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An Allergy of Society

On the question of how a social "lockdown" becomes possible.

Abstract: The paper explains that with the emergence of social media through applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, a new force is establishing itself at the level of society as a system. It is one that is characterized by being highly vulnerable to moral communication. A susceptibility to morality manifests, on the one hand, through an individual differentiation of society made possible by social media – for example, in the emerging Chinese social credit system – and, on the other hand, through the specific communicative structures of the social media themselves. It is argued that social media, in the form of a moral authority with a lasting effect on society as a whole, make a significant contribution to realizing the social "lockdown". Such a societal "lockdown", is, in fact, highly improbable as an event, if one assumes a functional differentiation of society.

1. Introduction[1]

In the course of the development of his theory of society until the end of the 1990s, Niklas Luhmann was able to state that "the dominance of functional differentiation, if and to the extent that it asserts itself as a forming principle, devalues morality evolutionarily and disprivileges it ideologically and motivationally." (Luhmann 2008, p. 155; my own translation) This statement was not intended to suggest that morality has lost significance in the course of functional differentiation. Such is, in fact, not the case, because the communication of respect - when we are dealing with the problem of double contingency - always plays a major role in personal encounters. It is irrelevant whether the conditions of respect are predetermined by social structure, as in relations of rank, or, as is often the case in modern circumstances, whether they are to be negotiated between peers.

Luhmann assumed that morality plays a primary role in systems of interaction and in mass media, regarded as a system (Luhmann 1997, p. 401). He placed moral communication on the level of the system of society and saw it as "a connecting medium between the fully operational communication media and the rest of society." (Luhmann 2012, p. 247). In terms of its functionality, morality would be a "kind of alarm" in modernity, when cases arise such as protest movements, "where urgent social problems come to notice that cannot obviously be solved by means of symbolically generalized communication media and in the corresponding functional systems." (Luhmann 2012, p. 244)

In this present paper, we want to explain that, although the function of moral communication as seen by Luhmann has not changed, technological developments, namely the establishment of both the Internet's infrastructure and of social media, have allowed moral communication to develop a

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[1] I would like to thank Stan Jones for editing the English text.

dominance since the beginning of the millennium that could not, of course, be observed by Luhmann. We too will link morality primarily to systems of interaction and the system of mass media. However, in Luhmann's day, no-one could foresee how the development of social media would make it possible to somehow "short-circuit" interaction systems and mass media, e.g. in applications like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

From Luhmann's point of view, the possibilities of influence by means of moral communication are limited, on the one hand, because interaction systems presuppose *physical presence* and are therefore among the most fragile systems of society. Morality can only be activated here on a case-by-case basis and for a limited time. The system of mass media, on the other hand, is more stable and enduring than interaction systems. However, it depends, of course, on a steady stream of novel topics, so that, here too, morality is activated only on a case-by-case basis and for a limited period of time , for example in the form of scandalizations.

At the time he completed his opus magnum ("Theory of Society, Vol. 1-2"), in 1997, Luhmann could, therefore, still assume a quasi two-sided "loose coupling" with regard to the medium of morality. On the one hand, on the side of the medial substrate, for example in the case-by-case establishment of interaction systems. On the other hand, also on the side of the formation of this medium, namely in regard of latently given values in application of the coded distinction between respect and disrespect: "Both reference to individual persons (one cannot respect or disrespect humankind) and the formality of the code difference guarantee the loose coupling of medium elements." (Luhmann 2012, p. 241)

The development of social media as "technically generalized communication media" (Räwel 2018) led to a permanent stabilization of the medial substrate of potentially moral communication. Communication via social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, is tied to the temporal, factual and social stability of individual *user profiles*, which enables the permanence of individual addresses, their links to other addresses (e.g. in the sense of "followers" and "likes") and the permanent storage of the communication ascribed to these addresses. Moral communication, bound to communication via stable user profiles, in contrast to the volatility of interaction systems of physically present persons, can gain enormously in impact and can address not only persons but also organizations. Recent phenomena, described as "hate speech" or "shitstorms" (cf. Stegbauer 2018), are empirically observable derivatives of the dominance of moral communication, which, in this form, only became possible relatively recently through social media.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section, we argue that, in addition to primary functional differentiation, social media, in their dependence on individual user profiles, make possible an "individual differentiation" of society that makes it vulnerable to moral communication. In the next section, we will then explain how a particular susceptibility to morality arises from the specific structures of social media. The following section specifically explicates the function of social alerting by morality, namely, as the handling of a time management problem. Subsequently we will address the current social "lockdown" to illustrate the consequences of a social dominance of morality, as realized with the emergence of social media. It will be explained that social media are an important factor in explaining what is, in fact, an extremely unlikely occurrence: the social lockdown itself. Since autopoietic systems can only be irritated by their environment but cannot be controlled causally or informatively (cf. Luhmann 1997), a coordination of functional systems in society - even if

