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THE MEANING OF REALITY IN COMMUNICATION

ZNAČENJE REALNOSTI U KOMUNIKACIJI

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Summary

*Communication reveals the way how reality is discovered, taken for granted, or changed by individuals and groups in positions of power. That means that reality is a social construction which is reflected through language. It is related to the treat of the fundamental questions of theory of construction, evaluation, the criteria of meaning, and the structure of explanation. We do not react to events directly, we always react to interpretations or definitions of the situation, relevant and meaningful to our lives. Events are as real, as we define them to be real. Social consensus plays the most important role in defining what is appropriate and desirable in a particular society. A broader human, as well as scientific communication can lead us to unsupervised access to good information and useful knowledge about how society works, and what a real **reality** should be.*

Sažetak

*Način na koji otkrivamo realnost, način na koji je razumijevamo ili mijenjamo, ili netko drugi u društvu tko je od nas moćniji, ovisi upravo o komunikaciji. To znači da je realnost društvena konstrukcija koja postoji pomoću jezika. Povezana je s odnosom prema temeljnim pitanjima teorije konstruiranja, vrednovanja, kriterijima značenja i strukturom objašnjenja. Na događaje ne reagiramo neposredno, mi reagiramo na interpretacije ili definicije onih situacija koje su značajne za naš život. Događaji su realni onoliko koliko ih definiramo da budu realni. Društveni konsenzus ima najvažniju ulogu u definiranju onoga što je poželjno i primjereno u određenom društvu. Jedino šira ljudska i znanstvena komunikacija može nas dovesti do cjelovitog pristupa pravim informacijama i korisnim spoznajama o tome kako je društvo ustrojeno i što je to istinska **realnost**.*

Introduction

Uvod

Communication states facts, implies judgments, and traces a policy. The common understanding of the developing situation is presented perfectly during the football game. In a deliberate frustrating situation players coordinate their activities so well that people pay to watch. But in ordinary social environment, emotional background of actors is sometimes in such an extent of a different character that the enlightenment of **reality** becomes the most challenging task. The attempt of seeking the truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events is qualified as **an act**, but the whole domain of **omissions** is not. Therefore some people - although being aware of the difficulties which are produced by imperfect communication - still consider that there is no necessity for a separate study of communication. The situation is complicated by the fact that established institutions show very little interest to be aided by academic studies in communication.

Although very different things are brought under the heading of communication, studies in communication reveal how we acquire our sense of self, how culture and history influence our personal experiences, and how **reality** and truth are constructed.

The Society of Professional Journalists¹ established the CODE OF ETHICS. One of the most important impacts of the Code requires: "*Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know*".

Journalism reflects the aspect of socialization, regarding the way how we learn to perceive our world through the task of creating and maintaining the social order.

At the level of common sense we have no difficulty in understanding what people say. We usually understand one another's reports because we all have access to the things to which they refer. But while trying to be **realistic** - even if we were able to obtain reality, we would not always be able to give an account of it. It seems that we sometimes communicate information which we do not have, as when our behavior enables others to know us better than we know ourselves.²

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The task of studies in communication is to exhibit what is common between the social and other 'spheres' of reality. Are our valuations based on statements of fact, and is our vision of reality **reducible to statements of fact**? We must examine the role which the facts play in our reasoning because our judgments are typically defended by an appeal to **factual** considerations.

Facts and values *Činjenice i vrijednosti*

Facts are made of the confusion between the actual situation and the description of it. Gidon Gottlieb³ points out that situation is always given, but to state the facts, means to analyze and interpret the situation. So, any description and any account of '*what actually happened*' is necessarily **selective**, depending upon some implicit or explicit **standard of relevance**. Whatever we say, there remains much more that could have been said, and always there are things, left unsaid. That means that there are always more reportable things than reported facts. Namely we could endlessly proceed the descriptions which all might be true, confirming what was observed to happen. But our task is to reach a decision - which means that we have to get the **quality** (of good deliberation), arriving at "*the right conclusion not only in the right manner but at the right time*".⁴

If we try to answer the question : What is **reality**, and how we could reproduce it? We will recognize that we can't manage if we do not make a sort of choice. The problem of reproducing reality can be compared to the distinction between photography and painting. The best photography reveals only a detail of reality, but the artist makes a **deliberate choice of reality!**

Gottlieb concludes: "We communicate through offerings of CHOICES, not through presentations of FACT".

