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# Stepping Stones Towards a Constructivist Epistemology for Mass-Communication

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## **Comments**

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## **Stepping Stones Towards a Constructivist Epistemology for Mass-Communication**

by

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# Stepping Stones Towards A Constructivist Epistemology for Mass Communication

By Klaus Krippendorff

Having been a longstanding but largely absentee member of the Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft, I am pleased to have been invited and to be here. I feel especially honored to be assigned the task of presenting a heretical theoretical perspective and of raising some challenging questions we as practitioners, researchers and theoreticians of public communication should be addressing.

As a personal note, let me say that I have lived through various theoretical transitions: from a content analyst to a cognitive semanticist, from a theorist of information to one concerned with human agency and understanding, from a systems theorist to one that respects the unknowability of ecology, from quantitative researcher to one concerned with epistemological questions, and last but not least from a first-order cybernetician to a second-order one who must put himself into his own constructions and this naturally leads to some kind of constructivism.

Frankly, I do not like the word "constructivism" for it suggests, like all isms do, the existence of an all embracing dogma, a system of beliefs that claims ultimate hegemony over how the world must be seen and what the universe is. In contrast, I do believe constructivism provides a multiplicity of reality constructions, a multi-verse as Humberto Maturana<sup>1</sup> suggests, that other isms tend to foreclose. It also is heretical in its epistemology in the sense of providing choices the orthodox objectivism seeks to rule out<sup>2</sup>. But even in constructivism there already are different schools. There is social constructivism a la Berger and Luckmann<sup>3</sup>, there is social constructionism a la Gergen<sup>4</sup>, there are a variety of trivial constructivisms from Delia<sup>5</sup> to Kelly<sup>6</sup>, there is radical constructivism a la von Glasersfeld<sup>7</sup>, there is a more or less explicit constructivism in Heinz von Foerster's<sup>8</sup> and Humberto Maturana's and Francisco Varela's<sup>9</sup> work and there is the recent effort in the Funkkolleg of the Hessischer Rundfunk that brought together a great variety of views on the subject<sup>10</sup>. To lump them all into one category gives the impression of unity and

invites judging one contributor from fragments familiar from another. I therefore beg you not to pigeonhole me yet.

The task of constructivism, as I see it, is **to describe a system's operation within its own domain of description and account for the constitution of its identity and the conditions of its continued persistence in its own terms.** Said differently, constructivists need to find a way of **putting the knower into a known that is constructed so as to keep the knower viable in practice.**

Probably the most important challenge for constructivists is to overcome certain epistemological obstacles in understanding language. Recognizing these is difficult enough. Overcoming them often involves inventing a new way of using language which can make it difficult for others to get into it (and perhaps even more difficult to translate this use into another language, German for example).

In spite of these difficulties, I want to explore with you today the complicity of theory, theory of public communication if you wish, in the constitution of the mass media as a particular social organization in our society and in everyday life.

I think it is no exaggeration to say that at no point in human history has there been any authority that approached a position of influence as great as that of the modern media. Their global technology reaches into virtually every household through numerous channels. They operate 24 hours of the day as provider of information and as observer of their effects. As the main educator, governor and mindsetter, the mass media are unparalleled in determining virtually everyone's life. Nobody can escape them. No ruler, no government, no religion has ever had at its disposal such an astounding instrument of power, except that no single person is in charge of it and, I dare say, no one really understands what makes the mass media function the way they do.

It is my contention that the failure to understand the mass media is not so much due to a lack of interest in the subject matter or caused by the absence of appropriate research funds, but a consequence of pursuing theory constructions with inadequate epistemologies and from

disciplinary perspectives whose agendas are separate from or only marginally related to communication. A language for communication research that could explain how the mass media constitute themselves in the very public within which it operates still needs to be developed.

To further this development, let me invite you to reconsider the relationship between language and reality and to entertain several almost axiomatic propositions on reality, theory, understanding, communication, discourse and position--that may hopefully lay in front of you a path worth walking. Although you may find it going rough at times, perhaps even tedious, tempting you to return to familiar territory, I hope you will not get lost until you reach a point from where the mass media appear to make a different sense. There I will leave you to go on by yourself.

### **Language and Reality**

The received view of theory is that it must describe as accurately as possible a reality that exists outside its observer and independent of its description. In my opinion, this view of theory is a major obstacle to understanding communication in general and the public media in particular. Besides the familiar descriptive and persuasive functions attributed to language, its role in bringing forth reality is largely ignored yet fundamental for understanding what communication does. The notion that language is an intrinsic part of the reality it describes goes back to Wittgenstein who developed the idea of language as a game speakers play and who insisted that words are deeds as well<sup>11</sup>. Austin's concept of performatives, that is, utterances that do what they say<sup>12</sup>, supports the same contention. Promises, commitments, declarations, etc. have no referents but change the world in which they are uttered. "I hereby pronounce you married" makes a man into a husband and a women into a wife and creates for everyone to see the kernel of a family that could not exist without saying so.

Indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini's mere declaration of *The Satanic Verses* as a blasphemy made it so, not just for him but for many followers who held compatible reality constructions as

well, causing real people to be killed in demonstrations in Pakistan, New York booksellers to fear terrorist attacks and the British Government to protect the author. Incidentally, Khomeini's use of language has a history that goes back to the 12th century Persian ruler Hasani Sabbah, who founded the order of the Assassins, based on the knowledge that the very threat of murder can be as disabling as its execution. A man who fears being killed often is no stronger than a man already dead<sup>13</sup>. But one does not have to go into such extreme incidents. Therapeutic interventions (saying "I feel O.K."), political agenda setting (claiming "the real issue is...") prejudices (that force those stigmatized into submission) provide ample examples for how timely assertions can make real what they say for those who understand them so.

Some of my own work concerns the use of metaphors which have the ability to create the reality of something by suggesting it to be seen in terms of something else. My interest in metaphors does not lie in their rhetorical figures but in their entailments. For example, the "war on drugs" metaphor, frequent in the U.S. government policy statements and in the press, made drug users into faceless enemies, demanded the urgent allocation in the U.S. Congress of extraordinary resources to oppose them, created specialized fighting forces to protect civilians and justified physical violence, ultimately the invasion of Panama. At the same time other metaphors of drug use are available, for example, illness metaphors, communal metaphors or hedonist metaphors whose use has entirely different entailments and could have created entirely different realities<sup>14</sup>.

