

Towards a Constructivist Communication Theory?

Report from Germany

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Nothing is so practical as a good theory!
Kurt Lewin

This article aims to offer a short overview about the current debate and theories on communication, media and culture in Germany. The background for the article is provided by the author's three-month research visit at the "Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Publizistik" at the University of Münster, which had the purpose to underpin the foundations of the author's Ph.D.-dissertation about media discourse analysis of the constructions of Germany and Germans in the Danish media¹. This research in particular aimed to define a perspective for interpretation in this dissertation, which appears to be an alternative to both positivist quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis from the perspective of ideological criticism.

Besides my personal interests, I think there is a variety of reasons, why other Nordic scholars should also be interested in German communication research. Both my research visit and this article are furthermore based on my observation of a reciprocal lack of contact between German and Scandinavian media and communication researchers and institutions which especially during the 80s and 90s had appeared to be increasing. Surely, we all know Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *Schweigespirale* (1974). Surely Gerhard Maletzkes *Psychologie der Massenkommunikation* (1972) has had a broad reception also in the Nordic countries. In particular Jürgen

Habermas' *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981) and *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) have been a guide for many Nordic scholars. Although the latter especially still seems important today, Nordic communication research appears to have turned its interest towards French and British sources of inspiration since the 1980s.

There is probably a variety of reasons for the lack of contact between Nordic and German communication research. One explanation might be the growing linguistic distance: German researchers do not publish in English at the same rate as the decline in the use of the German language as a communication device in scientific and academic fields. Another reason might be the special tradition and history of German communication research, including a very narrow self-perception as "Zeitungswissenschaft", preventing a more distinct international orientation for many years.

Still, the lack of reception and recognition is remarkable and even questionable, due to the fact that German communication research especially in the 80s and 90s has had a face lift and new conditions of existence, and thus can offer remarkable progress in both theoretical and applied studies². The growth and differentiation of German communication research has among other things resulted in an extension of the objects of research as well as in an intensified discussion about the theoretical and methodical foundations of communication studies.

One final reason for an increased interest in German communication research is the correspondence between central topics in current Nordic and German discussions concerning communication and media research. The plenary sessions at the 13th Nordic Conference for Mass Communication Re-

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search (Jyväskylä 1997) had two topics for a self-critical discussion about the methodological foundations of communication research and the ability of Nordic communication research to cope with a new mediascape changed by technological progress. Keynote speakers mourned about a proclaimed conformism in current Nordic communication and media studies, partly resulting from thinking in traditional Cartesian dualisms (Ekecrantz, 1997:11-12) and from reading and using the same books (Kivikuru, 1997:6; Gripsrud, 1997:21). Other keynote speakers (e.g. Jensen, 1997; Fornäs, 1997) asked for a new orientation in communication studies regarding the technological development and its consequences for communication by bridging between the research on information technology, communication, media and culture.

German communication and media studies have been confronted with the same kind of questions. By presenting the German debate it is my hope that Nordic scholars will be inspired to have a look into widely unknown and unperceived books as well as methodical attempts to enable communication studies to escape from stated conformism, inner self-limitation and lack of diffusion of central concepts and ideas into and from other scientific disciplines. The central questions, topics as well as new ideas and concepts in the German debate could be highly interesting and relevant for Nordic communication and media research in general, and especially for those scholars who for many years have been inspired by critical theory and its perspective on communication.

I will begin this project by outlining the development in German social philosophy and its affect on the field of German communication studies since the late 1970s and early 1980s when the majority of Nordic scholars moved their eyes towards Britain.

“Stocktaking”: About the Apparent Wretchedness of Communication Research

German media and communication studies have basically divided into two historical poles of development: on the one hand the Noelle-Neumann-school, which has always been strongly influenced by American positivism and pragmatism. The other pole – with Adorno, Lazarsfeld, Krakauer, Marcuse, Löwenthal or later Habermas as prominent leading figures – is the tradition based on critical theory, which has also been very influential in the Nordic countries.

