Michael Dellwing

»Un-Doing Things Together« and Creating Disruption: Commitments to Attention in a Narrowcast Media Economy

In *Disruption and Disaster*, Hendrik Vollmer bemoans that »among social scientists, experts at discursively rearticulating disruptions appear to outnumber those researching them by a large margin« (2013: 7). Much work in the area, he notes, is merely a sociology of risk or of »crisis«, general social theory that uses disruptions as examples in works that ultimately do little with them (7), or a deterministic factor sociology (10) that likes to pretend we live in a clockwork universe. He pleads for a true sociology of disruption and disaster that includes »empirical intelligence about disruptiveness« (2013: 7).

To achieve this focus on the empirical negotiation of disaster, one emphasis seems to me indispensable: sociologists should not define disruptions, the participants in our fields of study do. Therefore, to start an inquiry into disruptions with set definitions of disruptions seems to prematurely close off the very venue of research we would like to open. An empirical sociology of disruption protects the people under research from outside definitions of their life-worlds and from being utilized as »data cows« (Dellwing/ Prus 2012: 62) to be milked for filling, and being shaped by, theory-shaped containers we brought with us. Instead, it can analyze the complex web of definitional negotiation that can be found under the hood of putative »disruptions«: actors engage in making meaning for the world, an endeavor that includes »doing disruption« as a meaning. Since actors cannot engage in this feat alone, but rather need to be mindful of the anticipated definitions and interpretations of others, I will call the negotiated events *looking-glass disruptions*.

Disruptions and disasters need not be calamities. In a pluralist universe, actors can engage in the creation of them; in an interpreted world, this creation has multiple levels, including the definition of the situation as »disruptive«. This is notably the case in the contemporary media economy.

To showcase the utility of taking definitions *of* the situation *in* the situation seriously, I would like to turn to a specific example of the multiperspectival definition of disruption: earned media in the television economy. Though this is a rather narrow example, it shows the wide applicability of a perspective of looking-glass disruption. Even more widely, it shows that disruption, as an approach, may be more suited to analyzing processes of stability and their unraveling than the more classical frame of »deviance«, though the tools developed in the deviance debate remain transferable and applicable to the study of disruption, enriching and rounding it off.

Doing disruptions

By applying and enriching the insights gained over fifty years of deviance research to disruption, we can find a detailed and complex sociology of the construction of disruption as a form of knowledge about an event. Not only is disruption a meaning that actors arrive at in concert, it is a meaning that remains entangled with other meanings (cf. Dellwing 2009). In this case, this entanglement captures the construction of stability, but also of the »causes« of the disruption in a nestled web of definitions of the situation. As a construction, there are strategies of defining disruption; as strategies, they can be utilized, and the dynamics of defining disruptions can be played for gain (Goffman 1959: 7).

Looking-glass meaning: Deviance, Alignment, and Disruption

Interaction analyses[1] can yield much insight into the sociology of disruption, an insight Vollmer persistently taps. I want to especially mine the sociology of deviance and the sociology of aligning actions to help conceptualize a sociology of disruption, using the sociology of television as a field to show what can be done with this approach.

The sociology of deviance has long noted that deviance is a meaning, not an objective fact; the central quote of the interactionist sociology of deviance holds that »deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.« (Becker 1963: 9) As such, it is negotiated: ascribed, fought, accepted, rejected, modified, and supported. After the intervention of Howard Becker (1963, 1967), John Kitsuse and Malcolm Spector (1975, 2001 [1977]), Erich Goode (1975), Edwin Schur (1969, 1971, 1980) and others from the 1950s on, the sociology of deviance has not focused on deviant action, deviant actors, or the rules this action putatively breaks as much as on the actors who *interpret* actions, *interpret* rules, and through this, *interpret* actors (Becker 2013, Dellwing 2015), and the processes they engage in Rule breaches are meanings as well, and successfully calling behavior a rule-breach, »untoward«, or deleterious to one's face are rich and complicated interactive achievements (cf. Fish 1989, 1999). Edwin Schur speaks of this process of interpretation as »deviantization.« (1980)

Where deviance is a process of ascription, with its practices, successes, and failures, interactionist sociology has identified aligning actions as the other side of this process: where deviantizations engage in border maintenance by ascribing outside positions and

---

1   It is difficult finding a term for this that has not been abducted to the nest of theory comparison worker ants. Using the widely used terms such as »interactionist«, »dramaturgical«, »ethnomethodologist«, »phenomenological«, etc. exclusively exposes this text to charges that the authors names are »not actually« members of this »school«, as author X has »convincingly shown« in her theory comparison piece on it. Erving Goffman, whose legacy plays a prominent role in the present work, decried work of this kind as »scholastic«, as sterile interest in the discipline. Following Goffman's lead, I am not interested in such taxonomies and in debates on the »real« school names for authors; I am interested in an analysis of the social world and will engage in this analysis rather than in expeditions of theory comparison. I will therefore make no effort to distinguish such terms.

citing rules to justify it, aligning actions arise as strategies to protect or reestablish inside positions. Hazani calls aligning actions a »response to inconsistency« and »modes of reduction of disequilibrium.« (1991: 146) In Interaction Rituals, Goffman notes that the achievement of aligning actions or accounts consist of »transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable.« (Goffman 1972: 109) This entails the insight that something could, but need not be seen as offensive at all: consequently, he (1967) does not start his discussion of ritual ways to heal broken behavior with the disturbance, but with the challenge as an attempt to mark behavior as a disturbance in the first place, emphasizing that the situation is not disrupted by the offensive act itself, but only by this challenge. Someone needs to stop normal interaction to note that »[wait a second-, M. D.], something unusual is going on here.« (Emerson 1973: 210 ff.) And someone else has to do something with this ascription.

