ABSTRACT: Taking up a suggestion by Marshall and Eric McLuhan to use the metaphor of the ear rather than that of the eye when it comes to exploring media effects, the paper looks first at a certain oblivion of media following their clear-sighted discovery by Aristotle. Media, which for Aristotle were the invisible precondition of any vision, were to be rediscovered only when notions of the invisible were no longer the exclusive domain of religion. First in German Romanticism, then in the psychology of perception, and finally in both cultural theory and sociological theory, both phenomena and notions of media had to be re-conceptualized to account not only for figure and ground but also for loosely coupled elements prefiguring their rigid coupling in things. Focusing on sociological ideas, the paper looks at dissemination and success media of communication and adds a notion of media of composition, examining the examples of causality, rationality, and complexity. Brief remarks on a culture theory and a management theory of media conclude the paper. Listening to media rather than attempting to watch the ground of a figure amounts to learning to account for media dependencies, media interconnections, and media compositions. This might be useful in a next society opting for meshes and mashes, cross-overs and coverings rather than for reasonable clear-cuts among media.

I. Oblivion of Media

For Marshall McLuhan and his son Eric, fruitful work in media theory would profit from a switch from visual to acoustic metaphor. Media do not refer to the ground of a figure to be looked at but rather to "the apposition of both figure and ground" to be listened to (McLuhan/McLuhan 1988: 91). There are at least four effects one may notice when listening to both figure and ground: an enhancement of a certain form, a corresponding obsolescence or displacement of some other form, a retrieval of earlier forms, and a reversal into some other form when pushed to its limits (ibid: 99). McLuhan and McLuhan comprehend these four effects or aspects of media listening in their tetrad model, which gives the "four laws of media," which act simultaneously when new forms present themselves in old or new media.

The invitation to listen to media instead of watch them may already address one of the most pertinent reasons for a striking reluctance to take the notion of medium seriously in old

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and new European thinking. Our analytical stance is, so to speak, still very much that of Plato: alphabetic writing enables us to look at words and take their elements apart instead of listening to them and comprehending their sound by both distinguishing and embedding a note with respect to all others (Havelock 1963). Ever since Aristotle in *On the Soul* – using visual imagery – wrote that "the existence of some medium is necessary," namely to be able to see a phenomenon which cannot affect the eye directly but only "through the intervening medium" (Aristotle 1907: 419 a 6), European thinking has been struggling to switch from figure to ground. Martin Heidegger wrote about the *Seinsvergessenheit*, an "oblivion of being" in European thinking (Heidegger 1949: 19), which he understood as an inability to refer back from entities to the being they stem from, exhibit, and fall back into. Oblivion of media might be cultural theory's version of this idea. If the ground is not just a background necessary to give a figure its emphasis and singularization but in fact a physical, mental, or social matter by which an entity is informed and into which it is shaped, then looking at things means missing the most important part, which is the peculiar kind of matter that gives form to things and events and renders itself invisible.

Of course, this reluctance to take media into account might also have been caused by religious thinking insisting on the need to look beyond the obvious to see the truth behind it. Keeping to the visual always meant being wary of religious intuition and theological thinking. Hearing voices is not one of the most respected of academic abilities. It therefore took an age critical of religion to return to the Aristotelian idea of mediation without ending up with the assumption of a creator behind empirically observable creatures. According to Walter Benjamin, German Romanticism, although still fond of mystical ideas, was among the first movements of thought to reconsider forms of any kind not just as figures to be classified and understood but as entities reflecting something else (Benjamin 1997). For Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and others, forms of art in particular are reflections of other possible and conceivable forms of art. At the same time, they are explorations of a general idea of beauty to which they adhere and in which they invest. Novels, for instance, are not just manifestations of a beautiful order or of delight or pain in actors but variations on other novels exploring what it means to search for form in prose and poetry.

The notion of medium, if taken up, is often accompanied by the notion of form. However, as long as form is considered the opposite of matter or content, the notion of form tends to block the potential offered by the notion of medium. Only a rather paradoxical idea of "inner form" can relate to medium. "Inner form," explicit in Shaftesbury's aesthetic thinking of "forms which form the forms which form" (Shaftesbury 1999: 323), are like Marx's forms of commodity, money, and capital, which are versions of themselves: both expressions of
relations of production and ways to operate them (Marx 1990). Similarly, Wittgenstein understood forms as structures of possibility that permit thought about the space, order, and principle of the possibility of possibilities (Wittgenstein 2001: No. 2.033). Only such a relational and in fact operational notion of form allows us to conceive of its outside as a medium shaped into some concrete entity.