In his article: *The Use of Political Theory*, John Plamenatz⁵ argues that **everything feasible and imaginable is limited by the actual**. We wish to discuss in what extent the gap between facts and values requires to be bridged. Namely, as Richard Rudner⁶ points out, - when we speak of someone as giving "*a factual, or objective account*" of something, we appear to be saying **little more** than that it is a true account. So, descriptive criteria seem to be insufficient to justify our judgment.

R. Hare holds that when we make judgments, we do so on the basis of certain factual criteria. But the judgment does not consist in any set of facts about the subject, it must consist in these facts **plus** something else **over** and **above** these facts⁷. It is important to elucidate the nature of this extra element.

Abraham Edel⁸ emphasizes that a judgment of value cannot be derived from a judgment of fact. A common sense view will therefore imply that a value judgment is characterized by arbitrary ideas which are scientifically irresponsible or have no controls. But if we agree that the function of moral principles is to

guide conduct, cumulative nature of intrinsic values will contain **prescriptive relevance**.

According to Alfred Ayer⁹, so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary "scientific" statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be **neither true nor false**.

While reviewing the theory of interpretation, Gidon Gottlieb¹⁰ differs the interpretation that leads to appreciation, and that which leads to action. This distinction is essential because those who must act are confronted with situations that demand a decision.

Decision making requires putting events into context, and that is the task of **shaping reality**. When the interpretation involve the jump from the domain of rules to the domain of action, the **intention** should determine interpretation. Omitting to do anything positive, and remaining passive, also produces a sort of reality. Gidon Gottlieb¹¹ advises that interpretation should be seen as scientific inquiry bent on discovering the truth, not on choosing only the right meaning. Namely, if an event can be explained in more than one meaning, we should consider **all the potential meanings**. The job of interpretation must be the job of selecting the **decisive authoritative meaning**.

As Alan White in his Introduction emphasizes¹² - We need to distinguish between explanations of human actions and explanation of human happenings, feelings, failings... We need to distinguish different descriptions of the action, realizing which of these explanations are of a **causal** kind, and which are quoted as **motives**.

Human actions are directed by various reasons, but in most cases the distinction between motives and causes is not discoverable at the common sense level. Therefore, A. J. Ayer¹³ points out that **causes push**, while **motives pull**, (motives operate **a fronte**, whereas causes operate **a tergo**).

If we are **motivated** for a certain action, we **are free**, which means that we **assume reality** and at the same time are aware that we have an alternative course. Good and bad motivation is further distinguished ethically: "... *what makes actions right is that they are productive of more **good** than could have been produced by any other action open to the agent*"¹⁴.

In the case when all our actions are directed only by **causes**, we **are not free**, which means that our **vision of reality** is distorted and we are obliged to do something because in the circumstances all alternatives other than the obliged one are closed to us either physically, or in some other way.

Oldenquist¹⁵, while trying to define causes, said: "*We may not know what the causes are beyond the fact that they lie in our genetic make-up together with our environment*".

We should separate motives and causes in order not to assimilate descriptive to prescriptive elements of **reality**.

The Construction of Reality *Izgradnja stvarnosti*

The **vision of reality**, if considered as extralinguistic entity, cannot be true or false - namely, according to Rudner¹⁶ the conception of truth are predicates that apply to linguistic entities, i.e. sentences and statements. The vision of reality can be objective or subjective - objective if we interpret situations on definitions of reality, learned from those around us, - and subjective if delusive or hallucinated. G. Vickers would say: "Reality is the stream of experience which we interpret consciously or unconsciously, in the light of our past experience and which serves to regulate our relations with each other"¹⁷.

The significance which the facts can have for us, is derived from the relation between facts and values, which will determine our **ideas of reality**.

In common language we are not being fully aware of value drives while speaking of facts and referring to needs. Michael Maccoby¹⁸ emphasizes that human needs are never purely physiological: we always express a **value** when we speak of a need.

To understand many of the phenomena that influence our daily lives, we must provide the appropriate **context**, because the phenomena are not generated in a social vacuum - whether they occur in childhood or adulthood, whether freely chosen, or forced. To explain the meaning of the phenomena, we try to meet the exact meaning of a word. But, words do not have meaning in isolation from events, "...the meaning of a word is its use... its use is to denote"¹⁹.

There are many "facts" we cannot and will never perceive with our senses, which we feel to be right despite the lack of hard evidence or objective proof. We believe in the reality of ozone layer, we believe in the reality of justice, love, human rights... We act toward one another in **accordance to our definition of reality**, which we share with other members of our culture.