only in a negative, destructive sense: namely as a coordinated restriction of their functions - seems extremely improbable. At least if a *functioning* functional differentiation is assumed.

2. The susceptibility of society to morality through "individual differentiation"

On the one hand, the technological infrastructure of the Internet and, on the other hand, specifically social media in their dependence on individual user profiles allow a comparability of communication *across* functional systems. Technological generalization - i. e. the use of similar programs (or "apps") across society and functional systems - is based on user profiles and, as it relates to individuals, it allows an algorithmically supported comparison of functionally different forms of communication. It is possible - at present primarily with the help of smartphones - to aggregate different functional forms of communication in order to compare them as they relate to individuals, which means in, concrete terms, to user profiles. For example, communication concerning the economy (internet banking), politics (e. g. election preferences communicated in corresponding social media), personal or intimate relationships (in the use of online dating websites), communication concerning sports activities through the use of fitness apps, artistic preferences in the favouring of specific music streams or the purchase of various theatre or cinema tickets and so on, can be compared in relation to individuals (user profiles). (see Räwel 2020a, p. 159)

Social media, in their societal disposition, can potentially corrupt the autonomy of functional systems. However, their potential is not activated by these media enabling determinant interventions, for example bribery in the sense of "buying" political decisions. Rather, social media makes it possible for their corrupting potential to unfold where they aggregate communication across functional systems in a comparative and evaluative manner. The autonomy of functional systems is corrupted by the fact that these aggregates allow an irritating influence on all functional systems *simultaneously*.

An individual differentiation of society only became possible through the permanence of user profiles allowing a reliable individual attribution of communication across functional systems, and its most advanced form is China's so-called "social credit system". We should understand the credit points or reputation values attributed to individual persons or organizations as algorithmically determined aggregates of evaluated communication across functional systems: " "Credit points" could be accumulated, for example, by complying with government regulations such as tax payments, by meeting standards on environmental protection (emissions), energy saving, recycling, job and production safety, or taking into account quotas for vehicles with alternative engine systems. The number of social "credit points" achieved would then determine, for example, whether a company would have access to public procurement, could access public subsidies or funds, or whether it could issue bonds. Furthermore, the availability of credit, the intensity of government supervision, access to online retail platforms, or the type of transport accessible, such as high-speed trains (Meissner 2017, p. 3), could depend on the "credit points" achieved." (Räwel 2020, p. 154)

In a socially established social credit system, for example, people's purchasing decisions, such as taking an expensive but fast flight instead of a train ride, depend not only on existing financial resources, but also on the aggregates ("social credit") of evaluated communication in other functional systems. Corrupting effects are to be assumed because there is a tendency for the (future, potential) "social credit", or the reputation of individual addresses (persons and organizations), to

simultaneously irritate the way all functional systems operate. Economic, political, educational, religious or other decisions or actions are then always made at least with a view to the effects that these could have on the individual reputation, as expressed in the accumulated "credit points". Since autopoietic systems achieve their functionality through autonomy (operational closure), their functionality can be severely impaired.

The potential of social media to enable individual differentiation in society is by no means only used by the authorities in China. Other parameters apart from those of the "social credit", derived across functional systems, have already been realized, "for example, *security risks* or the *buying interests* of persons or organizations. The NSA's "Prism" monitoring programme (cf. Greenwald and MacAskill 2013 or Gellman and Poitras 2013) or social media such as Facebook (cf. Carter-Harris et al. 2016) show that here too we can no longer speak of merely theoretical possibilities. In fact, the algorithmic determination of *individual* buying interests, which enables targeted advertising, is currently the main business model of social media." (Räwel 2020, p. 160). Furthermore, the Cambridge Analytica scandal shows that *individual* political preferences can now also be identified; this is knowledge that can then be successfully used for election manipulations in the worst case (cf. Granville 2018).

