Abstract: This presentation sketches out three scenarios of information suppression in social environments ravaged by pervasive feelings of insecurity and looming breakup. While containment (common in totalitarian regimes) strives to decrease the amount of information in the system by encouraging redundancy and semantic inflation, escape (typical for populist milieus) results in informational nihilism (information = noise). Inversely, tolerance (common for conspiracy adepts) interprets all signs—and even non-signs—as meaningful cues reinforcing pre-existing beliefs (noise = information). It is argued that these attempts at uncertainty reduction typically lead to pathological states, failing to reduce the overall amount of information within the systems in question.

Keywords: information; noise; redundancy; semantic inflation; totalitarianism; conspiracy; fake news

1. Introduction

The presentation sketches out three scenarios of information suppression in societies and social groups ravaged by the pervasive feelings of insecurity and looming breakup. In all three cases, the reduction in uncertainty is sought in suspension of internal communicative differentiations and eradication of interactional contingencies. However, the specific approaches to the easing of informational pressure in totalitarian and democratic environments vary, as do their outcomes. It is, therefore, worth looking at each strategy a bit more closely.

2. Totalitarian Containment: Keeping the Spirit in the Bottle

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 [1–3], the resulting low credibility of communication makes autocracies murky and dangerous to themselves [4–7]. The attempted remedy against possible explosion is containment, i.e., the reduction in informational exchanges within societies to a manageable level. The typical measures (common for other natural and social sign systems) are the code and channel redundancy, the tolerance of semantic inflation, and the reduction of communicative complexity—for instance, the elimination of the differences between information, messages and messengers [8–12]. This state of affairs could be illustrated by a page from the leading Bolshevik Party newspaper, filled with multiple stereotypical greetings to Joseph Stalin on his 70th birthday [13,14]. Whereas the only function of this and similar flattery was the confirmation of the senders’ loyalty, the rare and cryptic summary responses from the top commonly signaled nothing but vague and generalized offers of personal protection [15]. To be sure, the obituary page of a typical German newspaper, or a manifestation in support of a certain candidate in the U.S. presidential election, would also feature the same sort of identical messages placed next to each other and addressed to the same recipients. However, such a repetitive signaling...
of support would commonly occur in democracies on the margins of the public sphere, since media enterprises selling information to their recipients would hardly be willing to sacrifice their front pages and prime time to the unprofitable phatic communication [16].

The downside of this informational impoverishment of the public sphere is the hoarding of potentially explosive data in disjointed pockets of society such as security services, private diaries, or informal conversations [17]. Despite the utter diversity of such storages, their insulation from the rest of society carries similar risks. Indeed, the accumulation of unprocessed differences between knowledge and ignorance heightens the risks of explosion whenever the system is shaken up: whereas American democracy withstood the revelations of Watergate with relatively modest damage, personalist dictatorships largely fell prey to the influx of previously unavailable information [18]. Coupled with the increasing worthlessness of the signs in circulation, containment exacerbates systemic obscurity, heightening the very risks that informational suppression was trying to avoid [19].

3. Democratic Escape (Information as Noise) and Tolerance (Noise as Information)

In democracies, the relative stability of their socio-political systems is combined with the far greater structural role of information. Indeed, as Walt Whitman has noted in his famous poem Election Day, November 1884, expressing intra-systemic differences through political choices in elections is not the byproduct of democratic interaction but rather its legitimating substance: “the heart of it not in the chosen: the act itself the main, the quadrennial choosing” [20]. The resulting omnipresence (and paramount significance) of information in socio-political system presents considerable challenges to many disgruntled individuals whose procession and selection abilities are stretched to the limit by the overproduction of news in social media and the gradual disappearance of interpreters—village elders, shamans, agitators, and popularizers—mediating between senders and recipients [21–24].

The ensuing anxiety results in two parallel—and opposite—strategies of ignoring the difference between information and noise, which might be called escape and tolerance, respectively. In the first case, the proponents of the ‘fake news’ theory and their likes declare all signals to be cheap [25]. A case in point could be the poster Politics, TV + Newspaper: A Pack of Lies, carried at one of the anti-vaccination demonstrations in Berlin in 2020. The second variation, in turn, distinguishes itself by interpreting all signs from high-content messages as random cues reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs [26]. Here, examples could range from old-fashioned antisemitism (Dostoevsky’s belief in the anti-Christian conspiracy involving all Jews) to the modern obsession with QAnon [27–30].

It is easy to see that both strategies succeed in breaking the crucial link between information and decision [31], albeit in different ways. In the case of escape, the messages are abstracted from their coded (verbal) content and instead used for reflexive self-identifications with a certain group [32]: in this vein, Lock Her Up was a common signal of support lent to Donald Trump in the presidential election of 2016 [33]. Tolerance, in its turn, embraces information wherever it can find (or invent) it, only to instantly couple the received messages with a prefabricated interpretation at their source. For example, conspiracy-minded observers see the vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 as evidence of the global microchipping inflicted upon humanity by the former CEO of Microsoft [34]. In both cases, human communicators act as trivial machines, incapable of changing their behavior on the basis of the information that is available at the input stage [35].

At the end of the day, both populist groups and conspiracy adepts succeed in building a fence between their own cherished safety zones and the surrounding informational landscape. Moreover, as the current politics in USA, Brazil and elsewhere demonstrates, their behavior could make inroads into the mainstream public sphere. However, none of the strategies seem to decisively change the informational balance in the systems they abhor, resist and fear. Still, the specific dynamics of interrelations between the aforementioned groups and larger society remain to be studied.
4. Conclusions: Avenues for Future Research

This presentation aimed to provide a template for comparison between different strategies of information avoidance in modern and post-modern societies. Due to the format, the presented material was limited to illustrations chosen from samples of relevant material. A future, large-scale study would encompass such diverse examples of flattery, fake news and conspiracy as adulation at the court of Caligula [36], public communication in Soviet Union (1917–1941), 19th century European antisemitism, the support groups of Donald Trump in the 2020 election campaign, and the Querdenker movement in Germany during the pandemic.

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