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*Polyphonic Organisations*

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# Polyphonic Organisations

## Introduction

For many years, private companies have been intuitively understood as part of the economy in the same way that political parties are considered a part of politics and museums are considered a part of art. Today, concepts are linked together in ways that create immediate wonder. We have coupled concepts such as “the political organisation”, “the learning organisation”, “the expressive organisation”, “the market-oriented political party“, “investment in ethics”, etc. These concepts seduce us and produce new horizons for the workings of business but they also engender scepticism. Is an investment in ethics really ethical? Is a political organisation really social-minded?

This article asserts that many of society’s systems such as art, politics, and education, have exploded beyond their organisational boundaries, and in effect a large number of new organisations have become aestheticised, politicised, and educationalised. Shell is still a market economic organisation, but it is also a political organisation and thus needs to uphold politics which extend beyond itself and are socially justifiable and in which Shell must follow the logic of politics. Likewise, Shell is also a media organisation with its own PR program that relies on the conditions of mass media. Economics, politics, and mass media subscribe to each their set of values, each their logic, language, and voice. There is no set phrase capable of reducing politics to economics or economics to mass mediation – in Shell or anywhere else. In effect, Shell has become polyphonic. Shell has become an organisation in which many voices collide without a bounded whole, without a firm balancing principle, and without values that constitute a firm foundation. Today, these are the managerial conditions in Shell: to manage without stable anchoring points, without a given hierarchy between the discourses and voices that pervade the organisation.

The example contains the question of polyphony in organisations and the aim of this article is to articulate and conceptualise this problem in order to enable subsequent empirical studies of the specific managerial conditions of different forms of polyphonic organisation. Thus, my question is: How can we perceive of organisations posed in the “grey areas” between different social fields without diagnosing them as deviations from the norm? How can we comprehend their value pluralism? How are we to understand the relationship between organisation and society when organisations can no longer be ascribed to one social system?

The question is not entirely new. Already Cyert & March realised that organisations rarely operate with only one value and more often with more values, which means that decisions cannot be viewed as pure rational calculation (Cyert & March 1963). To Cyert & March the organisation as coalition of interests became the principal metaphor. Since then, the question has displaced itself in different directions, normatively in shape of the current discussion of company ethics as a way to procedurally manage the plurality of values as well as cognitively in studies of clashes between ideas.

However, organisation theory tends to limit itself to the organisation as observation point. Society is simply seen as organisations and their environments. Accordingly, the broader social science studies and sociology are much too often dismissed in the literature and in terms of theory very few organisation theorists provide valid contributions to descriptions of the relationship between organisation and society. The recent evolution of institutionalism is looking for an opening but the name of the trend alone discloses its organisational centrism.

In this article I will propose a social-theoretical perspective on the question of the polyphonic organisation and its managerial conditions based on the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. The article is not to be read as a concluded theory or a fully elaborated hypothesis as much as an inquiring essay. I do not, therefore, arrive at a definitive conclusion but at the articulation of proposals for further research, empirically as well as theoretically.

The line of argument in the following will be founded on a notion of society as communication and nothing but communication. Today, society is functionally differentiated into systems of communication holding each their values and communicative codes. Economy, law, politics, art, and sports are some of these function systems. Throughout the differentiation period specialised organisations equivalent to the separate function systems have emerged. What brings on the polyphonic organisation is the fact that the “natural” coherence between type of organisation and function system becomes artificial, which means that it becomes the task of the individual organisation to define and decide this relationship. The polyphonic organisation is simultaneously linked to many function systems. In effect, organisations are now pervaded by numerous incomparable values and communicative codes, and one of the main managerial issues is the management of this heterogeneity.

## Society as communication

As mentioned, the point of departure is the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. Here, society is viewed as consisting of communication and nothing but communication. The fundamental event in society is seen as communication rather than action.

Luhmann speaks of communication as the unity of three selections: information (what is to be communicated?), form of communication (how is the information to be communicated?), and understanding (how is the information to be understood?). Understanding is not a psychological concept. Understanding designates the way that subsequent communication chooses to link up with prior communication if at all. It is decided by the subsequent communication, therefore, if there is to be communication at all but also how there is to be communication. Communication, as it is, is always open to many connections. One piece of information can be taken seriously or taken for a joke and thus it is for subsequent communication to decide the meaning of the previous communication and the way that the communication is to be continued. However, every connection opens up for a wealth of possible connections that are selected in subsequent communication etc. Thus, communication becomes a recursive flow of possible and actual connections and in such a recursive flow no partaker in the communication can control the communication. The communication gains a life of its own, so to speak, which cannot be reduced to the partakers in the communication (Luhmann 1996, Luhmann 1995).

Accordingly, Luhmann describes systems of communication as autopoietical, a concept borrowed from Maturana (Maturana 1981:21). With this concept he seeks to maintain the systems of communication as independent systems that cannot be reduced to other systems, e.g. reduced to an

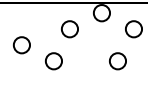
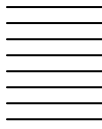
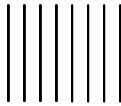
aggregation of human actions. That a system is autopoietical means that it only consists in self-producing elements. All elements in the system are produced by the system itself through a network of such elements (Luhmann 1995: 5, Luhmann 1990b).

Communication always takes place within a social system which is autopoietically closed on itself. Social systems create themselves through communication. They create their own structures, their own communicative operations, and their own environment. When communication communicates, demands are made on the individual to communicate. A system of communication conditions itself, so to speak, as communication within the communication and demarcates itself in relation to other systems of communication. As part of this a social system constructs its own perception of itself and of its environment. The environment becomes an internal construction in the system and through the construction of the environment the system is defined as that which the environment is not. Consequently, there are as many environments as there are systems. Through the internal constructions of the environment other systems are defined as environment as well. The many social systems are able to communicate, therefore, *about* each other to the extent that they have constructed each other as relevant environments, but they are by no means capable of communicating *with* each other. The conditioning of their communication is far too heterogeneous.

## From stratification to functional differentiation

Luhmann believes that our present society is functionally differentiated and that it has moved from a segmental form of differentiation via a stratified form of differentiation to functional differentiation. Form of differentiation suggests a dominant similarity in the differences between the systems at a given time (Andersen 1999: 135-137). New social systems are continually formed and this does not occur randomly. When a new system is isolated, it happens through a differentiation from society as such. Form of differentiation, therefore, is the unity in the way in which systems makes themselves different from each other at different points in time.

### The differentiation of society

Segmental differentiation	Identical sub-systems, e.g. tribes, villages, and families	
Stratified differentiation	Differentiation in uneven layers based on the distinction top/bottom	
Functional differentiation	Differentiation in dissimilar sub-systems that differ from each other with respect to their function in society	

In the segmental form of differentiation society is differentiated into identical sub-systems. There are many social systems but they all constitute themselves in the same way with identical perspective of observation.

In the stratified form of differentiation the social systems are separated by layers such as for example the castes of old Indian societies, or citizens vs. slaves in Antiquity, or king, nobility, peasantry, and tenants of European feudal society.

In the functionally differentiated society we see a marked distinction between function systems and organisational systems. In the following we will focus on the relations between these. Here, function systems can be characterised as systems without social demarcation. They apply to society as a whole and contain no membership requirements. In principle, everybody can participate. By contrast, they are closed in relation to their function, that is, they are closed in relation to the *fact dimension*. The economical system is closed around economical questions, law around judicial questions, politics around political questions, etc. Likewise, the art system is closed around communication about art but it is open in regard to participation. In principle, everybody can partake in the discussion of a work of art (which naturally does mean that everybody receives the same kind of attention).

