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A structural coupling or a new system?

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Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Paper for the Conference "Luhmann in Action: Empirical Studies of Structural Couplings". IUC, Dubrovnik, Croatia. April the 11th - 15th, 2011.

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Abstract

The paper addresses how the media system and the political system in Denmark interact or couple. The overall question of the paper is whether this interaction should be seen as a strong and continuing structural coupling or as a new emerging system with a new binary code. The paper will be limited to develop the theoretical analytical frame for this specific question and topic, and for that purpose based on some of the empirical production, namely interviews with the spokesmen of climate from all parties represented in the Danish Parliament. Primarily the theoretical analytical frame will outline how to search the interaction as a specific structural coupling and secondarily outline some suggestions for seeing the interaction as an emergent system. It is this specific frame and work in progress, I would like to present and discuss at the conference.

Introduction

Among politicians it has through many years been a common practise to receive media training. It has obviously been important for politicians to become visible in the Media and then necessary to fit into the selection criteria of the Media. Contemporary to this development, the political parties have hired more Press Officers and spin doctors with the purpose of strategic communication in Media, in political spheres and other spheres (Hansen, 2007). Mediatisation seems to be of increasing importance for politicians and their political career. Can we then describe this influence of the

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media system at the political system as part of the society's self description (Luhmann 2002a) or/and as an obvious part of the autopoiesis of the political system, or do we have to understand this development differently? Answering these questions we need further analysis of the interaction between the political system and the media system and we need to see how far reaching this interaction is.

Of further interests is then how mediatisation and what Luhmann describe as the society's self-description of the political life and then the political system are. In his book "Die Realität der massemedien" Luhmann presents *utterance of opinion* as one of ten principle of selection in the media system and in some senses this principle seems to be more and more apparent in the media's description of Society. Luhmann presents it as utterances of opinions from lay-people and from prominent persons which were then presented in the media as news (Luhmann, 2002a). These kinds of utterances is without doubt still part of the news picture, but the utterances of opinions stated by journalists are a more and more common part of that picture. This focus at opinions of journalists, we see with respect to many different issues handled in the Media and the news, but of special interest of this specific study is the opinion of journalists when it comes to political issues, politicians and the political system in general. Looking at the political issues in the press, we even se former Press Officers and spin doctors having their own programs, their own columns and the like, uttering their opinions about political life, politicians and not least about other commentators and spin doctors utterances about politics and politicians.

In these senses the political system and the media system seem to be so strongly interwoven and difficult to differentiate that we have to pose the already mentioned overall question; whether the interaction or the mutual irritation of the media system and the political system is a strong structural coupling or the emergence of a new system[1].

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[1] The answer to these specific questions will be based on an analysis of the political climate debate in six Danish newspapers in the period first of November 2009 until 28. February 2010. The newspapers are Politiken, JyllandsPosten, Berlingske Tidende, Information, Urban and MetroExpress. Special awareness is on the articles written by contemporary and earlier Press Officers, commentator and spin doctors, as they draw strongly on both systems. This analysis is supplemented by face-to-face and in-dept interviews with the spokesmen of climate from all the parties represented in the Danish Parliament. The interviews were carried through in February-august 2010. These interviews are used as examples in this paper primary developing the theoretical analytical frame for the further analysis. The

The question is of both theoretical and practical interest. Of theoretical interest to see if the system-theory has to describe the interaction of the media system and the political system in other terms and to see if and how new functional systems or subsystems emerge in this specific area or thematic delimitation. Of practical interest to see if and how the political system is so strongly influenced by the media system that we can deliver researchable support of the often heard claim, that we see less regular political discussions, arguments and statements in medias and more politicians and politics adjusted the media logic (Dahlgren, 2001; Habermas, 2006; Kock, 2011), analysing the interaction with a non-normative intention.

With the ambition outlining a theoretical, analytical frame based on the system theory of Luhmann, the paper will first present some of the important meta-theoretical reflections important to understand the specific system-theoretical angle of these two systems; their functions, their interaction and their interdependence. Then the paper will present the concepts in use of building the theoretical, analytical frame. Further the paper will take an introductory step into the empirical analysis with the analysis of face-to-face and in dept interview with the spokesmen of climate from the parties represented in the Danish Parliament. Finally the paper will elaborate more specific on the overall question and outline some suggestions for the further analysis.