As a »reaction theory«, the interactionist sociology of deviance and its concomitant analyses of alignment look at what other actors do to ascribe these roles – actors who are themselves subject to reaction. This is not necessarily a chancy affair, which Akers charged that any labeling approach to deviance would be: »One sometimes gets the impression from reading this literature that people go about minding their own business, and then ‚wham'-bad society comes along and slaps them with a stigmatized label« (Akers 1968: 463). Deviance ascription is not that arbitrary: marking something as deviant is already nestled in a world of expectation of what markings others will understand and accept, and then in a world of action where others will have to interpret the marking as a marking of deviance in the first place, and then to react to it, a set of actions that will feed back to the marker, who will then interpret and react to the reaction. The potential to enact a successful deviance construction is entangled with the role of these making the ascription; this points to the role of power, or what Becker calls the »hierarchy of credibility« (1967) that awards actors higher and lower probabilities of initiating and influencing deviantization processes. It is this web of looking-glass deviance that practically creates successful deviance. Any definition must gain traction in a relevant reference group. As Robert Prus notes, the social world is not ours alone to determine (1999: 9-10). It is a plural, diverse affair subject to conflict, negotiation, modification, enforcement and defeat. »The problem for pragmatists is not so much that the thing in itself is unknowable in principle, but that it can be known in so many different ways«, Shalin writes (1986: 11), and Dietz, Prus und Shaffir second when they emphasize »the diverse and shifting meanings that people attach to objects« (1994: 15). Reality, as Goffman's body of work never ceases to emphasize, is a team sport, where »teams«, (Goffman 1959) form coalitions and collusions (Goffman 1972) to define reality together, and different teams define reality against one another.

As a consequence, the sociology of deviance has pivoted away from looking at the causes of disruption, personal and impersonal: any attention to causes presupposes a definition of the problem, and researching causes without reflecting on this matter entails joining the team, wittingly or unwittingly, that defined the »problem:« constructing deviance already comes with constructing causes, and the construction of causes is always already connected to the construction of deviance with the entire web of meaning attached

to it (cf. Peters 2009, Mills 1940, Achugar/Schleppegrel 2005). »Why-questions« solidify the very irritation that a sociology of deviance should problematize, analyze, and deconstruct.[2]

Disruption as deviantization

It is this web of meaning that needs to be lodged firmly in the center of our research on disruption. As meanings, disruptions are actions: a sociology of disruptions must focus on the practice and process of doing disruptions. A situation is not objectively disrupted; it has been actively *made* to veer out of the routine, it denotes events that have been *made* problematic by participants in the situation who were *irritated*. Someone needs to stop normal interaction to note that something unusual is going on. We cannot, then, comfortably define a disruption, or conditions for a disruption to occur, in the abstract. In consequence, Vollmer defines disruptions as »an occasion which at least one participants marks as being disruptive.« (42) Anything can be made problematic in interaction: »Any line of social action has the potential for being interpreted as untoward or offensive.« (Blumstein et.al. 1974: 551), if it is young people not combing their hair or looking at their phones, charges old people often make – deviantizations that may serve as border maintenance, but that the putatively »offending« groups see nothing wrong with.

In reference to Howard Becker (and in a conversation with him), Reiner Keller calls the activity in which disruptive meanings are made »un-doing things together« (2016). Therefore, Vollmer's reference to »at least one participant« may be slightly too narrow. As a shared reality, what is required is a load-bearing definition in which an »interpretive community« (Fish 1980) joins together in constructing a disruption. Following the basic tenets of interpretive social science, »equilibrium«, »routine«, »interference«, and »disruption« are definitions of the situation that arise within thickly peopled, localized situations (Blumer 1969, Prus 1996, 1997, Fine 2010). A »definition of a problematic situation« becomes potent in the sense that it becomes socially shared enough for others to react to. Events »are [...] made meaningful because of, the ways in which people incorporate them into their own particular situations« (Dietz/Prus/Shaffir 1994: 61).

As in all good interaction-analytical and ethnographic work, this definition must be found in the field, and respected as it is found; it is not the place of sociologists to rein in a pluralistic an diverse world in clear and precise definitions that will work for creating

---

2   A very prominent example of this is the large body of work that attempts to tie video games to violent behavior; the very existence of this large body of work already gives weight to the deviantization of video games, a practice that 155 million Americans, 1.5 billion people worldwide, and 44 million Japanese engage in – the latter out of a population of 127 million, in one of the most peaceful countries in the world. (http://venturebeat.com/2015/04/14/155-million-americans-play-video-games-and-4-out-of-5-households-own-a-gaming-device/;http://venturebeat.com/2013/11/25/more-than-1-2-billion-people-are-playing-games/; https://karasucorps.wordpress.com/2016/04/15/translation-japanese-gaming-demographics-and-statistics-for-2015/). Conversely, board gaming sees no such studies at all.

the illusion of objectivity for social scientists in lab coats (Goffman 1972: xvi), but will fail in describing a real, muddy, imprecise world. As in all interpretive work, precisely defining the phenomenon under study beforehand makes faithfully studying it impossible, replacing the phenomenon with a cardboard figure brought into the field.