The societal form of differentiation between individuals, as made possible by social media, is susceptible to functioning as an institutionalized moral authority on the comprehensive societal level, i.e.pertaining to all functional systems of society. However, we do not claim that social media, just as interaction systems and mass media, are exclusively conducive to moral communication; this is already not the case because otherwise social media would not be able to enable the comparability of functionally different forms of communications. Morality depends on the fact that communication is assigned to individual social addresses. This is precisely what is enabled by the permanence of user profiles. One can speak of a potentially institutionalized moral authority, because social media, unlike interaction systems that require the physical presence of persons, exhibit stability in terms of time, substance and social aspects. Profiles on Facebook, for example, do not have an expiry date. The communication ascribed to these profiles and their social relationships to other profiles (e.g. "friends" or "likes") are permanently stored in their dynamics and thus prove to be extremely stable.

The susceptibility of social media to morality at the societal level results from the fact that aggregated values allowing individual differentiation, for example as "social credit" or as "security risk", show a structural similarity to latently given, and thus hardly debatable, values to which moral communication refers in its individual attribution of respect / disrespect. Moral values, such as the value inherent in protecting (human) life, are unquestionably valid by the fact that they are not presented as a matter of choice and thus appear, to a certain extent, to be incontestable and not debatable. This is precisely why Luhmann assumed that moral communication refers to values existing in latency. Aggregates, such as values allotted to reputation and determined across functional systems, have the same functional latency or unassailability as values in moral communication. It is difficult to discuss algorithmically-determined aggregates in a purposeful way; their statistical significance lies, to a certain extent at least, beyond the specificity of arguments. Therefore, they encourage moral forms of communication, in other words, forms that are oriented towards the code values of respect and disrespect. They promote conclusive judgments about persons, which can eventually lead to their exclusion, or respectively, their exclusive inclusion.

However, the susceptibility of social media to morality is not only evident at the *societal* level – namely in the form of the *individual differentiation* made possible by social media– but also in its specific structures, as will be explained below.

3. The structural susceptibility of social media to morality

We are assuming that the social media are socially innovative in that they short-circuit interaction systems and mass media (respectively distribution media). Through the stability of individual user profiles and the storage of communication, it becomes possible for interaction to take place independently of any synchronous physical presence by persons. Interactions can be resumed or continued again and again, flexibly in time and space. User profiles are similar elements , and it is their multiplicity that makes the functionality of social media as media possible in the first place (cf. Räwel 2018). Thus, we can further assume a stable, enduring medial substrate, which basically enables functionally diverse forms of communication; examples of these may relate to economic, scientific, political, educational, religious, etc. spheres. In contrast to the "loose coupling" of systems of interaction occurring only casually and fleetingly between physically present persons, the aforesaid media substrate allows us here to speak of an established or even institutionalised medium resting on the stability of the similar elements.

Due to their specific structures, social media are susceptible to moral communication. They are characterized by the fact that communication here is often aimed at generating a maximum of *attention*. We want to differentiate between an aspect of *aggregation* concerning interaction systems and a mass media aspect of *dissemination* of forms of attention. The number of followers (such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok etc.), friends (Facebook), likes and comments, for example, are to be understood as aggregated values of attention attributable to individual user profiles. Mass media effects concerning dissemination are achieved by sharing, retweeting (Twitter), hashtags or linking of communicative content (pictures, videos, texts). The frequency with which content is shared, or, when sharing becomes an avalanche, spread "virally", is, like the number of followers or likes, a measure of the attention paid to communication in social media. Aggregation and dissemination-related parameters are decisive in motivating communication in social media.

In terms of theory, we can express the affinity communication in social media has to morality by defining the medium of attention as a unit of the difference between respect and disrespect. Both respect (such as the number of likes) and disrespect (such as the number of "hate comments") express attention. Social media can be understood as totalizing communication media, because even the outside of the form of attentionable communication still motivates communication in social media; in other words, communication that is simply ignored, i.e. that does not generate any likes and followers. This is due to the fact that also the probably in this context most frequent form of communication, namely ignored or unnoticed communication, is often understood by users as a disregard of their person or communication and thus increases the motivation of users to produce communication capable of gaining attention.

