



Re-theorizing news' construction of reality: A realist-discourse-theoretic approach

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Abstract

Constructionism has always carried problems for journalism studies, for, whereas news is supposed to be about facts and reality, constructionism problematizes these very concepts. This article bears on this tension by revisiting the proposition that news constructs reality. We distinguish between construction as a concept and constructionism as a theory, and argue that the above proposition is fruitful but has hitherto been argued on the faulty theoretical grounds of constructionism. A realist-discourse-theoretic approach is proposed to establish the proposition on a sound theoretical basis. This is done on the basis of realism, and by means of modifying constructionism's central thesis that the outcome of discursive contention is decided upon exclusively by extra-discursive factors and grounding it on a realist basis. The characteristics of news-making are conceptualized as a particular category of extra-discursive factors, which, in particular types of cases, can play a central role in the construction of reality, thereby constituting reality construction by news. Empirical illustrations are provided. Our analysis should contribute to resolving the tension mentioned at the beginning.

Keywords

Construction of reality, constructionism, extra-discursive factors, journalistic practices, news production, news values, realism

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Constructionism has always carried potential problems for journalism studies. Whereas news is supposed to be about facts and reality, constructionism queries (in postmodernist terminology, problematizes) these very concepts. As Zelizer (2004) notes, this potential tension broke out into open verbal warfare between journalism educators and cultural studies scholars taking the constructionist stand and who were involved in journalism curricula in Australia in the late 1990s.¹ Wright (2011) relates how journalism students are being confused by this tension, and proposes to resolve the tension by means of critical realism.

While this article is not meant as an intervention in the above as such, it does bear directly upon it, since it revisits the proposition that news constructs reality, which has been a fundamental issue in the sociology of news production. This proposition has always been advanced by scholars adopting the theoretical perspective of constructionism. This perspective in the sociology of news production was founded in the 1970s to 1980s. It has since been presented in standard textbooks as one of the three established perspectives in news sociology (the other two being the political-economic perspective and the culturalist perspective). The reason why we propose to re-examine this issue is that, while the proposition of news constructing reality is fruitful, important and of continued relevance today, because it has so far been advanced on the faulty theoretical basis of constructionism, its promise has not been fulfilled.

It will be noted that we are drawing a distinction between construction and constructionism. The proposition that news constructs reality concerns construction, and we are going to show that under certain specific types of situations, news does construct reality in the sense that the reality described in news and taken to be true by the public does not accord with the underlying reality. We also argue that this proposition cannot theoretically be consistently argued on the basis of the theoretical perspective of constructionism, but only on the basis of our realist-premised approach. This distinction between construction (hence also construct and its various verbal forms) and constructionism (hence also constructionist) is crucial throughout the following discussion.

To back up our thesis, we need to begin with the work of the founders of the constructionist perspective in news, showing why they were unable to establish a sound case for construction due to certain inherent theoretical problems with constructionism's core premises. Subsequent studies admit to but side-step these problems. Besides, many of them involve a dilution of the construction concept. Moreover, the objective of the perspective's founders was not simply to talk about reality construction in general, but to argue specifically that reality is constructed *by news as a result of* the characteristics of the news-making process. This point has not received due attention in many subsequent analyses.

Having shown why and how constructionist analyses have failed to successfully argue that news constructs reality, we then explain our approach, which we call a realist-discourse-theoretic approach. The philosophical position of realism, on which our approach is based, and its critique of constructionism's core premises are briefly stated. Then we explain why, despite the untenability of constructionism's core premises, its central contention concerning the role of non-epistemic or extra-discursive factors in discursive contention is potentially fruitful, and why and how it can be modified and given a realist grounding, and on that basis incorporated into the realist position. The

description ‘discourse-theoretic’ in the name of our approach refers precisely to this incorporated element.

Concretely, we argue that concerning a particular issue, the underlying reality with respect to it can be ascertained (on a realist basis). Various discourses compete against one another with regard to that reality, and the degree of truth or falsity (i.e. epistemic value) of these various discourses can be evaluated and compared (on a realist basis). In any particular case, due to contingent but ascertainable circumstances, it may well happen that the discourse which has achieved hegemony out of this discursive contention is one whose epistemic value is inferior to that of the competing discourses. In other words, the outcome of discursive contention in such a case is not decided by epistemic factors (the comparative epistemic values of the competing discourses), but by non-epistemic factors. These factors may include material interests, power considerations, and so on.

One category of non-epistemic factors of central relevance to the analysis of news is the characteristics of the news-making process. In contemporary terminology, the term ‘extra-discursive factors’ is usually used in place of ‘non-epistemic factors’. It should be noted that ‘extra-discursive’ in this term means both (1) outside of discourse, *and hence* (2) unrelated to the epistemic values of the discourses concerned, and not (1) alone (in contrast, ‘extra-discursive’ in the term ‘extra-discursive world/reality’ does mean (1) alone). Hereinafter, the terms ‘non-epistemic factors’ and ‘extra-discursive factors’ are used interchangeably and synonymously.

