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Niklas Luhmann's Theory of the Mass Media

Gotthard Bechmann · Nico Stehr

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Abstract In this paper, we critically examine and contextualize Niklas Luhmann's analysis of the modern mass media. Aside from features of the political economy of the day, the motor that nourishes and sustains the alleged trajectory of modern societies toward "mass societies" is, in the eyes of many observers, the growing significance of the *media*, increasingly accessible and within the reach of virtually all of the public, a view shared by the Frankfurt School and Luhmann's systems theory.

Keywords Niklas Luhmann · Mass media · Modernity · Mass communication

None of Luhmann's many other books made it into the media, in the form of reviews and extensive discussions, as quickly as his *The Reality of the Mass Media*. This may naturally be because the mass media saw themselves in a sociological treatment and reacted ambivalently—flattered at being elevated to the status of an autopoietic system with social relevance, but also annoyed because the picture that emerges in Luhmann's examination did not match their own self-image.

A deeper reason may be, however, that Luhmann explicitly took the public suspicion of the mass media as the basis for his theoretical construct, only to arrive at a completely different assessment of the functioning and

importance of the mass media. This assessment is far removed from either an enthusiastic endorsement as enlightenment, or severe criticism of the media; rather, it provides an analysis of the mechanisms of producing reality which is more merciless and free of illusions than Adorno and Horkheimer's reflections, let alone those of their intellectual successors.

Luhmann's observations about the mass media open with an apodictic note: "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media"; and, on the other hand, "we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources."

This defines the area for study. In the remainder of his book, Luhmann explains in detail why this contradiction constitutes the uniquely modern and productive elements in the mass media. His argument is based on two fundamental ideas that serve as the cornerstone of his study. First, the mass media form operationally closed systems that can be compared with other social systems, e.g. law, politics, science, business, etc. Second, cognition itself is self-referential and closed: it can only occur in systems. What does this mean?

It means that the mass media do not present an image of a reality that they have distinguished (this cannot actually be their function), but rather they themselves create the reality which they communicate daily as news, reports, advertising. Although this reality is a manufactured reality that arises selectively—and we are aware of this—it is the socially relevant one, and retains its validity while giving us a view of genuine reality, if we understand how this is produced, constructed and consumed.

The project of ideological criticism and enlightenment is not concerned with this, as it involves effects of functional differentiation that cannot be penetrated. Simply by adopt-

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ing this starting point, Luhmann changes the perspective of mass communications research radically. He is not concerned with how we can improve media reporting or enhance the situation. It would be more accurate to say that by reversing the point of view, he distances himself from his subject by emphasizing the improbability of the way the mass media function.

Luhmann's description starts with a definition: mass media "includes all those institutions of society which make use of technical means of reproduction for the purpose of the dissemination of communication." But the decisive feature of this definition of mass media is that "no interaction can take place between sender and receivers in the presence of both."

This conception of mass media has far-reaching implications. There is no direct feedback from recipient to sender that can be centrally managed; each party must construct its own image of the other. Media producers indeed have certain ideas about whom they are actually producing for, but this viewer is characterized by assumptions, speculation and statistics. Like Nietzsche's madman seeking God, the search for *the* viewer is doomed to failure. Mass media must individualize and produce on a generalized basis, without being able to configure for individuals. This dilemma describes the *structural* operation of the media.

A second factor that reinforces this ambivalence is the dual reality of the mass media. On the one hand, the reality of the mass media is their mode of operation, and to some extent their technological aspect (the materiality of communication, for example as print, radio, TV, Internet); that is, everything which they use for distribution and which can be seen in their system as communication in transit—as communication that goes on within it and through them. On the other hand, they generate reality—for themselves and others. Here Luhmann's focus is not on the mode of operation, but rather on the mass media's operation of observing, how *they* see the world. There is a duplication of reality here: "[The media] indeed communicate—about something. About something else or about themselves". Mass media as systems are capable of distinguishing, and forced to distinguish, between self-reference and external reference; and it is possible to observe this as a social scientist, a critic or someone involved who appears in the media, and to a certain extent rediscovers a perspective on themselves not as a person, but rather as a topic. The processing of self-references and external references is what defines the curious mobility of the media. Self-reference is always present in every mode of operation: one broadcast follows another, and if this chain breaks, the system of the mass media disintegrates. External references, by contrast, relate to the context of the system, and in our instance are represented by topics.

Topics not only form the "memory" of the media, but also constitute the structural coupling to other areas of

society. Within the system (and this is what characterizes the actual functioning) there is an ongoing balancing process between self-reference and external reference. The construction of reality is not a capricious or even arbitrary process: on the contrary, the ongoing creation of the unity of self-reference and external reference is (assuming the operational closure of the system) the rule-driven mode, in which the media systematically create reality.