It must be assumed, somewhat for "technical" reasons, that the striving for attention is more on the side of disrespect than on the side of respect. Negations of expectations[2] , for example in the sense of provocations, insults or impertinences, which refer to (estimable) conventions and values, are technically, i.e. causally controlled, easier to carry out than to meet expectations to an attentionably estimable (over-)extent.[3]

In this context, it should be emphasized once again that we are by no means claiming that social media produce exclusively moral communication. It is equally possible that economic, scientific, religious, educational and other forms of functional-system-specific communication beyond morality will also be covered by social media. It is precisely this functionally different formation, which allows social media within the same medium, that makes it possible to compare functionally different forms of communication. However, since *attention* - expressed in forms such as the number of followers, likes or retweets - often takes the form of a medium itself within social media, we assume that social media are particularly susceptible to moral communication. This is due to the fact that communication here is often motivated by the equally attentionably attribution of respect and disrespect.[4]

Aggregates at the societal level, such as a "social credit" or a "security risk", cannot be disputed in their statistical factuality any more than aggregates in the social media, such as the number of "likes" or "followers". As explained above, these aggregated values, therefore, fulfil a similar function as the values to which moral communication refers, which are hardly questionable in their latency. Values, such as the number of followers, can, therefore, serve as undeniable anchor points for conclusively attributing respect (or disrespect), or at least attention, to individuals. "Influencers", for example, regardless of their personal integrity, are, therefore, if not respected, then at least given attention simply because of their high number of followers, for example in economic terms as advertisers (cf. Khamis/Ang/Welling 2017). In general, user profiles in social media attract attention or respect simply because of the sheer number of their followers. Examples here are the footballer, Cristiano Ronaldo, with 191 million, or the pop singer, Ariana Grande, with 168 million Instagram followers (see Wikipedia entry "Instagram"). Individual user profiles thus have a reach that, historically, conventional mass or distribution media (newspapers, radio, and television) have hardly ever had.

The usual brevity of messages or posts also makes social media susceptible to moral communication. The actual length of messages is limited only by the technology of "Twitter" (maximum 280

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[2] In the sense of the effortless way in which a "crossing" in Spencer-Browns terminology is possible (see Spencer-Brown 1969).

[3] We can confidently assert that, for example, a "Mahatma Gandhi", a figurehead, so to speak, who gains attention overwhelmingly in the form of respect, is much rarer than figureheads in the sense of a "Donald Trump", who gain attention overwhelmingly in the form of disrespect. In other words, persons, who are provocative, who negate established values, i.e. who attract attention because they do not meet generally respected social expectations; the same goes for the phenomenon of "trolls" (cf. Rieger/Dippold/Appel 2020). The generation of attention can be prosecuted causally better by *not* meeting expectations than by meeting them. This is precisely because a conformity to expectations is the - not noteworthy - normal case (cf. for instance in this context Gabielkov et.al. 2016, Tufekci 2018 or Hemsley 2019). Worth of attention in this context is, at the very least, the (intuitive?) cleverness of Donald Trump, who in his *attention* orientation per se is able to reach a potentially larger electorate than politicians who merely strive for *respect* in elections.

[4] In the German language, the connection between the medium ("Beachtung") and its forms ("Achtung" or "Missachtung") can be expressed very well by referring to the same word stem. In the English language, the connection between "attention" as a medial substrate and its forms ("respect" or "disrespect") is linguistically less obvious.

characters) [5] However, it is generally true that short, concise messages, as distinct from complex, differentiated ones, attract attention in social media. Once again, we can speak of techniques aimed at gaining attention. The operation of negation, i.e. a deviation from the expected, a provocation, a surprising, funny message, is likely to attract more attention than posts of a more conventional or complex nature. Communication in the pursuit of attention provokes in this way, evincing a pointed disregard for the usual standards of value, advancing moral evaluation, or expressing outright contempt. In the form of humor as a communication medium, communication that deviates from expectations can still find respect (see Räwel 2005), so that humor is probably one of the most appreciated forms of communication in social media.[6]

Last but not least, it is anonymity, or at least the impossibility of immediate physical confrontation, which promotes moral forms of communication in social media. Also with regard to conventional interaction systems, it is rather unusual for physically present persons to confront each other face-to-face morally, assuring themselves of their (mutual) disrespect. It is more common to morally judge *absent* persons, for example, in the form of gossip (cf. Kieserling 1999). The disposition of the social media - in the usual physical absence of persons - has also made it possible for gossip or moral communication to evolve into a dominant form of communication in society (cf. for example Künast 2017 for an illustration of this trend).

