

Necessary entanglements: Reflections on the role of a “materialist phenomenology” in researching deep mediatization and datafication

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[TO BE PUBLISHED IN *SOCIOLOGICA* 2023]

1. Introduction

The idea of “social construction” and a preoccupation with the “materiality” of media and communication have been anything but contradictory for a long time. That is why the discussion between “constructivism” and “realism” in general, and “communicative constructivism” and “new realism” in particular, that frames this thematic issue has been tangential to the main themes of media and communication for quite some time.

One might ask, why then, does a contribution from the perspective of media and communications makes sense in this special issue at all? From our point of view, there are two reasons that, which also form the starting point of our argumentation: On the one hand, something can be learned from the specifics of media and communications that is of general interest for the discussion about (communicative) constructivism and (new) realism in the social sciences. Second, questions of “social” and “communicative construction” are problematized in a new way by recent developments in our media environment, neatly condensed by the terms “deep mediatization” and “datafication”:¹ What does it mean for our theories and approaches when our social reality is not simply “created” by social and communicative practices, but when digital media and automated data processing develop their own agency alongside and through human agency? It is media and communications in particular that addressed these questions very early on – questions that have interested the social sciences and the humanities in their entirety.

Against this background—the specificity of media and communications on the one hand, and its early preoccupation with processes of mediatization and datafication on the other—we believe that an article like ours can contribute to the broader discussion in this thematic issue. To support this assertion, we would like to address one central question: What can media and communications teach us about the re-emerging discussion around the “constructivist” and “realist” positions in social research? We approach this question from a limited perspective, namely the viewpoint we developed

¹ For the concept of “deep mediatization” see – among others – Couldry 2020a; Couldry & Hepp 2016; Hepp 2020; Hepp, Breiter, & Hasebrink 2018, for the concept of “datafication” Cheney-Lippold 2017; Flensburg & Lomborg 2021; Schäfer & van Es 2017; van Dijck 2014. More recently we reflected on the relation between both in this chapter: Couldry & Hepp 2022.

in our book, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. However, we avoid confining to the concept of “materialist phenomenology” (Couldry & Hepp 2016: 5) that we coined writing this book, but will reflect on it in more broadly.

Our contribution is divided into three sections. In the following section, we reconstruct some of the basic positions on “construction” and “materiality” in media and communications and situate our own reflections within them. In the third section, we will discuss the concept of “entanglement”, which we want to deal with more assiduously, because it allows us to explore in greater depth the conceptual challenges of deep mediatization and datafication. This will be explained through the examples of data colonialism and communicative AI. This then leads us to a fourth section in which we want to draw some general conclusions from for the discussion around our time-diagnostic understanding of societies.

2. Materialist phenomenology

As already stated, explicit examinations of “constructivism” and “realism” in media and communications has been declining for years. One possible reason for this is that a kind of “quotidian constructivism” is more prevalent in media and communication research than one might initially think. By “quotidian constructivism” we refer to an attitude, often not further reflected on by the researcher, that “media content” does not simply “portray” the world, but that communication with media is a but one aspect of the construction of reality. We can find this “quotidian constructivism” in “classic” works as diverse as those of George Gerber (1978), who, with his team, famously coined the “cultivation hypothesis”, that is, the assumption that intensive television viewing results in a different construction of reality. Yet other classic studies such as “Policing the Crisis” by Stuart Hall et al. (1978) are concerned less with the question of whether “mugging” in Britain is “accurately” portrayed in the media, and more the importance of the construction of “mugging” as a “moral panic” by mass media representations. These examples and many others² treat media coverage as an aspect of the construction of social reality and break with the assumption of the “portrayal” of reality by media content can be seen as the point of departure for any kind of appropriate media and communication research.