In any particular case, if it is these very characteristics which have enabled one of the competing discourses to achieve hegemony, and there is a disjunction between the reality described in this hegemonic discourse and the underlying reality (i.e. the hegemonic discourse is epistemically false), then we can speak of the construction of reality *by* news – that is to say, a reality that does not accord with the underlying reality has been constructed *directly as a result of* these characteristics of news-making. Further, although the reality so constructed does not accord with the underlying reality, because it has become hegemonic, it exerts real effects; that is, people will take the hegemonic discourse as true and act accordingly.

It is possible for a reality that does not accord with the underlying reality to be constructed by an epistemically false discourse that has achieved hegemony as a result of other extra-discursive factors than the characteristics of news-making, such as successful source media strategy. In such cases, we speak of the construction of reality *through* news instead of *by* news. In our view, this distinction between ‘by’ and ‘through’ is important, though it should be understood as not so much dichotomous as a matter of degree. Finally, we provide two empirical cases to briefly illustrate our approach and demonstrate its contemporary importance and relevance.²

To return to the tension mentioned at the beginning, whereas this journal is not an appropriate venue to critique constructionism in general, our analysis does show that as soon as constructionists engage in empirical studies, they will *necessarily* fall into an inherent theoretical self-contradiction. This self-contradiction has been admitted to by many constructionists. Thus, as a theoretical perspective, constructionism cannot be sustained. However, its thesis concerning the importance of extra-discursive factors in discursive contention is valuable, and can be reworked on a realist basis and incorporated into the realist position, which is what our realist-discourse-theoretic approach is about.

In addition to fulfilling the promise of the proposition that news constructs reality, It is hoped that our approach could contribute to resolving the above-mentioned tension.

Constructionism and the failure of the constructionist perspective in news-making

Tuchman (1972, 1978), Molotch and Lester (1974), and Fishman (1981, 1997[1982]) are generally seen as the founders of the constructionist perspective of news production. Tuchman's approach actually differs from that of Molotch and Lester, and of Fishman, a point to be addressed in due course. Meanwhile, to examine the perspective, it is necessary to begin with Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory of social constructionism.³

Briefly, for certain philosophical reasons that we propose to bypass, Berger and Luckmann 'bracket' (meaning to suspend from consideration) objective (social) reality. As a result, the knowability of this reality by knowledge is also thereby bracketed. Various discourses do, of course, make claims concerning this reality or particular aspects of it; but since its knowability has been bracketed, Berger and Luckmann argue that there is no way in which the competing discourses can be empirically evaluated as to whether or not they, or any of them, correspond to objective reality, and hence there is also no way in which these discourses can be empirically adjudicated, i.e. compared to one another in terms of their epistemic values to ascertain which one, if any, is truer with respect to objective reality. As a result, it is not possible to talk about truth or falsity concerning contending discourses. This view is known as epistemic relativism. Thus, whichever one of the competing discourses achieves hegemony, it is not and cannot be due to epistemic factors (i.e. consideration of relative epistemic values), but to extra-discursive factors, such as power relationships and so on.⁴

Berger and Luckmann's bracketing of the knowability of objectivity reality and assertion of epistemic relativism constitute the two core premises of constructionism. They may seem hard to understand for being contrary to commonsense. An illustration may help explain why, despite this, their position became popular and remains so today. In the 1960s to 1970s, Arthur Jensen argued that science 'proved' that 'race' and 'intelligence' were correlated. Scholars who found his argument unacceptable could either try to rebut it as epistemically false, or adopt Berger and Luckmann's position and argue that the 'Caucasians possess superior innate intelligence' discourse became hegemonic not because it was epistemically true, but only as a result of extra-discursive factors. Many hegemonic discourses found normatively unacceptable could be rejected in the same way and attention focused on advancing contrary discourses to contest the objectionable discourses in the struggle for hegemony. In other words, constructionism was seen as liberatory by many scholars and embraced by them for that reason. This is still one major reason for constructionism's continued appeal up to the present day.

To see how Berger and Luckmann's position can be applied, consider constructionists Kitsuse and Spector's (1973: 415) defining of social problems as 'the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims [i.e. advancing discourses] with respect to some putative [instead of objective] conditions'. Thus, something becomes a social problem simply because it has been constructed as such by a hegemonic discourse, and not because it is truly a problem that exists in a knowable objective reality.

The problem with such an approach has been perceptively pointed out within the constructionist camp itself by Woolgar and Pawluch (1985), who argue that the typical explanatory structure of many constructionist studies in the field of social problems is: (1) a putative condition is identified; (2) competing claims or discourses about it are enumerated; (3) the variability of the claims is contrasted to the alleged constancy of the condition; (4) the conclusion is drawn that given Point 3, the fact that different claims prevail at different times, in consequence to which the condition becomes or ceases to be a social problem, is purely a construction.

