Radical Constructivism in Communication Science

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> Purpose • Describing how radical constructivism was introduced to communication science and analyzing why it has not yet become a mainstream endeavour. > Situation • Before radical constructivism entered the relevant debates in communication sciences, moderate constructivist positions had already been developed. > Problem • Radical constructivists’ argumentation has often been provocative and exaggerating in style, and extreme in its position. This has provoked harsh reactions within the mainstream scientific community. Several argumentative strategies have been used to degrade radical constructivist arguments and their relevance. > Solution • Beyond such rhetorical devices, radical constructivism has become established within the field of communication science, although it has not become mainstream. One should probably not even wish to make radical constructivism a mainstream approach in case it loses its sceptical ability for second-order-observation.

> Key words • Communication science, argumentative strategies, objections to radical constructivism, meta-theory.

1. Introduction

Explaning to students what communication science is has to deal with many areas of confusions because the labels for this discipline and the ideas regarding what this discipline is about vary a great deal. These are the labels most often used: communication science, communication studies, media studies, semiotics, (mass) communication research, etc. The term “communication science” suggests an orientation towards the social sciences, whereas “media studies” and “semiotics” are more located in the field of the humanities. “Communication studies” seems to be the most general term as it leaves open the field to which the discipline belongs. (Mass) communication research is a more specific term that emphasizes that the discipline is an empirical one that can be distinguished from communication theory as a field (cf. Craig 1999). Although the International Communication Association (ICA), which represents scholars of communication studies worldwide, includes the full range of the disciplines mentioned above (or even more) and stands for the greatest possible pluralism, the differences between them matter with respect to the focus of this article.

For the purpose of the following discussion I have chosen a triple restriction: I will focus the following argumentation on mass communication research, on the German-language part of the discipline and on radical constructivism (rather than on other types of constructivism, such as social constructivism, social constructionism, etc.). I think the discussion about the significance and salience of radical constructivism within the discipline will benefit from this narrow focus. First, radical constructivism (RC) challenges empirical research more than it does theoretical efforts. In the field of communication theory, constructivist ideas are often discussed in the wider context of pragmatism or relativism, which is a matter rather of fundamental philosophical or sociological problems (cf. Craig 1999; 2007 vs. Myers 2001) than of research questions applied to empirical methods and to the interpretation of empirical results, particularly in the field of (mass) communication research. It is the dominating nomological scientific understanding of communication science (in this narrower sense) that is provoked by a radical rather than a moderate type of constructivism.

Second, I mainly refer to the German discourse of RC ideas, although RC obviously has not only been discussed in German-speaking countries. However, German-language communication science debates on RC have been essential and effective and have provoked interesting controversies. In the U.S. debates, social constructionism (rather than RC) is more often at the centre of controversies without any references to the well-known radical constructivist theorists, such as those of Maturana, von Glasersfeld, von Foerster, etc. (cf., e.g., Potter, Cooper & Dupagne 1993). Particularly, the showcase German-language debate can be used to demonstrate why RC has not become a mainstream endeavour, although the conditions for a successful adoption of constructivist ideas have been very good, as I will show below.

Third, I will discuss the debate specifically on RC rather than on other types of constructivism, such as social constructivism, social constructionism, interactive constructivism, cultural constructivism, relativism, anti-realism, or whatever label maybe used in this field. This is because the debate on RC already consists of all the elements or rhetorical practices that are typical of debates on epistemological and methodological issues (cf. Edwards, Ashmore & Potter 1995 for an overview of rhetorical devices and tricks used by realists to degrade relativism).
Communication science, notably in the (narrow) sense above, should be an ideal candidate for integrating (radical) constructivist ideas because it is engaged in research on reality construction by the media. One should suppose that this discipline is interested in second-order observation that reconstructs the media’s reality construction and the conditions that cause processes of reality construction. Indeed, this is the case and there is a far reaching tradition of constructivist research questions going back to the 1920s, when Walter Lippmann (1922) published his pioneering study on “Public Opinion,” which challenged the belief that media coverage can and does reflect reality. Lippmann claimed that professional stereotypes classify and reduce the complexity of reality. Journalists’ professional selection of real world events does not result in a representative sample or even in a simplified copy of reality.

Although Lippmann’s early view on reality construction is sceptical, it is obvious that we would not call it radical in the sense that we talk of RC nowadays. However, his approach has become a constitutive framework for news value research worldwide and for the German-language debate on news, news values and news reception, too.