These two notions of medium and form become explicit in Fritz Heider's theory of perceptual media and in George Spencer-Brown's calculus of the form of indications (Heider 1959; Spencer-Brown 2008). Heider conceives of a medium as a loosely coupled set of elements like light waves, acoustic waves, sand, or units of measurement, which when rigidly coupled constitute a thing or event such as a vision, a sound, a footprint, or a length, volume, or other kind of measurement. Without quoting him, Heider takes up Aristotle's understanding of medium as a necessary but invisible mediating substrate informing, and being shaped by, things and events visible, audible, or observable in some other way.

Spencer-Brown, in turn, quotes Wittgenstein in several respects but not his notion of form. Nor does he in any way refer to a notion of medium. His understanding of form, however, is what we need when looking for a notion able to refer to a unit, or entity, or mark relating to – by being distinguished from – an unmarked space accompanying it as, again, a condition of its possibility strictly in Immanuel Kant's sense (Kant 2003).

II. Sociology of Media

Having these explicit notions of both medium and form at our disposal does not mean, however, that we can already speak of media being rediscovered and their oblivion corrected. We are still with Marshall and Eric McLuhan's reminder that the "task confronting contemporary man is to live with the hidden ground of his activities as familiarly as our literate predecessors lived with the figure minus ground" (McLuhan/McLuhan 1988: 114). Human beings are still very much visually informed beings predisposed towards what they can see and touch. Most of their auditive and sensitive abilities are relegated to the wisdom of the body both in space and time and intuition in handling encounters with other humans and social situations featuring the usual complexity of issues addressed and avoided, of people consenting or dissenting, and of time horizons pressing for decisions or being relaxed, without too much consciousness invested in grasping this complexity. With respect to both perception and social competence, let alone behavioral control, human beings are aware of figures and mostly ignorant of their ground, form, and medium.
Such oblivion of media is all the more distressing because media theory following Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School of Communication has been quite successful of late in cultural studies. Its potential has been blocked, however, by a technological determinism for which Friedrich Kittler is not altogether guiltless when he relies more or less deliberately on a Foucault type of analysis treating media as informing discourses that are the product of a power executing a certain kind of knowledge (Kittler 2009; Foucault 1980; Winthrop-Young 2011). A media theory not pegged to technological determinism but sufficiently generalized to encompass sets, spaces, and principles of possibility regarding behavior, perception, action, and communication should be able to look at human construction, exploration, and exploitation of the world in terms of a dependent arising, as Buddhist thinking puts it (Nagarjuna 1986), or conditioned co-production. Just as the dolphin is not dominated by the water in which it swims, humans, too, are the product of their world as they probe and change it. To be sure, this idea includes technology, which should neither be reduced to mere instruments executing the human will nor be demonized as the cage in which we sit, but be seen, or listened to, as just another medium, even if a more and more intrusive and unrenounceable one.

The notion of medium has been given a more cautious reception in sociological theory than in cultural studies. Talcott Parsons became famous not least for his invitation to look at power, influence, intellect, or affect in terms of a money or a language (1) consisting of circulating symbols of successful communication, (2) becoming taken-for-granted via their adoption and backing by some societal institution, (3) having a specific meaning which both frames them and relates, via distinction, to other media to which one can then switch, and (4) featuring the non-zero-sum property of being increased by being used (Parsons 1977: 204–207). Parsons mused that influence groups or so-called stratification bundles focusing on an especially expert use of symbolic media of interchange such as money, power, knowledge, belief, or, indeed, affect were about to inherit the older stratification order of society embodied in aristocracy or class (Parsons 1977: 220–223). Nowadays, his examples of the modern university and professions might not be quite as convincing as they were then, but looking at the control projects of network society in terms of Parsons' notion of stratification bundles could still be a promising avenue of research (Castells 1996; Deleuze 1995: 174–183). Be that as it may, Parsons' discovery of symbolic media of interchange could well count among the very few, if any, true discoveries sociology was able to muster in the 20th century, perhaps equal only to Auguste Comte's discovery of a so-called "static" dimension in society, which consists in a social phenomenon being—in dissent or consent, in conflict or alliance, in
knowledge or ignorance—aligned to any other simultaneous social phenomenon (Comte 1853, vol 2: 67–76).