Theories are not exempt from this intricate relationship to reality. The racial theories of the Nazis were considered valid during the Nazi period, created much research and became discredited not for lack of evidence but with the collapse of the regime. Theories in experimental psychology call for certain kind of experimentation and naturally lead to generating the data needed to support or contradict them. Freud's linguistic construction of the unconscious and his labeling of psycho-pathologies created a whole field, a profession and one could surely consider it a multi-million dollar business.

**The belief that language merely describes makes us blind to see that it brings forth the reality we see.**

Theories of communication possess another remarkable reality. They not only claim to be **about communication**, but, being part of a discourse generated by peers, they also must be communicable and hence survive being **in communication**. If such theories are general enough to describe the very process of communicating them, they will also have to provide the very data they claim to explain or be self-explanatory. Thus, as a criterion for accepting communication theories, I am suggesting:

**Communication theories must be capable of constituting themselves in the very realities they claim to describe.**

Parenthetically, theories in other empirical domains may not have this property. For example, theories in biology exist in the language of biologists which living systems, from cells to complex organisms being studied there, tend not to understand. There is communication of communication but there is no biology of biology. I believe the self-referential nature of communication (theory) could serve to delineate our science of communication--but this goes beyond my topic.

### **Saying things**

But surely, language does nothing by itself and describing it like grammarians do can not reveal how and where it is doing what it does. Let me propose an almost axiomatic statement for constructivism:

**Everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such.**

In proposing this, I am neither suggesting that all communication involves language (one obviously can say something in pictures and communicate by touch), nor that this someone is



necessarily someone other than the speaker (speakers too must be able to hear themselves talking to know what they do and this fact is expressed in Maturana's proposition "anything said is said by an observer"<sup>15</sup>). I am particularly avoiding the usual conception that it is a listener's task to accurately assess a communicators' intentions. I am sure, everyone who has travelled abroad will have had the experience of talking to someone who does not have a clue as to **what** one says but clearly understands **that** one wants to communicate something. By saying "everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such" I am suggesting three things. First, that the happening of something being said must be **understood by someone** as being said otherwise nothing is said for anyone. Second, that the one who understands that something is being said also **constructs his or her own participation in a process of communication**, whatever this construction may be. And finally, while there is no need to deny that there could be something, a sound, a text or any mediating thing that contributed to it being understood as saying something, this something cannot be understood without understanding it and is hence outside of human reach. In sum:

**Nothing can bypass human understanding.**

It follows, that there can be no text, no discourse, no language, no mass media and in fact no-thing without someone recognizing it as such. In a way my proposition contextualizes Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's first axiom of communication "one cannot not communicate"<sup>16</sup> differently by shifting the position taken from that of an author or agent of action to that of a listener or observer who has the option of seeing herself as the participant in a process only she can determine. Indeed, communication is impossible with someone who one has reasons to believe is unable or refuses to understand what one says or does as communication. To me, a practitioner's understanding is decisive here and the shift to that position also entails an epistemological shift away from objectivism as it were. And this shift is not a trivial one as we shall see.

But how do these propositions affect theories of public communication? The received and objectivist view ties public communication to the operation of the mass media and conceptualizes these as a complex organizational pattern, a system, organized for the purpose of production, transmission and equal distribution of news and entertainment to large and anonymous audiences. Harold Lasswell defined the field of mass communication research by its addressing questions of "who, says what, to whom, through which channel, and with which effects."<sup>17</sup> These questions assume a linear process initiated by a sender and terminating in effects on an audience and perhaps beyond. You are all too familiar with this view and I do not need to further elaborate except to highlight some easily overlooked characteristics of this traditional perspective.

Noticeably, it shows absolutely no awareness of the reality constituting capabilities of language. I would say, Lasswell's questions **bring forth** the linear view just described by directing research to generate data that cannot do anything other than to reify this understanding and it is no accident that the mass media we know are pretty much what we have learned to say about them. This received view not only denies alternative realities to emerge but also provides **no place for human understanding** to enter theories of mass communication. For example the "what" in his questions assumes one could describe mass media content without reference to anyone's interpretive abilities, perception of social situations or intents. This, of course, is tied to the conception of a homogeneous audience in which everyone is alike. Instituting such a view in the very media practices being described **disables the cognitive abilities** of its human constituents, forces them to behave like trivial machines (whose capability of understanding, is absent or irrelevant), invites a communication technology to optimize the linear process of public communication and delivers the system thus evolving as an open instrument of control. Finally, the proponents of this model of mass communication assume **no responsibility** for their public construction.

In contrast, my proposition suggests that public communication cannot exist without someone constructing, describing and recognizing it as such and since the mass media are

conceived to involve many people and in different roles, there ought to be many ways of understanding them.

### **Understanding and autopoiesis**

In saying "everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such" and concluding that "nothing can bypass human understanding," I invited you to jump right into something difficult to grasp and this is understanding. Since the notion of understanding has moved closer to the center of my epistemological concerns, let me comment on its embodiment. The objectivist epistemology leads one to think of understanding as being **of something** outside of us. It entails the contradictory claim of being able to compare something seen with something without or before seeing it or to understand something outside of our understanding. This renders the objectivist program epistemologically inconsistent and hence untenable. I take understanding to be no more than a **quality of knowing**, a feeling of certainty, competence, wholeness, connectedness with the world or fit without explanation for why this feeling is as is. When we say "I understand you" we can never know what that you has in mind but that we are satisfied with the way we have constructed the discourse that led to this assertion, maintaining a sense of coherence and completion with what we know.