A second step towards RC was taken by the German news value researcher Winfried Schulz (1976), who interpreted so-called news factors not as event-based selections of newsworthy events (from an unlimited total of real world events) but as journalists’ professional hypotheses on the world and on relevant events. Schulz’s position, too, is not a radical constructivist perspective in an epistemological sense, either. Rather, it refers to pragmatic and methodological issues, as Schulz refused to accept so-called real-world-data (such as official statistics) as indicators of the real world that can be compared with media coverage. Ultimately, Schulz has no philosophical doubts about the world as it is but he doubts that reality can be measured as such. However, the debate about the constructivist perspective in news research sensitized the scientific community to alternative views on reality construction, and as such it prepared the ground for a more profound argumentation on epistemological questions.

Similar and simultaneous to this paradigm shift from a (realist) “Ptolemaic perspective” to a (constructivist) “Copernican perspective” (cf. Schulz 1989), a debate about objectivity in journalism challenged the ontological certitude about a most relevant professional ideal in Western journalism, which U.S. sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1972) exposed as a “strategic ritual.” One can call this argumentation a second-order perspective, as it does not accept the first-order-claim that journalists’ objectivity can be measured as a comparison between media coverage and real-world cues. Rather, journalists justify their media coverage by claiming to be objective, neutral or detached, but this reflects a professional ideology and works as a strategic ritual to avert media criticism and media criticism.

All in all, there was already a debate about constructivist ideas in communication science before RC entered the field. However, this discourse lacked a fundamental epistemological access that included all the logical and methodological consequences that were to follow later, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

2. Radical constructivism in communication science

Curiously enough, it was a radio-based course of lectures that brought RC to communication science. In 1990, Klaus Merten, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Siegfried Weischenberg organized and edited a comprehensive series of radio features on “Media and Communication” (published in 1994), which were used for adult evening courses as well as for introductory university courses. Previous to this more popular material, Schmidt (1987) had edited a multidisciplinary book on Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstrukтивismus [The discourse of radical constructivism], including contributions by the later well-known radical constructivist authors, such as Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Peter M. Hejl, Erich Jantsch, Wolfram K. Köck, Humberto R. Maturana, Gerhard Roth, Gebhard Rusch, and Francisco J. Varela. Although only a few articles referred to typical research questions in communication science, many issues were affected by these fundamental philosophical ideas (cf. several contributions in Merten, Schmidt & Weischenberg 1994):

- In the field of journalism research, journalists’ media coverage should no longer be viewed as biased (with respect to the real world) but as one possible construction of reality that mainly follows professional rules and roles.
- In the field of audience research, media effects should no longer be modelled as causal influences of media contents on the audience’s formation of knowledge, emotions, opinions, attitudes or even behaviours. Rather, media coverage offers one (out of many) possible reality construction(s) that irritate(s) media recipients’ cognitive processes of reception in a non-determining way.
- In the field of social interaction, understanding should no longer be understood as the listener’s correct identification of the speaker’s meaning but as a cognitively autonomous construction of meaning by the listener. Speakers’ utterances are no longer described as stimuli with clear-cut meanings, which only have to be reproduced by the listeners, but can be characterized as contingent communicative acts in order to help the listener to orientate himself in a cognitive and communicative environment. Thus, misunderstanding is a social attribution by the speaker or the listener within a series of communicative acts.

The introduction of RC to communication science was so stunning that the professional association of communication science, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publicistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft [German Society of communication science], had a very controversial debate on RC during its annual convention in 1991, which was opened and provoked by Klaus Krippendorff’s keynote speech on “Steps towards a constructivist epistemology of mass communication” (published in 1993). Krippendorff claimed a new and self-contained epistemology of the phenomenon of (mass) communication. Thus, he refused to accept two commonly accepted clear-cut distinctions: the separation between the level of object-based empirical research and the level of its epistemological (philosophical) reflection on the one hand and the separation between the analytical and the normative
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3. Barriers to the diffusion of constructivist ideas

3.1 Debut of radical constructivism in communication science

The way RC was introduced to communication science is at least unusual if not provoking. There was no scientific article in a journal for the discipline that triggered the debate on this new perspective. Rather, a popular series of radio features made students of communication science (and a broader audience) familiar with the ideas of RC. Generally, one would expect that a new theory or even a new paradigm first be introduced by a scientific debate before it is used for teaching undergraduate students. Of course, this scientific debate was carried out afterwards but the order of addressing such important questions and the marketing-like character of introduction irritated a lot of members of the scientific community.

