Systems theoretical observations of the moral media panic debate

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Abstract

In Denmark (like in many other countries) there is a fierce debate these years in both mass media and in the social media regarding children and young people's use of media (smartphone, tablet and computer). The debate is polarized; on the one side there is debaters, opinion makers and self-appointed experts while on the other side there is media researchers. It runs in both mass media and in social media as well as in meetings, seminars and festivals. Using a systems theoretical angle this paper will analyze such kinds of debates. The questions are 1) why researchers are not taken more seriously, why their views are neglected and criticized? 2) what part does moral plays in modern society and in such debates? 3) How and why does the mass media act as they do e.g. often listen more to the, opinion makers and self-appointed experts than to the researchers? 4) What is the role of the so-called social media? And last 5) Is the debates best understood as conflicts?

Introduction

The topic of the paper is that we (the researchers) have experienced public debate about our research field (children's and young people's media use) and are not undoubtedly pleased with the interruption by laymen. The field is interdisciplinary and include studies within all functional systems and even though we have a common ground we are also specialized, my main field, for instance, is media and education. Systems theoretically speaking the field is differentiated and therefore we as researchers have to use each other's insights not to get lost in this very complicated situation with a medium revolution going on. Our research grows as a bush and together we contribute to all fields of society with our research and knowledge. We have seminars and research projects in schools on all levels, cooperate with municipalities, ministries, and we also mediate knowledge to the public

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through lectures and the mass media and we run education within the field at universities. In the last couple of years, we have had company from people from other fields, not just assisting us in relation to e.g. juridical questions, but outsiders who as self-appointed experts inform the public providing how-to-do and how to act prescriptions and also explanations in relation to all functional systems and in all media and all codes. So, in relation to education, learning, concentration (distraction), health, sleep, social relations and e.g. commercialization they have taken the public agenda. This could be good from our view point, but often it is not, because they have taken the agenda by an alarming, cautionary and sometimes terrifying attitude that does not go hand in hand with a neutral scientific ideal of knowledge and truth. The specific debate has a term in the literature which is *media panic* and what this paper does is to observe and analyze it in its present form by using systems theory.

The paper is not a witch hunt on the debaters and at the same time it does not want to help them get even more attention, what it tries to, is to find out what kind of phenomenon, or perhaps system this debate is. Therefore, it will not analyze concrete examples but only postulate what the problem is about and make systems theoretical observations of the debate on a principled level.

After a short epistemological section describing what observation is in Luhmann's systems theory, the paper describes the media panic debate about childhood and the use of media both historically and in relation to the present debate. Then Luhmann's theory of the functionally differentiated society is very shortly explained and also his exposition on what modern science is. On this background the position of researchers is discussed and put into proportion in relation to the debate. Then Luhmann's theory of moral is described followed by a discussion about the morally implications in the debate. Thereafter, Luhmann's theory of the mass media is described, followed by a discussion of their role in the debate. Then the paper tries to define and expound what social media are and what their role is in the pending debate. Last, before a short conclusion, the paper look into if the debates about media panic is best understood as crisis systems parasitizing on other social systems in the functionary differentiated society in the present medium environment.

So, the form is a little special with theory summaries and interpretations followed by short analysis of and accounts on the debates seen in the light of the presented theory. The advantage is that things are not mixed together making it possible to e.g. make a little Luhmann study without taking an interest in the subject.

Epistemology

Inspired by the logician George Spencer-Brown (1969), Luhmann (2012) defines observation as the distinction between indication and distinction. If one draws a distinction, a marked inside is distinguished from an unmarked outside. The two sides and the distinction between them together form a form (form = marked⌐unmarked). This means that observation is a paradox because invisibility becomes the condition of visibility (Luhmann 2018: 381). We only see the marked side of the distinction. The identity of the difference is the unity of the distinction, and the conditional basis of the observation, but the invisibility of the outer side of the distinction, means that the observation is un-reflected – it only sees what it sees, but does not see what it does not see. Based on another concept by Spencer-Brown (1969: 69-76), namely *reentry*, Luhmann explains how to observe the first observation by making a new observation. An observation of an observation is a reentry of the form observation into the form observation and is referred to by Luhmann, as a second order observation. However, a second order observation is merely a new first order observation that is blind to the difference it distinguishes itself from. Luhmann distinguishes between three different levels of systems formation; the biological, the physic and the social and again distinguishes between three different main kinds of social systems; society, organization and interaction. All these systems are defined as *autopoietic* which means that they produce themselves by the operations through which they observe. For instance, organizations produce themselves and observe through decision communication (Luhmann 2018). What Luhmann suggests is to observe how observes observe which means that this article will have to observe observations of media panic. That is; observe how (from which differences) science, moral and the mass media observe according to Luhmann.

