

On the Symbolic Infrastructure of Face-to-face Communication in Early Modern Society: Simple Success Media¹

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Symbolic Infrastructures

Defining infrastructures as mechanisms that extend or limit the human possibilities of action emphasises a technological conception of infrastructures. The concept of action centres on a pattern of ends and means, which connects it to the mechanics of a strict coupling in technological processes. But the very fact that unintended side effects exist indicates that, in most cases, the development of social processes cannot, in fact, be attributed to intentions and the means employed to realise them.

The concept of communication, on the other hand, takes into account that, for those involved, social structures as well as social meaning are distilled from circular processes of acquiring information and of comprehension through the medium of meaning. Alter and Ego operate as two mental units that are independent of one another; meaning cannot be transferred between them but must be gained and stabilised through communication, selecting from an infinite number of possibilities. Each side must assume that the other side's ability to acquire information and their processes of understanding are unpredictable, and similarly, the interests of the other side can hardly be calculated in unstructured communication. Such a calculation only becomes possible once the interaction has been systemically consolidated and once those involved have developed a shared history. The formation of social structures requires time, not least because structures crystallise through repetition.²

1 This text incorporates in some small sections from Rudolf Schlägl, "Einfache Erfolgsmedien in der Gesellschaft der Frühen Neuzeit," in *Systemtheorie und antike Gesellschaft*, eds. Alois Winterling et al. (in preparation). This chapter has been translated from the original German by Helen Imhoff (2023).

2 Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

As a result, double contingency, which precedes all communication, is not simply an obstacle to be overcome; it is also the engine that guarantees that communication will continue. Every communicative offer can provoke reactions that were not anticipated and that give a new direction to one's own observations of the world and the expectations with which one encounters that world.

For this reason, systems that are stable over time – even if it is only a group of regulars at the local pub – assume constraints. Not everyone can join the group at the pub, and it is clear that only certain topics will serve to create a pleasant and convivial atmosphere among the individuals who are present. Communication amongst the pub-goers is also regulated with regard to time. These demands regarding limitations and constraints become greater as social systems increase in size and as the problems which the systems process in order to derive the impulses and energy necessary for their operative reproduction increase in complexity. The observation of the world must be attuned to reducing complexity in order for social systems to be able to maintain the flow of communication internally in a world in which there is an infinite variety of causes and effects to be discovered. The world shows the system that face which supports the operative reproduction of the system.

Communicative mechanisms that support the processing of double contingency in social systems and that simultaneously aid the reproduction of complexity are known as success media.³ They thus serve as infrastructures with regard to the differentiation and reproduction of social systems. The functional differentiation of modern societies depends decisively on symbolically generalised success media such as money, power, the law, or truth. The way in which they function corresponds to the dominant communication through technologically supported mass media. In the following, we will highlight pre-modern situations, in which communication mainly occurred as interaction.⁴ We will call the mechanisms that are functionally equivalent to modern situations “simple success media.”

Success media are not produced by social systems; instead, social systems contribute to their stabilisation because the systems’ operative reproduction follows these mechanisms. Differentiated societies like the advanced civilisations of the pre-modern period are confronted with a number of problems in the formation of their social structures. Success media make it possible to process these problems. For example, it is necessary to differentiate and stabilise a hierarchical order with an upper class in such a way that this becomes tangible in interactions in everyday life. Concordant views of the world are necessary without the public of technological media. In order for decisions with a greater reach, both in terms of the specifics

3 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997): IX-XI.

4 Rudolf Schlägl, *Anwesende und Abwesende. Grundriss für eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2014).

of the case and the individuals involved, to be effective, it must be possible to remove the limitations on influence in such a way that it is no longer dependent on situations or personal constellations. Finally, it is also necessary to regulate and shape access to scarce resources. Success media are therefore a matter for society. Society provides the systems differentiating themselves within it with a symbolic infrastructure.

In order to illustrate the achievement of success media in addressing these problems, let us return to the basic constellation of communication. Double contingency can be transformed in continuous communication if the expectations of Alter and Ego become complementary. The requisite for this is that Alter and Ego's mutual observations are guided by the distinction between action and experience. In this way, the complex process of forming social meaning is reduced to a sensory and cognitively comprehensible form for those involved. Success media can establish themselves if Alter and Ego's actions and experience can be unambiguously related to defined problems and to one another. If such a constellation is given symbolic representation, it can be recalled and brought up to date in the process of communication. Thus, success media are not tools that can be strategically and unilaterally employed but instead they integrate Alter and Ego simultaneously into a view of the world that makes a complementarity of expectations possible. They provide a definition of a given situation that is binding for Alter and Ego and set a communicative mechanism in motion that determines what information is to be detected from a message and how that information should be processed. For communication that is in progress, success media function as an infrastructure that determines what those involved can assume within it, without this being elaborated on further. A simple scheme with four fields may illustrate this. It was employed by Niklas Luhmann in his derivation of symbolically generalised success media. Following him, and without any claim to completeness, we identify a series of simple success media that can be observed in the society of Early Modern Europe as an infrastructure for the development of social order.⁵

5 Luhmann. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, vol 1, 336. This matrix (for symbolically generalised success media in the modern age) was first used in Niklas Luhmann's "Einführende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie symbolisch generalisierter Kommunikationsmedien," *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 3 (1974), 236–255; it is reproduced here following Niklas Luhmann's *Ökologische Kommunikation: Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen?* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986), 175.

