Systems-theoretical observations of moral media panic debates

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of the article is to examine and analyze the fierce debate regarding children and young people’s use of digital social media, going on in Denmark (and in many other countries) in both mass media and social media. The overall question is what this panic is about and why the mass media and the public does not listen more to the media sociologists than to self-appointed experts?

Design/methodology/approach
Using a systems-theoretical angle, the article analyses the debate and answer the following questions: 1) why are researchers not taken more seriously, why are their views neglected and criticised? 2) What part does morality play in such debates? 3) How and why do the mass media act as they do, for instance listening more to debaters than to the researchers? 4) What is the role of the so-called social media? And last 5) Are these debates best understood as conflicts?

Findings
The debate is polarised: on the one hand there are debaters (self-appointed experts), while on the other hand there are media researchers especially media sociologists. It turns out that the debaters have better communication possibilities than the researchers, since the scientific code does not trigger the news criteria as good as the often alarming statements from the debaters, who also uses the moral code of communication which the researchers do not, since they are obligated to communicate solely in the scientific code.

Originality/value
There are no other systems-theoretical analysis of the moral media panic debates. The application of Luhmann’s systems theory is well suited, since it is both a communication theory and a sociological theory, why it is including both the relevant functional systems, like the mass media, and the relevant communication codes, like the news criteria of the mass media.

Introduction
There has been a great deal of public debate with regard to the use of media by children and young people, and researchers in this field are not always pleased with the interference by debaters like opinion makers, self-appointed experts, and experts in other fields.¹ The

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¹ It is often good when intellectuals involve themselves in debates, and also when parents, teachers and other groups do so. But when physicians (for instance) intervene, calling themselves doctors and presenting their prejudices as medical knowledge, problems arise.
field is interdisciplinary and includes studies within all functional systems. Even though the researchers involved share some common ground, we also specialise in different fields. For instance, my main field is media sociology and education. In terms of systems theory the field is differentiated, so as researchers we need to use each other’s insights in order to navigate a safe path in this very complicated situation, in which a medium revolution is taking place. Our research grows like a bush and together we contribute to all fields of society with our research and knowledge. We have seminars and research projects in schools on all levels, cooperate with municipalities and ministries, and also communicate our knowledge to the public in lectures and the mass media, as well as conducting degree programmes in the subject at universities. In the last couple of years, we have been joined by outsiders, self-appointed experts (from now on called *debaters*) without a PhD or any published research to their names, who provide the public with diagnoses and tell people what to do and how to act. As a result, in relation to education, learning, concentration (distraction), health, sleep, social relations and commercialisation, these debaters now dominate the public agenda. In many cases this is not an advantage from our point of view because these debaters have taken over the agenda with their alarming, cautionary and sometimes terrifying attitude, often making untrue or unproven claims which researchers then have to spend time trying to modify. One of the most common claims is that a medium is addictive, for instance that Facebook is addictive (a claim made in *BT*, a Danish daily newspaper, on 21 August 2017), or that the screen itself makes us addictive (*Politiken*, another Danish daily newspaper, on 31 March 2017). There are countless articles on how IT can make us addicted, but no scientific support for such claims (Nielsen 2018; Przybylski et al. 2019). In an interview with The Wiered (14 January 2019), Przybylski expresses this very clearly: “Using technology is about as associated with well-being as eating potatoes”. The debate put forward by these debaters has a term in the literature: *media panic*. And what this article does is to observe and analyse this media panic in its present form by using systems theory.

The article is not a witch hunt targeting these debaters, but nor does it seek to generate even more attention for them. Instead, it tries to find out what kind of phenomenon (or perhaps system) this debate consists of. Consequently, it will not analyse concrete examples
but only postulate what the problem is and make systems-theoretical observations of the
debate on a principled level.\(^2\)

After a short epistemological section describing what observation is in Luhmann’s systems
theory, the article describes the media panic debate relating to childhood and the use of
media both historically and in relation to the present debate. Then Luhmann’s theory of the
functionally differentiated society is very shortly explained, as well as his exposition of what
modern science is. Against this background, the position of researchers is discussed and put
into proportion in relation to the debate. Then Luhmann’s theory of morality is described,
followed by a discussion of the moral implications in the debate. Luhmann’s theory of the
mass media is described next, followed by a discussion of their role in the debate. Then the
article tries to define and expound what social media are and what their role is in the
debate. Last, before a short conclusion, the article considers whether the media panic
debates are best understood as crisis systems parasitizing on other social systems in the
functionary differentiated society in the present medium environment.