Besides this constant alternation of the difference between self-reference and external reference, the mass media also have to be able to distinguish, on a system-specific basis, mass media communications from those that are legal, scientific or religious. Here, Luhmann draws on his differentiation and media theory. What is modern about modern society is its functional differentiation into different subsystems that have formed their own type of communication. The central mechanism in this communication structure is the binary coding of the individual system. Binary coding is crucial to functional differentiation, as this organizes communication specifically in terms of the exclusion of outside values, regardless of the consequences for other communication. Accordingly, the legal system only needs to concern itself with the difference just/unjust, and scientists with true/false, without having to worry about the religious or economic consequences of their invention and discoveries. Functionally differentiated systems link two essentially opposed but complementary structures: they specialize in a particular form of social communication, determined by their respective code. To this extent the differentiation and increase in performance are fuelled by self-delimitation. At the same time, they are universal, in that their function cannot be performed by any other system. It is this development which has boosted the capability and growth processes of modern society in a historically unique manner. So what is it that structures mass media communication?

Here, Niklas Luhmann sees the coding as information/noninformation, where information is the positive value, the designatory value that can be continuously extended, and with which the system describes its own operating; and noninformation is the negative or reflexive value that shows under what conditions the positive value may be used. This type of coding has two specific features that result in continuous unrest and distraction in society. The most significant feature of the code information/noninformation is its relationship to time. First, the coding creates constant pressure to generate information. Secondly, information cannot be repeated. Information, once communicated, becomes an event. As events pieces of information still have their meaning, but lose their informative value and are merely redundant.

The ongoing transformation or de-actualization of information into noninformation keeps the system running

and accelerates the tempo. The hunt for information is the defining characteristic of journalism and the source of its frenzy. There is also the pressure for novelty: mass media must always have something new to report. Although this pressure is also present in art, politics and (particularly) science, this modern approach is particularly crass in the case of the mass media's reporting something new every day, and so identifying everything from the previous day as "old." At the operating level of society, the mass media accordingly produce the effect that has gone into the theory of postmodernism as the ongoing revision of the past, a key feature of the postmodern era. Ultimately, postmodernism is itself an effect of functional differentiation.

The Mass Media and their Environment

Mass media, according to Luhmann's hypothesis, constitute one of the functional systems of modern society, a system that "owes its increased effectiveness to the differentiation, operational closure and autopoietic autonomy of the system concerned." How this system maintains its own autopoiesis (which means simply fulfilling its own social function, and so producing reality for society) is the subject of the following considerations: First, Luhmann studies the system in its internal differentiation. Second, adopting a different point of view, the link between the media and the environment internal to society is reviewed in terms of the structural coupling. Finally, in an epistemological reflection, the hypothesis of the social construction of all reality is explained, using the mass media as an example. The basic building blocks characterizing Luhmann's perspective are the context of functional differentiation of the societal system, the duality in the functioning of the media, and the constructivist view of reality.

Luhmann refers to the familiar distinction—including the possibility of items in mass media research overlapping between programs as news and documentary reports (features), advertising and entertainment—which constitutes the most important internal structure of the system of mass media. However, he does not ask how far reality is accurately represented, whether it is manipulated, what the nature of entertainment happens to be, or whether the entertainment is good or bad, educational or trivial: what is of interest to him is how reality is constructed by these types of programs, and what the effect is, in this case, at the program level of the coding information/noninformation.

The sector of news and features still corresponds most closely to our everyday expectations of a media function of reproducing reality. Although information is offered here in a mode of neutrality and objectivity, closer analysis reveals that the mass media are not greatly interested in truth, and not at all interested in scientifically generated truth. The

problem faced by the mass media is therefore their unavoidable, yet intended and regulated, selectivity.

The decisive insight is that the media cannot create any point-for-point correspondence to their environment, even if they wanted to: this would mean that individuals, and above all the system itself, would be unable to distinguish themselves from their environment. The media would be in the same situation as Ireneo Funes in Jorge Luis Borges' story "The relentless memory." Ireneo Funes had a remarkable memory that recorded everything in vivid, life-like detail. This quickly led to Funes lying on his bed, unable to act. He was temporally synchronized with his environment.

To be able to act and even observe, systems must work with the distinction between internal and external complexity; to perceive at all, they must separate themselves from their environment and copy this differentiation of system and environment into the system with the distinction of self-reference and external reference. It is not surprising that empirical research has identified such selectors: these are indicators of the system-specific type of reality construction of the media. The important thing here is not so much the fact of the selection as the mass media's need to process the difference between information/noninformation for society. Many of these selection routines are familiar. Conflicts are preferred, as are events that depart from normal expectations. Quantities are particularly easy to present as information, because figures are always different from other figures, suggesting that they reflect something new. Information with a local referent is preferred. Behavior that violates norms and standards attracts special attention, particularly if it reaches the stage of scandal. There is a clear media preference for unusual events and moral judgments. These are all examples of how events are turned into information and information into news, which then affects our view of social reality.