So, understanding is always embodied in something, a medium, a practice, something yet or principally unknown. From the position of an outsider one could say human understanding is embodied in human biology and everything capable of sustaining it: other people, social organizations and ecology. Let me capture this intuition by saying that, as a quality of knowing:

#### **Understanding sustains itself in its embodiment including the practices it engenders .**

This proposition depicts understanding and its embodiment in practice as an **irreducible circular unity** whose reality lies neither in someone's head as solipsists hold true, nor entirely outside its detached observer, as objectivists insist it to be, but in the dynamic fit between them. In claiming

this, (my) constructivism takes a middle path that overcomes both epistemologically untenable extremes. Gregory Bateson<sup>18</sup> too located what he called mind in a circularity involving not only the circuitry of the brain but also the network of interactions outside of it. I maintain that understanding cognitive constructions, including mind, can only be understood as mediated, as embodied or as manifest in particular practices, linguistic practices or discourse included.

But, this "irreducible circular unity" must also be understood as such and thus cannot escape the very quality of knowing it is invented to explain. Practice, as the enacting or unfolding of understanding and as enabling new understanding in return, is itself **a construction that takes place within understanding**. Drawing a distinction within understanding between understanding and practice reveals understanding to be a recursively self-embedding phenomenon. There is not just understanding understanding and practice, there also is understanding someone else's understanding, understanding someone else's understanding of my understanding, etc. Understanding is a operationally recursive construction drawing a knower deep into her own process of constructing. The fact that practice does not have a parallel structure leads me to summarize the obvious:

**There is no escape into the real world  
without understanding it as such.**

Excepting the qualification "without understanding it as such," the proposition is consistent with the works by von Glasersfeld, von Foerster, Maturana and Varela who concur, each in their own terminology, that cognition is an operationally closed system that maintains itself in the face of perturbations. I want to merely sketch the relationship between understanding and autopoiesis. Suppose understanding would be nothing other than the eigen behavior of cognition, that is, the coherence to which the recursive operation of cognition ultimately converges, then the claim that **all acts of construction, decomposition and reconstruction are dedicated to sustain understanding** would say exactly the same except for using the metaphor of purpose when,

perhaps, we can not do otherwise. Indeed, it would seem: **Understanding cannot knowingly be contradicted.**

The above proposition renders understanding analogous to Maturana and Varela's formulation of autopoiesis as a theory of living systems<sup>19</sup>. However, to me, understanding and autopoiesis belong to different phenomenal domains, the social and the biological respectively, and should not be confused. The relation between them may well be seen in the proposition that human

**Understanding cannot contradict its embodiment  
(for long).**

Any embodiment of understanding unquestionably includes the biology of a knower as an autopoietic system and contradicting it, whether by guiding it into fatal accidents or suicide would destroy the autopoiesis of the knower and all that is embodied in it. Conversely, since humans lived long before autopoiesis was invented, the living of living systems can hardly be dependent on being understood as an autopoietic system. Thus, we can say, (a) understanding is predicated on the autopoiesis of its biological embodiment, (b) understanding autopoiesis is not necessary for understanding to exist, but, (c) it can certainly lead to an understanding of the limits to understanding.

There have been several proposals to apply the idea of autopoiesis to social systems, most recently by Luhmann<sup>20</sup>. Maturana has been skeptical of such efforts because of his belief that no society can exist without allowing its members to realize their own autopoiesis<sup>21</sup>. The critical question concerns the reality of the structure of a society. It is quite possible that what appears as societal self-construction is not structure determined but the joint product of communicators' pursuing their own understanding relative to each other, through recurrent interaction (communication) with each other and within the wide limits of (biological) autopoiesis.

The proposition that "understanding cannot contradict its embodiment" also delineates what von Glasersfeld called viability. Instead of narrowing the acceptability of cognitive

constructions by criteria of truth, by correspondences with a fictional reality, which is what objectivists maintain, this proposition recognizes only certain constraints within which a great variety of constructions are possible. Notions of human agency (purposeful interactions based on understanding them as such), imagination (playfully extending constructions into the unknown), creativity (decomposing and reconstructing something new) and perturbations (resulting from the unfolding of constructions into non-knowable practices) always require and expand the space of possibilities in which they operate, always edging towards these constraints and always restlessly seeking to transcend them. Realizing, as Kant did long ago, that our limits do not derive from nature but are largely set within the mind, are self-imposed and invented, I see in constructivism an approach to human understanding that enables to continuously expand, test, and negotiate a cognitive space in communication with others.

Finally, the fact that nobody can be forced to understand something as intended, as it exists or as it should be, and the fact that nobody can directly observe someone else's understanding attests to the **cognitive autonomy** inherent in all human understanding. This cognitive autonomy is not inalienable, however. As we shall see, cognitive autonomy may not be realizable in conjunction with certain--what I will call--disabling constructions and it is possible to give up one's cognitive autonomy to various inventions of authority.

## **Communication**

Communication too invokes the distinction between understanding and practice. It is both cognitive and social and I would add it is the key to understanding discourse and the construction of society within which public communication plays a major role in need of understanding.

To begin with, one must acknowledge that we know of no single general theory of communication and I am suggesting here and probably at your dismay there should be no universal one. I am advocating merely a general framework within which a variety of

communication theories can be constructed from what the constituents of the process can bring to it.

As communicators, we always have, through participation in different discourses, a variety of alternative models, metaphors and myths of communication available.

There is communication as the carrying of messages, analog to what postal workers do. There is communication as the transmission of information through copper wires, for example. There is communication as the flow of signs and symbols. There is communication as the reduction of interpersonal uncertainty. There is communication as the maintenance of relationships, whether among people or between mass production and consumption. There is Luhmann's proposal to regard communication as resonance between systems<sup>22</sup>. There is communication as the carrying out of a mission, an understanding prophets practiced. There is communication as exerting power and influence. There is communication as control. There is communication as sharing, as creating commonalities among participants. There is communication as closing knowledge gaps. There is communication as establishing superiority, nourished by the "argument is war" metaphor. There is communication as the use of proper tropes as promoted in classical rhetoric and many more<sup>23</sup>. I like communication as dance.