Organisational systems can communicate within law, art, economy, etc. They are not closed in relation to the fact dimension. On the other hand, organisational systems are closed in relation to the *social dimension*. Organisations are founded on a principle of exclusion: *Everybody is excluded from the organisational communication except for those who have been appointed members by the organisation* (Luhmann 1982 and 1994). The membership limitation, therefore, is central to the autopoiesis of organisations without, however, subscribing to a rigid definition of membership. One is either a member or not a member of an organisation, but within this membership space one can communicate through the functional systems.

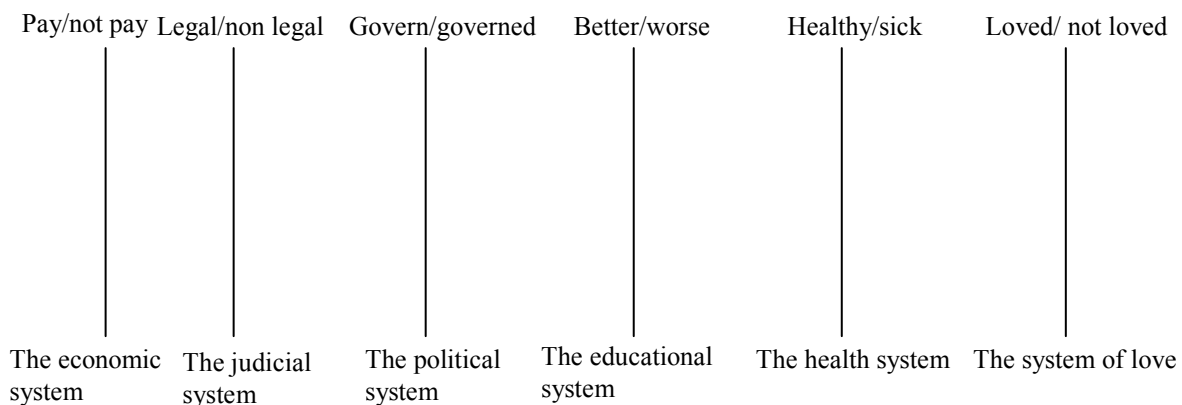
The function systems have evolved over centuries and one of their basic evolutionary conditions is the creation of *symbolically generalised media*. Symbolically generalised media are general in the sense that they can function as media to any kind of communication about anything. For example, everything can be communicated in terms of money. Everything can be priced. Symbolically generalised media are symbolic in the sense that they are condensed around single symbols. If we take the economic function system, the symbol is coins, bank notes, and today also credit cards. The symbolically generalised media establish all communicative codes that demarcate communication on the fact dimension.

Code is understood as a basic and unambiguous binary preference in which a distinction is made between a positive and a negative value. The positive value defines a fundamental striving or motive in the communication without, however, specifying the motive. The negative value of the code serves as a reflexive value and can be used particularly to control the value of one's activities in relation to what was not done or could have been said. In relation to the medium of economy – money – the code is to have/not have, where it is always better to have than not to have. Codes are open to supplements that specify the content of the plus side of the code and thus the expectations behind proposals and consents. The codes, therefore, become mobile structures the use of which changes from situation to situation. The fact that the code is binary also means that they divide the world in two halves. The whole world is comprehensible through the code. In the eyes of economy, the world can be summed up in what I have and what I do not have. Thus, when the communication links up with a symbolically generalised medium it can only link itself to either the plus side or the minus side in the code. There is no third value. This also means that two media cannot be shaped simultaneously. If communication links up through the economic code, then everything is perceived economically. If the code is that of law, everything is perceived judicially. The codes exclude each

other, so to speak. Each of them is a total logicity and a change of code in a conversation implies a change in the entire content and possible continuation of the conversation.

Consequently, society today is differentiated into a wide range of function systems each with their own symbolically generalised media and each their binary codes or logics that rule out communication between the function system. I have tried to illustrate that in the below figure, although it does not include all existing function systems. The function systems have been placed next to each other in order to emphasise that they do not form a hierarchy and do not contain a centre, which can represent society as a whole.

### Codes and function systems



I will briefly go through selected function systems, their media, and codes.

*The economic function system* closes around the function of fixing prices and communicates, as mentioned, through the symbolically generalised medium of money. A single coin or banknote is not a medium but itself a form, that is, a condensed communication. Only the fact that coins, bank notes, etc. are so loosely coupled, the fact that they are immediately interchangeable enables them to function as media for a specific communicative shaping. Thus, money contains no memory of their application. The use of money for food or weapons leaves no mark on the money. Precisely for that reason, money can appear as medium in the communication. Money can circulate over and over again without any decrease in communicative possibilities through new payments of anything. In any payment, money is tied up or shaped through a particular payment with a specified communicated meaning, but because the meaning does not establish itself in the money, it can be recycled in new communication. Money does not smell. But as soon as communication happens through money, it obtains a particular codification. In the case of money this code is, as mentioned, to have/not have or in a more active form to pay/not pay, where every payment simultaneously communicates solvency in one place and lack of solvency in another place. The economic way of seeing the world automatically creates shortage (Luhmann 1994: 230-272). Shortage does not precede the economic communication. Shortage occurs as a result of the binary division of the world into have/not have by the economic code, which, moreover, produces the possibility of economising on the scarce resources whether these be money or as translated into other problems of shortage such as shortage of competency, shortage of food, shortage of oil, etc. As soon as one



realises that it is not possible to simultaneously have what one has and does not have, shortage is unavoidable. Thus, economic communication is closed around itself, which does not mean that economic communication is unable to look into the world and observe other systems of communication. However, these are immediately defined according to the formula of shortage when observed economically. Love, power, art, law becomes something one either has or does not have.

*The judicial function system* employs a particular medium and binary code. The symbolically generalised medium of law is “to govern” as in the expression “governing law” (Rechtsgelden). Symbolically, the medium is recognised as laws, paragraphs, judicial decisions, and rules. The code is legal/illegal, where it is better to be right than to be wrong. Thus, law, as a symbolically generalised medium (and not a single law or case law), divides the world into right and wrong. Together, the two side of the code provide a complete description of the world. Right is always right in relation to wrong and the distinction is not based on something outside itself. Consequently, the very emergence of the code of law implies a separation of morals from law. In judicial communication right is right and has nothing to do with justice. This also means that judicial communication is based on a paradox that appears when law inquires about its own code: Is the distinction between right and wrong itself right or wrong?

The binary code of law produces the assurance that if a person is right, the law is on his side. Uncertainty about the law only exist in a form which in principle can be dissolved with reference to decisions of the judicial system itself (Luhmann 1989: 64). Functionally the judicial system of communication closes around the function of providing against conflicts and securing stable expectation that can survive actual disappointments. This function is expressed through the basic value in the system of justice, which is the desire for social order. The fact that judicial communication is conflict oriented does not mean that law solves conflicts. When the law observes conflicts, judicial communication transforms them into judicial problems about right and wrong. This is all law understands. This is all law can take a position on. The function of handling conflicts also pertains to the definition of rules that enable the law to move conflicts into the law and define them as judicial. This simultaneously excludes the original “substance” of the conflict. The assignment of rights to persons is one of the most important tools the law possesses for permitting conflicts to be transferred into judicial problems. As an example, a conflict between neighbours cannot be taken to court without the proprietary right to one’s house, and if it is taken to court, all that is not relevant to the determination of right or wrong is excluded. Moreover, the judicial communication can even employ the distinction legal/illegal to decide what can be considered judicially, e.g. which facts count as judicial facts (Luhmann 1992).

Law simplifies conflicts and is exceedingly accurate in relation to the distinction between what is within the bounds of the conflict and what is not. The latter is ignored if it cannot be formulated in legal terms. Personal reasons and interests, for example, are irrelevant in conflicts regarding purchases if these cannot be argued legally as valid conditions.

