

# How can journalism studies benefit from a systems theoretical approach? Luhmann's systems theory applied to journalism

Regina Cazzamatta<sup>1</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7162-3219>

I - Universität Erfurt  
Thüringen. Germany.

**Abstract:** This paper aims at introducing the theory of social systems (derived from the differentiation theory) by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann and discuss its application to journalism studies. While systems theory has been considered the mainstream of journalism research in Germany since the 1990s, renowned Brazilian textbooks do not even mention Luhmann's framework and further efforts to model it amidst journalism research. As this perspective is still not well established in Latin America, we seek to highlight the benefits of employing such an approach in journalism studies. Since journalistic routines, roles, and organizations are being radically challenged, definitions and delimitations derived from systems theory can be handy to describe and analyze such structural changes.

**Keywords:** Luhmann; systems theory; journalism theories; differentiation theory; the German research tradition.

**Resumo:** Como os estudos em jornalismo podem se beneficiar com a teoria dos sistemas? A teoria de Luhmann aplicada ao jornalismo - Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar a teoria dos sistemas sociais (derivada da teoria da diferenciação) do sociólogo alemão Niklas Luhmann e discutir sua aplicação ao campo jornalístico. Enquanto na Alemanha, a teoria dos sistemas é considerada dominante na pesquisa em jornalismo desde os anos

90, renomados livros didáticos brasileiros nem sequer mencionam a teoria de Luhmann e os esforços de autores posteriores em modelá-la ao jornalismo. Como essa perspectiva ainda não está tão bem estabelecida na América Latina, esperamos destacar os benefícios de empregar tal abordagem nos estudos de jornalismo. Como rotinas, papéis e organizações estão sendo radicalmente desafiados, definições e delimitações derivadas da teoria dos sistemas podem ser úteis para descrever e analisar tais mudanças estruturais.

**Palavras-chave:** Luhmann; teoria dos sistemas; teorias do jornalismo; teoria da diferenciação; tradição alemã de pesquisa.

## Introduction

This article aims to apply social systems theory — derived from Niklas Luhmann's differentiation theory (LUHMANN, 2009) — to journalism and discuss the advantages of a systems theoretical approach to the field. Within this framework, journalism is described as a societal system that fulfills a specific function for society, i.e., it goes beyond the sum of individuals and their actions. From this perspective, one can observe the boundaries and interactions of journalism with other societal systems (economics, politics, law) and deduce a functional definition specifically for journalism (GÖRKE, 2008). The examination of the boundaries between journalism and its environment has become even more pertinent since the function journalism fulfills within and for society has been strongly disputed (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004; SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). Since journalistic routines, roles, and organizations are being radically challenged, definitions and delimitations derived from systems theory can be useful to describe and analyze such structural changes. In addition, systems theory can be helpful for empirical research by constructing samples based on clear differentiation between journalism and other forms of public communication (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006).

Luhmann developed a post-Parsonian systems theory (a branch of general differentiation theory) that provides a compelling and convincing framework to identify and distinguish journalism (HANITZSCH, 2005). His work has been well received in German-speaking communities, but it is still not extensively known internationally due to a lack of translations. His posthumous publication *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*, for instance, is still not available in English. Translations available in Portuguese are mostly related to sociology (RODRIGUES; COSTA, 2018), especially in legal theory. A second and perhaps most reasonable explanation is the complexity of Luhmann's

theory. It requires a high level of abstraction that challenges the ordinary comprehension of hypotheses oriented research (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019).

Due (at least in part) to the reasons described above, the reception of Luhmann's ideas has not been widespread in Brazil (OLIVEIRA; MAIA, 2018). This is especially true within the field of media, if one compares it to, for example, the repercussion of Jürgen Habermas's work. For instance, well-known compilations of journalism theories in Brazil (TRAQUINA, 2020a, 2020b) do not even mention the work of Luhmann or its application within the field of journalism. The impressive collection of communication theories — *Teorias da Comunicação, Hoje* — by Ciro Marcondes Filho (FILHO, 2016, p. 21–23) dedicates a subchapter to Luhmann's contextualizing the high improbability of communication. However, the focus is on developing communication theories and not applying systems theory to journalism. Marcondes Filho has also published one of the most relevant articles dealing with communication and political action based on the comparison of Habermas' and Luhmann's theoretical approaches (MARCONDES FILHO, 2008). Other compelling academic publications discuss Luhmann's ideas about communication studies, but are not necessarily directly applied to journalism. Some focus on specific aspects of Luhmann's thoughts, such as the improbability of communication and symbolically generalized media (QUIROGA; TORT, 2013), while others scrutinize Luhmann's understanding of the public sphere and the democratic process (FERNANDES, 2015).

In Latin America, media and communication studies are strongly marked by the consolidation of cultural studies around the 80s, the movement for social change of the 90s, and the spread of community and alternative media at the dawn of the new millennium (PERTIERRA; SALAZAR, 2020). In Germany, on the other hand, functional systems theory is the "mainstream of journalism research" despite the existence of other theoretical perspectives. "In contrast to earlier approaches of journalism theory, systems theorists are not primarily interested in what a (journalistic) individual does in society, how he acts and takes decisions, but how different social systems perform different functions for society at a higher level" (LÖFFELHOLZ; QUANDT; THOMAS, 2004, p. 181).

