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Data Paranoia: How to Make Sense of Pattern Discrimination

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When I want to communicate with another person, I have at hand a number of old and new methods: languages, systems of writing, means of storing, of transmitting, or of multiplying the message—tapes, telephone, printing press, and so on.

—Michel Serres, Hermes

In Michel Serres’s *Hermes* (1982) we follow the mythical journey of the Greek god, whose goal it is to deliver a message to different protagonists of European cultural history. During this journey the message gets translated, transformed, and multiplied through diverse means of communication and spaces of knowledge, reaching from mythology to science, from philosophy to literature, from mathematics to biology, thermodynamics, and cybernetics. These fields constitute the nodal points of a global network of communication, which Hermes constantly weaves into a fabric of circular codes. Hence, the namegiver of modern *Hermeneutics* is the divine herald of all communication. But at the same time, and this is Serres’s punchline, he is a parasite of communication, a trickster,
who subverts the symbolic order he builds in the first place. Similar to the figure of the hacker (see Pias 2002), he has to disassemble the code before he can reassemble it. Hermes, in this sense, causes disorder, interference, and confusion, the background noise against which the meaning of a message can only take shape (see Harari and Bell 1982, xxv). However, this noise must be excluded in order to maintain the illusion of frictionless communication.

According to Serres, in communication a smooth transfer is not the norm but rather the exception. Misunderstanding and divergent interpretations are an integral part of the symbolic order. So even if we misunderstand a certain situation, there is an attempt to catch its meaning. It is always a common meaning and symbolic order that our understanding is referring to. Without this common meaning there is no understanding. Understanding, therefore, necessitates an intersubjectively produced meaning; it implies a collective principle of comprehension, assuming that this principle is always about to fail. From this perspective, hermeneutics is not only the methodology of interpretation but also the general theory of understanding (see Schleiermacher 1998). It does refer to reproductive comprehension, understood as interpretation of a pregiven symbolic system, as well as productive understanding, which implies an attribution of meaning. In particular, the latter is of importance for the book at hand, because it relates to an authoritative—although not necessarily authoritarian—entity, a master signifier organizing meaning. Hence, even though—or precisely because—there is no necessary analogy between reality and its symbolization, meaning is attributed to the world by a symbolic order, which, ultimately, functions as an ideological system (see Žižek 2008, 95–97).

Big Data, it seems, proceeds to become a new ideology with its very own horizon of meaning. As Florian Cramer suggests in his contribution to this book, hermeneutics therefore has enjoyed a revival with Big Data analytics, even though it now has to be considered a “backdoor hermeneutics.” In times of the so-called fourth paradigm (see Hey, Tansley, and Tolle 2009), data-intensive computing yields
a new form of analysis that is no longer about the interpretation of the past but rather focuses on speculating about the future. However, far from being a neutral tool for capturing, curating, and analyzing, Big Data is based on its very own interpretative framework: “Just like the Oracle of Delphi, it is dependent on interpretation” (see Cramer in this volume). And according to Cramer, this “interpretative capability is limited by algorithmics—so that the limitations of the tool (and, ultimately, of using mathematics to process meaning) end up defining the limits of interpretation.” Herein lies the whole problem with data analytics analyzed in this volume: the process of understanding something as something—the formal structure of any understanding and thus of hermeneutics—disappears into a nirvana of algorithmic computation, which is no longer intelligible to the human mind.3

Yet one could ask if the disappearance of this process isn’t an integral part of communication itself? At least this is Serres’s point when he questions modern information theory, which, for him, is only one particular case within the problem of communication (Serres 1982, 71–83). For Serres the problem is not so much about how to encode or decode a message; that is, to know the code. Rather the problem lies in the fact that for a communicative act to be successful, the underlying code has to be hidden. This becomes apparent when we think about dominant meanings in the cultural, social, and political world, which are necessary preconditions if we want to make sense of—or even critique—everyday life (see Hall 1999). In order to be part of it, one has to speak and understand the common language, without referring to it all the time.4 This taken-for-granted knowledge constitutes an organizational principle of understanding, a master signifier, to which both the psychic and social individual are subjected. Hence, Hermes does not simply deliver the messages of the gods, which then have to be interpreted. Being a god himself, he represents the system of symbols within which a common reality is constructed and therefore communication can take place. Hermes is messenger, translator, and authoritative figure in one. And as god of disguise, he is aware
of the fact that successful communication requires his exclusion as mediator (Serres 1982, 67). Such an awareness also depicts the challenge of this book: neither does it want to repeat the pervasive belief that algorithms are just too complex to be understood, nor take the bait that by simply making every communication step transparent, the problem can be solved.

