

Luhmann On-Line

The Official Newsletter for Jottings on Luhmann Discussion Group

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Published by Michael G. Terpstra, Ph.D., [Sociocyberforum Associates](#)

"Luhmann's theory is an intriguing, challenging and an inspiring one. His death somehow brings with it a kind of relief. First and foremost because he did get to finish his general theory of society, and secondly because his monstrous production now has come to an end. The theory lies before us, and should be investigated with scrutiny." - by André Aronsen, Norway on October 21, 1999 *Excerpt from Testimonials at "America on Luhmann."*

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Thank you,
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<p>Editorial</p> <p><i>The Re-Construction of Luhmann On-Line.</i> by Michael G. Terpstra</p>	<p><i>The Re-Construction of Luhmann On-Line</i></p> <p>The original purpose for the newsletter, in general, was to describe, illustrate, and/or implement the systems theory developed by Niklas Luhmann. The backdrop for English language discussions on Luhmann over the Internet was the discussion/ mailing list, Jottings on Luhmann. April marks the beginning of our sixth year as one of the Yahoo e-Groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the goals was to raise the visibility of Niklas Luhmann's work. We currently have over 340 members originating from every continent. • We wanted to develop an excellent vehicle for teaching Luhmann's concepts. It turns out that almost every query has been raised by students or others seeking explanations of Luhmann's ideas • We intended to demonstrate relevant applicability to many different disciplines. In the past five years, many inquirers listed background in disciplines other than sociology such as law, economics, and public policy. • We hoped to create a facilitating tool for the discussion of Luhmann's concepts and ideas. With the help of Barry Gibson, we established a web-based forum site, Sociocyberforum Associates, with over 50 registrants. <p>Going forward, we continue to build a foundation to collaborate on publishing. Technically, we strive for increased understanding of the value of web-based forum tools. To continue the useful shelf life of the on-line material, we want to develop efficient retrieval of archival material. In upcoming issues watch for collaborative works either with group authorship or a series of contributed writings edited to present a wider spectrum of ideas and interpretations. If you are interested in joining us in this newsletter venture at any level of commitment, please register at http://sociocyberforum.org and let us know your interest.</p> <p>Best Wishes, Mike</p>
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<p>Reflections</p> <p><i>Practical applications of Luhmann's work: Observations</i></p> <p>Jesper Tække - MA. Ph.D.-Student - IT University of Copenhagen - Dept. of Digital Aesthetics & Communication,</p>	<p>Jottings on Luhmann, was the first mailing list that I subscribed to or rather I was the first to join the group established by Mike Terpstra or one of the first. Now I have my own (the Danish Luhmann list) and subscribe to a number of others. Since on-line communities are my research field, I doubled my participation in communication in such groups. I have mostly been looking at Usenet newsgroups, but there my role is clear - that is, I never intervene in the communication. But in the mailing lists I participate in two roles, one as a participant and the other as an analytic observing and contributing to the communication.</p> <p>When I contribute I always have to be careful not to do it as an observer of the communication. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it would be very impolite and create mistrust on the list. The second reason is that when participating in the communication I must always remember that I only have a peripheral perspective and cannot manage or direct the communication process. If you interfere in a discussion on the web you know even less about how the observation of the communicative contribution unfolds than in a face-to-face interaction. In an academic group like the sociocybernetics mailing discussion group, there is always one that knows more than I do. This is</p>
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especially felt when there is no response to a posting of mine, which is when I really feel stupid. The lack of response causes me to re-read my message and imagine how others are observing my "poor uttering" and me. Many times my lack of responding or posting on the lists is because I feel that a thesis grows better by protecting it from too much early feedback.

This often results in two kinds of postings. One version is void of any well-defined thesis making it hard for others to relate to (Anschlussfähigkeit). The other version originates from neophyte Luhmannians that have more questions than the established academic has time to catalogue into FAQ help files. This type of contribution can be very fruitful in facilitating discussions where the scholars in a particular academic area feel free from interference.

During the years I have learned a lot as a participant in the group, not only by having answers to my questions and feedback on my thesis, but also just by 'listening' to discussions. The group has given me important information about the academic milieu, conferences etc. Not least, I have gained a position in the in academic world. Through the Sociocybernetics Discussion List and the Danish Luhmann lists I now have a network including many of the finest academics in my field.

How is it possible that I can benefit from this medium when the communication has so many frightening and risky traits? The Sociocybernetics Discussion List functions as a self-organizing interactive system building a border of meaning - which consists of what, we can talk about and how talk is delivered (in what tone). The border of meaning develops with accepted and negated proposals of meaning defining what is possible in the group giving the structure to the communication process that at the same time can be altered only by the processes running through the structure. Over the years I learned to trust in the group knowing what I can expect - not in a precise way but I know something about the identity of the group as a type of creature that has a generalized core directing its observations of messages. Durkheim observed that what really counts in the social becomes explicit when it is threatened. When I analyze on-line communities I go after the breakdowns to learn about the border of meaning - what is protected and by which arguments. An example on The Sociocybernetics Discussion List was a song:

*Luh-mann, Luh-mann,
Ueb-er-al-al-le
in-der-So-zi-ol-o-gie...*

*Luh-mann, Luh-uh-mann,
un-ser-Koe-oe-nig,
un-ser-Herr-der-So-zi-ol-ol-o-gie,
(etwas mehr schleppend und feierlich!)
Luh-mann, Lu-uh-mann,
un-ser-Koe-oe-nig,
un-ser-Gott-der-So-zi-ol-ol-o-gie!*