Niklas Luhmann combined Parsons' notion of success media of communication with the cultural studies notion of disseminative media of communication (Luhmann 2012: 120–123, 150–189, and 190–238; Baecker 2016). The former, like money, power, truth, belief, beauty, justice, education, or love turn improbable into probable communication by selectively engaging only certain aspects of action and experience, leaving others to float freely. They motivate by indicating what exactly they demand and offer and distinguishing what they do not demand and offer. One may accept a declaration of love precisely because it does not consist in an attempt to also educate the loved one—category mistakes notwithstanding. Or one may accept an order precisely because it binds action, not thinking, thus facilitating the consideration of alternatives next time. And one may collect money without being able to buy justice, love, beauty, or truth—category mistakes, this time called "corruption," again notwithstanding.

Media of dissemination, in turn, do not motivate by selection but extend the use and reach of communication beyond the evidence of perception (language), people present (writing), restricted numbers of writers and readers (the printing press), or single channels of communication and one-ways of communication (electronic and digital media). Instead of motivating by selection they attract by their potential and threaten any communication which proves unable to cope with their effects.

Both types of media of communication are media in Heider's and even Spencer-Brown's sense. They consist of loosely coupled elements obtaining their form through operations of their specific use indicating at any moment that they are to be distinguished from other uses of the same elements or from the use of other media. Examples are payments in the medium of money, orders and obedience in the medium of power, theories, methods, or just assertions in the medium of truth, declarations of desired intimacy in the medium of love, confessions in the medium of belief, works of art in the medium of beauty, court decisions in the medium of law, spoken or gestural words in the medium of language, sentences and texts in the medium of writing, programs in the medium of television, and so on. You listen to these operations—and you realize their contingency, their alternatives, their network, and their recursive cross-linking.

Two things are important to note. One is that their use at any instant is indeed a specific operation, that is something happening and changing one state of the world into another. Because this means that their decoupling and embedding are rich in terms of a reality to which they are linked. That is why it is possible to speak of the form of any of these
operations. They do what they do, and yet they simultaneously and invariably refer to the structure of their possibility consisting of consequences, alternatives, moderations, fine-tunings, tactical and strategic moves. Think only of an entrepreneur watching competitors, of a lover looking for the moment and tone of voice for a declaration, of a religious practitioner reflecting on how to address God, or of a scholar selecting an appropriate method for proving a theory. All of them listen to what they are about to do and select a specific version of what they are about to do from among an indistinct, yet present set of alternative possibilities. Without listening to this media use as an operation changing a state of the world, the imagery of the set would be empty. Listening to it, however, means imagining the addressee, the situation, the moment in time, and oneself, as it were, in all their richness depending on the ear lent to it.

Note, however, that our ears are only able to listen to it when we are already doing so. There is no way to know beforehand what we are about to engage with. We may be both surprised and borne out by the way a communication affects us the very moment it is meant to affect others. George Herbert Mead made this point with respect to gestures (Mead 1962: 65–74). And John Cage, quoting Gertrude Stein, turned this insight into art, making it audible and distinguishable (Cage 1963).

The richness of an operation relating to a reality that it is both decoupled from and embedded in is realized not just by a sociologist paying attention but by actors themselves, thus informing their social competence, emotional intelligence, or political acumen even without their taking conscious note. The second important thing to bear in mind is therefore that an operation within these kinds of media, both success and dissemination, might well be called a "communication." Communication is a concept that picks up information and links that information to a selection of points of interest regarding participants, situation, and time horizon. This means that to answer the question of what a communication actually means, one does not ask for the intentions or purposes of actors, let alone "senders," or for the errors or correctness of understanding by another actor, let alone "receiver," but listens instead to the very next communication and from there determines what the communication is apparently about. Communication is best understood in hindsight, that is, by itself (Luhmann 2002; Baecker 2013). This is why we may indeed speak of listening to it. Since any of these operations of communication within a medium of success or dissemination refers to a wealth of circumstances, a specific actor will the very next moment be able to refer only highly selectively to the appropriate selection while nevertheless having to develop a feeling for it. Listening to switches between figure and ground is not an operation to be commanded
consciously. You need your body, your mind, your tact, and your imagination to do so—and you will still miss on some of the most important issues.