Simple success media: a matrix

		EGO	
		experience	action
ALTER	experience	1) $A^e \Rightarrow E^e$ (concordant experience) rituals ceremonials rhetoric “truth”	2) $A^e \Rightarrow E^h$ (conditional action) friendship honour “love”
	action	3) $A^h \Rightarrow E^e$ (conditional experience) property and privileges trust “money”	4) $A^h \Rightarrow E^h$ (concordant action) reciprocity/gift giving morality ruling authority contract “power”

Simple Success Media

In the following, we provide a cursory and incomplete discussion of the four fields as our main focus is the respective mechanism of symbolisation.

The first field addresses the problem of congruently relating to the world in such a way that Alter and Ego's experience of the world does not become identical but concordant. Up to and into the 18th century, such concordance had to be ensured without recourse to an entirely differentiated and generally accessible system of dissemination media and without the procedures of an academic system of scientific enquiry that is committed to the truth through institutionalised objection.⁶ Accordingly, simple success media aimed to have a local effect, that is to say to “convince” those who were present. Authority might come to mind. However, for situations in which such positions of authority, that is, roles that were frequently also external to the system, were absent or had no effect, media were required that eliminated any questions regarding the causes of concordance. Rhetoric relied on the power to persuade, in the first instance focusing on emotions and then on arguments or making use of rhetorical techniques that suppressed or diverted possible objections. In

6 Luhmann. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, 339.

any case, rhetoric was to serve its purpose precisely when authority failed or was in doubt. In this context, however, the most effective and therefore most widespread approach was performative stagings, in which orders, hierarchies, and situations were defined, produced, and presented in a way that could be perceived by all. Rituals can be regarded as a special case of this in that their focus was on changes in status and situation, that is on turning points, whereas ceremonial performances were always placed in relation to an order that was assumed to exist, in whatsoever way, and to the reproduction of that order.⁷

The situation described in the second field, to the right of the first, ties Ego's actions to Alter's expectations. Contrary to what one might assume, this model of disinterested sociality could not be taken as a given even for face-to-face communication. Charity proved to be too general to connect to a social reference problem. In its Christian tradition, it was a medium of group formation determined by solidarity. It was not so much associated with different expectations as different motives, although disinterest was required. The person who showed charity to a beggar also expected prayers in return. Charity thus became continuously overburdened, with the result that the entire salvation economy was reorganised during the Reformation.⁸ Friendship underwent a more successful development, not least because it had already been connected to usefulness and vested interests in Antiquity. As a result, the concept of friendship had a career that extended beyond the middle of the 17th century, when society was beginning to be regarded as a space in which vested interests circulated.⁹ The success medium of honour was central to reproducing the hierarchical order of society. Honour demanded that Ego fulfil Alter's expectations of how the latter should be approached. And it obliged Alter to sanction any disappointment of expectations. In this way, honour not only contributed to the formation of hierarchical order, but it also provided a high degree of rivalry and potential for conflict in the daily life of society.

The third field is determined by constellations in which Alter acts and Ego experiences and ratifies this action. In relation to the scarcity of goods and resources, this can be regarded as the social codification of egotisms, which ensure that such actions are accepted and can thus be used for the formation of structures without leading to violence and anomie. Scarcity and the way in which this was treated socially represented an unambiguous reference problem; in such a case, there were also social attribution constellations that could be interpreted without ambiguity.

7 Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's *Rituale*, vol. 16. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2013) provides an overview of concepts and research (not relating to systems theory).

8 Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, "Zwischen Nil und Kaukasus," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 46, no. 3 (1994): 270–275.

9 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Printed for A. and J. Churchill at the Black Swan in Paternoster-row: London, 1693): par. 142–145.

and to which the semantic codification of property could reliably connect. Thus, this codification appears to have been very stable and of vital importance socially even before money developed from a measure of value to a commodity. This should not, however, distract from the fact that it was the exception for property to act as a binary code structuring communication in conditions of scarcity in such a way that a money- and price- driven allocation of resources and the circulation of goods should have been set in motion. The property code of the Early Modern period worked differently. It was aimed at resolving the social distribution of scarce resources through the distribution of access rights.¹⁰ Owners therefore always had to assume that there might be co-owners, and so the circulation dynamics of buying and selling could only be established with some difficulty. For this reason, ownership of land as well as rights of use always remained tied to specific individuals and their social status. This was intended to ensure that ownership supported rather than undermined the hierarchical order.