During the 80ies German communication research was marked by the same main tendencies as

in Denmark and the other Nordic countries: target group orientation came into the centre of research interests, which again found its expression in an extensive growth of reception studies on micro-level. However, since the early 1990s at least three areas of concern pressed on the research agenda, needing discussion and demanding explanation. These areas of concern are:

1. *The technological developments*, which have resulted in a new mediascape, where traditional mass media increasingly become replaced by an ongoing differentiation of the media system. This does not mean that traditional mass media no longer exist – but their role in society as public space for discussion and debate is changed in step with the increase of new (multiple) media channels. This development is a growing challenge for all media and communication researchers and for the diverse theories, models, methods and criteria for evaluation in mass media research.
2. *The blind alley of reception and effect studies*: Despite intensified efforts during the last two decades, the results of these studies are rather modest and rarely reach out for more than singular case studies. This, sometimes by proponents of reception studies even proudly presented self-limitation, is making it difficult for media and communication scholars to gain public acceptance for their research.
3. *The schism between theory and practice in communication research in principle* which, from a theoretical and analytical point of view argues for a non-linear understanding of communication (e.g. based on semiotic approaches), but which is difficult to apply in practical planning of communication. Thus one is usually forced to fall back on the same linear communication models which are in principle based on the old Lasswell-formula. These are the same models that have just been criticised from an analytical point of view.

In Germany these areas of concern and interest raised a debate about the question, whether German communication research is able to cope with the developments described above. This debate even broke through the isolation and closed circles of academic conferences and journals, entering into Germany's leading weekly *Die Zeit* in 1997. The debate in *Die Zeit* started with the critique of a retired positivist colleague on current communication research, where he demanded a renewed self limita-

tion on a core field of interest. In reply to this critique, a number of Germany's leading communication researchers answered, that the discipline is well-equipped to meet the challenges of the future, although they acknowledged the dangers in the differentiation of the discipline which make it more incalculable and confused. Nevertheless, as an indication of the dynamics and yielding capacity several researchers focused on the discussion of a new constructivist approach to communication. This discussion is acknowledged as the most fruitful controversy that German communication research has ever experienced by most scholars, regardless of whether they agree with this approach.

Towards a Constructivist Science of Media Culture

Since the beginning of the 1980ies constructivist and systemic theories and concepts have experienced a broad spreading and reception in several scientific disciplines. However, especially in Nordic media and communication research the diffusion of the constructivist innovation has still not achieved its comprehensive breakthrough³.

Constructivist approaches share the view of the world as a phenomenon constituted through individuals (and communication of) socio-cultural potentials of meaning and experiences (cf. Reckwitz & Sievert, 1997:5). It is not a homogeneous approach, but rather differentiated into a variety of different schools of thought and direction⁴. In relation to the field of communication and media research and with regard to the debate in Germany, two protagonists of constructivist research are of particular interest. These are Niklas Luhmann, whose contributions to systemic constructivism on the level of grand theory is well-known, and Siegfried J. Schmidt, who has been working on a further development and application of constructivism in communication theory on the level of middle range theory.

The debate about the apparent wretchedness of communication research can fundamentally be drawn back to the general discourse about the concept of communication in sociology and social philosophy. Thus – and with regard to the prominence of Habermas' approach to communication in the Nordic countries – the German Habermas-Luhmann debate in the early 80ies can serve as a starting point for the understanding of the sprouts towards a constructivist modelling of communication.

1. Step: The Debate between Habermas and Luhmann

Looking back on Max Weber's analysis of modernity, three concepts characterising social life in modernity can be seen in the focus of today's reading (Kneer, 1996:33-34). These are: *rationality* – which is the central concept in Habermas' theoretical work; *disciplining* – which is the central concept in Foucault's analysis of power in discourses; and finally, *differentiation* (pluralism) – which is the central concept in Luhmann's system theory. From this perspective the three perhaps most fruitful and widely discussed contributions on the grand theory level of social science of this century can be seen as putting one of Max Weber's central aspects of modernity respectively into the centre of their considerations. At the same time Habermas, Foucault and Luhmann share the belief that communication is the key concept in their theoretical buildings to social analysis.

While a growing influence of Foucault's discursive thinking could be observed in the Nordic countries during the 1980ies, scientific debate in Germany was characterised by the showdown between Habermas' and Luhmann's view on communication in particular. As a consequence of this controversy, a considerable part of German communication research today has based its work on a systemic and/or constructivist perspective.

