

Political Power in the Mirror of Mass Media Constructions: The Function of Televised Debates in the U.S. Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the impact of mass media coverage in the U.S. presidential election using the example of the televised presidential debates within the context of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. It focuses on the functional interactions of the structurally coupled social systems of politics and mass media with respect to the representation of public opinion and political power. The article outlines how the debate broadcast constructions are part of the respective operations of both systems and considers alterations caused by social media communication.

KEYWORDS: Systems theory, Niklas Luhmann, mass media, presidential debates, presidential election, U.S. election

When the first presidential debate was telecasted in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, electoral researchers eagerly emphasized the importance of that new form of media coverage for voters' decision-making. As Alan Schroeder points out in the introduction of his study *The Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High Risk TV*: "A revolutionary programming genre burst forth that night in Chicago, one that fundamentally realigned both politics and the media in America" (11). More than 50 years later the format amounts to the second most watched live broadcast after the Super Bowl (cf. Schroeder 282). In 2012, about sixty million people watched each one of the three presidential debates between President Barack Obama and his contender Mitt Romney (cf. Balz 301). At the same time, the assumption that presidential debates still have any significant impact on the voters' actual choice is nowadays heavily disputed. A high degree of pre-debate preparation—including for example a so-called "memorandum of agreement" between campaign negotiators and producers that is supposed to anticipate any contingency of the live broadcast—conveys the overall impression that nothing is left to chance. As a consequence, televised debates are by now often dismissed as scripted and predictable. Schroeder explains that "[t]he genre has been dismissed as contrived, counterfeit, even

countereducational” (292). Thus, for the most part, the analytical focus of psephology has shifted to new forms of web media such as Twitter or Facebook, which are currently praised to be of particular importance in recent U.S. elections as they enable political parties to communicate with potential voters much quicker and more effectively and might thus replace television as one of the key campaign media.¹ Nevertheless, the most recent live broadcasts of televised presidential debates in 2012 captivated the attention of about one fifth of the overall U.S. population. One might therefore ask why the controversial program is still a permanent feature of U.S. political campaigning when there seem to be promising, less precarious, and more direct alternatives for the candidates to reach a political audience, for example, via Twitter or Facebook. In view of high ratings and an enormous amount of international media exposure, the question arises whether the debate format is simply a form of prime-time entertainment rather than political guidance and whether it is, especially in the light of advancing social media communication, actually still relevant for the election process in the United States today.

From Empirical Approaches to Systems Theory

The interpretation of selected empirical survey data predominates in the field of campaigning analysis of the presidential elections both in the field of political research and sociological inquiries. Traditional electoral research practice links collect data on the seemingly stable interests and opinions of different social groups and loyal party voters, such as the data gathered by the famous Gallup Poll. This method, however, tends to be problematic as it often retroactively creates non-verifiable correlations between voter groups' electoral choices and previously collected empirical data. Departing from these empirical methods, the present article takes a constructivist path. It does not focus on individual opinions and statistical data but examines the presidential debates as key mass media campaign events in U.S. elections from a systems theoretical perspective. In doing so, it focuses on the current impact and specific function of the mass media system and the

¹ Cf. Edgerly, Stephanie, Leticia Bode, Young Mie Kim, and Dhavan V. Shah. “Campaigns Go Social: Are Facebook, YouTube and Twitter Changing Elections?” *New Directions in Media and Politics*. Ed. Travis N. Ridout. New York: Routledge, 2013. 82-99. Print.

background reality it creates for the electoral process in a broader social and cultural context.² It seeks to analyze presidential debates as a hybrid program, aiming to illustrate that mass media coverage still remains a highly important source of information for voters in U.S. presidential elections despite increasing social media usage. With the aid of Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems and the concept of structural couplings in particular, I argue that presidential debates cannot merely be understood as forms of mass media entertainment that report on political topics as a sideline. Rather, as I will illustrate, presidential debates also reflect political operations for the political system by giving form to the medium of public opinion. On the one hand, the debate telecasts—in the sense of their media-specific form, their *mise-en-scene*, so to speak—are constructed as information in the mass media system, which operates autopoietically according to its own system-inherent rules. On the other hand, these constructions also provide a framework for second-order observations of political power in the elections that serve as legitimizing processes strictly within the operationally closed system of politics.

Universality and Social Communication

In 1988, the German Sociologist Niklas Luhmann attended the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association and expressed his concern with the purely empirical practice of sociology in the U.S.:

Rather, I wish to draw your attention to certain problems that result from the American commitment to empirical research. As a first problem, the empirical concept of sociology itself becomes unclear precisely when we conceive sociology as empirical research. About what are we going to talk: about people (sociologists), about organizations, about publications? This would lead us to neglect the fact that research is selection, that results are contingent, that sociologists process information that they themselves have previously constructed. ("American Sociology" 253)

² This article provides an excerpt of a comprehensive case study about the structural coupling of the mass media and the political system in the 2012 presidential debates. The line of argument is linked to a media-theoretical analysis of the respective debate broadcasts and newspaper follow-up reporting and cannot be presented in detail at this point. Therefore, this article focuses on a more general observation of the debate format with respect to fundamental theoretical assumptions about the structural coupling of politics and media with regard to U.S. democracy.