III. Media of Composition

We have media of perception such as light, sound, touch, smell, and feeling, all of them not just channels for the transmission of signals but resonance chambers which define the richness or poorness of our sensorimotor spread of behavior. Our ability to use these media is highly plastic and trainable, yet we may also become oblivious to them and lose aspects of our vision, sound, touch, smell, or feeling, thus giving way to a deprived version of our life.

We have media of communication, such as media of success and dissemination of communication, the use of which is equally subject to education, to professionalization, and even to appropriation and exclusivity, sometimes giving rise to stratification bundles distinguishing between experts monopolizing them, novices being attracted and exploited, and publics looking on incredulously. And we have media of composition such as the medium of causality which Luhmann described as the selective use of two endless horizons of possible causes and possible effects (Luhmann 1994/5). Luhmann, to be sure, spoke of media of observation, yet to better pursue our metaphor of listening to media, we here adopt Ranulph Glanville's proposal to speak of composers instead of observers (Glanville 2015: 87-88). The notion of observation in cybernetics and in particular in second-order cybernetics of so-called "observing systems" (von Foerster 1981) is sometimes taken to refer to vision even though it refers to any operation of cognition able to draw a distinction and to reproduce. We nevertheless propose to speak of "composition" instead to enable us to highlight the altogether active role of the observer, understood as a composer, in giving shape and form to selected elements within a medium which is more zuhanden than vorhanden, to use Heidegger's distinction (Heidegger 1967: §§ 16–28), more ready-at-hand than merely in existence. Media of composition, following Luhmann's proposal, are media that schematize ignorance, here the ignorance of true or reliable causes and effects. They come up with a form, indicating certain issues on their inside, hinting more or less threateningly or temptingly at an indeterminate wealth of possibilities on their outside, and thereby both establishing and withdrawing from view an actor, an institution, a technique, or a practice able to do just that, singling out certain from among uncertain issues.

Luhmann wrote of causality as a medium of observation respectively composition. We may expand on this idea and ask for others. There are certainly quite a few of them, such as intentionality, indicating certain intentions; rationality, indicating certain means and ends; or
complexity, indicating certain pairs or tropes of irreconcilably meaningful elements. Here I just highlight rationality and complexity, since in the historical development of society they in a way replace causality as the dominant media of composition. If causality is the medium of composition of choice in ancient literal cultures, banning the magic universe of tribal societies while still admitting endlessness, rationality might be the medium of choice in modern printing press society, and complexity in a next society impressed by electronic and digital media. Media such as media of dissemination thus co-produce other media, such as certain media of observation. Again, there is no technological determination in whatever direction, but much mutual evolutionary conditioning. And it is interesting to realize that the tribal society concept of magic still informs later media of composition by not only suggesting horizons of endlessness, that is of ignorance, but by also insinuating a means to deal with that ignorance. The shamans of tribal society, switching back and forth between the realms of this life, the underworld, and the netherworld (Eliade 2004), become in ancient society philosophers presenting arguments that call for a rhetoric of responsible causes and possible effects combining gods, humans, and nature in different packages of responsibility or blame and guilt (Lloyd 1979: 49–54). In modern society they become experts on strategic and tactical rationality, once again listening as accurately to what people are ready to accept and believe as to what is possible or manageable in fact (Meyer/Scott 1992). And in next society they become physicians, therapists, and consultants taking care of the most improbable incompatibilities between body, mind, technology, society, and culture (Illich et al. 1977).