*The political function system* closes around the function of reaching collectively binding decisions on behalf of society (Luhmann 1990a, 2000b). Like the other function systems, the political function system communicates through its own medium and code. The symbolically generalised medium in political communication is power and can symbolically be represented in titles etc. The basic code of the political system is govern/governed or, in other words, superiority/inferiority of power. Under this code, the world is divided into those who rule and those who are ruled, where superiority of power is evidently better than inferiority. Thus, power is the fundamental value and

motivation in politics and inferiority is only valid in terms of reflection: Why are we not ruling? Moreover, the political system contains a secondary codification: that of government/opposition. It is better to be part of government than to be in opposition and an opposition is only conceivable in relation to the position of government (Luhmann, 1990a).

Historically, the code govern/governed precedes the code government/opposition. With the break through of democracy the top of the political system, that is, the plus side of the code (govern), is divided into government/opposition. Hence, democratic political communication is characterised by two codes: govern/governed and government/opposition where democracy, according to Luhmann, is precisely the unity of the distinction government/opposition, meaning that all democratic political communication is linked to one side in the two distinctions. Subsequently, politicisation means a deployment under one of the two codes of politics.

As autopoietic system the political system determines whether something is political or not but once the political communication positions a theme on the side of politics it is under pressure to take action. To avoid action (by means of a law, appropriation, or other interventions) simultaneously communicates lack of control. Thus, the code govern/governed is not symmetrical. There are a considerable higher number of connecting possibilities on the plus side than on the reflexive side in the same way that rejection of action can be used in oppositional communication as inability to act. Thus, the political system contains a logic of expansion.

In more than one way, the medium of power is an interesting medium for communication. The form of power is the unity of disagreement, which means in short that coercion causes the distinction of power to collapse (Luhmann 1979). Power can function as medium as long as it does not turn to coercion. In power communication the governed communicates through action in response to the action of the governing power and the power consist precisely in the fact that the governed is forced to interpret the intention of the governing power. What could the minister have implied with his statement at the last meeting? What is management up to? The governed is governed precisely through self-governing when he attempts to interpret and exercise what the governing power might have communicated. Luhmann speaks of inflation of power as the condition when the medium of power is depleted of communicative potential if the superior position of power needs to resort to force in order to coerce the inferior person into acting in a specific way. There is also a risk of inflation of power if the governing power does not conceal his actual specific expectations. This leaves only one thing to do for the governed. The circulation of power depends, therefore, on maintenance of insecurity regarding the intentions of the governing power.

I hope that the few function systems that I have chosen to describe above demonstrate the principle behind functional differentiation, including the heterogeneous definition of the conditions in the different systems and thus the significance of whether a theme is illustrated from the perspective of one or another system. The different functional systems of communication and their media can be summed up like this:

### Function systems and codes

Code (+/-)	Function system	Medium
Govern/governed Govern/opposition	The political system	Power
True/false	The scientific system	Knowledge
Pay/not pay Have/not have	The economic system	Money
Better/worse educationally	The educational system	The child
Information/not information	The system of mass media	Information
Legal/illegal	Legal system	Law
Respect/disrespect	Moral communication	None
Art/not art	Art system	Work of art
Help/not help	Care system	Care
Healthy/sick	Health system	Medicin
Loved/ not loved	Intimate communication	Passion

The central point is that society today is differentiated in systems of communication that closes around each their function. These function systems are social systems, that is, they have no locality. The economic system of communication exists whenever communication happens through the code to pay/not pay. It does not, therefore, represent a particular “level” or “area” in society but a particular logic of communication. Each function system is autopoietic. They produce and reproduce themselves and only consist of the elements that they have themselves produced. In that sense they are closed to each other. Communication between them is not possible. On the other hand, they can observe each other and be disturbed by each other. But only economy can determine its response to, for example, the political system. Likewise, one can easily imagine events observed by different systems simultaneously, but the events will obtain different significance and in different ways in different function systems. One example could be an advisers’ report from the Economic Council. In the political system such a report will be read from the perspective of the political code government/opposition where the opposition in its attempt to obtain a government position is going to point out all the economic problems and how they express a lack of efficiency in the government in power. In the same way, the government in power will note that “we are on the way”. The economic system will communicate about the report from the perspective of the code to pay /not pay and fasten upon the economic expectations and the effects they might have on price formation. Thus, it will communicate through purchase or sale of, for example, government bonds depending on the formation of expectations. The system of mass media will communicate about the report from the perspective of whether or not the report as a whole or in part can be regarded as information, etc. The external environment appears differently from the perspective of different systems. The world is poly-contextual (Fuchs 1992).

### Organisation as system of communication

On one hand, thus, we have function systems that are factually and functionally closed around themselves. Against these, we set organisational systems, which are functionally open but socially closed. Observed through the guiding distinction system/environment, organisations are systems of communication communicating through decisions. On the level of communication theory, decisions

constitute a particular form of communication that forms one specific distinction in each communicative operation.

A decision is fundamentally communication which involves consideration of social expectations. Decisions are aimed at all the expectations held by members of the organisation in relation to each other. Decision communication is not the communication of these social expectations as such but precisely a *consideration* of the many different and maybe opposing social expectations in the organisational communication. Decisions do not determine the future. Decisions create and fulfil in the present the existing expectations among the members of the organisation of what is going to happen in the organisation, their individual tasks and, not least, what is to be expected from future decisions. Hence, decisions create social expectations of subsequent decisions.

In the light of the decision, “before the decision” stands out as the point of *open contingency* in respect to which social expectations among the members will dominate in the future. That is, the decision defines “before” as the point when a variety of different solutions to a particular situation were conceivable, the point when much could still be changed. After the decision, this contingency, this openness in respect to the end, appears in a fixed form, that is, by the possibility of having reached a different decision. Only one conclusion was reached but others could have been chosen. What could have been changed is now established. We could have done one thing but we did something else. In every operation, decision communication, as it is, shapes the distinction fixed/open contingency in respect to social expectations (Luhmann 1993a).

As autopoietic systems, organisations create themselves and all their elements through decision communication. An organisational system establishes its *boundary* as the limit for the legitimacy of the decisions through definitions of membership, including what membership implies and who can become member. An organisational system decides its own purpose through the decision of some form of *program* for the topic of its decisions without necessarily defining very clearly or exactly what the factual premise for decision is. The third element is differentiation and co-ordination of “actions”, for example in the shape of tasks, positions, and *staff* which constitute the social premise for decision. And finally, *the form of decision* is a premise for decision that has to be established as well in order for the organisation to determine its boundary, program, staff, etc.

From the perspective of the system/environment distinction, therefore, organisations and function systems constitute autopoietic system that communicate each in their own way. Function systems closes around the fact dimension and organisations around the social dimension (+/- membership). They represent each other’s environments and they can observe and disturb each other but are unable to communicate with each other.

## Organisation as a form capable of forming symbolically generalised media

If we change the observational guiding difference from system/environment to form/medium, however, it becomes clear that organisational systems are always closely linked to at least one function system. Below I shall argue that organisational systems relate to function systems in the same way that forms relate to media. This necessitates a brief introduction to the concepts of form and medium.

The distinction between form and medium is a distinction between fixed and loosely coupled elements. By *media* Luhmann understands loosely coupled elements. Media are characterised by a

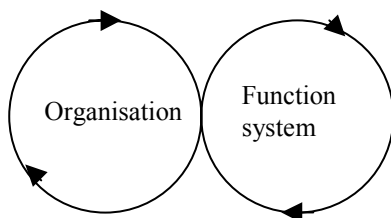
high resolution and by being accessible to Gestalt fixations (Luhmann 1997: 101). Conversely, *form* to Luhmann implies a fixed connection of elements. Forms emerge through a condensation of elements, and always constitute a selection of the possibilities offered up by a medium (Luhmann 1997: 102). Form and medium only exist in relation to each other. Media are not media except in relation to a specific manifestation of them and conversely, any form has to make use of a medium. One example of a form/medium relation is the relationship between a specific statement and language. Language is a medium in the sense that it contains a number of loosely coupled signs. As such language hold possibilities for combinations that can never be exhausted in a single statement. The statement, in turn, is a form that uniquely condenses a selected amount of signs as in the statement: “Yesterday, Tele Danmark was bought by a big American company”. Language never stands out as just language but is only observable in the specific statements formed by it. This applies to all form/medium relations.