The fourth field summarises symbolically condensed semantics and practices that provide society with possibilities of coordination and communicative connections beyond those that result from the potential interests of Alter and Ego. In the first instance, these are very simple mechanisms of influence, such as the principle of reciprocity. Ego does what it has learnt from Alter, and because Alter can assume that this will be the case, Alter can also expect that its actions will direct those of Ego's correspondingly. However, this applies both in the positive and in the negative sense. Someone who does good can also expect good, and a person who inflicts harm on others must expect vengeance. This is an obvious rule in social relations based on interaction, and it solves the problem of attribution between Alter and Ego unambiguously because the chains of action are straightforward. It is only in very fortunate circumstances that this rule actually achieves the implied reciprocity. Outside such a paradise, it quickly leads to problems because Ego can always also decide not to reciprocate good deeds unless additional means, such as the threat of exclusion or the withdrawal of honour, are employed. Reciprocity has a switch that can easily be turned on or off, which makes conflict more likely than coordination. Reciprocity alone therefore tends to maintain a cycle of harm and vengeance rather than one of good deeds.¹¹ Gifts provide a way out of this.¹² Gifts are good deeds that are marked as such, and if they are accepted, this establishes a claim to a counter gift. Because,

¹⁰ See *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, eds. John Brewer and Susan Staves (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Das Recht der Gesellschaft*. vol. 1183 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995): 226–233; Niklas Luhmann, "Das sind Preise. Ein soziologisch-systemtheoretischer Klärungsversuch," *Soziale Welt* 34, no. 2 (1983): 155–158.

¹² Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

according to convention, gift exchange allows very different things to be connected, depending on a given constellation and intention, it represents a fundamental principle of communicative coordination in face-to-face social contexts. Votes at diets can be exchanged for wine, decisions for money, positions for political allegiance and intimacy for information.¹³ To this extent, gifts are a medium that can be employed universally in the creation of structures and in coordination, and it is found in almost all social fields of the Early Modern period. The limits of this communicative codification are found in its temporal structure. Gifts must be repeated at regular intervals if temporally stable, focused, and case-specific structures of influence are to be established. This assumes a gradient of resources so that such “models of reward” can be used to establish identifiable avoidance alternatives which provide lasting and reliable orientation for Ego’s actions. Ruling authority that is based on gift exchange must also always be geared towards accumulating resources in order to stabilise its own influence.

On the Dynamics of Social Infrastructures

Early Modern society encountered comparable structural problems to modern society. It developed simple media of communication which could address double contingency and the environmental complexity in the operative reproduction of social systems in a case-specific way (and thus in relation to a particular problem). An infrastructure based on simple success media did, of course, also differ from one based on modern, symbolically generalised success media. Its inability to be generalised across the three dimensions of meaning was particularly consequential. Rituals must be tailored to specific situations, and they are only binding for those that are present. Ruling authority was also only able to bind a small number of individuals as long as there was no shift to negative avoidance alternatives. It was obliged to regenerate itself through continuously repeated gift giving, which considerably restricted the reach and controlling effect of such power.

However, it is clear that such structural deficits in the communication infrastructures served as an incentive to improve them. Making use of writing and printing was one way of doing so. On the one hand, the new media exacerbated the problem of double contingency because they removed context and they also meant that systems were confronted with a more complex environment. However, the developing media system could also be employed to theorise about simple success media, to refine their semantics and thus to strengthen their functionality. Ceremonials,

13 Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

rhetoric, and honour, too, were among the success media that were strongly theorised. This shows that they were important for the reproduction of the hierarchical order of society. Contracts and trust, however, had also been a significant focus of attention since the middle of the 17th century.¹⁴ This indicates that the social formation of structure had already moved from presence-based constellations in many social contexts. Written theorisation regarding simple success media was attended by their legal standardisation. This can be observed in the cases of honour, ceremonials, and contracts. Here, the law and all the institutions of legal practice exerted an influence on society's symbolic infrastructure in a way that helped to reduce conflicts or arbitrate them without violence. This extended the productive treatment of "no" in communication considerably.

The effect of law in particular indicates another aspect of the developmental dynamics of symbolic infrastructures. Many of the simple success media lost their key function in modern society, were pushed aside into niches, such as rituals and ceremonials, and survived there as folklore. Contracts and property had to be fundamentally restructured in order to fit into the modern order. This supports an observation put forward here only as a hypothesis: much like technological infrastructures, symbolic infrastructures are resistant to reorganisation through evolutionary processes. Evolution assumes variation and the system-internal compatibility of variation, but infrastructures must reject these aspects precisely in order to be reliable and thus fungible. Infrastructures can be refined and improved, but they always adhere to their basic logic and thus lose any function in the context of a society developing by evolution. In the symbolic order of a society, the new is also constructed alongside the old.

14 Patrick S. Atiyah, *The Rise and Fall of Freedom of Contract* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Ute Frevert, *Vertrauensfragen. Eine Obsession der Moderne*. Vol. 6104. (München: C. H. Beck, 2013).