This was very creative and the text was set to Hayden's beautiful music. I think that many of us enjoyed the intended humor but for some this use of Hayden's composition went outside the bounds and unsubscribed from the list. The limerick was sent along with a theoretical question and some responded to the question complimenting the poem. It did not stop there; the "composer" then now started to insult respected members of the list. Several members took offence at these insinuations while others continued to discuss the theoretical

	<p>topic, eventually branching off to a parallel theme. Some decided that the tone of the discourse was getting too rough and they asked for rules and moderation. When it started to look like we were about to get rules to guide the communication, it appeared that the group did not want the restrictions. It was against the border of meaning in our group. The conclusion was that the conflict halted further contributions. Even when it is wrong to sing in the forum the communication will self-guide. As Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen says there is a "un-decidability" of decision.</p> <p>In Usenet newsgroups such individuals as this "composer" are called "trolls" and cannot really harm a forum that can externalise topics in cyberspace. For groups that discuss such topics as motorcycles or marriage, deception is always a problem to the trust placed in the group. The difference for groups like ours is that the contribution's content is revealed whether one links to the discourse or not. The "composer" deceived us with an easy theoretical postulate. The deception prompted a group member to request that the group challenge the "composer" to further develop an argument in defense of Luhmann's theory. Our Sociocybernetics Discussion List eventually reached a consensus on this issue.</p> <p>In accord with Luhmann's theory, conflicts like this assume their own autopoiesis, eventually disappearing when there are no more contributors only to resurface in a new life through a contribution linked to the original content. In our group the discussion was almost imperceptibly normalized which was also the case for the Usenet group. The border of meaning became explicit thus giving identity to the group. The side effects felt are similar to those of family or community members that are prepared to protect each other.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*****</p>
<p>Questions and Answers Functional Differentiation</p>	<p>MK: I have just finished reading your very interesting articles on education. There is one issue on which I would like your help - that of the functions of Luhmann's social systems. You write in your 'education expansion' article that 'functional differentiation organises communication processes around special functions to be fulfilled at the level of society' (494). My understanding is that functions relate directly to communications and it is their specific effect on communications that makes them functional and not their organization around some function to be fulfilled within society.</p> <p>I realise that this is a subtle distinction, but I think that it is an important one. For example, I would not describe the function of science as 'acquiring knowledge' but as organizing 'facts' or 'knowledge' on which social communications can rely. Similarly, the function of education would not be 'to educate human beings' but to provide a classification of human beings on</p>

which other systems (and so society) may rely.

Could you let me know what your views are on this matter. It is rather important for me, as I am about to embark on an analysis of children's rights which will look at their function (if any) for communications, rather than for individuals

RV: What is at stake here is, I think, the difference between the early, functionalist Luhmann and the later Luhmann. The things you quote from my article refer to the early Luhmann, while your own proposals are, I think, proposals with which the late Luhmann would feel more confident. You can avoid an 'ontological' account of society (in which systems fulfil needs) and provide more space for sociological analysis. Perhaps it can also be said that the early functionalist Luhmann still relied very much on a Parsonian scheme of thought. I mean: he uses a decomposition scheme, according to which the whole is differentiated into parts, and according to which these parts fulfil functions for the whole system. The later Luhmann focuses much more on the emergence of subsystems. (In 'Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft', these perspectives are sometimes blurred, in my perspective at least.) I come back to this later. Part of the reason for my use of these views is that I could quote from an English text of Luhmann - and at that time there was hardly anything properly translated (except from the early article 'The differentiation of society').

MK: Thanks for your thoughts on this issue. I am still a little confused about this issue of function, both as it relates to education and more generally.

Would it be helpful to separate functional to the individual or 'psychic system', functional according to a social system's self-description and functional for social communications? I can see that education may clearly be seen as functional to individuals (your article deals admirably with this). I can also see that education may wish to describe itself as functional in many different ways. What I am looking for, however, is some equivalent social function to those of law, politics and economics

in relation to communications. I am not so sure that education facilitates communication, it might well have the opposite effect, creating resistance to accepting utterances or increasing complexity in a way that restricts communication. I would have thought that the pass/fail code of the education system (and I am referring here to 'schooling' or formal education) provides functional ways of classifying both people and institutions in a society in which hierarchical structures, such as class, race, breeding etc.) are not longer prevalent. This is what I meant by my comments concerning social functions. *RV: Another way of approaching the problem(s) you raise might be via the notion of double contingency. Double contingency is the basic condition of sociality, of communication. One can argue that education changes the double contingency inherent in every communication. One expects that other people are educated too, and chooses a path of action that follows this expectation. If you compare with the famous 'infants savages', or wolf children, who were found in the 18th and early-19th century, one can see what the effects of education on interaction might be. I think that notions of education have hitherto focused too much on what education means for the person who is being educated (personal development, Bildung, acquisition of knowledge, degrees, etc.). Education is important for others in communication, because it makes particular expectations 'function'. In this sense, education is functional to society. But, of course, individuals can play with the expectations with which*

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	<i>they are confronted. They can choose another direction - exactly because something is expected. But education mostly also provides for 'Anschlussfähigkeit' in that new situation. I hope this is helpful</i>
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