Moreover, it is asserted that any communication has to insert a specific relation between form and medium. Every communication takes on a form that becomes imprinted in a medium.

Which forms and media are available to communication is a historical question in which the development of new media of communication constantly opens up for new forms of communication, which might further develop into new media etc. Today we are able to generally distinguish between four media of communication: meaning, language, media of distribution, and symbolically generalised media. Meaning is the most basic medium formed by all communication. Language condenses meaning in the amount of signs available to communication. Media of distribution are media such as writing, radio, television, and Internet permitting the formation of communication to an unspecified group of partakers in the communication. Symbolically generalised media, finally, are specifically related to the development of modern function systems and enable binary codified communication.

It has been argued that an organisational system *always* comes into being as structurally linked to a function system. On one hand, function systems and organisational systems are mutually autopoietical. This means that they cannot appear as sub-systems for each other. On the other hand, they are structurally linked which means that organisations can only communicate if their communication simultaneously causes communication within a function system. This linking can be illustrated like this:

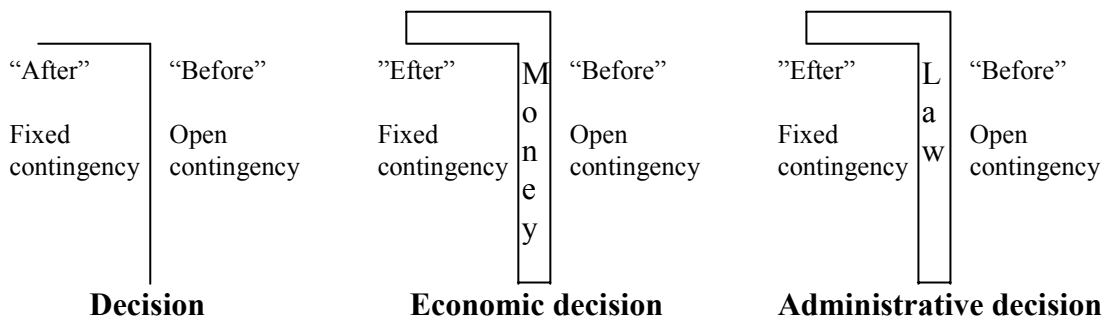
### Structural linkages



The systems are simultaneously closed and linked. Without intervening in each other they connect to each other's operations.

The way that organisations and function systems are linked only becomes clear, however, through the distinction of form/medium. Any decision functions as form in relation to a symbolically generalised medium. *Decisions cannot be communicated except in the imprinting in a symbolically generalised medium.* I have tried to create an exemplary illustration of this in the following figure:

**The relationship between form and medium in decisions illustrated by means of the media of money and law**



Any decision operation installs a distinction between before and after the decision. In fact, a decision is the formal unity of "before" and "after". But the distinction "before"/"after" is always imprinted in a medium that affects the decision as decision. The medium is the "material" in which the distinction leaves its mark. If the distinction is imprinted in the medium of money, the decision becomes an economic decision, if it is imprinted in the medium of power it becomes a political decision etc. Thus, it is by employing the media of the function systems that organisations and function systems are linked and that the organisational decisions simultaneously become events in the organisational system and in one of the function systems.

When a decision is imprinted in a particular symbolically generalised medium the organisational communication becomes codified in accordance with the medium. If the imprinting happens in the medium of money the code becomes to pay/not pay, in the medium of power it becomes govern/governed, in the medium of love it becomes loved/not loved etc. This means that the organisational decision communication is *coloured* by the medium formed by the communication. An organisational communication can form more than one medium. In fact, it is hard to imagine an organisational system that does not employ several function systems. We cannot perceive of a bank without the communication media of the economic, legal, and political systems respectively, or a court of law, or a ship for that matter. The organisation is a *container* for several functional systems of communication but in the individual communication, in the connecting act, one and only one coding has to be chosen.

From the perspective of the organisational systems, the function systems offer each their possibility for communication. The function systems represent a fund of symbolically generalised media with concomitant codes or logics available to decision communication. From the perspective of the function systems, organisations represent a form of borderline objects to which different meaning can be assigned depending on the communicating function system (Star & Greisemer 1989, Star 1989). When an organisation forms generally symbolic media it implies a binary coding of the organisational communication. The binary code colours the construction of the organisational environment as well as the elements of the organisational system, including its autopoietic

operation. When the organisation shifts between different symbolically generalised media it does not only cause a shift of code but also a change in self-description; the environment is observed anew, the players change, and the chains of argument are replaced. The autopoiesis of the organisation changes. Or in other words: when the code changes, the organisation reconstructs itself, its elements, its environment, and its operations, and its identity prior to the change of code is no longer compatible or suitable for connections; it is now observed from a different place, from a different code.

If the symbolically generalised medium for a decision is *money*, the decision becomes a decision about “best value for the money”. Whenever money is the medium, the communication generates problems of scarcity and seeks solutions to problems of scarcity. Also, the external environment is constructed in a particular way inside the organisation. The environment emerges as a market with suppliers and demanders and the organisation is defined as an organisation-on-a-market. In the eyes of economy, the employee becomes an “economic man”, driven by economic incentives and constantly focused on other possibilities for selling his skills. If, on the other hand, the medium is *care*, the organisational environment immediately emerges in the shape of unspecified needs that need to be specified. The decision becomes diagnostic and pertains to the specification of unspecified needs. Care communication systematically designates new demands for methodical intervention and decisions become decisions about that. If the employee is articulated in care communication, he is constructed as needing care, someone who needs nursing, maybe by helping him to help himself. Finally, if the symbolically generalised medium for a decision is the *law*, the organisation incessantly observes the risk of conflicts internally in relation to employees as well as externally in relation to partners. Communication is about guarding against conflicts through rules and contractual agreements. Decisions become settlements and in the light of this, the environment becomes legal facts that can be of consequence in settlements about right and wrong. The employee is defined as a *bonus pater*, that is, an individual of reasonable knowledge, common sense, and moderated selfishness.

As an example of a shift of code in an organisation we might imagine an organisational communication involving a manager and a person from the IT department. The communication is about purchasing software. They discuss what to buy. The IT-person argues in favour of greater investments than the manager. Although the communications contradict each other, the shared code is that of have/not have: what are we going to have and what are we not going to have? Then the manager says: your budget is this and I will not accept another overrun on your part. Suddenly the code is changed from have/ not have to +/- power. It changes everything that has been said up until this point. The situation is new and the connecting possibilities of the communication radically different. And still, the organisational system is “the same” in the sense that there has been no change in membership. The nature of the membership has merely become visible through the re-coding. The central point is that the question of which medium is formed and therefore which code the organisational systems links up with is of critical significance for the emergence of the organisational system and for the possibility for continuance of the organisational communication.

## The homophonic organisation

Although organisations always employ several codes, they have traditionally had a primary codification. Parallel to the differentiation of the function systems, organisational forms have been created that have adjusted themselves in relation to individual function systems with structures that

consider the codification of one specific function system. In fact, we generally identify the different function systems by means of organisational manifestations rather than their media and codes. We identify the health services as the scope of hospitals, clinics, medical practices, etc., the economic system is identified by organisations such as corporations, banks, stock exchanges, etc, the political system is identified by parties and parliaments, and so on.

