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The Mediated Construction of Reality

Matching Berger & Luckmann with Elias to Understand How Facebook and Google Construct Our Social Reality



Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp
**The Mediated Construction of Reality .
Society, Culture, Mediatization**
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50 years after the seminal sociological work on *The Social Construction of Reality*¹ Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp's book aims to demonstrate that today's construction of the social world is deeply immersed in media and shaped through mediation processes. Couldry and Hepp have re-read Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book. They found next to nothing on the role of technologically based media of communication in Berger and Luckmann's understanding of the social construction of reality. Even at that time, this was a neglect.

Since *The Social Construction of Reality* was published in 1966 modern complex societies have become much more dependent on mediated communication and a larger range of media technologies have become available. Digitalization and networking technologies are at the core of these changes. Citizens can now handle everyday coordination with smartphones. However, behind this visible surface, the infrastructure provided by companies like Facebook and Google control much of the ongoing communication – and of the revenue streams in the media industries. The concept of 'media' is extended into the realm of ICT, Information and Communication Technologies. Mediated construction of reality is to a growing extent taken care of by data-based processes and automated

algorithms. Couldry and Hepp denote this tendency as “datafication”. It becomes a crucial concept in their attempt to understand this ongoing transformation of modern societies, which they see as a ‘deep mediatization’.

‘Mediatization’ has become a much-used term in media and communication research to grasp the interrelation between changes in the media on the one hand and changes in culture and society on the other.² This goes beyond early German meanings of ‘Mediatisierung’ and ‘Medialisierung’.³ Couldry and Hepp take the contemporary thinking on mediatization in Northern Europe to a radical stance by proposing the term ‘deep mediatization’. This is meant to help understand how the contemporary social world is deeply interwoven with media, and thus involves a fundamental transformation in how the social world is constructed.

Couldry and Hepp take a phenomenological approach, as did Berger and Luckmann. The newcomers, by contrast, plea for a ‘materialist phenomenology’. This term covers the influence of data, digitalization and networks in “the types of social world in which media play an obvious and unavoidable part” (p. 5). The approach is materialist in the sense of ‘cultural materialism’ as proposed by Raymond Williams,⁴ where symbolic aspects are included.

The book is organized with three parts in addition to Introduction and Conclusion. The first part outlines how the mediated social world is constructed and how we live with media, today and in history, seen as waves of mediatization. The second part discusses space, time and data as dimensions of the contemporary social world, while the third part deals with agency in the social world, on different levels: self, collectivities and order.

Theoretically, this book builds further on phenomenologists that were central to Berger and Luckmann, primarily on Alfred Schutz. The social world is thus understood by Couldry and Hepp as “the intersubjective sphere of the social relations that we as human beings experience” (p. 20). However, in bringing the phenomenological take onto the material aspects of the media in a networked, digital environment, they turn to Norbert Elias. Couldry and Hepp use his thinking of ‘figurations’ to get hold of the complex social arrangements under deep mediatization.⁵ A figuration is “a more or less stable interaction of individuals which produce in this interaction a certain kind of social meaning” (p. 63). The concept of figurations help them understand how social entities as families, organizations and so on are constantly under formation and reformation. Digitalization offer opportunities to build figurations in changing patterns of online and offline

interactions. These are “Figurations for Living with Media”, as one of their subtitles read. Thus, Couldry and Hepp apply Elias’s concept of figuration on social interaction in contemporary media infrastructures. They take the concept further by proposing more complex patterns as ‘figuration of figurations’.

I do not find the concept of figurations easy to grasp but this approach opens for flexible thinking about social patterns in a mediatized world. This book has certainly an original theoretical take on the contemporary social and technological environment. It does exactly what the title promises, namely explicate an understanding of ‘the mediated construction of reality’. This is quite an achievement. It carries original observations, e.g. on how ‘data’ influence our social world. The discussion is of highest quality. The authors are well read and build their theorizing on a broad platform of social theory and media studies.

I would have appreciated a discussion that had put Couldry and Hepp’s own take on mediatization in contrast to other attempts to grasp these transformations, such as the institutionalist approach developed most extensively by Stig Hjarvard.⁶ The authors also very easily do away with the concept of ‘media logic’, rightly from another approach, but much-used in scholarly as well as more popular discourses. For this reason, it would have been useful with more of a discussion rather than just mentioning this concept in passing.

Despite these critical comments: *The Mediated Construction of Reality* is simply an important book for sociology and for media and communication studies alike – maybe as important as *The Social Construction of Reality* became half a century ago.

Endnoten

1. Peter L. Berger / Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, London 1966 (dt.: *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, m. e. Einl. z. dt. Ausg. v. Helmuth Plessner, übers. v. Monika Plessner, Frankfurt am Main 1969).
2. Knut Lundby (ed.), *Mediatization of Communication*, Berlin/Boston, MA 2014.
3. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, *Understanding Mediatization in “First Modernity”: Sociological Classics and Their Perspectives on Mediated and Mediatized Societies*, in: Lundby (ed.), *Mediatization of Communication*, 109–130.
4. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture. Selected Essays*, London 1980.
5. The two key references are the following books by Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?*, London 1978 (dt.: *Was ist Soziologie?*, München 1970), and *The Society of Individuals* ¹⁹³⁹, London 1991 (dt.: *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*, hrsg. v. Michael Schröter, Frankfurt am Main 1987).
6. Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, London 2013.

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