Meta-theoretical approach

Calling this section, meta-theoretical approach is to draw on the interconnectedness of theory and empirical work in Luhmanns authorship and thereby underline how this specific topic is part of the whole system theory of Luhmann. The section will then concentrate on this specific topic in the system theory and the concepts underlining this and the elaborating of the overall question. Thereby the paper will try to follow the suggestion from Dirk Baecker about walking into the field with limited system theoretical concepts to show something empirical new and not try to discuss or move the whole architecture of the system theory (Baecker, 2000).

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future plan is to carry through face-to-face and in dept interview with relevant Press Officers and spin doctors.

Binary codes of the political system and the media system

To understand the functions of the considered systems, the systems binary codes are of special importance. Social systems identify themselves by their binary codes and distinguish themselves from their environments by the specificity of each code. Further the binary code is a strictly internal structure (Luhmann 1992). The binary codes are for the political system power opposite to not power and for the media system information opposite to not information. The political system then operates through communication continuing judging whether the judged express power or leadership or express not power or being leaded (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2004). The media system then operates through communication continuing judging whether the judged is information or is not to be judged as information (Luhmann, 2002a). These systems can not communicate with each other due to the heterogeneity of binary codes and autopoiesis. Another difference between the two systems is that the media system is the only system judging whether the information is at all information or not, whereas the political system and all other functional systems take the information for granted as such (Luhmann, 2002a).

Luhmann describe the reality of the mass media as an interconnected double reality. One reality is the understanding of the media system as a functional system in line with other functional systems. Except of being an autopoietic system with its own binary code, the characteristics of this reality of the media system is its specific journalistic style wherein writings have to describe what is just happened as it is still present, still interesting and still informative. Besides this characteristic, the principle of selection, whether the communicated is information or not, seems to be reinforced, because the information has to be easily understandable in a broad group of recipients. This reinforcement means that the basic selection is supported by different selection criteria or news criteria. Luhmann presents ten different criteria and some of them are: Surprises, conflicts, quantities, local touch, departure from social and moral norms, actuality and opinions (Luhmann, 2002a). In this connection the selection criteria of opinions is as mentioned of special interests.

Luhmann further describe the media system as a system dependent on other social systems and their irritations of the media system. The media system is then more

qualified than other social systems to handle irritations. This understanding of the media system brings us to the other reality of the media system; which is the understanding of the media production as the society's self-description. The media system is constantly irritated and structural coupled to other systems through thematic deliberations, and this continuing irritation keeps the media system developing and keeps it dynamic and continuingly descriptive of society.

It is of special interests when Luhmann pinpoints how themes make the structural coupling possible and give the media system the possibility of reaching all other systems, while the opposite movement is difficult; per example the political system and the scientific system's offering the media system their themes and expecting a prober mediatisation of them (Luhmann 2002a). The structural coupling seems in that sense to be asymmetrical when it comes to the structural coupling or interconnection of the media system and the political system.

The state is the self-description of the political system (Luhmann, 2000) and for that reason the political system is often described in terms of the state and the function of the state (Luhmann 2000; 2002b). This is to say that the state has been of central importance in Luhmann's elaboration of the political system's binary code; power/not power. The function of the political system is to politicize different problems without the possibility of knowing the consequence of this politicizing. When the political system judges a problem to be political and then to be a part of the political system, the political system will intervene or lead on basis of this political problem. This despite of the autopoietic condition of the political system, that the only dirigible politics is politics itself (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2004). The political system can not make any political intervention of other systems, but are like every other system obliged to structural coupling and irritation. In this connection the interesting aspect of the political system is to what degree the political system observes its possibility to intervene or irritate the media system. This in light of how difficult it is to systems in the environment of the media system to be mediatised properly, while the media system has the possibility of reaching all other systems. Of further interest is how the political system politicizes the media system and see some aspects of the media as political problems.

The dynamic perspective of Luhmann's system theory

As it is already insinuated, the system-theory is a dynamic theory in many aspects. The media system is dynamic in the continuing handling of irritations, which is the continuing judgment of whether these irritations are information or not. The political system is dynamic in the continuing judgement of whether the information is an expression of power or not. The continuing judging is what make the system continuing reproductive and renewable or what Luhmann states as autopoietic: "*The structure that actually organizes the autopoiesis of the system as an unavoidable outcome of its own operations is the system's binary code;...*" (Luhmann, 1992 p. 1427). This autopoietic character is visible in the continuing production of news in mass media and in the continuing political discussions and new political issues. This dynamic characteristic is the characteristic of all social systems in the system theory of Luhmann and should be understood as multiple. By multiple is meant the variety of information, also expressed in the variety of selection criteria, the variety of political power, the variety of truth versus false in the scientific system etc.

