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Social constructivism and its implications for critical media studies

Kurzfassung: Während Medienkritiker daran festhalten, dass Kriegsberichterstattung einen starken Bias in Richtung auf Konflikteskalation hat, behaupten ihre Gegner, dass das Konzept einer verzerrten Realität nicht aufrechterhalten werden könne. Was wie eine medien-politische Auseinandersetzung erscheint, rührt von einem erkenntnistheoretischen Problem her, welches die Wurzeln der Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften ganz allgemein berührt: die Frage, ob die soziale Konstruktion der Realität die Beliebigkeit von Meinungen impliziert. Die vorliegende Arbeit diskutiert diese These aus konstruktivistischer Perspektive und zeigt auf, dass sie sowohl auf einem unzureichenden und logisch falschen Verständnis von Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit basiert, wie auch auf einer mangelnden Differenzierung zwischen Fakten und Bedeutungen, zwischen Wahrheit und Glauben und zwischen objektiven und subjektiven Realitäten. Indem sie einen dritten Weg zwischen Kulturimperialismus und einem naiven Verständnis von Kulturrelativismus aufzeigt, erörtert diese Arbeit schließlich die methodische Grundlage, auf welcher Medienkritik aufbauen kann.

Abstract: While media critics maintain that war coverage has a strong bias toward promoting conflict escalation, their opponents claim that the concept of distorted reality cannot be upheld. What seems to be a media-political dispute results from an epistemological issue that tangles the very roots of cultural studies in general: the question of whether the social construction of reality implies the arbitrariness of opinions.

The present paper discusses this proposition from a constructivist point of view and shows that it is based on an inadequate and logically incorrect understanding of truth and reality, and on a lack of differentiation between facts and meanings, between truth and beliefs and between objective and subjective realities.

Defining a third path between cultural imperialism and a naïve understanding of cultural relativism, the paper finally discusses the methodological basis on which media criticism can build.

1. Introduction

In communication studies, there is an ongoing debate between those who criticize the media for misrepresenting reality and those who do not. Particularly with respect to conflict and crisis communication, critics maintain that media coverage has a strong bias toward promoting the escalation of conflict and ask for a more balanced and all-sided way of reporting (cf. Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Galtung, 2002, Kempf, 2003).

Their opponents, on the other hand, claim that the concept of distorted reality cannot be upheld. Since the media are an active element in the process of constructing reality, the *one* version of reality which is constructed by war reporting is as compatible with classical standards of truth *as countless other versions* (Hanitzsch, 2004, 185).

What seems to be a media-political dispute disguised in methodological garments does indeed result from an epistemological issue which tangles the very roots of cultural studies in general: the question of whether the social construction of reality implies the arbitrariness of opinions.

In the following, I will try to show that this proposition – which is usually referred to as the position of *radical* constructivism – results from a misunderstanding of the constructivist approach. Although *social constructivism* emphasizes the perspective of *cultural relativism*, it does not imply the arbitrariness of decisions as to which statements about social reality can be held to be true or false.

In order to do so, I will first comment on the inappropriateness of so-called classical standards of truth, I will then refer to *methodological* constructivism and its understanding of truth and reality, and, finally, I will discuss the consequences which result from the circumstance that not only do cultural studies deal with “objective” phenomena (like natural processes) that can be observed from an external perspective, they also deal with “subjective” phenomena (like meanings) which can only be assessed from a perspective inside the individual, society or culture.

2. The inappropriateness of the classical understanding of truth

The classical definition of truth (which still can be found in many social science textbooks) claims that a statement is true if it corresponds with reality.

Given this definition, and combining it with the social constructivist approach, it certainly does seem that any arbitrary set of statements (as in war reporting, e.g.) can claim to be true because it is in accordance with the reality it constructs.

The only problem with this argument is that it is based on circular reasoning

- in which truth is attributed to any statement which corresponds with some reality and
- reality is attributed to any state of affairs which is described by some statement.

In the philosophy of science this is a well-known problem resulting from the inappropriateness of the classical definition, which has two shortcomings:

- *First:* The so-called classical definition cannot define the concept of truth as long as the concept of reality has not been defined *beforehand* and *independently* of the concept of truth.
- *Second:* Even if we had such an independent definition of reality, the classical definition of truth would still be logically incorrect.

Statements and the states of affairs described by them belong to different logical categories that cannot be directly compared with each other. In other words:

- Statements can only be compared with and correspond with other statements, and
- in this sense, they also cannot be compared with empirical observations, but only with statements about the observed.

3. Methodological constructivism

Considerations like these already led the founder of formal logic, the mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege, to abandon the classical definition of truth.

According to Frege, the labeling of a statement as “true” is to be understood as an explicit promise to prove it. Vice versa, the labeling of a statement as “false” is nothing else than an explicit promise to disprove it.

