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Media use as social action – then and today

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Abstract: This contribution refers to the article “The ‘Media Use as Social Action’ approach: Theory, methodology, and research evidence so far,” published by Karsten Renckstorff and Fred Wester in 2001. Re-reading an article in media and communications studies that has been published 24 years ago, necessarily confronts us with the deep changes of the media environment and their implications for scholarly discourses. Against the background of these changes, we discuss the media use as social action approach regarding its theoretical perspective, its methodological approach, and the empirical evidence presented in the 2001 publication.

Keywords: media use, social action, qualitative research

1 Introduction: Re-reading a scholarly article 24 years later

“Media use as social action”: Today’s readers might wonder if this phrase refers to an “approach” or rather to a matter of course. As it seems, the researchers who, in the seventies, eighties, and nineties of the last century, have argued that media audiences are not “passive” but “active” were quite successful in reshaping the way we think about people making use of media. Even in 2001, when Karsten Renckstorff and Fred Wester published their article, this theoretical framework was not a novelty: Karsten Renckstorff had developed the main arguments of his approach in the seventies (1973), then, together with Will Teichert (1972, 1973), a researcher at

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the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research in Hamburg. Renckstorf's work culminated in an often-quoted German language publication, in which he outlined the *media use as social action* approach (1989). As the authors state in the beginning of their article, 1989 was also the starting date of a research program at the University of Nijmegen that was dedicated to theoretical and empirical investigations within the framework of this approach. The main objective of the article was to present an interim résumé of this research program, thus, a synthesizing effort to look back after twelve years and to reflect on what had been achieved.

Re-reading an article in media and communications studies that has been published 24 years ago, necessarily confronts us with the deep changes of the media environment and their implications for scholarly discourses. Relevant concepts as *mediatization* (Krotz, 2001; Couldry and Hepp, 2016) and *media convergence* (Sparviero et al., 2017) indicate a transformation of the field that challenged the former focus on mass communication. Like most of the scholarly work until the late nineties, the empirical evidence in Renckstorf and Wester's article is focused on television. Since then, the mediatization of everyday life, the omnipresence of media, and the trend towards permanently being online (Vorderer et al., 2017) have blurred the distinction between media-related and non-media-related action as well as between different spheres of everyday life. Furthermore, the concept of media convergence questioned the established order of the research field based on different types of media and their specific functions. These changes caused a substantial expansion of communication studies' research field in general and research on media use in particular: While research before the end of the century focused on the exposure to and reception of preproduced content, today's research includes a much wider range of practices, communication services, and functionalities (e.g., Bruns, 2016; Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018). Against the background of these substantial changes, we will discuss Renckstorf and Wester's media use as social action approach regarding their theoretical perspective (Section 2), their methodological approach (Section 3), and the empirical evidence they have presented (Section 4).

2 Theoretical foundations of media use as social action

Reflecting on the question what has remained since 2001, the authors' theoretical framework with its roots in the seventies and eighties is not at all outdated—on the contrary, the framework in general and many of its theoretical arguments still form the foundation of an integral part of today's scholarly discourses on how individuals use media. The starting point of their approach is the conceptualization of

media use as social action. This is first based on the theory of action (Schütz, 1960), and second on symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Both emphasize the ability to act meaningfully as a constitutive characteristic of humans. Third, it goes back to the phenomenological sociology of knowledge, as outlined by Berger and Luckmann (1967), and Schütz and Luckmann (1979). Following these theoretical baselines, the individual's ability to act meaningfully is always bound to the constitution of social interactions: "Man does not live in a type specific environment in which the instinctive capabilities of the organism readily provide acceptable reactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 47)" (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 390). With his concept of "Lebenswelt" or "lifeworld", Alfred Schütz laid the foundation for the phenomenological sociology mentioned above, which strives to uncover the universal structures of life worlds. Following Schütz and Luckmann (1979, p. 30), Lebenswelt may be conceived as what individuals consider to be the given sphere in which they act (Paus-Hasebrink, 2019). As Renckstorf and Wester (2001, p. 390, emphasis in original) write:

Human beings must therefore create their 'lifeworld' (Schütz, 1932), which is to be shared with others. In everyday life the individual is regularly confronted with repetitive situations in which solutions are developed and methods of response are tried out, to which others in turn react. In this manner the person develops 'recipe knowledge' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, 42) with respect to potential situations and routines which can be employed therein. Society can be considered as the sedimented form of such shared meanings and actions.