**Epistemology**

Inspired by the logician George Spencer-Brown (1969), Luhmann (2012) defines observation
as the distinction between indication and distinction. If one draws a distinction, a marked
inside is distinguished from an unmarked outside. The two sides and the distinction
between them together form a form (form = marked \(\uparrow\) unmarked). This means that
observation is a paradox because invisibility becomes the condition of visibility (Luhmann
2018: 381). We only see the marked side of the distinction. The identity of the difference is
the unity of the distinction, and the conditional basis of the observation; but the invisibility
of the outer side of the distinction means that the observation is un-reflected – it only sees
what it sees, but does not see what it does not see. Based on another concept by Spencer-
Brown (1969: 69-76), namely *reentry*, Luhmann explains how to observe the first
observation by making a new observation. An observation of an observation is a reentry of
the form observation into the form observation, and is referred to by Luhmann as a second-

\(^{2}\) A search on Google’s search engine for “screen addiction” on 2 February 2021 produced more than 80 million
hits.
order observation. A second-order observation makes it possible to reflect on what
distinction a first-order observation is based on – it shows the contingency of the first
observation, observing that it could also have been different.
Luhmann distinguishes between three different levels of systems formation: the biological,
the psychic and the social, distinguishing again between three different main kinds of social
systems: society, organisation and interaction. All these systems are defined as autopoietic,
which means that they produce themselves by the operations through which they observe.
For instance, organisations produce themselves and observe through decision
communication (Luhmann 2018). Luhmann suggests that we should observe how observers
observe, which means that this article will have to observe observations of media panic.
That is; observe how (from which differences) science, moral and the mass media observe
according to Luhmann.

The debate
The present debate regarding the use of media by children and young people is polarised:
on the one hand there are debaters, while on the other hand there are media researchers.
The debaters present arguments about the harmful effects of the media on the biological
level (brain damage, lack of sleep and exercise, and e.g. addiction), the psychic level
(loneliness, narcissism, low self-esteem, and e.g. self-harm) and the social level (bullying,
asesocial behaviour, normlessness or countercultural norms, unwanted photo sharing, echo
chambers and e.g. sharing of fake news). The researchers, who often come from the
humanities and who are fundamentally critical of the application of technology, must
paradoxically find themselves as opponents of the criticism which they experience as one-
sided, unnuanced, ahistorical and without scientific evidence. But anyhow they seem
pushed in the positive position of the debate.
The first thing that stands out when observing this debate is that it is an old debate which is
re-actualised every time a new medium comes into use (Frau-Meigs et al. 2017: 93-98).
Drotner (1999) defines the debate as media panic or even as moral media panic⁴, and
according to her every time a new medium arrives in the social field, it spurs public debate

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³ See the introduction.
⁴ The concept of “moral media panic” has roots in classical works by McLuhan (1967) and Cohen (2002).
and: “In some cases, debate of a new medium brings about [...] heated, emotional reactions: in that case we have to do with what may be defined as a media panic. It may be considered a specification of the wider concept of moral panic, and it has some basic characteristics: the media is both instigator and purveyor of the discussion; the discussion is highly emotionally charged and morally polarised (the medium is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’) with the negative pole being the most visible in most cases; the discussion is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young people” (ibid.: 596). Drotner’s oldest example is from 1795, when a group of evangelical philanthropists in Britain launched a zealous campaign against what they termed “the poison continually flowing thro’ the channel of vulgar and licentious publications [short stories]” (ibid.: 599). According to Luhmann (2000: 139 n23; 142 n12), the concept of the authentic did not arise until the arrival of print technology and the mass media. The distinction between those who really experience the world and those who only experience it second hand did not appear until the arrival of books. In relation to digital media, Drotner (1999: 595) writes that cases from the USA were reported in Denmark as early as 1998 by Berlingske Tidende (17 March 1998) under the headline: “The internet is as addictive as narcotics”. This sounds like the headlines presented in today’s debate about smartphones and social media. One example of moral media panic which seems to appear with every new medium relates to sleep. When we look into the topic like Matricciani et al. (2012), who made a systematic review of 32 sets of medical recommendations for sleep from 1897 to 2009 the problem seems to be a permanent public conflict: “Recommended sleep duration consistently exceeded actual sleep duration by about 37 minutes... as if children always needed extra sleep, no matter how much they were actually getting. The rationale for sleep recommendations was also strikingly consistent for more than 100 years: children were overtaxed by the stimulation of modern living, although that stimulation was embodied in whatever the technological avatar of the time was” (Matricciani et al. 2012: 553). The stimulations included schoolbooks, radio, television and the internet. The review also highlighted the “consistency with which authors acknowledged the lack of empirical foundation for their recommendations, despite extremely detailed and quantified guidelines. It is remarkable that after more than 100 years, sleep recommendations are still being issued in the
acknowledged absence of meaningful evidence” (ibid.). The situation today is that the mass media only listen to researchers if they can come up with a conflict angle like the debaters: “It’s ‘digital heroin’: How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies” (New York Post, 27 August 2016). In Denmark debaters are now appointed to public committees and invited to give lectures, and they paradoxically spend huge amounts of time on social media to spread their views and advertise their self-help books and courses. With regard to the question of which debaters are normally involved, Drotner writes: “Not surprisingly then, librarians, teachers and cultural critics have been instrumental in staging media panics” (Drotner 1999: 615). They are the ones who have invested most in gaining cultural capital (in the old media), and are also the principal victims if this capital loses its currency.