4. The alarm function of morality

As mentioned above, Niklas Luhmann assigned the function to morality of alarming in cases "where urgent social problems come to notice that cannot obviously be solved by means of symbolically generalized communication media and in the corresponding functional systems." (see above) It remains unclear, however, how exactly this function is fulfilled by morality. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this is, in fact, a matter of coping with a time management problem.

We are assuming that the way moral judgements refer to values in *latency* is, at this point specifically brought into play. Moral values are undisputed as values precisely because, as opposed to ethical considerations, they do not need discussing; if morality is to function, they remain undisputed in their unmediated reference. Persons insisting on discussing these values - such as the absolute value of protecting human life - thus do not discredit morality, but rather themselves. Moral judgments appear as indisputably valid; at best, dissent triggers reactive moral judgments in the sense of quick reflexes, but does not lead to a - time-consuming - rethinking of these judgments. It is precisely the fact that, in moral communication, values are unquestionably valid, hence not open to discussion, or, at best, also derive from an immediate insight into facts, that makes it possible to react (and act) immediately.

Morality has a special position in society because its functionality makes it the only form of communication that is explicitly opposed to reflexivity or the achievement of contingency. It can, therefore, also be understood as a medium that enables reflexes instead of reflections (see Räwel 2005, pp. 155 ff). Thus, morality can exercise an alarming function, as it necessarily suppresses time-

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[5]See https://help.twitter.com/de/glossary (term "Tweet")

[6] The satirical magazine "Titanic" (https://www.titanic-magazin.de/) is particularly effective in sounding out communication at the interface between humorous respect and moral disrespect (cf. Cavar 2012)

consuming reflections, in order to enable quick reactions or rapid action in the face of any (existential) threats. It thereby obviates - potentially dangerous - contingent or hesitant action.

Morality also performs the function of alarming, because it has a high (destructive) potential of irritation in relation to any form of communication, by asserting an undeniable, universal validity of values or directly evident facts. This is due to the fact that morality, in the sense of averting danger, relentlessly assigns immediate disdain to any communication or action that deviates from its expectations. In the sense of focused danger prevention, morality can, especially when it is institutionalised to a certain extent by social media, largely suppress the contingency of social action, which is already a result of the different requirements of the functional systems. This is currently being illustrated empirically by the social "lockdown" (see also Räwel 2020b).

In general, however, the social and factual urgency and scope of the alarm depends on the values or facts in question. A lawyer whose choice of clothing does not meet expectations may at best - in presumed disrespect of the "dignity" of a court - cause alarm locally. On the other hand, if, as is currently the case in the Corona crisis, the value of human life is presumably called into question, for example by failing to comply with the obligation to wear a mouth and nose mask on public transport, more drastic consequences can probably be expected, and these are, moreover, not locally restricted.

5. The "lockdown" of society in the course of the Corona pandemic

A social "lockdown", which is enforced to combat the current pandemic, can be understood as the subordination of social functional systems under the imperative of one ("moral?") societal perspective (see Stichweh 2020). This is characterized by the way in which economic objections, educational concerns, legal doubts, artistic interventions, and even scientific reflections outside the realm of virology and epidemiology were, at least initially, considered all but irrelevant throughout society. Accordingly, we can deem a "lockdown" a far-reaching restriction or constriction of the societal reflexivity society exercises, not least through the multitude of different functional systems and organizations. A "lockdown" thus enables an elimination, at least temporarily, of the functional differentiation of society, and, in other words, this amounts to an extremely improbable event, at least if a *functioning* functional differentiation is assumed. It is characteristic of functional differentiation not to allow the dominance of a specific - insofar reflection-hostile - perspective.