Due to the dearth of journalistic analyses of Luhmann's ideas, this article aims to discuss the advantages of employing a systems theoretical approach to journalism research and to argue why journalism studies can benefit from

the social systems theory. The paper may provide a significant contribution to delineate the boundaries between communication and journalism, a point that has been prominently discussed for decades in Brazilian communication studies. This article draws on several existing approaches to the systems theory and thus is not innovative in nature. However, it has a high potential for impact within the Brazilian academic community to innovatively address critical issues related to journalism. Thus, this paper will first introduce the fundamentals of Luhmann's general theory of social systems, presenting its main instruments. Then, we will display how Luhmann applies this approach to mass media in his book "*Die Realität der Massenmedien*" and the repercussion this work prompted among academics. Afterwards, we will discuss how scholars applied and adapted Luhmann's framework to journalism. Finally, the paper closes with a discussion regarding the benefits of employing systems theory in journalism research and how to advance theoretical aspects given the rapid and constant changes in journalism.

### **Key fundamentals of Luhmann's systems theoretical approach**

Considering the complexity of Luhmann's theory and the broad horizon of his analyses, this subsection will condense a few critical elements of his society's theory, especially the ones that will be essential to comprehending his thoughts regarding the mass media system (LUHMANN, 2009 [1996]). The main idea is to review his general conceptualizations applied to journalism, as proposed by the next-generation media theorists (BLÖBAUM, 2004; GÖRKE; KOHRING, 1996; GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006; MARCINKOWKI; BRUNS, 2004). In this sense, we are not aiming for completeness, and as such, we have made omissions.

### **Primary assumptions**

The central premise of systems theory is that "social systems operate autonomously based on the functional differentiation to their environment" (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). Based on this distinction, the system acquires its unity and operations (BORCH, 2011). This contrast between the system and its environment is called 'functional differentiation' and minimizes environmental pressures by constructing complex internal structures to deal with it. In Luhmann's words, the system 'is' nothing but the difference to its environment (LUHMANN, 1995a), and its function is to solve specific problems within and for societies (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). Luhmann's super-theory investigates how social order is possible in society and observes it scientifically.

## Autonomy and autopoiesis

Oriented to the work of the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, Luhmann uses the concept of “*autopoiesis*” (production and reproduction of systems’ fundamental operations) to describe the recursive performance of self-referential systems. In other words, autopoiesis means the self-production and copy of communication in social systems and consciousness in psychic ones. In his words, autopoietic systems “not only produce and change their structures” but “everything that is used as a unit by the system is produced as a unit by the system itself” (LUHMANN, 1995a, p. 3). Autopoiesis refers solely to the system’s operational level and does not implicate environmental disentanglement. In summary, social systems are self-referential, self-organizing, and self-reproducing. “It is possible to determine a specific mode of operation that is found only in that system” (BARALDI; CORSI; ESPOSITO, 2021, p. 38). “*Social systems’ autopoiesis is based on their elementary components, which are communication*” (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). Social systems exist by establishing boundaries against their environment, the central premise of autonomy. However, autonomy should not be confused with autarky, which implies that social systems cannot be influenced by their environment. In another way, Luhmann sees social systems as closed concerning their function and basic operations, but open structure-wise. One can understand the system’s autonomy as the self-determined selection of environmental influences (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019).

The radical consequence of the concepts of autonomy and autopoiesis is the “removal” of the consciousness, the subject, the individual, or the actor. More precisely, the subject is placed in the psychic systems and hence in the environment of social systems. Luhmann deconstructs the subject into systems references. There is no room for methodological individualism, but rather societal holism. Luhmann’s systems theory replaces the subject with a reality composed of self-referential systems and observable operations, i.e., people are excluded from social systems. This paradigm shift, this interruption of the subject-theoretical tradition, is one of the most controversial of Luhmann’s postulations: **only communication can communicate**.

Of course, one can still say that human beings act. But since that always occurs in situations, the question remains whether and to what extent the action is attributed to the individual human being or the situation. If one wants to bring about a decision of this question, one must observe, not the human being in the situation, but the process of attribution (LUHMANN, 1995b, xlv).

## Structural Coupling

Modern societies, unlike pre-modern societies, are functionally differentiated. This means every modern societal system fulfills a specific function while avoiding redundancy. One societal system cannot perform another's function. This makes modern society, on the one hand, highly effective in solving its problems (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). On the other hand, it makes modern societies vulnerable since no other system (such as religion in pre-modern societies) controls the others from above. Thus, societal systems are **structurally coupled** (i.e. they set up relations of mutual observation of autopoietic systems, relying on each other complexities to develop internal complexities) and interdependent (*ibidem*).

Be that as it may, it is crucial to notice that self-selection and the system's autonomy are not contested by the concept of structural coupling or interpenetration (LUHMANN, 1995b, p. 214). In addition, there is no hierarchy of sub-systems of society and, in particular, no representation of the whole by any of its parts. For instance, politics exist among other functional systems of society, and although this system enables collective binding decisions, it does not take center stage or lie above other economic or legal ones. The economy is also not considered a basic dominant system, as posed in Marxist terms (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). Such hierarchy would be incompatible with the assumptions of functional differentiation and operative closure (self-referentiality and autopoiesis) of the systems (ALBERT, 2016). Even though Luhmann's theory also deals with politics, it is not a political one. For the sociologist, such a theory would be a "reflexive self-description of and within the political system" (*ibidem*).

