

Mass-media and the social construction of reality

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Abstract: *The social construction of reality through media has been a research topic for sociology, psychology but also for media studies. The article presents different points of view but focuses especially on the perspective of Constructivism. Constructivism emphasises the fact that media has strong effects on the individual, subjective perception of reality. Words, but especially visual communication media, can shape the picture of reality in the receivers' minds.*

The process of communication is at the basis of any social activity, and the role of communication media is very complex and invites many debates (Wells/ Wells: 1997, 19). We are referring to the fact that gradually, in everyday life, mass communication media have become more than just simple media. Mass-media has become an important component of the social context, one which cannot be ignored. As a part of our lives, mass-media is a means of information, a means of existence (Jeanneney: 1997). We rarely see the difference between media institutions themselves and their products. In the terms of the sociology of knowledge this can be translated as a superimposition of the objective reality of mass-media (the institutional organization) and the subjective reality (the media products).

We must specify that everyday social reality is a reality constructed through its reflection in the individual conscience and the collective one, which is the basis of conventional reality. Media institutions are those who, through media products, offer a first reflection of reality, a first level of reality construction. An argument for this could be the fact that mass-media everywhere is in direct relationship with the

institutional organization of society. Their role is to apprise citizens of the way in which the society's institutions are operating, the way their activity influences their life and daily actions.

The reality of everyday life appears as ordered, arranged before the individual's contact with it. We naturally consider everyday life as being reality itself, because we can most often perceive it directly, at first hand. We know that it is so, that reality is in a certain way without us acting upon it. When we have the possibility to know something directly we know for certain it is real and we have the possibility to personally interpret the everyday reality. In other words, we "construct" our own reality to relate to. There isn't any reality that is "more real" than the one we perceive and interpret ourselves.

On the other hand, everyday reality is reflected in our conscience. Different objects and events (human interactions) that make it up are presented to our conscience as constituents of different spheres of reality (the reality at work, the reality at home, at school etc.). At the same time, the surrounding world is spatially and temporally structured and it is reflected by our own conscience as such because, in Luckmann and Berger's opinion temporality is an inherent characteristic of our conscience (Berger/Luckmann 1999).

We tend to consider as absolute reality what is happening "here" and "now", as close to us as possible both spatially and temporally. This situation can explain the role of press institutions in constructing reality. Press stories (of any kind) are chosen firstly considering the public's interest. We are especially interested in what affects us directly and what happens close to us in space and time. These events are reflected in the individual conscience and are reconstructed observing rules specific to each of us, which derive from personal experience, knowledge accumulated over time and interaction with a certain cultural environment. Practically, when we talk about the construction of reality we don't relate to an inherent reality of everyday life, but to the way in which we perceive, interpret this reality.

The very idea of the social construction of reality revolves around the idea of reflection in the human conscience. It can be said that the reality of everyday life is a construct inasmuch as the reflection in the human conscience of the objects, phenomena, people we interact with, is at its basis. At the same time, the construction of reality is a social process because society is the environment in which the individual is anchored and represents immediate reality, the reality "par excellence" to which we relate and into which we wish to be integrated to be able to live and operate properly. This means that there is a conventional reality, generally accepted from a social point of view, because of the fact that the reflection of the environment in one's conscience happens similarly in all individuals.

Our interest is not oriented towards objective reality, but towards the way it reflects in the conscience. In this process of constructing reality, mass-media can have a decisive importance in the case of events to which we have no direct access, which we

cannot perceive through our own senses, at first hand. Mass-media can be considered a first level of reflection and direct perception is of major importance for constructing the individual reality. Still, there are events to which we have no access, but which can influence everyday life. The world is made up of several spheres of reality, and to some of them we cannot have direct access. This is where the mass-media come in, its role being to record and reflect these events. Based on this first reflection and by reason of the symbolic character of language, we can (re)construct the reality of a situation or of a world to which we had no access before. To this end, the mass-media make use of all the functions of language, but especially of *communication*, *symbolic*, *expressive* and *persuasive representation*.