In the observation and analysis of a factual situation - in this case the corona pandemic - a distinction can always be made between self-referential aspects, that are, to a certain extent, "subject-related", and those that are other-referential, to a certain extent, "object-related". It follows, then, that in communication theory, we always have to distinguish between the perspectives of self-referential utterances and information, which is other-referential. When observing the social "lockdown", we will primarily focus on the self-referential side, i.e. on the aspect concerning perception. This is simply because the investigation of the other-referential characteristics of the pandemic, i.e. the specifics of the infections, is the responsibility of disciplines other than sociology, such as medicine (epidemiologists and infectiologists) or biology.

With regard to other-reference, however, the following considerations are based on the assumption that the current pandemic is by no means an unprecedented event; it is, indeed, comparable with

other (influenza) pandemics of the last hundred years. This is obvious in comparison with the Spanish flu from 1918, which was probably far more dangerous in its effects, but also in comparison with pandemics such as the Asian flu of 1957-58 and the Hong Kong flu of 1968-69, which cost the lives of between 1 and 4 million persons. In relation to the current (approximately doubled) world population, were these pandemics afflicting us today, they would, therefore, be expected to cause between 2 and 8 million deaths (source: Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response: A WHO Guidance Document. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2009, p. 13).

If the current pandemic were defined as a completely new event affecting contemporary society, a sociological analysis, i.e. an analysis that relates the pandemic to the way modern society observes itself, would be unnecessary. Under these circumstances, it would be plausible to explain what is actually a novel and unprecedented social "lockdown" simply by reference to the specifics of the current infectious disease and the life-saving counter-measures invoked in combating it. The life-threatening - physical - reality of this disease in the environment of the social system would allow the social lockdown - something extremely unlikely from a sociological point of view - to be explained exclusively in medical or biological terms. The fact that it is, apparently, actually possible to temporarily suspend the functional differentiation of modern society and to subordinate it to the requirements of a specific functional system of society (the health care system?) could be explained exclusively in terms of other-reference, namely an infectious disease of an unprecedentedly life-threatening nature.[7]

There is empirical evidence that society has in the past reacted, and subsequently acted, differently, although conditions were similar to today. We see it, for example, in response to pandemics such as the Asian flu or the Hong Kong flu , where there was, at least, no social "lockdown". Hence, posing sociological questions about changed structures in modern society is meaningful, in order to explain the differences in the observed social reactions. Only in this way is it possible to explain the lockdown in such a way that self-referential aspects of social observation gain in importance.

It can be assumed that a (sociological) analysis focusing on self-referential factors relating to cognition and applied to the current pandemic is itself in danger of incurring (negative) moral evaluation. Moralists can make, on the one hand, the reference to the universality and indisputable validity of latently given values and, on the other hand, to the seemingly undoubted reality of facts. Consequently they tend to overestimate other-referential aspects of observations, while underestimating self-referential aspects. Morality reacts defensively when the contingency of values or facts is pointed out reflexively. On the other hand, conspiracy theorists (in this context, e.g. "corona deniers") have a tendency to underestimate (or even negate) other-referential aspects in the observation of a factual situation. In this case, self-referential factors (in a sense "armchair decisions") are overestimated with regard to the factuality of an infectious disease. In our sociological analysis, we assume that a "middle way", as it were, of cognition is possible. We will refer to the specific (changed) cognitions of modern society in the explanation of the social

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[7] This description is simplistic in that it is impossible to completely eliminate self-referential aspects of observation in favour of those that are other-referential (and vice versa). Only facets of these aspects can be emphasized in the observation. Thus, for example, theoretical ("pure") mathematics is tempted to completely abandon other-referential aspects, while empirical research methodologically attempts to keep any data collected "pure", i.e. to abstain from self-referential, idiosyncratic effects of scientific observers (cf. Räwel 2007).

"lockdown", without questioning or indeed negating the seriousness or dangerousness of current infectious disease.

But what has changed in terms of the structures, or even the form, of modern society, so that obviously it is currently reacting in a significantly different way - namely with a social "lockdown" – from its reaction when faced with earlier, comparably life-threatening pandemics? And a lockdown is, certainly, extremely unlikely because autopoietic systems can only be irritated by their environment, but cannot be controlled causally or informatively (see Luhmann 1997). A coordinated functional restriction of the functional systems of society in social, factual and temporal regards, can indeed be observed in the current "lockdown", even though it is hardly to be expected, at least not if a functioning form of society of functional differentiation is assumed.