I think you will agree that the communication constructions on this short list have no feature in common and exhibit at best some Wittgensteinian family resemblances. A general theory of them might also be impossible because they seem to belong to different discourses, the information transmission notion to engineering, the mission notion to religious discourse, the symbol manipulation idea to mathematics, etc. Under certain circumstances, such communication constructions can travel across discourses, for example, when the well articulated information processing model from computer sciences becomes a metaphor for understanding the otherwise complex behavior of social organizations, or when the biological notion of autopoiesis is used as a metaphor for illuminating certain features of social systems. The direction of this "traffic" usually is from a privileged and well articulated to a less privileged discourse which is thereby usurped. In any case, the preference for any one of this multitude of

communication constructions or theories might be serving someone's particular interests and privileges one discourse over another but ignores the variety of constructions culturally available, at least in principle.

Besides my explicit resistance to settle on any one general theory of communication, if "everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such," the unfolding of this individual understanding of communication into practice means **getting involved with others that can participate in one's own communication constructions with communication constructions of their own.** The consequence of several individuals simultaneously acting out their own understanding of communication and of each other, turns out to be an interweaving of their practices, a co-ordination of their behaviors, a mediated interdependence, a joining of efforts--always under conditions that the participants in this process preserve their respective understanding. Let me say what might by now seem obvious that

**Communication resides in the unfolding of communication constructions by and of selves and others into intertwined practices.**

While I hope the statement is clear, to be sure of that, let me point out a few implications.

First, the intertwining of practices and the individual communication constructions belong to different but recursively connected phenomenal domains. The intertwining of different practices can be observed by an outside observer as well as by its participants. But the communication constructions that do unfold in the process and in turn explain that process are each participant's own. Understanding someone else's understanding always means constructing cognitive explanations of someone else's practices under the assumption that these could account for why someone does what she does. In practice, it is virtually impossible to exclude from these explanations references to others' constructions of themselves. Thus:

**Communication sets in motion a recursion through which communicators can see themselves through the constructs of each others' eyes.**



It would follow that any communication theory that intends to explain an observed intertwining of human behavior must make reference to the cognition of the constituents of the process and recursively embed in its constructions the constructions of the communication constructions that do account for the process as observed. In a sense communication theory must bridge several levels of recursion by constitutively involving the potentially recursive theories held by the communicators.

Second, given so many species of communication constructions culturally available, not all of their combinations lend themselves to continuous communicative engagements and may not survive their simultaneous unfolding. Two individuals that believe each must be in charge can not communicate for long. Someone holding that communication means producing and sending messages cannot live with someone expecting intimacy from a partner in communication . Mismatches of this kind can lead to breakdowns of communication, disengagement or accommodation. As it turns out, accommodation usually proceeds toward experiences construed as of no one's making, as factual givens, whose authority may not be questioned (all of which are constructions, of course).

It is my contention that the medium in which the mass media are constituted, permits only a limited number of communication constructions, the linear one-to-many way influence/control model being one of them. Presenting itself as a one-way medium, as a transmission technology, as an authority on news and entertainment whose objective nature is non-negotiable, the mass media demand of their mass audiences nonreciprocal accommodation to what their own medium affords, responding to changes in audience behavior only slowly if at all. Thus the asymmetry built into the medium puts its stamp on the nature of the communication constructions that can survive the process.

Third, under conditions of continuous communication (without disengagement or breakdown and after mutual accommodation), **the constructions of and by the communicators** involved, **become complementary** (like a buyer is to a seller, a parent is to a child, a sender is to a receiver or a system is to its environment). However, since we are

constitutively prevented from observing each others understanding, having access only to our own understanding, an observer of the practices that mediate this communication may mistakenly explain the observed intertwining as resulting from the **same** communication constructions (which is usually assumed to be consistent with one's own understanding), as if the communicators would understand their involvement in the same way, as if procedures were agreed upon, as if symbols had a common meaning, as if all speakers would speak the same language, etc. This is the objectivist fallacy. Assumption of sameness can also enter the communication constructions of the participants, each in their own way, and give rise to notions of cognitive sharing and normative commonalty and a host of pathologies I cannot discuss here in detail.

### **Public discourse and accountability**

Let me suggest discourse to be one manifestation of the recurrent and longitudinally stable intertwining in a medium of communication. Specifically:

#### **Discourse records what the recurrent intertwining of communication practices leave behind.**

This proposition provides a link between language, communication and understanding. I consider it central to understanding public communication and the mass media. Let me develop the notion of discourse without falling into the above mentioned trap of the objectivist fallacy.

In saying "everything said is communicated to someone..." I am using "said" and "saying" metonymically and do not mean to exclude non-linguistic practices, the composition of artifacts and the production of television shows, for examples. However, since language is so central in all of these endeavors let me develop an understanding of saying something as a public discourse in which I see public communication situated.

Before presenting this constructivist notion of discourse, let me say that I have not found an entirely satisfactory definition of public communication in the literature. There is of course the

debate model, the idea of responsible citizens arguing with each other and reaching consensus. This may have been working in our idealized image of ancient Greece, may still explain the front stage of contemporary parliamentary debates but, since its agendas are largely set elsewhere, the public is reduced to a passive audience. There is the model of the marketplace of ideas where problems are traded for solutions, where information is sold for a profit. But, ideas and information hardly are compatible with tangible goods and the model of giving up something for receiving something else is not what is going on in public communication. Political scientists have taken public opinion polls as providing an operational model of the public. It serves candidates during election campaigns, indirectly influences political decisions, but cannot account for ordinary political conversations, the categories of analysis being set by those who pay for these polls. Content analysis has provided us with a model of public in terms of frequencies of what the mass media say, excluding the mass audiences altogether. The concepts of public communication as talk among strangers is an equally deficient conception. Strangers rarely talk to ponder political issues. Some familiarity and trust tends to be required for all human communication to take place. I am suggesting public communication to be based on a particular notion of discourse which embraces the following intuitions.

Commonly, **discourse** is defined as a coherent body of literature, verbal arguments, texts or messages, based on the use of language but not part of any particular one. One can distinguish many discourses, for example medical discourse, post-modernist discourse, intimate discourse and, of course, public discourse. Discourses can span different natural languages as scientific discourse can be translated from English into German, for example, save for the usual problems of distortions. However, discourses can rarely be translated into each other. Medical discourse can hardly be translated into the discourse of intimacy just as the language of religion tends not to be expressible in mathematical terms.