The debate

The present debate regarding children and young people's use of media is polarized; on the one side there is debaters who are self-professed experts, while on the other side there is

media researchers. The former forwards arguments about the harmful effects of the media on the biological (brain damage, lack of sleep and exercise, and e.g. addiction), the psychic (loneliness, narcissism, low self-esteem, and e.g. self-harm) and the social level (bullying, asocial behavior, normlessness or countercultural norms, unwanted photo sharing, echo chambers and e.g. sharing of fake news). The latter (the researchers) who often come from the humanities and who are fundamentally critical of the application of technology, must paradoxically find themselves as opponents of the criticism which they experience as one-sided, unnuanced, ahistorical and without scientific evidence. But anyhow they seem pushed in the positive position of the debate.

If I as a media scholar observe the debate with the non-researchers the first thing which stand out is that it is an old debate re-actualized every time a new medium come into use (Frau-Meigs et al 2017: 93-98). Drotner (1999) define the debate as *media panic* or even as *moral* media panic and according to her every time a new mass medium has entered the social, it has spurred public debates and: "In some cases, debate of a new medium brings about […] heated, emotional reactions: in that case we have to do with what may be defined as a media panic. It may be considered a specification of the wider concept of moral panic, and it has some basic characteristics: the media is both instigator and purveyor of the discussion; the discussion is highly emotionally charged and morally polarised (the medium is either "good" or "bad") with the negative pole being the most visible in most cases; the discussion is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young people" (ibid: 996). Drotner's oldest example is from 1795 where a group of evangelical philanthropists in Britain launched a zealous campaign against what they termed "the poison continually flowing thro' the channel of vulgar and licentious publications" (ibid: 599). According to Luhmann (2000: 139 n23; 142 n12) the concept of the *authentic* first came with the print and the mass media. Not before books came the distinction between those who really experienced the world and those who only experienced it on second hand, i.e. through books. In relation to *digital* media Drotner (1999: 595) writes that cases from the USA was reported in Denmark as early as 1998 by Berlingske Tidende (17 March 1998) under the headline: "Internet is addictive like narcotics". This sounds like the headings in today's debate about smartphones and social media. An example of a moral media panic, which seems to come back with every new medium, is the one in relation to sleep. When we look into the topic like Matricciani et al (2012), who made a systematic review of 32 sets of

medical recommendations for sleep from 1897 to 2009 the problem seems to be a permanent public conflict: "Recommended sleep duration consistently exceeded actual sleep duration by about 37 minutes… as if children always needed extra sleep, no matter how much they were actually getting. The rationale for sleep recommendations was also strikingly consistent for more than 100 years: children were overtaxed by the stimulation of modern living, although that stimulation was embodied in whatever the technological avatar of the time was" (Matricciani et al. 2012: 553). The *stimulations* included schoolbooks, radio, television and the Internet. The review also highlighted the "consistency with which authors acknowledged the lack of empirical foundation for their recommendations, despite extremely detailed and quantified guidelines. It is remarkable that after more than 100 years, sleep recommendations are still being issued in the acknowledged absence of meaningful evidence" (ibid).[1] The situation today is that the mass media only listen to researchers if they can come up with a conflict angle like our opponents: "It's 'digital heroin': How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies" (New York Post August 27, 2016). In Denmark we even are in the situation where the self-professed debaters are appointed to sit in public committees invited to give lectures and they paradoxically spent huge amounts of time on social media to spread their views and advertise their self-help books and courses, etc.

So, what is this for a world where we who knows what there is to know, in relation to the debate are almost ignored, while such laymen become famous, rich and gain influence? To understand that the paper now take a road trip in Luhmann's theory about society, science, moral and the mass media and end up with a discussion on social media.