However, in arguing the constancy of the condition (Point 3), objective reality is no longer bracketed but regarded as knowable; and in comparing the competing discourses with this knowable condition, the epistemic values of these discourses are no longer bracketed but regarded as ascertainable. Constructionism's two basic premises are thereby abandoned in practice. Woolgar and Pawluch call this self-contradiction between premise and practice 'ontological gerrymandering'.⁵ It is clear that once a constructionist attempts to make an empirical comparison between the reality constructed by the hegemonic discourse and the underlying reality in order to argue that there is a disjunction between the two (i.e. the former does not accord with the latter), this self-contradiction becomes inescapable. The only way to avoid this inherent problem in constructionist theory is to eschew empirical analysis altogether, but many constructionists reject such a move as intellectually futile.⁶

Constructionist scholars of news are, of course, faced with the same problem. Fishman (1997[1982]: 211, 213) states:

... news is neither a reflection nor a distortion of reality because either of these characterizations implies that news can record what is 'out there' ... the notion of 'news selectivity' [is wrong] ... in its assumption [of the existence of] ... entities 'out there'.

Because Fishman, in accordance with constructionist theory, brackets the knowability of reality, as well as asserts that news as discourse cannot be compared to the bracketed reality, hence he speaks of 'nothing out there' and denies that 'news can record what is "out there"'.⁷

But Fishman (1997[1982]: 214–215, 222, 224) then wants to prove that news really does not accord with reality by trying to empirically show a disjunction between the two: 'Things going on right under a reporter's nose may not be noticed'; 'The incident was not reported ... It was a nonevent not in the sense that it was never seen'; 'though they [reporters] literally "saw" something'. In doing so, however, Fishman admits unawares, in a classic case of ontological gerrymandering, that there is indeed something out there which is knowable, since some of this something is reported, while the rest has not been noticed by reporters or has been noticed but not reported. Having asserted that news neither reflects nor distorts what really happens out there, what according to Fishman does news reflect then? 'News stories, if they reflect anything, reflect the practices of [journalists]' (1997[1982]: 211). Fishman actually says very little about these practices, but we leave that until later.

Molotch and Lester's (1974: 101–102, 111) position is identical to Fishman:

... we develop a conception of news as a constructed reality ... Our conception is not of a finite set of things that 'really happened out there' from which a selection is made ... We see media

as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others.

Speaking of 'happenings' etc., and calling 'cognized happenings' occurrences, Molotch and Lester argue:

... individuals or collectivities ... have differing and sometimes competing uses for occurrences ... competing accounts [i.e. discourses] of what happened ... competing *event needs* exist with respect to a given occurrence ... The work of promoting occurrences to the status of public events springs from the[se] event needs. (1974: 104)

In distinguishing between happenings and cognized happenings, the implication can only be that both belong to an objective reality which is knowable. Since news consists of cognized happenings that are promoted into public events, this means that what news covers is something that 'really happened out there'. This is also clear when Molotch and Lester state: 'all events are socially constructed and their "newsworthiness" is not contained in their objective features' (1974: 110). In saying that events have 'objective features' which may not be newsworthy, the assumption can only be that such objective features are ascertainable instead of having their knowability bracketed.

As seen, Molotch and Lester 'see media as reflecting ... the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others'. Besides news promoters, Molotch and Lester mention news assemblers as possessing such power. News assemblers have their 'own event needs ... as routines of getting work done in newsrooms' (1974: 105). Thus, Molotch and Lester highlight the impact of journalists' practices on news production. However, like Fishman, they provide no analysis of these practices.

In our view, Fishman, and Molotch and Lester were unable to establish a sound case for news constructing reality due to constructionist theory's inherent problems once news is examined empirically, ironically in order to support the constructionist contention that news does not report anything out there. Further, they failed to provide an analysis of how journalists' practices impact on news-making.

This brings us to Tuchman (1972, 1978). Tuchman makes no strong claims such as there being nothing out there. Instead, she focuses on the analysis of journalists' professional practices, such as the practices concerning 'facts' and 'objectivity', and how they impact on the process of news-making. She rejects the mirror metaphor that news 'presents to a society a mirror of its concerns and interests'. Instead, what journalists present in news is 'justified by a professionally shared notion of news' (1978: 183, 23). Although Tuchman is generally regarded as a constructionist, as Lau (2004) shows, her analysis of journalistic practices is entirely consistent with a realist perspective, a point that Tuchman appears to acknowledge (1978: 157). As shown later, the insights of her analysis of journalists' practices constitute a crucial component of our approach.

In response to Woolgar and Pawluch's critique, many constructionists, since known as contextual constructionists, admit to engaging in ontological gerrymandering, but refuse to refrain from carrying out empirical analysis for being intellectually futile. In order to show the existence of a disjunction between the constructed and the underlying realities, the knowability of the underlying reality is no longer bracketed, while the epistemic

falsity of the hegemonic discourse is, contrary to epistemic relativism, regarded as ascertainable.⁷ Contextual constructionists argue that important insights are produced in showing such disjunctions in particular empirical studies, and hence the price of ontological gerrymandering is worth paying (Best, 1993). However, we doubt whether or not their willingness to pay the price means that it is logically affordable.