In order to filter a message out of noise, to literally discriminate data to extract information, the discriminatory patterns within the communication process have to work behind the scene. This is the hermeneutical paradox and the reason Michel Serres considers Hermes to be the patron saint of our postmodern time. As soon as Hermes enters the stage to deliver the message, he blurs and renders it unintelligible; only after he disappears does the message become legible. He is the excluded third in every communication process, like algorithms, which are present and absent at the same time. With new information and communication technologies, we live in a time of such paradoxes, often compared to the passage from oral to written culture (see Stiegler 2012) or from writing to printing (see Builder 1993). As a consequence, the cultural logic of late capitalism is entangled into a postmodern confusion (see Jameson 1991), propelled by a “decline of symbolic efficiency” (Dean 2010, 6). The symbolic order resembles a flip-flop picture: Like Hermes, it constantly changes its state, leaving us in the dark about its actual meaning. But as can be seen from Hermes's journey, pictured by Serres as a succession of random encounters and discoveries, every disconnection entails a reconnection; the interruption of a symbolic order of exchange allows for the production of a new, more complex order (see Serres 1982).

### Connecting People Apart

In times of global connectedness, the symbolic order we live in gets more and more complicated. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues in her piece in this volume, we have to critically engage with this order, rather than simply dismiss it as the latest hype of capitalist
innovation. According to her, we need to work through the problems posed by network analytics, in particular its excessive search for correlations: “If almost anything can be shown to be real (if almost any correlation can be discovered), how do we know what matters, what is true?” In our networked environments, network analytics has become the default model, on the basis of which causality gets replaced by data correlation. We live in a flat ontology of likeness and similarity, within which every fact is correlated to another fact, with the effect that no fact is of significance anymore (see Lynch 2016). Yet this analysis is far from new; Friedrich Nietzsche already came up with the idea of a postfact world, where there are no facts but only interpretations (see Nietzsche 1989).

What is new, though, is the fragmentation of largely stable knowledge sources into an atomized world of updates, comments, opinions, rumors, and gossip. In order to be able to filter information from this constant stream of data, we rely on algorithms, helping us to bring order into our new media life. In this sense, Facebook, Google, and company create a habitual environment, a seemingly personalized world, which keeps us in a state of self-identification through social segregation (see Chun 2016).

The salient point of Chun’s text is the conclusion that these isolated worlds, also called echo chambers or filter bubbles, are not simply manifestations of a “natural” preference of individuals to bond with similar individuals, but have to be constantly produced and reproduced. Hence, behind the concept of homophily the “old” power relations of class, race, and gender flare up. But instead of “new theories of connections” (Chun in this volume), in order to cut through the ideological linkage of Big Data and network analytics, we are confronted with “the end of theory” (see Anderson 2008), a claim that is deeply problematic, because it tends to obfuscate what is crucially needed: a critical knowledge about the (sexist, racist, classist) mechanisms underlying today’s networked sociality. This not only affects the technological aspect of pattern discrimination but also our very understanding of democracy. If data speaks for itself, an informed debate about how and for whom it works
becomes obsolete. Likewise, classical hermeneutics, in the sense of a positive or negative interpretation of existing normative symbols, gets replaced by free-floating cosmographies, understood as attempts to map the world without a common point of reference.

In the digital world a new “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1970, 32) vis-à-vis media technologies is necessary. As Boris Groys has argued, such a “media-ontological suspicion” isn’t simply a subjective illusion, arising in the imaginary of an individual, but an objective phenomenon, which appears during the act of media observation itself: “As observers of the media, we are simply incapable of seeing anything else in the media but loci of hidden manipulation” (Groys 2012, 38). The paranoid doubt, according to Groys, cannot be suspended, because the submedial space—that is, the space lurking behind the symbolic surface of media—is structurally hidden. As is the case with the divine dis/appearance of Hermes, “we have no choice but to suspect, to project, and to insinuate” (38). Hence, we inevitably assume manipulation behind the media, which remains a dark space to us; and still we build upon the reality constituted by it. For Niklas Luhmann this is one of the paradox effects of the functional differentiation of modern society: “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media. . . . On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources” (Luhmann 2000, 1). Yet Luhmann is still assuming that there is only one reality constructed by mass media, while today, with the emergence of digital media, we have to consider a variety of realities in different media settings, which makes the media-ontological question even more complicated.