Functional differentiation

Luhmann describes modern society as functionally differentiated (Luhmann 1995; 2012). Modern society does not have a center but is differentiated into functional systems that operate from different function-specific communication media and associated codes and programs for observation. Examples of functional systems are economy with the symbolically generalized communication medium *money*, politics with the medium *power*, the law with the medium *right*, science with the medium *truth*, religion with the medium

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[1] Here quoted in in line with the latest OECD report Burns & Gottschalk (2019).

faith, education with the medium *child* (later CV), and the mass media with the medium *news*. Luhmann's description of society is based on the difference between system and environment and not on the traditional difference between part and whole. Such an understanding is too ontological. Instead, an epistemologically oriented theory of system differentiation is formulated. Functional differentiation involves repeating the difference between system and environment within the social system (Luhmann 1995: 7). Society will act as the internal environment for the functional systems in a specific way for each of them. Each functional system takes on a specific aspect of societal complexity, orienting itself only on its own system ⌐ environment difference, and reconstructs society using only this outlook. The functional systems can thus relieve themselves by assuming that the other requirements for reproduction of society are met by other systems (Luhmann 1995: 192).

As noted, each functional system operates using a symbolically generalized communication medium and associated codes and programs for observation. The medium simplifies, motivates and focuses the communication and the code sets criteria for measuring success and failure. The code is binary and structures the system's operations. The binary code indicates a communicative preference by opposing a positive and a negative value. The positive value defines a motive, a basic endeavor for the individual functional system's communication - a motive that then finds its counterpart in the negative value of the code. "Cods indicate the medium responsible for their functional areas and thus limited but loos coupling of possibilities" (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 217). They attribute communicative processes to the relevant functional system. Programs work on the organizational level of systems formation and specifies how to use the code. Codes cannot be forgotten whereas on the program level both remembering and forgetting are possible. Since the system of science (together with the system of the mass media which the paper later return to) are significant in this paper science will here work as an example of the introduced concepts.

The science system

In this theory the science system with the medium *truth* has the code true ⌐ false, which since the system's out-differentiation has been building system-internal programs for the handling of, so that contributions (meaning suggestions) can be accepted or negated in communication (Luhmann 1994). Its main programs are theories and its function is

production of knowledge and societal self-descriptions, and like other systems it provides opportunities for careers like I am an associated professor. The science system has structural couplings through the universities to education, economy, mass media and e.g. politics (Luhmann 1992). Looking closer at the programs they also include, for instance, guidelines for repeating scientific experiments, the reference system and blind peer-review procedure for journal articles. According to Luhmann (1998: 38), printing provides a transition to a knowledge technique that depends entirely on writing and which immediately leads to second-order observation. In Western 'scientific papers', a style is laid down for the day, which is typically based on the status of the research, thereby saving further reflections. Any reflection is replaced by a scurrilous pedantry (the programs) that is controlled by editors and reviewers. Furthermore, Luhmann believes that this can be accomplished as a first-order observation: it still extracts only its account of the momentary state of research out of a historical state that it can change. Second-order observation comes first with theory of knowledge and cognition, reflecting on the current state of research – and explicates what it as research can offer in the way of something new (ibid) - which of course also occurs in the form of articles in journals. But however how improbable, the science system was out-differentiated to handle what is true and what is untrue in society. The forms in the medium is theories and the system produces truth in a totally internal and idiosyncratic process using the distinction between code and program: "The code must […] as distinction be differentiated in a further context from the programs of the system, that specify under what conditions something is right or wrong, if it must be marked true or untrue. And only this distinction between code and program give the medium the form that instructs the operations that couple and decouple the medium into truthful sentences during operation" (Luhmann 1992: 184). So, "Truth is a coded medium" (ibid: 185). Despite science produce knowledge, science does not produce general knowledge which is provided by the mass media: "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann 2000: 1). The point here is that what we know we know from the mass media and not from research journals. Like stated in the epistemological section we only have observations consisting in distinctions why: "science is not the authentic realization of truth, but a social system with its own standardized forms of communication, just like all other social systems. Its *truth* is merely a communicative construct among many others" (Moeller 2012: 42).

Here is the first part of the explanation of the media panic debate. Scientific knowledge and what researchers state are only one meaning or kind of truths and not an authentic realization of truth. So why should people listen to us, they do not read journals and we only report on momentary state of research out of a historical state which may be a bit boring. Now I will look at moral to find out about which part moral plays in the debate.