Most subsequent studies which analyse news and construction have been of the contextual constructionist type. Besides side-stepping the problem concerning ontological gerrymandering, most studies fall short for other reasons as well. First, as the next section shows, the construction concept is often seriously diluted by being invoked without meeting the conditions of advancing a valid argument of construction.

Second, we have seen that both Fishman and Molotch and Lester argue that news reflects nothing out there but only journalists' practices. Whereas they have actually not provided an analysis of these practices, Tuchman has filled this lacuna. The point we want to make is that the objective (whether or not realized) of the founders of the constructionist perspective of news production was not simply to argue construction in general, but to argue specifically the construction of reality *by* news (instead of *through* the medium of news), and they understood that such an argument requires journalists' routine practices to play a central role in the construction process. Here we add that the same applies to news values, which, together with journalists' practices, are referred to as the characteristics of the news-making process hereinafter. In our view, this point has not received due attention (see section 'The role of the news-making process in construction').

The dilution of the construction concept

In the literature, the construction concept has been much diluted in a variety of ways. For instance, if a disjunction between news and underlying reality is not shown, then it cannot be validly argued that news constitutes a construction. Best (1991: 341), a contextual constructionist, provides an example. He argues that the media constructed the category of 'freeway shootings/violence' in summer 1987. After a while, because 'there was no dramatic new news to keep the story alive ... [and] no independent [i.e. extra-media] primary claimsmakers interested in pursuing and promoting the story', this crime wave constructed by the media dissipated. Thus, 'Freeway violence offers an example of a short-lived social problem in which the media acted as primary claimsmakers'.

But Best fails to ask the obvious question: were there *in reality* sufficient incidents of violence occurring on freeways (or roads generally) between motorists or between motorists and other road users to justify the public's attention to the issue, prior to, during, and since the intense news coverage? If so, then this indeed was and remained a problem even though the media's intense coverage lasted only for a specific period. In other words, the intense coverage might have been short lived, but this might not have been a 'short-lived social problem'. Unless Best is able to empirically show the contrary, then he has not shown any disjunction between reality and media coverage to justify seeing the coverage as a construction.

In the sociology of news, all perspectives reject the mirror metaphor and argue that a disjunction exists between news and reality. As noted, Fishman states that his position is not about a 'distortion of reality', but the construction of reality. This distinction between distortion and construction is conceptually important. Generally, the political-economic and culturalist perspectives are concerned with the distortion of reality; they are what we may call output-oriented approaches, pointing out that due to socio-structural or socio-cultural factors, the reality as described in news (the output) distorts the underlying reality in favour of certain socio-economic groups (the political-economic perspective) or due to the influence of, for instance, ideology (the culturalist perspective). In contrast, the concept of construction is a process-oriented approach. It focuses on how and why in the process of discursive contention, a certain discourse (whose description does not accord with the underlying reality) is able to achieve hegemony in news. It sees the outcome of the process of discursive contention as much more contingent instead of being predetermined by socio-structural or socio-cultural factors. However, in the literature, this distinction between distortion and construction is often not made.

A clear example of this is an article entitled 'Media's social construction of environmental issues' (Dispensa and Brulle, 2003: 99–100). The authors argue that whereas within the scientific community the global warming thesis has more or less achieved general consensus, because the 'US economy is strongly tied into the fossil fuel industry' and 'media controllers ... have money tied into industries', the thesis is represented in the US media as 'controversial'. This is clearly a straightforwardly political-economic argument, hence to speak of construction as in the article's title constitutes a conflation between distortion and construction and a dilution of the latter concept.

The role of the news-making process in construction

The objective (whether or not realized) of the founders of the constructionist perspective in news production is, it bears repeating, to argue that reality is constructed *by news as a result of* the characteristics of the news-making process, even though most claims originate from non-media sources. We believe that this point has not received due attention. Hence, we often see articles with such titles as 'The social construction of ... by the news media' (Herda-Rapp, 2003) in which the characteristics of the news-making process play no role at all in the analysis.

To illustrate what we mean, let's refer to an analysis which is indeed about reality construction by news, albeit the analysis itself is faulty. As noted, Best (1991: 330) argues that the media were the primary claims-maker in constructing the category of 'freeway shooting/violence' in 1987. Specifically, he points out that 'Journalists have a rule of thumb: once a third thing happens, you have a trend.' Thus, after a third incident came to the *Los Angeles Times*' attention, the paper published a feature article on the topic, which sparked off the subsequent intense coverage. As mentioned, Best's argument is untenable; but were it so, it would have shown how a particular characteristic of news-making (the said rule of thumb) initiated a process of reality construction.

