A theoretical framework common to studies of the role of the mass media in the process of the social construction of reality from both European and American communication research traditions is developed in this article. The framework is derived from the theories of Schutz (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) on the process of reality construction. A model composed of two dimensions— type of reality and distance of social elements from direct experience—is developed. Studies of the media and the social construction of reality are classified and discussed according to the model. The authors suggest that a holistic approach, as defined in this article, is the best suited perspective for a more complete understanding of the role of the mass media in the process of the social construction of reality, and for the integration of the two schools of communication research.

MEDIA AND THE
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY
Toward an Integration of
Theory and Research

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The role of the mass media in the process of the social con-
struction of reality holds a central place in communication
research. Despite the diversity of conceptualizations and
methodologies in the studies dealing with this topic, two basic
approaches can be distinguished. The first focuses on the
social construction of reality as an important aspect of the rela-
tionship between culture and society. The second approach
concentrates on the social construction of reality as one type
of media effect. To a large extent, these two approaches cor-
respond to the historical cleavage between the European and
American traditions of research on knowledge, culture, and
communication (Turner, 1974).

   In the present article, we shall develop two interrelated no-
tions. The first is that neither of the two communication re-

search perspectives alone can offer a full picture of the role of the mass media in the dialectical process of the social construction of reality. By definition, this process includes interactions among individuals, society, and culture. Our second suggestion is that since both approaches share an interest in essential cognitive processes of social life, a common theoretical framework can be derived from the theories on the process of the social construction of reality as developed by Schutz (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1967).

In our opinion, a common theoretical framework can make two contributions to the study of the media and the social construction of reality. For one, such a framework will clarify ambiguities inherent in the lack of a systematic conceptualization characteristic of this area of research. Second, it will aid in the development of a holistic approach to the topic, as will be elaborated later in this article.

Our proposals stem from works by communication scholars from different periods who advocated the integration of the American and European schools of thought. As early as 1949, Merton suggested that both the European sociology of knowledge and American empirical sociology of mass communication "can be regarded as a species of that genus of research which is concerned with the interplay between social structure and communications" (Merton, 1968; 493). More recently, Carey (1977) suggested that an integrative approach would enrich both traditions. Lang states that "there is no inherent incompatibility between the 'positivism' of communication research and the critical approach associated with the Frankfurt School" (Lang, 1979: 83). Blumler (1980) points out that proponents of the two schools of thought should reexamine both their own and each other's basic premises in an effort to refine their theories and analyses. In his paper on the mass media and social change, Rosengren (1981) suggests that recent developments in the area of social and cultural indicators research may be helpful in the integration of the sociologies of knowledge and mass communication. Lull (1982) advocates the adoption of the communication rules perspective in order

to develop a mass communication theory that includes concepts and methodologies associated with both the empirical and critical schools of thought.

Berger and Luckmann's far-reaching redefinition of the sociology of knowledge has direct implications for the study of culture and mass communication. They postulate that the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with "everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 14). Thus, the emphasis should be on various expressions of the social construction of reality and not solely on its intellectual articulations. This definition is compatible with McQuail's notion that the mass media play a part "in shaping the individual and collective consciousness by organizing and circulating the knowledge which people have of their own everyday life and of the more remote contexts of their lives" (McQuail, 1972: 13).

The following paragraphs discuss concepts from the works of Berger and Luckmann and Schutz, which, in our opinion, are relevant to the study of the mass media and the social construction of reality.

The process of reality construction is defined as *social* because it can be carried out only through social interaction, either real or symbolic. The social construction of reality is a dialectical process in which human beings act both as the creators and as products of their social world. This is the consequence of a special human faculty of externalization and objectivation of one's own internalized and subjective meanings, experiences, and actions.

For heuristic purposes, a distinction can be made between three types of reality implied in this dialectical process: first, *objective* social reality that is experienced as the objective world existing outside the individual and confronting him or her as facts. This reality is apprehended by people in a common sense fashion as reality par excellence, and does not need any further verification over and beyond its simple existence. Although human beings are capable of doubting this reality, they are obliged to suspend such doubt in order to be able to perform

the routine actions that ensure both their own existence and their interaction with others.

The second form of reality is *symbolic* social reality, which consists of any form of symbolic expression of objective reality such as art, literature, or media contents. There are multiple symbolic realities that differ from one another by various symbol systems. Most important in this regard is the individual's ability to perceive different spheres of symbolic reality and to distinguish among different objects that are the constituents of these multiple realities.