Parallel questions of media’s materiality have also floated around media and communications for a long time now. An examination of the social construction of reality through mediated communication was hardly seen as anything but contradictory to an appreciation of the materiality of media. Perhaps one of the first attempts to adequately grasp this conclusion in the field is Roger Silverstone’s (1994) “double articulation” of media. In essence, this says that “mediation” (Silverstone 2005) by technology-based media must always be approached from a twofold perspective: First, a preoccupation with media as social institutions of generating certain “contents” that are produced but also appropriated in a complex material

². See for instance: Ang 1991; Brunsdon & Morley 1978; Couldry 2000; Keppler 1994; Merten, Schmidt, & Weischenberg 1994.

process. Second, a preoccupation with media as “technologies” that also have a corresponding objecthood as receiving apparatuses, transmission towers, buildings, etc. The “double articulation” argument lifts the curtain on early perspectives that are still of interest today (Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward 2006; Livingstone 2007), such as the implications of the media’s “design” (Mansell & Silverstone 1998), a point of view particularly important for today’s digital media and how they are “programmed” (see Hepp 2022).

It is worthwhile to revisiting this debate which has persisted through the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s, because it shows us that a position which Georg Kneer (2009: 11) has called “neutralism” was, and still is, widespread throughout media and communications discourse. “Neutralism” refers to a type of American pragmatism which can be seen as existing in between an extreme version of “realism” and an “anti-realism” discussed mainly by postmodernist constructivist thinkers. If one follows authors such as Richard Rorty (1998) or Donald Davidson (2001), “realism” and “anti-realism” make the same mistake, albeit under different auspices: “While realism proceeds from the conception of a language-free reality, anti-realism suggests the misleading assumption of a reality-free language, i.e., of an ordering system that precedes any reality.” (Kneer 2009: 14) Both “dualistic” approaches, however, lead to a dead end, because it is precisely the relationalities of both that matters in scientific analysis. The binary opposition of realism and anti-realism is a “mistaken alternative [...] because it pretends that we can cite an ultimate ground, such as ‘the world out there’ (realism) or ‘our schemata’ (anti-realism), as the independent basis of our knowledge.” (Kneer 2009: 17) “Neutralism”, then, avoids this trap by beginning with the relationalities between “the world out there” and “our schemata”—an approach Kneer also sees in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1966) emphasis on the role of institutions and objectifications in the construction of social reality. A similar “neutralism”, however, can also be seen in systems theory, which may help resolve the problem of why authors like Niklas Luhmann cannot be easily assigned to either the world of realism or that of anti-realism (Scholl 2012). Even in recent publications arguing for a “critical realist ontology” of mediatization research (Ansaldo 2022: 4008), “neutralism” seems to be the common ground.

It is obvious that this “quotidian constructivism” diverged from sociology, especially the sociology of knowledge. Nevertheless, there are other connections across disciplinary boundaries when it comes to questions of a mediated construction of reality. Within the sociology of knowledge, the idea of the “social construction of reality” has been further developed into a “communicative construction of reality” which has led, in some way to a rapprochement between sociology and media and communications. Reiner Keller, Hubert Knoblauch, and Jo Reichertz (2013: 11), for example, explicitly discuss communicative constructivism as a “continuation of social constructivism” that comfortably addresses the approaches of discourse analysis, ethnography, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, and interaction analysis. Speaking of *communicative* construction conceptually accomplishes this shift of focus (see also the introduction to the thematic issue by Hubert Knoblauch and Michaela Pfadenhauer).

If one delves deeper into the relevant publications, it becomes apparent that with such a shift of focus concepts of media and communications have been addressed with increasing enthusiasm. Hubert Knoblauch, for example, argues that we should connect communicative constructivism with mediatization research, emphasizing that “[t]he study of mediatization is [...] the study of the changing structure of communicative action.” (Knoblauch 2013: 310) Later, he also deals with questions of the materiality of media and digital infrastructures, whereby his decisive argument is that infrastructures are to be understood best as a “materialized part of the social structure” (Knoblauch 2020: 249). More influential voices from the communicative constructivism camp appear to have moved deeper into media and communications approaches, especially those specific to mediatization research (see for example the chapters in 2022).