This kind of socio-phenomenological conception of everyday life provides an opportunity to avoid both a one-dimensional objectivist perspective on social phenomena and a purely subjectivist one (Paus-Hasebrink, 2019).

The sociological and socio-psychological theories of social action offer—and this has been a crucial step for communications research—a framework for a theory of media reception, which focuses on individuals' sense-making activity (Charlton and Neumann, 1992, p. 48).

According to an interpretive, action theoretical perspective, *human action* in general, and *human social action* especially, is not to be considered a 'reaction' to an 'objective' action or even more generally an 'object', but as carefully planned activity ('re-action') in the light of the actor's own hierarchy of relevances. (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 392, emphasis in original).

Thus, the activity of media users manifests itself in not simply receiving media content but in attributing their personal meaning against the background of their aims and values: Media content is subjectively reconstructed.

While it is the individual who reconstructs media messages, Renckstorf and Wester also argue that this reconstruction is rooted in general societal frames of

interpretation and knowledge. Therefore, media users' interpretations are not at all arbitrary or individualistic in an ahistoric sense (Charlton and Neumann, 1992, p. 48). The social context and individuals' social position become effective, because "as social beings, that is to say, as more or less successfully socialized beings, people generally know how to behave, how to act relative to a particular role or position" (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 390). The authors emphasize that this normative view of social action, according to which "pregiven rules guide action" (Renckstorf and Wester, p. 390), grasps just one aspect of social action. The proposed interpretative perspective also considers that, within their everyday life, individuals are often confronted with unexpected situations: "So the individual's actual action proceeds much less problem-free than one would expect on the basis of normative or dispositional assumptions of a theory of social action (see Wilson, 1970)" (*ibid.*). Within their conceptual model, this argument leads to the distinction between non-problematic situations, in which individuals can apply media-related routines, and problematic situations, in which they, based on motives and projections, have to make decisions on media exposure.

From today's perspective, on this abstract level, the fundamental theoretical arguments of the media use as social action approach still hold and are integral elements of several recent approaches, for example audience and reception research within cultural studies (e.g. Hall, 1973) and praxeological research (Weiß, 2020; Paus-Hasebrink, 2019; Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2024; Pentzold et al., 2024). In addition, these arguments are suitable for today's practices that can be observed in connection with mobile communication and social media and that can—and should—be regarded as social actions based on users' interpretation of situations; their characteristics make it even more evident that media use goes far beyond the "passive" reception of pre-produced content.

In contrast to these fundamental theoretical arguments, the authors' conceptual specification of these arguments, i.e., the "general action theoretical reference model for empirical (mass) communication research" (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 394), has some implications that limit its fruitfulness for research—then and today. The reference model as illustrated in their Figure 2 focuses on the level of individuals and their actions in specific situations, thus, on the reconstruction of single actions. It specifies the inner process of interpreting the respective situation, of deciding if this situation is problematic or non-problematic, and of preparing external actions, e.g., an act of overt media exposure. Beyond that, the figure suggests that this inner process is in all phases somehow influenced by individual characteristics, and by a wide range of societal factors. The large conceptual gap between the macro level of society and the micro level of single actions limits the model's potential to develop more specific theoretical assumptions and hypotheses.

Furthermore, with its focus on single actions, the proposed general framework fails to grasp more complex patterns of action that go beyond situation-bound actions. While this limitation was relevant already within the former mass media environment, today's high-choice media environment definitely requires concepts and research designs that help to understand cross-media phenomena (Schröder, 2011; Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017).

3 Methodological approach to media use as social action

Given their social action theoretical framework with its focus on individuals' sense-making activities and their social embeddedness, Renckstorf and Wester emphasize that an "integrated planning of various types of qualitative as well as quantitative research is needed" (2001, p. 397). From today's perspective this plea sounds rather familiar; however, back then, it was important for communication studies, particularly in Germany where quantitative approaches dominated the field. Scholars from other disciplines of the social sciences (e.g., Soeffner, 1979; Hoffmann-Riem, 1980) long ago followed the Chicago School of Sociology's (e.g., Glaser, Blumer, Strauss) conviction on an "interpretive paradigm," which led back already to the twenties and thirties of the last century, and Barton and Lazarsfeld (1955) already propounded qualitative research and recommended an integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Notwithstanding, for a long time research on media use mainly relied on quantitative methods and indicators of "overt activity" as they were applied by departments of audience research in the media industry (Ang, 1991). Therefore, in the field of communication studies, it is not to be understated that Renckstorf and Wester made a strong argument for the combination of quantitative *and* qualitative methods in order to also grasp "covert activity":