Vollmer already shows a similar orientation when he notes that a sociology of disruptions should abandon »the possibility of a unified sociological framework for investigating disruptiveness – from ordinary troubles lapses and mere annoyances, through accidents, towards full-scale breakdowns of order« (Vollmer 2013: 12). Rather, what concerns a sociology of disruption is a focus on multi-perspectivity and the divergent definitions of the situation that produce different disturbance constructions. »Disruptions substantially emerge from participants' responses«, Vollmer writes (19), and this »undermines the idea that disruptiveness could be characterized deductively from a given set of rules or regulations« (16). Conversely, »There is an evident empirical preference among participants to accept just about everything that transpires in a situation as long as nobody complains« (40) – so that events are not disruptive as long as people do not construct them as such. »The difference between normal and abnormal events«, then, Vollmer notes, »is constituted not by actual occasions but by how participants respond to them« (41). Just as Blumer and Prus noted that there is an obdurate reality, but that it is constituted by the social constraints woven from the web of meaning others will ascribe to situations – and allow others to ascribe to situations – Vollmer notes that »Questions of interpreting behavior are associated with questions of rights, competence or membership.« (91) In Vollmer's text, this becomes especially pronounced and fleshed out, when he notes that trauma is, as is widely known in the literature, not an objective occurrence, but an interpretive one, the force of which »does not correlate with the existence of a distinct set of discrete events which would unequivocally be identified as traumatic sui generis«, cautioning us to avoid »the ›naturalistic fallacy‹ of assuming certain events to just be genuinely traumatic.« (19) On a later occasion, he extends the same analysis to panic, noting »The persistence of panic myths despite the rarity of actual panic behavior« (100), where it is mostly outsiders who »reframe the behavior as panic« to report on it – and to underline what is seen as a panic-normal, ascribing panic where panic is expected from an outside perspective. Vollmer also notes the situational divergences and instabilities that can occur in these processes: »events may [...] often be initially affirmed … before they are being marked as disruptive« (41). A meaning once made determinate in a social situation need not remain so when the situation changes. Finally, he also calls for the very empirical study that is necessary to identify these meaning-making activities. I think we agree on all of these points.

Alignment and Stability

Vollmer defines disruptions as »things that interfere with stable equilibria«, »temporal discontinuities between historical episodes of relative stability« (2013: 11). This is true, though it is clear at this point how thoroughly complicated, and not definitional in the

classical sense, this is: If disruptions are made, then so is stability. Stability could be seen as the absence of disruption constructions, as not doing disruption. However it is also part of the very definition of disruption, as a foil against which the disruption can be sharply outlined. He also notes that much of the interaction analysis literature betrays an emphasis on stability: the focus on the realignment of »broken« action has been framed in what interactionists have termed a »commitment to stability«, a »devotion to a smooth flow of action« (2010: 366). Vollmer terms it the »Simon and Garfinkel«-rule. The Simon and Garfinkel rule is, however, only partially and imperfectly applicable; it shares that, of course, with every rule.

The literature on aligning actions puts a strong emphasis on the need to continuously construct a stable world; especially Erving Goffman's work is full of references to the fragility of the social world and what a wondrous achievement it is to keep this fragility at bay. »Impressions fostered in everyday performances are subject to disruption«, he notes, (1959: 66) and »the dangers of being in the presence of others are perhaps not frequently realized« (1963: 197) as »students of social life fail to see the systematic desisting that routinely occurs in daily living, and the utter mayhem that would result were the individual to cease to be a gentleman.« (1967: 179). Goffman speaks of »a vast filigree of trip wires which individuals are uniquely equipped to trip over« (1972: 106) that permeate social interaction situations in which people come together, where every statement is an instance of »taking a line« (1967: 5) in the interaction, and every line may contradict or damage a line taken by other participants and teams. Every statement, every dramaturgical action (verbal or nonverbal), and therefore every action/behavior[3] »in a sense places everyone present in jeopardy.« (1967: 37) From the perspective of fragility, stability is the explanandum; from the perspective of ritualized desistance, fragility is the result of an attack. The physical prowess of people alone allows them to disrupt situations majorly (1967: 169); anyone can be »immensely disruptive of the world immediately at hand. He can destroy objects, himself, and other people. He can profane himself, insult and contaminate others, and interfere with their free passage« (1967: 169) up until the comparatively, but perhaps only seemingly less severe danger that arises from the »wonderfully disruptive power of systematic impoliteness.« (1983: 13)

It would follow, then, that stability ensues when actors do not engage in disruption constructions. That, however, would be a shortsighted reading, and the scholarship on aligning actions shows this dialectic. Constructing meaning entails constructing difference; any construction of deviance entails a construction of »normal« as its converse element. Aligning is necessarily conjoined with a definition of disalignment, or »broken« sociation; the very act of »healing« something defines it as broken. Any construction of disruption therefore entails a construction of stability: as the state before the disruption, or the state of the elements that escaped disruption, both co-defined when disruption is defined. If what came before wasn't stable, the present affair can hardly be a disruption.

---

3   In a Goffmanian frame, the distinction between »actions« and »behaviors« is not a given one; it, like every other meaning, is subject to negotiation in an open interaction, and I will make no general distinction between them.

The social world is thus stable and fragile in concert; it is this concert, and only this, that keeps it stable, and it is a constant possibility that the participants will strike a sour note that keeps it fragile – where someone's sour note can be the other participant's overture to another concert.

Looking-glass disruption, looking-glass stability

To take on the task Vollmer gives us, to empirically analyze the interactive construction of disaster and disruption, then means to deconstruct the complex looking-glass of constructing disruption and stability within the web of expectation of who will react in what manner to these constructions. Rather than mere »labeling«, it means surveying the expectations that actions will be interpreted as disruptive, that disruption constructions will be received as valid (and *as* disruption constructions in the first place), and that construction agents will be able to get a team to share joint definitions of reality. This construction entails constructions of stability as backdrops, causes as the »tails« of disruption, expected consequences and other entangled meanings. In case the event is interpreted as one to which human agency contributed, events can be seen as strategically inviting disruption definitions or as being surprised by unintended disruptions; they can resist the disruption definition or aid it, and there can be »split« reactions, where the definition of disruption is disavowed verbally and on the front-stage of public communication, while the same definition aided subtly. On an even lower level, the definitional actors are also defined as such, their status as a definitional actor is as little objective as the event they define. This level requires a concept of social construction; originally, therefore, social scientists were the ones who took the role of defining them. In a popularized constructivist approach, the press, activists, and people in everyday life join into ascriptions of *who made that knowledge*, suspecting interests and intentions to deceive when they identify active construction of meaning.