By describing all empirical research as contingent reality constructions of social scientists, Luhmann acknowledges the key principle of radical constructivism that considers ontological reality as existing yet inaccessible. Instead of pursuing the legacy of what he called a “science of social facts” (*Society, Vol. I. 1*), Luhmann developed his “social systems theory” based on constructivist assumptions in order to understand how modern society—i.e., a society that is concerned more and more with global issues and can no longer be understood as locally delimited and stratified but decentralized and self-steering—deals with its ever growing complexity. Based on the idea that society does not consist of individual people but of different social systems, which work independently from each other and are functionally closed, Luhmann analyzed the operations of functional systems such as economy, law, science, religion, politics, and the mass media. What makes systems theory particularly suitable for cultural studies is that Luhmann’s considerations about the mass media are directly related to politics, but he does neither simply see the media as a tool to convey political ideologies nor does he conceive television as the instrument of capitalist oppression. Instead, he understands politics and media as two separate social systems with inherent operations that cannot steer each other but that merely observe each other. Rather than practicing ideological criticism, Luhmann therefore observes the functional principles of modern democracies and the role of the electoral process, which makes social systems theory eligible for an analysis of the presidential debates in particular. It must be emphasized at this point that a systems-theoretical analysis of U.S. presidential election does not necessarily contradict empirical studies, but it does not correspond to methods typically employed in political sciences. While empirical studies are typically trying to collect information on voter opinions and media usage through polls and surveys in order to understand and predict voters’ behavior and decisions, systems theory denies that it is possible to know what human beings think, and it completely dismisses the idea that society consists of human beings. Consequently, all observations of society have to be understood as constructions from the viewpoint of their respective systems, not as generalities.

Luhmann’s theory of social systems is based on the assumption that it is universally applicable to modern society/ies, and it assumes a radically different concept of communication, that may not be confused with the traditional two-fold sender-receiver model. Although Luhmann’s observations are mainly focused on social developments in

Germany, he aims for a theory that would be universally applicable to describe and analyze social processes in all modern societies. Hannes Bergthaller and Carsten Schinko point out that:

The universality of these function systems trumps all other principles of social organization (without, however, completely displacing them) and asserts itself irrespective of spatial boundaries of any kind: although it emerged in a European context, modernity is a global phenomenon. Modern society, as Luhmann conceives it, is by definition a “world society”; it has no geographical address. (6)

The greatest benefit of using systems theory for the analysis of U.S. presidential debates, the mass media, and politics in the election may result from its universality. Luhmann claims that his theoretical concept applies to modern society in general and is thus not limited to region-specific contexts or one particular culture. This may at a first glance seem to neglect cultural differences and thus to underrate what cultural theorists generally emphasize as U.S. American peculiarities. However, Luhmann, despite rejecting the tradition of the term culture,³ does not deny cultural differences but understands them as evolutionary contingent second-order observer distinctions used to compare observations.⁴

Social systems theory is based on two key assumptions: first, in accordance with the leading principle of constructivism, it assumes that everything that can be perceived in the world is constructed by observers. Operative constructivism, as Luhmann calls his approach, does by no means imply that reality does not exist, but it cannot be depicted the way it is and therefore only be described by “observers.” Hans-Georg Moeller elucidates this notion: “Construction of reality always implies the reality of construction. Radical constructivism does not diametrically oppose realism. It is a more complex type of realism than traditional forms for it integrates the notions of reality and construction” (*Luhmann Explained* 151). Systems theory, so to speak, anticipates the accusation that shows like the presidential debates are being highly “constructed” media formats and therefore contrived because it understands all perceivable reality as constructed *per se*. Those who reject Luhmann’s

³ Bergthaller and Schinko explain the problematic nature of the term as characterizing social practice as authentic, unchangeable, and incomparable while undermining these claims in the light of possible alternatives at the same time (cf. Bergthaller and Schinko 10).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of Luhmann’s concept of culture, see Baecker’s *Kultur* and *Beobachter*.