Social systems operate as the most fundamental through the smallest entity of the system, which is communication. In that sense communication constitutes social systems. Also the systems judgements in light of binary codes take place through communication, and in the system theory communication communicate whereas communication should not be understood as an intended individual action. In this way communication is also of autopoietic character and communication makes the autopoietic charcter of systems possible. Luhmann states it like this: "*...,communication seems to be an emergent reality of its own, a kind of autopoietic network of operations which continually organizes what we seek, the coincidence of self-reference (utterance) and external reference (information).*" Luhmann, 1992 p. 1424). Communication is continuing reproductive and renewable and makes social systems reproductive and renewable. Though, communication should be understood as the dynamic entity making the dynamic characteristic of social systems possible (Luhmann, 2000).

Luhmanns notion of operational closure should also be understood as part of the dynamic characteristic of the social systems. The strong dynamicity of the social systems is then anti intuitively connected to the closure of social systems because

operational closure is a condition for handling and reduces strong complexity, which is of core importance in the system theory. Part of the complexity, the systems have to handle, is the complexity established by irritations and structural coupling and the reduction of complexity is the condition of increasing complexity (Luhmann, 2007). Further increasing complexity calls for more reduction of complexity and this increasing complexity calling for reduction of complexity as a condition of more complexity is a continuing process making regularities. Luhmann states it like this: "*Hence, structural coupling, together with sufficient internal complexity, is a precondition for building up regularities to construct order from noise or redundancy from variety.*" (Luhmann, 1992 p. 1433). The interconnectedness of operational closure and structural coupling should then be understood as an important aspect of social systems dynamicity and is by Luhmann stated as *the twin concepts of closure and structural coupling* (Luhmann, 1992).

Complexity and the dynamic of complexity are further important to understand the system differentiation. The society's differentiation into functional systems is a consequence of increasing complexity in the society system (Luhmann, 2000). In that sense system differentiation is a decomposition of the original system into functionally equivalent subsystems, and is promoted by structural coupling and internal complexity of this original system.

The twin concepts of closure and structural couplings
"*In theoretical terms, the ultimate problem always consists of combining external and internal references, and the real operations which produce and reproduce such combinations are always internal operations. **Nothing else is meant by closure**.*"
(Luhmann, 1992 p. 1431, Luhmann's own underlining)

By this quotation Luhmann shows what is meant by closure, but at the same time he shows how closure is interconnected with structural couplings or what he here states as the problem of combining external and internal references. The important point is that the combination or structural coupling is always system specific and internal operations. Structural couplings are forms of simultaneous and not causal relations and "*The system in its normal dealings does not observe its structural couplings, but it has to contend with perturbations, irritations, surprises, and disappointments*

channelled by its structural couplings." and further "*But perturbations are purely internal constructs because they appear only as deviations from expectations; that is, in relation to the structure of the system. The environment does not contain perturbations or anything that in a semantical sense is similar to them.*" (Luhmann, 1992 p. 1432).

By this Luhmann states that structural couplings have to be compatible with the autopoiesis of the system. Further it is a notion of the high selectivity of structural couplings because only some elements in the environment are selected for this compatibility while other elements are excluded. Not the whole environment is structurally coupled with the system (Luhmann, 2007).

As stated structural couplings are together with system internal complexity a precondition for building up regularities. Further increasing complexity and reduction of complexity is a continuing process and increasing of complexity can in the process of reduction of complexity lead to system differentiation.

Theoretical analytical frame

The section 'Meta-theoretical approach' has been a description of the selected aspects and concepts from the system theory for the outlining of the theoretical analytical frame, investigating the interaction of the media system and the political system. This section named 'Theoretical analytical frame' is then the more concrete elaboration of the theoretical analytical frame. This is the section about how to search and describe the structural coupling of the media system and the political system.