## Radical constructivist epistemologies

Social systems are not an ontological component. They are stringently observer related, either through self-observation or an external observer, such as scientists or journalists (SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). Here Luhmann replaces the classical distinction between 'closed' and 'open' systems "*by the question of how self-referential closure can create openness*" (LUHMANN, 1995a, p. 9). After this paradigm shift, it is possible to consider self-description, self-observation, and self-simplification amidst systems. Thus, after this change, it is feasible to discern the system-environment differentiation from an observer's perspective (let us say a journalist) from the system-environment distinction as applied by the system itself.

Reflexive relationships of this type don't just revolutionize the classical subject-object epistemology, don't just de-dogmatize and 'naturalize' the theory of science: they also produce a very much more complex understanding of their object via a very much more complex theory design (LUHMANN, 1995a, p. 9).

## Communication

Communication is deemed a triple chain of possibilities selection and not a simple matter of utterances. Social systems can solely observe meaning, oriented to different codes and programs. Function systems differentiate themselves according to specific codes and particular symbolically generated communications (ALBERT, 2016; GÖRKE; KOHRING, 1996; LUHMANN, 1995a). The key mechanism is the binary coding of each system, for instance, the possession or absence of power within the political system or the code legal/illegal within the legal system. In other words, functionally-differentiated systems are specialized into a specific kind of communication, determined by their particular codes (BECHMANN; STEHR, 2011). Functional autonomy enables modern society to be effective but obliges each system to observe other systems' active operation.

Luhmann describes communication as a "three-part unity" (LUHMANN, 1995b, p. 142) — information (information selection from a range of meaning possibilities); utterance (a quote from a range of deliberate actions, why the selected information is pronounced), and understanding (the observation of the difference between information and utterance/the pronounced information should be comprehended by others). This distinction between information and the act of utterance offers an extensive analysis potential. Both selections demand meaningful interpretation of the communicator.

In short, society is produced and reproduced by communication (not by people or actions), i.e. a social system is composed of communication (the fundamental unit of the system self-constitution) and their attribution of activities (team of self-observation and description). The following section will discuss how Luhmann applied this theoretical framework of operationally closed systems to mass media.

## The reality of mass media

The publication of "The Reality of Mass Media" (1996) is considered a critical point since Luhmann, for the first time, described mass media as "one

of the functional systems of modern society, which like all others, owes its increased effectiveness to the differentiation, operational closure, and autopoietic autonomy of the systems concerned" (LUHMANN, 2009 [1996], p. 17). The book prompted several discussions within the media themselves, which reacted contrarily to Luhmann's ideas (BECHMANN; STEHR, 2011). The author proposes a mass media system based on three program areas: news/reporting, advertisement, and entertainment (LUHMANN, 2009). Based on "operational constructivism," i.e., a perspective that does not deny the existence of an external reality but considers it inaccessible to the observer, the book's core message refers to the dual function of mass media.

The first 'reality of mass media' alludes to not reflecting an image of reality they have observed. On the contrary, media manufacture a reality that they communicate daily in the news, advertisement, and entertainment. This constructed reality through sense-making results from a selection process, but it could still hold its legitimacy if we know how these realities are produced, created, and consumed (LUHMANN, 2009, p. 9-18). Such an assumption has radically reshaped the perspective of mass communication research. Luhmann is interested in the way media construct rather than distort realities. Such distortion would presume an ontological, objective, and accessible reality that could be approached without constructions (*ibidem*). What emerges in the media as reality is merely their creation. The second reality of mass media, in turn, applies to their structural sequence of operation, i.e. their sequence of observing the process that generates reality for themselves and others. In Luhmann's words, "[w]hat we now observe is a doubling of reality which takes place in the observed system of mass media" (LUHMANN, 2000, p. 4). Hence, mass media can distinguish between self-reference (present in every mode of operation) and other external references (*Fremdreferenz*) related to contexts and environments. Topics and themes build the medias' memory, which produces a background reality for other communication (LUHMANN, 2000, p. 97), but they also comprise the structural coupling to other systems in society.

Luhmann considers the invention of dissemination technologies (print, radio, television, and the Internet) the crucial development for mass media system differentiation. The author defines *mass media* as "all those institutions of society uses technical means of reproduction to disseminate communication" (LUHMANN, 2000, p. 2). However, the most crucial requirement is that "no interaction can take place between sender and receivers in the presence of

*both*" (*ibidem*). As in other functional systems, a binary code produces and constantly reproduces the sequence of operations in the system and the difference between the system and its environment. In mass media, this form of communication is determined by the specific code information/non-information (LUHMANN, 2009, p. 28), but this will be open for discussion, as we will see in the following sections. The code information/non-information complements our understanding of journalism but seems unsuitable to advertisement or entertainment (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006).