Ethics and morals

Moral is a form of communication that differs from other forms of communication by distinguishing between good ⌐ bad in the binary scheme (or between good ⌐ evil when subjected) (Luhmann 2009: 236), and by referring to the conditions under which, people esteem or disesteem others or themselves (Luhmann 1993: 999). Moral communication distributes esteem to those who profess or conform to *the good* and disesteem to those who do not profess or conform to *the good*. By *the good* is not meant something that is good in itself. *The good* refers only to the positive side of a distinction set by the one who communicates morally.

Even though moral have a clear medium – the good[2] - and a code - good ⌐ evil -, a function system was not formed and out-differentiated like science and the others, when society went from stratification as primary form of differentiation (handling of complexity) to functional differentiation. "Morality is now no more than morality. Its cosmological and therefore magical underpinning has lost, as has the intimacy of negative moral judgement with the impure, disgusting, despicable" (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 239-240). In the stratified society the power over moral together with economy, politics, truth, belief, law and judgment were placed in the top of a society that was hierarchically formed. The king or the pope, or more locally the mayor or the priest, decided over what was good and what was bad, over who was good and who was evil, and over what and who to esteem or disesteem. The problem for moral in the functionary differentiated society is that there is no consensus when it comes to what is good and what is bad, no consensus about what is the positive and what is the negative pole of the code (ibid: 241). Is abortion good or bad? There is no

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[2] The medium makes clear what we are talking about (the good). What is good and what is not good would be the question, that we by the code and local programs, would discuss.

consensus unlike in the law where it can be legal or illegal. "Its elements are communications that express whether certain persons are to be respected or disrespected" (ibid).

Sociologically, morality is linked to an observer, to a moral observation that split the world. In Luhmann's words: "moral coding is always coding of communication. In other words, there are no good or bad people, but only the possibility of indicating people as good or bad" (Luhmann 1993: 1000). In contrast, sociology (like this paper) is tied to the scientific code true � not true. The sociological observation cannot judge what is morally good, but is limited to observations of observations that make use of the moral code. Sociological observations can also be assessed morally, but if sociology will conduct science, its observations must be subordinated to the code of truth, not of moral (1995b: 219). "Moralists may feel free to evaluate sociological theories and sociologists may feel free to respond in moral terms; but sociologists, at least, should avoid mixing up roles, codes, systems" (Luhmann 1996: 32). What separates the systems theoretical moral sociology from the philosophy of moral is the understanding of moral as a difference. According to Luhmann, the unity (form) of moral is not the good (understood as the positive side of the difference good � evil), but the *difference* between good and evil (or *between* esteem and disesteem) (ibid.:33). Luhmann thus distinguishes between two meanings of *good*: *good* as the form of moral communication that operates with the difference good � evil and signals esteem � disesteem, and the positive value *good* which is the one side of this form. A side that cannot stand alone, since it is constituted on the basis of the difference (Luhmann 1995b: 214). This opens up for reflections on the paradoxes of the moral code. Any binary code leads to paradoxes when applied to itself. It is not possible to determine whether the distinction between good and evil is good in itself, or whether it is evil (Luhmann 1995b: 215). Traditional ethics is not open to the question about in which cases it is appropriate to apply the moral code and in which cases it is not appropriate (Luhmann 1993: 998). Unlike this, Luhmann emphasizes that one should not take for granted that reasons for invoking morality are good reasons. Philosophical ethics usually hold morality for good, but one can, as Luhmann points out, imagine that it can be immoral to make use of moral judgments as it inevitably leads to questions about what reasons, motives, interests this is based on. It is in the description of the social conflict potential of morality that systems theory of moral

sociology has a special contribution to make (Vallentien 2001). The form of the medium's elements (the form of the medial substratum in difference to the forms printed in the medium) only differ in the specific coding (esteem ⌐disesteem). Both references to individual persons and the formality of the code provides the loose coupling of the medium elements. The highly individualized reference to persons in modern society strengthens this loose coupling why the medium itself is highly stable. "It would therefore be a mistake to claim that the importance of morality is diminishing in modern society" (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 241). Morality is available in interaction and in the mass media and now also in the social media. Luhmann finds that the main problem with morality is that too often moral communication creates or aggravates conflicts. It is only by a superficial and one-sided view that morality seems to be a means that connects humans in society. Morality can also repel and foster hostility (Luhmann 1995: 235). Following Luhmann (2012 vol 1: 244) morality, anyway, now assumes a sort of alarm function that emerges where urgent problems come to notice that cannot obviously be solved in the function systems. Society recruits moral communication for problems caused by its own structures and differentiation form. Moral communication is directed to where alarming realities are apparent.