The definition of disruption, therefore, is a complex and complicated dance with many components, which – like deviance ascriptions – are negotiated, meet with resistance, are embattled, they succeed, fail and are modified. Actors engage in their action with expectations of what resistances and battles may be, and act accordingly; some of the expectations succeed, i.e. the expected negotiations and resistances arise as anticipated and can be dispatched with; others fail, i.e. definitional action is met with different negotiation and resistance than anticipated, or anticipated reaction cannot be met as anticipated.

Doing disruption in media economies: Television buzz

As an empirical program, this approach calls for a deep deconstruction of doing disruption. Harkening back to my work on the looking-glass structure of television, I will look at the disruption of content »stabilities« in television production in an attempt to elicit

earned media, often also called buzz. Here, it becomes obvious that »disruption« is not only a definition of the situation, but that the actors engaging in this definition are, in turn, constructed. Altogether, however, these multiple layers of deconstruction do not add up to invalidate the endeavor: the deeply constructed web of disruption is real in its consequences.

Media buzz in a narrowcast economy

The television economy has undergone a major change in the past fifteen years (cf. Dellwing 2017). The old, broadcast television economy was built around advertising revenue, calculated though the number of people watching a show in ratings. This crude metric is still constructed, in the U.S., through set-top boxes sent to »Nielsen families« that keep track of viewing habits and statistically extrapolate nationwide viewing numbers;[4] thus, a 4% rating nationwide is derived from 4% or the relevant demographic out of the total of Nielsen families tuning into a television program. In the old broadcast economy with few channels, the success of formats hinges on their appeal to a large audience; with three channels, any format that fails to reach a third of the audience as a whole underperforms. The sum total of viewers forms the basis for ad rates, where each reported viewer is equal. Nielsen ratings have their immediate basis in contracts between television corporations and advertisement agencies; in these contracts, the parties agree on how to count viewers for purposes of compensation (Thielman 2014). With few outlets, knowledge about the existence of a channel can be assumed, and with little choice, it is easy for new formats to gain visibility. Enthusiasm as a form of gaining attention is therefore not existential in the old broadcast system, and one enthusiastic viewer does not add more to the number than one casual viewer. Enthusiastic fans of a format can be a mixed blessing in this mass market: though fans may spread attention about a format, a fan base that is too enthusiastic may scare away viewers who do not wish to be identified with what is then perceived as a »fringe.«[5]

The broadcast economy prized stability constructions: it brought us »steady state programming«, »a world of static exposition, repetitive second-act complications, and artificial closure« (Sconce 2004: S. 97), i.e. TV series in which the status quo does not change from week to week and episodes are interchangeable; it emphasizes rules of »likeability« for their main characters and portrays front-stage idealisms that »confirms what [view-

---

4 Nielsen does not officially release the total number, but it can be inferred through reporting on extending the number in 2015 that there are around 20,000 in the United States today (http://tvline.com/2014/05/29/tv-ratings-nielsen-to-increase-sample-size/), and there were around 14,000 in 2008 (https://medium.com/autonomous/you-likely-have-no-idea-how-tv-ratings-work-a-lot-more-people-are-watching-than-you-think-152e51657a5#.wfxoohe95).

5 This is, of course, the Star Trek Problem: Though an enthusiastic fan base creates visibility, a cult following can project an image – with costuming, fan meetings, and an impression that these fans are taking lighthearted entertainment entirely too seriously – that makes it prohibitive for those not in the cult following to associate themselves with the program.

ers] already know [and] leaves their mental structures intact«, with heroes that are »two-bit spiritual guides, representatives of middle class morality« (Bourdieu 1999: 45-6). Before the advent of the remote control, these were grouped under the term »least objectionable programming«: programming that would not lead to viewers getting up and changing the channel (Lotz 2007: 11; Gitlin 2005: 61). Standards and Practices, the (private) internal network censorship departments of US television conglomerates, attempts to avoid content that creates an outcry strong enough to rouse regulators or advertisers: »Standards and Practices reviews programming prior to broadcast to make sure the content won't create any backlash that the network would have to spend money on fighting in court, or through other legal methods« (Adams et al. 2013). The broadcast economy is (largely) built on portraying stability and avoiding disruptions.

The broadcast economy is, however, dying. The contemporary narrowcast economy is made up of thousands of channels through cable and internet distribution, and relies more on »transactional financing« than on advertisement revenue (Lotz 2007: 123). Channels charge fees from cable companies which include them in their offering,[6] which collect them from cable subscribers. Channels with fan-favorite content gain a strong advantage in negotiating those fees, as the cable provider can expect strong protests, and customer cancellations, if it does not pay the asked rate and drops the channel. Providers can no longer assume that new formats will be visible through the sheer constriction of a narrow, supply-biased market. The television economy becomes fractured, viewership numbers per format shrink, and reaching a profitable niche becomes more important than creating mass-watched products. As the narrowcast economy's pie is carved into a thousand pieces, mass appeal is not necessary and perhaps impossible under the conditions.

As a consequence, the role of attention and enthusiasm changes, and with it the constructions of stability and disruption. In an environment with thousands of channels and offerings, attention – and knowledge about formats and channels – is not a given, so enthusiasm makes the invisible visible. Also, since viewers are now paying customers, their enthusiasm is tied to their pocketbook. Rather than produce a format that appeals to the lowest common denominator of a large part of the population, a narrowcast format is often successful by appealing to a specific preference of a small, but enthusiastic part. »›Cult‹, once negative, has become mainstream. Being a fan is becoming not just normal, it's cool.« (Robson 2010: 214).

