

The evolution of the public sphere

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Single Sentence Summary: Publicity or the public sphere has evolved with complex societies from their very outset adopting different forms as a result of a complex dynamics between two kinds of communication media, namely, success and dissemination.

Abstract:

Purpose

The aim of this article is to rethink the issue of publicity from a cross-cultural and evolutionary perspective.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach

Assuming that there is a dominant paradigm in the studies of the public sphere centered on Habermas' ideas, media theory (and especially Luhmann, taken as a media theorist) is selected as a new context providing different concepts, ideas, language-games, and metaphors that allow the re-foundation of the study of publicity.

Findings

Publicity as a social structure emerges –and acquires different forms during history– out of the complex dynamics resulting from the interaction between success media, such as power, and different kinds of dissemination media.

Originality/ Value

A research into the forms of publicity not only promotes awareness of the ubiquity of the phenomenon across cultural evolution, but also offers tools to make new discoveries and systematize what is already known about the subject and its ramifications.

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3 Keywords: Publicity, Public Sphere, Medium/ Form, Communication Media,
4 Mediality, Sociocultural Evolution, Media Theory.
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8 Type: Conceptual paper
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- 10 1. Introduction
 - 11 2. Media studies and the public sphere
 - 12 3. Niklas Luhmann and his theory of communication media
 - 13 4. Communication media and sociocultural evolution
 - 14 5. Forms of publicity
 - 15 6. Concluding remarks
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22 **1. Introduction**

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25 As soon as a colleague learns that someone in her/his department is interested
26 in publicity, publicness and/or the public sphere, she/he might immediately make
27 some remark with reference to Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the*
28 *Public Sphere (1999)*. Habermas' concepts and ideas have become common
29 places and are so deeply rooted in our culture, that it becomes hard to make
30 oneself clear if daring to talk about the subject using other language-games,
31 concepts and/or reference frames. It is striking how difficult it is to talk about a well-
32 known issue without walking the well-trodden path. When trying to innovate
33 expectations are raised too high and they become easily disappointed due to the
34 fact that it is impossible to fulfill everybody's expectations. Nevertheless, if one is to
35 re-think some problem, if one is to rephrase it in unconventional ways, that is
36 exactly the risk to be taken.
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47 The fate of this kind of enterprise seems to oscillate between pouring old wine
48 in a new bottle and that of advancing ambitious yet disappointing alternatives. The
49 difficulties are so huge as to cause faint and dismay. Yet, what if we face the
50 challenge with some creativity? Let us try a thought experiment.
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3 Let us make as if we had no theory of the public sphere. Let us make as if
4 Habermas' book does not exist. How could we theorize about the public, publicity,
5 publicness or the public sphere? To what theories would we reach out to? To
6 which concepts would we resort to in order to construct the object "public sphere"?
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8 What can be taken as the starting point?
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13 For certain, Habermas did not invent the concepts of the public and the public
14 sphere. What Habermas delivered was an interpretation and a systematization of
15 the theories of the public opinion that emerged short before, during, and after the
16 French Revolution. So the first question is: should we accept the framework
17 provided by the tradition of the Enlightenment? Should we take for granted that the
18 problem of publicness and/or its conceptualization is a hallmark of western history
19 and western societies?
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26 If we are interested in normative political theory and the theory of democracy, it
27 seems obvious that there are hardly better alternatives. After all, therein lies the
28 origins of modern democratic systems. The political language of today is the
29 heritage of the enlightened philosophy. The intellectual historian would also
30 consider that there is no other point to begin with, since there are no earlier
31 sources accounting for the phenomenon.
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38 However, if we try to think of a theory of publicity as such, we are in no need to
39 make the assumption that the public sphere is a modern phenomenon —just as
40 archaeologists do, for physical evidence suggests that cultures at different stages
41 of development tend to create "public spaces". It must be recognized that the
42 semantics of publicity and public opinion only acquired relevance and became
43 systematic during the French Revolution and later —at least that is what the
44 available sources allow to tell. Notwithstanding, if we are interested in the question
45 of publicity as a socio-structural feature —or in other words, as a transformation of
46 the form of organization of a society— it is necessary to think in more general
47 terms. One cannot think, as some historians usually do, in terms of —almost
48 unrepeatable— singularities. On the contrary, the investigator has to ask
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3 herself/himself how and under which conditions certain societies can acquire those
4 features, patterns or behaviors described as publicity, public sphere, publicness,
5 and the like. And this is a very reasonable approach for it is well-known that other
6 societies, such as China, have developed concepts of the public and have seen
7 the emergence of public spaces —see, for instance, (Jansen, 2000).
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13 The point is that, independently of the question of who came first with the idea
14 and the institution, societies and political systems under certain conditions become
15 public and/or develop some sort of public sphere. Which are these conditions and
16 how is it possible for these possibilities to reproduce or to materialize in different
17 cultural and temporal contexts? What if we begin to think of the public sphere as
18 Janus-faced: on the one hand, there is the semantic side (of which pretty much is
19 known —at least for western social systems); and on the other, there is a socio-
20 structural side, the darker side, of which much is ignored, or else what is known is
21 poorly systematized?
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29 Which theories, traditions and backgrounds can be mobilized in support? What
30 concepts, language-games and/or metaphors can help us to make of this issue a
31 scientific object of knowledge?
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36 It will be suggested that media theory, and specifically the contributions of
37 Niklas Luhmann to this field, represent a promising alternative to achieve this goal.
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40 **2. Media studies and the public sphere**

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43 As is the case with many others social concepts, such as power, community,
44 society, and so on, the concept of the public sphere embraces the whole of the
45 social sciences: political science, sociology, social psychology, history, philosophy,
46 media studies, journalism, communication sciences, and even economics, all of
47 these sciences shed some light on at least one dimension of the problem. As a
48 consequence, concepts such as the public sphere play the role of semantic and
49 conceptual crossroads between these disciplines. The result is not only a
50 polysemic Gordian knot, but also the contexts in which to meaningfully place the
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3 concept are multiplied. And not only linguistic contexts helping to elucidate the
4 meaning of the concept are being touched on, but first and foremost scientific
5 contexts consisting in corpuses of literature, theories, methods, language-games,
6 etc. Therefore, there are far too many theoretical choices available to grasp the
7 question of publicity.
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13 But if there are so many alternatives why are we opting for media theory and
14 how can this theoretical decision be justified?
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18 Relating publicity to media seems, in fact, an obvious and by no means original
19 choice. Many scholars have remarked that the development of publicity (or a new
20 form of publicity) has been tightly linked to the invention of the printing press —a
21 thesis closely linked to the ground-breaking works of Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979;
22 2005). However, drawing conclusions and generalizations from this fact has proved
23 troublesome. There is no a clear and lineal causal relationship between literacy,
24 the multiplication of public spheres and the growth of public opinion. For instance,
25 there is a lack of correlation between the spreading of printed material (pamphlets,
26 newspapers, books, and so on) and the levels of literacy in the population
27 (Petrucci, 1988;Shofield, 2005 ; Farge, 1995) and it is hard to tell if and to what
28 extent this phenomenon by itself became a source of social and political change.
29 The truth be told, most part of the historians prefer to explain the emergence of the
30 public sphere as a result of the evolution of democratic and representative political
31 systems during the so-called age of revolutions (Pocock, 2003; Edelstein, 2009;
32 Fontana, 2008) —neutralizing the problem of the growth of information caused by
33 modern media by labeling it as a “cultural transformation”. So it is known that the
34 printing press, especially in the form of newspapers (Barker and Burrows, 2002),
35 played a crucial role in political representation, nevertheless, accounting for the
36 reasons of this outcome have proved difficult. The fact that historical evidence
37 suggests that different and heterogeneous media come at play in times of social
38 upheaval (Darnton, 2010) only contributes to make the problem more puzzling.
39 Remarkably, most of the explanations have taken the path of political philosophy
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3 and turned into normative justification; the marriage of free press and democracy
4 has become a matter of principle, the foundations of modern polity.
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8 In light of these assumptions, social sciences currently deal first and foremost
9 with the question of if and to what extent new media threaten the marriage with
10 democracy. Although written 20 years ago the state of the art depicted by Paolo
11 Carpiagnano (1999) still claims validity:
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15 "That the current dynamics of the public sphere are intrinsically related to the development
16 and transformation of the media environment, is hardly a new discovery...And yet, in
17 academic analysis the media and the public sphere have remained relegated to their
18 respective domains, media studies on the one hand, and sociology and political science on
19 the other. Exploring the connectivity and interference of these two strands of research has,
20 at best, meant putting them side by side to see how they add to or subtract from each other,
21 while leaving intact their conceptual definitions. Thus, for example, from the viewpoint of the
22 public sphere it has been a matter of evaluating to what extent the media affect or distort the
23 expression of free public discourse, and from the viewpoint of the media, of seeing what kind
24 of a public function it might be able to perform, as in the case of the unending discussion
25 about the advantages of public versus private ownership of television." (p. 178)
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33 If media studies are to provide a framework to rephrase the issue of the public
34 sphere, they have to deliver an explanation of both: a) what is exactly the role of
35 the media in the emergence of the public sphere?; and b) how and why do media
36 (printing press, television, social media) bolster transformations in the organization
37 of society and the political system? Nevertheless, first of all, media theory has to
38 account for the conditions of the possibility for the emergence of something like the
39 public sphere; it has to provide, to state it again, a sort of genealogy of the public.
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46 Media studies are a complex interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field.
47 Although it might be questionable to call them a discipline, there is no doubt that
48 the field has experienced an exponential growth in the last decades. In media
49 studies we can find media archaeology, media history, media philosophy, media
50 sociology, and mediology. As a matter of fact, there is no consensus about the
51 meaning of the fundamental concept of medium. However, that seems to be the
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3 hallmark of disciplinarity in most cases: an implicit agreement about the profound
4 disagreement regarding the meaning of the most crucial notions defining a
5 research field. As a result, there is an interesting ecology of media theories. Let us
6 briefly review some of the most influential:
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11 • *Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School*: For many media theorists
12 McLuhan was a visionary and, indeed, he was. Although the
13 characterization of media (hot media vs. cold media; the eye vs. the ear,
14 electronic vs. typographic and so forth) is one of the most speculative and
15 questionable facets of his work, many of his ideas are still inspirational in
16 media studies research. For instance, that: a) media contain other media; b)
17 the medium is the message, for it is not content what is important but the
18 change of scale produced by the medium itself; c) media mark the character
19 of civilizations, namely, their forms of sensibility, their artistic forms of
20 expression, and their political organization; d) media are extensions of
21 human senses for they shape perceptions, feelings and ways of thinking;
22 and, finally, that e) mass media, such as electronic media, stand out for
23 creating simultaneity and restoring causality (McLuhan, 1994). The idea of a
24 conflict between the eye and the ear was also supported by the
25 contributions of Walter Ong (Ong and Hartley, 2012), Eric Havelock (2004),
26 and Jack Goody (Goody and Watt, 1963) —although Goody, properly
27 speaking, do not belong to the so-called Toronto School— regarding the
28 nature of oral societies, their social memory and how these social systems
29 faced literacy and literate societies. It is significant to remark that McLuhan
30 himself was not interested in something like “the effects of media in the
31 public sphere”, because from his point of view media worked not on the
32 discursive and rational side of man, as expressed in public opinion (itself a
33 creation of literate societies), but on the sensitive side. The public sphere
34 was to him mere content, “debased forms of human expression and
35 experience” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 210).
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54 • *Friedrich Kittler and media archaeology*: Media theory, as devised by Kittler,
55 is the outcome of the tradition of French structuralism. Kittler combined
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3 Foucault's archaeology with presentism —understood as a critique of
4 hermeneutics, put forward by H. U. Gumbrecht and others— and in the
5 search for the archives of culture, he discovered the importance of technical
6 media (Kittler, 1999). For Kittler the information flows generated by technical
7 media stand for the *Real* and become the basis for the *Imaginary* and the
8 *Symbolic* (Kittler and Gumbrecht, 2013, p. 48). Paraphrasing Kittler: media,
9 as the real, determine our situation. Again, the issue of the public sphere is
10 barely mentioned.