Due to the diversity of media formats and offerings supported by the internet, the “construction of reality” (Luhmann 2000, 76) has been dispersed into a network of simultaneously existing realities. While mass media, with its basic principles of periodicity, publicity, universality, and topicality, has established a common public
sphere within which—at least in an idealized world—all citizens are able to participate in rational deliberation (see Habermas 1989, 244–48), the actual realization of participatory media in the form of social media has led to a fragmentation of a mass-mediated public into partial publics (see Hagen 2016). This shift from mass media to social media is accompanied by the rise of web-based communication applications, the ubiquity of mobile computing and the formation of powerful media platforms, all of which are deeply enmeshed with our everyday media life (see van Dijck and Poell 2013). According to José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, social media is characterized by four principles, which, over the past years, have gradually infiltrated the logic of mass media: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. The latter in particular can be seen as a crucial aspect of a data-driven world, because it “refers to the ability of networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before” (9). Real-time data flows, unprecedented in their volume and constantly collected, provide the commercial basis of a whole new industry, which tries both to predict and shape the behavior of users, and, as a consequence, redefine our understanding of participation: in the interplay between how things are and how they might be (see Beyes and Pias 2016), a data-driven world becomes a malleable compound that can yield very different results.

With Big Data and social media platforms the public sphere gets more and more fragmented (see Varnelis 2008). For instance, in the last couple of years political news and advocacy pages have sprung up on platforms like Facebook (see Herrman 2016). What is unique about these media outlets is the fact that they do not exist outside of social media sites, but nevertheless attract a significant audience. They are based on algorithms, which filter and sort the content “to show people what is most relevant to them” (Adamic, Bakshy, and Messing 2015). Here the homophilic mechanism shows through, because the content, which is aggregated from a multiplicity of sources, is sifted according to the preferences of the user—or at least according to what the algorithm thinks these
preferences could be. Hence, the idea of topicality, central to mass media logic, is being subverted: instead of bringing everyone up-to-date with the same information, different stories circulate in different parts of the network, and by sharing them in peer groups, existing opinions get confirmed, while deviant opinions are filtered out. Such a confirmation bias, well known in psychology, has profound implications for a common space of reference:

While it may seem that the decline of symbolic efficiency ushers in a new era of freedom from rigid norms and expectations, the fluidity and adaptability of imaginary identities are accompanied by fragility and insecurity. Imaginary identities are incapable of establishing a firm place to stand, a position from which one can make sense of one’s experiences, one’s worlds. (Dean 2010, 57)

As Jodi Dean points out, to pin down meaning is getting more and more difficult with social media, where the truth becomes a matter of perception, rather than the result of intersubjectively agreed-upon facts.

The internet has created a new desire for participation, but other than the participatory hopes of the 1990s, the will to participate doesn’t seem to yield a common space of reference anymore. In a world in which every opinion can be expressed, paranoia penetrates almost all aspects of our lives, which, in turn, has dramatic effects on the understanding of a participatory public sphere (see Chun 2006). The result can be seen in recent political debates, where exaggeration, suspicion, and conspiratorial fantasies continuously spill over into the discourse: if I lose, the elections are rigged; only the polls in my favor are trustworthy; all the others are part of a conspiracy against me. This reemergence of a “paranoid style in politics” (see Hofstadter 1964) is possible due to the aforementioned postfact situation. And even if such a situation was already immanent in European fascism at the beginning of the twentieth century or the McCarthy-era in the United States, it is gaining significant momentum at a time when data simply outnum-
bers facts. Hence, the paranoid trait gets propelled by the fact that there are no facts, or, to be more precise, only factitious facts.

Data–Information–Knowledge

In modern times, democratic debate has been dependent on so-called expert knowledge, although it has always been clear that such knowledge is itself dependent on the actual public opinion of a given time. In this sense, the symbolic order prestructures the condition of possibility of what can and cannot be expressed, which, in retrospect, stabilizes the very same order. Even fascism tried to enshrine its grotesque and death-dealing laws in a fact-based scientific discourse, not only to prove its alleged superiority but also to justify its crimes. The dispute over what counts as a fact and what does not was at the very core of modern “games of truth” (see Foucault 1984, 386–88). Today, by contrast, the effort to maintain at least a pretense of truth, which is based on facts, seems no longer to be of importance. As can be seen with recent events, such as the Brexit, Trumpism, and the notorious and tiring prevarication of the European far right, to tell a lie, and being caught doing so, is no longer a cause for embarrassment. It seems that white men’s discourse does not rely on expertise, however botchy it might be, in order to insist on being right. All that is needed is some poorly researched information: £350m supposedly sent to the EU every week by Downing Street, increasing crime rates caused by refugees in the United States and Germany alike—all of these are simple lies, but do not stain the reputations of those who tell them. On the contrary, they may not speak the truth but are nonetheless beloved by a significant part of the population who sympathize with their authoritarian view; even more so, because they are believed to stand their ground against all those academic wiseacres and pundits.