Another problem is related to the question of communication (or behaviour) style. The way of speaking used by radical constructivists has had a deterrent effect. RC seems to be an all or nothing position without compromises or positions between the strictly opposing philosophies of realism and constructivism. Radical constructivists' search for hidden realities in mainstream research puts the argumentation on a very fundamental (philosophical) level, whereas ordinary research is much more characterized by epistemological pragmatism. Moreover, some attacks on realism have been rather aggressive. If von Foerster speaks of truth as a liar's invention and of war as an effect caused by claims of truth (cf. Förksen & Foerster 2008: 29f.; Förksen 2007), he clearly goes too far concerning a commonly accepted scientific language. However, this criticism of von Foerster's language style should not hide the substantial argument behind it: claims for truth are often used as argumentative strategies within (scientific) discourses to justify one's own position on a certain issue against deviating statements, which I will demonstrate later.

3.2 Debate on media effects

The example of media effects research makes clear how both sides talked at cross purposes: Klaus Merten (1991) reproached media effects research with a hidden realism running through most approaches known in this field of research. He opposed this realistic tradition, which is based on the assumption of linear causal effects of media coverage on media users, to constructivist tradition, which is characterized by a reflexive logic: media effects should not be regarded as general and generalizable normative rules; they should rather be modelled as historically specific and situation-related effects that affect later situations in such a way that effects affect themselves and do not occur in the same way that they initially did. A reflexive theory of media effects has to combine internal (cognitive) processes with external (situation-related) context.

Although Merten's suggestions result in a definite theoretical approach that is sufficient to the requirement that it can be checked empirically, Hans-Bernd Brosius and Frank Esser (1998) criticized Merten for his biased view on older theories on media effects. Those older approaches and empirical studies should not be accused of the primitive stimulus-response thinking for which Merten reproaches them. Rather, they integrated so-called intervening variables, even in earlier versions. According to the authors, no media effects researcher would have supported the impression of a simple linear causal determination without considering contingent conditions. The approach Brosius and Esser address to Merten criticizes Merten's conclusions that a causal approach should be replaced by a reflexive approach. Rather, Brosius and Esser prefer a causal logic to a reflexive logic in order to be able to do research on scientific predictions, which means that they do not want to do without a nomological philosophy.

3.3 Debate on theory transfer

Another reason for the irritation of communication science with RC is its external view on the discipline. Radical constructivists have often been natural scientists and have carried forward their arguments with the authority of an exact or hard science. For example, although von Foerster or Maurer have never been at the centre of their discipline in the sense that they stood for the generally accepted knowledge in cybernetics or in biology, they – deliberately or not – created the impression that they represented their discipline (or at least it looked like they did). As a consequence, social scientists, who mostly have no expertise in matters of natural sciences, attributed to their arguments an immense credibility or authority. Often, constructivist natural scientists benefited from the positive overall image of their discipline, too, rather than from the strength of their arguments only.

Recontextualizations of knowledge from one (or more) discipline(s) to another are always ambivalent: on the one hand they have a heuristic potential, create new ideas and refresh the importing discipline; on the other hand they cause problems when merging the concepts of the exporting and the importing theories. When a researcher claims to export substantial statements into another discipline, this is often considered presumptuous by colleagues in the importing disci-
There is a defensive reflex within the importing discipline caused by the external challenge. Sometimes this response is more agitated, which can be seen from the polemical communication style, and sometimes it is more tranquil, which can be concluded from metaphors such as “old wine in new skins” (cf. Burkart 1999). Neither attitude results in a continuing debate and in communicative exchange. While the polemic style at least clarifies the different standpoints, the seemingly integrative position blurs differences and oppositions and probably stops the debate before it has really started.

Advocates of symbolic interactionism sometimes used the argument that RC is nothing new or is even a step backwards compared with the achievements of the symbolic interaction approach (cf. Burkart 1999). From this point of view RC seems to reduce epistemology to the individual’s construction of reality rather than to understanding knowledge and understanding as a process of negotiation between individuals or between media content and media users during the process of media socialization (cf. Sutter 2009; Scholl 2010). It is then the task of a radical constructivist to clarify his own position or to correct the critic’s “biased” impression. Indeed, it was Schmidt (1994) who substantiated the debate by clarifying the arguments and positions of RC and by rebutting the most popular objections to RC:

