled the audience of the mass media: As we all know, the con-

cept of the “mass” is for many reasons fairly problematic. Focusing on mass communication, Maletzke has argued, the term ‘mass’ is problematic because it suggests strong, linear, irrational, however, predictable media-effects. It furthermore suggests the simultaneous presence of one mass, watching, reading, receiving one media offer which is a delicate assumption since we observe a progressive proliferation of media offers as well as a progressive proliferation of audiences. Readers, watchers, listeners, recipients of the mass media in general, dissolve into disperse, broken up, separated, divided clutters of audiences, if not into inorganic moods of reception. Whoever speaks of *the* audience therefore implicitly employs an “operative fiction”. This is to say: *The* audience does not exist, but we need it in order to know, what we are talking and what we are acting about. Given these assumptions: If processes of mass communication are social processes then how do we, in this case, model the observed observer? Klaus Merten’s answer to this question is thus: Whereas interactive communication episodes rely on the reflexivity of perception, mass communication relies on the reflexivity of knowledge. This means: In mass communication we usually do not perceive that others perceive that we perceive, but we know that others know that we know that we and they perceive. This social fiction serves as the basis for all communication processes mediated by the mass media. It is highly virtual, but nonetheless leads to highly relevant and factual results.

Let us behold: one of the crucial concepts in approaching communication processes is the concept of *reflexivity*. Whoever deals with reflexive processes, however, has to be aware of the fact that the object of his observations is constantly changing, because the effects of these processes are fed back into these very processes. On this background Klaus Merten has drawn the conclusion that many treasured stocks of our discipline, especially those in the field of media effects research, are fundamentally doomed to expire, because effects change effects. Closely connected to the above mentioned concept of reflexivity is another crucial concept we have to take into account when we approach communication processes: the concept of *embeddedness*, or *epistemic involvement*. The substance of this crucial concept can be explained on the background of a short, yet decisive anecdote in the evolution of a new Medium: the motion picture.

#### *IV Embeddedness*

When the Brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky patented their film projector in Berlin in 1895, they emphasized that the specific feature of their device is that it would not be heard by the audience. This means: At the outset of the motion picture stands the motion picture that wants to disappear in order to accomplish the illusion. Round about one hundred years later Sybille Krämer (1998) has pointed out that the media are the blind spot in every process of media use. The premises we make in order to use the media *have to be* the blind spot in processes of media use because otherwise the media would not work for us the way they do. The consequences of this notion obviously depend on what one calls the media. Most definitions of the term ‘medium’ have in common that they emphasize the aspects of the linking, joining and connecting function of the media. Following Siegfried J. Schmidt’s (2000) approach to media theory we can put this initial assessment in more concrete terms: All media are used to link and connect different cognitive and/or social systems. This connection, however, does not evolve randomly but is oriented towards the production of system-specific meaning. In other words: We use media in order to generate meaning – whatsoever. The production of system-specific

meaning, however, does not evolve out of the blue but is based on the specific potentials of specific media. These general features are frequently applied to a wide variety of different media. We can distinguish systemically four interrelated levels of those media: On the first and most complex level we analyze media products, articles, spots, advertisements and so on. These media products, of course, result from the specific formation of the respective communication-instruments (for examples: natural languages or pictures), all respective technologies needed to produce, distribute and receive these media products, and finally the social-systemic organization of the production, distribution and reception of media products.