Apart from creating a social memory that enables communication to continue, the *function* of mass media consists of "directing self-observation of the social system" (LUHMANN, 2000, p. 97) by communicating to their audience events chosen according to the code information/non-information. Despite the critics that we will address in the following section, Luhmann's perspective of mass media impacts the field in three main aspects (BECHMANN; STEHR, 2011). First, the author breaks up the causal relationship between mass media and society, which searches for direct effects from deliberative media manipulation. Media influence public opinion by setting and framing the public agenda. Thus, there is no immediate impact. His second contribution is acknowledging that media does not convey "the" truth but instead structure the day's topics and secure new information. Mass media is a selection of recursive, self-referential communication programs, and its function is not conditioned by external values such as fairness and objectivity (LUHMANN, 2009). Lastly, assuming media work selectively, they do not need to mirror but rather construct their reality.

### **Critics from media and communication scholars on the reality of mass media**

The systems theory proposed by Luhmann has inspired many adaptations for empirical journalism research, especially among German-speaking scholars (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). His theoretical concepts and tools have generally been well received, although a few specific reflections on mass media have been strongly criticized. Görke (2008, p. 178–179) points out four foremost critics concerning Luhmann's theory of mass media, highlighting a few contradictions derived from Luhmann's previous work itself (section 2). First, the definition of mass media based on communication without interaction as a boundary criterion for a social system is inconsistent with social systems theory. Görke (2008) argues that interaction is not unusual in other systems

(political, economic, or even legal systems), so why should mass media be the only system excluding exchange? Besides, non-interaction communication also happens in other systems (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006).

Second, technique as a demarcation principle seems contradictory. Using “Luhmann against Luhmann”, Görke (2008, p. 178–179) clearly states — “technology as a limiting criterion does not make sense.” Luhmann distinguishes the mass media system employing communication mediated by technical distribution (print, the radio, TV, the Internet). The problem here is not necessarily the separation between mass and interpersonal communication but the contradiction in systems theory. According to Luhmann himself, the only way to delineate a functional system's boundary is to identify sense-meaning structures (themes, generalized symbolic communication), i.e. the function of the system. Third, the use of the code information/non-information seems problematic because the term ‘information’ concurrently indicates one of the three selection steps that Luhmann defines as communication (see above). In other words, wherever contact occurs within society and their social systems, information selection also happens. Information is part of communication in a broader sense. (GÖRKE, 2008, p. 178). Fourth, as previously discussed, Luhmann considers journalism as one of the programs of mass media alongside advertising and entertainment. However, Luhmann does not persuasively justify what the three areas have in common to compose a social system with shared boundaries and environments (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006; SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019). Thus, according to the critics, the three programs carry out different functions and therefore should be differentiated from each other (*ibidem*).

## Systems theory applied to journalism

Although Luhmann has applied the differentiation and systems theories to mass media, the sociologist has not conceived a specific journalism theory. He was never primarily interested in describing journalism's function, but rather how a differentiated society can share a common reality (KOHRING, 2016). Manfred Rühl (1969) was the first German scholar to highlight the systems theory's advantages in describing journalism. Rühl's work was a benchmark in German journalism studies since it was the first publication focused on organized social systems and not journalistic individuals. To identify journalism and distinguish it from other highly complex social systems such as advertisement and public relations, it is necessary to locate journalism's

exclusive function. Rühl (1980, p. 319) identifies its primary function as producing and presenting public communication topics. After a few modifications in the definition, Rühl (2008) describes the process of journalism as

asserting selected and varied themes of persuasive (sometimes manipulative) communication, deliberately improving world population readability, comprehensiveness and transparency". [...] "Primarily journalism re-analyses sensemaking themes and information in interdependence with societally accepted norms and values [...] (RÜHL, 2008, p. 32).

According to Kohring (2016), a system-theoretically-oriented theory of journalism looks "*for communicative boundaries that make sense*" (KOHRING, 2016, p. 168). When one thinks of journalism as a functional social system (i.e. autonomous and self-determined), the following questions arise: a) can one describe and define journalism and the journalistic system's environment comprehensively? b) can one determine a meaning dimension that fits the journalistic communication exclusively? c) What is its derived generalized symbolic communication (binary code)? d) What is the social function of journalism, and which social problem needs to be solved with the formation of a journalistic system? (KOHRING, 2016). In short, from the differentiation and systems theories' stances, one needs a social problem that must be solved to answer the question of sensemaking. Only by addressing this issue can one draw the (communicative) boundary between the (journalistic) system and its environment. According to the premise of differentiation theory, increasing complexity, selectivity, and contingency of modern society demand functional differentiation of social systems (politics, law, science, and journalism). Each performs a crucial function to keep the social order (HANITZSCH, 2005).

An extensive systems theoretical debate emerged in German journalism studies in the 90s based on the dissertation of Marcinkowski (1993). Oriented to Luhmann's differentiation theory, the author (1993) discusses not journalism but "*Publizistik*" as a functional social system, describing journalism as a product of the publishing system's internal differentiation, i.e., its subsystem. According to his perspective, the public would be part of the system "*Publizistik*". Still, the functional system is journalism's internal environment. Thus, journalism is considered independent from the audience despite structural coupling regarding attention. The proposed binary code would be published not-published. However, as Scholl & Weischenberg (1998) put it, there

are a few imprecise terminologies in Marcinkowski's work, and it seems that, in practice, the entire observation of the publishing system derives from journalism. Besides this, the differentiation between journalism and other non-topical publishing forms such as books is not provided.