If hermeneutics is considered to be the art of differentiation between bullshit and facts, then the question arises as to why it is not central to the exercise of power anymore? Why can we endlessly
produce evidence to counter obvious lies, and no one really seems to care? This is the implicit question of Hito Steyerl’s contribution in this volume. She explains how “probability enters truth production on an extensive scale” (Steyerl in this volume). Rather than facts, which need to be verified by some sort of institution, data, which is endlessly processed and filtered, constitutes the basis of truthfulness today; with the effect “that the patterns supposed to be uncovered in massive data correspond to some degree with the patterns that are already assumed to be found there” (Steyerl). In other words: what we are looking for is not so much veracity, built on traditional inquiry and reasoning, but opinions and beliefs that fit into our world views. As a consequence, the age of facts and truth finding is being replaced by a new era, characterized by a permissive and incessant interpretation of data (see Lepore 2016). Of course, one could ask, why bother with the truth anyway? Wasn’t it the intrinsic goal of postmodern critique to get rid of or at least destabilize the grand narratives of modernity? Why becoming sissy, when Trump, Le Pen, or Strache are mocking the mainstream opinion of being biased itself? Well, because a common understanding of what is true, and what is not true, is important for the constitution of an objective reality, that is, a reality based on intersubjectively negotiated norms and rules. If such an agreement is annulled or simply ignored, society as a whole runs the risk of becoming cynical about its own truth and therefore existence. Again, none of this is new. However, with the rise of Big Data, we have reached a new qualitative step of soothsaying. The constant growth of data makes the idea of evidence-based politics appear outdated, because data, by definition, can be interpreted in this or that way. There is no major event that isn't entangled in a web of assertions and objections. No news not chopped up and distributed via social media channels, to the effect that a common space of cultural, social, and political reference is being rendered impossible. Due to this process, accelerated by personalized and personalizing algorithms, we risk missing the big picture for our small echo chambers filled with personal data (see Pariser 2012).
It is in the light of such a “data overflow” that Hito Steyerl discusses the implications of pattern recognition. In order to distinguish signal from noise, people always relied on specific patterns. In this context, racist and sexist algorithmic cultures are not so different from Ancient Greece, when women and slaves were barred—or should we say, filtered—from the public discourse. Their voices were not heard, because they did not apply to the specific set of values in the Greek polis. They may have been quantitatively significant, but they were not qualitatively relevant. Data, in the sense of a given thing (lat. *datum*), needs to be processed, in order to obtain meaning. Or, more simply, it needs to be put into form (lat. *informare*). Hence, a deliberate act is required, whereby data is applied to a preexisting scheme or pattern. And this process, as Hito Steyerl points out in this volume, is a “fundamentally political operation.” By applying filters, we constantly (re-)create them, particularly since the act of filtering information from data lies at the very heart of how we create our world.

Put into psychoanalytical and, in particular, Lacanian terms, one could say that unfiltered data represents the real, the absolute unknowable, whereas information stands for reality, rendered intelligible by our cognitive filters. Reality, in turn, can be seen as a composite of the imaginary and the symbolic, the two registers responsible for the constitution of our self. Thus, looking at the example of Google’s Deep Dream Generator from Steyerl’s text, we can see how the algorithmic training of an artificial neural network, which is constituted by a large amount of data, ends up by overidentifying with its own training set. Like humans are haunted by the demons of the past in their dreams, the algorithms, while trying to filter intelligible information from the noise of the deep web, simply repeat the imaginary they were fed with. “But”—and this is crucial in Steyerl’s analysis—“in a very materialist sense, these entities are far from hallucinations. If they are dreams, those dreams can be interpreted as condensations or displacements of the current technological disposition.” What we see in the phantasmagoric creatures is what Google offers us: its unleashed
prosumerist vision of “corporate animism in which commodities are not only fetishes but dreamed-up, franchised chimeras” (Steyerl). The produced signals are not just some dreamed-up images but representations of our current techno-capitalist system.