By claiming that counter-power can display locally by the actions of agents, Foucault adopts a somewhat middle position between the agents' theorist Habermas and the system theorist Luhmann, regarding the definition of the relationship between subject and society as well as between action and structure. The German debate between followers of Habermas on the one hand and supporters of Luhmann on the other hand was in this sense a debate between radical poles. The disagreement between the scholars was mainly about a) the definition of communication and b) the relationship between the individual and the social. These two main topics of the debate will be illuminated below:

a) The Definition of Communication

Habermas views communication as proof that human and social understanding in principle is possible. Luhmann, however, claims that communication is an inconsistent event which produces and reproduces the social. While Habermas is afraid of distortions in communication by strategic actions, Luh-

mann sees communication in mortal danger, because communicants believe to have understood each other. Furthermore, whereas Habermas hopes for understanding by communicative actions, Luhmann views mutual understanding in and by communication as an exception from the general impossibility to reach such an understandings⁵.

Luhmann (1987:32ff.) thinks that the evolutionary differentiation of society constantly changes the meaning of the single sub-systems in favour of the media system. Thus media⁶ gain a growing influence on socialisation processes and on the production of individual and social meanings. Modern society is, according to Luhmann, a functionally differentiated system, which is constituted by a number of sub-systems (such as science, politics, families) that are partly independent from each other. All these sub-systems are organised according to their own rules and work on the basis of different mechanisms of integration. There is, in contrast to Habermas, no universality, but a pluralism and variety of different possibilities of choice and selection. As a consequence the meaning of systems can only be identified in differentiation and selection among different possibilities, which is based on border drawing processes in communication between different social systems. Thus communication gets the most prominent placement in Luhmann's theory. Indeed, Luhmann believes that the modern (world-) society and its deepening complexity can only be integrated communicatively by the mass media (cf. Holzer, 1994: 177).

The distinction between psychic and social system serves as a key to understanding Luhmann's concept of systems. While psychic systems are constituted by conscious connections of minds, social systems are based on communicative connections which establish borders of meaning potentials that cannot be explained comprehensively (Luhmann, 1991:9, 18)⁷. Both types of systems are established through co-evolution, in which the one system must be seen as the surroundings of the other (ibid.:92). Both systems generate and process meaning, but they do it in a different manner: psychic systems are closed systems because consciousness can only think but not communicate. Only communication – social systems – can communicate:

As soon as any communication between human beings takes place, social systems arise. Because with each communication begins a story, which differentiates itself by selections which are interrelated to each other and in

which only one of many possibilities becomes reality (Luhmann, 1975:9).⁸

While Jürgen Habermas thinks about communication as an action and thus defines communication as a transmission of information, Luhmann defines communication as a self-referential system. Only communication can communicate (Luhmann, 1988: 884 If.) – with regard to the role of agents, this ultimately means also that the rational perspective on understanding of mediated messages has to be modified. As we already know from reception research, understanding of information does not depend on a variety of aspects. Thus, the establishment of meaning and cognition has, according to Luhmann, to be viewed as construction of reality and not as a reflection of reality.

b) The Individual and the Social

Habermas determines the relationship between the unique (individual) and the common (society) as a *relationship, where rationality* is the bridging concept to define the unique in the common *and* the common in the unique. The individual – the unique – is underlying social norms. These norms are the universal rules for the ideal speech situation. Luhmann calls this view naive, because individuals in his opinion cannot have both a personal and a social identity. To him individuals construct reality subjectively. Complying with this understanding, there are as many realities as cognitive systems. The viability of these realities can only be tested in concrete self-realisation, but not in proportion to or compared with a given reality or certain universal rules, which are independent from the individuals constructions of reality. Communication is not due to social norms and rules, but depends on the selection of information (cf. Rasmussen, 1993).

The differences between Luhmann and Habermas have finally consequences for the evaluation of communication: To Luhmann inter-subjective understanding is based on both consensus and conflict (Luhmann, 1996). Habermas, on the other hand, advocates the ideal speech situation based on inter-subjective consensus. He distinguishes communicative actions aiming at consensus from strategic and conflict orientated actions and ignores in this way that his own theory results from disagreements with other theories (cf. Cederstrøm, 1993: 117) .

As mentioned earlier, Luhmann sees the mass media as playing a central role in the interplay between systems. The self-reference of communica-

tion is founded on an arsenal of topics and concepts which have been established in and by earlier communication. On this background, culture can be defined as a knowledge about orientations that directs processes of selection. All this leads towards new central questions in media and communication research:

How do the mass media construct reality? Or, to put it in another way (and related to self-reference): How can we (e.g. as sociologists) describe the reality as their construction of reality? This does not mean: How do the mass media distort reality in the way they reflect it? This would presuppose an ontological, a real, an objective access to reality that can be recognised without construction. . . . Scientists can, of course, be of the opinion that they know the reality better than the one shown in the mass media that is obliged to popularisation. Yet this can only mean that one is comparing its own construction with another one (Luhmann, 1996:20).