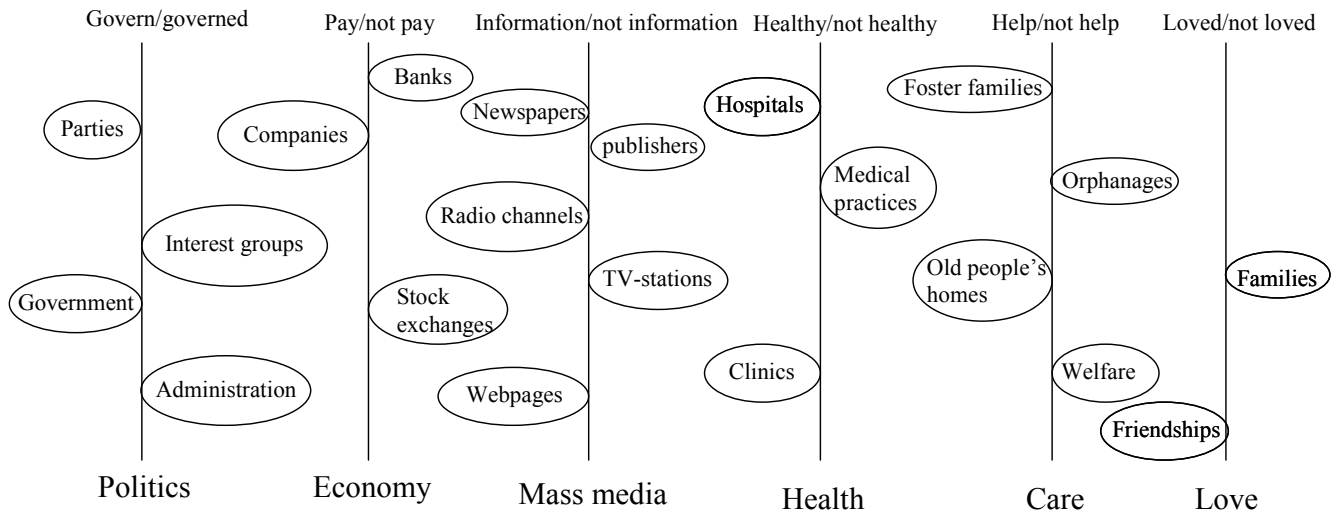
In this context I am going to address homophonic organisations. *A homophonic organisation is one that has a primary codification, which regulates the relevance of codifications.* Within a homophonic organisation, the code formed by the management communication is a given. Thus, the code formed by the organisation when describing and programming itself is stable. A homophonic organisation implies a structural fixation of when which code is instigated. The organisation is internally differentiated in such a way that sub-systems can hold different codifications without the occurrence of a clash of codes. The notion of autonomous professions with individual decision-making competencies can be a part of such a structure.

An example could be a classical party organisation. The party organisation primarily forms the medium of power and is therefore coded in relation to govern/governed and government/opposition. Its self-programming happens through the agreement on political programs. Its membership limit is regulated politically etc. But the organisational communication forms other media as well. The party forms the medium of money in so far as there is an economy to administer and economic priorities to make. But in the homophonic party the discussion of the program never becomes an economic communication although the reverse is conceivable, that is, the economic priorities can be politicised. Moreover, the party forms the medium of law in so far as it is subject to a specific legislation about eligibility, financial support, statements of accounts, etc. Another example could be a private company whose primary codification is economic but where the code of law can be formed as well through contractual agreements etc.

In the below figure I have tried to illustrate the homophonic organisation. The function systems are differentiated in co-ordinate order and with no ranking with each their function, medium, and code. The organisational systems emerge in the link to the function systems so that the organisational forms refer to the different function systems and are adapted for the formation of their specific medium. Thus, the homophonic organisations have a primary functional coupling.



## Function-specialised homophonic organisations



The above figure is not to be read as a self-evident truth. There are countless problems and questions hidden in the relation between the individual organisational form and function system regarding their co-evolution and particular evolutionary conditions. How, for example, has the relationship between old people's home and care system been historically established? How are they structurally connected? How is that expressed in the specific organisation of the old people's homes? And in the relationship between parties and politics? The secondary codification of the political function system in government/opposition presupposes organisations that are not only capable of winning the political power but also of voluntarily giving up power. Only a few systematic studies exist of the evolution of organisational forms with an awareness of their possible co-evolution with a function system (e.g. Luhmann 1990a, Foucault 1976).

## The polyphonic organisation

My assertion below is that a growing number of organisations no longer have a primary connection to one function system. There is no longer a given relationship between type of organisation and function system. An increasing number of organisations form many codes without a predefined hierarchy among them. We are moving away from the homophonic organisation towards the *polyphonic organisation*.

The concept of polyphony is not new. In music, polyphony primarily designates a specific tradition from the 15<sup>th</sup> century based on the Gregorian choir. In a polyphonic choir each voice represents its own voice with a melody, text, and rhythm of its own. Typically, the choir is organised in a way so that there is one singer in relation to whom the other singers conduct their voices so that the choir does not consist of a number of independent songs but of a number of voices that work together in some way. Later, polyphony becomes a concept within theory of music concerning polyphonic elements in all music. From the early 1920s the concepts moves into the art of painting. In 1929, Bakhtin uses the concept for the first time in literary and linguistic studies (Bakhtin 1978). The linguistic theory of polyphony has as its object the individual utterance and understands polyphony as the fact that a single utterance can represent more than one statement and discursive individual.

Linguistic polyphony presupposes a hierarchy between the voices of the utterance since the sender is assigned a double role as the one who creates the voices while also representing one of the voices. Literary polyphonic theory has an entire work structure as its object and understands polyphony as a game of equal voices (Thomson 1990). From here the concept wanders into organisation theory where it has never obtained more than a metaphorical status. It has typically been pointed out that texts in organisations are polyphonic as well and therefore one can speak of “multivoiced organisations” or point to heterogeneous notions or “points of view” that address the same organisational theme and thus speak of the voice of the production manager, the voice of technology, or the voice of the protection of workers (Steyaert 1997, Sjöberg 1994, Wertsch 1991, Virkuen 1991). Whereas the linguistic and literary polyphony have a clearly defined object, primarily single utterances, organisation theory has provided no or only vague proposals for “what” the object is or when polyphony exists. A few times the concept is used normatively following the literary polyphonic tradition as an ideal about the responsible multivoiced dialogue. Nowhere has the concept been employed in relation to the connection between organisation and social function systems (although Lars Qvortrup comes close with the concepts “poly-optic” and “the polymorphic organisation”, which, unfortunately, is not developed at length, Qvortrup 1998: 254-264).

Below, the concept of “polyphony” will not be directed at individual utterances, texts, or works. It will be directed at organisations and their formation of symbolically generalised media. “Voices” in this context represent the binary codes for whom the organisation functions as container.<sup>1</sup>

Organisational polyphony only pertains to the management of multiple binary codifications. My proposal for a definition is as follows: *An organisation is polyphonic when it is connected to several function systems without a predefined primary function system.*

The movement from homophony to polyphony can be described from the point of observation of either the organisation or the function systems. I will begin by observing from the perspective of the functions systems. If we define the function systems as point of observation we might say that *the polyphonic organisation emerges as a result of the way that the function systems explode beyond their organisational forms.* In this context explosion means that the function systems expand their themes without leaving their operational closure, they expand what included as political, economical, juridical, pedagogical etc. Themes, including organisations, are articulated based on the code of the function systems. What happens is that the symbolic generalised communication media become available to a much higher number of communication forms than originally employed by the functionally related forms.