These convergences and mutual inspirations were, and remain, incredibly productive for both media and communications and sociology. However, the argument we have associated with the call for a materialist phenomenology goes beyond questions of communicative construction and relativises them at the same time, namely the argument to deal not only with the communicative but also the *datafied* construction of reality. Or, put differently, the challenge for any analysis of today’s social construction is that it has to *start out* from the fact not just of digital media but also of the new data-driven infrastructures and communications on which today’s social interfaces increasingly rely. It means understanding how the social is constructed in an age of *deep* mediatization when the very elements and building-blocks from which even our *sense* of belonging to a social world is constructed become grounded in technologically based processes of mediation. As a result, the ways in which we phenomenologically make sense of the world become necessarily related to the constraints, power-relations, and material complexities that make up the communicative features of digital media and their infrastructures.

The crucial point is, therefore, that communication in today’s societies occurs, to a very large extent, through *digital media and their infrastructures*, a result of which is why every act of communication is already linked to processes of data generation and automated data processing. In addition to the *mediated* character of communication, it is therefore always necessary to take into account the *datafied* character of communication at the same time. And this is exactly what makes a *materialistic phenomenology* necessary.

The word *materialist* not only echoes the double articulation of media quoted above. It also echoes an approach called “cultural materialism”, as referred to by Raymond Williams (1980). Williams’ main point was to include the *material* as well as the *symbolic* aspects of everyday practices when analysing culture as a “whole way of life”. Williams (1990) himself demonstrated the importance of this point of departure when he discussed television as both (material) technology and (symbolic) cultural form. It is not a matter of positioning the material against the symbolic, but of grasping both in their interrelatedness, as part of a proper analysis of how media and communications contribute to the construction of the social world. We need, in other words, to consider media both as technologies (including infrastructures) *and* as processes of sense-making if we want to understand how today’s social worlds come

into being. It is by using the term “materiality” that we attempt to emphasise this full complexity.

At the same time, we need a *phenomenology* of the social world because whatever its appearance of complexity, even of opacity, the social world remains something accessible to interpretation and understanding by human actors, a structure built up, in part, *through* those interpretations and understandings. Indeed, it must remain so if what we call “the social world” is to be liveable. Weber’s definition of sociology as “the *interpretative* understanding of social action” (Weber 1947: 88) has much more than definitional force, since social life, as Paul Ricoeur (1980: 219) wrote, has its “very foundation” in “substituting signs for things”: that is, signs that embody interpretations. Phenomenology, however, goes a step further in taking seriously the world as it appears for interpretation to *particular situated* social actors, from *their* point of view within wider relations of interdependence. There is an implicitly humanist dimension to phenomenology by which we fully stand.³ We suggest that, even where an analysis is based on secondary literature, it should be developed from the standpoint of a *possible* phenomenology that is oriented to empirical research.

A fully *materialist* phenomenology is able to bypass some standard and important objections to what has been associated with the “classic” tradition of social phenomenology. Take, for example, Michel Foucault’s firm rejection of phenomenology for giving “absolute priority to the observing subject” (Foucault 1970: xiv), or Pierre Bourdieu’s objection to symbolic interactionism for “reducing relations of power to relations of communication” (Bourdieu 1991: 167). With a materialist phenomenology we hope to commit neither of these sins. If the social world is built up, in part, of interpretations and communications, as phenomenology insists, our account of that world must look closely at the material infrastructures *through which, and on the basis of which*, communications take place. Phenomenology cannot *only* focus on how the world appears for interpretation by particular social actors.⁴ What is needed instead is a full-blown rethinking of the social construction of everyday reality, in all its interconnectedness, for the digital age. That means reoccupying the space associated with Berger and Luckmann’s well-known book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, published exactly half a century ago and one of the most read sociology texts of the 1960s and 1970s.