A realist-discourse-theoretic approach to news' construction of reality

Having shown why and how the proposition that news constructs reality has not been, and cannot theoretically consistently be established on the basis of constructionism, we propose an alternative approach by means of which the proposition can be sustained under specific types of situations. Our approach is premised on the realist position. Realism believes in the existence of an objective reality (natural, social, psychological) independently of theories about and concepts of it. With regard to social reality and psychological reality, this is the case even though social reality itself is constituted by society members' self-conceptualized practices (actions and interactions), while psychological reality is imbued with the social dimension. Objective reality is knowable by knowledge, hence different discourses about it can be empirically evaluated and empirical adjudication between them can be carried out to assess their comparative epistemic values. In short, realism asserts the knowability of reality and rejects epistemic relativism, in precise opposition to constructionism's two core premises. For our purpose, it is unnecessary, in addition to showing constructionism's self-contradictions (which has already been done), to examine realism's general critique of constructionism, for this has been ably done by others (e.g. Chalmers, 1982; Greenwood, 1994: chaps 1 to 4; Sayer, 2000).⁸

The central thesis of constructionist theory is that, given its two core premises, the outcome of discursive contention is decided upon *exclusively* by non-epistemic factors. Since we are of the view that constructionism's two core premises cannot be upheld, the same applies to its central thesis. However, if we modify this thesis by changing 'exclusively' in the above to 'an interplay between epistemic and non-epistemic factors depending on circumstances', then the thesis becomes fruitful.

In debating with constructionism, realism has focused on the twin issues of the knowability of reality and the possibility of empirical evaluation and adjudication, i.e. on epistemic factors. Although on these two issues, constructionism's case is unconvincing, it is to the lasting merit of constructionist arguments that they have shown that non-epistemic factors can and often do play an important, sometimes even decisive, role in discursive contention. This point has not received sufficient attention from realists. The acknowledgment of the role of non-epistemic factors poses no threat to the realist position, for these factors are *knowable, realist-grounded objective* factors. We call our approach realist-discourse-theoretic; 'realist' signifies that it is premised upon realism; 'discourse-theoretic' refers to the role of knowable, realist-grounded extra-discursive factors.

Thus, in our view, all discursive contention involves both epistemic factors and realist-grounded non-epistemic factors.⁹ In some situations, the epistemic factors predominate, in which case, the discourse that achieves hegemony has greater epistemic value than its rivals. In some other situations, the non-epistemic factors predominate, in which case, the discourse that achieves hegemony might well be of inferior epistemic value to its rivals. It is in the latter type of situations that the reality described by the hegemonic discourse does not correspond to objective reality, hence allowing us to speak of a construction of reality. In yet other situations, there is likely to be more balanced interplay between epistemic and non-epistemic factors.

It is possible to develop a general typology of situations, but for our present purpose that is unnecessary and we need simply take note of the following two types of situations:

- (A) the comparative epistemic values of the contending discourses can be ascertained, but the circumstances of the situation are such that non-epistemic factors play a decisive role in deciding upon the outcome of the discursive contention. When in this type of situation, the discourse which achieves hegemony is epistemically inferior, then the reality described by it does not correspond to objective reality, and hence we can speak of the hegemonic discourse constructing reality.
- (B) The comparative epistemic values of contending discourses are inherently difficult to assess or inconclusive (we think this applies to all social sciences, inexact branches of natural science, and humanities disciplines such as history), hence the role of non-epistemic factors loom large and can become predominant. In such cases, the ascertainable underlying reality is that there is uncertainty about it. If, as a result of extra-discursive factors, any one discourse becomes hegemonic and hence its description of reality is taken to be the underlying reality, then a disjunction between the two exists, and we can also speak of the hegemonic discourse constructing reality.

In situations such as (A) and (B), we can speak of the hegemonic discourse being able to discursively construct a reality (which does not accord with the underlying reality) due to the influence of extra-discursive factors. To speak of 'discursively construct ... due to ... extra-discursive factors' sounds paradoxical. But the apparent paradox is resolved once it is recalled that 'extra-discursive' in 'extra-discursive factors' means, as previously mentioned, both outside of discourse and unrelated to the epistemic values of the discourses concerned. Thus, the above expression means the same thing as the hegemonic discourse being able to discursively construct a reality which does not accord with the underlying reality due to factors unrelated to its epistemic value.

There are different types of extra-discursive factors. For instance, Foucault's followers would stress, among other things, the right of discourse;¹⁰ in national or local identity politics, political and economic motives would be prominent; with reference to media studies, source media strategy (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) would constitute another such category; and so on. Our proposal is to conceptualize the characteristics of news-making as a special category of extra-discursive factors. If and when in situations such as (A) and (B) above, it turns out that it is these characteristics that play a central (not, of course, exclusive) role enabling one of the contending discourses to achieve hegemony, then it is legitimate to speak of reality construction *by* news. The first of our empirical illustrations in the next section provides an (A) situation, the second a (B) situation. In situations such as these, the objective of the founders of the constructionist perspective in news would be realized, but only on the basis of our approach. If, on the other hand, these characteristics play only a minor or negligent role, then we should more appropriately speak of construction *through* news.

In sum, in discursive contention, news coverage can often enable a discourse that departs significantly from underlying reality to achieve social hegemony. If this is a result of extra-discursive factors such as source media strategy, then it constitutes construction of reality *through* news. It is only when this is mainly due to the characteristics of the news-making process that we can speak of the construction of reality *by* news. While this distinction between ‘by’ and ‘through’ is important, it should not be taken as dichotomous, but in terms of degree, for different categories of extra-discursive factors may well be involved in any particular situation. In many situations, there is likely to be interplay between the ‘by’ and ‘through’ elements.