- 11 • *Sybille Krämer and the theory of transmission*: What is striking about
12 Krämer's media theory is her contribution to the definition of the mediality of
13 media, namely, its singularity and defining trait as a social phenomenon.
14 Krämer understands that all media deal with communicative issues and that
15 all communicative actions or processes involve transmission. Therefore, she
16 sets about to unravel the implications of a deep-seated cultural metaphor,
17 namely, that of Hermes, the messenger. The main idea suggests that
18 communication implies connecting two different worlds or entities and that
19 the bridge allowing this connection are media; communication media enable
20 the transmission of messages, however, they can only fulfill this function as
21 long as media themselves remain invisible —otherwise, noise emerges.
22 Significantly, this postal model of communication is contrasted to an erotic
23 model of communication where communication is understood as dialog,
24 understanding and whose goal is to integrate individuals in social interaction
25 and into a community (Krämer and Enns, 2015). In trying to debase the
26 erotic model of communication Krämer makes of publicity, understood as
27 public and rational deliberation about issues concerning the welfare of the
28 community, something utopic —or simply a wrong description of what is
29 really going on.
- 30 • *Bolter & Grusin's remediations*: The thesis of Bolter and Grusin (1999) is
31 that new technological media oscillate between two contradictory logics,
32 namely, immediacy and hypermediacy, transparency and opacity. Inasmuch
33 as new media promise to render evermore authentic experiences, as long
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3 as successful, they achieve immediacy. However, since media depend on
4 other media and were developed from previous older media, and since often
5 interactive interfaces involve multiple media (multimedia), the experience of
6 media is more than ever hypermedial. Remediation is the concept that
7 allows the observer to keep track of the ways in which media refashion the
8 technological network they are embedded into. One more time, there is no
9 reference to publicness, publicity or the public sphere.

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15 • *Regis Debray's mediology*: Debray was interested in the power of signs and
16 he reached the conclusion that only by studying the materiality of meaning
17 could this phenomenon be understood. Therefore, for Debray the medium
18 appears as the material trace of meaning —that is, forms of inscription or of
19 archiving. But the function of media is far more complex: media are
20 procedures of symbolizing, a means of social communication, and are
21 embedded in distribution networks that involve a flow of labor, know-how,
22 knowledge, in short, a process of mediation. That is how media produce
23 meaning, namely, by mediating. However, that process of mediation also
24 involves the set of social conditions that makes it possible, that is, a media
25 ecology. The issue of public opinion concerns Debray inasmuch as it
26 reveals an instinctual mediology, that is to say, a historical instance
27 (eighteenth century) when the powerful realized of the power of words
28 (Debray, 1996, p. 98).
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34 • *Stieg Hjarvard and the concept of mediatization*: In contrast to the literature
35 reviewed so far, the work of Hjarvard is inscribed within the more traditional
36 current of media sociology. For Hjarvard (2013, p. 19) mediatization consists
37 in a long-term process whereby the growth of the influence of media alters
38 cultural institutions and modes of interaction. What is remarkable is not the
39 problem in itself, because it has been addressed by many others theorists.
40 His contribution consist in distinguishing between mediation and
41 mediatization, in other words, what Hjarvard achieved was to isolate a
42 problem from a far more general context. However, the author tackles the
43 problem of the public sphere resorting to the framework of the marriage
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3 between publicity and democracy —an insight from which we wish to take
4 some distance.
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8 It is not by chance that most of the media theories ignore the issue of the public
9 sphere. They all want to point to something that underlies our common
10 assumptions about what media are and how do they relate to politics and society.
11 And the case of Hjarvard is just like the exception confirming the rule, because the
12 need to distinguish between mediation and mediatization reveals the presence of
13 different layers of complexity and the recognition of the distinctiveness of the
14 mediality of media. Particularly remarkable is the case of Krämer, for she explicitly
15 accounts for the opposition between the Habermasian model of communication
16 and the postal model for which she advocates. Certainly, as Carpignano (1999)
17 showed, the mediology of Debray can be tuned in to Habermas theory of the public
18 sphere. However, that can only be achieved at the expense of the silences and
19 subtle suggestions found in the work of Debray. In short, what is notable of these
20 theories is that they make implausible the Habermasian model of the public
21 sphere, because they point towards the rules constituting experience and
22 discourse, towards the technical conditions of possibility of transmitting speech and
23 experiencing someone else's voice or look; to put it another way, these theories
24 undermine the normative and dialogical assumptions on which Habermas built his
25 thesis.
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40 The question is: how can media theory help us to think of the emergence and
41 evolution of the public?
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44 **3. Niklas Luhmann and his theory of communication media**

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47 In spite of the heterogeneity of the approaches reviewed above, there are some
48 common denominators. The first is that media are deeply related to the problem of
49 communication. The second is the thesis that the communicative function played
50 by media is that of mediating between two or more separate entities by means of
51 transmitting a message from one point to another —an idea that Shannon &
52 Weaver's (1975) *Mathematical Theory of Communication* has helped to root.
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3 Regarding the first idea, it is an important point to make: communication theory
4 should be the framework of media theory. However, with reference to the second
5 idea, the postal model of communication —as Krämer described it— relies on a
6 few assumptions the author would not wish to follow.
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11 Transmission is just an instance of technically supported communication, but it
12 cannot be made the ultimate model of communication (Luhmann, 1995a, p. 140;
13 2012, p. 37) Besides, thinking of communication as transmission of messages
14 involves the fallacy of *telementalism* (Harris and Wolf, 1998), that is to say, it is
15 taken for granted that humans think of something and decide to communicate it to
16 others by translating their thoughts to language and by emitting sounds others can
17 hear and understand. This is a quite popular but utterly oversimplified and
18 erroneous way of “thinking” of language, thought and communication. It is just a
19 language-game or a discourse which creates its own subjects, objects and
20 manners for attributing action and passion that neither stands for the truth nor
21 provides an accurate (or at least, thought-provoking) description of what is going
22 on. It is ironic how contradictory it is for theorists who advocate materialism or
23 materiality (just like media archaeologists) to fall pray of assumptions like these.
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35 As a result of availing of the concept and metaphor of transmission, the function
36 of media or the mediality of media, is confused with the technical procedure of
37 transmitting a signal. In other words, communication technologies (carrier pigeons,
38 smoke signals, electrically and/or electronically transmitted signals...) and the
39 materialities supporting communication processes (stone, papyrus, paper, and so
40 forth) are being conflated with *mediality*, which is to say, —interpreting McLuhan—
41 the scaling up of information.
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48 Within this context our attention shall be drawn to a cybernetic approach to
49 media developed by Niklas Luhmann. The reason is that in contrast to other media
50 theories that have fallen victim to the metaphor of mediation and transmission, the
51 German sociologist observes media through the glasses of a distinction, namely,
52 the difference between medium and form.
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3 At this point the informed reader might wonder why to try with Luhmann's media
4 theory and not to straightforwardly address his conception of the public opinion
5 (Luhmann, 1994; 2000a; 1990a; 2002, pp. 274-318) and compare it to Habermas
6 —after all, the Habermas-Luhmann controversy offers an attractive point of
7 departure. There has been indeed an interesting reception of Luhmann ideas in the
8 literature concerned with the public sphere and mass media (Bechmann and Stehr,
9 2011; Gripsrud and Eide, 2010; Bentele, 2003; Gestrich, 2006; Marcinkowski,
10 1993; Landgraf, 2015; Marcinkowski et al., 2009). However, one gets the feeling
11 that the ideas of Luhmann have been emasculated because what has been at
12 stake is what answers could Luhmann provide to the problem of the public sphere,
13 and not how could the problem of publicity/public sphere be system-theoretically
14 (re)formulated.
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25 In a similar vein, the reception of the controversy between Habermas and
26 Luhmann has tended rather to emphasize the convergences between both
27 authors, assuming that in order for political science and political theory to adopt
28 Luhmannian systems theory it is necessary first to reconcile it with normativism
29 (think, for instance, in the writings of Hauke Brunkhorst and Poul Kjaer, among
30 others). This essay could have certainly begun by making a critical assessment of
31 the reception of Luhmann ideas about the public sphere and write another chapter
32 in the Habermas-Luhmann debate, notwithstanding, this path would have lead
33 astray from point the author wants to make: that the modern public sphere is a late
34 outcome of the evolution of communication media and that sociocultural evolution
35 has produced a wide range of publicity forms —something well beyond the terms
36 of the Habermas-Luhmann diferendo and irreducible to a matter of political theory.
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47 It is suggested that by digging in in Luhmann's sociology, specifically in his
48 theory of communication media, one could find the general guidelines of a model
49 that would account for how publicities emerge and what conditions their evolution.
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53 It should come as no surprise that the most suggestive descriptions Luhmann
54 made about the distinction of medium and form appear in his writings about arts
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3 (Luhmann, 2000b; Luhmann and Roberts, 1987). Since arts are the domain of the
4 form, the field for experimenting with form, perception and communication, it
5 seems logical that any attempt the trace a genealogy of media begins precisely at
6 this point. No wonder that the origins of writing are intermingled with forms of
7 artistic expression (Schmandt-Besserat, 2007); no wonder either that we, as
8 western observers, tend to confuse the communication media of other cultures with
9 arts (Golte, 2009; Blanco Rivero, 2018)
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17 However, a discussion about the issue of the origins of the distinction will be
18 avoided, for the problem has already been exhausted (Baecker, 1999; Esposito,
19 2004; Esposito, 2006; Schiltz, 2003; Brauns, 2002; Stäheli, 2018); it is well-known
20 that Luhmann made a very creative interpretation of Fritz Heider's theory of
21 perception, turning it into a principle of cognition. Further, Luhmann's earlier ideas
22 concerning modal theory and the notion of symbolic generalization (closely related
23 to Parsonian sociology) shall be counted as the first conceptualizations of the
24 theory of communication media. In any case, in contrast to the Parsonian
25 theoretical design (still impregnating Luhmann's late writings), we shall interpret
26 media based primarily on the latest Spencer-Brownian theoretical design (Roth,
27 2017).
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37 In this sense, tracing a sort of conceptual history that splits the notions of form
38 and medium leading to the conclusion that there are different concepts of medium
39 in Luhmann—for there is little doubt that the concept of form is closely knitted to
40 the work of Spencer-Brown (Baecker, 2013a; Baecker, 2013b; Schiltz, 2007)—is
41 also of little interest to us. From a logical-formal point of view, such as that
42 advocated by Luhmann himself, what matters are differences and differences—
43 even the temporal ones—are always simultaneous.
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51 Straightforwardly, a medium consists of the unity of two sides, on the one hand,
52 loosely coupled elements that constitute the *medial substrate*, and on the other
53 hand, tightly coupled elements giving rise to *forms*. From this very simple idea,
54 Luhmann draws a series a theoretical conclusions involving not only the
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3 dimensions of time, objectivity and sociability, but also the philosophy of science
4 (Luhmann, 1995b; 2000b, pp.102-120; 2012, pp. 113-120; 1991a; 1999) (Table 1).
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8 Indeed, the idea is not always easy to follow and, as to its theoretical
9 backgrounds refers, it might seem quite arbitrary or far-fetched —especially if the
10 reader strands in the references to Heider. In light of these remarks, computer
11 models can provide valuable insights, first, by allowing the reader to visualize and
12 play with the model, and second, by showing that isomorphic behavior also takes
13 place in other realms of nature. The kinetics of enzymes (Stieff and Wilensky,
14 2001a) (Figure 1) and a model representing LeChatelier's Principle (Stieff and
15 Wilensky, 2001b) (Figure 2) are two examples of patterns resembling a complex
16 dynamics of (*form*)ation and dissolution (medium).
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24 By comparing these models with the descriptions provided by Luhmann, a
25 distinction might be brought to the attention of the observer, namely, the difference
26 between the *distinction* medium/form itself and what shall be called *mediality*. As a
27 distinction the first thing being brought to the fore is that the difference
28 medium/form is drawn by an observer (she/he does not need to be human at all)
29 and that, in the act of being performed, it appears as *form*. For only forms can be
30 observed; only distinctions can yield information. As a distinction and therefore, as
31 a two-sided form, it has significant implications for the architecture of the theory
32 and, in broad terms, for the philosophy of science (i.e. it is by drawing this
33 distinction that systems theory intends to replace ontology). But if we turn towards
34 the other side, what remains is mediality as potential, as structured and non-
35 arbitrary contingency. By distinguishing between the distinction and mediality we
36 are discriminating between the observation itself and what is being observed.
37 However, again, the distinction is also a form —this is the paradoxical side; seen
38 the other way around, the distinction medium/form is self-referential because it is
39 almost impossible to define it without implying it at the same time —here is the
40 tautological side.
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3 In any case, emphasis should be placed on mediality. The very etymology of
4 the word is tricky for the reason that it seems to suggest a quality or essence.
5 Notwithstanding, what is meant is—in Spencer-Brown's terms—the link between
6 marking and crossing, namely, latency, uncertainty, in short, the capacity to
7 produce information. If asked for a description accounting for the unity of the
8 difference of medium and form, it could be said that media are *information sources*.
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14 The Enzyme Kinetics model (Figure 1) nicely illustrates this point: red shapes
15 couple with green triangles to form an envelope-looking shape—here the act of
16 tight coupling can be seen; but when an enzyme-substrate is formed (envelop-
17 looking shapes) a blue triangle emerges as a product—by the same token, the
18 emergent outcome of communication media is information.
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24 Just as media cannot emerge but within social systems (Luhmann, 2000b, p.
25 104), information cannot emerge outside media (of course, in order for information
26 to be brought about observers are needed—and that is precisely what social
27 systems are). The point is that information is media-relative; there is no
28 transmission of information, only signals are transmitted, only data is stored.
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34 Now, if we are right, the concept of communication devised by Luhmann
35 becomes problematic (Luhmann, 1995a, pp. 148-158). Looked at closely, it
36 becomes obvious that when Luhmann thought of communication he was
37 envisioning the most common and pervasive communication medium in society,
38 that is, language. Utterance, the truth be told, is a valid description of the second
39 selection integrating communication only within the medium of language. But
40 actually communication cannot be brought about without the *selection of a*
41 *communication medium* in which frames the meaningful interplay between
42 information and understanding finds its place.
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51 This re-description remains consistent with the rest of the theory, for instance,
52 the description of meaning—in the vein of Husserl's phenomenology—as a pre-
53 and supra-linguistic phenomenon (Luhmann, 1990b) and, especially, the
54 assumption that communication media overcome the improbability of
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3 communication being accepted (success media) and of extending its outreach
4 (dissemination media), thus steering sociocultural evolution (Luhmann, 1990c).
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7 **4. Communication media and sociocultural evolution**