There is, incidentally, still much to admire about Berger and Luckmann’s book, developing as it did the mid twentieth-century’s tradition of phenomenological sociology into a satisfying version of the sociology of knowledge. Yet, this book seems very distant from us now. A basic reason is that Berger and Luckmann say almost nothing about technologically based media of communication. Take for example this

³ Compare [to](#) humanism in research, for example, the late British philosopher Bernard Williams (2006).

⁴ Arguably it never did, which is why Ian Hacking (1999) spares from his polemic against social constructionism Berger and Luckmann’s 1966 book in whose wake our book, in a sense, follows: paradoxically, given today’s much higher standing of Latour’s work over Berger and Luckmann’s, it is Latour’s early sociology of science that comes in for heavy criticism from Hacking for its social constructionism! This strong line of anti-Latourian critique has recently been powerfully extended by Andreas Malm (2020).

rare passage where media are mentioned obliquely in a discussion of the lifeworld's dialectic of the near and far:

"The reality of everyday life is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present [. . .] Typically my interest in the far zones is less intense and certainly less urgent. I am intensely interested in the cluster of objects involved in my daily occupation [. . .] I may also be interested in what goes on at Cape Kennedy or in outer space, but this interest is a matter of private, 'leisure-time' choice rather than an urgent matter of my everyday life." (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 36)

Media feature in passing here, but only as the window onto a distant world of fascination that helps us while away our leisure hours. Berger and Luckmann do not even consider the importance of media-based narratives for shaping our sense of everyday reality. Was this plausible even in the 1960s? Probably not, and it had long since ceased to be plausible by the 1990s when we both became researchers, after which the embedding of media in the fabric of daily life has intensified considerably. Not surprisingly, therefore, Berger and Luckmann's work has not had much influence on the international cross-disciplinary field of media and communications research.⁵

3. Entanglements

The approach of materialistic phenomenology, briefly outlined above, thus extends our understanding of media's "double articulation" (Silverstone 1994) in the analysis in ways appropriate to current deep mediatization and datafication. This cannot, of course, be a matter of setting a "meaning dimension" against the "materiality" of media, but rather of seeing both in their relationality, any more than the case for Silverstone's original concept of "double articulation".

A concept which seems to us to be particularly helpful for this is "entanglement", a term that goes back above all to the work of Karen Barad. Especially in the discussion of constructivism and realism, such a conceptual link must look like a change of sides or a mixture of incompatible approaches, since Barad characterises her own account as that of an "agentic realism", with which she wants to abolish the contradiction between realism and social constructivism. In essence, she is concerned with the idea that "[r]eality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but things-in-phenomena" (Barad 1996: 176). Even if there is a tendency to situate her work differently (Kneer 2009: 5), we see in Barad's broader arguments a specific "neutralism" that attempts to argue beyond a simple binary of nature vs. culture and directs the view to relationalities from the outset. And it is precisely for this reason that the concept of "entanglements" seems so helpful to us.

"Entanglement" is not simply a metaphor for the fact that things hang together, but an analytical concept. As Susan Scott and Wanda Orlikowski (2014: 881f.) argue, "the entanglement of matter and meaning is produced in practice within specific

⁵ For a rare and preliminary exploration, see Adoni and Mane (1984). In Germany, however, their influence was much more far-reaching, see for example, Keppler 1994, Keller, Knoblauch, & Reichertz 2013 or Hepp, Loosen, Hasebrink, & Reichertz 2017.

phenomena.” As they go on to argue, the concept of entanglement challenges the notion of narrowly exclusive categories such as “subject” and “object”, “human” and “non-human” or—as we would argue—“sense-making” and “materiality” of media, and emphasises that their differences are constituted in their relationality:

“To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.” (Barad 2007: ix).