So what kind of world is this? This world in which the people who are experts in this field are almost ignored, while debaters become famous and rich and gain influence. To answer this question, the article will now consider Luhmann’s theory about society, science, morality and the mass media, ending up with a discussion about social media.

**Functional differentiation**

Luhmann describes modern society as functionally differentiated (Luhmann 1995; 2012). Modern society does not have a centre but is differentiated into functional systems that use different function-specific communication media and associated codes and programs for observation. Examples of functional systems are economics (with the symbolically generalised communication medium *money*), politics (with the medium *power*), the law (with the medium *right*), science (with the medium *truth*), religion (with the medium *faith*), education (with the medium *child* - later CV), and the mass media (with the medium *news*). Luhmann’s description of society is based on the difference between system and environment, and not on the traditional difference between part and whole. Such an understanding is too ontological. Instead, an epistemologically oriented theory of system differentiation is formulated. Functional differentiation involves repeating the difference between system and environment within the social system (Luhmann 1995: 7). Society will act as the internal environment for functional systems in a specific way for each of them. Each functional system takes on a specific aspect of societal complexity, orienting itself only

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5 Here quoted in line with the latest OECD report, Burns & Gottschalk (2019).
on its own system environment difference, and reconstructs society using only this outlook. The functional systems can thus relieve themselves by assuming that the other requirements for the reproduction of society are met by other systems (Luhmann 1995: 192).

As noted, each functional system operates using a symbolically generalised communication medium and associated codes and programs for observation. The medium simplifies, motivates and focuses the communication, and the code sets criteria for measuring success and failure. The code is binary and structures the system’s operations. The binary code indicates a communicative preference by opposing a positive and a negative value. The positive value defines a motive, a basic endeavour for the individual functional system’s communication – a motive that then finds its counterpart in the negative value of the code. “Codes indicate the medium responsible for their functional areas and thus limited but loose coupling of possibilities” (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 217). They attribute communicative processes to the relevant functional system. Programs work on the organisational level of systems formation and specify how to use the code. Codes cannot be forgotten, whereas on the program level both remembering and forgetting are possible.