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10 Luhmann intended to base his sociology on a tripod consisting of systems
11 theory, communication (media) theory and evolution theory, whereby each of these
12 self-referential theories would back each other in a mutual limitation relationship.
13 Evolution theory would account for complexity growth and system differentiation,
14 while communication media theory and systems theory would explain the
15 emergence of mechanisms of variation, selection, and re-stabilization (Luhmann,
16 1991b) —please notice that this very same tripod is the structure of his magnum
17 opus *Theory of Society* (Luhmann, 2012).
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25 In this guise, the German sociologist assigns to language the function of
26 variation in the context of segmented social systems; writing and printing press, on
27 the other hand, are made responsible for the differentiation of interaction and
28 society while holding the selection function (together with success media such as
29 power and money) in the transition to a functionally differentiated society
30 (Luhmann, 1981; 1991c; 1990d; 1995a, pp.159-163; 2012, pp. 120-180) —this is,
31 of course, a very tight synthesis.
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39 Within the framework briefly sketched above the author would like to bring to
40 the fore the evolutionary dynamics between success (power, money, love, and
41 truth) and dissemination media (writing, printing press, electronic media). This is an
42 underdeveloped dimension of evolution theory or sociocultural evolution with
43 tremendous potential for theoretical development. Specially because there is a vast
44 repertoire of empiric research in the fields of cultural anthropology, history of the
45 book, history of literacy, paleography, art history, political anthropology, intellectual
46 history, media history and media archaeology/ archaeology of media, among
47 others, that could be used not only to support research hypothesis, but also,
48 eventually, to provide data to run computer simulations.
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3 For the moment, a brief survey of the main literature of these disciplines
4 suggests that the relationship between success and dissemination media is
5 complex, dynamic, non-linear, chaotic, self-organizing and adaptive. Since there
6 are too many intervening variables, the author shall focus on the medium of
7 influence/power on the grounds that this medium (especially political power) plays
8 a crucial role in fostering and in putting obstacles as well in the development of
9 dissemination media —Goody (2000) again offers interesting supporting evidence
10 in this regard. Moreover, literature tends to lend more attention to power than truth
11 or money, not to mention love.
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20 In the first place, there is a strong connection between the processes of
21 generalization and symbolization of influence and the development and extended
22 use of primitive dissemination media, such as the erection of stelae (which
23 eventually might show inscriptions or depictions) and building complexes. A
24 positive feedback loop arises between big men longing for more influence and
25 artisans (or priests, as in the case of the Maya people) that gain social status and
26 enhance their skills by crafting a wide variety of artifacts and structures.
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33 In the second place, when conditions are appropriated, dissemination media
34 get an impulse of their own carrying social consequences that cannot be totally
35 controlled by political organizations —in fact, they cannot be organizationally
36 controlled. For instance, Europe between the Renaissance and late modernity
37 constituted a social system integrated by different political organizations, none of
38 them being able to exert sovereignty over the whole region —although universal
39 monarchy persisted as an unrealized ideal of submitting Europe under a same
40 crown. As a result, boundaries between states not only became a source of
41 irritation for the organization of power (monarchic or republican), but also served
42 for maturing conditions for the printing press to develop, not only furthering new
43 forms of sociability (Lilti, 2017; Sauter, 2009), but also opening up a new and
44 profitable market: the book market (Darnton, 1979). Furthermore, the literature
45 about the emergence of the modern public sphere in Europe shows how the
46 printing press challenged power structures (traditional forms of authority, as
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3 historians say) (Darnton, 2014; Melton, 2001; Sawyer, 1990) But on the other
4 hand, as Luhmann showed, it also meant the growth of complexity of the medium
5 of power and the emergence of a functionally differentiated system for politics
6 (Luhmann, 2002).
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11 Success and dissemination media behave like a dynamical system exhibiting
12 very interesting patterns. Under some configurations scaling can be observed,
13 especially when a determined medium such as the printing press or architecture is
14 boosted; but in other cases, the existing media ecology results in a variety of
15 potential equilibrium states. Our thesis is that within this *Spielraum* (play space),
16 among the medialities of these media, there arises what I shall call *forms of*
17 *publicity*.
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24 **5. Forms of publicity**

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27 Up to this point the reader might wonder what allows the author to say that
28 whatever that emerges between success and dissemination media is public or can
29 account for publicness.
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34 If, as a starting point, it is considered that common usages of the concepts of
35 publicity, public, publicness, and public sphere have to do with a kind of action
36 (namely, to make something known), with a type of social space where this sort of
37 actions are performed (i.e. theaters, squares, forums, balconies, and so on),
38 involving the usage of some kind of material (e.g. stone, textiles, ceramics, furs,
39 paper, wood, pigments, etc.) and/or some kind of technology (e.g. painting,
40 dancing, rhetoric, sculpting, writing, printing, broadcasting, transmitting, and so
41 forth) serving for this purpose, and last but not least, that these kind of behaviors
42 are observed in every known type of social system —regardless of the semantic
43 artifacts employed to describe them—, then, it is justified to call publicity any social
44 setting enabling and being enabled by the observation of observations (second
45 order observation). For this is what, in the end, publicity reduces to: the two-
46 sidedness of visibility and invisibility, distinction and indication, markedness and
47 unmarkedness, form and medium, publicness and secrecy.
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3 In light of these considerations, and without trying to be exhaustive, five forms
4 of publicity can be identified (Figure 3):
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8 a. *Ritual*: Ritual seems to be ubiquitous at all levels of social complexity. In
9 ancient social formations normative expectation structures usually take the
10 shape of rituality, while in modern ones its efficiency is subdued to functional
11 systems (e.g. as liturgy in the system of religion or as protocols symbolizing
12 sovereignty or majesty in the political system). Still, there are always certain
13 kinds of rituals (or, there is always a side of rituals) that shape and define
14 group identities –even in our modern rationalized and secularized world.
15 Exactly this reference to a definite whole is what makes the publicness of
16 ritual. Unity has to be represented, symbolized, embodied, and/or animated
17 (visibility), but at that very instant when unity is indicated, the contingency of
18 the selection appears as latency, as a potential source of divergent
19 interpretation, as means to express disarray or to institute the dominance of
20 a new self-proclaimed elite (invisibility). The difference between invisibility
21 and visibility is invariably accomplished by dissemination media at different
22 levels: the architectural layout is typically inscribed in a program of graphic
23 display (Petrucci, 1999), therefore, architecture also works as a
24 dissemination medium (Moore, 2005); scriptures, symbols, paintings,
25 ceramics, and the like, not only represent and/or reproduce a set of beliefs
26 of crucial importance for the ritual but also play a performative role in the
27 execution of the ritual; rituals can also be represented in rituals by means of
28 dissemination media, performing thus a reentry of the form into the form. In
29 spite of the standardized pragmatic dimension of rituality (i.e. the ritual
30 performance as such), ritual involves a highly dynamic and flexible
31 communication structure. This means that authority, influence, power and
32 truth are always at stake in the ritual praxis (i.e. there are often challenges
33 to the capacity of the elite to monopolize among the populace the authority
34 to officiate rituals) (Swenson, 2006; 2011). Although commonly embedded
35 in ritual, the following two forms deserve special attention because of their
36 specificity.
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3 b. *Feasting/Commensality*: Sharing meals is a common pattern of socialization
4 across many different cultures and this occurs mostly under the figure of
5 feasts with a lot of food and drink. Feasting or commensality may have a
6 religious connotation but it also accomplishes an important redistributive
7 function. Feasts are occasions and social locations to see and to be seen:
8 big men can exhibit their generosity, powerful chiefs can show their richness
9 and magnanimity (competing with their rivals), tribal leaders can reinforce
10 their bonds and achieve the necessary trust for consolidating alliances, and
11 so on. Greek city-states, for instance, made of commensality a republican
12 institution. Inasmuch as social formations became bigger and more
13 complex, commensality lost its function of reaffirming community bonds
14 (Bray, 2003).
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16 c. *Games*: Playing games is a common form of ritual. Games usually represent
17 or intervene in the realm of natural forces in order to restore or guarantee
18 cosmic equilibrium or assure good harvests. Independently of their goal,
19 games involve staging: a well-delimited location where the players do their
20 performances, and a periphery, delimited or not, from which the game is
21 watched. Either the nature of games becomes religious or martial, they
22 serve to expose individual performances to the eye of others: strength,
23 ability, bravery, sagacity, intelligence, leadership, and so on. From this
24 standpoint, social ranking differences are profiled, put to test and/or
25 reaffirmed. Therefore, games are a suitable ground for developing strategies
26 for symbolizing power (e.g. by representing a pinnacle of the system under
27 the figure of the ruler) (Huizinga, 1980; Gentile, 1998; Scarborough et al.,
28 1991; Baecker, 1999b).
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30 d. *Punishment*: The ability to punish the transgressor and at the same time to
31 give example of the right behavior (whereby some power technologies such
32 as confession, truth-telling, and avowal play a salient role (Foucault et al.,
33 2014)) constitutes one essential feature in the structuring of power as a
34 success medium (Foucault, 1977). Punishment is the execution of a penalty
35 which in the same act of being performed dissuades other potential
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3 transgressors. This is how influence inflates to political power (Luhmann,
4 2002, pp. 63-65). Exposing the suffering of the punished is essential for its
5 purposes (i.e. showing the corpses of the victims at the main square,
6 announcing executions orally or in the newspapers for people to congregate
7 and watch the spectacle, carving a stone depicting imprisonment and/or
8 executions, and so on). Therefore, power and dissemination media weave
9 together in the form of punishment with such intensity, shaping a long-
10 lasting structural drift in sociocultural evolution.
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- 17 e. *Modern publicity*: The heterarchy of modern functionally differentiated
18 society owes pretty much to the modern form of publicity and vice versa.
19 Modern publicity emerged since the eighteenth century, when the semantics
20 of publicness and opinion merged and entangled with the process of
21 growing structural complexity of political power. In other words, the
22 evolutionary process which fused the function of keeping the capacity of
23 taking collective mandatory decisions with the solution consisting in
24 achieving communicative success by means of the threat with sanctions
25 (positive or negative), availed of the semantic of publicness in order to afford
26 more contingency in the processes of decision-making and gain in
27 complexity. Semantic and social structure created a loop, concretely a
28 positive feedback, wherein semantic variations went in hand with political
29 innovations. As a result, power acquired such a structural complexity never
30 seen before in sociocultural evolution, namely, it became able to support
31 second order observation, to inflate and deflate, it acquired processual
32 reflexivity and a second coding (government/ opposition), it became able to
33 symbolize the inclusion of the exclusion, and finally, it set the conditions for
34 the differentiation of the functional system for politics (Luhmann, 2012, pp.
35 214-235). At the same time, while other functional systems also adapted to
36 second order observation, the political semantics of publicness still
37 continued to dominate the social self-descriptions of these developments –
38 as a consequence, political publicity currently fixes most of the social
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3 expectations regarding observing observations and the scientific
4 descriptions of it.
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7 8 **6. Concluding remarks** 9