Understood in this way, the concept of entanglement is associated with a certain approach to materiality that strongly emphasises its processual and relational constitution, precisely in contrast to concepts of actor-network theory that emphasise the permanence of society in matter (e.g. Latour 1991). That said, Barad’s work, at least as we read it, involves no naïve reductionism. The very concept (and metaphor) of entanglement, surely, makes no sense without attributing some ontological specificity to the various things, or types of things, that are being entangled, and so becoming ever more closely interwoven.⁶

Although developed independently, each applies in different directions our fundamental position of materialist phenomenology. Or, to put this more concretely, both approaches explore aspects and implications of the sort of social and economic *order* (Elias 1978) that emerges when the very elements from which social life is constructed themselves incorporate the dynamics of media technologies and institutions. The result is certainly a fresh perspective for the sociology of communication and knowledge. But, at a deeper level it is continuous, as just noted, with sometimes neglected figures in historical sociology like Norbert Elias. It is also much more continuous with a century of European and North American philosophy than it has become fashionable to acknowledge.

We noted at the start of this section that we interpret Barad not as a radical new direction, but as a helpful amplifier of a key strand that was already present in philosophical debates, namely neutralism between (extreme) realism and anti-realism. Indeed, to extend this point, it is, to say the least, an open question whether Barad’s work is a major philosophical advance, or rather, just the *last step* in a vast philosophical detour around and finally *back* to the work of mid-twentieth philosophy and the profound turn towards an appreciation of the *materiality of practice* that we find in Heidegger (1962) and late Wittgenstein (1954),⁷ a detour that has been

⁶ It is an open question whether we regard Barad’s work as a major philosophical advance, or rather just the last step in a vast philosophical detour around and finally *back* to the work of late Wittgenstein, that has been constituted by poststructuralism, postmodernism, and Actor Network Theory. Nevertheless, we believe that it is worth taking up the notion of entanglement that she developed, but taking it out of the context of describing quantum physics and unfolding it as a social science concept.

⁷ If Heidegger and late Wittgenstein seem far apart, it is worth noting that the first (and favourable) review of *Being and Time* in English was written by Gilbert Ryle who in his book *The Concept of Mind* was the key populariser of the approach to practice of the late Wittgenstein.

constituted by the apparently radical 'discoveries' of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and Actor Network Theory.

It is in that more cautious spirit, therefore, that we take up the notion of entanglement that Barad developed, taken out of the context of quantum physics, as a way of highlighting the contribution of materialist phenomenology in contemporary social science. As evidence for this we turn in more detail to unpacking the theoretical/empirical perspectives of 'data colonialism' and 'communicative AI'.

Data colonialism

The concept of data colonialism is the joint work of one of us and the Mexican-US scholar, Ulises Ali Mejías (Couldry & Mejías 2019b; Couldry & Mejías 2019a). Although it is not formulated in terms of entanglement, or Barad's work on agential realism, it is intriguing to view it from this direction. That is because it attempts to formulate a wider and deeper perspective on what all today's myriad processes of mediatization and datafication add up to, both as a contemporary social phenomenon and as a historical development. The proposal at the heart of the data colonialism thesis is that the conversion of human life—and much of non-human life and countless machine processes too—*into data* is not the unproblematic expansion of information and knowledge that its corporate and governmental proponents and beneficiaries claim it to be, but, rather, is one of the most far-reaching attempts to reconfigure power relations in human history.

We can get at the sheer scale of this new data-driven power grab (or *Landnahme* in the German term: Rosa, Lessenich, & Dörre 2015) precisely from the perspective of entanglement. For today, almost every institutional and interactional process out of which what we understand as society is being datafied, that is, enmeshed in elaborate practices of data collection and analysis and even more elaborate processes of data-driven evaluation. A short list of increasingly datafied sectors of contemporary societies would include: agriculture, education, government, health, leisure, logistics, tourism and work of all sorts. As a result, in each domain, but with specific conditions and dynamics, the configuration of who does what to whom, for what purposes, and with what authority and power, is being renegotiated. Information itself and its flows are being reconfigured, which necessarily changes the constitution of power relations (Zuboff 1988), resulting in new types of entanglement of everyday life in data relations.