Blöbaum (2004) argues that journalism has flourished in the course of its history as a functional system of modern society, developing its structure in the form of journalistic organizations (mass media, media corporations, and newsrooms), programs (research, selection, presentation, and coordination), and roles (journalistic and public). The author describes its primary function as the mediation of topical information. Like any other social system, it consists of communication, and must decide among a profuse information flow which data will be deemed relevant or irrelevant (BLÖBAUM, 2016). The author's perspective emphasizes the relative autonomy of journalism without denying that journalists work under constraints. However, these limitations are understood as environmental influences from the systems theory. In this sense, the journalistic system is connected to its environments differently, which can be a problem. However, these interdependencies or structural coupling between system and environment are fundamentally perceived from their importance for structural changes in journalism (BLÖBAUM, 2016). The comprehension of journalism as a functional social system provides different positions within journalism research concerning the system design and its generalized symbolic media of communication (binary code). Some scholars also place journalism as a subsystem of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) or public communication.

Like any other social system, journalism operates to a large extent autonomously or — in terms of the systems theory — self-referential and autopoietic. Hence, the journalistic approach has to decide, using a binary code or its guiding distinction, which topics are to be communicated in the journalistic system and belong to its environment (MEIER, 2007). The binary code is the pre-condition of journalism, but its definition varies within the literature — information/non-information (Blöbaum, 1994; Luhmann, 2009 [1996]), published/not-published (MARCINKOWSKI, 1993), multi-system association/no-multi-system association (KOHRING, 1997), actual/not-actual (GÖRKE, 1999) or reported/not-reported (WEISCHENBERG, 2014). Autonomy, however, does not exclude contact with the environment. A stimulus from outside can initiate self-change, according to its internal logic. "From the perspective of structure or 'programs' systems are open to the environment" (GÖRKE;

SCHOLL, 2006, p. 648). Structural change is a fundamental feature of social systems. By adjusting structural elements, social systems adapt to their environment. As mentioned earlier, this ability to interact and modify structures described as “structural coupling” allows innovation (BLÖBAUM, 2004).

According to Matthias Kohring (2016), this self-observation formula to describe journalism’s primary function in the course of its theoretical development is coherent and reasonable. However, most theory attempts employ an “indefinite, vague concept of information” (KOHRING, 2016, p. 170). Like Marcinkowski (1993), the sociologist Jürgen Gerhard (1994) defines the system’s function as a self-observation of society, but he specifies the concept of information further. The author categorizes the public sphere as a social system. The function of self-observation is described as the production of attention to specific topics or relevant themes for society. Attention versus non-attention is the proposed binary code (GERHARDS, 1994, p. 87–89). However, according to Kohring (2016), drawing attention to specific topics is the fundamental condition for successful communication within all other systems of society, including advertisement or public relations.

Like Marcinkowski, Gerhard’s conceptualization equates mass media and journalism and does not differentiate between journalism and public relations or other forms of public communication (SCHOLL; WEISCHENBERG, 1998). Thus, just the self-observation of society as a distinctive function would not be sufficient to determine journalism’s boundary meaning. Despite this, it is extraordinary (*ibidem*) how Gerhard’s theoretical advancement connects systems and actor theory aspects to remove essential academic and empirical weakness of Luhmann’s ideas. Gerhard resorts to the theory of communicative action in his description of actors (GERHARDS, 1994, p. 78–81). He speaks of structural restrictions limiting or determining actors’ scope of action based on the concept of constraints, thus enabling the application of systems theory. Gerhard then reflects on systemic activities that correlate with the suggestion to combine macro-, meso, and micro- levels of analysis by the emergence of media messages. Thus, crucial environment influences are systematized according to actors’ impact within the system journalism (SCHOLL; WEISCHENBERG, 1998).

Kohring (1997) also formulates the “public sphere” as a social system. “The functional differentiation of society has led to complex interdependences and influences” (KOHRING, 2016, p. 171). In other words, due to the functional

differentiation of modern society, “interdependencies of functional systems increase, but the integration of functional systems becomes a new problem to be solved” (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). Hence, this functional system has been differentiated to safeguard a continuous observation of events within society to form mutual environmental expectations, not based on the self-observation of the respective system (KOHRING, 1997). In other words, the function of the public sphere system consists of “generating and communicating observations about interdependence, i.e. interdependent and complimentary relationships of a functionally differentiated society” (KOHRING, 1997, p. 248). Journalism in its place is used to describe a dominant service system within the public sphere. It communicates through the binary code multi-system association of events, and therefore the author suggests the code multi-system association/non-multi-system association. Journalism as a functional system of the public sphere performs environmental observations considering if these events belong to several other systems, i.e., they might acquire meaning beyond their design. It orients its decision based on traits such as novelty and relevance (*ibidem*). An event is not reported because it occurred within a social system but because it might (from a journalistic stance) provoke and stimulate resonance in at least more than one other different system (KOHRING, 2016). The author distinguishes himself from other perspectives, such as those of Luhmann, Marcinkowski, or Gerhards, since he does not consider mass media dissemination a crucial requirement for this type of communication (SCHOLL; WEISCHENBERG, 1998). The technical dissemination of communication is not a criterion for the functional system's definition.