Now the crux of the matter is that dreams are not facts, and that Google is not (yet) equivalent to our reality. In fact, the latter is not only constituted by the imaginary but also by the symbolic. A tech company may be very influential when it comes to the imagination of our future, but it is only one player, albeit a powerful one, in the social deliberation of intersubjectively accepted patterns and codes. This leads us to knowledge as a third layer of analysis: in addition to data and information, knowledge can be seen as an agreed-upon framework for evaluating experiences and information. Take the example of the weather forecast: the measuring instruments of a meteorological station produce data in the form of discrete units. This array of figures, let’s say numbers from 0 to 9, only becomes legible when being applied to a specific scheme like the Celsius scale, a task normally done by experts. But in order to both make sense to the public and be accepted by it, this information has to be presented within a context that pins down meaning and gives it relevance. This is why people across the globe still watch the weather forecast every evening at a given time, or consult their most trusted app to show them the predicted temperature for the next day. This shared symbolic realm is necessary for information to be considered reliable.

While hallucinations take place at the imaginary level, and thus are only accessible to the individual, delusions refer to the symbolic, in which we rely on agreed-upon norms and values. This is why a distortion of reality can also happen collectively, in the sense that a social group deviates from common sense and its understanding of what is true and what is false. As theories of radical democracy have shown, these deviations are even intrinsic to the political process, because social reality is always in the making (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001). By the same token, we can never be sure whether the reality we live in isn’t delusional itself. There are no generaliz-
able criteria to determine its veracity, because every time we try, we are thrown back to reality. Conversely, to call another symbolic order delusional is only possible based on the prerequisite of an already established order, from which the alleged delusion is distinguished (see Foucault 1988). So our collectively agreed-upon reality provides us with a set of beliefs, ideas, and norms, which serve as a point of reference.

In accordance with Michel Serres’s idea of the excluded third, this common sense needs to be hidden in order to be effective. An essential part of hegemonic power, therefore, entails the ability to render deviant visions of the world impossible, while presenting the “real world” as the only possible one. This, in particular, is true about tech companies, whose imaginary is deeply rooted in the idea that their products are created to improve the world and our lives. Yet, what they do come up with are cock-and-bull stories, which, with the aid of massive advertising budgets, are sold to the public in order to become part of our everyday version of reality. Think about cloud computing, for example. The idea that some cloud is a trustworthy place for all our data, from holiday pics to our health information to our secret desires and wishes, is not only puzzling but profoundly problematic. And still, we use cloud storage services, even if we should and actually do know better. “I think conspiracy and paranoia are just what the cloud needs,” explains Tung-Hui Hu, the author of *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, because “the system works like a massive pyramid scheme—we all need to believe that it’s everywhere in order for it to be everywhere” (Sutcliffe 2015). This delusional drive lies at the very root of digital cultures and how they have unfolded over the last decades.

**Pattern Recognition**

In a review of William Gibson’s 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*, Fredric Jameson calls the collective unconscious of global consumerism the “eBay Imaginary” (see Jameson 2003), a notion that, fifteen years later, can be extended to Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Google,
and Microsoft. The so-called “Big Five” of the internet do not only constitute the backbone of today’s platform capitalism but are also at the forefront of predicting our techno-cultural future. In fact, the ability to identify potential trends from vast amounts of data, or, even better, to create them in the first place, has become the lifeline of capitalist production, with the effect that companies are contingent on new modes of pattern recognition that allow them to read the future. Now for Jameson, the breathtaking development in information and communication technologies refers to the most recent push for modernization, best represented by Gibson’s “high-tech paranoia,” in which “the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind” (Jameson 1991, 38). In the postmodern world, the individual gets lost in the hyper-space of computer networks. Not only does she lose her ability to locate herself within this space, but she is also dispersed into a myriad of datasets.

While Jameson associates cyberpunk’s “high-tech paranoia” with individual anxiety, social conspiracies, and the annihilation of the self, which is the pathological sediment of postmodern society, others have stressed the liberating effects arising from a destabilization of the modern subject and its totalizing master narratives (see Lyotard 1979; Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Vattimo 1988; Holmes 2009). In particular, Félix Guattari calls for new “collective assemblages of enunciation” (Guattari 1996, 263) in order to overcome the normative subjectivity of mass-mediated publics. This pluralistic approach not only challenges the idea of the individual in its singularity but was indeed seen as an immanent process of becoming a collective, which itself should be experienced as a process of greater freedom. In our “post-media era” (see Guattari 2013), the collective appropriation and use of media technologies by a multitude of “subject-groups” (Guattari 2000, 60) nourished the hopes that new modes of subjectivation would emerge, able to break through the mind-numbing effects of mass media.
However, the deconstruction of mass-mediated subjectivity poses the aforementioned problem that a common space of reference, within which you can agree or disagree, is increasingly difficult to maintain.