It is not the task of communication and media research to criticise communication from the perspective of questionable universal rules, but rather to observe and analyse media constructions of reality as well as those collective and social schemes of understanding that are behind these constructions (Luhmann, 1996:193). Cognitive schemes are the instruments of oblivion and learning and make structural coupling of mass media communication in circular processes possible. The understanding of mass media depends on cultural schemes, (re-)produced by the media self.

When communication is no longer seen as the transmission of information, the classical models and theories of communication deriving from the positivist or the critical tradition must obviously be re-evaluated from the constructivist perspective. This perspective basically distinguishes between three historical stages of development for media theories (e.g. Hünneken, 1995). The first stage produced theories about the single media (e.g. film theory, radio theory, theories of the press). The second stage contained communication theories taking account of the immediate context of a communicative event (e.g. the division between mass and interpersonal communication). The third stage, of course, comprehends system theoretical media theories emphasising the global question about the mediated conditions for social actions and social reality. This group of theories is holistically orientated and can be labelled as "media culture science".

"Radical Constructivism" had a decisive influence in sketching out the ground pillars of such a media cultural science. Thus, the central ideas and concepts in "Radical Constructivism" will be presented in the next passage.

2. Step: Perspectives on Communication in Radical Constructivism

Referring to Niklas Luhmann's system theory and inspired by several other constructivist thinkers (e.g. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Gerhard Roth, Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glasersfeld), a group of researchers around Siegfried J. Schmidt developed a new approach to communication based on constructivism. In this approach Schmidt et. al. attempt to apply Luhmann's rather abstract and generalised concept of self-reference on the middle range level of empirical communication research (Schmidt, 1996:4f).

The first programmatic introduction to communication science or media culture science was a series of educational programmes on German radio about media, communication and constructions of reality (DIFUT, 1991/1992), followed by the comprehensive publication *Die Wirklichkeit der Medien* (Merten, Schmidt & Weissenborn, 1994). The very idea of this introduction is to view the media and communication in general as mediators in an almost symbiotic relationship between the individual and the social, where cognitive schemes play the crucial role in mediation processes:

As socialised members of societies and cultures, cognitive systems acquire experiences in consensual domains with other living systems. These consensual domains constitute, and are in turn maintained by language and collective knowledge in the symbolic orders of a culture which constitutes, and is in turn maintained by communication. The operation called "construction of realities" thus takes place in individual cognitive systems according to the socio-cultural orientations which regulate, reproduce and evaluate communication and interaction...Media serve as instruments of socialisation and have an important impact on the staging and communicating of emotions. We learn from the media how to live and how to die. Media shape the relationship between culture and memory, between social and cultural differentiation and de-differentiation (Schmidt, 1997a).

Radical Constructivism's most important argument for an orientation towards cognitive systems in media and communication research is, that both social and media realities are subjective constructions, making the repetition of phenomenological processes impossible. Thus social reality cannot be recognised, and social phenomena, such as communication processes, cannot be understood qua linear or causal models of transmission, but only by using circular models based on selection (distinction) and self-reference (self-organisation). The analysis of a social system (e.g. the media) can only be done in deference to other social systems. Finally, the analysis of media offers cannot – as in the hermeneutic and the semiotic tradition – be done on their own conditions per se, but only in consideration of and deference to the concrete systemic context media offers (Schmidt 1997b:3£).

The context orientation of these basic assumptions become obvious in the definition of cognition, communication, culture and media as dimensional sub-systems, which constantly determine, condition and influence each other (Schmidt, 1996:7). Consequently, each communication analysis has to take account of each of those four dimensions and with regard to topics like informational content, knowledge, understanding, sense and meaning. Such a holistic analytical design requires also both a structural and a genealogical/historical perspective. Not to be understood as if each communication analysis has to comprehend an extensive analysis of each single aspect of each of the four dimensions. Instead each communication analysis has to argue for and reflect on its selective processes on each of the dimensions.

An understanding of communication as the transmission of information and reproduction of intended meanings is on the background of these assumptions and this analytical design no longer possible. The ideas of causality and linearity lying behind classical communication models are replaced by the concepts of plurality and diversity as the jumping-off point of any analytical reflection. Not misunderstandings, but rather the analysis of how communication succeeds at all despite the independence and closure of systems – becomes the focus of communication research.