Qualitative methods are especially suitable as a method of exploration because of their flexibility (Wester, 1995) (...). Quantitative methods (...) have attractive aspects such as the relatively easy processing of data and the possibility of generalizing research results statistically for larger populations than those investigated. (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 399)

These authors and many other colleagues argue for methodological openness and triangulation (see especially Denzin, 1989) or "mixed methods."¹ Today, there is

¹ "Mixed methods" means just a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and not—as is usual in the case of triangulation—an integrated handling of theories, researchers, methods and data (see Denzin, 1989).

wide consensus among the research community that most communication phenomena need an integrative methodological approach.

4 Empirical research on media use as social action

In the final part of their paper, Renckstorf and Wester specify three functions of research approaches:

(1) *ordering and structuring* of relevant literature and existing research findings, (2) *steering and stimulating* present and future research, and (3) *integration of findings* of present and future research, and, thus, allowing the accumulation of insights and building up a professional ‘body of knowledge’. (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 399, emphasis in original)

As for the first two functions, the authors refer to literature reviews and empirical studies that have been conducted by their research group in some specific fields of research, e.g., general patterns of TV use, use of public information campaigns, and use of TV news. In their view the third function is most important:

The integration of findings of present (and future) research, and thus allowing the accumulation of insights in order to build up a consistent professional ‘body of knowledge’ is, obvious enough, crucial for the further development of communication science as an academic discipline. (Renckstorf and Wester, 2001, p. 413)

Given this emphasis on the approach’s usefulness for the integration of findings, it comes as a surprise and disappointment that they frankly state that

we have to admit that this has not been done yet. At this stage—of past research efforts and ongoing research projects as well—there is no clear evidence available yet whether the ‘Media Use as Social Action’ approach really meets the demands of the third function. (ibid.)

On the one hand, this statement seems to be overly modest. Considering the literature reviews on diverse topics such as heavy viewing or public communication campaigns, one can conclude that the media use as social action perspective helps to overcome one-sided conceptions of media users, i.e., “passive” heavy viewers and victims of media effects, as they can be observed in these two research fields. On the other hand, beyond the general premise to regard media as social action, the authors do not seriously try to integrate the broad range of studies from their research group. By just adding abstracts of single studies, they miss the opportunity to conceptually and empirically link these studies and thus to further develop their general model, although the graphical illustration of this model suggests some

criteria and key questions that could guide this effort: How does the process of perceiving, thematizing, and diagnosing a situation lead to the conclusion that this situation is problematic or non-problematic? What do the studies tell us about the differences in media use between problematic and non-problematic situations? How do individual and social characteristics and the “surrounding society” affect the internal process of defining the situation and of preparing and performing media exposure? Still today, a systematic review of current research findings on media use along these questions would be helpful. For such an undertaking, as argued in the section on theory, one might specify the model in at least two respects: the introduction of *patterns of exposure* as a conceptual bridge between single actions and the structure of individuals’ everyday lives; and a more elaborated approach to social contexts that influence individual actions and at the same time are constituted by these actions.

5 Conclusion

For today’s researchers who want to understand how people make use of media, a strength of Renckstorf and Wester’s approach on media use as social action is that the users’—not just “recipients”—agency is taken seriously and well founded in sociological theory. However, the socio-structural integration of subjects that shapes their perceptions and actions, is claimed rather than actually conceptualized. It does not specify the “thematic structure of individuals’ lifeworld” (Krotz, 1991, p. 338), in which intentional and habitualized practices of media use as a part of coping with the challenges of everyday life in individuals’ specific social place are rooted. Therefore, in the last decades, it has been a highly relevant challenge for communication studies to theoretically conceptualize and to empirically investigate how the process of transforming social contexts into personal action in everyday life and vice versa takes place and which role media play in this context. For instance, a praxeological perspective on media use as social action can help to make Renckstorf and Wester’s approach even more fruitful (e.g., Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2024). This perspective sheds light both on how individuals communicate and on how they are embedded in social contexts, in which they make sense of their media use in order to cope with everyday challenges. Thus, Renckstorf and Wester’s approach served and still serves as a relevant footstep for communication studies to research the interlinkage of subjective perception, action-driving orientations, and everyday-life practices against the backdrop of (changing) socio-structural and (digital) media-related conditions. Another achievement of this article is the authors’ still relevant plea that this kind of research requires methodological openness and the research strategy of triangulation.

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