The transition from mass media to social media corresponds with Guattari’s prospect of post-(mass)mediality. The desired liberation and multiplication of the subject has lead to a new imaginary of participation. But other than the hoped-for resingularization—that is the ability of individuals to collectively remap their world—Info-capitalism has managed to retain the old model of exploitation by adjusting it to the new conditions of data production. Instead of a common vision that “designates an investment of attention, libidinal energy, and time,” what “happens today on Facebook, Twitter, and the like, is the reverse, which in spite of being the virtual home of a truly massive ensemble of humans, never form a collective project of ‘being-together’” (Hui and Halpin 2013, 107). In social media, the individual gets atomized, in order to become a source of data production, as well as an identifiable subject for marketing. This form of algorithmic governance is well known by now. However, most of today’s critical examination is simply repeating the implicit presuppositions of the problem, that is that the individual has to be preserved, rather than asking for new forms of individuation in our postmedia time. Such an approach doesn’t necessarily imply an affirmation of the status quo; on the contrary, it could help to set up some criteria to better understand, and maybe even vanquish the paranoid anxiety caused by “postmodern confusion” (see Chun 2015).

There is, of course, no clear-cut definition of what paranoia actually is. In its colloquial use, the term often gets confused with delusional disorder in the broader sense of the word (see Jaspers 1997) or the rather clinical schizophrenia (see Bleuler 1912). However, if we want to understand some of the specific aspects of paranoia, we can start with its etymology: The word paranoia is a composition of the Greek words παρά (para), meaning “beside, next,” and νόος (noos), that is “mind”; so paranoia literally translates into “being next to your mind.” This seems to be consistent,
given that the term is still used to describe a mental state of delusional or “false” belief regarding the self or persons or objects outside the self that is maintained despite indisputable evidence to the contrary. In this sense, paranoia can be seen as a partial, subordinate aspect of a delusion disorder; were it not for the fact that the French word for delusion, délire, stems from the Latin word delirium, which means “to go off the furrow” and, therefore, is almost equivalent with paranoia in the sense of “being deranged or distorted.” Even more, the German word Wahn or wähnen, which descends from the Indo-European wen, has the same root as in “to win,” and can be taken to mean “to imagine” and “to believe,” but also “to search,” “to strive,” or “to hope for something.” This is a crucial point in defining the delusional trait, in particular because it refers to a productive, if not salutary and reparative aspect in what we usually dismiss as paranoia disorder.

Paranoia as a specific way of knowing things is, along these lines, not so much caused by a lack of information as by an overproduction of meaning. Following the canonic description by German neurologist and psychiatrist Klaus Conrad, we can define a delusional episode on the basis of—at least—three stages (see Conrad 1958): First, there is the trema (Wahnstimmung), a delusional atmosphere, comparable to stage fright. You know that something is going on, but you cannot figure out what it is. This mental condition is associated with the sensation of suspiciousness, alienation, and fear, but also an anticipatory excitement. Second, the moment of revelation, termed apophenia (Wahnwahrnehmung), when things start to make sense again. Apophenia is described here as the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness, accompanied by a triumphant sentiment of having discovered something of tremendous significance. Such an Aha! moment is central to the paranoid perception of the world. And third, anastrophe (Wahneinfall), that is the delusional state of irreversible reference. Not only do things make sense to me, but they also begin to revolve around myself. Pathologically speaking, this is the point of no return, a “Copernican revolution” (Conrad),
after which the delusional idea becomes solid and incorrigible. Put into an even more simple model, we can speak of only two stages in the development of a delusion disorder: first the collapse of a central symbolic order, triggering the delusional sensation of the trema; and then the attempt to restore such an order by the discovery and, ultimately, ossification of a delusional idea, which helps to reconstitute the world (Kupke 2012, 116). In fact, the paranoid desire can be seen as a self-healing mechanism, a protective function to reappropriate the world.

It is not by chance that in cultural history and theory, media technologies often pop up as objects of desire of delusional systems: from telegraphy, to radio, to the internet (see Kittler 1984; Stingelin 1989; Chun 2006). Human cognition has always been embedded in media-technological environments, but it is with the rise of digital media that the need to develop a systematic understanding of our technologically modulated environments has become vital (see Hörl 2015). The concept of paranoia can be a useful tool in this context, because it helps to uncover societal beliefs, which have to be hidden, in order to function properly.²⁰ The paranoid person draws on the same beliefs, with the significant difference being that he or she overaffirms, and, thereby, reveals them. Hence, the irony behind pattern recognition algorithms like Google's Deep Dream Generator, analyzed by Hito Steyerl in this volume. It is a perfect example of an artificial neural network, which, by overidentifying with its own training set, becomes paranoid and, in doing so, gives us an insight into its inner functioning. What should be hidden behind the colorful curtain of Google's marketing department, unintentionally enters the stage, and what we see there is merely the fact that all the high-tech gimmicks are ultimately a reflection of techno-capitalism itself (see Steyerl).