Merten (1993:189ff.) argues that the linear understanding of communication can be referred back to Aristoteles, whose ideas have been based on absolute and classifying categories instead of relative and relational categories. Aristotelian Rhetoric introduced intentions and causality into our understanding of communication and both aspects are re-

flected in stimulus-response approaches. In addition, reception studies, which in their most outraged version divide the different parts of communications processes totally from each other and thus unable to explain the co-relationship between communicative agents qua media offers, also appear on this background as a reductive perspective.

The constituting principles of stimulus-response thinking – “proportionality”⁹, “causality”¹⁰ and “transitivity”¹¹ become in a constructivist approach to communication replaced by the principles of selectivity, reflexivity and emergens. Emergens can be understood as a process, in which new qualities arise on macro-level because of interactions on micro-level. These new qualities cannot be explained by the individual aspects characteristic in terms of transmission or causality, but are nevertheless a result of the interplay between these individual aspects. For that reason understanding presupposes a reflexivity, making allowance for those processes of selection that constitute communication (Schmidt, 1997b: 15).

Many media practitioners love to define themselves as the fourth power in state. According to their self-images they believe in their duty and ability to mediate real and concrete information (transmission, factual reports) about persons, things and actions to their audience (proportionality), which through these reports obtain an idea about what is going on in the world (causal effect). A constructivist approach on communication views the role of the media differently: Media mediate in first place (selected) meanings to meet certain already existing expectations in their audience. These meanings from media offers and expectations of the audience are melted together to ideas, images and schemes of things (emergens). In this way the media establish relations between the expectations on the part of the audience and those fictional images they produce. Thus talking about the reflection of social reality in mass media cannot be the point. Indeed, media is at best only able to produce a communicative coherence between social and media reality. Still, this kind of coherence will always at least be partly based on fiction.

To produce a media offer that is able to gain consent the product has to comply with social expectations to semiotic operations, i.e. it has to take account of common conventions and common sense knowledge. This normative knowledge is – from an evolutionary point of view social knowledge resulting from communication, which – from a structural

point of view – is constantly tested and re-assured in communication (Schmidt, 1996:5).

Media please and satisfy the cultural expectations of their audience by using cognitive schemes and images they produce by themselves. Here we find the structural coupling between cognition, media, communication and culture – and the very difference in relation to classical understanding of media and society. In summing up, we can with reference to Merten (1993:194f.) underline four advantages of such an approach to communication:

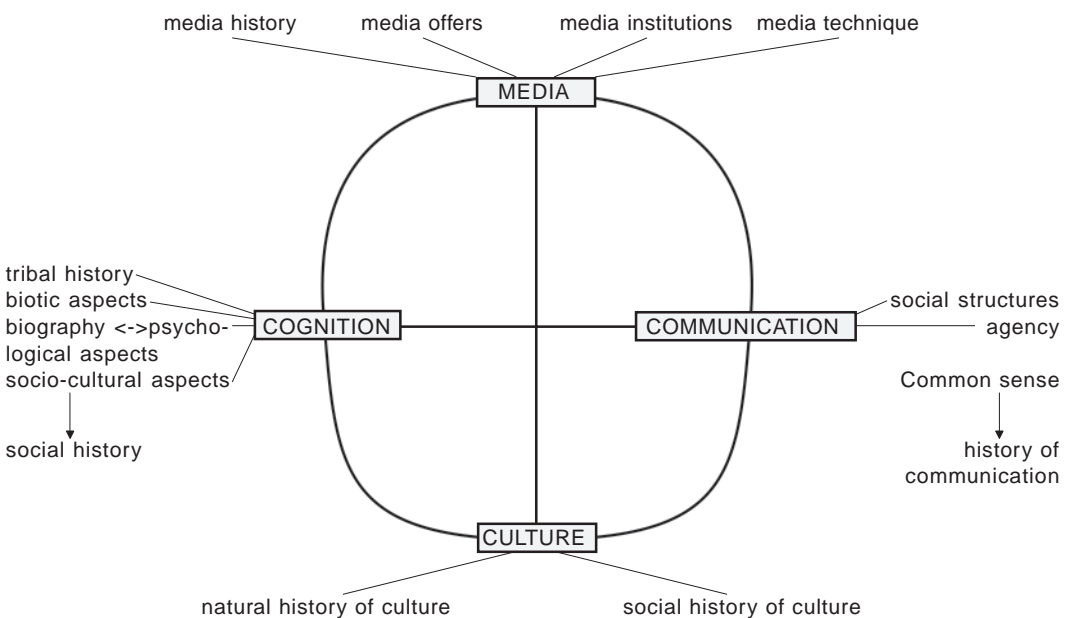
- 1) Systems are based on reflexive structures. This enables the analyst to work without causal assumptions (non-causality problem).
- 2) Systems can exist in different states (e.g. as organisms, technical systems, organisations and institutions). Findings and insights on one state can be fruitful for all other states (heuristic potential).
- 3) Systems in different states can be related to each other (relational potential).
- 4) Communication stimulates and stabilises all other social systems – and societal systems in particular (emergens potential).