theory because it is unable to describe how the world *is* undervalue that it can be used to describe how the world *works*, how society is constructed: “Systematic theory, as opposed to traditional systematic philosophy, is antifoundationalist; it does not attempt to prove its necessity, but to explain its own contingency” (Moeller, *Radical* 6). The question that has to be addressed is not *if* but *how* an observer-relative reality, in this case, the reality of the mass media (which is also the title of Luhmann’s comprehensive media study), is constructed. Second, in order to observe how modern society operates, Luhmann proceeds from the systems theoretical assumption that reality exists and that it features different types of “systems.” Each system operates according to its own specific binary code, in difference to its environment and in autopoiesis. Broadly speaking, this means that they are self-contained and operate structurally closed while observing their system-specific environment. The three main types of systems are biological, psychic, and social systems, of which society is the superordinate social system.⁵ People may serve as references in different social systems’ communications but the systems’ operations themselves and their ongoing functioning do not depend on specific individuals as such; nor do social systems (and thus society) “consist” of a number of individuals but of communications only. Communication is a threefold process in systems theory: “By communication (as by operation), we consequently mean historically concrete and hence context-dependent activity—and not merely the application of rules of correct speech” (Luhmann *Society Vol. I.* 35). For Luhmann, communication is a stringing together of three different selections: the selection of information, the selection of how it is put, and the selection of understanding (cf. de Berg 714). Only if all three steps are accomplished, communication can succeed: “Communication only comes about when someone watches, listens, reads—and understands to the extent that further communication could follow on” (*Reality* 4). Thus for systems theory, successful communication is dependent on the understanding of the fact that something is communicated and that further communication will follow on.

The very fact that Luhmann’s communication model is a threefold process, which depends

⁵ It is absolutely crucial to emphasize that systems are no units or objects that are assembled from elements or pieces but can only be understood as operating in difference to their distinct environment that is produced by the system itself. Luhmann calls this double distinction a “reentry” (cf. Luhmann *Society, Vol. I.* 19).

on the success of all three steps and can only be observed as such if the understanding is accomplished, makes communication unlikely to happen because every step of the communicative process is itself contingent. But if communication is such an unlikely process to happen, how can society still be able to function on its basis? How can follow-up communication be guaranteed? Luhmann's answer is that "media," specifically "communication media," i.e., language, dissemination media, and symbolically generalized communication media, help to increase the chance for successful communication. But since media are themselves invisible, they need to build temporary forms through which they can be observed (cf. Luhmann *Society, Vol. I*. 113-20). All social systems, and by association mass media and politics, operate through communication, but each system uses a distinct binary code by which communications can be determined as distinctions with a positive and negative value and thus be processed as information. In fact, each system only consists of its own operations that serve to preserve the system itself, which is called "autopoiesis." According to Luhmann, society has internally differentiated itself in an evolutionary process by observing both its environment and itself and by operating in distinction to its environment. This implies that both the evolution and the autopoiesis of systems is only possible in difference to their specific environment. Systems may therefore not be understood as fixed units but as constantly operating in difference to what they observe in their environment. Accordingly, social systems such as politics and mass media operate closed off from other systems but they observe their environment. Thus information observed in a system's environment causes irritations in the system which again leads to differentiation. The distinction between system and environment is crucial for an attempt to analyze the construction of U.S. presidential debates in the context of social systems theory precisely because it provides the basis for an observation of operations of both the political system and the mass media system. Luhmann's theoretical concepts and terminology form a vast, complex, and intricately connected network. For the present purpose of interpreting presidential debates in the U.S., this brief and necessarily simplified introduction will have to suffice. In the following, however, I will discuss specific ideas of Luhmann's as I go along.

U.S. Presidential Debates and Mass Media Reality

In order to ask what impact U.S. presidential debates actually have on the mass media system and the political system respectively, it is expedient to observe *how* the live broadcasts are commonly staged and constructed. First of all, presidential debates in the United States today are obviously mass media events in the common sense of the term. While most shows or news are generally limited to certain channels, the presidential debates of 2012, as latest example, were broadcasted live by ABC, CBS, C-SPAN, FOX, NBC, and all cable channels. While the preceding and subsequent commentaries differed from channel to channel, the actual debate telecast was identical and did only differ in channel-specific captions. The debates were also broadcasted live on most public radio channels.⁶ Moreover, all of the nation's most popular and widespread newspapers such *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* covered the preparation and follow-up reporting. Due to this extensive nationwide TV, radio, and print coverage, the debates clearly fulfill the key quality of plentiful distribution of what is commonly described as a typical mass media event. From a systems theoretical point of view, however, mass media communications, i.e., constructions of the mass media as a social system, are not defined by mass distribution alone; they must also meet a set of other specific requirements. Most importantly, they need to be generally accessible for everyone (not just a specific audience) while technology suspends any direct interaction between sender (for example TV channels) and receiver (the audience) (cf. Luhmann, *Reality 2*). More than any other event, these criteria hold true for the debate broadcasts in particular, as Judith S. Trent et al. emphasize: "Political debates, even at the local or state level, attract large audiences. Debates create conflict, the essence of drama. Hence, it should not surprise us that presidential debates attract huge audiences" (283). In contrast to the use of social media communication, which does not fall under the category of mass media communication in Luhmann's sense as it aims for a specific audience moreover works through direct interaction, and only targets small partial public spheres, mass media formats such as the presidential debates reach a nationwide audience.