While disruption was dangerous in the mass-appeal format of least objectionable programming, it becomes necessary in narrowcast environments. Disruption has already had a place in the broadcast economy: with three or four large channels, breaking the conventions of broadcast television, of genre and content expectation, can be a strategy to liberate a channel from last place, or gain attention and brand recognition

---

6   This is the situation in the United States; in Germany, channels have often paid cable companies for the privilege of sending their advertisement-financed content over them. This used to allow free satellite television in Germany, which is nonexistent in the US. Since the US is the unchallenged hegemon in entertainment production, it is the US economic environment that structures the modern television content economy. (cf. Dellwing 2017)

for a new channel. Disruption was the strategy of ABC (as the last-place network) in the 1970s, with shows such as *Charlie's Angels* (Levina 2007), and of FOX (as a new-comer) in the 1980s and 1990s, with *Married... With Children, 21, Jump Street*, and *The Simpsons*.

But with diversified narrowcast media, disruption has become the new normal out-side of special circumstances: in the narrowcast economy, disruption is the new stability. To distinguish a format in a sea of offers, it must produce an attention story. This is done via what the industry calls earned media, or, more publicly, buzz. Earned media is earned attention, i.e., presence in media outlets that the producers did not pay for (which would then be »paid media«), and that did not take place on one's own proprietary channels (which would be »owned media«). Earned media is the marketing term; in the cultural conversation, this attention is termed buzz. Buzz arises when one piece rises above the others to become a major topic of conversation. The process by which a format creates buzz and thus manages to be seen as different or new is breaking with convention, being outrageous, deviant, or »buzz through taboo« in a wider sense (Leverette 2008: 126). Transactional outlets like HBO measure their success in buzz rather than in viewership numbers (Santo 2008: 39).

In effect, disruptive media content for the purposes of this short segment is content that rouses strong reactions, be they love or hate, surprise or frustration.[7] »Fans evangelize for entertainment they want others to enjoy« (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 297), but also evangelize against entertainment they want others to hate. With Howard Becker, disruptive media content is media content that people so label. Since »buzz« mostly counts online interaction, these arms of the debate have gained a strong influence on the way popular culture, and popular politics, are debated.

In this shift, one construction of attention takes over for another. While Nielsen numbers are (quite fictional) extrapolations from very few viewers, »enthusiasm« is extrapolated from the »action« a format receives in the form of articles, criticism, discussion board activity, and social media mentions and interaction. One construction thus replaces another: though the latter can work with much more data, it remains a construction of knowledge about enthusiasm, assembled through accepted practices, compared in benchmarks and collected in best practices. The benchmark measurements entail posts on social media like Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit etc. and their reposts, shares, retweets, comments, etc., as well as »mentions« on other large aggregate forums. They also entail fanart and fanfiction on sites like fanfiction.net or ao3, or t-shirt sites like Redbubble and Teefury, where fans upload fan art to be printed on t-shirts and sold, with a daily rank of the most popular designs, pointing to the most popular pop culture content among those who frequent the site. While the broadcast viewer is counted as merely sitting down, the narrowcast viewer can be

---

7   There are other disruptions. Transactional formats also disrupt the production calendar, which is very fixed in broadcast economies, leading to very fixed contract schedules; new channels exploit the gaps. Also, there is disruption in format and style when content no longer has to be scripted around ad breaks. International cooperation introduces further structural disruptions. (Dellwing 2017)

counted multiple times through multiple points of action. Thus, networked enthusiasts count more, as they count more often, because interactions accumulate and compound. Multipliers – users of social media sites with many followers and classical media news outlets – also form nodes in the web of attention. The media remain a data-collecting organization, even if »data-driven« does not adequately reflect the way the television industry makes decisions (Gitlin 2005: 43).

The classical media economies aggregate and multiply this buzz through news stories, interviews, and cultural criticism. Localized physical networks of expectation and media definitions were central in the creation of such impact, and media definitions were powerful definitional forces. In social internet environments, a breakup of many different definitional forums for disruption takes place: what one circle defines as disruptive, another can define as normal. Constructing actors do not act with the expectation that everyone will define this act as disruptive; what trends on Tumblr or Teefury is often niche, but in a narrowcast environment, niche disruption is all that ist needed to create a successful transmedia product. In fact, agreement would be counterproductive, as it is disagreement and conflict that drives interaction, commenting activity, and thereby mentions. When online comment inspires reaction, buzz compounds. »Least objectionable programming« is no longer desirable in this environment.

Going back to the »doing disruption-model developed above, the questions are now as follows: (1) which events receive a disruption definition? By whom? In what coalition? With what entangled construction of causes and stabilities? (2) What looking-glass strategies arise to *elicit* these constructions, as they are economically essential? And (3) who constructs these constructors? How? In what coalition?

Disruption stories

Narrowcast providers attempt to elicit and cultivate this buzz through what could be called »disruption strategies.« *First*, this entails content creation strategies in which formats are made with buzz in mind: here, disruption definitions are anticipated in the way the content is set up. *Second*, it entails strategies to start disruption definitions, either by placing and eliciting »classical« media pieces on the format in news, interviews, and cultural criticism as a way of placing a seed of debate by starting it oneself. *Third*, such disruption strategies can »piggyback« on existing debate by picking up existing debates in the news media and »reporting on the controversy.« This can itself be earned media, when the PR department seeds the debate though influence work, or paid and owned media when one's own outlets within a wider media conglomerate are used for this purpose. All of these strategies do not function as abstract »attention strategies« in the sense that certain practices can guarantee attention, and therefore practices that »disrupt.« They function as »offers«, »enjeux« in a Bourdieuian sense, in a game of social meaning, where the action requires co-constructors to be completed.

I will use two examples to show the career of disruptions in the narrowcast media economy: *The Shield* and its unexpected pilot character death, and *Game of Thrones* and

its infamous »rape scene«. They are different in their disruption layouts; both of them, however, entail the social construction of a disruption narrative.