"How do we come to know what we know?"²⁰ David Newman has estimated that the process through which **reality** is structured, discovered, made known, reaffirmed, and altered by the members of a society - is a matter of **agreement**, *not something inherent in the world*. Individuals construct their realities through the process influenced by **power, economics, and politics**. Lot of journalists have been killed during the war simply because the aggressors ruling group had no other means of censorship upon them.

The way we distinguish fact from fantasy, truth from fiction, myth from reality is tied to interpersonal interaction, social roles, group membership, culture, history, and social institutions. All these are human creations which provide the way how we perceive the world. Sociologists, symbolic interactionists and conflict theorists "strive to explain the social construction of reality both in terms of its causes and its consequences"²¹.

Culture and Language *Kultura i jezik*

The way people talk to one another reflect a great deal of information about who we are and what we think we are. Status differences and power differences are refereed through formal versions of addressing a status superior, status equal, or a subordinate. In some cultures these differences are clearly institutionalized in language and style of behavior.

A speech situation typically involve a speaker, a hearer and the **utterance** by the speaker²². The word order, stress, intonation, and the mood of the verb define the semantic (relation of signs to real or imagined experience) content of a message. Meaning involves an interpreter, one upon whom the message is sent, and the one upon whom the message is received. The received message can be different from the message that the originator actually meant to send.

The majority of what passes through our brains is symbolized in words, but during the transmission, a message changes as it passes from one level to another, especially "...from 'top management' in an institution down to 'working level'²³. In that case the language can function as a command needed to get others to behave as we wish them to. If the use of language is noncognitive, it always involves **ethical evaluation**.

The language does not develop automatically. While a medicine student is studying the facts of practicing his art, the central item of his knowledge is the fact that he is studying only the **current way of describing** phenomena. The communication reveals how words used for description direct his attention to social environment and condition the action he performs in response to his environment.

Language is a reality which serves the purpose of symbolic communication, consistent within the country's **linguistic version of reality**. When the symbol received is completely independent from the symbol emitted, information is non-existent and communication stops entirely. We cannot be fully participating members of a certain culture if we do not share its language. Language communicates meaning and makes facts meaningful, which means **real**. The only verbal messages which find response in our brain are those which we judge in some way useful or important to us. **We view them from our conception of reality**. "People with more power, prestige, status, wealth, and access to high-level policy makers can make their perceptions of the world the entire culture's perception"²⁴.

Each culture has specific linguistic distinctions for certain phenomena, reflecting aspects of the world that are relevant and meaningful for that social group. We never react to situations directly, instead, we use language to interpret them, and then respond on the basis of those interpretations.

Language influences cultural and group identity and therefore affects **perceptions of reality**. If we believe that members of another group are enemies, we per-

ceive them as evil and threatening even in situations that might be meaningless.

So reality is not something that exists "out there", it is definitely the creation of culture, which exists as a quiet guide, whose influential presence we are not always fully aware of.

The Role of Media in Shaping Perceptions of Reality *Uloga medija u oblikovanju spoznaja stvarnosti*

Communication means the process of socialization into some definite group. But according to Riesman, one of the typical characteristics of the present day mass-media communication is: *other-direction*, the hetero-conditioning and hetero-orientation of the individual, which means that "*the media produce an impersonal 'grouping'*".²⁵ The human irresistible need to **define reality** turn the individual to seek the network of information to allow communication in both directions, combating forces of privilege, monopoly, and secrecy. But the example how media present the **culture's mythology, not its reality** - are the correlational studies which link young children's viewing of violence - and their combativeness and indifference to brutality as teenagers and young adults. David Myers²⁶ reports that during the last 20 years the average child has viewed some 8000 TV murders and 100,000 other acts of violence before finishing elementary school. On evening dramas, only one-third of the characters were women. Fewer than 3 percent were visibly old...

Media tell us about events we cannot experience directly. The primary way we are entertained with, are the **media**. The primary source of information is accomplished also **through the media**. Political interests of the government, together with its underlying economic concerns - in its attempt to gain public approval and support - shape and sustain public perceptions of reality again **through the media**. That's why the amount of press devoted to a topic, based on selectively released information might be confused with the accuracy of the message.

Occurrences, incidents and all potentially newsworthy events must be translated into **news events**, because their inherent importance does not satiate the profession.