Rationality is the medium of composition of choice in a modern society, turning a whole world into endless horizons of means and ends to be searched by politicians, entrepreneurs, engineers, seducers, educators, and artists for the profit to be drawn at some cost by appropriate selection from among these means and ends. The universe is listened to in teleological terms not because the world is in fact ordered according to function and purpose but because function and purpose dissolve it into variants of itself. Just as the dolphin cruises through water, these people listen to ends and means, variables waiting for new combinations. There is a certain irony in a modern society praising itself as reasonable while all the while using concepts of rationality to alternate means with respect to ends, and ends with respect to means. There is nothing constant and reliable in rationality save its command to combine ends and means, both subject to choice. I am not sure whether media theory's reassurance that at least the medium is refreshed each time means and ends are swapped for other means and ends turns out to be so reassuring after all. There is a certain self-propulsion of rationality as a medium of composition once it begins to be used, such that a countermovement like the
ethical discovery of the formerly purely economic category of value becomes highly probable when people search for means to restrict the range and scope of means.

Rationality as a medium of composition had underpinned most, if not all, of the functional systems of modern society. Any of its success media of communication was rephrased in terms of the rationality to pursue the positive value of the two values of a binary code and to use the negative value as the point of reflection of the world at large (Luhmann 2012: 215–227). When expecting payment, you become aware of a client’s deliberation about choosing otherwise; when in power you begin to judge the chances of opposition; when in love you know how easy it is to lose it; and so on. It is tempting to combine binary codes with rational deliberation, thus going for a calculus of possibilities in terms of means and ends. If, on top of this, organizations are involved, this scheme becomes self-satisfying, even attempting to align means and ends with causes and effects on the one hand, and a hierarchical order of top and bottom on the other (for an unraveling of this package, see Luhmann 1977). Thus, functional rationality becomes the pivotal ideology of modernity, assuming that some reason is behind it all and not realizing that rationality, technology, and hierarchy might also give way to insane combinations producing modernity's catastrophes in black pedagogy, bureaucratic control, biopolitics, and elsewhere.

Media of composition hide their threats behind their attractiveness. They do so by presenting reliable selections among causes and effects, or among means and ends, as selections of a composer following the nature of things, or the inherent necessity of facts, thereby not exactly hiding any arbitrariness in selection but intimating only so much that nobody wants to know more about it. Media hint at arbitrariness, deliberation, or just choice in selection, and, depending on the circumstances, that is on their command of alternatives, people may simply prefer the figure to the ground. Listening to media is not necessarily comforting.

The same holds true when complexity is treated as a medium of composition. The endless horizons here become explicit. One may even assume that the horizons of endlessness Luhmann saw in causality and which we find again in rationality depend on the notion of complexity being understood in the first place (Rescher 1979, 1985, 1998). There are many definitions of complexity. We take it to indicate a number of components too high to lend itself to causal analysis, components that are also too heterogeneous to be a reasonable subject of statistical analysis. Many heterogeneous components define phenomena such as an organism, a brain, a family, or a society that have to find out for themselves which components to link with what others and when (Weaver 1948; Luhmann 1990; Cilliers 1998; Morin 2008). Complexity gives way to self-organization, the emphasis being on an elusive
'self' to which neither the external nor the internal observer have access. Complexity is understood as the defining feature of a unitas multiplex which at any moment oscillates between unity and multiplicity, calling for one side of the distinction to maintain the other. Complexity therefore comes with systems, 'system' being the way operations recursively reproduce themselves as the components of the system they reproduce.

In mathematics, complex numbers are numbers that oscillate between two solutions, such as the root of -1: \( \sqrt{-1} = \pm 1 = i \), the imaginary number. One needs "at least two" entities, according to Gregory Bateson, to produce a difference that makes a difference (Bateson 1979: 68-69). These two entities must remain two; they are not supposed to merge. They thus define a trope as "a pair of mutually non-juxtaposable signifying elements" in Yuri M. Lotman's terms (Lotman 2001: 37). "Non-juxtaposable" here means, I assume, something like mutually non-reconcilable or orthogonal in relation. Two, that is, at least two, entities combine to define a unity that consists in an operation instantly dissolving back into the multiplicity of these entities. Again, we have two, at least two, horizons of endlessness and many examples referring to so-called interfaces where body and mind, action and technology, communication and consciousness, or mind and machine interlink and produce an effect, which is taken up by a next operation also establishing a link. The cognitive sciences as well as computer science have investigated these interfaces and discovered that affects seem to be more reliable, at least in interlinking man and machine, than cause and effect, or means and ends (Picard 1997).