The science system
In Luhmann’s theory the science system with the medium truth has the code true false. Since the system’s out-differentiation, science organisations have been building system-internal programs for the handling of codes so that contributions can be accepted or negated in communication (Luhmann 1994). The main programs of the science system are theories, and its function is the production of knowledge and societal self-descriptions, and like other systems it provides opportunities for careers. The science system has structural couplings through the universities to education, economics, mass media and politics, for instance (Luhmann 1992). These programs also include guidelines for repeating scientific experiments, the reference system and the blind peer-review procedure for journal articles. According to Luhmann (1998: 38), printing provides a transition to a knowledge technique that depends entirely on writing and which immediately leads to second-order observation. In Western scientific papers, a style is laid down for the day, which is typically based on the status of the research, thereby saving further reflections. Any reflection is replaced by a
scurrilous pedantry (the programs) that is controlled by editors and reviewers. Furthermore, Luhmann believes that this can be accomplished as a first-order observation: it still extracts only its account of the momentary state of research out of a historical state that it can change. Second-order observation does not occur before the theory of knowledge and cognition, reflecting on the current state of research – and explicates what it can offer in the way of something new (ibid.) – which of course also occurs in the form of articles in journals. But however how improbable, the science system was out-differentiated to handle what is true and what is untrue in society. The forms in the medium is theories and the system produces truth in a totally internal and idiosyncratic process using the distinction between code and program: “The code must [...] as distinction be differentiated in a further context from the programs of the system, that specify under what conditions something is right or wrong, if it must be marked true or untrue. And only this distinction between code and program give the medium the form that instructs the operations that couple and decouple the medium into truthful sentences during operation” (Luhmann 1992: 184). So, “Truth is a coded medium” (ibid.: 185). Science might produce knowledge, but it does not produce news and public opinions, which are provided by the mass media: “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (Luhmann 2000: 1). The point here is that what we know we know from the mass media – not from research journals. As stated in the epistemological section, we only have observations consisting in distinctions why: “science is not the authentic realization of truth, but a social system with its own standardized forms of communication, just like all other social systems. Its truth is merely a communicative construct among many others” (Moeller 2012: 42).

Here is the first part of the explanation of the media panic debate. Scientific knowledge and the things that researchers say are only observed as one opinion among others and not as the authentic realisation of truth. So why should people listen to researchers? The general public do not read scientific journals, and researchers only report on momentary state of research out of a historical state which may be a bit boring. The article will now consider morality to find out what part morality plays in the debate.

Ethics and morals
Morality is a form of communication that differs from other forms of communication because it distinguishes between good and bad in the binary scheme (or between good and evil when subjected) (Luhmann 2009: 236), and because it refers to the conditions under which people esteem or disesteem others or themselves (Luhmann 1993: 999). Moral communication distributes esteem to those who profess or conform to the good and disesteem to those who do not profess or conform to the good. The term the good does not mean something that is good in itself. The good refers only to the positive side of a distinction set by someone who is communicating morally. Even though morality has a clear medium – the good – and a code – good and evil – a functional system was not formed and out-differentiated like science and the others, when society went from stratification as primary form of differentiation to functional differentiation. “Morality is now no more than morality. Its cosmological and therefore magical underpinning has lost, as has the intimacy of negative moral judgement with the impure, disgusting, despicable” (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 239-240). In the stratified society, the power over moral together with economy, politics, truth, belief, law and judgment were placed in the top of a society that was hierarchically formed. The king or the pope, or more locally the mayor or the priest, decided what was good and what was bad, who was good and who was evil, and what and who to esteem or disesteem. The problem for morality in the functionary differentiated society is that there is no consensus when it comes to what is good and what is bad, no consensus about what is the positive and what is the negative pole of the code (ibid.: 241). Is abortion good or bad? There is no consensus unlike in the law where it can be legal or illegal. “Its elements are communications that express whether certain persons are to be respected or disrespected” (ibid.). Sociologically, morality is linked to an observer, to a moral observation that splits the world. In Luhmann’s words: “moral coding is always coding of communication. In other words, there are no good or bad people, but only the possibility of indicating people as good or bad” (Luhmann 1993: 1000). In contrast, sociology (like this article) is tied to the scientific code true not true. The sociological observation cannot judge what is morally good, but is limited to observations of observations that make use of the moral code. Sociological observations can also be assessed morally, but if sociology wishes to conduct science, its observations must be subordinated to the code of truth, not of morality (1995b: 219). “Moralists may feel free to evaluate sociological theories and sociologists may feel free to
respond in moral terms; but sociologists, at least, should avoid mixing up roles, codes, systems” (Luhmann 1996: 32). What separates systems-theoretical moral sociology from the philosophy of morality is the understanding that morality reflects a difference. According to Luhmann, the unity (form) of morality is not the good (understood as the positive side of the difference good \( \neq \) evil), but the difference between good and evil (or between esteem and disesteem) (ibid.: 33). Luhmann thus distinguishes between two meanings of good: good as the form of moral communication that operates with the difference good \( \neq \) evil and signals esteem \( \neq \) disesteem, and the positive value good, which is the one side of this form. A side that cannot stand alone, since it is constituted on the basis of the difference (Luhmann 1995b: 214). From Luhmann’s perspective it is observed that the positive value mostly, but not always, equals the “good” side, as opposed to the “bad” side, of the distinction. This opens up for reflections on the paradoxes of the moral code. Any binary code leads to paradoxes when applied to itself. It is not possible to determine whether the distinction between good and evil is good in itself, or whether it is evil (Luhmann 1995b: 215). Traditional ethics is not open to the question about the cases in which it is appropriate to apply the moral code and the cases in which it is not appropriate (Luhmann 1993: 998). Unlike this, Luhmann emphasises that one should not take for granted that reasons for invoking morality are good reasons. Philosophical ethics usually regards morality as good, but one can, as Luhmann points out, imagine that it may be immoral to make use of moral judgments because they inevitably lead to questions about the reasons, motives and interests on which they are based. It is in the description of the social conflict potential of morality that systems theory of moral sociology has a special contribution to make (Vallentien 2001). The form of the medium’s elements (the form of the medial substratum as opposed to the forms printed in the medium) only differ in the specific coding (esteem \( \neq \) disesteem). Both references to individual persons and the formality of the code provides the loose coupling of the medium elements. The highly individualised reference to people in modern society strengthens this loose coupling why the medium itself is highly stable. “It would therefore be a mistake to claim that the importance of morality is diminishing in modern society” (Luhmann 2012 vol 1: 241). Morality is available in interaction and in the mass media, and now in the social media as well. Luhmann finds that the main problem with morality is that too often moral communication creates or aggravates conflicts. It is only in a
superficial and one-sided view that morality seems to be a means of connecting humans in society. Morality can also repel and foster hostility (Luhmann 1995: 235). Following Luhmann (2012 vol 1: 244), morality now assumes a sort of alarm function that emerges when urgent problems are noticed that cannot obviously be solved in the function systems. Society initiates moral communication for problems caused by its own structures and differentiation form. Moral communication is directed to wherever alarming realities are apparent.