10 Since interdisciplinary research about the public sphere constitute a discourse
11 of its own with its characteristic concepts, problems and ways of thinking, the
12 author has tried to bring to the fore an alien context with different keywords,
13 assumptions, problems, and perspectives from where to rethink the problem of
14 publicity as a sociostructural feature in the evolution of social systems. The
15 thought-experiment consisting in making as if Habermas' work on the public sphere
16 does not exist, allowed us —as a heuristic resource— to bring to the fore the
17 theory of media in order to play this role. The advantage of media theory consists
18 in that it has consciously avoided what the scientific and social discourse about the
19 public sphere has taken for granted. In this sense, important contributions to the
20 understanding of mediality and its technological and material dimensions have
21 been made. The implications for the knowledge of the constitution of the public
22 sphere are clear: nothing can be made known in the absence of communication
23 media, no matter their degree of technical sophistication —and far from being a
24 commonsensical statement this has deep theoretical overtones.
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37 However, media theorists rely heavily on the problematic notion of
38 transmission. In fact, the distinctiveness of transmission consists in the coupling of
39 “media” of two different types, namely, physical and communication media. The
40 first condition consists in finding structural regular patterns within physical media
41 (i.e. the longitude of radio waves, patterns of electrical pulses, and so on) which
42 are susceptible of manipulation, then, by means of specially ad hoc fashioned
43 devices, the medium is employed to produce signals (i.e. a codified unit-pattern
44 within the medium that, in turn, codifies one by one the units of a symbol-system)
45 which are sent from one physical emitting point to another receiving point. Although
46 these technologies have defied time and space, radically enhancing the function of
47 dissemination media and their relationship with the material world, they and their
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3 effects cannot be confused with the long-lasting performance of communication
4 media as such. Mediality as the hallmark of communication media consist in their
5 potential to generate and scale up information and thereby to increase social
6 complexity.
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11 In reading Luhmann as a media theorist not only an insight into mediality is
12 gained, but also a framework that allows us to systematize the knowledge
13 produced by diverse disciplines. Furthermore, complexity sciences offer a wide
14 variety of methods, such as *Agent-based Modeling*, to study the interaction
15 between success and dissemination media adumbrating future theoretical
16 advancements.
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22 Finally, the author wishes that more than a list with some forms of publicity, the
23 reader retains the idea of the ubiquity of the phenomenon of publicity throughout
24 social and cultural evolution and that the media evolution theory being advanced
25 here offers concepts, ideas and intuitions that can help to account for it.
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The evolution of the public sphere

Single Sentence Summary: Publicity or the public sphere has evolved with complex societies from their very outset adopting different forms as a result of a complex dynamics between two kinds of communication media, namely, success and dissemination.

Abstract:

Purpose

The aim of this article is to rethink the issue of publicity from a cross-cultural and evolutionary perspective.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach

Assuming that there is a dominant paradigm in the studies of the public sphere centered on Habermas' ideas, media theory (and especially Luhmann, taken as a media theorist) is selected as a new context providing different concepts, ideas, language-games, and metaphors that allow the re-foundation of the study of publicity.

Findings

Publicity as a social structure emerges –and acquires different forms during history– out of the complex dynamics resulting from the interaction between success media, such as power, and different kinds of dissemination media.

Originality/ Value

A research into the forms of publicity not only promotes awareness of the ubiquity of the phenomenon across cultural evolution, but also offers tools to make new discoveries and systematize what is already known about the subject and its ramifications.

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3 Keywords: Publicity, Public Sphere, Medium/ Form, Communication Media,
4 Mediality, Sociocultural Evolution, Media Theory.
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8 Type: Conceptual paper
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- 10 1. Introduction
 - 11 2. Media studies and the public sphere
 - 12 3. Niklas Luhmann and his theory of communication media
 - 13 4. Communication media and sociocultural evolution
 - 14 5. Forms of publicity
 - 15 6. Concluding remarks
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22 1. Introduction

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25 As soon as a colleague learns that someone in her/his department is interested
26 in publicity, publicness and/or the public sphere, she/he might immediately make
27 some remark with reference to Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the*
28 *Public Sphere (1999)*. Habermas' concepts and ideas have become common
29 places and are so deeply rooted in our culture, that it becomes hard to make
30 oneself clear if daring to talk about the subject using other language-games,
31 concepts and/or reference frames. It is striking how difficult it is to talk about a well-
32 known issue without walking the well-trodden path. When trying to innovate
33 expectations are raised too high and they become easily disappointed due to the
34 fact that it is impossible to fulfill everybody's expectations. Nevertheless, if one is to
35 re-think some problem, if one is to rephrase it in unconventional ways, that is
36 exactly the risk to be taken.
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47 The fate of this kind of enterprise seems to oscillate between pouring old wine
48 in a new bottle and that of advancing ambitious yet disappointing alternatives. The
49 difficulties are so huge as to cause faint and dismay. Yet, what if we face the
50 challenge with some creativity? Let us try a thought experiment.
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3 Let us make as if we had no theory of the public sphere. Let us make as if
4 Habermas' book does not exist. How could we theorize about the public, publicity,
5 publicness or the public sphere? To what theories would we reach out to? To
6 which concepts would we resort to in order to construct the object “public sphere”?
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8 What can be taken as the starting point?
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13 For certain, Habermas did not invent the concepts of the public and the public
14 sphere. What Habermas delivered was an interpretation and a systematization of
15 the theories of the public opinion that emerged short before, during, and after the
16 French Revolution. So the first question is: should we accept the framework
17 provided by the tradition of the Enlightenment? Should we take for granted that the
18 problem of publicness and/or its conceptualization is a hallmark of western history
19 and western societies?
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26 If we are interested in normative political theory and the theory of democracy, it
27 seems obvious that there are hardly better alternatives. After all, therein lies the
28 origins of modern democratic systems. The political language of today is the
29 heritage of the enlightened philosophy. The intellectual historian would also
30 consider that there is no other point to begin with, since there are no earlier
31 sources accounting for the phenomenon.
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38 However, if we try to think of a theory of publicity as such, we are in no need to
39 make the assumption that the public sphere is a modern phenomenon —just as
40 archaeologists do, for physical evidence suggests that cultures at different stages
41 of development tend to create “public spaces”. It must be recognized that the
42 semantics of publicity and public opinion only acquired relevance and became
43 systematic during the French Revolution and later —at least that is what the
44 available sources allow to tell. Notwithstanding, if we are interested in the question
45 of publicity as a socio-structural feature —or in other words, as a transformation of
46 the form of organization of a society— it is necessary to think in more general
47 terms. One cannot think, as some historians usually do, in terms of —almost
48 unrepeatable— singularities. On the contrary, the investigator has to ask
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3 herself/himself how and under which conditions certain societies can acquire those
4 features, patterns or behaviors described as publicity, public sphere, publicness,
5 and the like. And this is a very reasonable approach for it is well-known that other
6 societies, such as China, have developed concepts of the public and have seen
7 the emergence of public spaces —see, for instance, (Jansen, 2000).
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13 The point is that, independently of the question of who came first with the idea
14 and the institution, societies and political systems under certain conditions become
15 public and/or develop some sort of public sphere. Which are these conditions and
16 how is it possible for these possibilities to reproduce or to materialize in different
17 cultural and temporal contexts? What if we begin to think of the public sphere as
18 Janus-faced: on the one hand, there is the semantic side (of which pretty much is
19 known —at least for western social systems); and on the other, there is a socio-
20 structural side, the darker side, of which much is ignored, or else what is known is
21 poorly systematized?
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30 Which theories, traditions and backgrounds can be mobilized in support? What
31 concepts, language-games and/or metaphors can help us to make of this issue a
32 scientific object of knowledge?
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36 It will be suggested that media theory, and specifically the contributions of
37 Niklas Luhmann to this field, represent a promising alternative to achieve this goal.
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40 **2. Media studies and the public sphere**