And third, we have *subjective* social reality, where both the objective and the symbolic realities serve as an input for the construction of the individual's own subjective reality. In more general terms, it can be said that the objective world and its symbolic representations are fused into individual con-sciousness. However, as we are dealing with a dialectical pro-cess, this individually constructed, subjective reality provides the basis for the individual's social actions, and thus ensures the existence of objective reality and the meaningfulness of its symbolic expressions.

The individual's subjective reality is organized in terms of "zones of relevance," which differ on the basis of their distance from the "here and now" of the individual's immediate sphere of activity. Accordingly, social reality is perceived along a con-tinuum based on the distance of its elements from the individ-ual's everyday life experiences. Those social elements and actors with whom the individual interacts and experiences fre-quently in face-to-face situations are part of "close" zones of relevance. The "remote" zones of relevance are composed of general, more abstract social elements that are not acces-sible to direct experience, for example, "public opinion" or "the social order."

The notion of a continuum of close-remote social elements is important because it provides a dimension along which the elements of the three types of reality can be classified and related to the micro- and macrolevels of social life.
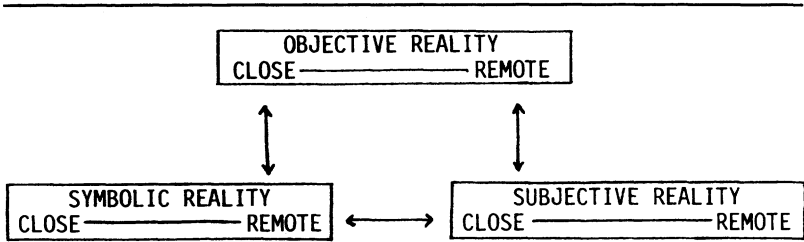
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          ┌─────────────────────────────┐
          │     OBJECTIVE  REALITY      │
          │  CLOSE ──────────── REMOTE  │
          └─────────────────────────────┘
                 ↑                ↑
                 ↕                ↕
┌─────────────────────────────┐    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│    SYMBOLIC  REALITY        │    │    SUBJECTIVE  REALITY      │
│  CLOSE ──────────  REMOTE   │←→  │  CLOSE ──────────── REMOTE  │
└─────────────────────────────┘    └─────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 1

The mass media are referred to only in a tangential manner in the analyses of social processes and structures presented by Schutz (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1967). In our opinion, media-dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976) provides a conceptual link between their theories and media research. According to the media-dependency hypothesis, the degree of media contribution to the individual's construction of subjective reality is a function of one's direct experience with various phenomena and consequent dependence on the media for information about these phenomena.

In the context of this article, the dialectical process of the social construction of reality can be defined as a system consisting of two dimensions—type of reality (objective, symbolic, subjective) and distance of social elements from direct experience (Figure 1).

Using the model in Figure 1, different studies of the media and the social construction of reality can be classified into two general groups. The first consists of studies that focus on part of the model, that is, the interaction between symbolic and *one* of the other two realities, and *either* close or remote social elements. The second group is characterized by a holistic approach and is comprised of studies that simultaneously examine the interactions among the three reality types as well as social elements that range from close to remote.

The proposed classification is important because it crosses the traditional boundaries between the critical and empirical traditions of communication research. Furthermore, this classification permits the development of the notion that the holistic approach can serve as a theoretical framework for the integration of both research traditions as well as for the systematic examination of the contribution of the mass media to the social construction of reality.

SYMBOLIC REALITY AND OBJECTIVE REALITY

Examples of early studies of mass media portrayals of objective social reality are those by Albrecht (1956) and Berelson and Salter (1964). They investigated how fictional contents in magazines reflect, respectively, American values toward marriage and attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Several members of the Frankfurt School were also interested in this type of interaction between objective and symbolic reality. An analysis of biographies published in American popular magazines during the 1920s and 1940s led Lowenthal (1961) to far-reaching conclusions about the change in American values from an emphasis on productivity to an emphasis on leisure and consumerism. Adorno (1947) analyzed the popular music genre of mass culture—jazz. He suggested that the unique rhythm of jazz reflects the position of individuals in modern society. They are led to expect a climax at the end of each musical sentence, and then conditioned to accept its anticlimax and the return to the monotonous uniform rhythm that is a symbolic equivalent of mechanical work along the assembly line.

