Media System As A System: Media Systems Theory From The Viewpoint Of Luhmann's Social Systems Theory.

Marína Urbániková

Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic

Media system – what is that?

- *media system* as a concept: tool for description, comparison, and prediction of future development

- media theory uses the term *media system* in a reductive sense which does not have much in common with the strict notion of *system* as known from general systems theory; it is more a label depicting the area of research interest

- the goal of the presentation: to sketch out how the media system research can be enriched and inspired by Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory

- (1) what is a media system? summary of various definitions and categorizations of *media systems*

- (2) description of Luhmann's social systems theory, definition of *media system* and definition of main axes for derivation of indicators

Media System as a black box I.

- Siebert, Peterson and Schramm: *The Four Theories of the Press* (1956) → Hallin and Mancini: *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004): what is a media system?

- sources: (1) encyclopaedia definitions; (2) the texts describing/comparing concrete media systems; (3) the texts introducing typologies of media systems (e.g. Siebert, Peterson, Schramm 1956, Williams 1968, Lowenstein 1979, Hachten 1981, Altschull 1984, Picard 1985, Sparks and Splichal 1988, McQuail 2005, Hoffman-Riem 1996, Smaele 1999, Cunningham and Flew 2000, Curran et al. 2009)

- media system features: (1) the relationship of media and state power, (2) the relationship of media and political system, (3) economic facet of the media industry, (4) the construction of journalism as a profession

Media System as a black box II.

- *media system:* (1) treated as something so commonly used that it does not need to be defined, (2) reduced to media landscape, (3) used as an umbrella term for various aspects of media in a country

- the dimensions and indicators for description or comparison of media systems should be derived from the definition and description of the main concept

- the definition and the theoretical background is missing, the choice of indicators is intuitive and baseless

- the term *system* invokes an inspiration by the system theory; it is used as a fig leaf covering the theoretical nakedness, a black box from which media scholars pick out particular features and aspects according to their convenience, leaving the concept as a whole without systematic exploration

Is there a way out?

- (a) we can continue in adding new indicators and testing them

- (b) we can try to support the concept of media system with theoretical background, define the key term and derive the indicators from the definition

- theoretical support: social systems theory by Niklas Luhmann

- general systems theory: the transdisciplinary study of systems in general, with the goal of elucidating principles that can be applied to all types of systems in all fields of research

Luhmann's social systems theory I.

- a social system emerges by differentiation from its environment, by reducing its complexity under specific historical conditions enabling this differentiation

- a social system thus does not consist of units and their mutual relationships, but of repetition of the difference "system/environment" (*system differentiation*)

- the complexity of the environment is reduced by the creation of structures and processes

- a social system is an *autopoietic* (self-reproducing) system, producing its units from its units

- its basic unit is *communication*: a unity of three selections: selection of information, selection of utterance and selection of understanding

# Luhmann's social systems theory II.

- the units have a temporal character; they constantly originate and fade, which helps the system manage its complexity

- the system produces its units on the basis of structures, which are relatively stable but able to change

- the social system defines its units, structures and processes on its own, i.e. it is *operationally closed* (there is no circulation of material nor energy between the system and the environment)

- it is *interactionally open*: it can communicate and interact with other systems by means of structural couplings created specifically for these interactions

New definition (derived from Luhmann's theory of social systems)

- *media system*: a functional subsystem of a social system, fulfilling the task of self-observation of society and production of social memory

- it emerged by reduction of the complexity of its environment; media communication as a reduction of general communication within a social system

- it reproduces its units on the basis of stable structures (structures of selection of information and selection of utterances)

- it is interactionally open, it reacts to and interacts with its environment by means of specific structural couplings

- no goal in a teleological sense; its goal is to keep autopoiesis working: (1) via protection of its autonomy in face of its environment, (2) via support of understanding, and (3) via building trust of the public in a truthful depiction of reality

