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## The Multimedia Organization

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Organization and functional differentiation are considered key principles of modern societies (Berger, 2003; Bergthaller, 2011). In fact, the distinction of autonomous function systems – such as politics, the economy, science, art, religion, etc. – adds an independent third dimension to the analyses of both the organization of societies and the identity of organizations. Without functional differentiation, there is no difference between truth and money - a hospital is the same as a bank and there exists no sense in such well-known concepts as doping, corruption, or secularization. Notwithstanding, however, only little research has been done so far on the interplay of function systems, organizations, and society in organizational studies. Still, despite this lack of research, pioneering works on organizational polyphony in terms of functional differentiation (Andersen, 2003; Andersen and Born, 2007; Thygesen and Andersen, 2007) started to move the organization out of the boxes of functional differentiation. As a result, we find it increasingly difficult to consider banks organizations of the economy, parties organizations of the political system and hospitals organizations of the health system. At the same time, a slowly growing series of current case studies are exploring the basic theoretical implications involved in the fact that banks run health programs, parties keep budgets, hospitals implement governance systems and the traditionally multifunctional universities are assigned their third mission. In fact, the formerly monochrome organizations are now showing their true colors.

The contributions to this special issue all start from the assumption that organizations are at least as much determined by their individual configuration of function system preferences (Roth, Scheiber, and Wetzel, 2010) as by the present-day key variables in organizational diversity, such as gender, age or ethnicity. This also includes the idea that organizational function system preferences are subject to change resulting from variations of the organizational environment – just as “changes in economic cycles and international competition create preferences for certain kinds of language and explanations” (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 970). An attempt has, therefore, been made in this special issue to illustrate how organizations discover functional polyphony, develop a more multi-functional identity and then have to bear the consequences.

The first article in the set presents polyphonic strategies of organizational identity construction used by large German organizations. Jasmin Siri and Victoria von Groddeck show that the cultivation of deliberately inconsistent identity descriptions is a way to express identity in the context of heterogeneous expectations of organization. The function of these organizational self-descriptions is, therefore, not in the construction of time-stable images, but in the creation of forms of expectation management that allow for the consideration of many function systems and still give the largest possible leeway in decision-making.

In the second article, Niels Thyge Thygesen also shows that organizations adapt to polycontextual environments by means of the production of a multitude of different images. With a particular focus on the use of management technologies in Danish governmental programs, he demonstrates how management by objectives triggers the emergence of contradicting images due to different time bindings within organizations. Organizational images, therefore, shift along polychronic timelines, a fact that can be managed in terms of second order observations of the observations enabled by management technologies. His concept of polychronic time management supports the idea that organizations can have different functional identities both at the same and in the course of time.

In the subsequent contribution, Justine Grønbæk Pors gives an example of how second order observations of paradoxical effects caused by their management technologies lead organizations to a culture of experimentalism. Her case study on the Danish Ministry of Education presents an organization whose once clear political identity is increasingly complemented by features that clearly refer to other function systems. Depending on the target audience, the ministry oscillates between roles as different as legislative power, communicator of educational research and supervising coach, and is engaged in this oscillation in an increasingly strategic way.

The final article opens up the horizon of polyphonic decision-making. In my own contribution, I follow the idea that the identity of organizations is formed on markets and that the discovery of multi-functional organizations, therefore, challenges the common sense of the economic nature of markets. Using the example of the Moroccan market place Jemaa el-Fnaa as well as evidence from ethnology and economic history, I make the case for a polyphonic market concept, which opens the market to all function systems and, consequently, allows for the analysis of the trade cycles of individual function systems as well as of functional differentiation.

Contrary to the habits of thought, the contributions to this volume show that organizations are neither exclusively nor primarily set on one particular function system. Rather, we find that organizations have structural couplings with all function systems of society. Organizations can, therefore, use all symbolically generalized communication media of society. Organizations that understand this option as part of their identity and learn to flag out this multimedia identity get to know each other anew as multimedia players. Organizational self-concepts will thus move on from the semantics of early modern times where organizations, such as machines, had only one (primary) function. In this sense, organizational multimediality is a concept with huge potential: We now can imagine methods by which organizations find out how often they actually make political, economic, legal, scientific or religious decisions (see Figure 1).

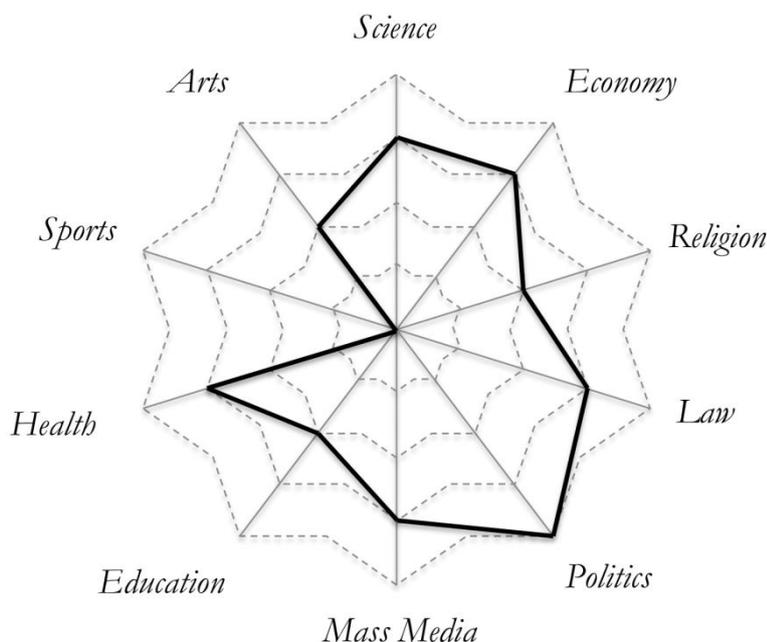


Figure 1: A functional profile of organization.

The profiles emerging from such an analysis would be both highly specific and easy to compare. All that is needed is to take leave from fond habits of thought on organization. Monofunctional concepts organizations belong to the past. Today, we find that organizations have more than one function system reference, at the same time, and that the function system reference of an organization may change – in some cases even as rapidly as every few seconds.

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