Two empirical illustrations

The first case concerns the controversy over immunization against mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) in the UK from 1998 to 2004 and thereafter (Tallis, 2004: 109–126). In 1998, physician Andrew Wakefield and his colleagues published a paper in *The Lancet*, describing 12 children who developed autism and bowel symptoms after taking the triple MMR vaccination. The article had obvious flaws, but the journal decided to publish it with an editorial comment on the article’s flaws. On the day of publication, Wakefield held a press conference to announce the article, thereby sparking off a heated controversy over the safety of the MMR vaccination.

All other studies (hereinafter MMR studies), both prior to and after that of Wakefield et al., most on a much larger scale, found against the claim that the vaccination could be linked to autism. Thus, it can be ascertained fairly conclusively that, at the current state of knowledge, Wakefield et al.’s study was of inferior epistemic value. This is the underlying reality with which we are concerned. However, in 2003, the Cardiff University School of Journalism (Forman, 2003) found in a survey that:

... more than half of the public wrongly believe the scientific community is evenly divided over the safety of the vaccination ... just 23 per cent of people knew that almost all experts reject the claim that the vaccine could be linked to autism.

This constituted the constructed reality, in which Wakefield et al.’s discourse enjoyed relative hegemony over the epistemically superior MMR studies. This constructed reality exerted the following real effects: ‘Many parents opted for untested single vaccines and in some cases no immunization at all’ (Forman, 2003). In retracting Wakefield et al.’s study in 2010, and then declaring it an ‘elaborate fraud’ in 2011,¹¹ *The Lancet* blamed it for exposing hundreds of thousands of British children to measles, mumps and rubella due to parental boycott of MMR (Agence France-Presse, 2011).

A number of extra-discursive factors were involved in constructing this reality. The first concerns what Tuchman calls journalists’ strategic ritual of objectivity and their non-concern with truth (despite proclamations to the contrary). In the strategic ritual, journalists report rival claims; however, since in Sandman’s (1997: 281) words, ‘in the epistemology of routine journalism, there is no truth ... A general assignment reporter on a breaking story just wants to get somebody to [make a claim]’, journalists are not concerned about whether or not the rival claims are of comparable footing, and hence whether or not they can appropriately be juxtaposed.

During the MMR episode, parents who believed their children to be damaged by the vaccine formed the group JABS (Justice, Awareness and Basic Support), with a parent named Jackie Fletcher as spokesperson. Following the strategic ritual, whenever the findings of a new study were made public, the media interviewed Fletcher for her opinion on the findings. For instance, in June 2002, two researchers announced that, on examining research into MMR from 180 countries around the world, they found no evidence to link MMR with autism. Fletcher was interviewed and summarily dismissed the findings (BBC News, 12 June 2002). In other words, the *research findings* of medical researchers from 180 countries were accorded the same footing as the *opinion* of a lay parent.

The second factor, which overlaps the first, concerns the news value of favouring simplicity over complexity. In his research into environmental risk reporting, Sandman (1997: 276–277) found that the reporting ‘isn’t about the risk [information]’, but ‘blame, fear’, etc. ‘What risk information provided came mostly in the form of opinions, not evidence.’ In other words, news takes simplistic opinions as being equivalent to complex evidence. That is another reason why, even concerning medical research, journalists had no problems with counterposing Fletcher’s lay opinion to research findings.

The third factor concerns the news values of negativity, individualization, the human interest story, and focusing on elites. On 19 January 2002, the *Manchester Evening News* featured a report titled ‘MMR jab ruined my life’, in which the son of cricket legend Clive Lloyd claimed that the vaccination had ‘destroyed his dream of following in his father’s footsteps’. This was a human interest story of an individual case of the son of a celebrity which is negative. For every case of this sort, which actually proved nothing, there were hundreds of thousands of anonymous cases, in which individuals receiving the vaccination had no problems with autism or bowels. But, of course, given the characteristics of news-making, no such case would ever constitute news.

Fourth, it is well known that a study that finds no correlation between say coffee-drinking and prostate cancer has little chance of becoming news; in contrast, a study that does find such a correlation (though it may actually mean little or nothing substantive), matching news’ preference for the negative and the sensational, will make news (see Bartlett et al., 2002, for a systematic study of this phenomenon). Hence, it is within expectations that, in 2003, the Cardiff University School of Journalism (Forman, 2003) found that only half of television reports and 32 per cent of broadsheet stories reported that most evidence showed the vaccine to be safe. This refers just to incidence of reporting; if the extent of coverage is also considered, the imbalance in reporting would be even greater.