Neo-Marxist researchers are interested in the interaction between symbolic contents and institutionalized social order, or, in our terms, objective social reality. They suggest that mass media contents reinforce the dominant ideology, thereby legitimizing the social order and maintaining the social status quo (Gitlin, 1979; Murdock, 1973; Hall, 1977). In their research, the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980) showed that

by using subtle verbal and visual techniques, televised news presents a distorted picture of objective reality. When reporting on industrial disputes, for example, TV news tends to focus on their manifest stages and consequences, thus obscuring their underlying causes. Furthermore, the portrayal of social groups from different social strata is differential and biased. The management representatives are generally interviewed in the quiet setting of their offices, connoting reason, authority, and responsibility. In contrast, strikers are shown in "action," at mass meetings and pickets, conveying the impression that they are the source of discord and a threat to the existing social order.

Another question relevant to the interaction between symbolic and objective realities is "Who is responsible for, and what determines the modes of reality portrayal in media contents?" This domain of communication research includes studies on patterns of interaction within and between media organizations (Breed, 1955; Tunstall, 1971; Engwall, 1978; Roeh et al., 1980); occupational norms, roles, and practices (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980; Johnstone et al., 1976; Schudson, 1978); technological and presentational constraints in the production of various media genres, both fictional (Elliot, 1972) and news (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1980; Murdock, 1973; Epsetin, 1973); and inherent tensions between technology, political institutions, and ideologies (Gouldner, 1976; Gitlin, 1979, 1980; Golding, 1981).

McQuail (1983) surveys central research findings in this field and discusses some of their implications for understanding the relationship between media organizational structures and objective reality. Rosengren (1981; 1983) goes beyond the specifics and suggests a basic typology of possible interactions between culture and other societal structures.

Applying our model to the studies cited above, we can see that only a few of them deal with social elements that are at the "close" end of the continuum, for example, occupational norms and roles. Several studies examine social elements that can be placed in the middle of the close-remote continuum,

such as industrial disputes and attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Most of the studies focus mainly on abstract social elements, remote from the individual's direct experience. Examples of these elements are value systems, dominant ideology, legitimation of the existing social order and power structure, and distribution of wealth.

SYMBOLIC REALITY AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY

Most students of the mass media who deal with this interaction are concerned with the impact of symbolic reality on subjective reality. Their main question is, "To what extent do mass media contents contribute to the individual's perceptions of social reality?"

An extensive survey of the research on the impact of television on subjective reality (Hawkins and Pingree, 1980) clearly shows that most of the studies concentrate on elements of social reality that are close to the individual's everyday life experiences, for example, fear of walking alone at night, perceptions of family roles, images of old people, and interpersonal mistrust. A few studies examine variables that are more distant from the individual's "here and now," such as perceptions of affluence and the functioning of the political system, or concern about racial problems. Yet, even these variables are not conceptually related to macrovariables, such as social power structure, distribution of wealth, or legitimation of the existing social order. On the conceptual level, several variables defined by Gerbner and his colleagues (1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980) are an exception and we shall deal with them shortly.

Studies on the role of the mass media in the processes of political socialization and agenda setting, as well as those dealing with the "knowledge gap" hypothesis, are relevant to this discussion.

Although they do not explicitly use the term "social construction of reality," the political socialization studies investigate

the impact of symbolic reality on the individual's subjective images of the political domain (Chaffee et al., 1973, 1977). The difference between the studies surveyed by Hawkins and Pingree and the political socialization studies is that while the former focus on immediate microlevel elements of social reality, the latter concentrate on more remote, macrolevel elements of social reality, such as the functioning of political institutions, civic and national values, and the legitimation of political authority.

In our own research (Adoni et al., forthcoming; Cohen et al., forthcoming), we examined perceptions of social conflicts in life areas at varying distances from the individual's direct experience. The main finding was that the perceptions of social conflicts in more remote life areas are more influenced by TV news portrayals than perceptions of conflicts in life areas that are accessible to direct experience. This finding supports the media-dependency hypothesis and reinforces our claim that the close-remote continuum is an essential dimension in the study of the role of the mass media in reality construction.

As is well known, the researchers associated with the agenda-setting studies do not always explicitly use the term "social construction of reality" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Weaver et al., 1981). Yet, their main purpose is to determine to what extent the agenda of the press contributes to the agenda of issues considered important by the public and the political elites. From a macrosocietal perspective, the very fact that during election years the mass media put politics at the top of the national agenda is indicative of the power of the media to define the framework within which collective social reality is perceived, and consequently to shape the basis of social action.