In a nutshell, Luhmann summarizes his own position: "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media" (*Reality 1*),

⁶ Cf. *The Streema Blog*, Oct.2012.

which implies that the mass media give form to a social background reality and constitute the memory of society (cf. *Reality* 98). This does *not* suggest that all knowledge is mass media knowledge. But the mass media system constructs a reality of topics, not of opinions, which can be observed by all social systems and which serves as the only possible reference of reality available for society, since any reality outside of a social construction cannot be accessed. Thus, “The Reality of the Mass Media” has two meanings: the mass media actually exist as a real entity and as a social system that operates, and this system constructs a second reality for its audience that appears to be real for those who observe it every day through the mass media’s broadcasts and publications. In doing so, they offer a representation of the public. In the medium of the public, to which the mass media give form, social systems reflect on their internal boundaries.⁷ In Luhmann’s own words: “If [...] the system reflects that it is being observed from outside, without being established by whom, it conceives itself as observable in the medium of the public” (*Reality* 104). The mass media system does not produce the public, it rather stimulates second order observations of social systems that can observe how they are observed from outside (what they can observe is always their system specific environment, no external reality) by observing topics in the mass media system and use these observations for their operations. The same holds true for the political system in a special way, which will be discussed in greater detail below in the context of the election as legitimizing process.

In summary, if U.S. presidential debates are staged as a form of program and topic of the mass media, i.e., as nationwide events in the mass media, they a) become part of a temporary background reality of society, and b) they can be observed by all social systems and these observations may be used in the respective system for its operations according to its code. To give an example: the economy, as a social system, observes its environment according to its system inherent binary code money/no-money. And it observes the public to observe how it is observed by observers. When a presidential debate is broadcasted, what matters for the economy are economic topics discussed, such as, for example, the federal deficit.⁸ Whatever information can somehow be observed according to the positive code value (“money”) can be used for the system’s operations while everything else is irrelevant

⁷ Luhmann’s concept of the public is based on a suggestion by Dirk Baecker (cf. *Reality* 104).

⁸ This was actually a broadly discussed point in the first presidential debate 2012.

("no-money"). This simplistic example shows that the forms that the public takes are dependent upon the respective social system that observes it, and it leads to an important follow-up question: how does the mass media system construct information, or, more precisely, how are presidential debates constructed in the reality of the mass media and how are they observed by the political system?

More than Entertainment: The Presidential Debates as Hybrid Media Format

As noted in the introduction, much of the criticism directed towards the debate format refers to meticulous pre-debate preparations. The expectations of presidential candidates and TV-makers provoke conflicts. While political strategists try to anticipate every possible contingency by negotiating agreements on the minutest detail (from the camera-angle to the length of responses),⁹ the media audience wants to be "simultaneously enlightened and entertained" (Schroeder 77). How can the ongoing success of presidential debates be explained against this background?

Notwithstanding campaign advisers' endeavors to eliminate surprise in advance, the actual live broadcast is constructed in the mass media system by the rules of construction of mass media information. That is not to say that previous agreements become invalid but in the live broadcast, the technical framework of presidential debates as well as the questions chosen (which are not announced beforehand) are constructions of the mass media system, not the political system. Like every system, in order to differentiate itself from its environment, the mass media system operates by a specific binary code to remain autopoietically closed and to determine what is relevant for its system specific operations and what is not. In case of the mass media system, this code is "information/non-information," which Luhmann explains as follows: "Information, then, is the positive value, [...] with which the system describes the possibilities of its own operating. But in order to have the freedom of seeing something as information or not, there must also be a possibility of thinking that something is non-informative" (*Reality* 17). It is crucial to emphasize that the negative side of the code does not mean that information does not exist. It is just not of

⁹ Cf. Polsby et. al. (189) for a detailed description.

informative value for the system, therefore, “[...] even the information that something is not information is also informative” (*Reality* 17). Having defined both code and characteristics of the mass media, the question remains how the system chooses the particular information that will or will not be of informative value. It does so by following the specific rules of its different *areas of programming*. These allow for the mass media system to construct information with regard to topics and schemes that link them to other areas of society. Luhmann calls the linkage between systems and other systems “structural coupling”: through structural couplings, systems are mutually irritated. Their operations are dependent on each other; yet their specific mode of operation, their operational closure, remains unchanged (cf. Moeller, *Schwarzenegger* 116). Luhmann differentiates between three main areas of programming: news and reports, entertainment, and advertising—and identifies general structural couplings between these different areas of programming and other social systems. Advertising is dependent on, i.e., structurally coupled with, the economic system; news and reports are coupled with the political system; and entertainment is coupled with the art system (cf. *Reality* 66-68). In view of these categories, a presidential debate is surely a special case because each of these three areas of programming is relevant for the debate format and they are all closely linked to political election campaigns, as Hans-Georg Moeller describes:

Particularly during an election campaign, political media coverage makes use of a number of “mutual borrowings”—televised debates, for instance share some characteristics of all three program strands: they are “prime time entertainment”, they are an important element of the “branding” activities by the political PR managers, and they provide some information on the political positions of candidates. (Moeller, “Absurd Democracy” 124)

Moeller concludes that shows such as the presidential debates are merely entertainment and therefore lead to an “absurd democracy,” in which the most telegenic candidate must necessarily be the winner. The observation however that the debates, as a sort of political entertainment that includes party advertisement, can be attributed to all three areas of programming supports a slightly different conclusion: each of these areas of programming has a specific set of selectors by which its information is constructed that must be taken into consideration. Dirk Baecker emphasizes that observers are constantly attentive on all three levels (cf. *Beobachter* 252); it thus appears to be short-sighted to reduce all communications

of a debate broadcast to their entertainment qualities.