**Paranoid Thinking Machine**

Germany, fall 2018: Three years after Angela Merkel's world-famous “We will manage,” regarding Europe's so-called refugee
crisis, the initial welcome culture has turned into a refusal culture. With the entry of the openly xenophobic and not-so-hidden racist Alternative for Germany (AfD) into the Bundestag, the political debate in Germany has become harsher, setting the tone for an unprecedented explosion of hate speech in social media, and, even worse, legitimizing physical violence and terrorist attacks against refugees. What we are witnessing here are symptoms of a political crisis, namely the erosion of solidarity in society. Hate speech, therefore, needs to be seen as an alarming sign for the disintegration of a common public sphere, which, until now, served as the minimal framework for social negotiation processes. The inflammatory term “Lügenpresse” (lying press), popular among reactionary right-wing groups, points to a rupture in the political discourse: even if modern mass media (press, radio, TV) were always suspected of manipulating the public, their function as a general framework of reference, manipulative or not, was largely undisputed. With digital media, by contrast, we find ourselves in an imaginary of participation, in a world of images and affects, which leads to a dispersion of a common ground.

Today’s oppositional politics, in particular of the far right, is not so much concerned with the creation of a counterpublic, which sets itself to correct the reality produced by mainstream media, but rather with the creation of its own media and, therefore, its own truth. Blogs, online magazines and Facebook sites of right-wing populists in Europe, but also the alt-right movement in the United States, are manifestations of the aforementioned transition from mass media to social media logic. The deadly force of this transformation results from the fact that every withdrawal, total or partial, from the collectively shared realm of the social world triggers the collapse of the symbolic, which, in turn, leads to a further drifting apart of this world. However, the question remains whether this is simply a relentless demise, or if we need to develop “new attentional forms that pursue in a different manner the process of psychic and collective individuation” (Stiegler 2012). To break from the echo chambers of personalized data, we need to
deploy the paranoid moment: while today’s everyday media life is characterized by an excess of truth claiming, with the effect that the individual is caught in his or her own network, paranoia in its productive and salutary effects, may provide a stencil to redraw a symbolic order in our postmedia world.

A paranoid thinking machine, understood as a theoretical concept, tries to compensate the symbolic void by filling it with meaning. The fact that these compensation efforts are currently characterized by hate speech reinforces the assumption that we are dealing with a social crisis of de-solidarization. But what if such a machine is put to different ends? What has to be done to switch the mode from hate to love? As Kübra Gümüşay reminded us at re:publica in May 2016, the hate against minorities in social media is highly organized, and, therefore, the only way to counter it is to organize love as well. This may sound naive but in fact points to the heart of what participation is all about: it is not only the act or state of having part of something, in order to be able to express your opinion, but also of sharing something in common, of becoming “an instance of a collective, not just one individual among others, but the very thing itself” (Kelty 2016, 236). This is why a debate about the reconstitution of a common symbolic order is so crucial; neither as a return to mass-media, nor as a “final” solution, but rather as a constant revision of the (post-)modern paradox that individuals are solicited by a collective will to share, and, by the same token, are thrown back into segregation. As long as this debate isn’t taking place, antiharassment tools, such as the ones recently introduced by Twitter and Instagram, can provide a first remedy to filter out the noise of racist and sexist slurs. And initiatives like TrollBusters, a platform to analyze and map how networks of harassers operate, are a good tactical means to fight back against hate speech. But in the long run, what we need is a strategy to reorganize our sociotechnical world, so that everyone feels free and safe to express him- and, in particular, herself.

In order to achieve this goal, or at least advance toward it, media, artistic, and cultural practices can be used to reflect on but also
test the reconstitution of a common space of reference. While the imaginary of the digital is still caught in the neo-feudal ideology of platform capitalism, with its belief in individualist consumerism and reductive identity politics, only collective practices promise the creation of new attentional forms, which, in turn, could help to reassemble the paranoid thinking machine. This is not to claim that we can get rid of discrimination by simply invoking creative forms of enunciation. As has been argued throughout this book, pattern discrimination—that is, the ability to filter information from data—is an essential part of human, but also nonhuman, cognition. However, what is at stake is the question of how and to what extent these patterns are themselves built on racist, sexist, and classist beliefs? Such a critical approach is sensible of the fact that the technological world functions as the excluded third, a world, which builds the basis for an increasing number of decision-making processes, and, therefore, needs to be brought into social and political awareness.