The Shield is an early example of disruptive scripting; it first airs with the launch of FX, in 2001, and is part of the first wave of niche quality television. *The Shield* was designed to create buzz, gain press coverage, and cause a stir: in its pilot episode, corrupt cop Vic Mackey, is found out, and his superiors place a »good cop« in his team to gather the evidence needed to move against him. Vic Mackey gains wind of it and uses a drug raid shootout to kill the »good cop« character in the final scene of the pilot episode, leaving the classical hero figure dead and a classical villain figure (in the frame of mainstream television and its reproduction of mainstream morality) the protagonist of the show. FX showed the pilot to a conference room filled with advertising executives. After the showing, Brett Martin reports, the room was dead silent: »Literally people's faces were peeled back. A couple of people slinked out the back door, looking at their shoes« (Martin 2013: 221). *The Shield* is disruptive from the perspective of advertising agencies, within their classical ideas of stability; the format, however, also highlights a »tame«, idealized morality-format of classic good-versus-evil-cop shows as »stable«, a distinction that covers more than it illuminates. The dramatic rendering given by Martin emphasizes a line that the producers draw: marking *The Shield* as »shocking« plays into the marketing strategy of a new channel geared towards a young, male audience, and marking past cop shows tame and idealistic in their morality emphasizes one's own self-presentation as »edgy«. (Bielejewski 2016) The description of the ad agents' reaction is not a difficult confession: it is a strategy. Disruption is not a problem; it is a prize that can be exploited, but in order to exploit it, one has to find definitional actors that mark the format as »disruptive« first.

The Shield, and its controversy, took place in the nascent stage of the internet, and before the advent of the social web and its social networks. Disruption constructions in the present are, therefore, more widespread and sprawling. Political issues in the contemporary US debate strongly circle around identity politics, and within that show a strong focus on sexual identity politics. Within the so-called »culture wars«, (Chapman/Ciment 2015) these forms of political debate are hotly contested among progressive and conservative circles, the boundaries between which are exacerbated through anonymous, and semi-anonymous, online debate on diverse forums such as the conservative-leaning 4chan and the progressive-leaning Tumblr, where outrage and attention, and conflict, can be generated and utilized.

Therefore, a more contemporary example of contested definitions of disruption comes in the form of a much-maligned scene in season four of the popular HBO format *Game of Thrones*. At the funeral of their son, Cersei and Jaime Lannister, alone in the Sept of Baelor – for all practical purposes, a cathedral – have sex in a manner that indicated lack of consent on the part of Cersei, a potential rape.[8] The scene immediately roused controversy in social media and the press that initially focused on the role of rape scenes

---

8   »›Stop, it's not right,‹ she says; ›I don't care,‹ he says« (http://www.ew.com/article/2015/04/07/jaime-cersei-controversy-sex).

in pop culture, namely, that pop culture uses rape as an »easy« character development tool without depth and, often, without depicting the trauma and suffering, thereby contributing to its belittlement and normalization. The scene drove earned media, first through criticism of the ways conflict is built into mainstream television, and whose normalities that underpins, and then through a debate on consent that connected to established debates on the subject.

While the scene itself created buzz, the stronger disruption arose through interviews the participants in the production gave immediately after the airing of the episode. Both the actors playing Jaime and Cersei Lannister, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Lena Headey, as well as the director of the episode, Alex Graves, gave interviews in which they ascribed »not rape« as a definition of the situation (http://www.ew.com/article/2015/04/07/jaime-cersei-controversy-sex): »is it rape? ›Yes, and no‹, says Coster-Waldau. ›There are moments where she gives in, and moments where she pushes him away. But it's not pretty. ‹« (http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/20/game-of-thrones-most-wtf-sex-scene-nikolaj-coster-waldau-on-jaime-lannister-s-darkest-hour.html). In the parlance of online discussion, they were »denying«, or at least not fully supporting, that the scene was a rape scene at all.[9] If this is or is not correctly understood as rape is not my concern here: I claim no authority to impose a definition. My reading of this scene is also not important. What is important is that the PR statements *resisted* a definition of disruption that had, at this point, already solidified in the interpretation of the scene on social media. The scene itself created attention and debate; the conflict with the participants, and their »denial« of the interpretation in the media, added to the debate and fueled the outrage of those whose mind had already, and publicly, been made up, an outcome publicists and others involved in the production could quite perceivably have been able to anticipate beforehand. Since those involved in the production are under contractual obligation not to give »rogue« interviews, and are coached by the PR experts at the production company, and multiple people involved in the production gave the same position, there is ample indication to assume that these interviews were seeded by design of the production company.

With this, complex social and easy individual cases come under construction: it allowed an ascription of »ignorance« to the producers (and those who would follow their definition of the situation in online commentary), making a structural problem into one with easy ascriptions of responsibility. On a deeper level, the actors and director marked those who would interpret the scene as a »rape scene«, and criticize it, as construction agents, not in order to deny the construction, but to bring intention in as an anchor for a resistant construction, as »intent of the author« is still an accepted tool to justify an interpretation, at least in public debate (cf. Fish 2007). Conversely, the outraged parties marked the actors and director as »morally guilty« parties.

Thus, we have a disruption definition leveled against the scene, and resistance to that definition by actors and the director; however, this resistance served to exacerbate the

---

9   »The director of the episode, Alex Graves, waded into the line of fire to say this wasn't rape – and was promptly blasted by some who claimed he didn't know what he was talking about.« (http://www.ew.com/article/2015/04/07/jaime-cersei-controversy-sex)

disruption definition. In the contemporary climate, and in a production structure that involves hundreds of participants, it is difficult to create scenes of this sort without anticipating this sort of reaction. This form of disruption and »buzz« by designing content for disruption, and therefore for earned media, is fairly conventional in narrowcast television. Finally, this turn of events is profitable. Initial outrage can be effective in creating a debate for the next few days after airing, slowly petering out after that – when new episodes, new formats, and other material becomes available to fuel these debates. By providing this material, the »disturbance«, as defined by the reaction of a relevant, networked public, was framed, supported, and enhanced. Emphasizing a »controversy« to report is the central feature of the playbook of cable news: it allows a dramatization of conflict, which in turn allows further reporting on the reporting of conflict. Just as the negotiation of disruption *is* the disruption, the report *on* the news then becomes the news. This self-referentiality is how the media economy operates in a news cycle environment. Disruption plays this cycle. It first mines a political or social issue that is known to be a major issue of online debate, known to rouse excitement and anger, love and enthusiasm. It places content on the market that does something to rouse it; then it can quell or stoke the reaction, which creates or continues a controversy, to stay in the news cycle. Buzz, deftly managed, thus yields compound buzz; and buzz is measured, benchmarked, and reported as a mark of success.