We assume that the structural changes, or even changes in the form of the system of society, described as "digitalization", make it possible that in a "lockdown" moral communication at societal level actually does not instruct its own "inner environment" (e.g. functional systems, organizations, interaction systems), but can irritate or even paralyze it, in a coordinated and synchronized manner, and thus massively restrict its functionality. With regard to social aspects, the infrastructure of the Internet and social media allow a globally coordinated perception, so that morality, in the face of globally perceived dangers, can unleash its massive potential for (destructive) irritation in factual and temporal terms, throughout society. Enabling urgent measures, social reflexivity is suppressed in accordance with undoubtedly valid values ("Protection of human life!") and undeniable facts ("The transport of corpses in Lombardy by the military!"). Social media allows a moral communication to be imposed on society as a whole on a permanent basis. In view of the alarm function of morality, this development has a highly destructive-irritating effect on any form of communication in modern society (for example, with regard to functional systems, organizations, interaction systems[8], communication media).

The impact of social media on society as a whole results from the fact that we must assume here that the observation of values and facts is located at the second-order level. Although it is relatively easy to critically question both cognitions and values on a personal, individual level,[9] this is far more difficult, e.g. with regard to political decisions, when the cognition of supposedly obvious facts and (millionfold assumed) values, shared by millions of people in the social media, have to be considered. The (imagined) cognition of the cognition of millionfold shared cognitions in the social media, such as the "horrible pictures" from Bergamo, forces these to be treated in the indisputable and hardly

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[8] The fact that interaction systems also do not remain unaffected by the corona crisis is for instance reported by rbb-online: "Hygiene demos - a controversial topic. How corona conspiracy theories have divided long-standing circles of friends." (my own translation)

[9] For example, with regard to the "horrible pictures" from Bergamo: "In Italy, cremation is rather rare. Therefore "the italian morticians were overburdened, when in the course of the Corona pandemic the state ordered cremation", analyzes Michal [chairman of the Bavarian mortician federation and vice-chairman of the German umbrella organization]. The morticians were not prepared for this. Crematoriums and the complete infrastructure were simply not available. "Therefore the military had to help. This explains the footage from Bergamo, which shows how army trucks help to transport coffins with Corona deceased"." (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 30.4.2020; quoted from Reiss/Bhakdi 2020, p. 24)

criticizable form of 1st order observations (for example in political decisions), i.e. as directly evident facts, which at best force a quick, immediate action.[10]

With Luhmann, we also see morality as an alarming "connecting medium between the fully operational communication media and the rest of society." (see above). Moral communication is located on the level of the system of society and can, therefore, in this disposition as an irritating "connecting medium", at worst synchronously and destructively irritate all functional systems of society. It is true that social media are, in principle, multifunctional in their application: educational functions, as is currently the case in "home learning", for example, can operate just as much as economic functions, eg. through Internet banking, or artistic ones, such as the streaming of music. Nevertheless, we can assume that social media are particularly susceptible to moral communication (cf. Section 3). In view of the global reach and stability of the medial substrate of social media, i.e. the multitude of user profiles, we can at least postulate that these media have a highly effective potential to permanently irritate society's functional systems and, at worst, to restrict their functionality.

Furthermore, the paradigm of China's emerging social credit system illustrates that social media allows modern society to differentiate itself individually in assigning reputation values to individuals and organizations. This is, to a certain extent, a moralistic social form of differentiation - reputation values can be interpreted directly on the basis of the coded distinction between respect and disrespect. It is, in fact, superordinate to the form of functional differentiation of society, since the reputation values of persons and organizations are derived from actions across functional systems. In their power to generalize in this way, it is highly probable that these values themselves have a retroactive action-guiding effect on functional systems.

An established social credit system would absorb the contingency of action, which results from acting in different functional systems, into the aggregate of reputation and thus fulfil a central function of morality: it would limit the contingency of persons' actions in orientation to undisputed (reputation-) values and facts. In an established social credit system, reputation would have a corrupting effect to the extent that this factor or value would always be involved in any social action, at the very least in an irritating, if not disciplinary, manner. This could apply in relation to actions in interaction systems, in organizations or in functional systems. It is questionable whether, under these conditions, functional systems could still fully perform. Hence, we have to expect limitations on the functionality of functional systems, and anticipate probable destabilizing effects on society.