The incommensurability of different discourses marks their boundaries and their distinctiveness is not so much based on vocabulary and grammar than on distinctions among

subject matters, things that are thought to belong to the same (semantic) domain, and on the manner in which this subject matter is expressed, coherently explained and elaborated.

Discourses are not entirely impermeable, however. I already mentioned that metaphors can bridge them. For example, when the previously mentioned war metaphor is used in the discourse of drug abuse or when a medical metaphor renders a slum as diseased and in need of a cure.

Discourses are also differentially privileged.

Before going on, I wish to distance myself from recently fashionable conceptions of discourse as a new kind of objectivity, for example by Derrida and Foucault, that have stimulated such titles as "*Society as Text*<sup>24</sup>," "*Architecture as Discourse*<sup>25</sup>," "The Human Body as Discourse" and crowned discourse or text as the only reality that exist, humans and society being mere epiphenomena. I am opposed to such lopsided objectifications for they create constructions that abstract human understanding out of their pictures, eliminate individual responsibilities and become literally inhuman in consequence.

I am proposing two necessary conditions of discourse. First:

**Discourse is generated by members of a community  
in mutual anticipation of understanding each other.**

This does not imply anything about **how** these members understand the discourse they participate in, only **that** they are expected to act as if they would. Based on what I said about communication, this condition merely expects the experience of a stable and recurrent intertwining of practices by members in the same discourse community. Second:

**Members of a discourse community hold  
each other accountable for what they say.**

The latter essentially is John Shotter's social accountability thesis<sup>26</sup>. It suggests that discourse always is a social affair and entails both, the **right to challenge** what is said, whether by asking for clarifications, extensions and justifications for why something was said, and the social

**obligation to meet such challenges** with appropriate responses. In view of the fact that understanding is always personal and mutual understanding is never cross-individually ascertainable, (i) social accountability keeps a discourse open for elaboration and extension, (ii) social accountability keeps discourse coherent for members of the discourse community without implying sameness of understanding, (iii) social accountability keeps the practices of members of that community coordinated, providing an empirical basis for deciding on when mutuality exists, and finally (iv) social accountability enables a boundary to be drawn, redrawn and maintained as such around both the discourse and the community that embodies it.

My motivation for presenting this constructivist notion of discourse here is threefold: conceptual, analytical and critical. Conceptually, discourse can be regarded as the medium in which particular communities and social organizations constitute themselves and maintain their own coherences. Public discourse and the organizational phenomenon of the mass media exemplify this relationship and can explain each other. In as much as all communication has a history and builds on the intertwining experiences currently available, and given that discourse is a reflection of that intertwining, we can say human

**Communication coordinates the decomposition,  
reconstruction and extension of discourse.**

Analytically, discourse can provide the data for inquiries into communal distinctions, the working of social organizations, pattern of explanation, social concerns and how various knowledge structures are extended from within. Discourse analysis becomes justified by not being so different from what ordinary participants are expected to engage in and is more easily validated during conversational engagements with members of a discourse community. Finally, since social accountability requires communication and hence is profoundly effected by characteristics of the media of this communication, outside observers may contextualize this discourse differently, thereby recognizing all kinds of distortions and critically ascertain their social consequences in ways members of the communities involved may not realize from within.

Let me give just one example of the latter, leaving others for later. Public discourse is presumed understandable by virtually every member of a public, requiring neither specialized knowledge nor political privileges. The mass media constitute themselves within that discourse. However, the social accountability condition of public discourse is severely limited by the one-way nature of the communication technology in use. Not that one could not write letters of complaint and force public retractions of wrong claims, not that there is no negative fan mail and libel suits, but, these are hardly noticeable compared with the media's massive productivity. While the mass media thrive on the impression of near universal understandability (the first condition of discourse), providing news and entertainment to nearly every one and without discrimination of class, gender, etc., at the same time, **the mass media effectively amputate public discourse, substituting social accountability** (the second condition of discourse) **by mass media created journalistic and popular authorities.** There is no easy way of holding professional communicators, entertainers, media celebrities and politicians made into folk heroes accountable to ordinary concerns. The media can create them with all the might of mass production behind them. This tendency has distinct economical advantages and drives the mass media as a social organization.

### **Knowers' position and pathology**

I started this paper by showing that language and reality are closely interrelated and that theories participate in the construction of the very objects they claim to describe.

This and similarly relativist claims face a major logical obstacle. For example, if one takes Benjamin Lee Whorf's claim that all reality is relative to the particular language in which it is expressed then the Whorfian hypothesis<sup>27</sup> must itself be relative for it too is expressed in language. This difficulty is also found in the kind of Marxism that claims all knowledge to be ideological, or distorted by the historical and social conditions that gave rise to it. If this proposition is true, it must also be true of Marxism, rendering its claim distorted as well. Similarly,

version of the Whorfian hypothesis asserts that subjectivity is a category formed by various discourses of which we are subjects<sup>28</sup>. This leads one to ask: which discourses formed the category "Foucault"?

As David Sless<sup>29</sup> observed, such theoretical constructions are superficially plausible only because their proponents fail to account for their own **position** relative to the object they are investigating. The truth of the claim that understanding is relative to language, history or discourse can only be established if one stands outside language, history or discourse when making the pronouncement. The consequence of ignoring one's position is not just an oversight. It privileges objectivist scientific practices, leads to offensive claims of superiority and stimulates intellectual imperialism.

The need to recognize one's position in one's own reality constructions is not limited to theoreticians. It applies to everyday communicators as well. My understanding is not the same as someone else's understanding and the difference between understanding myself and understanding someone else's understanding of myself may be a motivator for communication in everyday life. A text is necessarily different for its author, its typesetter, its reader or its discourse analyst. Every writer knows that she must be able to move freely from what she wants to say to what her readers might make of it, etc. This everyday experience suggests:

**Understanding differs with the positions taken.**

Just as is true for theoreticians, the failure to recognize one's position in everyday communication can lead to all kinds of social pathologies. In view of the ordinariness of this experience, it is quite remarkable how communication scientists could manage to get away with constructing their theories essentially positionless and largely ignore the positions of those theorized as well.