- RC does not deny reality and is not simply an anti-realist philosophy but refuses to draw any ontological conclusions at all.
- Although RC started as a natural scientific approach it can also be applied by humanities and social sciences. Thus RC does not reduce human perception to individual cognition but models it as structural couplings between cognition, interactive communication, media (in a broad sense) and culture.
- The term “construction” neither implies arbitrary perception nor strategic (media) performance but is the basic human mode of perception. Thus, RC is interesting in the analysis of socio-cultural conditions and in the processes of (human) cognition and not in the (normative) justification of any specific reality construction.
- Finally, RC does not reduce cognition and knowledge to the subjective part (in opposition to objective realism) but overcomes the subject-object-dichotomy by introducing the observer-observation relationship.

### 3.4 Argumentative strategies against radical constructivism

Beyond debates on communication style or the institutional context of introducing RC to communication science, there are further argumentative strategies for coping with radical constructivists’ challenge to realism, which are typical reactions to provocative opposite standpoints. First, there is the strategy of offering a compromise between the counter poles. Günter Bentele (1993) holds for a so-called reconstructive position, which he claims mediates (radical) constructivism and (pure) realism. According to this middle course, reality cannot be recognized altogether and in general, but pieces of it can be recognized more or less so that one can evaluate various observational statements as to whether they fit to real world events or facts in a better or in a worse way (cf. Keplinger 1993). At the very least, one can exactly reconstruct different constructions of reality and can estimate whether one observation is more coherent than others. This “compromise,” of course, is not the middle course it claims to be because it is a moderate realistic standpoint. It ignores the difference between first-order and second-order observation; it ignores the fact that constructivists do not simply postulate that one cannot recognize reality. Rather, radical constructivists are (or should be) agnostic with regard to questions of reality recognition. They simply do not ask such questions.

A second strategy of argumentation accepts the criticism of realism but does not accept the radicalism of constructivism (cf. Saxer 1993). This argumentation claims that RC does not go too far in completely neglecting reality: although there is a need to correct exaggerated claims postulated by realists, this does not mean that the world cannot be recognized at all. Again, this argumentation suffers from the trivialization of the radical constructivist position. It reduces RC to epistemological questions only and ignores the self-referential logic of second-order cybernetics.

The third strategy is a more constructive one, as it separates the object-related theory from the philosophical assumptions behind it (cf. Erbring 1993). Although the selection of events for media coverage and the construction of news can be explained by constructivist theory (according to Schulz, see above), there is no need for an autonomous epistemology. Rather, communication science in practice should keep away from asking epistemological questions and need not invent its own epistemology because social scientific disciplines rely on analytical philosophical approaches, such as critical rationalism, that have only a minimum of epistemological assumptions.

The fourth strategy is strictly exclusive, as it denies that RC is a serious scientific approach. RC is accused of being postmodern, which itself is characterized as arbitrary, ideological, accidental, anecdotic, essayistic, etc. (cf. Saxer 2000). This argument works with a double allegation: on the one hand RC is a sort of postmodern philosophy, which radical constructivists probably do not approve of, and on the other hand postmodern philosophy deviates from serious (social) sciences, as its “theories” do not fit what can be expected from theory-building within the framework of analytical philosophy. Again, this argumentative strategy ignores and despires the constructivist logic of self-reference, reflexivity and second-order-observation.

Although these argumentation strategies are different from each other with respect to the targeted constructivist argument, they agree in rejecting the epistemological and the logical standpoint of RC and therefore prefer a moderate constructivism or realism (which, from a radical constructivist standpoint, is the same!). To declare oneself moderate always seems to be more suitable (for everyday research) and more accepted (by colleagues) than to hold a “radical” position.

There is a fifth argumentation strategy, which is plausible but which I have not found in communication scientific debates yet: RC requires a certain perspective on the research into specific objects that does not (necessarily) fit actual research questions. This is particularly true for media effects research, which asks questions about the influence of a source (e.g., media coverage)
and of its determination on a recipient (e.g., media users). RC gives no hint on how to deal with persuasive communication or with causal effects because within the frame of self-referential logic such questions do not make sense. This seems to be a plausible objection at first glance, as it raises doubts as to whether constructivism is a universal or global super theory or whether there are issues that cannot be researched with the help of constructivist theory.