The "datafication of education" (Jarke & Breiter 2019) provides a particularly clear example of this, even if one that is not yet sufficiently appreciated. The very nature of schooling—what happens in the classroom, what expertise is valued in the teacher, the role of the parent, and the agency and privacy of the educated child—all are being transformed by external institutions (EdTech corporations, often supported and sponsored by governments) that extract data continuously not just about isolated processes or assignments, but about every action in school, and then process it at a distance.⁸ The management and accountability of schools is, in turn, being

⁸ See for example, Williamson (2017) and Mascheroni and Siibak (2022).

transformed. The consequences for the rights and privacy of children and young adults are potentially alarming (Hooper, Livingstone, and Pothong (2022)). But those consequences all derive from an intensifying entanglement of the actions of all actors in the education process in the far-flung nets of data-extracting technologies.

The broader thesis of data colonialism is that these multiple transformations can only be fully grasped if they are seen not just through the lens of developing capitalism (in particular, surveillance capitalism: Zuboff (2019)), but also through the larger historical lens of colonialism. At the core of colonialism, when it began roughly five centuries ago, was brutal violence and racialized conflict for which it is justly remembered, but also something else: a core act of appropriation which constituted the world-historical act by certain colonizing nations of claiming for themselves and their exclusive benefit the resources of the whole world, or at least those parts of it on which they could lay their hands. This historic *Landnahme* is the deep precedent, Couldry and Mejias argue, for a new digital and data-driven *Landnahme* today, whereby human life itself, in its totality and not just in particular exploited formations, becomes directly accessible to corporate and governmental powers of value extraction. As noted earlier, human beings are becoming ever more *entangled in what Couldry and Mejias call “data relations”* (Couldry & Mejías 2019b: 13-14). The result, astonishingly, is that particular institutions, dominated by some very large corporations, are able to reconstruct social life as a whole so that it generates a direct stream of data for their benefit.

The data colonialism thesis seeks to grasp this transformation through a double—or if you like, an entangled—theory of both colonialism and capitalism. It proposes both a new stage of colonialism—comprised of the massive expansion of datafication across human life and more—and a crucial development of capitalism made possible *through* this expansion, which may, in due course, generate a new mode of production within capitalism. Data extraction, from this perspective, does not just work as an external force *on* human social life; it in effect transforms it from within, through the work of digital platforms that are configured precisely around the production and extraction of data “to produce ‘the social’ for capital” (Couldry & Mejías 2019b: 26). No greater entanglement of human life with the forces of capital can be imagined, when what *counts as* action, interaction, and their absence, is itself, from the start, already captured as data *for* capital. Only the historical frame of colonialism’s generation of, and long continuing entanglement with, capitalism can grasp this transformation of the very conditions of human life and social order.

Communicative AI

Communicative AI including, but not limited to, artificial companions, chat bots, social bots and auto-journalistic work bots illustrate the necessity of approaching the conceptualisation of media in terms of *entanglements*. Andrea Guzman and Seth Lewis, who originally coined the term, define communicative AI as “technologies designed to carry out specific tasks within the communication processes that were formerly associated with humans” (Guzman & Lewis 2020: 3), a definition that is shared by notable researchers such as Agnes Stenbom, Mattias Wiggberg, and

Tobias Norlund (2021: 1), Marco Dehnert and Paul Mongeau (2022: 3), and Mike Schäfer and Hartmut Wessler (2020: 311).

These kinds of definitions emphasise the communicative dimension of AI systems but remain “generic” in that they outline a particular genre of media and communication technologies without analytically capturing both their commonality and distinction from others. For example, Guzman and Lewis’ (2020) definition raises the question of whether all automation in the communication process—for example, editing videos or automated translations—should also be called communicative AI. Schäfer and Wessler’s understanding is more useful in this respect, reflecting as they do on the rearticulating agency of communicative AI, while not analytically moving beyond the notion of “automated media” (Andrejevic 2020). Against this background and picking up on considerations formulated elsewhere (Hepp & Loosen 2022; Hepp et al. 2022), we can define communicative AI based on three criteria. Communicative AI (1) is based on various forms of automation the purpose of which is communication, (2) is embedded in digital infrastructures, and (3) is constituted in its entanglement with human practices.