Complexity is like a joker presenting us with surprising combinations of life, consciousness, technology, and society. It is the medium of composition of choice in a next society that has to deal with machine/man/society interfaces. It might be a worthwhile theoretical approach to compare it to earlier media of composition still with us, to be sure, in order to not overlook composers presenting their own solutions of appropriate selections as the most natural ones. There is still something shamanistic and ecstatic about software and hardware developers, therapists, and consultants presenting their selections among endless sets of complex possibilities as a remedy for our restless life.

IV. Cultural Theory

All of these dissemination, success, and composition media are structured with respect to form relating actuality and potentiality, oscillating between the two sides of the distinction, and gaining a memory from reconfirmed identities. All of these forms are subject to communication. They are experienced and acted upon according to situation, present and
absent participants, and time pressure or reduction. A social theory that attempts to describe the rich nature of any communication framed by its possibility to switch between aspects of such a situation quickly becomes unreadable, let alone unwritable. Examples include Talcott Parsons’ systems theory of action and Harrison C. White’s network theory of action (Parsons 1961; White 1992, 2008). Luhmann managed to keep it rather neat owing to his focus on the reproduction of social systems, that is on improbable communication becoming probable. The improbability of communication in Luhmann’s work remained a theoretical concept, on the one hand, and a side glance at empirical reality, on the other.

In social practice, however, if our theory is right, the complexity of communication must be dealt with both knowingly and spontaneously. Social intuition stemming from social experience, both supported and restricted by confidence in certain mostly unspoken biases (“what is it my mother always said?”) and stubbornness with respect to irritation (“doing it my way”), must step in to enable any actor not only to bear a social situation but to cope with it, even to turn it around, skillfully.

If a media theory of communication describes the complexity of a situation, a cultural theory and management theory describe how certain biases frame a situation in a way that enables actors not only to deal with it but to produce and reproduce it. These dogmas are like forms reduced to their inside, even though they still refer to an outside which lingers in the background, communicating both threats and lures. On their inside, however, they insist on tradition, knowledge, planning, and trust, or on creativity, innovation, and chutzpah to enable them to cultivate and manage a situation as one always has (for an entertaining study of backdrops becoming holey see Murray 2015).

There are other theories describing bias within a general theory of frames (Goffman 1974) but we focus on cultural theory and management theory, that is on identity and decision. Both are biased in the sense that they knowingly go for a bracketing of the outside of their form or for a certain, always to be tested, ignorance of what they exclude. This test can take most sensitive, curious, explorative forms or be performed rather rigidly, uncompromisingly. The composer drawing the distinction between indication and distinction, inside and outside, can choose to become noticeable as someone responsible for identity and decision, or to hide behind some institutional authority demanding maintainance of the existing status quo. At any rate, there is bias (Douglas 1982; Thompson/Ellis/Wildavsky 1990). One may even say that reflection on necessary bias is itself part of both cultural identity and managed decision.

Our question is how to conceive of identity and decision when considered functions of biased complexity within a media theoretical frame of communication. In a given situation, identity and decision inform of how to reach a solution if there seems to be none. Culture and
management take a step back from the concrete complexity of a situation into the
construction of a redundancy which, however, has to be accounted for it to be used flexibly,
that is to be used not irrespective of, but in keeping with, the situation. This is a highly
paradoxical task, to be sure. It combines oscillation with memory, yet opts for memory as
long as oscillation does not tell it otherwise.

Luhmann, albeit in a skeptical mood about its overall possibility, opted for a media theory
of culture calling culture the "condensation" (a Spencer-Brown term) of "the combined effect
of all communication media–language, dissemination media, and the symbolically
generalized media (...). Condensation in this context means that the meaning used remains
the same through reuse in various situations (otherwise there would be no reuse), but is also
confirmed and enriched with implications that can no longer be reduced to a simple formula.
This suggests that the overflow of meaning is itself the result of the condensation and
confirmation of meaning, and that communication is the operation that thus creates its own
medium" (Luhmann 2012: 248). Luhmann remained skeptical owing to the need to account
for cultural identity in terms of both reuse and new implications, which evidently leads to
some nonidentical understanding of identity, or, better, to an understanding of identity always
to be reforged, including its maintenance as the same. Within a context of complexity the
same is indeed different (Glanville 2012).