The *explosion of politics* is an example (Pedersen 1993). The political system closes around the function of reaching collectively binding decisions. Around 1900 that function was assigned to the government and parliament. One could speak of the government-centred form of government. However, since World War II there have been at least two movements which have caused politics to explode beyond the traditional organisational forms within which the constitution defines politics. One movement concerns the internal differentiation of the administrative apparatus, which has led to a more polycentric form of government where government is just one among many centres

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<sup>1</sup> One can imagine other ways of localising “voices” in organisations. Likewise, an organisation is pervaded by many different semantics in the same way that an organisation always differentiates itself in sub-systems that threaten the organisational unity since each sub-organisation defines its own system/environment boundary and sees the organisation as part of its environment. These questions are different from the relationship between organisation and codification and should/can not be answered by means of the same concept.

assignable to the function of politics. As an example, sectors have been established both horizontally as well as vertically which integrate public as well as private organisations, including in particular the interest groups (Pedersen 1993, Andersen 2000b). The other movement goes in the direction of creating private politics where private decisions are seen and recognised as political (Andersen & Kjær 1993, Andersen, Pedersen & Kjær 1993, Amin & Thomas 1996). An example is the recognition by the EU of private standardisation as private politics for the creation of political premises for European markets (Frankel 2001) Other examples are the repeated attempts to bring back political responsibility in private companies under headlines such as “the social responsibility of the company”, “the social-minded company” etc, but also attempts to involve private companies in binding political partnerships such as trade agreements in environmental policies, dialogue groups in the sector for industrial policies, and partnership in development policies. A range of traditionally non-political organisations is now expected to partake in the political function system on the conditions of politics.

Another example is the *explosion of education*. The communication medium of education is the child. Not the individual child, but the child as a symbol of something not yet formed, something not yet perfected, which therefore can be formed through upbringing and education (Luhmann 2002). Co-evolutionary with the emergence of the child as symbolically generalised medium we see the establishment of school, family as centre of upbringing and several other organisations minded on the formation of the educational medium. Since World War II, however, the symbolic replacements for the child have exploded. We are no longer limited to concepts like pupil, student, and apprentice as substitutes for the child. Also the adult, the formed person, can now be re-circulated and “be like a child again” through adult and post-school education. And the past twenty years have produced a new educational semantics in which we speak of lifelong education, the developing employee, and competence society. Here unlearning has become as important as learning. Perfection must be infinitely deferred or we become “struck by experience”. Educational communication, therefore, can no longer be placed in specific organisational forms. It has to be universalised and ubiquitous as a particular self-relation where the individual relates to himself as competence in an incessant self-evaluation of strong and weak sides (Andersen & Born 2001). At the same time, it is no longer only people that qualify for educational inquiries. Family and organisations can function as substitutes for the child symbol. We might, thus, employ the semantics about the learning organisation to consider the organisation like a child that can be formed through education and upbringing, and we see different institutions willing to take on the role of teacher, for example public administrations running instructive campaigns about diversity management for private companies that are defined as “children” in this communication. Likewise, we see organisations entering into an educational relationship with themselves through constant organisational self-evaluations. With the introduction of different quality prizes one might even speak of examination systems for organisations.

A third and provisionally last example could be the *explosion of economy* where a range of organisations whose budgets were formerly prescribed by the law are now tied much closer to the economic function system in connection with attempts to marketise and competitise the public sector by means of commercial services rendered by public institutions, commercialisation, free choice agreements, order-performer models, outsourcing etc. (Andersen 2000a, Clarke & Newman 1997).

Beyond these explosions of the function systems into new organisations we might cite the organisational *aesthetisation* through branding (Schultz, Hatch & Larsen 2000), the organisational

*spiritualization* through a grounding in cosmological notions (Salamon 2000), organisational *intimisation* through development dialogues and emotive meetings (Andersen & Born 2001). Naturally, these “explosions” each represent extensive questions that call for closer studies.

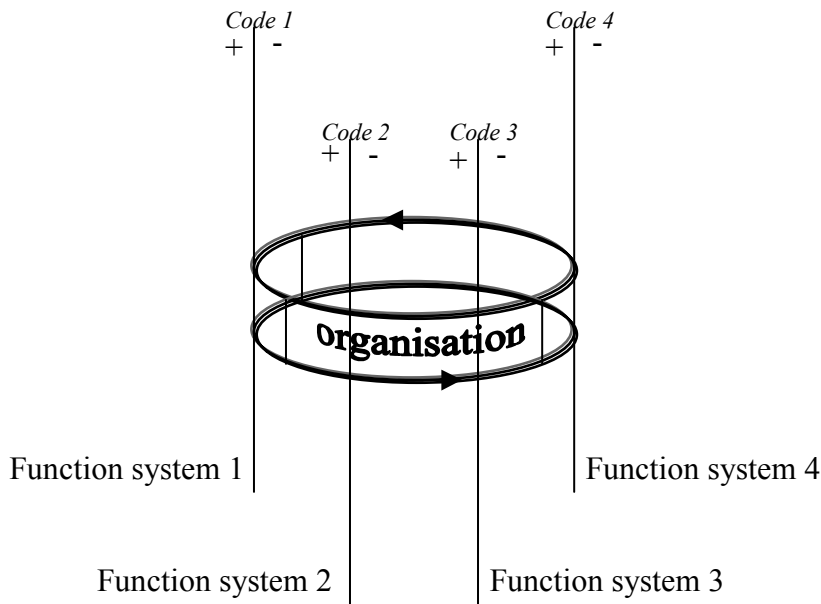
The explosions and universalisation of the function systems do *not* lead to the dissolution of their boundaries. It also does not lead to a de-differentiation, de-purification or blending of systems. It is precisely because the function systems are so unambiguous in their assessment of what is inside and outside through binary codes that it is even possible for an organisation to function as container for many co-ordinated media. Polyphony is only possible because the voices are distinct and because any binary code contains a kind of rejection value in relation to other codifications, because it cannot be decided whether power is better than money, love better than career, care better than art, Or in the words of Latour: the more differentiation the more hybrids (Latour 1993: 30).

By contrast, if we observe from the perspective of the function systems, organisational polyphony implies more links between the function systems. Organisations are simply a link (among others) between function systems.

Observed from the point of observation of the organisation, polyphony means that an increasing number of media are available for an increasing number of organisations, not just for communication that concerns specific functionally delimited themes but also for the general organisational self-description. Therefore, the polyphonic organisation is one that describes itself through many codes and not just one. The polyphonic organisation cannot choose to departmentalise the link to a number of function systems so they only concern sub-systems in the organisation. The polyphonic organisation is characterised by being unable to choose a primary coding. Or in other words: Decisions have to be constantly made about choice of communication medium and this becomes the basic strategic problem for the polyphonic organisation. In what way, we will see later.

The polyphonic organisation can be illustrated like this:

## The polyphonic organisation



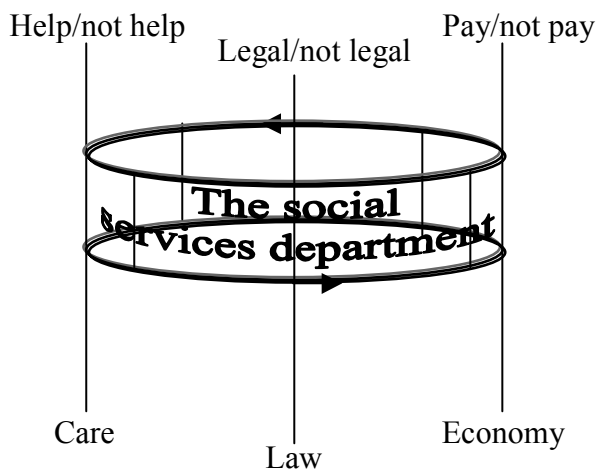
The organisation is a closed system that communicates through decisions and these decisions form symbolically generalised media with binary codes. The formation of these communication media links the organisation to the function systems. In the polyphonic organisation it is not predefined which medium is to be formed when. A surplus of media is available to the decision communication and the medium in which the decision communication is to be carried on is a continually contingent question. The decision communication does not have the option of not choosing a code. That would make decision communication highly unstable and improbable. It has to choose. But there is no choice except through a medium. And the choices are significant since the symbolically generalised media have binary codes that define each their values for motivation and reflection, and if the code is changed, it changes the view of the decision, the organisation, and the world outside. In the polyphonic organisation, therefore, incomparable values clash and no value is able to catch and represent the unity of values. Any attempt at installing this kind of super-value will always work to increase the polyphonic complexity. The super-value will drop to the level of the other values which will only add yet another link to a function system with a new medium and code.