David Newman²⁷ argues that "*the reality we receive from the media is an objectified, as opposed to objective, reality*".

A good journalist should have a feeling for "important" events, which means that he should to some extent appreciate the ideological uniformity, needed to support the broader political and economic structure of society. He must be an expert for the information of practical, political, or economic importance, interesting for purposes which it has to serve. Significant events, require to be interpreted objectively, which is always aimed, but not always attained. The frontier between information and propaganda is not easily distinguished because of the **political interference**. According to

Newman²⁸, the essence of politics is to control **public perceptions of reality** so that governments live or die by their ability to manipulate public opinion.

Lot of events happen every day. Reporters, editors, network executives, and corporation owners are the persons who make decisions which events correspond to social values. It does not mean that they will present inaccurate information or misrepresent news knowingly. They will present news "as they see it", according to the culturally defined significance of these events. Their own stratification position in a society being industrial or agricultural, large or small, technologically advanced or simple, fascist or democratic can also shape the meaning - whether freely chosen or forced. The orthodox view will therefore sound **as reality**, while the deviant view will be condemned.

David Newman²⁹ puts an example of how society plays a role in magnifying or diminishing the meaning of human inborn traits: "*We collectively decide which physical traits are socially irrelevant (e.g., eye color), and which become embedded in our institutions (e.g., sex and race), giving rise to different rights, duties, and expectations*".

If we try to be spectators of the human scene, if we wish to note observable features and connections among them we will be able to recognize **the truth** whenever it affects our own lives. Although we can never have a direct access to other people's thoughts, feelings, wishes and hopes, if we acquire a **good information**, created through controlled social research, we will never be deceived.

The nature of understanding is not the same as the nature of meaning, and according to Carl Hempel³⁰ it is basically the same in all areas of scientific inquiry. **Reality** is ultimately a human creation made of **judgments** in the sense that specific social environment creates a specific construction of reality. But, statements of value certainly cannot be controlled by observation, as ordinary empirical propositions can. Therefore sometimes what seems certain to one person, may seem doubtful, or even false to another.

Those who say that they know their judgments are correct, simply show assertions of **psychological interest**, and do not prove the validity of judgment. If differences of opinion arise in connection with facts, the presence of judgments adds nothing to its factual content. Both sides simply approve or disapprove, and produce sentences which have no factual meaning, because judgments of value remain outside the scope of argument.

Disputes are ordinarily regarded as disputes about questions of value. But, those disputes **deal with facts** because we **do not disagree** about values. We usually **disagree** about the meaning of the situation, about the facts of the case, about motivation and specific circumstances in which the agent was placed. We want agreement about the nature of empirical facts. If we do not find consensus in defining reality, it means that the opponent has undergone different moral conditioning, and has no respect to the same set of values.

Alfred Ayer³¹ thinks that arguments fail when we come to deal with pure questions of values, as distinct

from questions of fact. Argument is possible only if some system of values is presupposed.

To be morally approved to reduce imperatives to indicatives means to acquire knowledge about all aspects of the case.

Does everybody have the right to define his reality?

Under which circumstances journalism - while assembling and presenting the news - manages to provide accurate and objective report on proceedings, according to the demand of acquiring the total truth?

The Reality in Journalism *Realnost u novinarstvu*

While gathering, analyzing, reporting and interpreting information, journalists - if trying to be honest - will act professionally, which means that they will be aware of diversities between **advocacy and news reporting**. Stereotyping, whether by appearance, orientation or status, always lead to oversimplified reports. Highlighting incidents out of context does not serve the general public. ... "the old media models and measurements don't work in the new media world; and the time-tested standards of good journalists still matter, even in the digital age"³². If journalists recognize a special challenge for respecting their own professional responsibility than that of others, it is not because a special principle is involved, but because they realize that the one is more under their control than the other.

Sometimes it has been uncritically assumed that moral disagreements are produced only by controversies over moral judgments or principles, and **not by a lack of information**. Ethical theory is not only applied to cases, it is seriously challenged by the analysis of cases involving conflicts of interest, and conflicts of value. In order to obtain an objective assumption over difficult cases, conceptual and definitional agreement has to be extracted from the examination of cases. That's why journalists, while trying to apply the code's guiding principles and standards, must "*go beyond the code in working through dilemmas*"³³. If they wish to promote only their own interest, they are not acting from a sense of **rightness**, but from self-interest.