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43 As is the case with many others social concepts, such as power, community,
44 society, and so on, the concept of the public sphere embraces the whole of the
45 social sciences: political science, sociology, social psychology, history, philosophy,
46 media studies, journalism, communication sciences, and even economics, all of
47 these sciences shed some light on at least one dimension of the problem. As a
48 consequence, concepts such as the public sphere play the role of semantic and
49 conceptual crossroads between these disciplines. The result is not only a
50 polysemic Gordian knot, but also the contexts in which to meaningfully place the
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3 concept are multiplied. And not only linguistic contexts helping to elucidate the
4 meaning of the concept are being touched on, but first and foremost scientific
5 contexts consisting in corpuses of literature, theories, methods, language-games,
6 etc. Therefore, there are far too many theoretical choices available to grasp the
7 question of publicity.
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13 But if there are so many alternatives why are we opting for media theory and
14 how can this theoretical decision be justified?
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17 Relating publicity to media seems, in fact, an obvious and by no means original
18 choice. Many scholars have remarked that the development of publicity (or a new
19 form of publicity) has been tightly linked to the invention of the printing press —a
20 thesis closely linked to the **ground-breaking** works of Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979;
21 2005). However, drawing conclusions and generalizations from this fact has proved
22 troublesome. There is no a clear and lineal causal relationship between literacy,
23 the multiplication of public spheres and the growth of public opinion. For instance,
24 there is a lack of correlation between the spreading of printed material (pamphlets,
25 newspapers, books, and so on) and the levels of literacy in the population
26 (Petrucci, 1988;Shofield, 2005 ; Farge, 1995) and it is hard to tell if and to what
27 extent this phenomenon by itself became a source of social and political change.
28 The truth be told, most part of the historians prefer to explain the emergence of the
29 public sphere as a result of the evolution of democratic and representative political
30 systems during the so-called age of revolutions (Pocock, 2003; Edelstein, 2009;
31 Fontana, 2008) —neutralizing the problem of the growth of information caused by
32 modern media by labeling it as a “cultural transformation”. So it is known that the
33 printing press, especially in the form of newspapers (Barker and Burrows, 2002),
34 played a crucial role in political representation, nevertheless, accounting for the
35 reasons of this outcome have proved difficult. The fact that historical evidence
36 suggests that different and heterogeneous media come at play in times of social
37 upheaval (Darnton, 2010) only contributes to make the problem more puzzling.
38 Remarkably, most of the explanations have taken the path of political philosophy
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3 and turned into normative justification; the marriage of free press and democracy
4 has become a matter of principle, the foundations of modern polity.
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8 In light of these assumptions, social sciences currently deal first and foremost
9 with the question of if and to what extent new media threaten the marriage with
10 democracy. Although written 20 years ago the state of the art depicted by Paolo
11 Carpiagnano (1999) still claims validity:
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16 "That the current dynamics of the public sphere are intrinsically related to the development
17 and transformation of the media environment, is hardly a new discovery...And yet, in
18 academic analysis the media and the public sphere have remained relegated to their
19 respective domains, media studies on the one hand, and sociology and political science on
20 the other. Exploring the connectivity and interference of these two strands of research has,
21 at best, meant putting them side by side to see how they add to or subtract from each other,
22 while leaving intact their conceptual definitions. Thus, for example, from the viewpoint of the
23 public sphere it has been a matter of evaluating to what extent the media affect or distort the
24 expression of free public discourse, and from the viewpoint of the media, of seeing what kind
25 of a public function it might be able to perform, as in the case of the unending discussion
26 about the advantages of public versus private ownership of television." (p. 178)
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33 If media studies are to provide a framework to rephrase the issue of the public
34 sphere, they have to deliver an explanation of both: a) what is exactly the role of
35 the media in the emergence of the public sphere?; and b) how and why do media
36 (printing press, television, social media) bolster transformations in the organization
37 of society and the political system? Nevertheless, first of all, media theory has to
38 account for the conditions of the possibility for the emergence of something like the
39 public sphere; it has to provide, to state it again, a sort of genealogy of the public.
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46 Media studies are a complex interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field.
47 Although it might be questionable to call them a discipline, there is no doubt that
48 the field has experienced an exponential growth in the last decades. In media
49 studies we can find media archaeology, media history, media philosophy, media
50 sociology, and mediology. As a matter of fact, there is no consensus about the
51 meaning of the fundamental concept of medium. However, that seems to be the
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3 hallmark of disciplinarity in most cases: an implicit agreement about the profound
4 disagreement regarding the meaning of the most crucial notions defining a
5 research field. As a result, there is an interesting ecology of media theories. Let us
6 briefly review some of the most influential:
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11 • *Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School*: For many media theorists
12 McLuhan was a visionary and, indeed, he was. Although the
13 characterization of media (hot media vs. cold media; the eye vs. the ear,
14 electronic vs. typographic and so forth) is one of the most speculative and
15 questionable facets of his work, many of his ideas are still inspirational in
16 media studies research. For instance, that: a) media contain other media; b)
17 the medium is the message, for it is not content what is important but the
18 change of scale produced by the medium itself; c) media mark the character
19 of civilizations, namely, their forms of sensibility, their artistic forms of
20 expression, and their political organization; d) media are extensions of
21 human senses for they shape perceptions, feelings and ways of thinking;
22 and, finally, that e) mass media, such as electronic media, stand out for
23 creating simultaneity and restoring causality (McLuhan, 1994). The idea of a
24 conflict between the eye and the ear was also supported by the
25 contributions of Walter Ong (Ong and Hartley, 2012), Eric Havelock (2004),
26 and Jack Goody (Goody and Watt, 1963) —although Goody, properly
27 speaking, do not belong to the so-called Toronto School— regarding the
28 nature of oral societies, their social memory and how these social systems
29 faced literacy and literate societies. It is significant to remark that McLuhan
30 himself was not interested in something like “the effects of media in the
31 public sphere”, because from his point of view media worked not on the
32 discursive and rational side of man, as expressed in public opinion (itself a
33 creation of literate societies), but on the sensitive side. The public sphere
34 was to him mere content, “debased forms of human expression and
35 experience” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 210).
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54 • *Friedrich Kittler and media archaeology*: Media theory, as devised by Kittler,
55 is the outcome of the tradition of French structuralism. Kittler combined
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3 Foucault's archaeology with presentism —understood as a critique of
4 hermeneutics, put forward by H. U. Gumbrecht and others— and in the
5 search for the archives of culture, he discovered the importance of technical
6 media (Kittler, 1999). For Kittler the information flows generated by technical
7 media stand for the *Real* and become the basis for the *Imaginary* and the
8 *Symbolic* (Kittler and Gumbrecht, 2013, p. 48). Paraphrasing Kittler: media,
9 as the real, determine our situation. Again, the issue of the public sphere is
10 barely mentioned.

- 11 • *Sybille Krämer and the theory of transmission*: What is striking about
12 Krämer's media theory is her contribution to the definition of the mediality of
13 media, namely, its singularity and defining trait as a social phenomenon.
14 Krämer understands that all media deal with communicative issues and that
15 all communicative actions or processes involve transmission. Therefore, she
16 sets about to unravel the implications of a deep-seated cultural metaphor,
17 namely, that of Hermes, the messenger. The main idea suggests that
18 communication implies connecting two different worlds or entities and that
19 the bridge allowing this connection are media; communication media enable
20 the transmission of messages, however, they can only fulfill this function as
21 long as media themselves remain invisible —otherwise, noise emerges.
22 Significantly, this postal model of communication is contrasted to an erotic
23 model of communication where communication is understood as dialog,
24 understanding and whose goal is to integrate individuals in social interaction
25 and into a community (Krämer and Enns, 2015). In trying to debase the
26 erotic model of communication Krämer makes of publicity, understood as
27 public and rational deliberation about issues concerning the welfare of the
28 community, something utopic —or simply a wrong description of what is
29 really going on.
- 30 • *Bolter & Grusin's remediations*: The thesis of Bolter and Grusin (1999) is
31 that new technological media oscillate between two contradictory logics,
32 namely, immediacy and hypermediacy, transparency and opacity. Inasmuch
33 as new media promise to render evermore authentic experiences, as long
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3 as successful, they achieve immediacy. However, since media depend on
4 other media and were developed from previous older media, and since often
5 interactive interfaces involve multiple media (multimedia), the experience of
6 media is more than ever hypermedial. Remediation is the concept that
7 allows the observer to keep track of the ways in which media refashion the
8 technological network they are embedded into. One more time, there is no
9 reference to publicness, publicity or the public sphere.

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15 • *Regis Debray's mediology*: Debray was interested in the power of signs and
16 he reached the conclusion that only by studying the materiality of meaning
17 could this phenomenon be understood. Therefore, for Debray the medium
18 appears as the material trace of meaning—that is, forms of inscription or of
19 archiving. But the function of media is far more complex: media are
20 procedures of symbolizing, a means of social communication, and are
21 embedded in distribution networks that involve a flow of labor, know-how,
22 knowledge, in short, a process of mediation. That is how media produce
23 meaning, namely, by mediating. However, that process of mediation also
24 involves the set of social conditions that makes it possible, that is, a media
25 ecology. The issue of public opinion concerns Debray inasmuch as it
26 reveals an instinctual mediology, that is to say, a historical instance
27 (eighteenth century) when the powerful realized of the power of words
28 (Debray, 1996, p. 98).
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34 • *Stieg Hjarvard and the concept of mediatization*: In contrast to the literature
35 reviewed so far, the work of Hjarvard is inscribed within the more traditional
36 current of media sociology. For Hjarvard (2013, p. 19) mediatization consists
37 in a long-term process whereby the growth of the influence of media alters
38 cultural institutions and modes of interaction. What is remarkable is not the
39 problem in itself, because it has been addressed by many others theorists.
40 His contribution consist in distinguishing between mediation and
41 mediatization, in other words, what Hjarvard achieved was to isolate a
42 problem from a far more general context. However, the author tackles the
43 problem of the public sphere resorting to the framework of the marriage
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3 between publicity and democracy —an insight from which we wish to take
4 some distance.
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8 It is not by chance that most of the media theories ignore the issue of the public
9 sphere. They all want to point to something that underlies our common
10 assumptions about what media are and how do they relate to politics and society.
11 And the case of Hjarvard is just like the exception confirming the rule, because the
12 need to distinguish between mediation and mediatization reveals the presence of
13 different layers of complexity and the recognition of the distinctiveness of the
14 mediality of media. Particularly remarkable is the case of Krämer, for she explicitly
15 accounts for the opposition between the Habermasian model of communication
16 and the postal model for which she advocates. Certainly, as Carpignano (1999)
17 showed, the mediology of Debray can be tuned in to Habermas theory of the public
18 sphere. However, that can only be achieved at the expense of the silences and
19 subtle suggestions found in the work of Debray. In short, what is notable of these
20 theories is that they make implausible the Habermasian model of the public
21 sphere, because they point towards the rules constituting experience and
22 discourse, towards the technical conditions of possibility of transmitting speech and
23 experiencing someone else's voice or look; to put it another way, these theories
24 undermine the normative and dialogical assumptions on which Habermas built his
25 thesis.
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40 The question is: how can media theory help us to think of the emergence and
41 evolution of the public?
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44 **3. Niklas Luhmann and his theory of communication media**