All three points require further explanation. While the initial two remain concise here (see Hepp et al. 2022 for a detailed discussion), we want to focus in particular on the third criterion to illustrate the viability of the concept of entanglement as well. The first point directs us toward Elena Esposito’s suggestion (2017) that, in contrast to the ever-pervading Turing Test discourse, artificial communication’s central feature is not “that the machine is able to think but that it is able to communicate” (Esposito 2017: 250). The decisive factor is, therefore, not a discussion into the intelligence of such systems, but their success in communicating with people and, in turn, which social processes take place (Bareis & Katzenbach 2021; Natale 2021). Second, the embedding of communicative AI in technical infrastructures highlights the fact that none of these systems could work without being part of the internet’s “deep structures” that contain and carry ever-flowing streams of data. Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler (2018) have attempted to visualise this information supply chain using Amazon’s *Alexa* as their case study (for a more in-depth discussion, see Crawford 2021). We can see similar processes play out in other implementations of communicative AI such as social bots or chat bots which cannot work beyond the platforms, they are a part of (Gehl & Bakardjieva 2016).

However, the third, and perhaps most important, point is the “entanglement” of these systems with human practices: Entanglement can be approached at the individual as well as the collective level. An element of entanglement at the *individual level* arises solely from the fact that the agency of these systems only unfolds in the action(s) of a human being (a query posed to *Siri* or *Alexa*, for example). These machines do not communicate “on their own” but within a framework set by human practices. Even more remarkable is the entanglement at the *collective level*. We are dealing here with an entanglement with a multiplicity of collective practices. For example, what characterises many of the systems of communicative AI is not that a human would interact with the material vis-à-vis a machine, but with systems that generate their communication based on a variety of human digital traces. *Siri*’s responses, or *Alexa*’s, for example, are based on gigantic repositories of online data generated by humans;

automated translation occurs not on the basis of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic “decoding” of existing text, but through the processing of correlations based on accumulated existing human translations. What constitutes systems of communicative AI as such is much more closely entangled with collective human practice than might appear at first glance.

Both examples—data colonialism and communicative AI—could and should be considered further if we want to arrive at an appropriate analysis of their role in today’s social construction of reality and its profoundly material evolution. However, this would go beyond the scope of such an article. Nevertheless, we hope that these two examples make apparent how an appreciation of the new forms of entanglement to which our relations with data and AI commit us helps to extend further the “materialist phenomenology” we have outlined in concrete terms. The point is to grasp how the materiality of digital media and infrastructures is intimately interwoven with meaning-making human practices. A critical analysis presupposes that we are able to grasp precisely this evolving interconnectedness. And this is where the concept of entanglement—developed here for media and communication research and freed from its original natural-scientific context—seems to be an appropriate tool from our point of view.

4. Conclusion: Deeply mediatized societies

So far in this article, we have made a broad set of arguments. Our starting point was the juxtaposition of (communicative) “constructivism” and (new) “realism” set by this thematic issue, into which, from our point of view, our priorities in developing the concept of the “mediated construction of reality” do not fit seamlessly. This is due—as we have tried to show—to several reasons. On the one hand, these are related to the history of media and communications research, in which a “quotidian constructivism” became dominant early on, based in intense interest in the materiality of media. On the other hand, they are also related to current issues, namely the contemporary construction of reality with and through digital media and infrastructures, and the resulting challenges of addressing the ontological implications of the dynamics of automated data processing. This requires us to build different concepts from those available, for example, in the sociology of knowledge.