The use of new media by children and young people must be an alarming reality for many people, which is why they contribute to the debate which has evolved into what could be described as a crisis system (something to which the article returns later). The moral alarm is as follows: “Should children be turned into addictive junkies?” and the answer must be: “No, that would be evil.” This is moral communication and typical for triggering a debate disesteeming children and young people’s use of, for instance, social media. Contributions to the debate become moralising because they, for instance, use the premise that there is a media-drug comparison, and because of this comparison all counter argumentation becomes evil. When scholars say that the premise is wrong and that this is a media panic, they are immediately disesteemed as evil individuals that are against children’s well-being. When they present research results like statistics, they are met with individual case stories pointing at unique pathological cases. The risk is that the arguments presented by researchers are characterised as immoral. The majority of the population (public opinion) seem to follow the arguments presented by debaters and think that it is morally right to keep things like in the old medium environment and that researchers are evil if they put forward their truth in the debate. And in any case, the debate loses its factuality if it becomes a moral debate. The article will return to morality later, but first it takes a look at how Luhmann describes the mass media.

**The mass media system**

The symbolically generalised communication medium of the mass media system is information (or news in news media), relying on the code information not information. The mass media is separated out by the distribution medium, which both enables distribution and disables interaction between media organisations and their readers, listeners and
viewers: “The crucial point at any rate is that no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers. Interaction is ruled out by the interposition of technology, and it has far reaching consequences which define for us the concept of mass media” (Luhmann 2000: 2). In this situation, the media organisations themselves must decide what has information value, which means that news criteria differ from organisation to organisation. In other words, having developed their own programs for handling the code, they select differently with regard to what is thought to have information value.

Luhmann (2000: 28-34) opts for nine selectors (news criteria for which media organisations have different programs): surprise, conflicts, quantities, local relevance, norm violations, moral judgement, attributable to actors, topicality and expression of opinion. There is also a tenth: considerations of repeated applicability (ibid.: 35). According to Luhmann, media organisations, however, also routinely use other criteria related to local programs or just to the present situation. The process of this communication suggests that positive values are constantly turned into negative values: you cannot write the same thing – as a piece of information – in the same paper two days in a row. At the same time, this process creates a history of communication with regard to which new happenings become information (the tenth selector). If organisations or persons from the perspective of one of the other functional systems wants to have something known in public, they must tolerate the forms of the different mass media organisations and their different specific and local programmes for handling the code of information. Like any other functional system, the mass media primarily reproduce themselves.