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47 In spite of the heterogeneity of the approaches reviewed above, there are some
48 common denominators. The first is that media are deeply related to the problem of
49 communication. The second is the thesis that the communicative function played
50 by media is that of mediating between two or more separate entities by means of
51 transmitting a message from one point to another —an idea that Shannon &
52 Weaver's (1975) *Mathematical Theory of Communication* has helped to root.
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3 Regarding the first idea, it is an important point to make: communication theory
4 should be the framework of media theory. However, with reference to the second
5 idea, the postal model of communication —as Krämer described it— relies on a
6 few assumptions the author would not wish to follow.
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11 Transmission is just an instance of technically supported communication, but it
12 cannot be made the ultimate model of communication (Luhmann, 1995a, p. 140;
13 2012, p. 37) Besides, thinking of communication as transmission of messages
14 involves the fallacy of *telementalism* (Harris and Wolf, 1998), that is to say, it is
15 taken for granted that humans think of something and decide to communicate it to
16 others by translating their thoughts to language and by emitting sounds others can
17 hear and understand. This is a quite popular but utterly oversimplified and
18 erroneous way of “thinking” of language, thought and communication. It is just a
19 language-game or a discourse which creates its own subjects, objects and
20 manners for attributing action and passion that neither stands for the truth nor
21 provides an accurate (or at least, thought-provoking) description of what is going
22 on. It is ironic how contradictory it is for theorists who advocate materialism or
23 materiality (just like media archaeologists) to fall pray of assumptions like these.
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35 As a result of availing of the concept and metaphor of transmission, the function
36 of media or the mediality of media, is confused with the technical procedure of
37 transmitting a signal. In other words, communication technologies (carrier pigeons,
38 smoke signals, electrically and/or electronically transmitted signals...) and the
39 materialities supporting communication processes (stone, papyrus, paper, and so
40 forth) are being conflated with *mediality*, which is to say, —interpreting McLuhan—
41 the scaling up of information.
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48 Within this context our attention shall be drawn to a cybernetic approach to
49 media developed by Niklas Luhmann. The reason is that in contrast to other media
50 theories that have fallen victim to the metaphor of mediation and transmission, the
51 German sociologist observes media through the glasses of a distinction, namely,
52 the difference between medium and form.
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3 At this point the informed reader might wonder why to try with Luhmann's media
4 theory and not to straightforwardly address his conception of the public opinion
5 (Luhmann, 1994; 2000a; 1990a; 2002, pp. 274-318) and compare it to Habermas
6 —after all, the Habermas-Luhmann controversy offers an attractive point of
7 departure. There has been indeed an interesting reception of Luhmann ideas in the
8 literature concerned with the public sphere and mass media (Bechmann and Stehr,
9 2011; Gripsrud and Eide, 2010; Bentele, 2003; Gestrich, 2006; Marcinkowski,
10 1993; Landgraf, 2015; Marcinkowski et al., 2009). However, one gets the feeling
11 that the ideas of Luhmann have been emasculated because what has been at
12 stake is what answers could Luhmann provide to the problem of the public sphere,
13 and not how could the problem of publicity/public sphere be system-theoretically
14 (re)formulated.

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17 In a similar vein, the reception of the controversy between Habermas and
18 Luhmann has tended rather to emphasize the convergences between both
19 authors, assuming that in order for political science and political theory to adopt
20 Luhmannian systems theory it is necessary first to reconcile it with normativism
21 (think, for instance, in the writings of Hauke Brunkhorst and Poul Kjaer, among
22 others). This essay could have certainly begun by making a critical assessment of
23 the reception of Luhmann ideas about the public sphere and write another chapter
24 in the Habermas-Luhmann debate, notwithstanding, this path would have lead
25 astray from point the author wants to make: that the modern public sphere is a late
26 outcome of the evolution of communication media and that sociocultural evolution
27 has produced a wide range of publicity forms —something well beyond the terms
28 of the Habermas-Luhmann diferendo and irreducible to a matter of political theory.

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31 It is suggested that by digging in in Luhmann's sociology, specifically in his
32 theory of communication media, one could find the general guidelines of a model
33 that would account for how publicities emerge and what conditions their evolution.

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36 It should come as no surprise that the most suggestive descriptions Luhmann
37 made about the distinction of medium and form appear in his writings about arts

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3 (Luhmann, 2000b; Luhmann and Roberts, 1987). Since arts are the domain of the
4 form, the field for experimenting with form, perception and communication, it
5 seems logical that any attempt the trace a genealogy of media begins precisely at
6 this point. No wonder that the origins of writing are intermingled with forms of
7 artistic expression (Schmandt-Besserat, 2007); no wonder either that we, as
8 western observers, tend to confuse the communication media of other cultures with
9 arts (Golte, 2009; Blanco Rivero, 2018)

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16 However, a discussion about the issue of the origins of the distinction will be
17 avoided, for the problem has already been exhausted (Baecker, 1999; Esposito,
18 2004; Esposito, 2006; Schiltz, 2003; Brauns, 2002; Stäheli, 2018); it is well-known
19 that Luhmann made a very creative interpretation of Fritz Heider's theory of
20 perception, turning it into a principle of cognition. Further, Luhmann's earlier ideas
21 concerning modal theory and the notion of symbolic generalization (closely related
22 to Parsonian sociology) shall be counted as the first conceptualizations of the
23 theory of communication media. In any case, in contrast to the Parsonian
24 theoretical design (still impregnating Luhmann's late writings), we shall interpret
25 media based primarily on the latest Spencer-Brownian theoretical design (Roth,
26 2017).

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37 In this sense, tracing a sort of conceptual history that splits the notions of form
38 and medium leading to the conclusion that there are different concepts of medium
39 in Luhmann—for there is little doubt that the concept of form is closely knitted to
40 the work of Spencer-Brown (Baecker, 2013a; Baecker, 2013b; Schiltz, 2007)—is
41 also of little interest to us. From a logical-formal point of view, such as that
42 advocated by Luhmann himself, what matters are differences and differences—
43 even the temporal ones—are always simultaneous.

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Straightforwardly, a medium consists of the unity of two sides, on the one hand,
loosely coupled elements that constitute the *medial substrate*, and on the other
hand, tightly coupled elements giving rise to *forms*. From this very simple idea,
Luhmann draws a series a theoretical conclusions involving not only the

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3 dimensions of time, objectivity and sociability, but also the philosophy of science
4 (Luhmann, 1995b; 2000b, pp.102-120; 2012, pp. 113-120; 1991a; 1999) (Table 1).
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8 Indeed, the idea is not always easy to follow and, as to its theoretical
9 backgrounds refers, it might seem quite arbitrary or far-fetched —especially if the
10 reader strands in the references to Heider. In light of these remarks, computer
11 models can provide valuable insights, first, by allowing the reader to visualize and
12 play with the model, and second, by showing that isomorphic behavior also takes
13 place in other realms of nature. The kinetics of enzymes (Stieff and Wilensky,
14 2001a) (Figure 1) and a model representing LeChatelier's Principle (Stieff and
15 Wilensky, 2001b) (Figure 2) are two examples of patterns resembling a complex
16 dynamics of (*form*)ation and dissolution (medium).
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24 By comparing these models with the descriptions provided by Luhmann, a
25 distinction might be brought to the attention of the observer, namely, the difference
26 between the *distinction* medium/form itself and what shall be called *mediality*. As a
27 distinction the first thing being brought to the fore is that the difference
28 medium/form is drawn by an observer (she/he does not need to be human at all)
29 and that, in the act of being performed, it appears as *form*. For only forms can be
30 observed; only distinctions can yield information. As a distinction and therefore, as
31 a two-sided form, it has significant implications for the architecture of the theory
32 and, in broad terms, for the philosophy of science (i.e. it is by drawing this
33 distinction that systems theory intends to replace ontology). But if we turn towards
34 the other side, what remains is mediality as potential, as structured and non-
35 arbitrary contingency. By distinguishing between the distinction and mediality we
36 are discriminating between the observation itself and what is being observed.
37 However, again, the distinction is also a form —this is the paradoxical side; seen
38 the other way around, the distinction medium/form is self-referential because it is
39 almost impossible to define it without implying it at the same time —here is the
40 tautological side.
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3 In any case, emphasis should be placed on mediality. The very etymology of
4 the word is tricky for the reason that it seems to suggest a quality or essence.
5 Notwithstanding, what is meant is—in Spencer-Brown's terms—the link between
6 marking and crossing, namely, latency, uncertainty, in short, the capacity to
7 produce information. If asked for a description accounting for the unity of the
8 difference of medium and form, it could be said that media are *information sources*.
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14 The Enzyme Kinetics model (Figure 1) nicely illustrates this point: red shapes
15 couple with green triangles to form an envelope-looking shape—here the act of
16 tight coupling can be seen; but when an enzyme-substrate is formed (envelop-
17 looking shapes) a blue triangle emerges as a product—by the same token, the
18 emergent outcome of communication media is information.
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24 Just as media cannot emerge but within social systems (Luhmann, 2000b, p.
25 104), information cannot emerge outside media (of course, in order for information
26 to be brought about observers are needed—and that is precisely what social
27 systems are). The point is that information is media-relative; there is no
28 transmission of information, only signals are transmitted, only data is stored.
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34 Now, if we are right, the concept of communication devised by Luhmann
35 becomes problematic (Luhmann, 1995a, pp. 148-158). Looked at closely, it
36 becomes obvious that when Luhmann thought of communication he was
37 envisioning the most common and pervasive communication medium in society,
38 that is, language. Utterance, the truth be told, is a valid description of the second
39 selection integrating communication only within the medium of language. But
40 actually communication cannot be brought about without the *selection of a*
41 *communication medium* in which frames the meaningful interplay between
42 information and understanding finds its place.
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51 This re-description remains consistent with the rest of the theory, for instance,
52 the description of meaning—in the vein of Husserl's phenomenology—as a pre-
53 and supra-linguistic phenomenon (Luhmann, 1990b) and, especially, the
54 assumption that communication media overcome the improbability of
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3 communication being accepted (success media) and of extending its outreach
4 (dissemination media), thus steering sociocultural evolution (Luhmann, 1990c).
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7 8 **4. Communication media and sociocultural evolution** 9

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11 Luhmann intended to base his sociology on a tripod consisting of systems
12 theory, communication (media) theory and evolution theory, whereby each of these
13 self-referential theories would back each other in a mutual limitation relationship.
14 Evolution theory would account for complexity growth and system differentiation,
15 while communication media theory and systems theory would explain the
16 emergence of mechanisms of variation, selection, and re-stabilization (Luhmann,
17 1991b) —please notice that this very same tripod is the structure of his magnum
18 opus *Theory of Society* (Luhmann, 2012).
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26 In this guise, the German sociologist assigns to language the function of
27 variation in the context of segmented social systems; writing and printing press, on
28 the other hand, are made responsible for the differentiation of interaction and
29 society while holding the selection function (together with success media such as
30 power and money) in the transition to a functionally differentiated society
31 (Luhmann, 1981; 1991c; 1990d; 1995a, pp,159-163; 2012, pp. 120-180) —this is,
32 of course, a very tight synthesis.
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40 Within the framework briefly sketched above the author would like to bring to
41 the fore the evolutionary dynamics between success (power, money, love, and
42 truth) and dissemination media (writing, printing press, electronic media). This is an
43 underdeveloped dimension of evolution theory or sociocultural evolution with
44 tremendous potential for theoretical development. Specially because there is a vast
45 repertoire of empiric research in the fields of cultural anthropology, history of the
46 book, history of literacy, paleography, art history, political anthropology, intellectual
47 history, media history and media archaeology/ archaeology of media, among
48 others, that could be used not only to support research hypothesis, but also,
49 eventually, to provide data to run computer simulations.
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3 For the moment, a brief survey of the main literature of these disciplines
4 suggests that the relationship between success and dissemination media is
5 complex, dynamic, non-linear, chaotic, self-organizing and adaptive. Since there
6 are too many intervening variables, the author shall focus on the medium of
7 influence/power on the grounds that this medium (especially political power) plays
8 a crucial role in fostering and in putting obstacles as well in the development of
9 dissemination media —Goody (2000) again offers interesting supporting evidence
10 in this regard. Moreover, literature tends to lend more attention to power than truth
11 or money, not to mention love.
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20 In the first place, there is a strong connection between the processes of
21 generalization and symbolization of influence and the development and extended
22 use of primitive dissemination media, such as the erection of stelae (which
23 eventually might show inscriptions or depictions) and building complexes. A
24 positive feedback loop arises between big men longing for more influence and
25 artisans (or priests, as in the case of the Maya people) that gain social status and
26 enhance their skills by crafting a wide variety of artifacts and structures.
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33 In the second place, when conditions are appropriated, dissemination media
34 get an impulse of their own carrying social consequences that cannot be totally
35 controlled by political organizations —in fact, they cannot be organizationally
36 controlled. For instance, Europe between the Renaissance and late modernity
37 constituted a social system integrated by different political organizations, none of
38 them being able to exert sovereignty over the whole region —although universal
39 monarchy persisted as an unrealized ideal of submitting Europe under a same
40 crown. As a result, boundaries between states not only became a source of
41 irritation for the organization of power (monarchic or republican), but also served
42 for maturing conditions for the printing press to develop, not only furthering new
43 forms of sociability (Lilti, 2017; Sauter, 2009), but also opening up a new and
44 profitable market: the book market (Darnton, 1979). Furthermore, the literature
45 about the emergence of the modern public sphere in Europe shows how the
46 printing press challenged power structures (traditional forms of authority, as
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3 historians say) (Darnton, 2014; Melton, 2001; Sawyer, 1990) But on the other
4 hand, as Luhmann showed, it also meant the growth of complexity of the medium
5 of power and the emergence of a functionally differentiated system for politics
6 (Luhmann, 2002).
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11 Success and dissemination media behave like a dynamical system exhibiting
12 very interesting patterns. Under some configurations scaling can be observed,
13 especially when a determined medium such as the printing press or architecture is
14 boosted; but in other cases, the existing media ecology results in a variety of
15 potential equilibrium states. Our thesis is that within this *Spielraum* (play space),
16 among the medialities of these media, there arises what I shall call *forms of*
17 *publicity*.
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24 **5. Forms of publicity**