It has to be determined how the conditions of constructions that are guided by the selectors can be observed in the construction of presidential debates. For news and reports, Luhmann names the following selectors: Most importantly, news needs to be *truthful*, but this can of course only apply to system-inherent constructions of the world, that is, to the previously constructed reality of the mass media. Accordingly, the topics discussed in debates should not conflict with what has been observed before so as not to endanger the system's autopoiesis. Although a suspicion of manipulation resonates in all mass media communications, as the selection of information is contingent and could have been a different one, ongoing lies would end society's belief in the reality as described by the mass media. It is still a recurring claim that debate constructions should be both entertaining and enlightening. According to the mass media's need to be truthful at least in terms of news and reports, and thus concerning political topics, it can be assumed that the system has an interest in a constructing debate broadcasts as truthful information to some extent. This applies to the mass media system, its journalists, debate moderator, camera team, etc. It does not apply to political figures like the presidents in the debates, as the political conflict that is staged is political and thus follows, as we shall see, different, i.e., political rules. Second, as news intends to *surprise*, the item of information has to be *new*. As already mentioned, political negotiators try to avoid surprises for the candidates by preparing all details in advance. But in a live broadcast, especially in an audio-visual medium such as television that leaves room for improvisation, politicians are confronted with a high level of contingency.¹⁰ If surprise poses a threat to politics, it must be understood as essential for the operations of the mass media system. Information, once it has been written or broadcasted, becomes non-information. Instead, it produces a deficit. Information requires more information, thus follow-up communications are created, which are necessary to uphold the mass media systems autopoiesis. Moreover, according to Luhmann, broadcasting companies and newspapers prefer *conflicts* and *quantities*, *local relevance*, and *norm violations*, which

¹⁰ Schroeder comes to a similar conclusion: "Although the selection of moderators and panelists has always been subject to candidate oversight, the interrogators have had free rein to pose whatever questions they choose. This freedom generates much of the tension that attends live debates, interjecting the element of surprise into a heavily stage- managed milieu" (177).

they like to mix with *moral judgments*. With regard to these selectors, both the construction of live broadcasts as well as follow-up press and TV stories are particularly “fruitful.” Not only do presidential debates constitute a framework for the most important political conflict in the U.S., they also allow for the construction of follow-up information that morally judges the candidates on the basis of how they have been observed. Systems theoretically speaking, social processes are not actions of individuals but operations of systems. However, the mass media attribute actions to *actors* in order to make norm violations visible. As neither individual actions nor autonomous actors exist in the reality of social systems’ operations, Luhmann describes the function of persons in a social system as being ‘tangible symbols of an unknown future.’ Due to the need for topicality, the news also focuses on *individual cases*. As a special case, Luhmann names the *expression of opinions* as last selector, particularly when the media reflect and comment on their own constructions.¹¹

On the basis of selection criteria of news and reports, it becomes quite clear in which ways the mass media system benefits from the construction of presidential debates. But the question that remains is what effects debates have in the *political* system. The program of news is, according to Luhmann, structurally coupled to the political system as it preferably constructs information that is attributed to politicians or political parties. Therefore the political system likewise uses the news to observe itself:

Politics benefits from ‘mentions’ in the media and is simultaneously irritated by them [...]. News reports in the media usually demand a response within the political system, and this response generally reappears in the media as commentary. So to a large extent, that same communications have at once a political and a mass media relevance. (*Reality* 68)

By going through the selectors of news and reports with regard to presidential debates, a close interlinking with politics has already become apparent. As Moeller emphasizes, election campaigning accommodates mass media coverage in particular. Yet, moreover, it has a functional importance in the structural coupling between politics and mass media, as the mass media enable democratic legitimization under the conditions of modern society. This is a subject, which will return in connection with the political system.

¹¹ An extensive discussion of the selectors of news and reports can be found in *Reality* (25-35).

In difference to news, entertainment uses the information/non-information code to construct a second reality within its own reality. Luhmann mainly thinks of purely fictional entertainment (such as novels or movies), yet TV-shows of any kind count as entertainment. Within this fictional reality, the key selector is narrative *credibility*. Fictional reality does not have to be true, but what is depicted needs to be credible for the audience to accept it. Information that is constructed as entertainment re-impregnates what one already knows and allows viewers to locate themselves in relation to what they observe. Consensus is not important in this process. Therefore, entertainment programs have two effects: they reinforce what is already known as well as what is believed, and they teach the audience second order observations. To specify in Luhmann's own words: "What is demanded of the reader/viewer, therefore, is a trained (and yet, not consciously handled) capacity for making distinctions" (*Reality* 53). If one understands entertainment as a way to reinforce what one already knows, the frequent complaint and accusation that presidential debates are "nothing but entertainment" is indeed compromising the significance of the format.