The above characteristics entailed that, in the process of news-making, little value was placed on truth and balance in the epistemic sense (preference for the negative; covering Lloyd’s son’s case and not the much more numerous anonymous cases). It is because of this that these characteristics, as a particular type of extra-discursive factors, played a central role in enabling the anti-MMR discourse (Wakefield et al., 1998; Fletcher; Lloyd’s son) to achieve hegemony despite its ascertainably inferior epistemic value. This discourse was eventually discredited because Wakefield et al.’s study was exposed to be a fraud, not because the discourse’s inferior epistemic value was recognized. In this case, it is legitimate to speak of reality construction by news.

The second case concerns the almost tripling of the number of diagnostic categories of mental disorders since 1952, and the correlated exponential expansion of the number of people said to be suffering from mental disorders (Horwitz, 2002). According to the claims of the therapeutic profession (hereinafter therapeutic discourse), this dual expansion is the result of epistemic advances which show that there are many more kinds of mental disorders than previously known, and that mental disorder is not, as previously believed, restricted to a small number of people, but is common among the general population.¹²

The therapeutic discourse has been much disputed. While respecting the disciplines of psychiatry, psychology and counseling, the critics argue that these disciplines have been abused by the aggressive claims-making of a variety of stakeholders, including many members of the therapeutic profession, the pharmaceutical industry, lawyers, consumer and advocacy groups (legal recognition of a certain behavior or condition as an illness or disorder entails insurance implications and the like). According to them, as a result, numerous kinds of distress as normal response to transient situations, individual character traits, etc. have been illegitimately pathologized. These critics include medical sociologists (e.g. Horwitz, 2002), critical clinicians and researchers (e.g. Spitzer, 2007),¹³ among scholars and intellectuals from other fields.

Both the discourse and its critique constitute claims. What constitutes the reality? For our purpose, the reality is not the disputed epistemic validity or invalidity of the therapeutic discourse, but the following: given the scholarly and professional quality of much of the voluminous critical literature, the epistemic values of much of the therapeutic discourse are seriously open to question. What is the constructed reality in the news? The answer to this can be gauged from the following. Where this author lives, the therapeutic discourse has been engaging in aggressive claims-making over the past decade or so. In all news coverage of such claims, there has been no hint that the discourse is disputed. Today, in the USA, the UK and other places, state and institutional endorsement of therapy has become deeply entrenched.¹⁴ Where this author lives, nowadays whenever a tragedy occurs to a student or even just her family, mandatory counseling is given to the entire class or even school. In other words, state and institutional endorsement of therapy can be seen as the real effect of the reality constructed by the therapeutic discourse which has achieved hegemony.

Sometimes, news does report rival epistemic claims; but, in this case, there are many reasons why this is not done. In terms of the special characteristics of news-making, the discourse's claims are sensational (e.g. failing to concentrate in work constituting a 'disorder'),¹⁵ since such claims contradict conventional wisdom (that such is a personality problem). Most news journalists assigned to cover such claims would not be concerned about their epistemic credibility, for their job is simply to report them as 'facts' attributable to the sources. This would be so even were a journalist to be skeptical of the claims, for 'what if the claims are true?'. As Sandman (1997: 278) remarks: 'Missing an issue is a much greater journalistic sin than overstating one (...). The possibility that X is [true] makes the story worth covering.' Moreover, she would also be under competitive pressure to report the 'facts', since the competitors will definitely do so. Given the inherent inconclusiveness of much of psychiatric and clinical psychological knowledge, even a journalist perfectly aware of the critique of the therapeutic discourse would be obliged to report the discourse's claims as 'facts'.

To claim that what has conventionally been regarded as indulgence (in shopping or whatever) constitutes 'pathology' constitutes news; on the contrary, to critique this claim normally does not. Thus, what the discourse's critics can do, if sufficiently motivated, is restricted to submitting commentaries to the op-ed page or more serious popular journals. However, this is a lop-sided battle. First, the discourse's claims-makers can and do (since motivation is not lacking on their part) regularly make claims; in contrast, editors are unlikely to publish critiques (if available) every time the discourse makes a claim. Thus, this author has conducted a search of print-media news where he lives for 2007–2010: over this period, the discourse's claims were featured in the news on 20 separate occasions, or on average once every 10.4 weeks; in contrast, there was only one solitary critical commentary in a broadsheet op-ed page, which was licensed from an American broadsheet, written by a scholar who had recently published a book critiquing the therapeutic discourse. Second, commentaries and serious feature articles reach a far smaller readership than news reports and hence are of far less influence.

Further, critics are not stakeholders on the issue, hence even journalists aware of them are not obliged to report their view in the strategic ritual. Foucault's theory highlights the right of discourse (see note 10). One characteristic of news-making is journalists' resorting to authority. For journalists, members and institutions of the therapeutic profession possess the automatic right of discourse on the matter. In contrast, critics (even leading experts), except those belonging to the therapeutic profession, enjoy no right of discourse. Given that clinicians have vested interests in the therapeutic discourse, clinicians who come out publicly to dispute the discourse are exceptions to the rule. Hence, journalists' resorting to those automatically conferred the right of discourse results in an in-built bias in favour of the therapeutic discourse. In sum, we can see that the characteristics of news-making play a crucial role in enabling the therapeutic discourse to become hegemonic, and hence we can again speak of reality construction by news in this case.