The coupling between cognition, media, communication and culture lead necessarily to an understanding of media and communication science as *media culture science*, which has the task to study the complex inter-relationship and interaction between the four dimensions cognition, communication, culture and media. These four dimensions cannot, of course, be dealt with equally comprehensively, extensively and thoroughly as is usual in the already existing specific branches and disciplines of science. Thus selections have to be made with reference to knowledge, understanding, information and sense. An analysis in media culture science comprehends i.e. selective partial analysis of the cognitive, cultural, structural and mediating aspects of communication and their interplay. See Figure 1.

According to Schmidt (1997b:42) such a media culture science focuses on four global areas of interest, namely media epistemology, media history, media culture history and research on intercultural communication. These areas of interest can be described in detail as follows:

- *Media epistemology*, studies diachronic and synchronic possibilities for cognitive and communicative constructions of reality in specific media systems or media networks and hybrids.

Figure 1.



Source: Schmidt, 1997b:5.

- *Media history* studies the history of communication, technology and mentality with topics such as “war and media technology”, “media and economy” and “media and the public space”.
- *Media culture history* studies (re-)constructions of co-evolution of the media, of communication and of cultural programmes as instruments of social reproduction. Typical topics of this research are the history of media art or “media and modernisation”.
- *Research on intercultural communication* studies the interaction between cultures, cultural differentiation, colonisation, identities, etc.

These four global areas, which anticipate the agenda of future research in media culture science and are a consequence of the theoretical assumptions of Radical Constructivism, have, of course, raised an intense debate. After all, such a frame for future research also delimits the area of media and communication studies. In the following section I will give a critical review of the main arguments in this debate.

3. Step: The Debate about a Constructivist Approach on Communication

Three types of reactions on constructivist ideas can be identified among German communication and media researchers: most German scholars appear to find this new theoretical perspective that convincing so they have chosen to work from this platform on their own. The most negative reaction came from the well established centre of communication research at the University of Mainz which traditionally was orientated towards American research and which also for years had been the basis of the school of research around Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Here most scholars with professor Hans Mathias Képinger insist that media have to transmit reality to their audience. This group of scholars meets – although under different political conditions – critical researchers from the political left insisting on the critical ideological perspective in communication analysis. Meanwhile, both positions appear to be rather weak in the scientific discourse.

Another position is a more moderate critique which attempts to incorporate some of the central ideas of the constructivist approach into the traditional understanding of communication and the role of mass media in modern society. Perhaps the most prominent representative for such a position is Günter Bentele, professor at Germany’s oldest institute for communication studies at the University of

Leipzig (founded in 1916). Bentele, who is also the chairman of the German Association for Communication, distinguishes basically between a realist and a constructivist perspective in the current paradigm of communication research (Bentele, 1993:156ff.).

The realist position considers the comparison between social reality and journalistic description of social reality as possible, whereas the constructivist perspective denies that social reality is the grounding for journalistic work. According to Bentele, this position is a challenge for all research, and he criticises it in order to create simplified polarizations that are even trivial and inconsistent. Trivial he calls the constructivist assumption that all differentiations are not real, but the working result of the analyst; inconsistent he calls the claim of the constructivist school to present a “true” or “right” theory, whereas this very perspective at the same time denies truth or objectivity as criteria for human cognition (ibid.:162). On the background of his critique, Bentele presents his own “reconstructivist” approach:

Radical Constructivism, applied in communication science, (cf. Merten/Schmidt/Weischenberg, 1994) rejects the possibility of distortions between social reality and the representation of it in the media with the central argument that reality (not only media reality) is a – although not any – subjective construction and that social reality cannot be recognised. From a **re-constructivist** approach in communication research against such a position can be argued: Both levels of reality, the directly accessible social reality and the likewise directly accessible media reality (...) can be compared with each other, so that there can be drawn conclusions regarding common and similar structures, regarding deviations, differences and contradictions between these two levels of reality (Bentele, 1993:66).