- It is this understanding of truth, which dates as far back as the 19th century, upon which the constructivist school in the Philosophy of Science is based.

If we follow this understanding, we may conclude that the conceptual category of "true vs. false" does not apply to all statements, but only to those statements

- for which there exists a *well-defined set of rules* for how to argue in favor of or against them,
- and the confirmation or refutation of which can be measured against *universal standards*.

Following this line of argumentation, Kamlah & Lorenzen (1967) finally suggested that

- a statement is to be labeled as "true", *if and only if* it can be successfully defended against any competent and unbiased opponent,
- and it is to be labeled as "false", *if and only if* it can be successfully refuted despite the arguments of any competent and unbiased proponent.

Based on this definition, which defines the concept of truth independently of the concept of reality, the relation between truth and reality can then be conceptualized as a relation between the properties of statements and the properties of the states of affairs they describe:

- Statements describe states of affairs, and
- *true* statements describe *real* states of affairs.

In other words: *Reality* is a human construction. It is the universe of states of affairs that is described by *true* statements, and it does not exist independently of the statements with which we describe it.

4. A first résumé

Summarizing our arguments so far, we can say that the radical constructivists' proposition, according to which the social construction of reality implies the arbitrariness of opinions, can be rejected for (at least) two reasons:

1. It is based on an inadequate and logically incorrect concept of truth and reality, and
2. it is in diametrical opposition to the methodological basis of constructivism itself, which claims that there is a *practical interest* in distinguishing between *true* statements and those which are *false*.

Our opinions have an important function for orienting our behavior in the world that surrounds us. And for the success of our actions it is of crucial importance that we can distinguish between those that we can rely on and those that we cannot. Even though reality is a human construction, the *way* we construct reality can therefore never be purely arbitrary.

5. Facts and meanings

When we consider whether we should take an umbrella along when going outside, for instance, it is important to know whether the sun is shining, or whether it's raining. Which of these statements is true or false can be decided according to *universal* rules that imply that anybody who follows these rules and who is not misguided by biases will come to the same conclusions about what is real and what is not.

Real states of affairs described by statements that can be judged according to universal rules are usually called *facts*, and since their very beginnings, the natural sciences have built up a vast universe of facts.

But human action is guided by more than just facts. It is rather based on their *meanings*, and the attribution of meaning does not follow universal rules. For the tourist, rain may be a nuisance that ruins his vacation. For the farmer, it may be a blessing that saves his crops.

The meaning of a fact depends on its context and on the perspective from which we look at it. The assignment of meaning is an interpretive process based on current interests and biographical experiences and – in our context most importantly – on social and cultural rules.

Since different individuals, groups and societies have different interests and experiences, and since different groups, societies and cultures interpret the same facts according to different rules, the world of meaning is not a homogeneous world, however. It is made up of a multitude of alternative worlds that can be referred to as *subjective*, (personal, social and cultural) realities.

Even if we call them realities, we must not fail to see, however, that *subjective* realities have a different methodological status than the reality of facts – which we might also call *objective* reality. They are not real in the same sense of the word as defined above.

Since the rules according to which meaning is constructed are not universal, the terms true or false do not apply to statements about the meaning of a fact *per se*. Statements about *the* meaning of a fact can neither be verified nor falsified in the strict sense of the word. They can only be *believed* or not.

- They *cannot* be defended against *any* competent and unbiased opponent,
- but only against persons who share the same social and cultural rules, view things from the same perspective and have had comparable experiences.

6. Possible consequences

So, if statements about *the* meaning of a fact are neither true nor false, what are the consequences for the scientific program of cultural studies?

- Do we finally come to the same conclusions as radical constructivism, which regards all arbitrary constructions of reality as equally true?
- Or should we rather abandon cultural studies as a scientific program and turn to the hard sciences, where things are much simpler?

As is so often the case in methodological debates, none of the alternatives that seemed plausible at first glance proves to be within reason.

Since people *do not* act as a direct response to the objective qualities of the states of affairs in their environment, but rather according to the meanings they attribute to these states of affairs (cf. Blumer, 1973), cultural studies are urgently needed. And even though statements about meaning *per se* are neither true nor false, this does not hold for the theories of cultural studies.

Although meaning is relative, there are statements about meaning that can be verified or falsified.

- These are *not* statements about *the* meaning of a fact *per se*, however, but they are
- statements which describe the meaning of a fact for a *given* person, group, society or culture,
- statements which describe the perspectives, experiences and sets of social and cultural rules according to which this meaning is constructed, and
- statements which describe how these reality constructions interact with each other.

What can be true or false, therefore, are only *descriptions* of subjective realities, *explanations* of how they are constructed, and *analyses* of their interactions. In itself, a subjective reality is neither true nor false.