The heading from the New York Post seems to live up to many of the news criteria which Luhmann lines up. There is surprise (what is going on?!), there is a crisis (with addiction), it has local relevance (everywhere in the Western world), children as junkies is a norm violation, there is someone to blame (moral judgement), and last it is attributable to all children in our part of the world. This kind of story is completely ruined when researchers (who regard it as fake news) point out that the premises do not hold. And the mass media have the right to appoint their own experts, so they almost always use debaters as their source. Many years ago, when schools started prohibiting the new media, I was in the mass media several times because I was against this prohibition (for many good reasons, see Paulsen and Tække 2017). This led to direct conflict in the mass media between two black
and white positions (my own position, and the position of a debater, teacher or school principal who wanted to prohibit digital media in the entire education system). The mass media provide society with other self-descriptions than science and in competition with science. Neither in science nor in mass media there is consensus about much, but they differ in their criteria for communication (truth’s programs for selection vs. news criteria), but in terms of morality they differ, because as Luhmann (1996: 32) states, sociologists “should avoid mixing up roles, codes, systems”. This causes an imbalance in the forms of communication used by debaters and sociologists when it comes to gaining the attention of the mass media. And morally observed, scientists run the risk of commenting on something they have no evidence of, for instance in 2019 11,258 - had signed to an online petition organized by the Alliance of World Scientists under the leadership of Professor of Ecology William Ripple – and it showed out that there were both historians and other researchers from fields with no research in that relation. In the end, it is up to the public to decide what they mean; but researchers, like sociologists, do not enjoy the best odds when it comes to attracting the attention of the mass media and influencing public opinion in the direction of truth. But in the end it is up to organisations related to other functional systems to decide, because meanings are only meanings. In other words, the political governments must decide whether it wishes to issue regulations or not; the financial institutions and organisations must decide whether they will pay for the development of algorithms to attract the attention of children and perhaps spoil their sleep patterns or concentration in school; and the education institutions must decide how it will react: with bans on social media, or perhaps – as we would argue – with the use of Bildung to help the students to control their own choices and habits in a way that benefits themselves and the public good (Paulsen and Tække 2018; 2019).

Social media

Naturally, all the media dealt with in this article are social, but media like Facebook and Twitter are now defined as social media. In accordance with Linaa-Jensen and Tække (2018: 42), and inspired by earlier definitions, not least by Boyd & Ellison (2007; 2013), I will define social media as: “a special type of Internet service where users can communicate (including, for example, sharing information, pictures and music). They operate through a digital infrastructure that enables, delimits and influences communication. Social media content is
user-generated (produced, remixed, or at least copied). In principle, they allow interaction (two-way communication). Last, they can almost always be accessed through different kinds of interfaces and different terminals.” In comparison with mass media, interaction is not ruled out by the interposition of technology. Indeed, interaction is in fact made possible by technology. Besides, the interposition of technology ruling out interaction, also, mass media has an editorial board making decisions for what has information value, which is not normally the case in social media. The validity of information is a result of the mass medium’s editor taking responsibility. Trust in (and the reputation of) mass media takes many years to build; and mass media are connected to the legal system (deciding what can legally be presented), to the economic system (mass media have to please their audiences to earn money, or just keep their share if talking public service), and to other systems like the political system. On the other hand, technically speaking, a social medium that disables all interactivity functions for interaction is not so different from the mass media. Blogs and other social media profiles are personal media when they are used for interaction and not edited, and they are like mass media when they are edited and only used for one-way communication. Profiles that are acting as a mass medium do not provide the option of replying and are only read or seen (selected) by people who agree with them; while social media profiles which do have the option of replying are commented on, even in cases of disagreement. In addition, the commercially programmed machine-learning algorithms of social media increase the human tendency to link to and gather in groups with others that confirm their outlook.\(^6\) When looking at democratic debate culture following Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) classic theory of the spiral of silence, people’s fear of isolation makes them remain silent instead of voicing controversial opinions. Recent American research from the Pew Research Center shows that people are less willing to express their (conflicting) opinions on social media than when they are face to face.\(^7\) This is due to the fact that people do not want to go against the strongest tendencies in their network because they fear isolation (ibid.). Facebook is losing around 15% of its personal original posts every year, and many of the status updates now come from what could be called