The studies that deal with the effect of the mass media on the "knowledge gap" focus on the quantity of information available to individuals from different social strata. The main finding of these studies (Tichenor et al., 1970, 1973) is that the better educated display greater gains in information compared with the less educated. Consequently, mass media in-

formation campaigns result in a wider knowledge gap among the different social groups. In his conceptualization of media effects, Katz (1978) points out that European researchers deal with the knowledge gap in terms of the development of class consciousness. Their main contention is that the mass media do not provide the lower classes with the kind of information necessary for realizing that they are deprived and exploited. The effect is a distorted subjective image of objective reality and abstinence from political action. Taken together, the American and European research on the "knowledge gap" can be understood as the study of the effect of the mass media on the construction of social reality, on the micro- as well as on the macrosocietal level.

HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO THE PROCESS
OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Early examples of holistic theoretical approaches are found in the writings of members of the Frankfurt School who were interested in "the functions of cultural communication within the total process of a society" (Lowenthal, 1957: 56). According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), mass culture products are economic commodities produced by the "culture industry," which is supported by financial and political powers. The structural constraints of this industry as well as the nature of its products are determined largely by economic, political, and social factors. The function of the "culture industry" is to perpetuate the existing social order and to provide the ideological basis for its legitimation. As a result, the portrayal of objective social reality in these symbolic contents is distorted. They express the ideology of the ruling classes, and elements of negation that are vital to any cultural expression are completely eliminated. The main function of these symbolic expressions of reality is to manipulate the individual into developing a "false" consciousness of both the immediate social environment and of more remote and/or abstract social phenomena,

such as social conflicts over wealth and power and the domi-
nant values that legitimize the social order. As a result of the
constant exposure to the mass mediated contents, the in-
dividual constructs one-dimensional subjective reality that is
based on the false contention that consumerism and comfort
equal happiness (Marcuse, 1964). Thus, individuals passive-
ly accept their place in society and internalize the social values
that legitimize the existing social order. This dialectical pro-
cess of biased representations of objective reality in symbolic
expressions and the consequent development of distorted sub-
jective reality provide the basis for future social action and thus
perpetuate the existing social system.

Alexander (1981) presents a holistic analysis of the role of
the news media in terms of the social system, as well as in
terms of social differentiation from a both historical and com-
parative perspective. His discussion deals with the modes of
production, characteristics of content, and their effects on the
audience and society as a "whole." Alexander (1981) stresses
that his conception of the social role of the news media is
grounded in functional theory and is diametrically opposed to
critical approaches to the topic.

More recent proponents of the critical approach who incor-
porate the study of interactions among the three types of reality
include Gitlin (1979, 1980), Hall (1977), Halloran (1970), Mili-
band (1969), Murdock and Golding (1977), Enzenberger (1973),
and the members of the continental Neo-Marxist school led by
Althusser (1971). Their works investigate the interaction among
the social system, the media (their structure, occupational prac-
tices, and products), and individuals' perceptions and accep-
tance of the social reality in which they live. Their conclusions
regarding the impact of the media at the macrolevel are based
on historical and ideological reasoning, while their conclusions
regarding the impact of the media on the individual's subjec-
tive reality are highly speculative. It is interesting to note that
the Neo-Marxists who are more empirically oriented, such as
the Glasgow University Media Group, actually concentrate
mainly on the investigation of symbolic reality, on the institu-

tional constraints that determine the choice of material presented by the mass media, and on the characteristic modes of presentation. And yet, they neglect almost completely the empirical investigation of the effect of symbolic representations on the individual. Various scholars (Connell et al., 1976; Hartmann, 1979) maintain that one cannot directly infer audience responses from the nature of the messages. Still, nearly all of the recent empirically oriented studies by critical scholars persist in making assumptions about this type of effect merely on the basis of analyses of the messages of the media's symbolic representations of reality. Gitlin (1978) even suggests that the empirical study of the effect of the mass media on the individual's subjective reality is unnecessary at this stage of communication research.