Bentele also claims that Radical Constructivists narrow the possibility to criticise journalists because they, as a result of their basic assumptions, necessarily reject a distinction between entertainment and high quality journalism (ibid.:161ff.). His own re-constructivist approach should be understood as a mediating perspective between the realist and the constructivist position that

... on the one hand certainly does not theoretically assume representations and neither misunderstands the normative aim that news

have to depict reality adequately and equivalently, but on the other side neither falls for a naive constructivism, not seeing at the ultimate end that news despite and through all subjective aspects and rules of constructions describes reality (ibid.: 166).

According to Bentele, such a perspective on communication enables the analyst of public communication processes to take account of the fundamental principals of observation and cognition (as selection, perspective and construction) and also to compare the mediated reconstruction of reality with social reality itself. Conclusively, the analyst can evaluate how (exact) the mediated re-construction of reality matches, represents or distorts social reality – which to Bentele still appears to be one of the main tasks for media and communication studies (ibid.: 171).

In this sense Bentele offers a Solomon-like “both. . . and”-answer to the introductory question asked from the constructivist perspective, namely: “Do the media represent reality or do they construct reality?” (Merten, Schmidt & Weischenberg, 1994: Introduction). Whereas Bentele points at the analysis of the concrete setting and context of a communicative event to find an answer to this question, the constructivist scholar Schmidt rejects this Solomon-like attitude. According to him, Benteles approach still requires an authority able to decide whether the media representations of social reality are adequate or distorted (Schmidt, 1993:116). Bentele responds here that he is not referring to a hypothetical reality which is independent from the analyst or observer. To him, reality is a rather pragmatic than a ontological term. The discussion stops at this stage and appears, as far as I can see, to be in a temporary backwater.

Final Comments

The presentation of some of the major thoughts framing a constructivist approach to communication have hopefully already indicated, how its theoretical assumptions are able to respond to the general problems and areas of concern in current communication studies, mentioned in the beginning of the article. The system theoretical departure point offers qua the concept of differentiation a perspective enabling to scope and observe, to describe and to analyse current changes in mediascape (e.g. the debate about public service-tv) scientifically.

The self-limitations of reception studies are lifted away by focusing on cognitive schemes and

cultural patterns. These schemes and patterns direct individual receptions of media offers and are – from an analytical point of view – mediating concepts between the dualism between micro and macro as well as between the clean-cut analytical separation of the basic elements of communication (text production, the text itself, text reception).

Furthermore, the schism between linear models of communication from the text producers point of view, enabling practical communication planning, and semiotic (circular) models of communication from the analytical point of view, can be deleted by focusing on cognitive and cultural schemes. By proposing a holistic approach, constructivists aim not only at the immediate context of communication but also at its larger social context, where the traditional principles of proportionality, transitivity and causality are replaced by the principles of selection, reflexivity and emergens.

With reference to the analysis of media discourses the constructivist approach offers an attractive alternative to traditional theoretical perspectives on communication. The interpretation of media discourses is no longer based on a comparison between the analysts own (allegedly and ostensibly more true) constructions of reality and the constructions of reality in the media, resulting in a critique of the media for distorting reality. The media have no longer the task to represent reality at all – basically because they would never be able to do so. Thus the analysis of constructions of reality in the media appears rather to be an analysis of those cognitive schemes that reproduce cultural images and thus also reproduce a plurality of constructions of reality. At the same time Radical Constructivists defend themselves against the reproach of arbitrariness, especially with regard to the ability of individual agents to decide freely, how media discourses can be interpreted:

Observations will still – first of all in functional differentiated societies - depend on discourses, i.e. connections of knowledge and themes and their specific genres, patterns of presentations and argumentation... The individual agent is so to speak a meeting place for all limitations and not an autonomous or even arbitrary producer of meaning and sense (Schmidt, 1994:13).

On the other hand, constructivist communication theory has to clarify its position towards the ethical consequences of such a theoretical stand. If the content of media texts is reality on its own terms and based on its own systemic rules and mechanisms,

and if media no longer can be blamed for not representing social reality, new questions concerning the political consequences for the role of the media in democracy and public space arise. Furthermore, the traditional ground for an evaluation of media offers (e.g. news) disappears.