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\(^6\) Humans have a tendency to consider information to be true if it confirms what they already believe, and this effect is increased in online communities, creating the risk of mutual confirmation of fake news as well (Giglietto et al. 2016, 4).

microbloggers, or **debaters**. The form of communication employed in the debate between those who still dare to participate and comment on other people’s status updates and tweets is often hateful and not very accommodating. Looking at the history of public debate, during the Enlightenment there was an increase in self-regulation (*Bildung*) in the public sphere, and over the course of a few centuries publicists developed a **culture of expression** which meant that the law hardly ever had to intervene in the public exchange of words, providing the criteria for the right to **freedom of expression** (Jakobsen 2016). The situation now with social media is that the debate has been taken over by debaters when conflictual topics such as the use of new media by children and young people are dealt with. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that an adequate culture of expression in social media has not yet been formed. There is a new situation in which public opinion is formed in an environment with filter bubbles and a lack of shared interaction culture. The situation is also exacerbated by the special interaction situation on social media. With the acquisition of writing, humans were able to contribute to communication loosely coupled from interaction (Luhmann 1995: 87). The loose coupling of written communication from face-to-face interaction meant a disconnection of the body as a mediator of psychic feelings as well as a loosely coupling from turn taking and other considerations in respect to other’s feelings. In social media **interaction** becomes written. There are many positive consequences of this, but there is also a downside: the empathy with the feelings of others that was probably a necessary part of the coevolution between psychic and social systems is now loosely coupled and contingent. In other words, online interaction is a form of communication in which someone utters something and others comment and react in a contingent way which may be somewhat cynical and moralistic – especially when the people involved do not know each other. A fact-oriented form of interaction filled with morally indignation or politically disagreeing, happening near synchronous. Furthermore, as in the mass media, in the social media it is what is unusual that attracts attention, not what is normal which has almost no information value. Media panic debates heading at new phenomena as huge problems, focusing on single cases, that are really problematic, as if

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8 Here the explanation is also **context collapse**, a term coined by Boyd with reference to Meyrowitz, which refers to the infinite audience which is possible online, making it difficult to frame a message suited to everybody.
they were a general phenomenon attract big attention. Debaters have far more followers than sociologists. Probably these followers to a large extent are those with the endangered cultural capital, for instance, teachers and parents who are frightened by structural changes triggered by the new media. Some of these followers might also suffer from ontological insecurity because the new medium environment changes the nature of our lives – not least the role of the parent and the teacher. In this unresolved and uncertain situation, researchers often run into interactions with debaters who have no inhibitions, who generalise, use moral arguments, and angles the discussion about new media like the best solution is to just shot them down and go back to pencil and paper. The new public suffer from the fact that in this initial phase an adequate culture of expression has not yet been developed. The consequence is that it is difficult for the public to know what we actually know about social media (what the research actually says). Consequently, it is difficult for the discussion to begin from this informed state.

**Conflicts**

A conflict occurs when a contradiction is communicated (Luhmann 1995: 388). Conflicts arise when communication takes up a contradiction in itself and contradicts it, or in other words, when one communicative element is linked to another communicative element by contradiction. The conflict does not consist of differing interests, but is due to the fact that these interests are communicated. Any communication produces a bifurcation between yes and no to proposals of meaning, so that conflict and consensus are constantly reproduced as alternatives (Luhmann 2007: 306). However, a no does not always produce a conflict. For instance, people often walk out of shops without buying anything. But a no often sharpens the tone, and provokes, and one is tempted to see the other person as an opponent. To tune into the other person communicatively as an opponent gives birth to the conflict as a system driven by a negative double contingency: “I will not do what you want if you do not do what I want” (Luhmann 1995: 389). One acts aggressively, defensively, or protectively, providing the other with only limited variation possibilities apart from, for instance, forming coalitions and searching for resources for resistance (Luhmann 2007: 308). When conflicts arise, for a while they take over the autopoiesis, i.e. the continuation of the communication (Luhmann 1995: 389). In this way, conflicts are parasites on social systems (ibid.). For a time, they draw all attention and all communication contributions to themselves, thereby
blocking the host systems. Conflict systems are highly integrative because they draw all action into the context of an opposition (ibid.: 390). In this connection, Luhmann (2007: 308) provides a formal definition of integration, which says that “integration is a restriction of individual freedom”, and he also defines how conflicts integrate: “For as an opponent, as an enemy, one in a conflict has far less variation possibilities, far fewer behavior possibilities: One must be careful, one must consider how to sharpen one’s own weapons, and how to make the opponent’s weapons blunt, how to protect oneself, how to prevent and how to attack” (ibid.: 309). Conflicts die out when they can no longer attract contributions, when contributors all get tired and bored of arguing and stop struggling. Time goes by, and people move on to other themes (Luhmann 1995: 392). The function of conflicts is an immunisation against the probability of cessation of the system’s autopoiesis (ibid.: 384), which seems a little like the alarming function of morality – but the connection between morality and conflict is that disesteeming a person or organisation is only one of several possible triggers of conflicts.