We are thus faced with the complex situation that resistance to a disruption definition can be interpreted as a strategic stoking of that very same disruption. What defines »disruption« and what resists it then becomes thoroughly problematic. Channels seek disruption definitions, elicit them, and use owned media and fake-earned media accounts (users posing as private persons, but paid by the corporation) to construct these definitions, and can use resistance in a looking-glass environment where it can be expected that resistance will be seen as aggravating the disruption definition. In an environment where customers have become cautious of what they read on social media, this entails expecting that users will ascribe the role of »construction agent« to the corporation and its employees, and taking steps to prevent this. In addition, what users define as an outrageous disruption of normalities they assume, others will define as a welcome return to what they expect formats to do – and finally, the successful definition of disruption levied on a format can be seen as a sign of perfect stability by its producers.

Generic Social Processes

The aim of interpretive social science is not merely to gain insight into the workings of very limited fields and dynamics; interpretive work aims at being generalizable without formulating general laws. Robert Prus calls the form of abstraction »generic social processes«, (Prus 1987) knowledge about processual practices in human action that have copies and cousins far beyond the field under study. As a specific outcome, the social construction of disruption as a form of creating attention happens far beyond the television economy. Defining an event as »disruptive« is not always a means to stave off the

disruption and reestablish stability; disruptors can actively seek such events, and a coalition to define it as such, as a means to further their own interests. This is not a new insight; it lies at the basis of Schumpeter's creative destruction, though it lacks our complex constructivist framework there. As a direct offspring of this market idea, »disruption« has become a buzzword in Silicon Valley (Weller 2015): undoing stable systems through technological innovation that shifts the way consumers spend their lives, and their money. More so, there is »a disruption obsession inherent in the Silicon Valley narrative« (Weller 2015). This narrative, Weller specifies, entails »several necessary elements, two of which are that »a technological fix is both possible and in existence« and that »external forces will change, or disrupt, an existing sector«. (ibid.) This narrative can be dated back to *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Christensen 2013 [1997]) which »made the distinction between sustaining technologies, which help improve an existing market, and disruptive ones, which establish a new market«. In this narrative, disruption is bonded to Schumpeter's creative disruption, a concept that long predates the Silicon Valley narrative and forms a basic element of capitalist economies.

In online communication, »trolling«, the current internet practice of extending a textual altercation through refusing to accede to what the other side considers an irrefutable argument, is »the problematic« engaged in as its own event: it aims at eliciting a disruption definition that elevates the actor defined as the »cause« of the disruption. As a feature of the internet/television nexus of contemporary media economies, it handed Donald Trump the media attention that, arguably, helped him win the White House while allowing the coalition that constructed disruption to have a narrative to report on, feeding the earned media loops of contemporary television monetarization.

As a more general outcome, the dynamic described here not only makes a »general definition of disruption« impossible, but also hinders a general procedural definition such as »disruptive things are things that are socially defined as disruptive.« The examples show that this is not an issue of stability and disruption as separate entities at all; specific kinds disruption (only disruptive from some perspectives), and the hope for specific kinds of stability (only stable from some perspectives), are kept in a merry-go-round for attention purposes, in a global news media that needs these stories to fill 24-hour-news segments. In a pluralist, narrowcast world, it is Schroedinger's disruption, at once disruptive and completely normalized, depending on the social resonance circles that define it. Disruption and stability cling together as far more than foils for one another.

Finally, I wish to make a much wider suggestion: disruption may be the better way to talk about deviance. The deviance debate has been »disrupted« multiple times as well, with commentators announcing the »death of deviance« as a concept in sociology, a way of analyzing social interaction that is no longer useful in a pluralistic social that has lost its belief in clear-cut norms and order. Deviance may be too limited in scope and too tied to ideas of orderly »norms.« (Best 2004, see also Dellwing/Kotarba/Pino 2013). Though this is a debate that I cannot engage in here, »disruption« would allow the substantive content of the sociology of deviance to transfer peacefully to it, as I have done in the first chapter of this text, while losing the term »deviance« and the rigid orientation to stability and norms that it entails. In order to do so, however, the analysis of disruption construc-

tions would have to extend to the construction of stability as well, an expansion that I am confident is already well under way in Vollmer's work.

Literatur

Achugar, Mariana/Mary J. Schleppegrell (2005) »Beyond connectors: The construction of cause in history textbooks«. *Linguistics and Education* 16(3),S. 298-318.

Adams, Erik, et al. (2013) »A South Park episode that's a real 'shit' show.« A.V. Club: 31.07.2013. Online at: http://www.avclub.com/ article/a-isouth-park-iepisode-thats-a-real-shit-show-100969.

Akers, Ronald L. (1968): Problems in the Sociology of Deviance: Social Definitions and Behavior. *Social Forces* 46(4), S. 455-465.

Becker, Howard (1963): *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Glencoe: Free Press.

Becker, Howard (1967): »Whose side are we on?«. *Social Problems* 14(3), S. 239–247.

Best, Joel (2004): »*Deviance may be alive, but is it intellectively lively? A reaction to Goode*«. *Deviant Behavior* 25(5), S. 483-492.

Bielejewski, Aaron (2016): »*Gangbusters, mavericks, and the cop next door. Dominant models of American policing in popular culture.*« Kriminologisches Journal 48(2), S. 106-127.