Concluding remarks

Many constructionists will probably not be happy with our analysis, for although we argue that the proposition that (at least sometimes) news constructs reality is fruitful, we also argue that it can theoretically be consistently established only on a realist basis, and not on the basis of constructionism. We also point out that in many current studies the idea of construction has been much diluted. We stress the need to make a clear distinction between construction of reality through news and by news, pointing out that the objective of the founders of the constructionist perspective in news-making is to argue 'by' and not 'through'. Reality construction by news should not be seen as a general phenomenon, for many cases are construction through news instead, while other cases of discrepancy between news and reality constitute distortion rather than construction of reality. Nonetheless, reality construction by news remains an important type of situation. Moreover, the distinction between 'by' and 'through' should not be understood dichotomously, but in terms of degree. Thus, a clear concept of the 'by' element will enable us to carry out more precise analysis of many situations in which more than one category of extra-discursive factors, and hence an interplay between the 'by' and 'through' elements, is involved.

In addition to the two illustrations provided, our approach can clearly be applied to many other situations. For instance, the MMR episode was constitutive of what Furedi (2002) has called the contemporary culture of fear. We think our approach can similarly be applied to various other episodes which played a role in constituting that culture.

Constructionism has always carried potential problems for journalism studies. This article should be able to contribute to resolving that tension. Finally, we think that reflexive practitioners should reflect deeply on the question of how the very characteristics of their news-making process can sometimes construct or help construct a reality that departs from the underlying reality with serious consequences for society.

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The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments; the usual caveat applies.

Notes

- 1 Zelizer uses the term 'constructivism' in her article. Though, strictly speaking, the term 'constructionism' focuses on what has been constructed through social interaction, while 'constructivism' focuses more on an individual's participation in that interaction, the two terms are often used without distinction.
- 2 It should be noted that some constructionist analyses concern normative discourses only, in which case one cannot speak of any disjunction between constructed and underlying reality. Hence, although these other types of constructionist analysis are often conducted with reference to news coverage, they do not concern us.
- 3 Berger and Luckmann's theory dates from the 1960s, but its basic position is shared by contemporary postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, hence it has retained currency up to today.
- 4 It should be noted that 'discourse', 'extra-discursive factors' and 'hegemony' are not Berger and Luckmann's but contemporary terms. We employ these terms because today's readers will be more familiar with them, and they do correspond precisely to Berger and Luckmann's meaning.
- 5 We have some differences with Woolgar and Pawluch concerning certain details of their argument, but their general point is valid.
- 6 Self-contradictions in constructionism are not limited to this one. Another example is constructionism's general denial of the possibility of truth, but it clearly intends this denial itself to be true.
- 7 The hegemonic discourse is epistemically false by virtue of the fact that the reality described and constructed by it does not accord with the underlying reality.
- 8 It should be added that contemporary realists are not believers in foundational truth, for knowledge is fallible. Instead of saying that a certain theory represents the truth, they prefer to say that, at the current state of knowledge, it possesses greater 'practical adequacy' (Sayer, 2000) and greater research-enabling capacity (Chalmers, 1982) in comparison to competing theories. Although we support this standpoint, in the present article, we still say (as do other realists) that a certain discourse is epistemically true or false, *solely* for the sake of simplicity of expression.
- 9 When we say 'all discursive contention', we refer to discursive contention in which the issue of true/false with respect to an objective reality is involved. As mentioned in note 2, there are situations in which this issue is not involved, but they fall outside our present scope. Although

these situations can also be readily taken into account, doing so is unnecessary for the purpose of the present article.

- 10 According to Foucault, not everybody is entitled to speak on particular issues, but only institutions and individuals regarded (by journalists, as far as news is concerned) as having authority on the issue enjoy the right of discourse. Since Foucault is an epistemic relativist, he dismisses this authority as being baseless. While disagreeing with Foucault's relativism, it is indeed true that in the case of news, many knowledgeable individuals are not given the right of discourse by journalists, as our second empirical illustration shows. For an incisive and readable discussion on Foucault, see Merquior, 1997.
- 11 It turned out that the parents in Wakefield et al.'s study were involved in litigation against the MMR vaccine, and the study was funded by litigation legal aid.
- 12 This author provides a detailed examination of the therapeutic discourse and its critique in Lau (2012, forthcoming).
- 13 Robert Spitzer was none other than the head of the taskforce that successfully applied the disease model to hundreds of purported disorders in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, it is remarkable that, in 2007, he came round to publicly endorse the work of critics such as Horwitz.
- 14 On state and institutional endorsement of therapy in America and Britain, see Chriss (1999), Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), despite warning from critical clinicians that therapy can often be counter-productive (Wessely, 2005).
- 15 Putting quotes around the word 'disorder' is not meant to indicate that we take the side of the discourse's critique, but to indicate that the discourse simply constitutes a claim. The 'disorder' referred to is Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, originally applied to children only, but now also applied to adults.

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Biographical note

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