In summing up, in addition to the biological-chemical factuality of the new infectious disease in the environment of society as a system, the differentiation of the social media in society is, at least, another aspect explaining why society reacts to the present pandemic quite differently - namely with a "lockdown" - from its reactions to comparable pandemics of the last hundred years. In view of the (formerly?) primary functional differentiation of modern society, what we have to explain, above all, is how a coordinated restriction of the functionality of almost all functional systems can occur. Social

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[10] On the basis of social media it can be shown that the cognition of perceived cognitions, to a certain extent 3rd order observations, is not necessarily associated with a reflexive increase in the contingency of observations, as is the case with 2nd order observations. Rather, what happens here is a collapse of the contingency of observations. Observations that are shared millions of times, for example those of video sequences, require political decision-makers, for example, to treat them in the 1st order observation mode, i.e. as facts that can hardly be doubted.

media, on the one hand because of their structural susceptibility to moral communication, on the other hand because of their potential to differentiate society individually, represent a decisive factor that makes the hitherto unlikely occurrence of a social "lockdown" actually probable. Hence, social media are calling into question the form of functional differentiation of society itself.

6. Conclusion

The prevailing view is that the social life of world society would "normalize" if the infectious disease Covid-19 could be brought under control by medication, at best by a vaccination. The cause of the current pandemic is, therefore, almost completely attributed to the life-threatening virus. If the thesis we have developed in the present analysis is correct, namely that it is social media or social conditions that influence perceptions that made the "lockdown" possible, then an exclusive "virus" view is naive.

The use of a few applications, first and foremost Facebook, Youtube, WhatsApp, WeChat, Instagram (each with more than 1 billion users, source: statista.com), by society as a whole has become an authority which, oriented towards and shaping of common values and facts, unfolds a dominant moral force at a global level. Synchronously disposed in the environment of all functional systems of society, this authority enables a functional restriction of all functional systems - in the sense of a destructive irritation -, in turn enabling the unprecedented social "lockdown". Admittedly, one can still cite Luhmann: "What we know about our society, indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media. (Luhmann 1996, p. 9; my own translation). However, what we now recognize is that a symbiosis of mass media and interaction systems has established itself with the advent of social media, and it is one that enables a lasting moral impact on the observation of values and facts on a global level.

The "lockdown" can be interpreted as an empirical fact which indicates the threat to functional differentiation - as the previously existing primary form of differentiation of society (cf. Luhmann 1997) - by the emergence of social media. In any case, it should be noted that the form of functional differentiation was, at least temporarily, factually suspended with the social "lockdown". The potential threat of the social media to the hitherto prevailing form of differentiation of society becomes even clearer in view of the fact that, as is shown by the paradigm of the Chinese social credit system, they allow an individual differentiation of society. This form of differentiation can have a disturbing effect on all functional systems of society, can impair their ability to function, and thus have a destabilizing effect on the system of society.

In view of the novelty of the social changes described - it is barely twenty years since the social medium Facebook became established - it is difficult to estimate what social impact can be expected in the long term. In the short term, if the functionality of the functional systems is limited by social media or individual differentiation, a social destabilization can certainly be expected. In the form of social media, morality has the function of enabling rapid immune reactions in the face of urgent dangers. However, a dominance of social media (respectively of morality) in society in general, especially in the (potential) form of an individual differentiation of it, would make effects such as

self-damaging "allergic reactions"[11] highly probable. The effects of the current "lockdown" can certainly be interpreted in this sense.

Luhmann assigned ethics the task of warning against morals (Luhmann 2008, p. 266). Such a warning concerning morality might suffice for a form of society which is primarily differentiated functionally. In the face of a form of society where morality is now, to a certain extent, institutionalized, a warning against it is, of course, more urgent than ever. However, a mere warning is no longer enough and confers little benefit anyway. How we can counteract the allergic, self-damaging effects of moral communication, which we can expect in the future, or right now, is currently far from clear.

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[11] Luhmann assigns a functionally equivalent function to the legal system of society, as the immune system has in relation to biotic systems (cf. Luhmann 1993). In this sense, we claim that the function of morality is to enable rapid, possibly overreacting (allergic) immune reactions.

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