In the efforts to reach a more concise description of the polyphonic organisation, I will provide three specific examples:

### *The social services department*

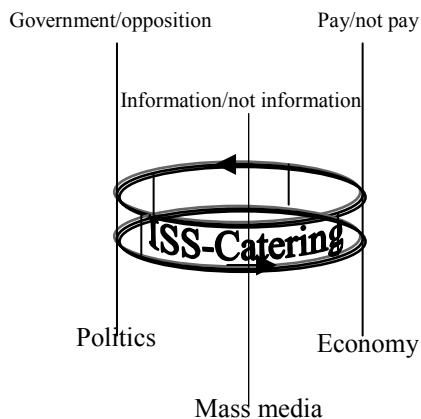
One example of a polyphonic organisation is the modern social services department in Denmark (the example is based on Majgaard 1995). Historically, the social services department has undergone a development from homophony to polyphony. At first, the social services department is established as a judicially codified organisation, making judicially codified administrative decisions in relation to the requests for help from individual citizens. As the law starts to acknowledge estimates and professional decisions by defining goals but leaving the means open to ideas foreign to the law, the social services department begins to further form the medium of care and its code of help/not help. With the Social Assistance Act of 1977, the definition of goals becomes a theme in the individual administrative decision. It is no longer merely a question of deciding on the right

means to a predefined goal. Judicially, the goal receives a status so general and unclear that the department itself has to revise and operationalise the socio-political policy aim. Moreover, this means that the law can no longer be regarded as the primary codification. Law and care become “equal” media. At the same time, a socio-political problem of scarcity is articulated. Formerly, economy appeared as considerations in the overall planning of the social policy and social legislation. From 1977, it becomes a question of how the decisions of the individual social services department can be made “economic”. To begin with, this becomes manifest in the definition of so-called pre-assessments capable of dividing the clients into “the slick”, “those requiring treatment” and “those requiring but impervious to treatment”. From 1991 the economic code indisputably moves into the individual social service department and its decision practice. It is now defined as an expectation that the administrative decision should not only represent support, or be legal, it also has to represent a good investment. Thus, the social services department is constituted as a polyphonic organisation that is not simply making decisions about support but also about the codification of the decision, about when to use legal, care-related, and economic reasons, and this decision concerning the codification can only be reached through the formation of the very same codes between which there is to be decided. In this context, Majgaard speaks of the paradox of the administration. I have tried to illustrate the polyphonic social services department with the below figure:



### *ISS-Catering*

ISS-Catering is a good example of a private company which, because of its activities on a public market, is forced to form the codes of both the political system and the mass media beyond the code of economy, and where the code of economy cannot simply orchestrate the other codes (Andersen 1996, Andersen 2000). I have illustrated the polyphony of ISS-Catering like this:

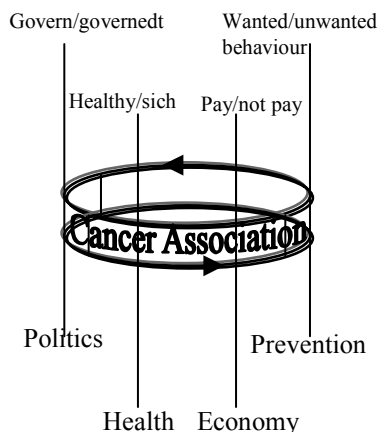


An example is the takeover by ISS of the provision of meals for elderly in the municipality of Lyngby-Tårnbæk in 1994 following a public invitation to submit tenders. One might have thought that the political part of the agreement was concluded with the signing of the contract. However, this was not the case – quite the contrary. Based on the code of economy of having/not having ISS assumed that when they had taken over the running of the kitchens they were also in charge of managing them. The political communication had a very different view of the provision of meals for the elderly and the kitchens. It included them as a central political theme and the opposition found various opportunities for scandalising the mayor in office by calling attention to operational problems in the kitchens. The smallest detail was politicised, from the ISS recruitment policy via snacks on Sundays in the old people's homes to the amount of pepper in the sauce of the delivered food. Before 1990, the provision of meals for the elderly was never discussed in The Social Welfare Committee. There were twelve meetings in 1995. Before 1992, The National Council of Handicap Affairs and Eldercare never discussed the provision of meals for the elderly. In 1995, there were ten meetings. Before 1992, the local weekly press never wrote about the provision of meals for the elderly. In 1995, they wrote 16 articles. Naturally, the mayor and with him the majority in power had to answer to the criticism in the code of the political communication. The opposition cast doubt on whether things were under control, which the mayor then had to prove. The mayor communicated through the code of govern/governed in which ISS was hence articulated as the inferior party. The mayor communicated by means of acts of power, as he would have in relation to any other administration. He demanded reviews, control, documentation, and impartial investigations. However, ISS, who were still communicating in having/not having, perceived of the mayor as someone who was trying to control something that he had in fact sold. Eventually, a joint committee was appointed in which all significant (and quite a few insignificant) managerial decisions were discussed. A kind of negotiated management was created where the management premises is a continual theme for negotiations between the public administration, the political organs and organisations, and the private company. But the negotiated management is schizophrenic in the sense that it has to simultaneously form two codes, the economic code of having/not having and the political codes of govern/governed and government/opposition. ISS learned it the hard way that on a public market one is a political organisation whether one wants it or not. One never knows which code applies. One also does not know whether an economic communication has been read economically or politically. But it is an absolute given that any action is followed closely by the press and that, as a private company on a welfare market, one is watched with particular suspicion. And moreover, once the press has spoken, the opposition will inevitably further feed the press, which will create ultra-cycles between mass media and politics. This requires

of a company that it 1) be capable of changing code, 2) has a poly-contextual outlook, 3) is able to reflect itself as communication and 4) is generally able to exist with a basis-less, turbulent polyphonic management.

### *Danish Cancer Association*

In conclusion, the Danish Cancer Association provides a good example of a polyphonic volunteer organisation. The Danish Cancer Association is composed of several different divisions for patient support, marketing, prevention, research, economy, and volunteers respectively. These divisions have each their area and each their objective. However, they all lay claim to the self-description of the Danish Cancer Association. The effect is a polyphonic association that form media without the possibility of an internal hierarchy and where the purpose of the association is communicated and read differently depending on the formed medium. Danish Cancer Association is linked to the scientific function system and forms the medium of knowledge with the binary code of true/false. It forms the medical treatment medium whose code is healthy/sick. There is a division for grief with the therapeutic medium of psychic balance/imbalance. There is a division for prevention whose code is wanted/unwanted behaviour. Finally, there is a campaign division which has the code of paying/not paying. In this way, different communications *within* the Danish Cancer Association link up with different systems of communication *outside* of the Danish Cancer Association. The Danish Cancer Association becomes a point of connection for heterogeneous systems of communication that all close around themselves with their own codes, notions, expectations, and practices. These might be illustrated like this:



These are co-ordinate systems of communication that do not communicate with each other but only with themselves. They hold each their own set of codes, containing each their set of values, and these codes and values enable them to observe each other without understanding each other. This leads us to a discussion of the cohesive force of the Danish Cancer Association: How is it possible to appear as a unity to the outside at the same time as the internal communication forms heterogeneous binary codes? It seems obvious that the potential proposals, expectations, problems, and solutions cannot be the same in the linking to different codes. The values cannot be balanced against each other. As an example, there are occasional conflicts between the division for prevention and the campaign division because a good anti-tobacco scare campaign does not necessarily bring in much money. On the other hand money is an essential part of the many activities of the association. Thus the dilemma is brought on: what is better: Prevention or money for prevention? How to manage in this kind of multi-voiced organisation? Is it possible to organise



the problem away? The Danish Cancer Association has gained a central role in cancer treatment in Denmark. This demands stability and solidity of the organisation. The campaign division, therefore, is working to free the organisations from volunteer donations because they are considered insecure. Instead, a money tank is built that can make its own money. This has a strange effect. The Danish Cancer Association is no longer a simple medium for some volunteers in their work for a specific cause. The volunteers also become a medium whose main task is to ensure the legitimacy of the association in an independent Danish Cancer Association. Now subscriptions are raised, more in order to create legitimacy and instil a feeling of being of help into the minds of the volunteers than in order to bring in money. How are these types of dilemmas strategically and managerially coped with?