7. A second résumé

Summarizing these arguments, we can say that the radical constructivists' proposition, according to which any arbitrary construction of reality can be regarded as equally true, is to be rejected for three more reasons:

1. It fails to differentiate between facts and meanings.
2. It fails to differentiate between truth and beliefs; and
3. it fails to recognize the logical difference between objective reality, on the one hand, and subjective reality, on the other.

With respect to our media-political dispute, we can thus conclude that the proposition according to which the version of reality constructed by war reporting complies with the standards of truth no less than countless other versions is a plain misunderstanding. It results from terminological inaccuracy and attributes truth to states of affairs to which the concept of truth does not apply.

The version of reality constructed by war reporting is neither true nor false. It is simply there. And we have to cope with it.

8. Cultural relativism

But doesn't this have the same implications? Doesn't it immunize media reality against criticism just as does radical constructivism? No, it does not.

As far as subjective realities are concerned, however, the dispute about competing reality constructions cannot be a dispute about which of them is true. It can only be a dispute about which of them is functional.

And again, functionality is a relative concept. Nothing is functional *per se*. The concept of functionality relates states of affairs like reality constructions with the *goals* that they serve; in our example, with goals like fighting the enemy and coping with the burdens of war – or with goals like conflict resolution and reconciliation, etc.

Being aware that the criticism of reality constructions cannot criticize their lack of truth, but only their lack of functionality also opens up a third path between a naïve understanding of cultural relativism, which accepts any construction of reality as equally true, and cultural imperialism, which aims at imposing one's own construction of reality on other societies or cultures.

With respect to conflict and crisis communication, for instance, the rules according to which conflict parties interpret their conflict cannot be criticized as false, but they can be criticized as avoiding conflict, or as escalating conflict, etc. And the same holds for the media coverage of conflicts as well.

As can be shown with the same example, the avoidance of cultural imperialism does not necessarily imply that reality constructions can only be evaluated from within the respective society or culture, its history and aims. At least in some cases – like conflict – it is even necessary to evaluate them from outside the respective society or culture.

Conflict is an interactive process, and like all human action (cf. Werbik & Appelsmeyer, 1999) it involves (at least) three different kinds of reality.

1. One party's subjective reality (first party), and
2. the subjective reality of an opponent (second party),

that can both be assessed from within the respective party's perspective only. And

3. an objective reality (third party),

that can be assessed from an external (objective) perspective only and which shows how the subjective realities interact with each other.

In order to evaluate the escalation or de-escalation potential of the conflict parties' reality constructions, this external perspective is needed. And from this objective perspective, we may well criticize some reality constructions as *biased* toward promoting conflict and appreciate others as more balanced and all-sided.

9. Misrepresentation of reality

But is this a sufficient methodological basis for criticizing the media as misrepresenting reality? Can subjective realities be distorted if they are neither true nor false?

Of course they can. And they can be labeled as distorted and misrepresenting reality for at least three reasons

- *First*: if they are based on "facts" which are *not real* (and, hence, not facts at all),
- *Second*: if the factual basis of reality construction is *incomplete*, and
- *Third*: if the rules according to which the facts are interpreted are *inadequate*.

The inadequacy of rules is again a relative term that relates the social and cultural rules of reality construction to the objective properties of the respective subject matter.

In the case of conflict, for instance, such objective properties are that

- any conflict affects the rights and goals of all parties involved, and
- any conflict is basically open to being dealt with either in a cooperative (win-win) or in a competitive (win-lose) way (cf. Deutsch, 1973).

Accordingly, any set of rules can be called inadequate if it excludes one of these options *a priori*.

To put it more concretely: If war reporting reduces the complex process of conflict to a simple struggle between good and evil, it interprets reality with respect to a set of rules which is not only unsuitable with respect to the aims of conflict resolution, but is also inadequate for assessing the complexity of conflict. And in this sense of the word, it *is* a misrepresentation of reality – even if the factual basis of the coverage might be correct.

10. A final résumé

Summarizing these arguments, we come to our final conclusions:

1. A dispute about subjective realities cannot be a dispute about which of them is true *per se*,

2. it can only be a dispute which relates them to something outside the reality constructions themselves: to states of affairs like goals and/or objective reality.
3. Taking this into account opens up a third path between a naïve understanding of cultural relativism, which accepts any constructions of reality as equally true, and cultural imperialism, which aims at imposing one's own construction of reality onto other societies or cultures.
4. Although subjective realities are neither true nor false *per se*, a social construction of subjective realities can thus be criticized on the basis of three criteria:
 - lack of functionality,
 - misrepresentation of the facts and
 - inadequacy of the social and cultural rules on which it is based.

And to come back to our initial problem: there is no methodological reason why subjective realities – and particularly the *one* version of reality which is constructed by war reporting – cannot be criticized as misrepresenting reality and/or as biased toward promoting conflict escalation.

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