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27 Up to this point the reader might wonder what allows the author to say that
28 whatever that emerges between success and dissemination media is public or can
29 account for publicness.
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34 If, as a starting point, it is considered that common usages of the concepts of
35 publicity, public, publicness, and public sphere have to do with a kind of action
36 (namely, to make something known), with a type of social space where this sort of
37 actions are performed (i.e. theaters, squares, forums, balconies, and so on),
38 involving the usage of some kind of material (e.g. stone, textiles, ceramics, furs,
39 paper, wood, pigments, etc.) and/or some kind of technology (e.g. painting,
40 dancing, rhetoric, sculpting, writing, printing, broadcasting, transmitting, and so
41 forth) serving for this purpose, and last but not least, that these kind of behaviors
42 are observed in every known type of social system —regardless of the semantic
43 artifacts employed to describe them—, then, it is justified to call publicity any social
44 setting enabling and being enabled by the observation of observations (second
45 order observation). For this is what, in the end, publicity reduces to: the two-
46 sidedness of visibility and invisibility, distinction and indication, markedness and
47 unmarkedness, form and medium, publicness and secrecy.
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3 In light of these considerations, and without trying to be exhaustive, five forms
4 of publicity can be identified (Figure 3):
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8 a. *Ritual*: Ritual seems to be ubiquitous at all levels of social complexity. In
9 ancient social formations normative expectation structures usually take the
10 shape of rituality, while in modern ones its efficiency is subdued to functional
11 systems (e.g. as liturgy in the system of religion or as protocols symbolizing
12 sovereignty or majesty in the political system). Still, there are always certain
13 kinds of rituals (or, there is always a side of rituals) that shape and define
14 group identities –even in our modern rationalized and secularized world.
15 Exactly this reference to a definite whole is what makes the publicness of
16 ritual. Unity has to be represented, symbolized, embodied, and/or animated
17 (visibility), but at that very instant when unity is indicated, the contingency of
18 the selection appears as latency, as a potential source of divergent
19 interpretation, as means to express disarray or to institute the dominance of
20 a new self-proclaimed elite (invisibility). The difference between invisibility
21 and visibility is invariably accomplished by dissemination media at different
22 levels: the architectural layout is typically inscribed in a program of graphic
23 display (Petrucci, 1999), therefore, architecture also works as a
24 dissemination medium (Moore, 2005); scriptures, symbols, paintings,
25 ceramics, and the like, not only represent and/or reproduce a set of beliefs
26 of crucial importance for the ritual but also play a performative role in the
27 execution of the ritual; rituals can also be represented in rituals by means of
28 dissemination media, performing thus a reentry of the form into the form. In
29 spite of the standardized pragmatic dimension of rituality (i.e. the ritual
30 performance as such), ritual involves a highly dynamic and flexible
31 communication structure. This means that authority, influence, power and
32 truth are always at stake in the ritual praxis (i.e. there are often challenges
33 to the capacity of the elite to monopolize among the populace the authority
34 to officiate rituals) (Swenson, 2006; 2011). Although commonly embedded
35 in ritual, the following two forms deserve special attention because of their
36 specificity.
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- b. *Feasting/Commensality*: Sharing meals is a common pattern of socialization across many different cultures and this occurs mostly under the figure of feasts with a lot of food and drink. Feasting or commensality may have a religious connotation but it also accomplishes an important redistributive function. Feasts are occasions and social locations to see and to be seen: big men can exhibit their generosity, powerful chiefs can show their richness and magnanimity (competing with their rivals), tribal leaders can reinforce their bonds and achieve the necessary trust for consolidating alliances, and so on. Greek city-states, for instance, made of commensality a republican institution. Inasmuch as social formations became bigger and more complex, commensality lost its function of reaffirming community bonds (Bray, 2003).
- c. *Games*: Playing games is a common form of ritual. Games usually represent or intervene in the realm of natural forces in order to restore or guarantee cosmic equilibrium or assure good harvests. Independently of their goal, games involve staging: a well-delimited location where the players do their performances, and a periphery, delimited or not, from which the game is watched. Either the nature of games becomes religious or martial, they serve to expose individual performances to the eye of others: strength, ability, bravery, sagacity, intelligence, leadership, and so on. From this standpoint, social ranking differences are profiled, put to test and/or reaffirmed. Therefore, games are a suitable ground for developing strategies for symbolizing power (e.g. by representing a pinnacle of the system under the figure of the ruler) (Huizinga, 1980; Gentile, 1998; Scarborough et al., 1991; Baecker, 1999b).
- d. *Punishment*: The ability to punish the transgressor and at the same time to give example of the right behavior (whereby some power technologies such as confession, truth-telling, and avowal play a salient role (Foucault et al., 2014)) constitutes one essential feature in the structuring of power as a success medium (Foucault, 1977). Punishment is the execution of a penalty which in the same act of being performed dissuades other potential

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3 transgressors. This is how influence inflates to political power (Luhmann,
4 2002, pp. 63-65). Exposing the suffering of the punished is essential for its
5 purposes (i.e. showing the corpses of the victims at the main square,
6 announcing executions orally or in the newspapers for people to congregate
7 and watch the spectacle, carving a stone depicting imprisonment and/or
8 executions, and so on). Therefore, power and dissemination media weave
9 together in the form of punishment with such intensity, shaping a long-
10 lasting structural drift in sociocultural evolution.
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- 17 e. *Modern publicity*: The heterarchy of modern functionally differentiated
18 society owes pretty much to the modern form of publicity and vice versa.
19 Modern publicity emerged since the eighteenth century, when the semantics
20 of publicness and opinion merged and entangled with the process of
21 growing structural complexity of political power. In other words, the
22 evolutionary process which fused the function of keeping the capacity of
23 taking collective mandatory decisions with the solution consisting in
24 achieving communicative success by means of the threat with sanctions
25 (positive or negative), availed of the semantic of publicness in order to afford
26 more contingency in the processes of decision-making and gain in
27 complexity. Semantic and social structure created a loop, concretely a
28 positive feedback, wherein semantic variations went in hand with political
29 innovations. As a result, power acquired such a structural complexity never
30 seen before in sociocultural evolution, namely, it became able to support
31 second order observation, to inflate and deflate, it acquired processual
32 reflexivity and a second coding (government/ opposition), it became able to
33 symbolize the inclusion of the exclusion, and finally, it set the conditions for
34 the differentiation of the functional system for politics (Luhmann, 2012, pp.
35 214-235). At the same time, while other functional systems also adapted to
36 second order observation, the political semantics of publicness still
37 continued to dominate the social self-descriptions of these developments –
38 as a consequence, political publicity currently fixes most of the social
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3 expectations regarding observing observations and the scientific
4 descriptions of it.
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7 8 **6. Concluding remarks** 9

10 Since interdisciplinary research about the public sphere constitute a discourse
11 of its own with its characteristic concepts, problems and ways of thinking, the
12 author has tried to bring to the fore an alien context with different keywords,
13 assumptions, problems, and perspectives from where to rethink the problem of
14 publicity as a sociostructural feature in the evolution of social systems. The
15 thought-experiment consisting in making as if Habermas' work on the public sphere
16 does not exist, allowed us —as a heuristic resource— to bring to the fore the
17 theory of media in order to play this role. The advantage of media theory consists
18 in that it has consciously avoided what the scientific and social discourse about the
19 public sphere has taken for granted. In this sense, important contributions to the
20 understanding of mediality and its technological and material dimensions have
21 been made. The implications for the knowledge of the constitution of the public
22 sphere are clear: nothing can be made known in the absence of communication
23 media, no matter their degree of technical sophistication —and far from being a
24 commonsensical statement this has deep theoretical overtones.
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37 However, media theorists rely heavily on the problematic notion of
38 transmission. In fact, the distinctiveness of transmission consists in the coupling of
39 “media” of two different types, namely, physical and communication media. The
40 first condition consists in finding structural regular patterns within physical media
41 (i.e. the longitude of radio waves, patterns of electrical pulses, and so on) which
42 are susceptible of manipulation, then, by means of specially ad hoc fashioned
43 devices, the medium is employed to produce signals (i.e. a codified unit-pattern
44 within the medium that, in turn, codifies one by one the units of a symbol-system)
45 which are sent from one physical emitting point to another receiving point. Although
46 these technologies have defied time and space, radically enhancing the function of
47 dissemination media and their relationship with the material world, they and their
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3 effects cannot be confused with the long-lasting performance of communication
4 media as such. Mediality as the hallmark of communication media consist in their
5 potential to generate and scale up information and thereby to increase social
6 complexity.
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11 In reading Luhmann as a media theorist not only an insight into mediality is
12 gained, but also a framework that allows us to systematize the knowledge
13 produced by diverse disciplines. Furthermore, complexity sciences offer a wide
14 variety of methods, such as *Agent-based Modeling*, to study the interaction
15 between success and dissemination media adumbrating future theoretical
16 advancements.
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22 Finally, the author wishes that more than a list with some forms of publicity, the
23 reader retains the idea of the ubiquity of the phenomenon of publicity throughout
24 social and cultural evolution and that the media evolution theory being advanced
25 here offers concepts, ideas and intuitions that can help to account for it.
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Meaning dimensions	Objective	Time	Social
Medium/Form	<p><u>At the element level:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A <i>medium</i> is constituted by loosely coupled elements • When elements become tightly coupled, a <i>form</i> has arisen. <p><u>From an information-theoretic perspective:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loosely coupled elements are <i>redundant</i>, namely, they are little informative, they contain no novelty, no surprise. • Tightly coupled elements are <i>informative</i>, uncertain, novel, surprising, and unique – even if forms can be iterated. <p><u>Observed from Spencer-Brown’s <i>Laws of Form</i>:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media regenerate their forms or circulate since the <i>marked space</i> occupied by a two-sided form invites the observer to cross towards the <i>unmarked space</i>. Unmarkedness is just another instance of surplus of possibilities. <p><u>Implications for the philosophy of science:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the “element” is a function and not a quality, essence, entity or a thing, the distinction medium/form has significant epistemological consequences (e.g. it debases ontology and foundationalism as the constituting rules in the formation of knowledge) 	<p><u>At the synchronic level:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Constancy and variety</i>: Inasmuch as the medium is more stable than forms, in relative terms, the medium remains constant and forms vary. In other words, differences of speed of change enable the medium to allow simultaneously stability and instability, variety and invariance, duration and eventness. <p><u>At the diachronic level:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Connectivity</i>: Media play an irreplaceable role in assuring the autopoiesis of communication. By structuring possibilities, media structure communication itself. As a result, communicative events become processes. <p><u>Observation and description of time:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The inescapable simultaneity of every operation means that access to future or past events is impossible. However, the simultaneity of the two-sided form of the medium allows for the handy introduction of further distinctions, especially, <i>time distinctions</i> (i.e. before/after, past/future). • Another current operation with temporal implications is the <i>memory</i> function. Delaying repetition is, so Luhmann, the way memory actually works –because events cannot be stored to be used later. • Following the ideas of Spencer-Brown, time also appears as an <i>imaginary value</i> allowing paradoxes to unfold. 	<p>Although more or less implicit in Luhmann’s descriptions, it is plausible and consistent to assume that the fact that the same element might also work as a form for other media has consequences for the attributions schemes used to distinguish between <i>ego</i> and <i>alter</i> and also for system differentiation. For instance, scientific concepts often acquire different connotations (and as a result, become informative for different media and different social systems) when taken out of the medium of truth and divulged in the press (dissemination media) or used in the scripts of sci-fi movies (mass media system).</p>

Table 1. Defining traits of media according to Niklas Luhmann.