Blumer, Herbert (2012): *Symbolischer Interaktionismus: Aufsätze zu einer Wissenschaft der Interpretation*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Blumstein, P., K.G. Carsow, J. Hall, B. Hawkins, R. Hoffman, E. Ishem, C.P. Maurer, D. Spens, J. Taylor, and D.L. Zimmerman (1974): »The Honoring of Accounts«. *American Sociological Review* 39(4), S. 551-66.

Bourdieu, Pierre, 1999: *On Television*. London: New York: Free Press

Chapman, Roger, and James Ciment (2015): *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices*. London: Routledge

Christensen, Clayton (2013 [1997]). *Headline-Style capitalization: The Innovator's dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press

Dellwing, Michael (2009): »Das interaktionistische Dreieck«. *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform* 92(1), S. 3–17.

Dellwing, Michael (2015): *Recht und Devianz als Interaktion*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Dellwing, Michael (2017): *Kult(ur)serien auf dem Schirm der Soziologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Dellwing, Michael, Joseph Kotarba und Nathan Pino (2013): *The Death and Resurrection of Deviance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dellwing, Michael und Robert Prus (2012): *Einführung in die interaktionistische Ethnografie*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Dietz, Mary Lorenz, Robert Prus und William Shaffir (1994): »Introduction«. In: Dies. (Hg.) *Doing Everyday Life. Ethnography as Human Lived Experience*. Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, S. 1-29.

Fine, Gary Alan (2010): »Sociology of the Local: Action and Its Publics.« *Sociological Theory* 28(4), S. 355–376.

Fish, Stanley (1980): *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Fish, Stanley (1989): *Doing what comes naturally. Change, rhetoric and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fish, Stanley (1999): *The trouble with principle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Fish, Stanley (2007): »Intention Is All There Is: A Critical Analysis of Aharon Barak's Purposive Interpretation in Law.« *Cardozo Law Rev*iew 29(3), S. 1109-1149.

Gitlin, Todd (2005 [1985]): *Inside Prime Time*. London: Routledge.

Goffman, Erving (1959): *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Goffman, Erving (1963*): Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings*. New York: The Free Press.

Goffman, Erving (1967*): Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Aldine: Transaction.

Goffman, Erving (1972): *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York: Harper & Row.

Goffman, Erving (1983): »The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address«. In: *American Sociological Review* 48(1), S. 1-17.

Goode, Erich. 1975. »On behalf of labeling theory«. *Social Problems* 22(5), S. 570-583

Hazani, Moshe (1991): »Aligning vocabulary, symbols banks, and sociocultural structure.« *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20(2), S. 179-202.

Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford and Joshua Green (2013): *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: NYU Press.

Keller, Reiner (2016): Ways of Telling About Society. Howard S. Becker in Conversation With Reiner Keller. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* 17(2), Art. 12

Kitsuse, John/Spector, Malcolm (1975): »Social problems and deviance: Some parallel issues.« *Social Problems* 22(5), S.): 584–594.

Kitsuse, John, und Malcolm Spector (2001 [1977]): *Constructing social problems*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Leverette, Marc (2008): »Cocksucker, Motherfucker, Tits.« In: Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott und Cara Louise Buckley (Hg.)*: It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. London: Routledge, S. 123–151.

Levine, Elana (2007): *Wallowing in Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lotz, Amanda D. (2007): The Television Will Be Revolutionized. New York: NYU Press.

Martin, Brett (2013): *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. New York: Penguin Press.

Mills, C. Wright (1940): »Situated action and vocabularies of motive«. *American Sociological Review* 5(6), S. 904–913.

Peters, Helge (2009): *Devianz und soziale Kontrolle*. Weinheim: Juventa.

Prus, Robert C. (1996): *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Human Lived Experience*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Prus, Robert C. (1997): *Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities: An Ethnographic Research Agenda for Pragmatizing the Social Sciences*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Prus, Robert (1987): »Generic Social Processes: Maximizing Conceptual Development in Ethnographic Research«. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16(3), S. 250-293

Robson, Hillary (2010): »Television and the Cult Audience: A Primer«. In: Abbott, Stacey (Hg.):Abbott (Ed.), *The Cult TV Book*. London: I.B. Tauris, S. 209–220.

Santo, Avi (2008): »Para-television and discourses of distinction. The culture of production at HBO.« In: Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley (Hg.): *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. London: Routledge, S. 19–45I.

Schur, Edwin (1969): »Reactions to Deviance: A Critical Assessment«. *The American Journal of Sociology* 75(3), S. 309-322.

Schur, Edwin (1971): *Labeling Deviant Behavior. Its Sociological Implications*. New York: Harper & Row.

Schur, Edwin (1980): *The Politics of Deviance: Stigma Contests and the Uses of Power*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Shalin, Dmitri (1986): »Pragmatism and Social Interactionism.« *American Sociological Review* 51(1), S. 9–29.

Sconce, Jeffrey (2004): »What if? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries«. In: Lynn Spigel und Jan Olsson (Hg.): *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium*. in Transition. Durham: Duke University Press, S. 93–112.

Thielman, Sam (2014): »Viewership Is Up but Ratings Are Down – What's Going On? Our show is especially popular among imaginary viewers«. Adweek: 19.11.2014. Online at: http://www.adweek.com/news/television/viewship-ratings-are-down-whats-going-161525.

Vollmer, Hendrik (2013): *The sociology of disruption, disaster and social change: Punctuated cooperation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weller, M (2015): »MOOCs and the Silicon Valley Narrative«. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education.* 1(5): 1-7.

Young, Robert L. (1995): »Misunderstandings as Accounts«. *Sociological Inquiry* 65 (3-4), S.): 251-264.

Anschrift:
Dr. Michael Dellwing
Universität Kassel
Fachbereich 05 Gesellschaftswissenschaften
Nora-Platiel-Str. 5
34109 Kassel