Hanitzsch also speaks about a public sphere as a social system to enable “social co-orientation” (HANITZSCH, 2005). However, to differentiate journalism from the other areas of public communication, the author outlines three dimensions. Reporting, entertainment, and advertising may overlap, but the three formats have their criteria for managing information and distinguishing it from non-information. The author adds PR to the model of public communication and classifies the four formats according to information values (factual/fictional) and intended goals.

### **Why can journalism studies benefit from a systems theoretical approach?**

As we have seen, German journalism research has been, to a certain extent, strongly influenced by Luhmann's theoretical framework of functional social systems. The popularity of the approach is justifiable if one considers its

strengths. Kohring (2016, p. 173–174) and other scholars (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006; SCHOLL; MALIK, 2019) have summarized the points of fundamental values in employing systems theory concepts in journalism research.

First, it permits a new understanding of the social meaning of journalistic communication that is not overshadowed by normative assumptions (KOHRING, 2016, p. 173–174). One of the main results in employing systems theory is the renunciation of comparisons between journalistic produced reality and the “real” world since each system constructs its own reality. It is less important to examine if the political system or public relations impacts journalism from the systems theory stance. The crucial question is how journalism responds to the increasing external constraints to keep its identity, independence, and trustworthiness (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). Second, the systems theory equips scholars with terminology much more intelligible than before, enabling a distinction between journalism and other forms of public communication or action.

Third, founded on the three steps of communication (information/utterance/understanding), systems theory provides an original vision of the audience selectivity's relevance. It becomes explicit that the public is not situated within the environment of the journalistic system. On the contrary, the public is a crucial part of journalism (KOHRING, 2016, p. 173–174). Thus, the approach is not focused on the psychological understanding of the effects of media (GÖRKE; SCHOLL, 2006). Fourth, due to the sharp contrast between (technical) distribution media and symbolically generalized communication media (binary code of operation), one requires a strict differentiation between journalism and mass media. For this reason, it can be theoretically asserted that not everything disseminated within mass media can be deemed journalism (KOHRING, 2016, p. 173–174).

### **Changes in journalism, dissolving boundaries and the systems theoretical approach**

While some scholars anticipate journalism's vanishing due to its obsolescence in a radically changed environment, others suggest a new conceptualization of the journalistic system. In other words, the theory itself would have to adapt to these changed conditions (LÖFFELHOLZ; QUANDT; THOMAS, 2004). Blöbaum (2004) also observes that structural changes — in organizations, programs, and roles — will make the definition of journalism and

its boundaries more demanding. Identifying journalism is the challenge of current journalism theory. For instance, amidst journalistic organizations, one can locate several goals that are no longer related to journalism's primary function, i.e., establishing a public sphere. Organizations expect to work cost-effectively and set their editorial goals based on the combination of information, entertainment, and services. According to systems theory's terms, this process can be understood as "evolution" (a radical structural change that challenges the identity of the system). Blöbaum (2016) does not see this process as the extinction of journalism through the loss of its identity. The author considers that a tiny part of journalism still perpetuates its core function, while other elements — advertisement, PR, or economy — assume their function as an interpenetrated unit.

Especially with the advent of the Internet and social media — and their assimilation into societal public communication — scholars have been applying the notion of blurring boundaries of journalism (NEUBERGER, 2009). However, the notion of blurring boundaries or de-boundedness antagonizes conceptualizations based on systems theory since differentiation, i.e., drawing lines of demarcation and making distinctions, is crucial for its theoretical design (LOOSEN, 2015, 2016). Despite this initial hypothetical disruption, Loosen (*ibidem*) defines de-boundedness more precisely under guidance of systems theory. The phenomenon can be clarified regarding the evolutionary appearance of new journalism structures, the co-evolutionary progression between journalism and its environment, and the interpretation (structural coupling) between journalism and other societal systems. The author goes further and differentiates between the term "de-boundedness" (related to daily empirically observed phenomena of blurring boundaries) and "(de)-differentiation" (related to theoretical aspects). The analysis of de-boundedness in Germany has also developed from systems theoretical approaches into journalism. Loosen (*ibidem*), also oriented by Luhmann's ideas, describes journalism's academic changes as an oscillation between differentiation and de-differentiation, classifying it as a (de)differentiated process. The author also argues that "as long as we care about 'blurring boundaries', the underlying boundaries are still a relevant object of matter" (LOOSEN, 2015, p. 76). The crucial question is to what extent other types of public communication threaten the social function of journalism. However, as Pörksen and Scholl (2011) point out, the discussion emphasizing de-bounding processes is mostly a general "catch-all" pronouncement for all changes and journalistic transformations.

The phenomena are mostly corroborated empirically through secondary methods. For these reasons, the scholars suggest levels of analyses to differentiate the phenomena: macro-level (e.g. increasing media concentration and interplay with economic or political systems); meso level (e.g. de-bonding between editorial and marketing departments), micro-level (e.g. the vague distinction between core journalistic undertaking and non-professional ones) and levels of media coverage (the merging of information, entertainment, and commentaries). Even de-bonding between journalistic and public roles, journalistic or user-generated content, production, and reception entails differentiation forms or leads to different forms of general inclusion in journalism. In any case, Loosen (*ibidem*) observes that “laboriously drawn boundaries [...] must be subject to the new discussion under the changed relation of communication in society too and are also, in part, re-defined” (LOOSEN, 2015, p. 78). This fine-tuning of the analytical tools necessarily includes the communication space that emerged with the Internet. The starting point of investigation always involves “drawing lines of demarcation” (LOOSEN, 2015, p. 74), thus defining the system and its environments (mass media, journalism, public sphere, Internet etc.). The analysis relies on structural coupling or interdependencies between systems in a second step. The third phase comprises the question of de-differentiation and the dissolution of previously demarcated boundaries.