Of course, every observation has its specific blind spot, yet, on the basis of these medium-theoretical premises, the specific problem of media research is, that the blind spot of its observation is the *object* of its observation. Most media researchers “live” in one or two language worlds, most of them produce texts and usually publish them in magazines, books, sometimes in newspapers and thus address a scientific community. No doubt: Through the practice of observing media research is embedded in the practice it observes. On a more abstract level, this of course, is one of the core problems of constructivist research as it has been conducted by Siegfried J. Schmidt in the last years. The autological problems of media research, one can say with reference to Siegfried J. Schmidt (2003), are just but one version of the more general problem that we are always already involved. Every judgement, every estimation, every opinion on the nature or quality of something – Schmidt prefers to say with reference to Hegel: every *positing* – of an observer unavoidably requires an antecedent in logic and fact as a presupposition. If we say *young* we thus presuppose the semantic differentiation between young and old; accordingly if we say *cold* we thus presuppose the multivalent differentiation between ice-cold/cold/luke warm/warm/hot and so on. This, of course, resembles logical figures that have been extensively discussed within the theory of logic, cognitive science or Gestaltpsychology. Yet, the point Schmidt wants to emphasise is quite another. The theoretical operation had become necessary, because even though constructivist thinkers have *tried* to get away from it they have implicitly fostered a dualistic world view: the world of thought, language, description or the media on the one hand, and the real, yet, unreachable world on the other. As it was said above: What united the wide variety of contributions to constructivist media research since the end of the 1980s was a profound epistemic doubt concerning our capability of perceiving the reality *as such*. The problem behind the “as such”, of course, has troubled generations of scholars, for it evokes questions concerning the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge. Siegfried J. Schmidt, therefore, does not assume the overambitious task to solve this problem, yet he tries to *dissolve* it, and he does so by the help of the cultural adjustment of his constructivist argument. With every judgement, every estimation, every opinion on the nature or quality of something we never begin, as Niklas Luhmann and, of course, George Spencer Brown have maintained, in an “unmarked space” because with our observations we are always already involved in stories and discourses. This is to say: on the basis of the mechanism of positing and presupposing we unavoidably revert to antecedents in logic, *communications* which have been integrated in so called *discourses*, and we unavoidably revert to antecedents in fact, *actions* which have been integrated in so called *stories* (the latter term according to Wilhelm Schapp).

Schmidt refers to the semantic system of the possibilities that, as it were, “nurture” stories and discourses and reversely is nurtured by them as the *reality model* of a soci-

ety. The semantic differentiation between “Realität“ and “Wirklichkeit“, for example, is possible in the German language and in the Danish language (*Realitet / Virkelighed*), though it is not possible in English. The Reality model of a society can be described as the collective knowledge every individual member of a society disposes of and which emerges from acting and communicating with other members of the society. This semantic system of possibilities, of course, needs a practical program that regulates possible relations of categories and differentiations, their relevance in practical life, affective content and moral significance in a socially binding manner – and this program Schmidt refers to as *culture*. The differentiation between good and bad, certainly, belongs to the reality model of almost all societies, however, it is the object of constant cultural negotiations within any given society as well as between different societies.

### *V Consequences*

The short example of the previous paragraph shows two aspects. *First:* Culture, as conceptualized by Schmidt, is stable, while being referred to, yet it learns, develops and evolves with every application. *Second:* Due to this fact, culture is presupposed in every communication process, *and* at the same time every culture fundamentally depends on communication. On the basis of these theoretical manoeuvres, I would finally like to propose, we obtain a tool with which we can work on some of the urging problems of contemporary media research.

Whereas in the constructivist *and* realistic epistemology the reality “as such” is presupposed, even though we might not reach it by the help of our routines and practices, in the light of a non-dualistic approach we presuppose many other routines and practices, which might be just as limited and restricted as the ones at hand, but nonetheless construe a reality “as such”. As to the *subject matters* we are concerned with: operating without an ontological starting point means that we can observe the selectivity of specific communication-processes only in relation to the selectivity of other communication processes. This drives us to acknowledge the fact that the respective media products we focus on make sense only in a competing yet complementary relation to other media products. Practically speaking this means that there is no theory of mass-communication without an embedded theory of face-to-face-communication; there is no theory of journalism without embedded theories of Advertising, Public Relations or literature. There is no theory of the television without an embedded theory of the letterpress, no theory of email without an embedded theory of snail mail and so on. In the practice of our research this change of perspective, of course, drives us to assume the logic of the practice we conduct research on, and this logic spells out: integration by difference management. Finally, as to the *empirical* practice of media research one of the crucial challenges is this: We can – and we have to! – reflect about the experiences we make using the media only to the price of new experiences with other media. Therefore we need to intensify our efforts to improve empirical tools that account for us – unavoidably involved observers in the field of media research. The more earnestly we consider the consequences that follow when we reflect our own practices that virtually go without saying, the better we can live up to the challenges posed by the expanding field of media research.

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