

This text has been translated from German, and formed part of my bachelor thesis on the topic of "Politics and online-media. The relationship of irritation and adaption on program level caused by structural couplings in perspective of systems theory, on the example of the Pirate Party Germany."

The internet as mass media

Luhmann does not consider the internet as a part of the mass media system (as described in an earlier part of this thesis). The excluding factors are the possibility of reverse communication through the internet (as in communication between the system and its environment), as well as technical conveying (separation between transmitter and recipient).

However, in regards to technical conveying, the internet does indeed fulfil the criteria Luhmann sets for mass media, in all the relevant areas. Platforms, which fulfil the systemically typical transformation of news into information, that can assumed to be general knowledge, through their reach and communication density, do – apart from examples like chats, internet telephone applications or other forms of direct, personal communication between individuals – stand out because they do not allow, or do only allow very little, direct contact between transmitter and receiver of this information. Writing and technology, and also videos which are recently becoming popular, convey information, analogous to newspapers and television. Mass media formats take place on the new platform internet. Entries are not consumed in real time.

Luhmann assumes that reverse communication to the mass media is not part of the system and therefor excludes it from the system. He does however allow for reverse communication that becomes part of the system, for example through reader's letters. This differentiation is critical for the application to the internet. Reverse communication to the mass media, for example through comments on blog posts, happen just as staggered in writing online, as they do for traditional mass media. They are no communication of the environment, but become connected communications to the information of the mass media, and thus become a part of the system itself. Especially comments do not differ very much from reader's letters in newspapers. In most cases, they are even examined against relevance criteria before they are published, and in this process irrelevant or inappropriate contents are or can be filtered out. The comments are then perceived by further consumers as information (albeit with less relevance) similar to the initial information, and thus also support the formation of public opinion.

In contrast to Luhmann's view, online feedback in form of comments is simply no longer an exception, as it was the case for printed newspapers. Technology facilitates the increase of the amount of published „reader's letters“ through the reduction of costs. The extent to which this can be used is limited though: The higher the number of recipients

becomes, the higher the number of comments grows, but only about 10% of readers actively contribute, and only 1% will publish related content themselves.¹

Contrary to Luhmann, one can argue that the possibility of contact between mass media and recipient allows connected communication to the medially submitted information – based on the assumption that these recipients can themselves communicate information in the code of the mass media system.

Castells defines a new opposite to conventional "*mass communication*", in which sender and receiver can be clearly separated and one sender communicates to many receivers. He names the new form of communication online "*mass self-communication*", in which every sender has the potential to reach an unlimited number of recipients, and can also receive responses from each of these recipients.²

Huber argues for the differentiation of a part of the internet as a system.³ Fuchs assumes the internet as a new social system in the process of emerging, among other reasons because it allows participation for all users as a "private mass media". That means that

"the effective asymmetries through mass media – the favouring of quantities on the factual level, the allocation of persons and information with high news relevance⁴ – (...) are of no relevance for the WWW."⁵

However, the definition of the internet, or only a part of the internet, as an independent system seems to be inappropriate. The internet, especially the WWW, does indeed communicate through computer-conveyed data, yet an integrated code cannot be recognized. The necessary function of the social system for society also remains unclear. In the context of this thesis the internet is therefore, following Castells, not understood as a medium or code or social system, but as an extension of the physical world, a technical platform for communication, which can be allocated to all social systems based on its code.

The internet offers the opportunity for communication – which code is used in this communication is as little the concern of the internet as the conveyed communication content is a concern of the tones that form language. The internet allows communication to happen in the code of all social systems: The system to which the communication belongs is defined – as it would happen outside of the internet – through the kind of communication, its code and the following connected communication. For example, if a payment is made online, this is part of the economic system. If communication is

¹ Nielsen, 2010

² Castells, 2009, p. 54 f.

³ Huber, 1997, p. 45 ff

⁴ Luhmann, 2009, p. 42 ff

⁵ Ammer, 2008, p. 149

conveyed in the code information / non-information, this is part of the mass media system.

The mass media system communicates in information and thus converts it into non-information. The conveyed information is used by other systems to create world descriptions, and assumed to be common knowledge. In regards to online mass media communication, the decision what is part of the mass media system and what is not is no longer made by the organisation that publishes it. The selection of information through programs / news criteria is no longer an obligatory requirement. The decision of what constitutes information in the sense of mass media, now lies with the recipient, the general public. If information is picked up, it can be allocated to the media system, if it is not picked up, then it cannot be allocated to the system. A following connected communication⁶ defines a successful mass media communication and thus allows the allocation to the mass media system.

One of the main differences between conventional mass media, or their online appearance, is that communications do not only occur through mass media organisations (editorials), but every organisation in every system, as well as every psychic system, now has the opportunity to communicate their own information. Only the reception of this information, marked through the following of a connected communication, serves as a clue for its allocation to the mass media system. The internet speeds up this process⁷, and the web 2.0 intensifies it further. Possibilities for connected communications are multiplied.