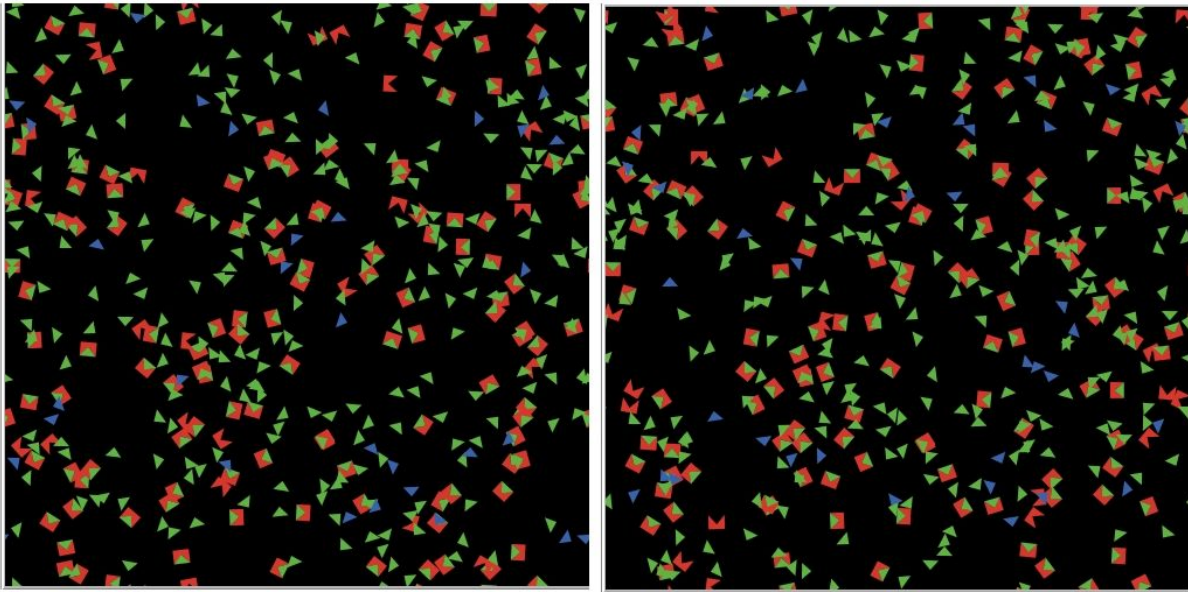


Figure 1. Enzyme Kinetics model. This model was designed to illustrate the kinetics of single-substrate enzyme-catalysis. This is a reaction that depends on the ratio of the rate of complex formation between the rate of complex dissociation. The similarities between the model and Luhmann's conception of media are striking. The picture depicts a brief sequence where the coupling between enzymes (red) and substrates (green) can be observed as well as the product being released (blue). In the same way as enzyme-substrates, forms are eventual couplings that fade away and regenerate once and again. Again, just as enzyme-substrates, forms are not a casual and meaningless event. Forms not only enable the circulation of the medium, but also produce information.

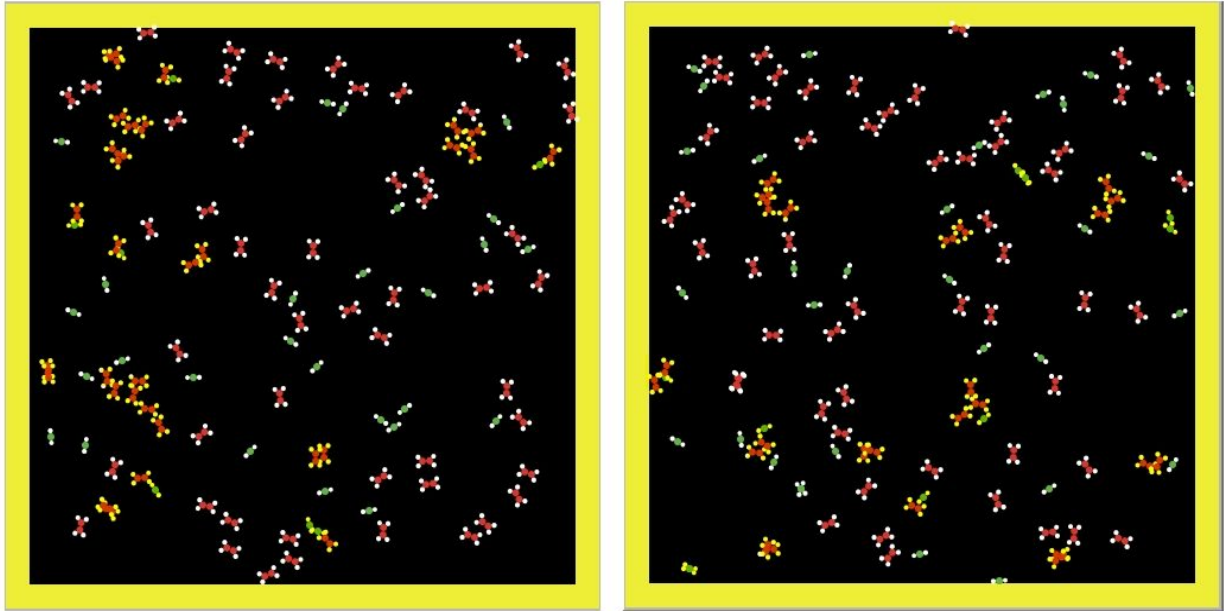


Figure 2. *Le Chatelier's Principle model.* This model was set up to illustrate how a system that is at equilibrium returns to an equilibrium state after being perturbed. Although in this case the parallels are not so obvious as in Figure 1, the pictures are useful to depict another feature of medial substrates and forms. Taking the highlighted dotted patterns as forms, the picture serves to illustrate the sheer variety forms can assume in contrast to Figure 1, where forms were only represented by envelope-looking shapes. On the other hand, it also shows the potential in the medial substrate to give rise to diverse tight couplings.

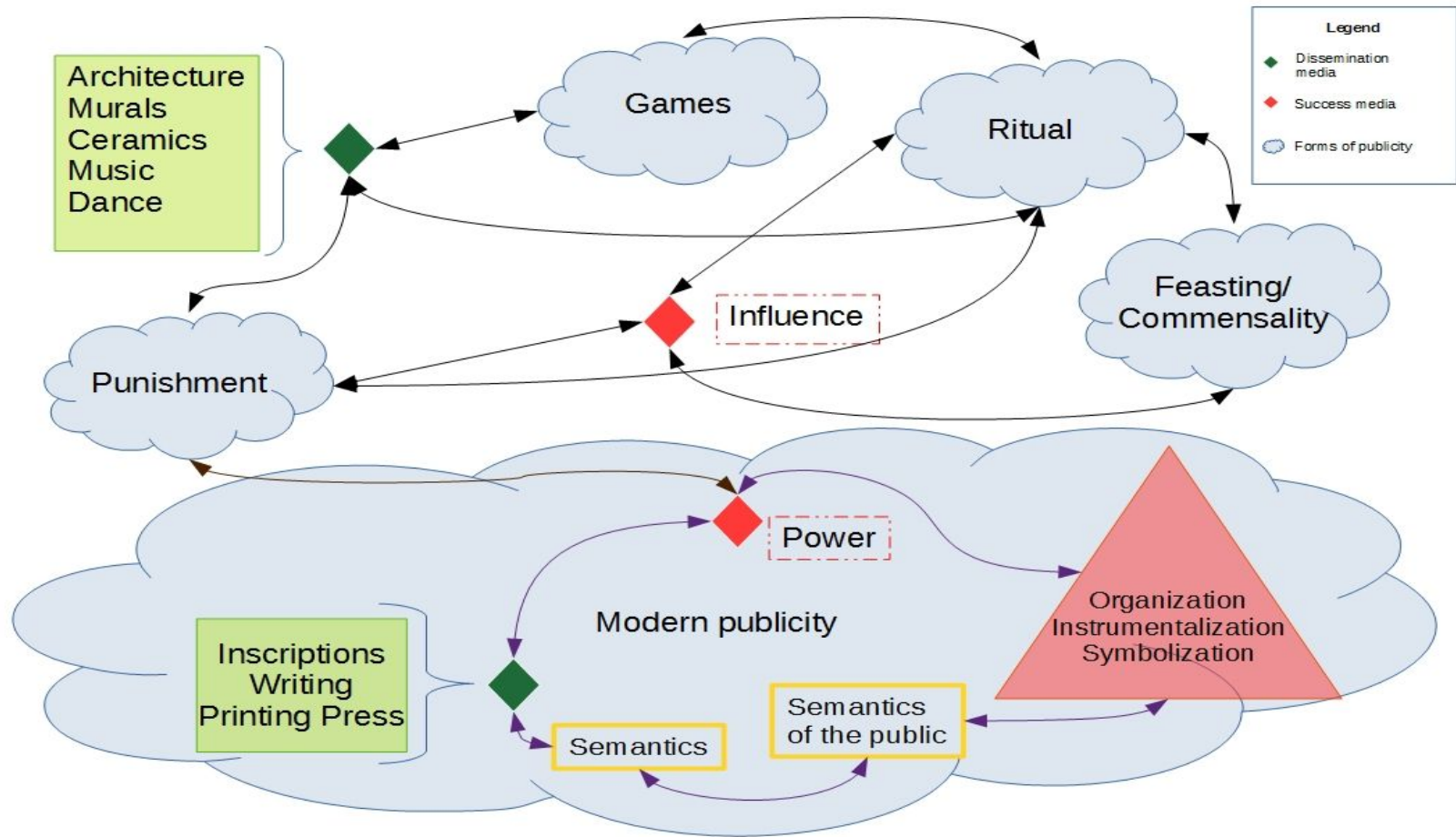


Figure 3. Forms of publicity and the dynamics of its emergence. The illustration basically depicts two major circuits or feedback loops (antique and modern) giving rise to different forms of publicity. The earlier one intends to show the growth of the medium of influence in social systems differentiated in segments, center-periphery and strata. The exertion of punishments is considered a key feature leading to the outdifferentiation of political power and introducing a new dynamics —along with the influence of new dissemination media. The modern circuit depicts a feedback loop between the semantics of the public, dissemination media and the structured complexity of power, having as an outcome a modern form of publicity.