Children and young people's use of new media must be an alarming reality for many people why they contribute to the debate which has evolved to what could be described as a *crisis system* (which the paper return to later). The moral alarm goes like: "Should children be turned into addictive junkies?" and the answer must be: "no, that would be evil." This is moral communication and typical for the debate like the heading from New York Post mentioned earlier. Such contributions become morality because they use the premise that there is a media-drug comparison and because of this comparison all counter argumentation become evil. If you as a scholar try to utter that the premise is wrong that this is a media panic, you are immediately disesteemed as an evil person that are against children's well-being. If we answer with research results or statistics, we will get single case stories back pointing at unique pathological cases. No one would see the problem of putting forward an inducted non representative example up against the normal population. It is not like we as researchers do not ourselves use moral against our counterparts in the debate. For example, we utter that it is a violation of children's rights to confiscate their smartphones, or we point to economic interests (the strongest debaters earn money on

self-help books and courses), or we point out that they are not researchers (we disesteem them for misleading the population).[3] But "being on the children's side" is both a wrong statement (we are only on the side of the truth) and children is also some weak allies. As Drotner (1998: 615) writes: "Not surprisingly then, librarians, teachers and cultural critics have been instrumental in staging media panics." They are the ones who have invested most into gaining cultural capital (into the old medium situation), and are also the principal victims if this capital loses its currency. It seems like the majority of the population (public sphere; public meaning) follow these opinion makers, supported by the professional self-professed experts, and think that it is morally right to keep things like in the old medium society and that researchers are evil if we put forward our truth in the debate. The paper return to moral later but first it take a look on how Luhmann describes the mass media.

The mass media system

The symbolically generalised communication medium of the mass media system is *information* (or news in news media) relying on the code information⌐ not information. The mass media is separated out by the distribution medium, which both enables distribution and disables interaction between media organisations and their readers, listeners and viewers: "The crucial point at any rate is *that no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers*. Interaction is ruled out by the interposition of technology, and it has far reaching consequences which define for us the concept of of mass media" (Luhmann 2000: 2). In this situation, the media organisations themselves must decide what has information value, which means that news criteria differ from organisation to organisation; or in other words, by having developed their own programmes for handling the code, they select differently in regard to what is thought to have information value. Luhmann (2000: 28-34) opt for nine selectors (news criteria that the media organizations have different programs for using): Surprise, conflicts, quantities, local relevance, norm violations, moral judgement, attributable to actors, topicality and expression of opinion. There is also a tenth which is considerations of repeated applicability (ibid: 35). According to Luhmann, media organizations, however, also routinely used other criteria related to local

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[3] We suffer from the delusion (following Luhmann, science is just one form of operationally closed communication) that we know best, why it must be evil to contradict us.

programs or just to the situation. The process of this communication suggests that the positive values are constantly turned into the negative values; you cannot write the same thing - as a piece of information - in the paper two days in a row. At the same time, this process creates a history of communication in regard to which new happenings become information (the tenth selector). If organisations or persons from the perspective of one of the other functional systems wants to have something known in public, they must tolerate the forms of the different mass media organisations and their different specific and local programmes for handling the code of information. The mass media as every other functional system first of all reproduces itself.