From our point of view, these arguments also have far-reaching conclusions for a “diagnosis” of the current development of society. If one follows communicative constructivism, and Hubert Knoblauch in particular, the decisive term for such a “diagnosis” is that of the “communication society”. In his own words, Knoblauch states, “[w]e use the phrase communication society because these social changes cannot be understood without what we have described as the mediatization of communicative action.” He continues, “The more recent forms of mediatization [...] demonstrate that communication contributes to material economic production and creates social structures.” (Knoblauch 2020: 234)

Fundamentally, as our examples of data colonialism and communicative AI have also shown, we agree with his assertions. We can barely grasp the dynamics and developments of contemporary societies without focusing on the role of digital media and their infrastructures. But we should demonstrate caution, especially as scholars of media and communications, of centring everything on communication, as the time-diagnostic concept of the “communication society” attempts to do. This is not only borne by the general experience with media and communication research, which from the perspective of a “non-media centric approach” has repeatedly taught us not to generally assume media-mediated communication as decisive for all social changes, but to question more openly *when* this has *which* relevance for *what* kind of changes (Couldry 2004; Morley 2009; Hepp 2010). Our argument is also analytically borne: either one understands—as Niklas Luhmann did (2012)—communication as fundamental to the social world (emphasizing, in our view, what we have called the meaning dimension of material phenomenology). From this point of view, however, *any* human society is a “communication society” because it cannot exist apart from communication, and the term loses its time-diagnostic value. Or one focuses—as is suggested in the Knoblauch above—on recent changes to communication. In this case, however, the continuous, increasingly automated generation of data and the social processes based on it have become an integral part of the societal construction of societies. So, it is no longer simply about communication, but about its new interweaving with data processing and an increasingly close infiltration of all of this into our everyday practices. This datafication (see the example of data colonialism) and the automation of communication based on it (see the example of communicative AI) are, from our point of view, the reason why we have entered a new stage of mediatization which we prefer to call, because of its deep entanglement with human practices, *deep mediatization*. For this reason, we would, *time-diagnostically* speaking, always refer to a variety of distinct, *deeply mediatized societies*.

This all has two consequences for the general discussion of “constructivism” and “realism”. First, from our point of view, there are many arguments in favour of the position of “neutralism” outlined above, which tries neither to fall into the trap of extreme “realism” nor into the trap of constructivist “anti-realism”. If one takes seriously the original concern of Berger and Luckmann’s *Social Construction of Reality*, a concern with social processes of construction is not simply about abstract ontological questions, but about concrete and historical analyses of material processes of construction, which are always also based in underlying infrastructures of the material world. Simple dualisms hardly help at this point, especially if we want to analyse the complexities of deeply mediatized societies.

Second, we should be aware that ongoing deep mediatization is accompanied by a comprehensive change in how social reality is constituted and we have to discuss openly whether the “classical toolbox” of social constructivism is sufficient. From our point of view—and this was for us the starting point of the book *Mediated Construction of Reality*—we would answer this question with a resounding “no”. To go forward, we need concepts beyond those of Berger and Luckmann. We are also not sure whether the formal step from “social constructivism” into “communicative constructivism” is in itself sufficient to articulate the additional tools we need. At any rate, it can only be so if the latter also develops appropriate terms to capture processes of automated data

processing as a partial aspect of the construction of reality. As one of many concepts, which are important for this kind of theory development, we have introduced that of entanglement and, on that basis, we have taken a closer look at our own more recent work on data colonialism and communicative AI. However, as we live in the midst of the ongoing transformations of deep mediatization and datafication, further concepts will no doubt arise.

In our view, the focus should therefore be on analysing the social processes that surround us all in a critical and methodologically appropriate way—and for this purpose, an appropriate form of theory development is always necessary as well (Hepp 2017; Kelle 2019). It is important that such theory avoids the sort of philosophical grandstanding that has, for example, characterized some of the work in Actor Network Theory (Couldry 2020b). In our view, however, the quality of theory development is measured by the extent to which it provides us with tools for critically questioning the material transformations we all struggle with in our everyday lives. Our debates in scientific theory must always be set against this exacting measure.

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