Similar to entertainment, advertising does not aim to be truthful but moreover even exposes its own untruthfulness in order to motivate people to buy something and is mainly structurally coupled with the economic system. Luhmann describes its potential function in *supplying people with no taste with taste*. To be able to do so, advertising constructs information that is repeated over and over again to supply the audience with selective security (cf. *Reality* 47). While presidential debates may not be advertising of products in the classical sense, they are surely a form of political advertising.¹² According to Luhmann, advertisement openly manipulates, and everyone knows. In a sense, watching presidential debates is watching candidates advertise themselves for the upcoming election day; their appearance in the mass media is self-marketing. Politics is increasingly confronted with the accusation of becoming more and more trivial, especially when it is observed in the media. According to Luhmann, for advertising the principle that "[g]ood form destroys information" applies (*Reality* 45). It might hence be a necessary evil that political advertising in the media, especially during election campaigns, leads to the impression that politics are generally trivialized as they are putting image before issues. But especially live TV is not simply an

¹² See also Schroeder (67).

advertising stage. Unlike pre-produced and pre-selected forms of political advertising such as campaign spots or pictures on Instagram, live debates are dangerous: “For debaters, the risks could scarcely be higher” (Schroeder 135). Nevertheless, presidential candidates expose themselves to these risks and debates are still an inherent part of the U.S. presidential election. It is about time to focus on the mode of operation of the political system in order to understand why.

Political Legitimacy, Elections and Public Opinion.

In his essay “Who is afraid of Arnold Schwarzenegger? Absurd Democracy in the United States,” Hans-Georg Moeller emphasizes the importance of the structural coupling of politics and mass media during an election campaign:

There is a strong symbiosis, a tight structural coupling between politics and the mass media, which, once more, is most conspicuous during elections. The mass media are by far the most important stage for political competition. It is hardly imaginable how this crucial procedure for legitimizing governments could be performed without the mass media. In this quite important respect, the credibility of the democratic process is fully dependent on the mass media. On the other hand, politics are not only “covered” by the media, they are also a decisive factor in allowing or not allowing for the existence of operationally autonomous mass media. (124)

As noted above, the mass media system has a preference for political topics, but how does it contribute to the legitimizing process in the political system? Luhmann’s understanding of politics and democracy is fundamentally different from the idea that democracy equals “the rule of the people.” For Luhmann, modern democracy emerged through internal differentiation of the political system and it does not equal popular sovereignty. Democracy is a subcategory of the political system and works with a similar code as politics does *per se*: “In politics the primary code is constituted by the difference of possession of and subjection to power, or power/powerlessness [...] This is a preference code as possessing power is preferable to being subjected to power [...]” (Brunczel, *Disillusioning Modernity* 145). In a democratic political system, this code is replaced by government/opposition. Politics operates by power/powerlessness (respectively government/opposition) because its function in society is to enforce collectively binding decisions. King and Thornhill explain:

“Power is the necessary medium for the implementation of collectively binding decisions, and it is within the political system that issues which might be resolved by the application of power are addressed” (70). Political power can only be observed in the political system. Power, however, like any medium is invisible and needs to build temporary forms to be observed. Thereby it needs to take symbolic forms, as it is what Luhmann calls a “symbolically generalized communication medium” (Luhmann *Society Vol. I* 190-199; my translation). Like the media money and love, power increases the chance that a message will be accepted as message and that understanding the message will lead to intrasystemic follow-up communications:

Symbolically generalized communication media establish a novel kind of link between conditioning and motivation. They gear communication in a given media area, for example, in the money economy or the exercise of power in political office, to certain conditions that enhance the chances of acceptance even in the case of “uncomfortable” communication. (Luhmann, *Society Vol. I* 121-22)

As the political system of modern society has differentiated into a democracy, power requires legitimacy to be exercised. In a democracy, legitimacy can only be achieved through political elections, thus the meta-code of a democratic political system is *government/opposition* whereby government equals power and is preferable to opposition (cf. Luhmann, *Legitimation* 161). According to Luhmann, democratic elections do not express the rule of the people because they cannot implement concrete personal interests and only serve to determine a political cast. Nevertheless, elections, as they ensure political legitimacy, become the necessary formula of contingency of the democratic political system to maintain its operational closure. The mass media system plays an important part in this process. As described, the mass media give form to a representation of the public that all social systems use for second order observations; for the political system the medium of the public is called “public opinion” (cf. Luhmann, “Beobachtung” 85). It is only due to the fact that politicians and political parties know that they are observed by a political audience that will eventually go down to the ballot, that government and opposition observe their own actions in the mirror of public opinion and thereby reflexively relate to their own actions to which they adjoin new operations. In other words, as the political system does not only consist of parties, politicians, and administration but also of a temporary political audience, every

attempt of politics to align its operations to what voters possibly think by observing the public is again nothing but a system-inherent self-observation of the system's own observation of its environment. It must be, as there is no such thing as access to individual opinions. Instead, what Luhmann calls "public opinion" is an autological observation of the political system:

Thus, for the effective functioning of politics, it is necessary to limit the range of possible political communication. The task of public opinion is to fulfill this function. The selection of the communicative possibilities happens with the help of themes. The public chooses certain themes, which constitute the subjects of political communication, and the themes not chosen are irrelevant for politics. (Brunczel 165)

Being a medium for second-order observations, public opinion is used by government, opposition and audience for operational guidance. In order to be observable, the medium of public opinion has to take concrete forms, "[f]or the relation of the *public and politics*, environmental reference occurs through *public opinion* which is presented by the mass media" (Luhmann, *Welfare State* 60). As noted above, the mass media program "news" is structurally coupled to the political system via topics. The political system understands that it is observed "from the outside" and observes how it is observed in the mass media that give public opinion a form. Public opinion however only belongs to the system specific environment of the political system. It is constructed through the political system's self-observation in the mirror of the mass media: "Public opinion does not serve to produce external contacts. It serves the self-referential closure of the political system, the return of politics upon itself" (216).

In systems theory, public opinion refers not to one consistent public opinion to topics in the mass media that allow for many different personal opinions. Of course, public opinion is not only what is observable in the mass media but can also be observed for example in political protests. Likewise the mass media do not only construct information that is related to political topics. Nevertheless, in modern society, the political system substantially focuses on the mass media to observe a second reality that it can base its operations on. In respect to upcoming elections the political system tries to adjust its operations to what it observes through the mass media and this applies for all observers from within of the system. While the political audience is periodically needed to ensure the legitimacy and circle of power of

the U.S. democratic system in elections, it needs to be motivated to take up the voter role in the process of an election. To reach the highest possible number of voters in the U.S., political parties are dependent on the mass media. Due to the structural coupling with the mass media, political topics and political figures become part of the nationwide political perception. According to Luhmann, especially television serves the purpose of symbolic representations of political power, first and foremost because it facilitates a visual attribution to political figures and contributes to their recognizability. This need for visual representations of power naturally becomes most important in the electoral process, as both the political audience and the political parties need the mass media as mirror of public opinion to observe political operations: government and opposition both use public opinion and see in this medium the other side of politics and themselves. The same goes for the audience: it also needs the mirror although TV today makes the illusion of direct perception possible. (cf. Luhmann, "Beobachtung" 85).

Hence, the political reason for staging televised debates, the reason why all the risks are accepted, arises from an enhanced need for symbolical representation of power in the form of political persons in the political system:

The symbolic generalization of power is used likewise to mark politics for politics as politics, thus, to close the system operationally. Only when political power remains identifiable, certain topics, "issues," and "agendas" can build their own thematic narrative in the political system and can be treated further or be closed, respecting how the matters stand at the moment. (Luhmann, *Politik* 74-75)¹³

Political power can only be identified by linking topics, issues and agendas to persons in whom the electorate trusts as being able to enforce them. While leading figures like a president may not be necessary for the operations that constitute the daily routine of a democratic system, they become important as symbols of power in the election as they motivate people to become temporarily included into politics as voters. Assigning actions

¹³ My translation; original wording: "Die symbolische Generalisierung der Macht dient zugleich dazu, Politik für Politik als Politik kenntlich zu machen, also das System operativ zu schließen. Nur wenn politische Macht identifizierbar bleibt, können bestimmte Themen, »issues«, »agendas« im politischen System eine eigene Themengeschichte bilden und entsprechend dem momentanen Stand der Angelegenheit weiterbehandelt bzw. abgeschlossen werden."

and agendas to “strong” individuals like a presidential candidate reduces both complexity and insecurity in the system. This explains why political parties in the U.S. have made huge efforts in the last decades to construct a recognizable and preferably consistent image of their representative leading figures that the mass media can refer to. As Moeller maintains: “It is certainly a bonus for a candidate if he or she is known – and one can only be commonly known today through the mass media” (“Absurd Democracy” 125). However, being a topic in the mass media also deprives the political system of the control of information construction. When candidates as figures of the political system appear on TV or in the newspaper, the political system’s previously constructed information on a candidate in form of political homepages, newsletters, lectures, social media accounts, etc. is likely to be contradicted by mass media constructions. The structural coupling of topics and schemes does not oblige to consensus; neither on how to depict a candidate in the construction of information nor on how to understand any (follow-up) communication.