In particular I would argue that the current frame for a constructivist communication theory is short of a conceptualisation of the role of the text, its form and content, in the communication process. There are no models explaining how to analyse text and discourse from a constructivist perspective. In this sense the often criticised lack of empirical foundation of systemic and constructivist theories seems quite justified¹². I recognised this weakness myself, when I tried to apply the constructivist perspective in the analysis of my own data and experienced that the viability of the theory in terms of concrete ana-

lytical tools e.g. models and methods for empirical studies is still rather insufficient. This is especially surprising due to the fact that constructivism can be seen as a perspective on social reality that underlines the linguistic and discursive nature of social, political and cultural phenomena.

Further work on these aspects will in my opinion develop the constructivist perspective to a competitive approach to traditional linear or circular modelling of communication by offering a convincing frame to grasp current tendencies and areas of concern in media and communication studies. In this sense, a constructivist communication theory should not be considered as an entirely new paradigm, but should rather be seen as a widening frame for the analysis of communication, implementing earlier perspectives (e.g. the hermeneutical perspective) into a complex and holistic approach.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Professor Siegfried J. Schmidt for his kind professional advice and help during this research visit. The dissertation mentioned is intended to be finished at the end of 1998.
2. As a result of the general education reforms in the 70s communication research in Germany differentiated into several research disciplines (journalism, media economy, media pedagogy, film- and tv-research, communication politics, public relations, intercultural communication etc.) – mostly with their respective courses of study. Whereas there have been 10 professorships in communication in all during the 70s, there are about 100 chairs in Germany today.
3. Beside general introductions and discussions in social philosophy (e.g. Thyssen 1991, 1994; Jacobsen 1992), in Denmark in particular theology (e.g. Götke, 1997), organisational studies (e.g. Dahler-Larsen, 1998) and pedagogic (e.g. Cederstrøm. Qvortrup ~ Rasmussen, 1993) have put their attention on (Luhmanns) systemic thinking. In Norway, different aspects of the approach have been discussed among sociologists in the journal "Sociologi" (e.g. Rasmussen, 1996; Jonhill, 1993) on, and in Sweden Sverre Moe (1995) has introduced Luhmanns theories.
4. Reckwitz ~ Sievert (1997:5f.) distinguish between two basic groups of approaches:
 1. A system orientated constructivism which links the basic idea of a symbolic construction of reality with different versions of autopoietic and self-referential system theory.
 2. An action orientated, interpretative social constructivism, which links the basic idea of a symbolic construction of reality to collective meaning potentials in schemes of social action. In other words: While reality is constituted by independent and self-referential systems according to system orientated constructivists, social constructivists argue the social agents constitute reality by their actions which are based on a plurality and diversity of cognitive and cultural schemes.
5. Cf. Thyssen (1991) for a further discussion of the Habermas-Luhmann relationship (and their respective references to Talcott Parsons).
6. Luhmann uses "media" in a different and more general sense, referring to any device to communicate and distinguishing between language as the basic medium for understanding, distributing media (e.g. print, tv, radio) and other symbolic media, e.g. power as a political medium or money as an economic medium (cf. Thyssen, 1991). When speaking about the media in this article, I refer to "the media" as a term in communication studies to denote distributing media.
7. By claiming so, Luhmann turns his back on his former teacher Talcott Parsons, who believes that social systems are rooted in stable value patterns. The break with Parsons happened when Luhmann turned his interest towards theories of complexity and the concept of autopoiesis (Qvortrup, 1993:29). Theoretical inspiration about self-referential and autopoietic systems he acquired from the Chilean neuro-biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela. Their theory applied to a sociological perspective leads to the notion of the

impossibility of communication between human beings, because their brains or conscious minds are unable to communicate. Thoughts and opinions cannot be transmitted in the same way as e.g. letters or a tv-show and only communication can communicate.

8. All quotations from non-English sources are translated by the author of this article.
9. Proportionality is here defined as the equal transmission of information quantities. Research on the effects of communication is trying to measure those quantities.
10. Causality refers to the earlier mentioned principle in Aristotelian rhetoric which presupposes that each action has concrete causal effects. Stimulus-response-theories are mainly based on this rather mechanical slip trying to explain reality directly and linear by causes and effects (representational theories).
11. Transivity refers to the transfer of information via a medium.
12. Qvortrup (1993:43-44) defends the lack of empirical depth in system theory with the argument that empirical phenomena are taken even more serious in system theory than in any other theory, because they are not just taken for granted. Thus system theory does not just study which phenomena exist (what?), but primarily the reason for their existence first (why?).

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