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, several scholars have attempted to apply Luhmann’s theory of social systems to journalism, as we have demonstrated. Journalism has been modelled as a social system, i.e., a complex social unity intertwined with other social systems (BLÖBAUM, 2016). Other scholars consider journalism part of an extensive public sphere system (GERHARDS, 1994; GÖRKE, 1999; HANITZSCH, 2005; KOHRING, 1997). Regarding how journalism constructs realities, this is not the result of individuals but the outcome of several communication processes amidst systemic environments (WEISCHENBERG; MALIK, 2008). By employing the distinction between system and environment as a theoretical apparatus, this approach concentrates on crucial functions and journalism structures than individual actors. To what extent journalism performs a complete process for society (either individually or associated with other areas of public communication) is still a current discussion (*ibidem*). Crucial research questions nowadays are related to the border definitions

and delimitations of journalism, which can be addressed by systems theory (WEISCHENBERG; MALIK, 2008).

**Regina Cazzamatta** obtained her PhD in media and communication studies at the University of Erfurt, where she teaches in the English-language master's program MA Global Communication: Politics & Society. She had an international background of academic and journalistic experience. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, she graduated in Communication Studies and had post-graduation in International Journalism from the Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo. Author of the books – *Brasilien-Berichterstattung in der deutschen Presse* (Frank & Timme) and *Lateinamerikaberichterstattung der deutschen Presse: Struktur und Entstehungsbedingungen* (Springer Verlag).

regina.cazzamatta@uni-erfurt.de

## References

ALBERT, M. Luhmann and Systems Theory. In: ALBERT, M. (ed.). **Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics**. Oxford University Press, 2016.

BARALDI, C.; CORSI, G.; ESPOSITO, E. **Unlocking Luhmann**: a keyword introduction to systems theory. Tradução: Katherine U. Walker. Bielefeld: transcript, 2021.

BECHMANN, G.; STEHR, N. Niklas Luhmann's theory of the mass media. **Society**, v. 48, n. 2, p. 142–147, mar. 2011.

BLÖBAUM, B. **Journalismus als soziales System**: Geschichte, Ausdifferenzierung und Selbstständigkeit. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. Organisationen, Programme und Rollen. Die struktur des journalismus in system-theoretischer perspektive. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M. (ed.). **Theorien des journalismus**: ein diskursives Handbuch: [Lehrbuch]. Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss., 2004. p. 202–215.

\_\_\_\_\_. Journalismus als Funktionssystem der Gesellscha! In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; ROTHENBERGER, L. (eds.). **Handbuch Journalismustheorien**. Springer VS Handbuch. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016. p. 151–164.

BORCH, C. **Niklas Luhmann**. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011.

FERNANDES, L. C. DO C. Luhmann e as redes sociais. **Culturas midiáticas**. Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação da Universidade Federal da Paraíba, v. 14, p. 36–47, 2015.

MARCONDES FILHO, C. J. R. M. Comunicação e ação política no contínuo mediático. Luhmann contra Habermas. E nós contra todos. **Revista Galáxia**, v. 15, p. 39–58, 2008.

MARCONDES FILHO, C. **Teorias da comunicação, hoje**. São Paulo: Paulus, 2016.

GERHARDS, J. Politische Öffentlichkeit. Ein system- und akteurstheoretischer Bestimmungsversuch. **KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie**, v. Sonderheft Öffentlichkeit und soziale Bewegungen, p. 77–105, 1994.

GÖRKE, A. **Risikojournalismus und Risikogesellschaft Sondierung und Theorieentwurf**. [S.l.: s.n.], 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. Perspektiven einer Systemtheorie öffentlicher Kommunikation. In: WINTER, C. et al. (Eds.). **Theorien der Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft: grundlegende Diskussionen, Forschungsfelder und Theorieentwicklungen**. Medien, Kultur, Kommunikation. 1. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008. p. 173-192.

GÖRKE, A.; KOHRING, M. Unterschied, die Unterschied machen: Neuere Theorieentwürfe zu Publizistik, Massenmedien und Journalismus. **Publizistik**, v. 41, n. 1, 1996.

GÖRKE, A.; SCHOLL, A. Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems and Journalism Research. **Journalism Studies**, v. 7, n. 4, p. 644–655, ago. 2006.

HALLIN, D. C.; MANCINI, P. **Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics**. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

HANITZSCH, T. **Journalism Research in Germany**. In: III ENCONTRO NACIONAL DE PESQUISADORES EM JORNALISMO. Florianópolis, 2005. Disponível em: <<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.533.9974&rep=rep1&type=pdf>>. Acesso em: 30 abr. 2022.

KOHRING, M. **Die Funktion des Wissenschaftsjournalismus Ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf**. [S.l.: s.n.], 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. Journalismus als Leistungssystem der Öffentlichkeit. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; ROTHENBERGER, L. (eds.). **Handbuch Journalismustheorien**. Springer VS Handbuch. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016. p. 165–176.