Besides the need to put the knower into the known and, additionally, to recognize different positions individuals may assume within their constructions of reality, it is also possible to distinguish among kinds of positions. I already mentioned authors, readers, typesetters and

discourse analysts vis-a-vis a text. In this paper, I do not want to be more detailed than necessary and shall rely on just two kinds. Let me call them poets and subjects.

**Poets** construct realities other than themselves. They see themselves able to compose in language, create tangible artifacts and influence the people that populate the reality they have constructed so as to accept such interventions. While nobody can escape one's understanding, I want it to be a mark of poets that they themselves are not at issue while creating worlds they feel comfortable living in.

In contrast, **subjects** see themselves as integral parts of larger wholes, as components of social organizations, for example, whose reality is neither at issue nor in doubt. The role of a subject entails submission to super-individual, super-natural, extra-individual including spiritual realities whose laws they must learn to obey, whose constraints they take as givens and whose powers they do not dare to question. Subjects construct themselves as having to adapt, respond to or comply with the requirements of a world whose constructed nature they are unwilling or unable to recognize.

In a nutshell, poets create the world in which they live, subjects are created by the forces and conditions impinging on them. Poets see spaces in front of them, subjects their constraints. Poets assume responsibility for what they do, subjects blame their superiors or surroundings for what is being done to them. The distinction does not coincide with functional distinctions, such as between speakers and listeners. Any listener who understands that something is being said can take it as a compelling force, a command, an authorized fact, something that has one correct interpretation and when that listener tries to discover who is right or wrong, she makes herself into a subject to what is said. In contrast, a listening poet might be consciously inventing new meanings for what is being said, decomposing it and reconstructing it into something entirely new, using what is being said as a mere takeoff point for imagination and invention. "To fail as a poet," Richard Rorty suggests, "is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations of previously written poems"<sup>30</sup>.



My motivation for distinguishing between the two positions lies in their relation to cognitive autonomy and pathology. It always is possible and I would moreover say that **social participation makes it necessary to** give up some of one's own cognitive autonomy, for example, by making commitments to engage in conversations, sustaining the recurrency of interaction, keeping promises, maintaining meanings (truths), accepting declarations, trusting others, etc. These activities can **constrain constructive abilities while enabling a variety of other constructions**, for example, the synergistic products of group activities. Poets balance these constructions constructively.

But there does exist another form of constraint on the cognitive autonomy of individuals which largely comes from subjects' own belief in the invariable givenness of their world and the need to submit to higher and bigger authorities than theirs, for example, by objectifying (not realizing the constructed nature of) conventions, social institutions, various authorities and powers, by not differentiating positions, by not conceiving the ability to change to new positions, taking the positions of constructed others, for example, or by admitting only one version of reality in their own constructions. These are **disabling constructions** not because they constrain constructive abilities but because they also prevent subjects from seeing their own complicity in realizing these constraints. Objectivist discourse, with its claim of an observer-independent reality that only the privileged may have access to, contributes to this cognitive disablement.

Disabling constructions are the marks of subjects by definition. They become **pathological constructions**, however, when they imprison their beholder in intolerable reality constructions, whose signals are fear and pain, from which subjects no longer have the ability to escape. Oppression is one example<sup>31</sup>, Bateson's double bind<sup>32</sup> is another and there are less threatening cognitive pathologies subjects are prone to create for themselves. Take the construction of authority for an example. Subjects accept authority on the basis of their possessing powers far greater than their own, having resources inaccessible to them, etc. By not recognizing the constructed nature of power relations, subjects subject themselves to them and cannot see the possibility of being held responsible for authorities to exist. In contrast, poets

would have to examine their own constructive complicity in the authority of others, take responsibility for having empowered them through their own yielding and consider the possibility of reconstructing their own participation in such a social relationship an option.

### **Mass media and public communication**

What can these reconstructions of familiar terms tell us about public communication? Do they offer new insights into the public role of the mass media? Let me try out a few hypotheses.

My first hypothesis is not specifically about the mass media but it could serve as an epistemological warning. By defining discourse in terms of understanding it as such, I would have to say that **public discourse enables members of the public to communicatively engage each other into the kind of coordination of practices that socially construct and reconstruct the realities they see.** It follows that there can be no social realities without individuals being constitutively and collaboratively involved in their construction. It would be too simplistic to hold the mass media entirely responsible for constructing reality. Only individuals talk, can communicate and understand their communication in albeit different social roles. Reality is a social affair born in communication among people. The mass media mediate between them mindlessly. Derrida and Foucault have depicted discourse as the ultimate determinant of everything. I am suggesting discourse to be merely an important manifestation of the possibilities of recurrent interaction from which social realities, institutions and organizations like the mass media can arise in their participants' (including the theorists') understanding and practices. I believe this to be an important reorientation.

Second, while I do not need to hypothesize the obvious, let me simply acknowledge that **the technology of mass production**, which provides the infrastructure of the organization of the mass media, **dominates public discourse.** Its sheer volume, speed and variability of its production overwhelms public discourse in three ways: (a) in the drawing of its boundary, (b) in the delineation of the public and (c) in the definition of what members of the public need to know

to engage in the very public discourse thus emerging. Yes, engaging in communication means creatively extending discourse, elaborating it, constructing with it something else. Humans possess cognitive autonomy and can freely participate in various publics but the industrial mass production of public discourse easily drowns the recognition of individual contributions.

Third, **the one-way communication through which the mass media define themselves**, at least primarily, **unwittingly dislocates or amputates public discourse**. Grounded in the claim of public discourse's general understandability, the mass media capitalize on their ability to cater larger and larger audiences to governments and industries who desire to sell uniform products. But, by reducing feedback to a minimum, they also frustrate the ability to challenge what is said and to elicit appropriate responses, rendering social accountability a mere myth the public is led to live with.

Thus unable to provide an experiential basis for mutual understanding, the mass media put journalistic authority, star reporters, folk heroes and popular celebrities in place of what the social accountability to members of a public would otherwise assure. The mass media with their particular technology therefore institute themselves in ways quite different from ordinary participants in public communication.