An important development during the past decade has been a new empirical trend that is also characterized by a holistic treatment of cultural phenomena. This trend includes the attempts to investigate elements of objective social reality, their symbolic representations, and their differential contribution to the individual's subjective perception of social reality in a common framework. Hartmann and Husband (1971), for example, analyzed news coverage of racial issues in Great Britain and its effect on adolescents' perceptions of those issues. They found that among subjects living in low immigration areas, the tendency to define race relations in the terms used by the mass media was greater than among those living in high contact areas. In another study, Hartmann (1979) examined news coverage of industrial relations and the perception of these contents among audiences from different social classes. His analysis relates the findings regarding symbolic and subjective reality to objective reality in terms of social class differences in British society.

The most comprehensive effort to integrate the empirical study of symbolic contents and the construction of subjective reality is that of Gerbner and his associates. The Cultural Indicators Project (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980) compares the statistical facts of ob-

jective reality to the facts of television reality, and investigates audience perceptions in terms of correspondence to one of the two realities. According to their theoretical exposition, Gerbner and his colleagues are interested in the whole process of cultivation. Accordingly, they investigate both the dominant modes of symbolic representations of objective reality in media entertainment programs and the impact of this symbolic environment on the individual's perception of social reality. Moreover, they attempt to discuss their findings regarding the individual's perceptions of close, microsocial elements in terms of the power structure of a society, a remote macrosocial element. In this respect, their work is similar to that of the Neo-Marxist researchers.

However, in terms of the theoretical framework set forth in this article, this approach is subject to several criticisms. First, the macrosocial elements are not conceptualized in relevant sociological and economic terms. Instead, Gerbner et al. assume that discrete instances of violence and patterns of dramatic interaction between aggressors and victims are symbolic representations of the power structure in American society. Second, we believe it is impossible to measure in a direct fashion macrosocial variables due to their inherently abstract nature and hence the inability of individuals to relate to them directly. The conceptual gap between the microsocial variables that were measured in these studies and the macrosocial notions they deal with is too great to allow for direct inferences.

Nevertheless, despite these conceptual shortcomings and several methodological faults (Hirsch, 1980), the Cultural Indicators Project is a pioneering approach to a holistic empirical study of mass culture. Consequently, it is a potential meeting point for empirical research on media effects and the critical approach to cultural phenomena.

The approach to the study of public opinion advocated by Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1977) is in several aspects similar to the Cultural Indicators Project. In her work, she employs both content analysis and periodic opinion surveys to investigate the correspondence between news media coverage of various

issues and changes in public opinion regarding these issues. According to Noelle-Neumann, the *public* emphasis on certain opinions by the same news media creates the false impression that these are the dominant opinions in society. This situation influences the individual's assessment of the "climate of opinion." The individual becomes one of many who are subjected to "pluralistic ignorance"—a belief that the dominant opinions in society diverge from one's own. A "spiral of silence" ensues whereby the individual, fearing the isolation that can result from the public expression of an opinion contrary to the seemingly widely held opinion, remains silent and further distorts the image of objective reality. The mass media's representation of public opinion thus influences both the individuals' construction of subjective reality and the individual's voting behavior. The final consequence of this process is on the macrosocietal level, the outcome being the actual election results.

In his recent exposition on the comparative study of culture, Rosengren (1983) discusses the possibilities of a multidimensional analysis of cultural phenomena that would comprise theoretical, substantive, and methodological dimensions. On the methodological level, he suggests three main types of cultural indicators and analyzes their relations to particular substantive types of inquiry. This notion is especially relevant in the context of this article. The three types of indicators are content analysis that is used in the examination of symbolic reality; survey studies that can provide indicators of subjective realities; and analyses of secondary data that provide information on objective reality. Rosengren (1981: 250) claims that in the study of culture,

> ideally one should have access to at least two, preferably three or four sets of data. Data about social structure . . . about the values mediated by the mass media . . . values entertained by the population . . . data about the values of the producers and controllers of media content.

In our opinion, in the more narrowly defined domain of the media and the social construction of reality, it is impossible to reach conclusions without simultaneously examining indicators concerning the three realities. Furthermore, as pointed out previously in this article, research compatible with media-dependency theory reinforces our contention that the close-remote continuum of social elements is particularly important. Recent research from what we termed a holistic approach points in the direction of one main conclusion. Since the holistic approach is concerned with both the micro- and macrolevels of social life, and takes into account the different interactions among the types of reality, it appears to be the best suited perspective for a more complete understanding of the role of the mass media in the social construction of reality as well as a potential meeting point for different traditions of culture and communication research.

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