LÖFFELHOLZ, M. Heterogeneous – Multidimensional – Competing. Theoretical Approaches to Journalism – An Overview. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; WEAVER, D. H. (eds.). **Global journalism research: theories, methods, findings, future**. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008. p. 15–27.

LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; QUANDT, T.; THOMAS, T. Systemorientierte Ansätze der Journalismustheorie. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M. (ed.). **Theorien des Journalismus: ein diskursives Handbuch**. 2., vollst. überarb. und erw. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss, 2004. p. 180–183.

LOOSEN, W. The Notion of the “Blurring Boundaries”: Journalism as a (de-)differentiated phenomenon. **Digital Journalism**, v. 3, n. 1, p. 68–84, 2 jan. 2015.

\_\_\_\_\_. Journalismus als (ent-)differenziertes Phänomen. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; ROTHENBERGER, L. (eds.). **Handbuch Journalismustheorien**. Springer VS Handbuch. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016. p. 177–190.

LUHMANN, N. **Social systems**. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995a.

\_\_\_\_\_. Instead of a preface to the English edition: on the concepts "subject" and "action". In: **Social systems**. Writing science. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995b.

\_\_\_\_\_. **The reality of the mass media**. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Die Realität der Massenmedien**. 4. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss, 2009.

MARCINKOWSKI, F. **Publizistik als autopoietisches System Politik und Massenmedien**. Eine systemtheoretische Analyse. [S.l: s.n.], 1993.

MARCINKOWKI, F.; BRUNS, T. Autopoiesis und strukturelle Kopplung. Theorien zur Analyse der Beziehungen von Journalismus und Politik. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M. (ed.). **Theorien des Journalismus: ein diskursives Handbuch**. 2., vollst. überarb. und erw. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss, 2004. p. 488–501.

MEIER, K. **Journalistik**. Konstanz; Konstanz: UTB, 2007.

NEUBERGER, C. Internet, Journalismus und Öffentlichkeit. Analyse des Medienumbruchs. In: NEUBERGER, C.; NUERNBERGK, C.; RISCHKE, M. (eds.). **Journalismus im Internet: Profession, Partizipation, Technisierung**. 1. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009. p. 19–85.

OLIVEIRA, D. B. DE; MAIA, V. M. Niklas Luhmann no Brasil: resistências acadêmicas ao estudo da teoria dos sistemas. **Revista Brasileira de Sociologia do Direito**, v. 5, n. 3, p. 157-179, 2018.

PERTIERRA, A. C.; SALAZAR, J. F. **Media cultures in Latin America: key concepts and new debates**. [S.l: s.n.], 2020.

PÖRKSEN, B.; SCHOLL, A. Entgrenzung des Journalismus. Analysen eines Mikro-Meso-Makro-Problems aus der Perspektive der konstruktivistischen Systemtheorie. In: QUANDT, T.; SCHEUFELE, B. (eds.). **Ebenen der Kommunikation: Mikro-Meso-Makro-Links in der Kommunikationswissenschaft**. 1. Aufl ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011. p. 25–54.

QUIROGA, T.; TORT, P. G. Contribuições teóricas de Niklas Luhmann: a improbabilidade da comunicação e os meios simbolicamente generalizados. **Conexão – Comunicação e Cultura**, v. 12, n. 24, p. 41–53, 2013.

RODRIGUES, L. P.; COSTA, E. G. DA. Niklas Luhmann: uma visão sistêmica (e polêmica) da sociedade. **Sociologias**, v. 20, n. 48, p. 300–309, ago. 2018.

RÜHL, M. **Die Zeitungsredaktion als organisiertes soziales System**. Überarb. u. erw. 2. Aufl ed. Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1969.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Journalismus und Gesellschaft: Bestandsaufnahme u. Theorienentwurf**. Mainz: v. Hase und Koehler, 1980.

\_\_\_\_\_. Journalism in a Globalizing World Society: A Societal Approach to Journalism Research. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; WEAVER, D. H. (eds.). **Global journalism research: theories, methods, findings, future**. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008. p. 28–38.

SCHOLL, A.; MALIK, M. Systems theory and journalism. In: SCHOLL, A.; MALIK, M. (eds.). **Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication**. [S.l.]: Oxford University Press, 2019.

SCHOLL, A.; WEISCHENBERG, S. **Journalismus in der Gesellschaft: Theorie, Methodologie und Empirie**. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998.

TRAQUINA, N. **Teorias do jornalismo**. Porque as notícias são como são. Florianópolis: Editora Insular, 2020a.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Teorias do jornalismo**. A tribo jornalística – uma comunidade interpretativa transnacional. Florianópolis: Editora Insular, 2020b. v. II

WEISCHENBERG, S. **Max Weber und die Vermessung der Medienwelt: Empirie und Ethik des Journalismus-eine Spurenlese**. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014.

WEISCHENBERG, S.; MALIK, M. Journalism Research in Germany. Evolution and Central Research Interests. In: LÖFFELHOLZ, M.; WEAVER, D. H. (eds.). **Global journalism research: theories, methods, findings, future**. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008. p. 158–171.

Artigo recebido em 21/02/2022 e aprovado em 18/04/2022.