Forth, the institutional **commitment to the unique combination of objectivism** (the belief in a reality that exists outside of an observer and independent of its description), a **representational theory of language** (with its epistemologically flawed descriptive accuracy and truth-by-correspondence criteria of validity) and the above mentioned institution of **journalistic authority creates cognitively disabling discourses**. Such discourses encourage individuals to construct their realities as removed, powerful and fear inducing, prevent them from understanding the observers', the journalists', and, above all, their own contribution to what they see as real and project the responsibility for their own cognitive constructions to irrefutable or super-individual agencies.

Fifth, seeing themselves in the business of public communication, so to speak, that is, as presenting a world that is believed to be of public interest to everyone, this world necessarily

includes the mass media themselves. To be sure, no social organization, no industry, no civic action group and no government can do without some kind of communication with its environment, whether to appropriate material resources, to recruit qualified members, to generate clients or markets or to legitimize itself relative to other organizations. Whereas non-communication oriented organizations may employ suitable media for this purpose, **the mass media present themselves as this very medium** of public communication and establish themselves or better **construct themselves in the very realities they are capable of creating to thrive in**. Thus the organization of the mass media, its technological infrastructure and its economic base, increasingly becomes synonymous with public discourse, drawing the boundary of this discourse by "All the News that's fit to print"<sup>33</sup>, (operationalized as attracting large audiences), delineating the community that constitutes the public (usually under exclusion of minorities and the economically and communicationally deprived) and deciding what everyone needs to know to participate in the mass media, as audience members for example.

Sixth, public discourse usually can support an ecology of very many species of linguistic constructions, models, metaphors and myths of social forms, including of communication. Through practicing these constructions, they are constantly brought into contact and tested relative to each other. Since no cognitive construction can violate the medium of its embodiment and since the embodiment of public discourse has increasingly become the technology of mass production, **the mass media support only those constructions of communication and of society that do not contradict their medium and do not threaten the viability of their organization**. In practice, this means that communication in virtually all everyday life situations becomes increasingly conceived of as a linear process of transmitting messages from senders to receivers, as a way of bringing forth desirable effects, as a process of control. Our own text books are full of these conceptions and the fact that the received theories of mass communication as a system of production, transmission and equal distribution to large audiences corresponds so neatly to what the mass media need to sustain themselves in public is no accident. It is a demonstration of the selective power a medium can exercise when its audience

members, including scientific observers, are no longer capable of seeing it as a social construction and become unwitting subjects of their cocreations.

Seventh, **the mass media as a social organization establish themselves in the increasingly disabling constructions by its human constituents** selectively employing poets for variety but thriving on making them as everyone else into their subjects. This phenomenon is not entirely unique to the mass media. Virtually all social organizations establish themselves in the understanding of their constituents and extract from them a measure of their cognitive autonomy as the price for their participation. Members of a church are asked to accept a God as an authority to whose judgement they must defer as a condition of remaining in the church. Participating in the organization of the mass media, in whichever role, means submission to the structure as which the mass media present themselves. There is no way of questioning the journalistic authority of the mass media and at the same time believing that they provide accurate news about distant events. There is no way of questioning the referential nature of what is seen on the TV screen or said without eroding the trust in the organization of the media that are built on this construction. Our culturally conditioned emphasis on the content of communication rather than on the nature of the medium in which we live reflects our learned blindness that prevents us from seeing our own submission to what the mass media increasingly require. Incidentally, this gives Marshall McLuhan's battle cry *The Media is the Message*<sup>34</sup> a new meaning.

At this point, let me emphasize the tentative nature of these hypotheses. They could have been stated differently and certainly are in need of further revisions and refinements. Through them, I hope I have shown that my efforts to put the knower into a constructed known can lead you to alternative realities of public discourse and to different research questions concerning the mass media within it.

### **Public communication research**

Having sketched the contours of an emerging reality, I do not want to stop here without giving some thought to how we as communication scientists can go about doing research and constructing theories in and about the public. Obviously, with the lessons of constructivism in mind, we can no longer proceed as usual, buying into and improving the predictability of the received models of the mass media's operation. To understand what theater does one cannot remain seated in the audience and echo the language used in a performance. One has to look behind the stage and perhaps even become involved in various practices, perhaps as a writer, director or manager, while remaining aware of one's own contribution to the ongoing discourse. Let me spell out five hopes for theory construction and scientific methodology in the public domain.

1. **Theories of communication, public or otherwise, should constitutively include the communication constructions held by and of all of its participants.** Obviously human communication, meaning, all forms of social organization and culture cannot exist without human cognitive participation. One can objectify such phenomena, whether in the form of an objectivist semiotics or by formulating mechanistic theories of society. But, to explain their social existence and their workings, references to what constitutes them are indispensable. In such efforts it also is necessary to recognize different positions within such theories, minimally that of the participants and observers or bystanders involved.

To reveal the interplay of different positions, allow me to distinguish three kinds of theories: espoused, cognized and operational.

**Espoused theories**<sup>35</sup> are based on someone's reading of public discourse, opinions expressed in interviews or content analyses of what was said. Espoused theories are constructions of how members of a public seem to understand, what they are concerned about and how they see themselves participating in various social roles (the conceptions of media realities held by members of particular audiences being traditional targets of communication research).

**Socio-cognitive theories** account for the coordination of human behavior in terms of its participants' cognition. This is the kind of theory I have advocated above for communication. It relates the observed intertwining of individual practices as social phenomenon to the communication constructions unfolding into these practices as cognitive phenomena. A socio-cognitive theory of communication contains in it the theories of the communication constructions practiced by those observed, whether these are constructed to explain the participants communication practices or are the participants' espoused theories of communication. Such a theory respects the observed participants' cognitive autonomy, acknowledges the observing scientist's contribution to understanding communication in its construction and is recursively self-embedding. I already identified the very same recursion as a characteristic of our field when I said that scientific theories of communication must be **about** communication, prove themselves **in** communication and **not contradict** participants capacities of understanding. I argued that constructivist theories of communication should have such a form and my argument naturally extends to understanding social organizations in terms of its human constituents' understanding.

