
Instead of viewing today’s society as postindustrial or postmodern, Lars Qvortrup suggests that we understand it as hypercomplex. According to Qvortrup, this shift in focus is necessary, since we are confronting a growing level of complexity that represents the fundamental problem and challenge of our current society. The Hypercomplex Society outlines the features of hypercomplexity and foregrounds a theory of complexity as the core theory of society.

For Qvortrup, hypercomplexity does not imply that current society is simply becoming more complex in some quantitative sense that allows us to easily compare contemporary society to societies of the past. Hypercomplexity represents second-order complexity, or complexity inscribed in complexity, such as when one observer describes another observer’s description of a particular phenomenon.

Qvortrup argues that our emerging society can be characterized as a polycentric and polycultural social system that applies different codes of self-observation related to different positions of observation in society. For example, the economic system applies the code of profit and loss in its observation of society; the religious system the code of transcendence and immanence; the political system the code of power and truth; and so on. The nature of social observation has changed and the belief in the existence of a universal standard of observation must be given up.

Qvortrup draws heavily on the systems approach to society developed by Niklas Luhmann. For Luhmann, the analysis of society begins with complexity and the ways in which society, through social evolution, has developed into a social system capable of managing an increasingly complex environment. However, whereas Luhmann differentiates only between the pre-modern and the modern society, Qvortrup argues that a distinction also needs to be made between the modern and the hypercomplex society. The complexity of modern society has been replaced by hypercomplexity, anthropocentrism by polycentrism, and unlimited rationality by bounded rationality.

For Qvortrup, the state of hypercomplexity is mutually constituted by the observations and self-observations of society’s many complex and functionally differentiated systems. Within this framework, organizations and societies are not developing toward some final state of total control guided by unlimited rationality. Instead, stability is a “dynamic state of equilibrium in which mechanisms and procedures for mutual observation and communication have developed to neutralize tendencies toward social entropy” (p. 5).

Qvortrup explores the concept of hypercomplexity in three parts. The first part of the book contains the introductory chapter and is devoted to outlining the general features of hypercomplexity. In the second part, Qvortrup examines the social development of society’s frames of self-observation using the Kantian perspectives of practical, aesthetic, and pure reason. In general, the idea of a social transformation from a “traditional,” or pre-modern, theocentric society to a modern, anthropocentric society to an emerging hypercomplex, polycentric society is used to frame the analysis. Here, Qvortrup examines changes in society’s understanding of social order as well as the nature of organization, wealth, and the family. Subsequently, Qvortrup investigates developments in artistic forms, or society’s self-observations through art, and the corresponding influences exerted by these changes on aesthetics and our understanding of ourselves. Lastly, Qvortrup explores changes in epistemological agendas and argues that the self-observation of science is an expression of hypercomplexity that requires new approaches to understanding.

The final part of the book is devoted to an analysis of communication and culture within the context of conditions of hypercomplexity. Specific focus is given to an appreciation of media and public opinion that takes into account the unique characteristics of
hypercomplexity. The Internet is analyzed as a medium that is particularly shaped by the hypercomplex society and which has significant mechanisms and potentials for complexity management. According to Qvortrup, the Web combines the benefits of the dissemination media and the effect media into one “media structure.” Qvortrup concludes with a discussion of culture and the special role that it comes to play in a hypercomplex society. He argues that culture in the emerging hypercomplex society needs to be conceived as the meta-optics of society’s self-observation—a generalized medium that makes social comparison possible and which enables society’s differentiated subsystems to observe each other without requiring fusion or uniformity.

On the whole, Qvortrup provides a rich theoretical framework that provides an alternative starting point to existing formulations of contemporary society. Despite this achievement there are several key shortcomings that deserve mention. Specifically, Qvortrup’s conceptualization of the Internet as a medium with “extraordinary social complexity-management potential” that utilizes search engines and browsers as “observational complexity-reduction machines” (pp. 174 and 182) operates at a high level of abstraction and stops short, aside from a general discussion, of actually investigating the nature of this “complexity-reduction” activity. Search engines, and the algorithms they employ, are operated within a particular context that both directly and indirectly influences the nature of search results and, hence, users’ observations. Most search engines support sponsored searches that favour paying content producers and certain search engines can be, and often are, ‘outwitted’ by content producers who optimize their websites in order to receive a high ranking within search results (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Loosen, 2002). Qvortrup’s discussion of the Internet’s complexity-reduction mechanisms includes minimal reference to the actual practice of search engine providers, content producers, and Internet users and this omission limits the scope of his analysis and conclusions.

In addition, Qvortrup’s discussion of the mass media is likely to leave most readers disappointed. Following from Luhmann, for Qvortrup the mass media constitute a mutually exclusive functional subsystem in society whose primary function is the construction of society’s common, shared world. Qvortrup posits, again in line with Luhmann, that the mass media bring about “irritation” in society because they are able to constantly “keep society on its toes” (p. 153). That is, the media, constituting their own functional subsystem in society, make communicative choices on the basis of their own criteria. According to Qvortrup, “there isn’t anybody in particular outside the media who can decide what the media will say: They do it themselves” (p. 153). Unfortunately, there is little evidence, both in Qvortrup’s account as well as in much mass media research, that would support the claim that the boundary between the mass media and the “outside” is this well defined and this impermeable. Numerous detailed accounts demonstrate the many ways in which so-called “external” political and economic systemic projects overlap with the mass media in key areas and how these intersections play an important role in determining what the media will and will not say as well as how it will and will not go about its daily activities.

These specific shortcomings suggest a more general problem with an ideal formulation of this sort, since it fails to account for the real world overlaps that often take place between subsystems. The “real” abstraction of the actual mass media is nowhere near as total as the highly idealized abstraction present in Qvortrup’s framework. The boundaries between social subsystems are not always as sharp and well defined as Qvortrup’s formulation requires and when these conditions are not met the utility and accuracy of the theory is greatly limited.

References

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