The activity of mass-media cannot be conceived without language. This is obvious if we consider even just the communication function, function which is defined similarly in language and in mass-media: transfer of information, ideas, states, from a communicator to a receiver. Mass-media itself, as social reality (therefore, as social environment) is articulated through language. From a social point of view, language is the depository of knowledge and social experience. The whole activity of media is based on language and its functions.

The assignment of significations has an essential role in reflecting reality. The moment we perceive the surrounding reality and represent it mentally, we tend to give it a certain meaning, in accordance to the experience and knowledge accumulated. In case we do not have direct access to an area of reality, our access is possible through mass-media products. Thus, we read articles, see reports, and listen to news about events to which we have more or less access. Whether we are aware of it or not, media products represent an already constructed reality. The event has been reflected in someone's conscience (a reporter, an editor, a photographer) and has, consequently, been interpreted and has had a significance attributed to it. Manipulation through mass-media, the fabrication of information, or biased reporting, are not the object of our discussion as forms of constructing reality. We will dwell on the broader idea that the reality of an event to which we have no direct access is offered to us as a mediatic construction. It is worth to stop and consider the link between mass-media and the social construction of reality.

Our demonstration uses the term *reality frame*, which refers to the ability to perceive and present reality in an organized fashion. Paraphrasing the definition given by W.A. Gamson: "*A central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue*" (Gamson/ Modigliani: 1989, 35), we point out that *frame* refers to an idea, a concept whose purpose is to organize everyday events so that they gain meaning. Associated to mass-media, *media frames* can be best understood in the context of the social construction of reality as it appears in Berger and Luckmann's theory. The premises of the social construction of reality are the facts that we live and move around in a social reality that has no implicit signification. We have seen that the environment matters only inasmuch as by reflecting it in our conscience we

assign meaning to it. This meaning is spatially and temporally determined. The same object, person or situation can designate different realities in different moments and contexts. The way of constructing of signification at the individual level is determined by the relations that the individual has with different groups of society to which he/she adheres.

This situation allows for the existence of a large number of reality frames. In mass-media, the role of media frames is to organize both the world of journalists and those who come in direct contact with events and interpret them and the world of the audience, that is, of those who receive the media products and use them in constructing everyday reality. In this context, media frames are patterns of thought, interpretation, presentation, selection, inclusion, and exclusion, which organize the mediatic discourse and assign signification to the surrounding reality (Wolfsfeld: 1997, 31-33).

Thus, mass-media is more of a media constructor, being the first entity that, having direct access to a “slice” of the event constructs a reality at a first level. In the case of events that take place in spaces to which the audience has no access, the specially sent reporters and cameramen are actually the first to have contact with what goes on there. From what they report, the media institutions construct a product (a news story, a report etc.) which shows a mediated, otherwise inaccessible, reality. Another level of reality construction refers to the receiving of the media product by the audience. Once the mediatic material is received, the audience interprets it in a certain way, creating their own reality, exclusively based on the mediated reality. At the first level, the construction of reality is created by the reception of flows of stimuli, so called “pieces of reality”, and their interpretation, that is by arranging them in a certain way, according to certain coordinates and the background of the one who perceives the stimuli. When the audience has no contact with the authentic events, reality is also constructed on approximately the same coordinates on the next level. In other words, what we call “reality” is based exclusively on the *interpretation* of the constructor of reality, which is the mass-media. The conclusion is inescapable. The social construction, including the mediatic one, of reality is based on the reflection of everyday life in the individual or collective conscience. This reflection assumes differences in perception in accordance to the individual’s social context, social relations, culture and knowledge. The only reality which we consider authentic is the one we perceive ourselves, directly. But in the case of events (such as international conflicts) to which we have no direct access, mass-media is the one that o first level of reality, already interpreted, through media products. If we consider the subjectivity assumed by the paradigm of modernity, reality becomes the personal construction built by every individual on information that has already passed through the filter of mass-media.

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