## Polyphony: a current analysis

What defines the polyphonic organisation in the three examples above is the absence of a primary codification and the crucial test for this absence is the competing self-descriptions in the organisation that differ with respect to codification. *In the polyphonic organisation it is not only up for decision by means of which code decisions are to be made. It is also up for decision which code the decision about code is to be decided by means of.*

Thus, a polyphonic organisation is principally a stranger in its own house. It is space-less. It is space-less because the organisational self-description has become contingently and pluralistically divided into an economic, a political, an aesthetical self-description etc.

The concept of the polyphonic organisation raises at least four major problems:

### *Reflexivity*

It is hard to imagine this kind of plurality without a concomitant reflexivity. It might at least work as a thesis that *the polyphonic organisation is characterised by reflecting itself as communication* and thus its linking to function systems. This was true of several of the above examples. In the social services department, the relationship between the codes was thematised as a question of the boundaries of the department. The boundary between public and private underwent a change of status from given premise to contingent boundary through considerations about whether the problem of priority between economy and care could be solved simply by outsourcing the care task of the social work to volunteer organisations. In ISS-Catering, a poly-contextual outlook was created in the realisation that it was not possible to hold up the organisations' idea of the world as an ideal for others but that it was necessary to accept and base their decisions on the fact that the environment of ISS observes the world in ways different from ISS. ISS realised that they should not judge other observations as being false but rather observe the way others observe the world in order to reflect their own observations. They also realised that ISS was observed by others and that these observations were different from their own self-observations. Finally, ISS realised that it is necessary to represent these "other" observations within ISS in order to be able to continuously jump in and out of differently codified communications in the description of their own decision alternatives as communication, in an attempt to understand the spaces of denunciation that were created through ISS statements and decisions. This represents a great potential for further empirical research. In what form does new reflection occur in different organisations of the organisation as communication? Which new reflexive semantics are created? Does reflection receive its own conceptual reservoir? Are we thus able to demonstrate what could be called organisational second-order semantics? In this context, semantics of "values", "values management", "dialogue", and

“culture” could be interesting topics for research. In relation to these questions, it seems obvious to inquire about the creation of new reflexive practices. Are new concepts, practices, and technologies created for organisational reflection and how do they define and delimit reflexivity? Who becomes subjectivised in these new practices and where and how are they installed in the organisations? As an example, we seem to see the creation of a range of new conversational technologies which precisely facilitates the reflection of the organisation as communication (see for example Thomson 1998). Other examples could be the expansion of different forms of accounts: social accounts, ethical account, knowledge accounts, employee accounts etc.

### *Strategy*

Moreover, it seems that polyphony produces a very specific strategic question that forces us to distinguish between strategies of the first and second order (Andersen 1996, 2000). If we understand *decision* as the basic communicative operation of the organisation, *planning* becomes a second-order decision, a decision about premises for subsequent decisions (Luhmann 1971). The highly differentiated organisation typically manages several forms of co-ordinate sector-divided planning: production planning, financial management, marketing etc. *Strategy*, therefore, could be defined as a third-order decision, as a decision about the premises for differentiated planning. Strategy and self-description are tightly linked. It is through the description of the organisational visions, prospects for the future, and general strategic staking and priorities that organisations seek to reduce the difference in the premises for the different forms of planning. But with the absence of primary codification the self-descriptions become multiple and the outlook poly-contextual. That is, the organisation observes and describes itself as well as its environment with the awareness that it could have observed and described differently. Thus, we are given *strategies of the second order*, which fundamentally pertain to the shaping of the language and the way of seeing within which strategies can be made. Strategy of the second order is about making decisions about the symbolically generalised medium in which to decide. It concerns a strategic attitude towards the space and order of conversation, towards the possibilities for communication, thematisation, participation, argumentation, inclusion, and exclusion opened up and closed respectively by different codes and semantics. It is about, for one thing, hacking one’s way through the communications that one wish to control. Here, too, is a great potential for further research. Which forms of second-order strategies appear to take shape? Which practices do they obtain? Do the conditions for second-order strategies depend on the constellation of symbolically generalised media that constitute the polyphonic organisation? Thus, a set of prevailing conditions might be created for companies on public markets in connection with the economic, political and mass media systems. Other conditions apply in relations to, for example, pension funds linked to economy, mass media as well as morality.

### *The shifters of communication*

Inherent in the study of symbolically generalised media in polyphonic organisations is also a question about potential constellations as such, about the way that different symbolically generalised media can be open to communicative changes of direction. How do the codes collide? How does an organisation cope with the balancing of incomparable values such as power, money, information, love, and care? What instigates the communication of a particular function system in an organisation? Roman Jakobsen speaks of “*shifters*” (Jakobsen 1981: 153-154) A shifter is an instigator of a specific linguistic code. What are the instigators in economic, political, mass media, educational, and judicial communication? What determines whether a particular organisational theme is cause for the formation of particular symbolically generated media for communication? What are the possibilities inherent in the codified communications for returning to prior

codification? Do different media have different capacity for recognising other media? Judicial communication, for example, appears to be open for other forms of codification and contains the possibility of returning to the judicially codified communication after the communication has been codified differently. Other codes appear much more restrictive on the question of change of code. Communication which forms the medium of love is not simply capable of returning to the medium of love if the communication has taken on the form of law (Andersen & Born 2001). This presents both a theoretical and empirical challenge.

### *Parasitic codifications*

Finally and in conclusion I wish to point to a question about parasitic codifications in polyphonic organisations. Although a communication is not able to simultaneously form two symbolically generalised media with each their code, a specifically codified communication can parasitically exploit another code. Political communication often parasitically enters the scientific code by adding a scientific aura to power-related efforts. In the same way, financial communication can land parasitically on the code of art etc. We might call it a form of structural corruption among the function systems. How do we distinguish parasitical communication from codified communication as such? Parasitical communication is characterised by having a particular codified communication use the plus side of a particular foreign code as a supplement in the attempt to pursue its own value. The test is that the communication never links up with the reflexive side of the host code but remains at the side of motivation. Although the reasoning is scientific, the codification remains political in so far as the communication seeks to employ the truth as a justification of a political decision and never seeks to question the truth through falsification. To argue that a communication links up with a particular code simply presupposes that we can sustain that the world in the communication is divided exactly into the two sides of the code. What is interesting in this context is the way parasitical codification happens in polyphonic organisations. Does parasitical use of codes add to the management of polyphony? Does parasitical codification become a central strategic element of the second order?

With the concept of the polyphonic organisation I have not meant to suggest a new theory. It is meant as a concept of a current analysis. As such, the purpose is primarily to indicate guidelines for empirical studies directed at changes and displacements in the conditions of the relationship between organisation and society. Thus, the ambition is to ask some guiding questions through which it is possible to define contemporary questions that inquire about the changes in conditions of organisation as such but also about changes in the differentiation of society and in the connection between the function systems in society. The polyphonic organisation does not merely capture a random aspect of topical organisational changes, therefore, but is a symptom of constitutive conditions of the unity of the organisation, of the differentiation form, and not least, the unity of organisation and society and its constitution.

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