David Carr³⁴ assumes that our time is characterized by the so called "*journalism of aggression*" and that "*asking a journalist about his ethics is like asking a shark about his conscience*", which is the visible evidence of the unseen condition: Journalists make all sorts of compromises, knowing how to make and observe a verbal contract, but while **representing themselves and their own stories**, the report easily falls into a gray area, exposing how the lack of ethics prevails.

David Carr, himself, chooses his subjects side, feeling uniquely qualified to **tell his or her story with understanding and in context**. Although he appraises the same reporting and information-gathering standards as the conventional press, he emphasizes: "*The tone of our news coverage is often rife with judgment. I believe our approach is intellectually more honest than the main-stream media's myth that they are just reporting THE TRUTH and nothing more*".

Conclusion *Zaključak*

Communication Theory enhances the interest of views upon reality, the knowledge of the real world, its expression in language and signs, its transmission, and its use within social and ethical systems. Semiotic deals with meaning and reference of the symbols in which interpretation is expressed.

News plays an important role in formulating public issues, influencing public perceptions of reality. Most of us assume that the stories we see are pure factual information, we internalize what we see, feel, think and do. Sometimes we do not know what makes us hold our belief whether because of reasons we give, or the reasons function like pure ornaments, produced after the fact. Reasons why we believe in some sort of reality are irrelevant to the right or wrong of our beliefs.

Cultural and intercultural communication develops within the context of traditional assumptions, sometimes we are not being fully aware of typical blind spots, especially if these are widely embodied in social life. That's why **combat for reality** should be concerned with practices defining right and wrong within the scope of ethics, finding a purpose within itself, which is good because it achieves an intelligent understanding of the world in the long run.

Notes

Bilješke

¹ <http://www.spj.org/ethics/index.htm> (Sigma Delta Chi's Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984 and 1987. The present version of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in September 1996.)

² A. J. Ayer: What is Communication? (Studies in Communication, pg. 12)

³ Gidon Gottlieb: The Logic of Choice - An Investigation of the Concepts of Rule and Rationality, pg. 51

⁴ Aristotle: Ethica Nicomachea (The Basic Works of Aristotle), 1142b-25

⁵ Political Philosophy, edited by Anthony Quinton, pg. 23

⁶ Richard S. Rudner: Philosophy of Social Science, pg. 76

⁷ R. W. Beardsmore: Moral Reasoning, pg. 70

⁸ Abraham Edel: Ethical Judgment - The Use of Science in Ethics, pg. 75

⁹ A. J. Ayer: Critique of Ethics (Problems of Ethics, Edited by Robert E. Dewey, Francis W. Gramlich & Donald Loftsgordon), pg. 400

¹⁰ Gidon Gottlieb: The Logic of Choice - An Investigation of the Concepts of Rule and Rationality, pg. 97

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 92

¹² The Philosophy of Action, edited by Alan R. White, pg. 12

¹³ A. J. Ayer: Reasons and Causes (Readings in Ethical Theory, pg. 677)

¹⁴ Sir David Ross: What makes Right Act Right? (Readings in Ethical Theory, pg. 482)

¹⁵ Andrew G. Oldenquist: Moral Philosophy - Text and Readings, pg. 74

¹⁶ Richard S. Rudner: Philosophy of Social Science, pg. 76

¹⁷ Sir Geoffrey Vickers: Communication in Economics Systems, (Studies in Communication, pg. 70)

- ¹⁸ Michael Maccoby: *Why Work - Leading the New Generation*, pg. 56
- ¹⁹ *The Theory of Meaning*, Edited by G. H. R. Parkinson, pg. 12
- ²⁰ David M. Newman: *Sociology - Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, pg. 44
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 45
- ²² *The philosophy of Language*, edited by J. R. Searle, pg. 39
- ²³ Ifor Evans: *Introduction (Studies in Communication)* pg. 7
- ²⁴ David M. Newman: *Sociology - Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, pg. 57
- ²⁵ J. L. Aranguren: *Human Communication*, pg. 127
- ²⁶ David G. Myers: *Exploring Psychology*, pg. 505
- ²⁷ David M. Newman: *Sociology - Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, pg. 60
- ²⁸ David M. Newman: *Sociology - Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, pg. 59
- ²⁹ David M. Newman: *Sociology - Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, pg. 105
- ³⁰ Carl G. Hempel: *Explanation in Science and in History (The Philosophy of Science*, Edited by P. H. Nidditch), pg. 79
- ³¹ A. J. Ayer: *Chritique of Ethics (Problems of Etics)*, pg. 407

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