Luhmann takes this empirically confirmed hypothesis of the self-selectivity of the mass media and pushes on to further conclusions. What appears in the media as reality is simply their own product. They are not dependent on the environment for the ways in which the outside world is being communicated about. The awareness of selection has always aroused the suspicion of manipulation, without research reaching clear conclusions in this regard.

People assume that vested interests, commercial and political, control the mass media; and in individual cases this can be shown to be the case. However, these disclosures have had no significant effect on the mode of functioning of the mass media, as there is no alternative to the system of the media. Instead, society has accepted the deficiencies of the media. "The mass media seem simultaneously to nurture and to undermine their own credibility. The media 'deconstruct' themselves, since they reproduce

the constant contradiction of their declarative and their performative text components with their own operations.”

This contradiction is reproduced through advertising, although in a different way. The basis for advertising is not the creation of a pretty appearance of reality: on the contrary, advertising openly states its desire to manipulate, and by doing so it is better able to influence the motives and memory of its target audience. Advertising helps people deceive themselves, while loudly proclaiming its own dishonesty. Even eleven-year-olds know that advertising is trying to sell them something, that the family consuming margarine is not always as happy as it seems in the advertisements, and that its happiness is certainly not a result of the margarine it eats on its bread. However, that is not important. Advertising exploits paradoxes in the motivations of its audience: a mass product is offered exclusively, but the product appears only in the background, as if selling it is not the issue. The trend towards greater individuality is proclaimed everywhere, with the result that a whole generation is wearing trainers and designer clothes. The decisive element in advertising is not the product, but rather its latent function of supplying people “who have no taste with taste.” The most important function of advertising is manufacturing a reality that simultaneously creates redundancy and variety in new ways for everyday life.

The most difficult mass media program is entertainment. Even Luhmann seems to feel that here the boundaries blur. Entertainment is fiction, conveying facts, advertising and narration (memory) in a colorful medley that makes it difficult to identify a clear structure. Mass media entertainment can presume that the viewer is able to observe the start and end of a story, in contrast to their own life. A second and fictitious level of reality is created; but because this is imaginary it needs information, which is where the mass media, with their coding of information/noninformation, enter the scene. Although it is fictional, entertainment also has to be “realistic.” It must have some link to the everyday world of the viewer, or at least to the viewer’s everyday world as the media imagine it. This is the point where the mechanism of self-reference and external reference operates. Films, stories or talk shows must create their own plausibility. They live from stories, actions, etc. that they have created themselves. On the other hand, they have to deal with a viewer whose interest has to be roused. The closure of self-reference in entertainment is prevented from collapsing into tautology by the external reference that is processed at the same time. This has the effect that the viewer always crops up in entertainment and is constantly referred to, as if *Tristram Shandy* was the original for all entertainment.

Niklas Luhmann goes on to argue that these features highlight the special contribution the entertainment segment

of the mass media produce; “entertainment enables one to locate oneself in the world as it is portrayed [...] What is offered as entertainment does not commit anybody in a particular way, but there are sufficient clues (which one would find neither in the news nor in advertising) for work on one’s own ‘identity.’ Fictional reality and real reality apparently remain different, and because of this, individuals remain self-sufficient, as far as their identity is concerned.”

How do the mass media come into contact with their social environment in the first instance, if they form an autopoietic, self-referential closed system? Luhmann’s answer is straightforward. The mass media link to their environment through *structural* coupling. Structural means the reciprocal dependence (without having to postulate causal dependency) of programme types on specific environmental states of the system.

Advertising, for example, is dependent on business; entertainment on the art system and everyday life; and the reference point for news is the political system. The fact that there is overlapping is unusual, but the difference in the reference points enables us to identify overlapping as such. Luhmann notes that these different environmental reference points for programmes do not lead to the breakdown of the systemic character of the pattern, because they use a standard technological medium. However, this is merely the surface: the less obvious structure is the societal function of the mass media, i.e. creating the conditions for further communication, “which do not themselves have to be commented in the process.” Mass media create a background reality which functions as the “memory” of society.

The societal function of the mass media is therefore not to be found in the volume of information produced, but rather in the memory generated, which allows for the possibility of communication; in this respect, the social system of the mass media performs a (societal) function akin to that of the economy, though not in the business of “producing wealth”; or that of the political system, though not about “retaining or gaining power,” but rather in the persisting reproduction of forgetting and remembering. And in this respect, the main function of the mass media is its irritability of societal communication.

In the long term, the societal task of the media is not the substantive production of information of and for the moment, but rather the creation of certain assumptions about reality, which actors draw on—but do not have to explicate—in social communication, and on which they can rely as points of connection without feeling that they live in different, incommensurable worlds. This is why the topics are structurally more important than the substantive views touted in the media.