Indeed, from a strict self-referential perspective it is more complicated to model external effects, e.g., effects of media coverage on media users’ cognitive processes. However, empirical research should be able to detect statistical correlations and regularities, which can also be interpreted in a constructivist manner. Constructivism should not be misunderstood as an approach postulating only idiosyncratic cognitive processes that cannot be explained or predicted. Rather, constructivism relates to the interaction between the individual and its environment all effects that cannot be separated (e.g., into stimulus and response or into internal and external effects, etc.). From an individual’s perspective all media effects are the individual’s (re)cognitions of media coverage. Individuals with similar cognitive structures should recognize their environment in a similar way if these structures are measured in a sufficiently abstract way. The more specific a prediction or an explanation of a certain reaction by an individual to certain media coverage (or texts in general) and the individual’s recognition of media coverage, the more likely it is to fail; the conclusions drawn from each side were not the last and not the least function of a constructivist epistemology to focus on the society’s attention in an irritating manner on what it allows itself, if it affords science.” (Luhmann 1990: 57f., translated by the author)

The epistemological relativism corresponds with a practical or normative relativism. Just as (empirical) knowledge is strictly observer-related, societal norms are, too. Particularly in journalism research, this relativism has been criticized harshly (cf. Saxer 1992). Constructivist media ethicists Siegfried Weishenber (1992) and Bernhard Förksen (2006) pointed out that RC does not result in solipsism or in destructive relativism without any normative principles but raises awareness of the shortcomings of naïve realism. Thus, constructivist ethics can be accepted by other normative theories as well (cf. Brosda 2008: 61). Moreover, the relativism of RC keeps debates on reality construction alive, because it “can include and analyze realism and relativism alike, viewed as rhetorical practices.” (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter 1995: 41).

But the question still is: Do we require (radical) constructivist epistemology to find out that journalists (or people at all) should be aware of the way they construct (their) reality? Förksen would probably answer, in line with von Foerster, von Glasersfeld or Maturana, that it may not be necessary to argue from a constructivist point of view, but that if you argue with the help of a constructivist epistemology, it is sufficient to come to the ethical conclusion that you are responsible for your construction of your reality. As a consequence, the normative debate on constructivist ethics results in a kind of practical compromise, as both constructivists and realists cannot claim that humanity derives exclusively from either of their theoretical approaches.

4. Conclusion

When RC was introduced to the field of communication science, it radically challenged the realist position and provoked a harsh backlash. The debate was like a thunderstorm that cleared the air. This metaphor does not indicate scientific harmony (after the argument) but the clarification of epistemological fundamentals. Later, when the debate calmed down, a more moderate position emerged from the extreme positions of RC and (radical) realism. This does not mean that both positions converged but that the conclusions drawn from each side were not as oppositional as had seemed at the time of confrontation. We can observe this development with epistemological questions as well as with ethical considerations.

Doing empirical research from a constructivist perspective does not mean refraining from methodological rules (as used in standardized methodology) and does not even imply anything with regard to scientific (methodological) norms. Rather, a critical evaluation of methodological practice in empirical research needs to change the researcher’s position from first-order-observation to second-order-observation. Doing empirical research practically implies that the researcher primarily acts as a first-or-

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his study. Not until there are doubts about the observer during the time he carries out this research practice by sometimes referring to some (research) issues and to some (other) researchers. Constructivists’ main concern is obviously perturbation, which is not the business of a mainstream endeavour.

Within the field of ethics, constructivist communication scientists have either postulated a moderate position, as outlined above (cf. Förksen 2006), or have developed a more sceptical position, which does not conclude strict ethical rules from constructivist epistemology (cf. Schmidt 2003). Realists or critical theorists (cf. Brosda 2008) can pragmatically accept both kinds of argumentation, although they need not share the same epistemological fundamentals. Again, we notice a kind of practical convergence between constructivist and realist points of view. The future of (communication) research will show whether the epistemological debate will fall asleep for pragmatic reasons or will, again, inflame fundamental disputes.

Communication science in the narrower sense as an empirically driven social science tends to neglect philosophical and epistemological questions and to leave these to communication or media theorists. Hence, gaps accrue within the discipline if we perceive it in a broader sense as including both the social scientific approach and the humanities approach. However, from time to time the need for answers to these fundamental questions breaks through and debates over them may help to bridge this gap in paradigms. Radical constructivists or related epistemologists (cf. Weber 2005) are a major driving force in keeping the epistemological debate a matter for the discipline itself and not only a matter for a specialized discipline for epistemological questions, such as philosophy. It is not the least merit of (radical) constructivism that it keeps a discipline such as communication science alive.

References


