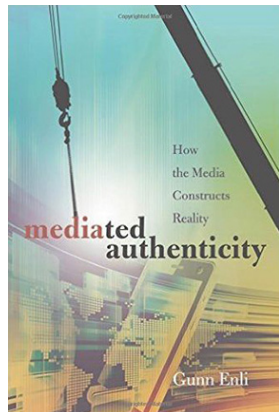




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Too brief about an interesting problem

Gunn Enli
Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality
Peter Lang, 2015

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In this ambitious monograph Gunn Enli engages in a «hermeneutics of suspicion» where the media's content is considered to have a problematic reality status. She argues that production strategies in broadcasting and on the Internet create «reality effects» among audiences, and she focuses on the human tendency to perceive of mediated people and events as *authentic* to different degrees. Authenticity is a vague and elusive topic, but Enli has a good grip on it. She presents a colorful parade of illusions, deceptions and frauds, picked freely from Anglo-American media history.

Enli argues that there is too little research on authenticity nowadays. Scholars like Benjamin, Horton and Wohl, Anders Johansen and Paddy Scannell have written about previous epochs, and Enli wants to contribute with a contemporary approach. However, the greatest novelty of Enli's book lies in her will to re-establish the topic, while it is less evident whether she manages to deliver an original theoretical contribution to the study of authenticity.

THEORY ABOUT REALITY

Let me get into Enli's theoretical universe in some detail. Enli has set herself an ambitious goal by putting «construction of reality» at the center of her investigations. But despite the high-flying potential, Enli has a down to earth approach. She does not deal with reality in the way of phenomenology, neither with the existentialist approach from Heidegger, and definitely not in a positivist or behaviorist way.

In chapter 1 Enli introduces the mechanism for constructing authenticity, namely the authenticity contract, which is built painstakingly by producers with every new media establishment, especially in the early phase of adoption (p. 19 and 50). Enli argues that mediated authenticity is established through negotiations between producers and audiences, but the contract will often be broken, typically by producers. Enli presents two ways in which the contract is manipulated, namely authenticity *scandals* and authenticity *illusions*. She presumes


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that there are codes that can be exploited to make things appear different than they really are, to be representations of reality rather than proper reality. Humans have an existential need for this interpretation or decoding. Media audiences are keenly engaged in solving ‘authenticity puzzles’ – separating the fake from the real in reality shows, blogs, etc. It is directly inspired by Roland Barthes' term «reality effect» (p. 15).

WELL-KNOWN HISTORICAL CASES

Through famous case studies, this book examines mediated authenticity in broadcast and online media in a historical span from the 1930s to the 2010s. In chapter 2, Enli discusses early radio history and shows how important genres for authenticity illusions were established. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats in the 1930s created an illusion of the friendly and personal, yet powerful president. There is also an extended analysis of the War of the Worlds as an authenticity scandal. In the next chapter «Money, fraud, and deception: The Quiz Show scandals» she analyses the emergence of TV with her by now familiar vocabulary of scandals and illusions, and she is right to emphasize personality as a very important feature of televised authenticity.

In chapter 4 there is a big jump in time as Enli turns her attention to reality TV in the 1990s and 2000s. The chapter is called «Ordinariness as authenticity: The reality TV genre», and Enli presents the amateur singer Susan Boyle in detail. She performed on Britain's *Got Talent*, and was perceived to have a raw vulnerability that created a very strong authenticity effect in British audiences, also making her an international pop star for a while.

I find chapter 5 particularly interesting. It deals with mediation on the Internet from the 1990s to our own time, and is called «Fake personas and blog hoaxes: Illusions in Social Media». In a time when networked technology has become pervasive «we seem to have become even more oriented towards preserving authenticity in human connection», Enli writes (p. 89). The key reason for this is the same as it was for radio and television before, namely «the lack of physical evidence online and the need to compensate for its absence» (p. 90). People trust online trustees partly because they feel their network supports them. A Facebook post is strengthened as an authentic expression if it is widely shared. The support from the network may feel stronger for the audience member than it actually is, and as such there is an «illusion».

The seventh and last chapter, the conclusion, is called «Towards a theory of mediated authenticity», but despite its ambitious title it is only 8 pages long. Here it is confirmed that the essence of Enli's theoretical project is *contract – breach – scandal – illusion*.

ENLI CONSIDERED AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST

For good and bad, Enli formulates a social constructionist position – although she herself does not call it by this name. While McLuhan and other medium theorists are quoted and endorsed, Enli certainly does not come across as a medium theorist. It is true that chapter 2 about radio has active conceptualization of the role of technology, but from then on the technological perspective more or less disappears. Compared to fellow scholars Paddy Scannell and John Durham Peters, who are quite radical in their explorations of the materiality of mediation, Enli systematically argues that reality is constructed in a hermeneutically coded practice which is essentially socially constructed. Genres and televisual texts influence our perception of reality by constructing positions and emotions for us to take up.

CONCLUSION

It is very difficult to describe what reality is in a world saturated with digital mediation, and I was not convinced by Enli's description. The book is only 139 pages, and it is really too short for its own topic. There is too little depth of theoretical analysis, and the detailed historical narratives seem to suggest that this is a textbook or introduction, something which waters down the theoretical focus even more, and makes it difficult to understand what the intended readership of the book is.

Enli's book deals with the social dimension in a way that conforms to a minimum common denominator, namely socially constructed mediation. This approach is so flexible that Enli's book is likely to be accepted by scholars in mediatization theory, structuration theory, Bourdieuan sociology and other traditions. Considered as a theory it should have been positioned against these and other theories, and there should have been a clearer understanding of the philosophical implications of her argument. But this would have required a much longer book, with a more sustained theoretical line of argument.

While reading Enli's analyses it dawned on me that since she focuses so much on illusions she creates a grim picture of the mass media. It seems there are illusions all the way down, and that her hermeneutics of suspicion only captures this negative aspect of the media. That said, I was intrigued by her application of the famous examples, and most certainly learnt something new about mediation by reading Enli's book.