Media panic debates often resemble conflicts: a researcher posts an article or shares a research result on social media and is attacked by a debater through a comment saying “no” to the points raised by the researcher. Or researchers and debaters are brought together for a seminar where a ministry or some other body wants to collect various opinions. The same thing happens in the climate debate, which is often characterised by black and white arguments in favour of (or against) the points being raised. The combatants also meet in the mass media and have conflicts live on television, or in the form of quotations in newspaper articles. Media sociologists also contribute to the mass media. For instance, a group of media researchers wrote a feature in the Danish newspaper Politiken to warn against a book written by a debater (14 October 2017: Mobilforbud i skolen er problemet, ikke løsningen). All these activities provoke conflicts on the social media with attacks and accusations flying in both directions. Seen as parasites the conflicts may be more demanding for the debaters, who may be afraid of losing their business. But on the other hand, they may also be part of their business concept: by raising the alarm they can draw attention to their name, books and self-help courses. So maybe the conflicts are worse for the debaters’ followers who are afraid of losing their cultural capital, and gets upset, and for the public and public opinion
because the polarisation between the researchers and debaters, does not foster much
nuances and enlightenment.

Conclusion
This short conclusion will try to answer each of the questions presented in the abstract. The
first question was: why are researchers not taken more seriously, why are their views
neglected and criticised? The answer is that the scientific code is only one among several
other codes. Especially the mass media also communicates about truth but only as a result
of their own code and programs, which also counts for other functional systems like the
juridical and the political system. In the code and programs of a given mass medium it has
information value that different actors have different truths, to which comes that conflicts
between different opinions of truth is a direct selection criterium. This is the function of the
mass media, and nobody would like to live in a society without (except for dictators and
their henchmen). Last science is very programmatic and communicates only through its own
code and programs why research results seldom reach the public in its own form (scientific
books and articles) but through the lens of mass media organisations and the debaters.
When science is observed from other systems it happens through their codes and programs
why science often does not count more than ordinary people’s meanings. The next question
is 2) What part does morality play in such debates? The moral code that distinguishes
between good and evil individuals easily triggers conflicts which not least is well suited for
the mass media’s and social media’s selection criteria. A scientific account, for instance,
against prohibition of smartphones in school, or for vaccination against COVID-19, can
easily, by the use of single cases (inductively based arguments), be used to morally attack
the scientific account, no matter how stupid this will appear from the scientific perspective.
Moral moves the focus from the factual dimension of a topic and place it on the question if
it is good that, for instance, children use TikTok. 3) How and why do the mass media act as
they do, for instance listening more to debaters than to researchers? This question is
answered under the first question and here is only to add, that the mass media reproduce
through the medium of information that matter for the opinion either counted in sold
newspapers, view ratings or, for instance, in number of hits – and here moral conflicts and
condemnations is a good fuel. 4) What is the role of the so-called social media? The social
media constitute a new communication infrastructure in which everybody can now publish
their own newspaper or TV show which everybody else in their network can comment on and share. They lack the editorial filter of the mass media, and are no better than the people contributing to them. They provide a new interaction situation, and a suitable culture of expression has not yet been developed – which is why there are so many examples of hate speech and the like on social media. In addition, the social media companies’ commercial strategies, in form of algorithms spreading the most controversial content, does not make the situation better. Morality is a typical unreflective motive for attacking others on social media which often are named persons or companies, which brings us to the last question: 5) *Are these debates best understood as conflicts?* Here the answer is yes. Debaters and researchers reject each other’s claims, for instance on the social media, and a conflict is born. In this kind of conflict, the media weapons available to researchers are less effective than those available to debaters because debaters are not limited by scientific truth and feel free to use morality, while researchers remain committed to truth rather than morality.

**References**