In the mass media event of the presidential debates of 2012, both political figures, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, were simultaneously observable as symbolic representations of the government/opposition binary for a large audience through nationwide mass media live broadcasts. TV ratings for one debate alone hit over 60 million viewers in the U.S. in 2012. Thus the immediate exposure of the candidates to a large audience that presidential debates offer is unequalled by any other media event during the U.S. presidential campaign: “Presidential debates are major milestones in the general election season because they directly expose the candidates in verbal competition before millions of Americans” (Polsby et al. 184). Within the political system, the parties can hardly control how their candidates are presented in the actual live broadcasts because they cannot intervene in these constructions. But another “danger,” maybe even the bigger one, lies in the mass media system’s follow-up communications. The mass media system, due to its selectors, has no interest in constructing primarily positive images of the candidates. To the contrary, the system prefers conflicts, norm violations, and moral judgments and thus has an increased interest in morally evaluating the candidates: first, political news are an inherent part of the system’s areas of programming and safely guarantee the audience’s need for more information and the system can thus always build new constructions on the basis of previously constructed political information. Second, presidential elections and especially

the presidential debates are present in all programming areas of the system—news and reports, entertainment, and advertising—and are compatible with the mass media system’s autopoietic operations to a special degree. Third, since politicians are generally expected to be socially and morally flawless representatives, who are capable of solving political problems, the constructions of candidates in the political system can easily be observed *by* the mass media *in* the mass media to construct deviant information that contrasts the positive images constructed in the political system and that might cause a publically broadcasted scandal. Thus the mass media audience’s system-inherent need for follow-up communications concerning these topics (the audience always wants to know “the whole truth”) is increased, as well as the political system’s need to adjust its operations according to self-observations in the mass media mirror of public opinion. Especially in the case of presidential debates, constructing information according to the mass media’s selectors is extremely easy for the system as these events are perceived by the audience as a type of rhetoric battles where one candidate tries to bring the other to show a moral or professional weakness. Of course, debates also stage a political conflict inasmuch as they expose the operational logic of the political system according to the system’s preference code that makes being part of the government favorable to being part of the opposition. For the mass media system, however, who of the candidates will finally end up at either side of the political code is completely irrelevant to its own functional principles because topic-related communications will follow-up either way. Therefore, in constructing presidential debates, the mass media do not communicatively “profit” from one particular candidate “defeating” the other. Instead, it is the contingency of follow-up communications in the live-broadcast construction of a debate and its follow-up communications that are needed by the system in order to achieve the acceptance of its communicative proposals so that further communications can follow. No one would tune in to a presidential debate if the winner could be determined in advance. That is not to say that the media do not produce bias and that individual channels and newspapers are tendentious. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, some key topics (with many different opinions) emerge that constitute the reality of the mass media, the reality of what has to be known in the present. In constructing presidential debates, the mass media system can observe its previously constructed images of political figures and construct new information that either confirm or object the political systems self-observations depending on how the mass media system observes its own constructions

of the debates for which it provides a stage.

Conclusion and Perspectives on Social Media Communication:

The objective of this paper was to observe the U.S. presidential debates from a systems theoretical perspective with regard to two main questions. Do debates make a political difference, i.e., are they relevant for the electoral process, and why are they still broadcasted in the age of internet and social media? Both questions could simply be answered by quoting one of Niklas Luhmann's most prominent statements again: "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media." Therefore, if politics wants to remain a part of society's only accessible reference reality and reach the greatest possible audience, it is necessary that political figures are exposed in constructions of the mass media. Since a democratic political system needs to legitimize its government, it depends on conducting elections and on activating voters. To do so, it is absolutely dependent on visibility and debates, as long as they are both staged and watched, provide the greatest possible public visibility. Let me be clear, I do not want to overemphasize the importance of presidential debates at this point: neither are debates indispensable nor are they responsible for voter's decisions as individual programs. But as long as they are staged, they do make a difference in social systems communications and, as observable mass media information, they ensure the visibility of political power necessary to uphold the autopoiesis of democracy. However, currently many electoral researchers claim that the mass media will no longer be important in elections and see social media as the real "game changer." Democratic elections are necessarily dependent upon media for politics to reach voters. The current trend appears to be towards social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, which enable direct interactions and are therefore no mass media communication in the sense of Luhmann. In 2008, the intense use of Twitter in the Obama campaign caused a sensation and appeared to sound the bell for a new era of more democratic political web communication. However, this social media enthusiasm already dwindled in 2012 due to higher levels of control that were both exercised by political and media organizations (cf. Owen 112). Social media might provide an additional, yet strictly limited, way for systems to observe their environment. But even

though the internet, as a technical medium, increases the speed, the range, and the amount of communication, it is doubtful that social media will be able to replace traditional mass media in the presidential election campaign, at least if the mass media is understood in the sense of a social system. The importance of the mass media cannot be understood if we only think it in terms of technological apparatuses such as televisions or newspapers in the sense of print on paper. The termination of these products has already been predicted. Yet, the evolution of communication media has up to today not resulted in the end of social systems but rather supported functional differentiation. We can already find branches of all popular TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers on the internet. The digital age will therefore not automatically lead to the end of the social system of mass media. To the contrary: in a world in which the amount of communication increases on a daily basis and becomes more and more complex, it is even more important to be able to refer to a shared version of reality. Personally, I assume that we still live in the reality of the mass media.

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