Thus, the question is what condensation or bias is able to inform a social practice of a way
to deal with a social situation which at the same time is too complex to be understood. In
cybernetic terms we ask for a culture able to act as a control device in interaction with
complexity (Ashby 1958). A control device has space for variation yet opts for redundancy. It
decouples itself from one-to-one relations with a complex phenomenon, including itself, by
introducing time lags to be able to account for possible errors, that is for irrelevant events or
operations (von Neumann 1956: 61–63). Accounting for irrelevance means being able to
indicate and distinguish relevance. And relevance may turn out to be just another medium of
composition, this time relating two horizons of endlessness with respect to relevant and
irrelevant events and operations. Again we switch from figure to ground by looking at
relevance and irrelevance in terms of loosely coupled elements. And we thereby listen to
culture as switching back and forth between different forms combining different selections of
relevance and irrelevance. Remember Lotman's and Uspensky's theory of culture as a
mechanism of alternation (Lotman/Uspensky 1978).

Our empirical question is thus what kind of bias might inform a culture acting as a control
device of social complexity brought about by dissemination, success, and composition media
overtaxing any communication with an overflow of possible meaning to go for. And we want
to be able to ask the same question for management. Our linking of composition media of communication to specific media epochs of society such as the ancient high culture of literacy, modern printing press society, and next society dealing with electronic and digital media, may already contain a hint of what culture to look for. Luhmann, when expanding on his skeptical theory of culture, proposed the culture form of teleology for ancient society and restless equilibrium for modern society, asking whether the "organization of complexity" might fit a society that has to deal with the expansion of the possibilities of monitoring offered by the computer (Luhmann 2012: 248–9). Teleology frames causality if causes and effects are matters of a cosmological order. A restless equilibrium frames rationality if any combination of means and ends is never bound with respect to nature or content but only with respect to maintaining a state from which to proceed further. And organized complexity is exactly what we need to determine a culture able to go with the flow of complex entities meeting and departing again.

The bias in ancient culture consists in the question whether or not a possible meaning fits a place in psyche, oikos, polis, or cosmos, to use the Greek terms. Since neither cosmology nor teleology overdetermine the world, this question admits of interpretation and reinterpretation. In modern culture, the question becomes whether or not to maintain an equilibrium, thereby becoming not exactly free but wide-ranging in combining intention, purpose, and resources. As in ancient culture, the question is scalable, or fractal, as it relates to individual equilibrium of opinion as much as to equilibria of forces in politics, of supply and demand on markets, or of autonomy and heteronomy in education, the arts, or in an organization. And in next society's culture, the question is whether to be in a flow or not (Csikszentmihalyi 1996), foregoing any attempt to understand exactly what complex entities or processes to rely on.

These culture forms become bias the moment they help to manage the overflow of meaning produced by the "combined effect of all communication media" by enabling a participant to decide whether to accept or to reject an offer of meaning. This is why Mary Douglas was able to propose a culture theory taking as its starting point the ways participants of a culture are able to express, and take on, surprises, distinguishing, as it were, between fatalistic ("nothing makes a difference"), hierarchic ("beware limits"), entrepreneurial ("take your chances"), and communard ("no experiments") styles of bias (Douglas 1989). As social or even societal theory would have it, communication is possible only if participants are able to reject it, because if not they will be unable to act on their own behalf, which is tantamount to not being able to communicate. It should be remembered that communication is the establishment of relationships of dependency among independent units. So the culture device we are looking for consists in enabling everyone to say No in order to be able to say Yes as
well. In logic we might say that culture is a device of general negation profiling specific affirmation. Social practice does not need to understand the situation it is in. It suffices to be able to decide whether it fits, maintains, or helps recover an equilibrium, or keeps one in the flow. All these cultural devices of complexity control are still with us, to be sure, giving us in turn an Aristotelian, Cartesian, or Ashbian touch to the way we listen to our world. Yet living in next society we have to know at any moment whether we are in or out of the flow.