The heading from New York Post seems to live up to many of the news criteria which Luhmann line up. There is surprise (if you are not studding media panics), there is a crisis (with addiction), it has local Relevance (everywhere in the Western World), children as junkies is a norm violations, and there must be someone to blame (moral judgement), and last it is attributable to all children in our part of the world. It totally spoils such a story – which we as researchers observe as fake news – to have a researcher telling that the premises do not hold. And the mass media has their own privilege to appoint experts, so they almost always have these self-professed experts as a source. Years back when the schools began to prohibit the new media, I was in the mass media several times because I took a position as totally against prohibition (from many good reasons and not just as an experiment). This gave the direct conflict in the newspaper article, in the radio - or television program between two black and white positions (mine and one from one of the self-professed experts, or a teacher or e.g. a school principal). The mass media provide society with other self-descriptions than science and in competition with science. Neither in science nor in mass media there is consensus about much, but we differ in our criteria for communication (truth's programs for selection vs. news criteria), but in terms of moral we differ, because like Luhmann stats, we (the sociologists) should know the difference. This provides a misbalance in forms of communication between the opinion leaders and us, when it comes to who can get the attention of the mass media. And morally observed scientist run the risk of commenting on something they have no evidence of, for instance in 2019 11,258 - had signed to an online petition organized by the Alliance of World Scientists under the leadership of Professor of Ecology William Ripple – and it showed out that there

were both historians and other researchers from fields with no research in that relation. In the end it is up to the public to decide what they mean, but researchers, as we begin to get a picture of, have not the best odds in relation to get awareness in the mass media to influence the opinion in the form of truth – of the here mentioned reasons - and also because we use a heavy language and is rather boring with many reservations. But in the end it is up to other functional systems to decide, because meanings are only meanings. Therefor it is up to the political system to make regulations or not, to the economic system to decide if it pays to form algorithms to catch the attention of children and maybe spoil their sleep or concentration in school, or not – and to the education system how to react with prohibition, ignorance or maybe, as we argue, with Bildung to help the students to control their own choices and habits in a way that benefits themselves and the public good (Paulsen and Tække 2018; 2019).

Social media

Of course, all of the media I have touched on in the paper are social, but media like Facebook and Twitter now have that name. Here I in accordance with Linaa-Jensen and Tække (2018: 42) inspired by earlier definitions, not least by boyd & Ellison (2007; 2013), will define *social media* as: "a special type of Internet service where users can communicate (including, for example, sharing information, pictures and music). They operate through a digital infrastructure that enables, delimits and influences communication. Social media content is user-generated (produced, remixed, or at least copied). In principle, they allow for interaction (two-way communication). Last, they can almost always be accessed through different kinds of interfaces and different terminals." Here interaction is *not* ruled out by the interposition of technology but on the contrary interaction is made possible by the technology. Besides, the interposition of technology ruling out interaction, also, mass media has an editorial board making decisions for what has information value, which is not normally the case in social media. The validity of information is a result of the mass medium's editor taking the responsibility. The respectability of a mass medium is build up over years, they have a coupling to the legal system deciding what is legal to put forward and a coupling to the economic system, because a mass media has to please its audience to earn money, or just keep their share if talking public service. On the other hand, technically seen, a social medium that disables all interactivity functions for interaction is not so

different from the technological tools used by online newspapers. Blogs and other social media are personal media when they are used for interaction and not edited and like mass media when they are edited and only exposes single-directionality (one-way communication). An indicator for this is that many users more frequently respond to a message when they disagree than when they agree. This behaviour is in sharp contrast to the WWW link graph, where linkage is an indicator of agreement or common interest (Rakesh Agrawal et al. 2003). This is properly the same with blogs and other social media, those that are acting as a mass medium provides no reply possibility and are only read (selected) by people who agree, while blogs with a reply possibility are commented on also in cases of disagreement (there are not much information value in saying yes, but Facebook with the "Like" and other reactions makes it a *feel good medium* anyhow). Also, there are algorithms, especially on Facebook, pushing to the human tendency to link to and gather in groups communicating what they already agree with and that confirms their outlook.[4] When looking at democratic debate culture following Noelle-Neumann's (1993) Classic theory of *the spiral of silence*, people's fear of isolation consequently leads to, that they remain silent instead of voicing controversial opinions. Resent American research from Pew Research Center, shows that people are even lesser willing to express their (conflicting) opinions on social media than when they are face to face.[5] This properly comes from that humans do not want to go against the strongest notes in their network in fear of isolation. Facebook is losing around 15% of personal original posts every year and many of the status updates now comes from what could be called micro bloggers when not looking at the discussions in the groups and on super notes like politicians' profiles.[6] In the debate between those who still dare to participate and comment on others status updates there often is seen a hateful and not very accommodating form of communication. During the Enlightenment, there was a growing self-regulation (Bildung) in the public sphere, and the publicists developed, over the course of a few centuries, a *culture of expression*, meaning that the law from then on almost never had to intervene in the public exchange of words,

