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Book Reviews

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Gunn Enli
Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality

Authenticity is a concept that can have a multitude of meanings in relation to media, all presenting us with different kinds of problems, all somehow interrelated: the (in)authenticity of intentions, sources, messages and documents as well as the (in)authenticity of our perception of the world through the media. The scope is wide-ranging and the task of finding a way of approaching it in a coherent and fruitful scholarly way is indeed challenging. Enli chooses (wisely) to focus on a very specific question: How is authenticity constructed in mediated communication? Or, framed in a different fashion – how is it possible to transmit a sense of authenticity through inherently inauthentic channels?

“Mediated authenticity” is defined by Enli as the result of a paradoxical process “whereby a negotiation between producers and audiences is crucial to the success of the communication” (p. 131). In other words, authenticity (as delivered to audiences through media) is a social construction achieved through an interplay between audience expectations and preconceptions about what determines a sense of the real (on the one hand) and media producers’ success in delivering content that corresponds these notions. Hence, mediated authenticity relies on the successful implementation of “authenticity illusions”. Typically, Enli illustrates, the audience “understand that canned laughter (...) is a technique for enhancing a comedy show” (p.1) but the seemingly spontaneous outbursts of laughter are an expected component in their viewing experience related to genre, among other things. They are not real, they are not perceived of as real (by the viewers), but they help create a flavor of authenticity in the specific context of comedy shows. To clarify: mediated authenticity is in effect inauthentic, but that does not really matter because the audience knows it... When communication is successful, Enli argues, a certain balance is upheld and an “authenticity contract” between the producers and consumers of media can be said to be in place.

For the authenticity illusion to work successfully and the authenticity contract to be effective, seven characteristics are especially relevant, according to Enli: Predictability (for example by living up to genre conventions), Spontaneity (when content is scripted but appears as improptu), Immediacy (a “sense of ‘liveness’” connecting producer and audience in a shared “now”) (p. 137), Confessions (revelations of facts or emotions that appear trustworthy and that the audience can relate to), Ordinariness (especially concerning people appearing in the media who come across as just ordinary people, as opposed to glamorous celebrities or experts), Ambivalence (it seems more authentic if something is presented ambivalently or even reluctantly, for exam-
ple a fake blogger who discloses facts about him/herself) and Imperfection (too perfect is not credible). This list, and the investigation of their meaning throughout the book is certainly interesting for anyone interested in how media consumption takes part in the processes of shaping peoples view of the world. Indeed, it could also serve as an authenticity check-list or recipe, for anyone in the business of producing authenticity-flavored media concoctions. Enli employs a number of historical as well as contemporary case studies to make her point: The case of the famous radio broadcast of Orson Welles’ (1938) The War of The Worlds illustrates not only the necessity of establishing an authenticity contract for radio producers and listeners when introducing radio as a new medium. The legendary audience reactions (over 1 million Americans believed the events in the play to happening and were scared) is an example of an “authenticity scandal”, an illustration of the miscommunication caused by the authenticity illusion being too convincing and the absence of an effective authenticity contract. From the construction of Barack Obama as the “authentic politician” to Susan Boyle as the “ordinariness icon” (p. 80) and fake bloggers’ use of self-disclosure as means of maintaining the authenticity illusion, the cases are used to build up a convincing argument.

The relevance and contribution of Enli’s analysis of mediated authenticity is, I argue, mainly practical. Many a media scholar have spent (perhaps too much) time lurking around in the dense jungle of authenticity-related quests for truth and sincerity, but most of us have not made it to the point where we have come up with insights that are both useful and presented in a concrete and ready-to-use way. Enli presents the embryo of a practical and handy theory that will help students and researchers conceptualize, understand and investigate the construction of mediated authenticity better. The book is admirably short and to the point but the format seems to have had the effect that some of the relevant theorists have been omitted or mentioned en passant. Plato, Kierkegaard, Adorno and Heidegger are examples of thinkers who would have a lot to offer in terms of enriching the arguement.

Enli places the birth of the ideal of authenticity historically around the time “of the first wave of modernization in the West” (p. 11). However, as John Durham Peters has pointed out, this theme has been quite present in ideas about communication much longer than that, and especially the impossibility of depicting reality authentically through images, has been quite central throughout history.

Having said this, it is a book that raises questions in a new way and provides a fresh and relevant framework for thinking about mediated communication in our time. Especially the analysis of blog hoaxes and fake personas in the light of the insights into how authenticity is constructed and sometimes exploited maliciously opens up a fruitful way to think about and analyze, for example, contemporary propaganda. Understanding authenticity illusions and contracts will therefore be important in developing media literacy. I am thinking here also about the ethical implications of the authenticity illusion and contract. Enli mentions the audience, producers and regulators as stakeholders in the authenticity contract, but the existence of an authenticity contract implies not only legislative concerns, but also important ethical ones. These are not developed in the book, but implied by its general argument. Herein lies a challenging and relevant cue further research.

Notes

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