The difference between espoused and socio-cognitive theories is well articulated in the anthropological distinction between an institution and an organization. The institution of a family, for example, is a prototype that is espoused in popular discourse. It entails all kinds of general expectations, provides the basis for practical social judgements and is very different from my neighbor's family which is a social organization with physically existing members who act out their own cognitions and provide each other with spaces for participation. This difference can also be visualized as one between understanding a discourse and understanding a particular communication process in terms of the cognitive operations individuals bring to bear on its collaborative extension.

I might add that most of our traditional theories of public communication are refinements of espoused theories. Such theories often reproduce existing prejudices, power structures and social institutions, even in efforts to be critical of them. The difference between the two kinds of theories is important in realizing that public discourse is not only created by the mass media, it

also provides the very espoused theories of the mass media as social institutions within which the mass media as social organizations define themselves, operate and thrive. Espoused theories of the mass media rarely locate themselves in anyone's (neither the audience members' nor the producers' not even the communication researchers') cognition and are under these conditions unable to address issues of how the public or the mass media constitute themselves as living social organizations. This is particularly evident when theories of communication aim to predict effects--a requirement from which behaviorists theories acquire their received validity. Predictive theories cannot but exclude all notions of agency and can therefore say little about human cognitive participation in social phenomena. Predictive theories of public communication exemplify what the media need to improve their operation and to constitute themselves in the minds of their public but can not shed any light on the very constitutive processes of communication and social organization they are involved in.

**2. Theories of public communication should include their own creators or proponents as socially responsible participants.** Traditional scientific theories are stated as if their inventors would be historically insignificant, as if the act of scientific observation assured an accurate representation of what is observed and theorized about and as if their consequences would not matter. In contrast, when one recognizes that theories are nowhere close to being a reflection of an outside reality, that they arise in particular social circumstances or scientific practices, and that they always are interventions by bringing forth particular practices and by influencing subsequent theory constructions, it is necessary to include the theories' proponents in them. Only then can theorists be held responsible for the consequences of their constructions. Minimally, we should learn to include the personal pronoun "I" in our reports, take personal responsibility for what we have constructed and consider us socially accountable for our observations. Better still, we should let a theory account for how our own lives gave rise to it.

**3. Theories of public communication should continuously enhance and expand the public discourse into which they come to be embedded.** As I said, socio-cognitive theories, if sufficiently complete, are capable of describing the workings of social organizations based on



what its constituents contribute. The public is such an organization. Strictly speaking, theories of public communication describe operationally closed systems, systems that can observe only themselves and render everything outside their self-understanding mere perturbations. Except for its omission of references to human cognition, Luhmann's theory of ecological communication<sup>36</sup> is an excellent example of this conception.

However, I am suggesting that as long as discourses, including public discourse, are distinguishable from each other and hence recognizable as separate and coexisting, the organizations that construct themselves in them are not entirely closed. The ability to move across discourses provides us with different positions and gives us the leverage of a poet to construct bridges and something new in either. I would suggest that we as social scientists have an obligation to try to continuously decompose, critically examine and reconstruct our theories especially when we recognize pathologies in what these theories do in practice.

A way to **enrich** public discourse is to import through the use of metaphors well articulated structures from another discourse. Autopoiesis from biology is a good example Luhmann<sup>37</sup> provided us. Control theory from engineering is a bad example Beniger<sup>38</sup> suggested. My own source of reframing public communication comes from language and cognitive theory. There is ample room for new metaphors that could reconstruct what heretofore may have existed quite differently.

A way to **enlarge** public discourse is by contextualizing it. Contextualization may be nourished by the suspicion that the mass media foster a discourse, an espouse theory of themselves that tells only part of their story, allow us see only the front of a stage while hiding a vast industrial complex behind it, much as the work of Goffman<sup>39</sup> suggested. Ricoeur aptly dubbed this attitude a "hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>40</sup> Putting public discourse into an economic context, into a sociological context, into a managerial context, into a historical context or into a regulatory (or legal) context expands that discourse by assimilating new explanations into it. Systems theory provides an **operational theory** for the contextual understanding of public communication. It enables an investigator situated outside that system to create any set of

variables, irrespective of whether they are part of a discourse or cognized by anyone other than the theorist and study the interaction between its inside and its outside, between the system and its environment which insiders may not be able to see. Operational theories can inform socio-cognitive theories and, once published, may affect individual participants' understanding, can ultimately become espoused theories and thus expand the horizon of public discourse.

4. **Theories of public communication should be able to bring forth and sustain their own realities.** Whereas an objectivist epistemology demands that theories be true by correspondence to an outside reality, a constructivist epistemology suggests that theories be coherent within the discourse in which they arise and prove themselves viable in the practices they inform. New theories of public communication always are interventions at least into the understanding by peers and possibly in a public's understanding as well, have to survive challenges from within the discourse to which they contribute, be practiceable by participants in that discourse even if this means their evolution into new and more resistant forms. Self-fulfilling hypotheses are classical examples of what viable theories of public communication will have to create, being part of the public practices they claim to describe.

5. And finally, realizing the reality constituting consequences of social theory constructions, **responsible theorists of public communication must be willing to live in the very realities their theories could bring about.** This statement rephrases my ethical imperative<sup>41</sup> which calls on social scientists to grant the human constituents that populate their reality constructions at least the same cognitive abilities they claim for themselves in constructing them. I am arguing that only those theories of public communication that acknowledge individuals' ability to understand, to engage in public discourse and to accept social responsibilities for their own creative contributions to the constructions of realities, only those theories are able to create mutually enabling conditions. Within such socio-cognitive theories, theorists and their fellow beings can coexist in mutual respect for their cognitive differences and can remain poets committed to a cooperative process of constructing social practices of living, always including themselves.

I have no illusion and do not expect my proposals to be easily agreeable. I know, espoused conceptions of reality are dear to many and hard to change. All I can hope is that they contribute to a discourse and perhaps deprivilege some of the epistemological obstacles to understanding human communication which I tried to challenge in the foregoing.

Thank you for joining me on this probably rocky path.

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