Notes

1 Slavoj Žižek refers to the concept of radical democracy (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001), in order to answer the “crucial question of the theory of ideology: the multitude of ‘floating signifiers,’ of protoideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain ‘nodal point’ (the Lacanian point de capiton) which ‘quilts’ them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning” (Žižek 2008, 95).

2 After the first three paradigms in scientific research, which were experimental, theoretical, and computational, the fourth paradigm indicates the analysis of massive data sets.

3 This adds another narcissistic wound to the human subject: After Copernicus’s death blow to heliocentric cosmology, Darwin’s dethroning of the human being, and Freud’s subversion of the thinking subject, Big Data wrests the communication process from an anthropocentric worldview.

4 Actually this is the strategy of so-called “Reichsbürger” in Germany, who do not acknowledge the FRG to be a legitimate state. By painstakingly interpreting every legal document and executive order, they block any interaction with its institution.

5 Here Dean follows Slavoj Žižek’s diagnosis of a demise of “symbolic efficiency” (Žižek 2000, 248).

6 See Cramer in this volume.

7 To be clear, by using the notion of the public sphere I am not following the
Habermasian idea of an ideal space that now disintegrates under the influence of networked media. On the contrary, this space has always already been a contested one, a hegemonial but necessary construction to constitute political subjects (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xvii–xviii).

Michael P. Lynch, in his book The Internet of Us, speaks of “Google-Knowing” in this context (Lynch 2016, 21–40).

Friedrich Nietzsche already explained at length how human beings are constantly deceiving themselves in order to be able to survive. However, the salient but often overlooked point is that, precisely because of the artificiality of truth, humans have to believe in and take responsibility for it. In other words: Simply because facts are factitious doesn’t mean they are of a nonbinding nature.

Think about the scheme, institutionalized by Greenwich Mean Time. The hands on your clock do not bear any meaning by themselves; in fact, they are just two (or three) mechanically (or digitally) driven pointers. Only when applied to the overall scheme of GMT can they tell you the time.

For a more systematic distinction between the real and reality, see Lacan's Seminar XI (Lacan 1977).

In information science, the relationship between data, information, knowledge, and sometimes wisdom is represented under the acronym DIKW.

The weather forecast also gives us an example of how we could deal with a postfact world: we normally accept the fact that the forecast, based on data from a wide range of sensory devices, only gives us a rough approximation of what will happen in the near future. No one would come up with the idea of holding the weather service accountable for possible mistakes. Even the usual complaints about the inaccuracy of the weather report are part of the narrative, which, and this is the salient point, is a common narrative.

Autonomous radio stations of the 1970s and 1980s in Europe (e.g., Radio Alice in Bologna) represented for Guattari an example of how collective assemblages of enunciation can be produced and preserved.

Typically manifested in delusions of persecution or grandeur that are often tantamount to paranoia. But as I want to argue here, paranoia is a much broader concept, referring to a feeling of radical insecurity due to a disorder of the symbolic system. Such an obscure feeling is often more difficult to endure than the belief of someone following.

Thanks to Wolfgang Sützl for literally spelling this out for me.

For the idea of a “reparative motive” in paranoid thinking, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003).

See for example the work of Mark Lombardi, whose drawings meticulously document various topographies of political and financial power structures.

In fact, Conrad, a former member of the National Socialist German Physicians’ League (NSDÄB) who also published on the heritability of epilepsy, differentiates between trema, apophenia, and apocalypse, whereas anastrophe works at the interface between the apophenic and apocalyptic phase. In this sense a catatonic psychosis is to be seen “one level lower” of the apophenic experience and is characterized by a sudden turnover into a stable delusional perception.
(Conrad 1958, 192). However—for the sake of the argument—I am more interested in the actual “turning point” (lat. crisis) in order to understand the creative potential of paranoia (Schödlbauer 2016, 123).

20 See beginning of this text.
21 To be clear, the verbal and physical violence is, of course, also affecting non-refugees, not least Germans, who, due to a nationalist (völkisch) understanding of citizenship, are not considered to be “true” Germans. Unfortunately mainstream media is fueling this racist discourse, by repeatedly reporting on “Ausländerfeindlichkeit” (hostility to foreigners), even if the victims are Germans.
22 This can also be seen in the rise of a technocratic language to subvert such a common ground. Eighty years after Golda Meir’s absolute despair in the face of a failing Évian Conference, during which the fate of more than half a million Jewish refugees was decided, Europe’s heads of state and government are again merely speaking of “numbers” instead of human beings.
23 The idea for such a concept emerged from a conversation with Brian Holmes. My gratitude goes to him for his intellectual support.
24 See Chun in this volume.

References


