

FLATTERY, FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES: ON PATHOLOGICAL REDUCTION OF COMPLEXITY

Kirill Postoutenko

University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany

The presentation sketches out three scenarios of information suppression in societies and social groups ravaged by the pervasive feeling of insecurity and looming breakup. In all three cases, the reduction of uncertainty is achieved by suspension of communicative differentiation within the systems in question, aimed at eradicating interactional contingencies. It is argued, however, that this simplification typically results in local pathologies within systems in question, failing to reduce the overall amount of information in systems in question.

(1). Outside of the democratic realm, early tyrannies and modern dictatorships are the most conspicuous examples of systemic instability: since the ascent to illegitimate power is typically marred by betrayal and repression (Roger B. Myerson), the resulting low credibility of communication makes autocracies murky and dangerous for themselves (Talcott Parsons). The attempted remedy against possible explosion is the reduction of informational exchanges within societies to the containable level. Among other measures, it is achieved by elimination of the principal differences between *information*, *message* and *messenger* (Niklas Luhmann). Whereas the chief - if not the only - function of stereotypical greetings and outsized ovations to leaders is the confirmation of the senders' loyalty, the rare and cryptic responses from the top commonly signal nothing but vague and generalized offers of personal protection. The downside of this avoidance of all potentially explosive information is the communicative system which combines cheap signaling (see above) with absurdly low - and diminishing - throughput capacity. This, in turn, encourages the flight from public communication to the informal interaction groups and surveillance channels, exacerbating systemic obscurity and heightening those very risks informational suppression was trying to avoid.

(2-3). In democracies, the relative stability of socio-political system is combined with a far greater structural role of information in the system: indeed, as Walt Whitman has noted in his famous poem *Election Day, November 1884*, expressing intra-systemic differences through

political choices is not the byproduct of democratic interaction but rather its legitimating substance. The resulting omnipresence (and paramount significance) of information in socio-political system presents considerable challenges to many. The ensuing anxiety results in two parallel – and opposite - strategies of ignoring the difference between *information* and *noise*: while the proponents of the ‘fake news’ theory declare all signals to be cheap, using deliberately outrageous messages for group identification purposes (Mikael Klintman), the conspiracy adepts interpret all signs – and even non-signs – as information reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs (Paul Lazarsfeld & Herbert Menzel). It is easy to see that both strategies succeed in breaking the crucial link between information and decisions, albeit in different ways: whereas in the first case runaway semantic inflation prevents the transmission of information among ‘fake news’ adepts (and possibly beyond) altogether, in the second the neurotic approach to the abundant available information only reinforces intransigence, turning human communicators into trivial machines (Heinz von Foerster). So, at the end of the day, both approaches engender local escapes from the surrounding informational landscape rather than producing general changes of the informational balance in the systems.

The empirical data presented in the talk includes flattery at the court of Caligula, public communication in Soviet Union (1917-1941), 19th century European antisemitism, supporters of Donald Trump in the 2020 election campaign, and the *Querdenker* movement in Germany during pandemic.