Description of the structural coupling

In the search of how the structural coupling of the media system and the political system takes shape, the systems binary codes will be of special interests. The idea is through a semantic analysis to observe the systems communication about the interaction. As a starting point we can expect the politicians to communicate within the binary code power (leading)/not power (leaded) when they communicate about media, and we can expect the journalists and articles to communicate within the binary code information/not information when they communicate about politics and

politicians. The interesting question is then: Is this communication actually communicating as expected? Or do politicians sometimes communicate within the binary code of the media system and do the media sometimes communicate within the binary code of the political system? Or do they sometimes communicate in a different code as a result of increased complexity and dynamicity?

In connection to this, opinions and comments in the media and political spin will be of special interests, as this communication could be seen as an 'incarnation' of the interaction and should then be closely investigated to construct the description of the structural coupling between the media system and the political system to observe if a new binary code emerge.

I will then observe the political system through the interviews with the politicians and the media system through the reading of articles with the thematically delimitation of the interaction of the two systems. The interviews should expose the communication about the media to see if and how the politicians communicate within the binary code of the political system or if and then how the binary code of the media system is in use among the politicians. Articles about political issues or politicians should pinpoint what information about politics and politicians is actually accepted as information and if and how the binary code of the political systems becomes visible in the Media system. Further I will observe the communication of spin doctors and Press Officers through interview and through articles written by themselves or about their practice. Here opinions and comments in the Luhmanian sense are of special interests.

Seen as the 'incarnation' of the interaction or the structural coupling between the media system and the political system, the communication of spin doctors and Press Officers will be central to observe how the interaction takes shape right now. Of special interest is then whether their communication is marked by the binary code power/not power or by the binary code information/not information or if they communicate within both codes depending on the actual situation and issue.

Of further interest is to investigate if and how a new binary code emerges as a code more specific of the concrete interaction and no longer solely rely on the binary codes power/not power or information/not information. If a new code emerges it indicates

the emergence of a new system relying on its own autopoiesis. This system could either be understood as a functional subsystem or maybe as a specific institution or organisation in the Luhmanian understanding? – Like an organisation the system should then be understood as a polyphonic organisation, as modern organisations are suggested to be by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2004).

Until now the elaboration of the theoretical frame has been on the operational level. Besides this level we have to search the structural coupling at the programmatic level (Kneer and Nassehi, 1997) and search the possibilities for how this structural coupling is actually taking place. At the programmatic level we find theories in the scientific system and we find laws and statutory instruments in the juridical system, we find political parties programmes in the political system and we find news criteria in the media system. The political parties programmes and the news criteria of the media system will be of interest in this specific connection, but of special interest will be the political parties press strategies, which can also be observed as programmatic.

The specific character of the programmatic level is that they are guiding the judging within the binary codes and thereby the operational level (Kneer and Nassehi, 1997). The programmatic level consists of already decided decisions (la Cour and Højlund, 2006) and delivers a sort of structure or expectation for the further operations. In that sense the programmatic level is less dynamic than the operational level, but should still be accepted as operating on conditions of contingency. Following Kneer and Nassehi the programmatic level is the level of possible structural coupling, as this level is the system's possibility of being open and considers changes in the environment, but still this can only take place if the changes are compatible with the operation of the system.

The investigation will of course consider this programmatic level and observe the news criteria, the political parties' programmes and the political parties' press strategies. As indicated it is of further interest to see how the structural coupling is actually taking place and see how this specific coupling was initiated and continued maybe with more and more strength. These questions need further investigation, but for now my suggestion will be to observe the physical media like television, radio, papers and the like as the coupling media between the political system and the media

system. Even though we must observe a combination or interconnectedness of power and information as paradoxical, we find the interests of the political system and the media system connected in the physical media. We find this connection in the media system's striving towards viewer, listeners and readers, and the political system's striving towards voters or in combination - the systems' striving towards the public.

The study will then be carried through by a semantic analysis focusing on both systems' conceptualising of the interaction or mutual irritation of each other at both the operational and the programmatic levels. Following this the semantic analysis should help me to focus on the binary codes of the two systems and see if a new binary code emerge or the binary codes of the two systems are still descriptive of the systems operations and in detail show how the interaction of the two systems is a structural coupling. The study will then include interviews with politicians, interviews with spin doctors and Press Officers, news articles, news criteria, political parties' programmes and press strategies. Further the study will focus on the mentioned coupling media and examine if and then how the physical media is the coupling media of this specific structural coupling.