V. Management

There are no established ways to translate a media theory of communication into a management theory. Management, framed by organization or at least by organized teams, projects, or networks, has to deal with the same kind of social complexity by similar means of intuitive and spontaneous reproduction of decision even if decision here is not only a question of operation but also of regulation. The more or less unspoken biases we are looking for here relate formal to informal, spontaneous to purposeful, contingent to plan, and back again, so that at first sight management is only adding to social complexity, not controlling it (Schwenk 1986; Wildavsky 1983; Thompson/Wildavsky 1986). At second glance we may realize, however, that this adding of complexity, as in homeostasis (Cannon 1929, 1963), is nothing other than the condition for introducing the time lag necessary to tell errors, or to tell the relevant from the irrelevant. I can only give the general idea here, but a management theory of complex media communication will have to focus on any intuitive decision based on experience and situational grasp always combining references to operation and to regulation. If a culture form in general communication is a usually unreflected because by tradition shared reference to customs of rejection and acceptance (Becker 1982), then management in organized communication asks for explicit reference to regulation as well, thereby placing reflection of the reflection of regulation out of reach.

An inclusive form of regulated operation, or of decisions premised by previous decisions absorbing the uncertainty of what to refer to (Simon 1997; March/Simon 1993; Luhmann 2000), is management's way of dealing with the complexity of communication. It is all the more important to frame a first step into a sociological management theory in this general way because in next society institutional ways to take certain management practices for granted fade away. In modern society management was regulated by reference to a functional subsystem of society usually offering just one success medium of communication, so that governments had to deal with the overflow of power, of enterprises, of money, courts, law, universities, with the overflow of selection and truth, or of art institutions, of beauty (or of
formal satisfaction); but no organization had to deal with the overflow of an indeterminate combination of them.

Moreover, owing to the advantages of the written file management invented by bureaucracy (Weber 1978: 223–226), modern organization could safely stick to a certain prioritization of the written form of communication over any other, leaving to oral communication the fine-tuning of operations with respect to regulation. This is no longer so. Forms of team production, project management, and agile leadership foster oral more than written communication (the latter being more and more frequently replaced by visual, i.e. picturized communication), meanwhile relying strongly on electronic and digital media embedding the process of organizing in internal and external networks.

Organizations, to be sure, remain specific when it comes to attempts to influence behavior compared to the rather diffuse communication in interaction or society (March/Simon 1993: 21). In next society, however, organizations and their management, like everybody else, have to come up with a particular combination of dissemination, success, and composition. This means they are challenged by the same type of overflow as everybody else. And they thus have to forego giving priority to one or at most two favorite success media of communication, one dissemination medium (writing, supplemented by orality), and two observation media (causality and rationality) and instead go for all of them. Media come in packages or in interconnections, in the arts (Lehmann 2016: 106–129) as in management.

This is why management theory has to forego its administrative and economic biases as well, to rediscover old professional virtues of theological, military, pedagogical, medical, or aesthetic leadership in organizations, and become "polyphonic" (Anderson 2003) in its portfolio of which media of communication to combine. Whether deliberately or not, the management of an organization will have to settle for a scalable, self-identical, and individual type of decision that produces and reproduces its particular way of combining operation with regulation.

VI. Conclusion

Not only dissemination, success, and composition media of communication define the social situation of the human condition; perception media also do. If we just look at human beings as Parsons emphasized in his considerations on a "paradigm of human condition" (Parsons 1978), we have the human nervous system within its medium of irritability, the human organism within its medium of vision, sound, smell, touch, feeling, and movement, human action within its media of communication, and an as yet theoretically underdetermined
medium of information and communication technologies. The next step in our elaboration of a sociological media theory will therefore have to be a better understanding of technology in general and electronic and digital technologies in particular. Cultural theory's media theory has already cleared up any misunderstanding of technology as merely instrumental, thereby leaving human and social purpose unimpaired (Winthrop-Young 2011; Tholen 2002). Yet this will turn out to be only a necessary first step in determining the possibly non-trivial nature of electronic and digital technologies.

The overflow of meaning is set to increase. The rational order of modern society and its functional subsystems will give way to a complex ecology of networks of organisms, action, communication, culture, and technology. Man/machine/society interfaces will occupy the center of attention in any media theory, let alone social theory. It seems to be important to not leave possible notions of medium undiscussed. This paper has therefore made an attempt to call attention to Heider's notion of medium within a sociological understanding of communication. Marshall McLuhan's invitation to use our ears instead of our eyes in learning to account for complex switches between figure and ground, action and communication, form and medium is as valid as it ever was.

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