The spread of the internet and the possibility for everyone to publish their own information is accompanied by a diminution of the relation between media and recipients: The range of available information grows almost exponentially, whereas the available perception capacity does not. Thus the attention is spread across more sources – and the mass media reach an ever smaller mass.

„Through the ‘sender extension’, especially in the electronic sector, access to media is simplified also for non-established actors, the reach of a mass public however becomes more difficult for everyone.”⁸

At the same time, the individual skills for selection of online information become more important. Information is specifically searched and consumed. Conventional media may still apply their programs and news criteria for the selection of information out of the available supply, but especially for the web 2.0 and social media, this does not apply. The selection of information that is consumed now lies with the individuals, who apply their

⁶ The connected communication can, but doesn't have to occur through other organisations of the mass media system.

⁷ Jarren & Donges, 2011, p. 191

⁸ Sarcinelli, 2011, p. 63

own criteria and are directed by their own interests to find relevant information.⁹ Thereby the mass reached through the mass media decreases, the assumption of general public knowledge of communicated information may apply only for smaller recipient groups.

Conventional media online

Web appearances of conventional media, for example 'Spiegel Online' (one of the largest political magazines in Germany), are run by mass media organisations, who also offer offline publications, although both sectors are often run by separate editorials. The consumers of printed publications partly move to the online offering, and read articles online rather than purchasing a magazine. It can be assumed that these online publications are also part of the media system.

The question whether and how the internet replaces conventional mass media shall not be discussed for the context of this thesis. The usage of television and printed media is declining,¹⁰ partly, because the same publications are consumed online instead.¹¹ But neither is to be expected that these media die out completely, nor is the focus of this thesis which effects new media have on conventional media.

Web 2.0 / User Generated Content

One of the functions of mass media is the selection of information. News factors and organisation programs direct this selection. In regards to user generated content (content developed by individual internet users), it can be argued that the definition of news as news for systems theory is not a decision of the system itself (because it has no consciousness of its own), but is based on the following connected communication. Sarcinelli describes a tendency towards "*deprofessionalisation* of political journalism", because nowadays "an IT standard equipment consisting of a digital camera, photo mobile telephone and internet [can be used to] produce information that cause global sensation."¹² Individuals have the possibility to communicate in the code of mass media through blog posts. They generate publicity and create perceptions of reality for other systems the moment their information is received or referenced as such, and connected communication follows.

"If someone receives something as information, then it is information to him, regardless of whether it is true or not (...) Based on the primacy of the difference

⁹ Emmer et al., 2011 about changes to information reception through effects of the internet

¹⁰ Sarcinelli, 2011b, p. 30

¹¹ Sarcinelli, 2011a, p. 70

¹² Sarcinelli, 2011b, p. 13

between information and non-information, the question of truth only comes second."¹³

The determination of the relevance of information, which constitutes the media system, takes place not through mass media organisations, but through individual psychic systems, or organisations outside of the media system, which communicate in the code of the mass media. Through reception of these communications by the media, or as media, they become part of the system. Filtering functions of the media system are circumvented, because no editorial applies its news criteria to decisions about publications, but every sender applies their own individual criteria. The filtering function does not disappear altogether though, because it can be assumed that the wider a reach that an individual blogger achieves, the higher their communication expenditure becomes, which again makes filtering necessary.

Possibly this points towards a change or addition to the programs of the mass media system, and a new program arises besides news and reports, advertisement and entertainment. The differentiation between these and other programs seems to be based, rather subjectively, on informational content of the communication, and cannot be discussed conclusively at this point. For the context of this thesis we record the fact, that web 2.0 content can be seen as part of the mass media system.

Social Media

Mass media communicate to undefined recipients. The same applies for social networks, especially when the communication (like for example on Twitter) is public, and is not (like for example on Facebook) limited to "friends" who are allowed to read messages. As example for the usage of social media for news through established media organisation, Twitter posts are frequently cited in the "Spiegel" and function as the basis for articles.

Communication through social networks cannot be captured directly through systems theory, because it occurs between persons and cannot be allocated to social systems. Social networks then function as a "market place" for communication about different social systems, for example through the posting of professions of faith (religion), discussion of papers (science), or arguments about political standpoints (politics). The common sharing of links to interesting mass media content in social networks accelerates their spread, but does not communicate new information. Thus social media might be part of the "mass", but not of the "media" – they function as a distribution channel, similar to a multiplied version of word-of-mouth.

Social networks as such are not regarded as part of the mass media system for the context of this thesis. Only the publicity aspects of their communication might be seen as

¹³ Luhmann et al., 1996

"mass media", for example public fan sites on Facebook (which would fall into the space of web 2.0) or information communicated via Twitter, but not the related interactions between individuals.

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