

NETWORKS AND MEANING

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Plenary presentation. Luhmann conference, in Luzern, Dec. 7, 2007

Abstract:

The paper relates social network analysis to Luhmann's systems theory to advance foundations of general network theory. It starts from Luhmann's discussion of meaning as the central concept of sociology. Luhmann's formulation is extended from a focus on the dyad and double contingency to the scope of networks and thus multiple contingency. While communication and action facets of meaning come intertwined in networks, the paper analytically disentangles the peculiar conditions of each, introducing the concepts of netdom, netdom switching, and discipline. It is thereby shown how network theory allows directing closer attention to the interplay of temporal, social, and interpretative dynamics in the constitution and concatenation of horizons of meaning. Furthermore, the paper lays out the concept of style as syncopated complexity for supplementing Luhmann's top-down focus on codes in the implementation and self-referential reproduction of functional sub-systems. The arguments are substantiated with a comparative discussion of the cases of journalism and fashion.