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[4] Humans have a tendency to consider information to be true if it confirms what they already believe, and this effect is increased in online communities, creating the risk of mutual confirmation of also fake news (Giglietto et al 2016, 4).
[5] http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/
[6] Here the explanation is *context collapse*, coined by boyd with reference to Meyrowitz, which refers to the infinite audience possible online providing us with problems with framing a message suited to everybody.

providing the criteria for the right to *freedom of expression* (Jakobsen 2016). The situation now with social media is that millions of conflict ready not professional editors (amateurs, laymen and self-appointed experts) takes part in the debate - like they have each their own printing press (Blod 2003) and with the possibility to comment on all that is catching their attention. The situation is also that there is not jet formed an adequate culture of expression in social media. There is a new situation where the public meaning is formed in an environment with filter bobbles and a lack of shared interaction culture. With the acquisition of writing humans were able to contribute to communication loosely coupled from interaction (Luhmann 1995: 87). The loosely coupling of written communication from face-to-face interaction meant a disconnection of the body as a mediator of psychic feelings as well as a loosely coupling from turn taking and other considerations in respect to others feelings. In social media interaction becomes written and a consequence (among many positive), is that the respect to others feelings, considerations that probably was a necessary part of the coevolution between psychic and social systems, now is loosely coupled and contingent. So, online-interaction is a form of communication where one utter something, typically a status update on Facebook, and others comment and react in a contingent way, that if it is among people who do not know each other, who are not family or friends, can be rather cynical and moralistic. A fact-oriented form of interaction filled with morally indignation or politically disagreeing, happening near synchronous.

In social media like in the mass media, it is what is unusual that gets the attention (hits) and not what is normal which has almost no information value. Media panic debates heading at new phenomena as huge problems, or only focusing on the single cases which really are problematic as a general phenomenon attract big attention. If we compare the debaters and us sociologists, they have many more followers - probably to a large extent those with the endangered cultural capital, teachers, etc. who are frightened by structural changes triggered by the new media which will change their working lives (see Drotner 1999). This is guesswork, but some of the followers might also suffer from ontological insecurity because the new medium environment changes how things are in our life. Anyhow, we often run into interactions with debaters that have no inhibitions, that generalises, use moral

arguments and angles the discussion about new media like the best solution is to just shot them down and go back to pencil and paper.[7]

Conflicts

A conflict occurs when a contradiction is communicated (Luhmann 1995: 388). Conflicts arise when communication takes up a contradiction in itself and contradicts it, or in other words, when one communicative element is linked to another communicative element by contradiction. It is not the differing interests, but that they are communicated that is a conflict. Any communication produces a bifurcation between yes and no to proposals of meaning, so that conflict and consensus constantly are reproduced as alternatives (Luhmann 2007: 306). However, a no does not always produce a conflict, for example, one might walk out of a store again without buying. But a *no* often sharpens the tone, and provokes, and one is tempted to see the other person as an opponent. To tune into the other person communicatively as an opponent gives birth to the conflict as a system driven by a negative double contingency: "I will not do what you want if you do not do what I want" (Luhmann 1995: 389). One acts aggressively, defensively, or protectively, giving the other only limited variation possibilities except from, for instance, to form coalitions and search for resources for resistance (Luhmann 2007: 308). When conflicts arise, they take over for a while the autopoiesis, i.e. the continuation of the communication (Luhmann 1995: 389). In this way, conflicts are parasites on social systems (ibid). For a time, they draw all attention and all communication contributions to themselves, whereby they block the host systems. Conflict systems are highly integrative because they draw all action into the context of an opposition (ibid.: 390). Thereto, Luhmann (2007: 308) provide a formal definition of integration, which says that "integration is a restriction of individual freedom". and Luhmann also formulate how conflicts integrate: "For as an opponent, as an enemy, one in a conflict has far less variation possibilities, far fewer behavior possibilities: One must be careful, one must consider how to sharpen one's own weapons, and how to do the opponent's weapons blunt, how to protect oneself, how to prevent and how to attack" (ibid.: 309). Conflicts die out when they no longer can attract contributions, when

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[7] Moreover, social media is by far the a positive contribution to society's media matrix, but precisely in quasi - public debates this new public suffers from the fact that in the initial phase an adequate culture of expression has not yet been developed.

contributors all get tired and bored of arguing and stop struggling - time goes by, one moves on to other themes (Luhmann 1995: 392). The function of conflicts is an immunization against the probability of cessation of the system's autopoiesis (ibid.: 384), which seems a little like the alarming function of moral – but the connection between moral and conflict is that morally to disesteem a person or organization is only one of several possible triggers of conflicts.