Interview with politicians

As mentioned, I have interviewed the spokesmen of climate in the Danish parliament and asked them about the role of media and of spin. These interviews are part of this examination as an observation of the political system at the operational level. The intention was then to see if and how the politicians communicate within the binary code of the political system or if and then how the binary code of the media system is in use among the politicians. I did find many interesting statements about media. It seems to be a fundamental understanding among the politicians that they do need media to launch their politics and political opinions. They never verbalised it, but they need the media to reach the voters – the public. Only one small party has had a practice not to strive towards media as it was difficult for them to get into the media because of the size of the party and thereby their little political meaning and due to the difficulties of presenting important and complicated political issues in few seconds. This is not their practice any more.

Even though the politicians in some aspects have different understandings of the role of the media; they have in many aspects a common understanding of the media's role. The following are some of these aspects:

Many of the politicians found it necessary to adapt to the media agenda, and underline that it is not always easy to have a story told in the media. This difficulty can be because of the theme, which was here climate, but it can also be because of the size of the party and their political importance. Moreover they experience it as absolutely impossible to bring the issues on top of the parties' agendas into the media. These issues are not accepted as news. One way they adapt to the media agenda is not trying to bring in stories or issues they find it unthinkable to get accepted. Further they adapt the media agenda by media training. Not all of them have taken part in this kind of training, but most of them find it necessary and constructive because it eases the way of the messages. This training or some years in politics make them aware of their use of language so that it will not be easy for the journalist to manipulate the message.

Some of the politicians promote the stories themselves and learn how to promote in different media on the condition of these media. Some politicians let the journalists take the initiative and accept more passively to be dependent on the media.

Nearly all of them comment on the tendency of the media to focus on conflicts and even artificially make up this kind of conflicts in discussions. Moreover they find it easy to get scandals and disasters published, sometimes in a way that presents small differences in opinion as important conflicts. In this way they find the rhetoric exaggerated.

In opposition to this they would like the media to have a more serious approach and be more informative in stead of the increasing use of tabloid journalism. Still they see the media play an important role in Danish politics and one of the politicians describe their work as reactions and actions on the media's descriptions. In that sense both politicians and journalists have a tendency towards the easy stories in opposition to the more profound knowledge and stories.

From these interviews we get an impression of what Luhmann states as the media's possibility of reaching all other systems including the political system and the difficulties of the opposite movement where the politicians want a story told in a proper way. Most of the politicians stated their media ambitions to be subjugated the media logic or concretely the journalists and editors in many different ways.

This part of the examination gives some indicators of how the politicians communicate about media. It seems to be the fundamental understanding that politicians and politics have to be present in media to reach the voters. In that sense they seem to communicate within the binary code of the political system. On top of this fundamental understanding, the communication about media seems to be strongly characterized by the media logic, when the politicians communicate about the importance of media and how they adapt the media logic. In that sense they seem to communicate within the binary code of the media system or at least borrow some of this logic. Thus the communication of the politicians seems to be communication within the political logic, but influenced by the media logic.

Worth remembering here is that this is only a small part of the examination, and will never be enough to make the more final conclusion. When we will say something more precisely about such a structural coupling, the examination has to include all parts of the analysis mentioned above.

Concluding remarks and preliminary suggestions

When these years we see more and more spin doctors and Press Officers it is as mentioned above interesting to investigate if the communication of these positions is the emergence of a new system whether it is a subsystem or an organisation. If these positions communication can be observed as a central part of the interaction between the media system and the political system, we can, as mentioned, expect the communication to be of paradoxical character. Paradoxical in the sense, that this communication should establish a connection between power and information, which are not compatible in the Luhmanian sense of compatibility. This understanding of paradoxical is the paradoxical character of the dominating communication form (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 1999; 2003). The search of this dominating form of

communication could be interesting to follow and I will here bring up my guess or suggestion of the dominating form of communication among these spin doctors and Press Officers. When spin doctors and Press Officers communicate with politicians we will expect them to communicate on the political side of the paradox and when they communicate through media, we will expect them to communicate on the information side of the paradox. These two sides should in combination force the communication to continue and my guess will be that this continuation of communication and then the dominating form of communication will be communication as 'power in the logic of media'.

If this specific dominating communication form can be seen as an indication of the emergence of a new system it could be of further interest to investigate if this dominating form of communication is at the same time an indication of the binary codes of such an emerging system? Then the binary code could be expected to be information power/ not information power or power information/ not power information, but this is only preliminary guesses!

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