The differentiation of topics and opinions is an important method of reporting, and also has a dual effect. On the one

hand, opinions can be treated as facts in this way: they can be reported and they are informational. On the other hand, a reality is created which is not required to be consensual. So many opinions are reported on the pro and cons of nuclear power, the Shell Brent Spar platform incident or climate change that the “real reasons” for their contested nature are lost in the diversity of opinions, leaving only the divergence and conflict of views as the basis of our knowledge about these phenomena. We only acquire the ability to observe observing, and infer that the contested nature of the issues is the reality. The greater the volume of information, the greater the uncertainty—but also the greater the temptation to form one’s own opinion, defend it as such and leave it at that.

At the same time, the unity of the communication must be preserved, if not as consensus, then in some other form so that further processing is secure. The media do this by making available communication for individual motivation constellations. This is complicated by the fact that mass media production is unable to address actual individuals directly. It can only cover the person as a generalization based on stereotypes. This is done through fictitious individualization: in the news, entertainment or advertising, the general reference point is a simulated individual—not an actual person as a biochemical and intellectual social unit, but rather a construct, the “man in the street” who is interested in news, the consumer or the slouch who has to be entertained. The central characteristic is the paradox of the de-individualized individual.

It would be a mistake at this point to launch into a jeremiad on the alienating function of the media and the leveling pressures they generate. The subtlety of Luhmann’s analysis lies in the way he shows that this process increases freedom and structure. Stereotypes (or schemata) do not force us to repeat them. They leave us the choice of following them or not; but they are instruments of forgetting and learning in the way they bring order into the flood of information while providing a setting for individual self-definition, if only in one’s own home. “From the point of view of society, structural coupling mediated via schemata has the benefit of acceleration of structural changes in such a way that, if this acceleration is successful, it will not break the structural coupling of media and individuals, but will simply link up other schemata. From the point of view of the individual, the advantage of schemata is that they structure memory but do not determine action.”

Highly complicated interactions that cannot be reduced to pressure are generated between media and the individual. As in the theatre, the individual is put in front of a scene but outside the setting, leaving him free to choose without really having a choice, because that would bring the entire complexity of the world down about his ears again. The individual is compelled to construct his identity or “self” in

dialogue with the media, and within boundaries set by the media.

The Theorist and the Mass Media

In concluding his theoretical exploration of the modern mass media, Luhmann shifts his analysis to an epistemological basis and asks reflexively about the point of view of the observer—both the mass media and the theoretician. For both, it is true that the question of justification, which would lead to an infinite regress, is replaced by the question about the observer; and “whoever wishes to give reasons for his own experience or actions must observe himself as an observer and, in doing so, allow access to the choice of the distinctions which guide his observing.” Anyone raising this question radicalizes the idea of the enlightenment of liberating themselves from their self-imposed powerlessness by facing the question of their standpoint. This reflexively dissolves the traditionally established absolutes like God, Nature and Reason, leaving “the contingency of all criteria and of all possible observer positions.”

The elucidation of enlightenment leads to another version of the paradox: “It calls for something to be made visible which must remain invisible. It contradicts itself. It executes a performative self-contradiction and thus avoids appearing dogmatic or prescribing cures.” The paradox of the observer also overcomes the difference common among sociologists and intellectuals between “critical” and “affirmative.”

What is fruitful about a theory that is ultimately rooted in a paradox? We believe that Luhmann, through his analysis, corrects three key assumptions in media research:

First, he no longer proceeds on the basis of a causal relationship between the mass media and society, which seeks direct effects as if the media were deliberately seeking to manipulate. Media affect public opinion, but by framing topics rather than directly. Each individual piece of information may be wrong, but the topic itself structures public communication, providing structures for further communication.

His second insight is that media do not disseminate truths, but rather organize information flows and ensure novelties. The term ‘information’ does not have any objective status. In communication, information is the result of communication; its truth-value requires more new information and communication—and so on.

Third, it is clear that the media operate highly selectively, so that they do not function as a mirror and channel for the public, but rather generate their own reality. This creates degrees of freedom between viewers and the media, which had previously not been perceived as such. Any piece of information can be accepted or rejected, creating the possibility of bifurcation in further communication without the need to assume an underlying plan or genuine reality.

It accordingly remains to be settled whether the mass media play a material role in the construction of social reality despite their high degree of selectivity. Or, as Luhmann puts it in his concluding sentence: “We therefore repeat our initial question. It is not: *what* is the case, what surrounds us as world and as society? It is rather, *how* is it possible to accept information about the world and about society as information about reality when one knows *how* it is produced?”

Anyone seeking an answer to this question needs to critically examine Luhmann’s observations about “The reality of the mass media,” which starts with the thesis: “Everything we know about our society and even the world we live in, we know... etc.”

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