Media system and its environment
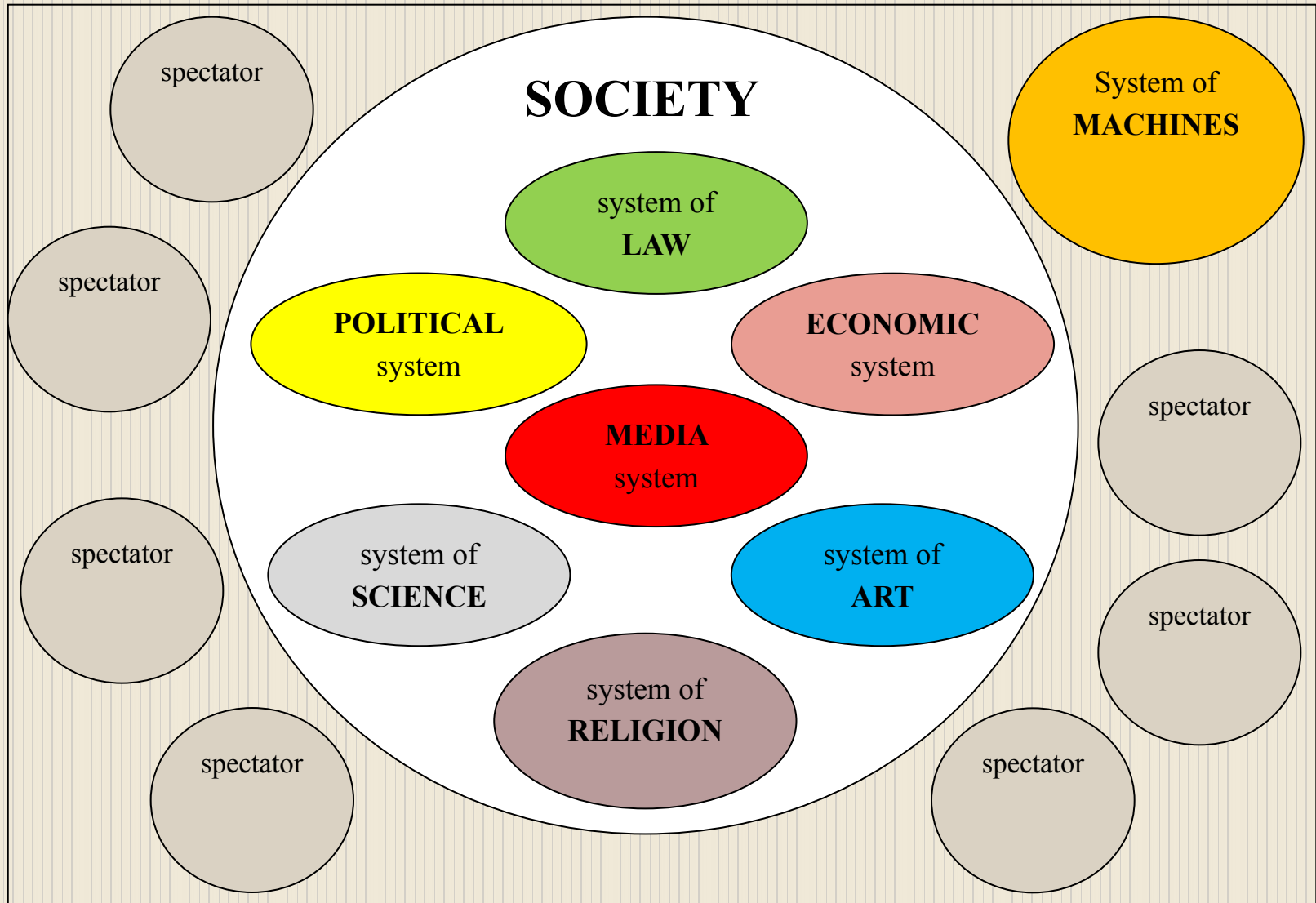
Axes for description/comparison of media systems

- (1) the genesis of a media system, the process of its differentiation from its environment (and the conditions which enabled it)
- (2) the process of autopoiesis of media system: (a) selection of information, (b) selection of utterance, (c) self-description
- (3) relationships with its environment: (a) with psychic-organic systems (audience), (b) with the system of machines, (c) with other subsystems of the social system
- (4) autopoiesis preservation: (a) destruction from the environment, (b) defects in the creation of understanding, (c) erosion of trust of the audience in truthful depiction of reality

Application to Hallin and Mancini's model

- Hallin and Mancini: *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004)

- a framework for comparative analysis of the relations between the media and the political system in 18 West European and North American democracies

- 4 main indicators, 3 models: the Liberal model (Anglo-American countries); (2) the Democratic Corporatist model (Northern Europe); (3) the Polarized Pluralist model (Mediterranean Europe)

Media system according to Hallin and Mancini		Media system derived from Luhmann's social systems theory
1. Development of media markets	→	Differentiation of the media system from its environment
2. Political parallelism	→	Structural coupling with political system
3. Development of journalistic professionalism	→	Construction of journalism as a profession (one of the means of autopoiesis preservation)
4. Degree and nature of state intervention in the media system	→	Structural coupling with political system

Conclusion

- the advantages of a media system model based on Luhmann's social systems theory:

(1) it analyzes the media system itself more in detail

(2) it considers a wider environment than a political system, which enables a subtle analysis of mutual relations in social system

(3) it is not based on a collection of empirical indicators which are valid only for selected media systems, it is based on general concepts, so its application is not limited to one selected socio-cultural area

(4) it avoids the dichotomy mediocentrism/sociocentrism

Thank you for attention.