

## Book review

# Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality

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Gunn Enli's *Mediated Authenticity: How the media constructs reality* (Peter Lang, 2015) raises the claim to explore *mediated authenticity* for the first time in communication studies, since, according to the author, it was up until now only conceptualised in the era of critical theory. Enli first gives a brief introduction to the paradox of mediated authenticity. She points out the fact that the audience expects authenticity and that this authenticity is constructed during the production process of media. Meanwhile, she introduces four key points which she identifies for authenticity: authenticity illusions, the authenticity contract, authenticity scandals and authenticity puzzles. All of these elements help to construct mediated authenticity. In the first chapter, Enli describes briefly and in the manner of a survey how important

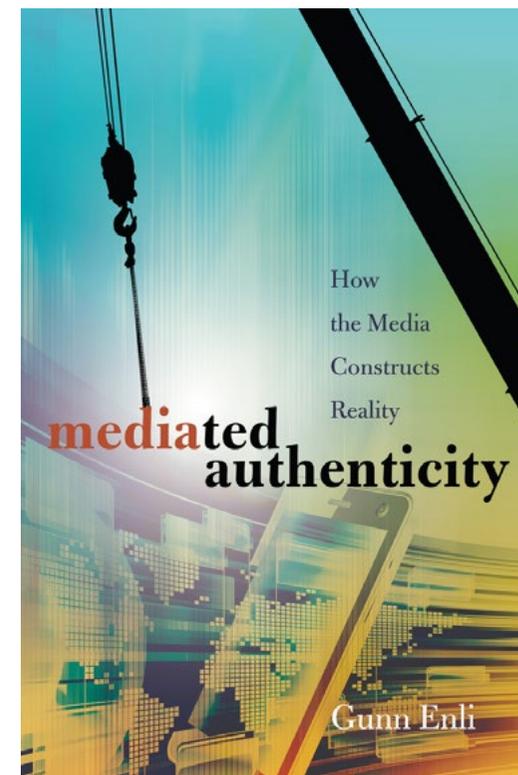
authenticity is to contemporary culture and, to underline what is meant by authenticity, she draws a line between trustworthiness and authenticity. Her key point in this context is that the audience knows the world through the media and therefore "the media are normatively supposed to provide the people with trustworthy, balanced, and neutral information about the world" (p. 3). To emphasize her point Enli gives an overview of media studies concerning trustworthiness in news. Her next point is authenticity and originality, for which she argues with the findings of Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer and their idea of mass media as a capitalist instrument. To show the paradox of originality, she cites the tourism industry and the fact that tourists seek original experiences, but that originality is almost always staged for tourists.

**Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality**

**By Gunn Enli**

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The last point in the context of authenticity is spontaneity. Enli shows that spontaneity is staged and therefore the opposite of authenticity, but nonetheless accepted. She uses the example of music studies, which showed that musicians are particularly plausible if they act spontaneously. But in fact performances are always pre-planned and staged. Enli is able to give an idea of what she means, but because of the briefness of her description the reader is left with some questions, for example: are the chosen examples really comparable and do they assist Enli's objective of showing the paradox in mass media?

In the following chapters Enli discusses three components to introduce a tentative theory of mediated authenticity. First she deals with authenticity illusion, which she claims is very important in the context of factual genres, such as news production. Journalists try to create authenticity while interviewing people on the street and this Enli calls a strategy to signify the realness. To accept this construction of authenticity, the audience needs a contract. This contract is unspoken, which means the audience knows the specific character of each genre and its specific way of creating the authenticity illusion. The audience knows how to deal with this and the media

producers act accordingly. However, if a media producer transgresses this contract, authenticity puzzles and scandals arise.

Enli's approach is to provide an initial verification of her theory in five case studies that cover the evolution of mass media. Each case is to "illuminate a change in the relation between producers and audiences" (p. 19). Thus, she highlights a novelty or new phenomenon in each case, describes what happened in the struggle over the authenticity contract, the authenticity puzzles or scandals, and discusses the change which each case brought about.

The first case study looks at the US radio drama *The War of the Worlds* (1938) which feigned live reporting about the invasion of Martians. Some people took it to be genuine, because they were not used to such radio plays. They knew the medium only with serious reporting, music, or radio dramas like theatre plays. Enli's point is that the producers used new staging for the authenticity illusion and while doing this offended the authenticity contract resulting in the outcome of a newly negotiated one.

The so-called US *quiz show scandal* in the late 1950s serves as her second case. What is new in this case is the audio-visual authenticity illusion. Contestants who were already famous with the public only acted as if they were guessing although

they knew the answers of the quiz show questions. However, the audience believed that the contest was real. Here again the authenticity contract was broken and the audience had to learn that even if there is an audio-visual illusion of authenticity (like nervously chewing on fingers), it may not be true.

The role of ordinariness in authenticity is discussed in the third case regarding *reality television*, in which Enli focuses on Susan Boyle as a participant in the show *Britain's Got Talent*. Enli shows that the public realised the gap between Boyle's appearance and her talent and discussed whether her plainness was staged or real. This case study underlines the authenticity puzzle of reality TV. The public again had to negotiate the authenticity contract while dealing with the question of what authentic is in reality TV.

The fourth case highlights the problem with authenticity in social media while showing that bloggers may build an authenticity illusion by using markers the public is used to associating with authenticity. Bloggers constructed fake personas, for example a young girl with cancer, and did this so authentically that they had huge fan groups and followers that took the blog to be real. All bloggers described by Enli were unmasked by suspect or illogical incidents in their stories. Here again, the

public struggled with an authenticity puzzle and negotiated the authenticity contract.

The last point Enli discusses is performed authenticity and she shows this in her case about the Obama campaigns, which demonstrate, in Enli's words "the construction of politician as authentic" (p. 21). She shows how politicians perform in ways designed to communicate trustworthiness, originality and spontaneity while she outlines how Obama created an authenticity illusion during his campaigns in 2008 and 2012. She argues that Obama managed very well to be authentic, especially because he knew how to deconstruct authenticity puzzles in a controlled and deliberate way and thus appeared even more authentic. Her key point is that Obama won votes by fulfilling the authenticity contract that the media had constructed around him.

Enli's conclusion, based on these case studies, is that mediated authenticity is constructed through illusions and the audience is very well aware of the fact that the media produce these illusions. She claims that the audience accepts this due to the authenticity contract. This contract needs to be negotiated and this might be a problem in the phase of new media, to which the audience is not completely adjusted. Therefore, there is a likely risk of authen-

ticity scandals. Enli says: "The linear history of mediated authenticity is a narrative of cumulative learning, whereby stakeholders' practices and expectations are perpetually readjusted according to previous experiences" (p. 135). She describes mediated authenticity as a "paradoxical phenomenon" (p. 136), but shows seven characteristics: predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence and imperfection.

As Enli herself stated, one may say that this was a first, but also a very interesting and inspiring look at this phenomenon which now has to be explored in more detail and depth.