The media panic debates often run like conflicts where one of us post an article or share a research result on social media and are attacked by a debater through a comment saying no to what we argued. Another form is when we are brought together to a seminar where e.g. a ministry wants different opinions, like we know from the climate debate, either for or against. We also meetup in the mass media and have our conflicts live in television, or as quotations in newspaper articles. We also ourselves contribute to the mass media, e.g. we wrote a feature in the Danish newspaper Politiken to warn against a book from one of the debaters (Kronikken 14. Oktober 2017 i Politiken: Mobilforbud i skolen er problemet, ikke løsningen). All these activities provoke conflicts on the social media with attacks and accusations back and forth. This first of all means that the nuances are lost and things turn out as they were either black or white. Seen as parasites they may be more demanding for the professional debaters, afraid of losing their business, but on the other hand, they can be part of their business concept: by alarming they can draw attention to their name, books and self-help courses. So maybe the conflicts are worse for the debaters' followers who afraid of losing their cultural capital, gets very upset. We as researchers mostly just try to live up to our obligation to mediate knowledge (truth) to the surrounding society and have a job with income at the universities, where we have to teach and research and only have a little time for the moral media panic debates. But okay, admitted, we also get really upset when we have to read the most horrible things like that media should be like heroin.

Conclusion

This short conclusion will try to answer the questions from the abstract one by one according to what the paper has shown. The first questions were: *why researchers are not taken more seriously, why their views are neglected and criticized?* Here the answer is that the scientific code only is one among several others. Especially the mass media also

communicates about truth but only as a result of their own code and programs, which also counts for other functional systems like the juridical and the political system. In the code and programs of a given mass medium it has information value what truth different actors has and conflicts between different opinions of truth is a direct selection criterium. That's the function of the mass media and nobody would like to live in a society without (except for dictators and their henchmen). Last science has its own programs and communicates very programmatic and close to its code why its seldom reach science external persons. When science is observed from other systems it happens through their codes and programs why science often does not count more than ordinary people's meanings. 2) *What part does moral plays in modern society and in such debates*? The moral code that distinguishes people in god and evil persons easily triggers conflicts which not least is well suited for the mass media's and social media's selection criteria. A scientific account, for instance, against prohibition of smartphones in school, or for vaccination against measles, can easily, by the use of single cases (inductively based arguments), be used to morally attack the scientific account, no matter how stupid this will seem from the scientific perspective. Moral can also be used productively, for instance, in relation to unethical experiments on animals or humans. This also counts in other functional systems like in politic where moral can be constructive seen from the view of the common good, for instance, in relation to gaps in tax law that multinational companies use, like morality can also be used unproductively in politics to, for instance, liquidate political opponents for a single mistake (identity murder). 3) *How and why does the mass media act as they do e.g. often listen more to the, opinion makers and self-appointed experts than to the researchers*? This question is answered under the first question and here is only to add, that the mass media reproduce through the medium of information that matter for the opinion either counted in sold newspapers, view ratings or, for instance, in number of hits – and here moral conflicts and condemnations is a good fuel. 4) *What is the role of the so-called social media*? The social media works as a new communication infrastructure where everybody now can publish their own newspaper or tv-show, that everybody else in their network can comment on and share. They lack the editorial filter of the mass media and are no better than the persons contributing to them. They provide a new interaction situation and there are not yet evolved a suited expression culture why there are many examples of hate speech and the like. Moral is a typical unreflective motive for attacking others (for better or worse) which often are named

persons or companies, which bring us to the last question 5) *Is the debates best understood as conflicts*? Here the answer is yes: either laymen or researchers say no to an uttering from the other part, for instance, on social media and a conflict is born. But in that conflict, we must expect that the sociologists behave themselves and does not go on bord in the moralistic form of communication, but stays subordinated to the code of truth, not of moral.

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