


Pathogenic Text: Semiocentric Approach

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Annotation

More than a quarter of a century ago, the concept of «pathogenic text» (PT) was introduced to media studies in Ukraine. In this article, we provide a review of academic publications that reflect on this concept from a philosophical perspective. Since 1996, the PT concept has been widely discussed in academic discourse. Therefore, it is important to summarize its usage by outlining our current interpretation and addressing how the concept differs from the more familiar term «harmful content». Can the destructive influence of the media always be attributed to deliberate and malicious actions of certain individuals? If we interpret «pathogenic» as «harmful», the simplest way to identify pathogenic text is by analysing it through the lens of law and morality. From this perspective, the problem of PT can be addressed by adhering to the laws and ethical norms adopted in any given country. According to the formula «harmful is what is prohibited by law», this approach may seem convenient and straightforward. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that this approach is too one-sided. The concept of pathogenic text has been incorporated into some media studies. We support the attempt by various authors to separate a purely applied understanding of the pathotext (based, for instance, on legal restrictions and prohibitions) from its neutral philosophical interpretation. Some authors have made the concept and classification of PT part of the methodological framework of their research, while others have sought to elaborate on or criticise our classification.

Publications by various authors on this topic encourage a reconsideration of the initial understanding of pathogenic text, particularly in the context of semiocentrism. We also view our proposed considerations as a contribution to the philosophy and methodology of media studies.

Keywords: *media philosophy, pathogenic text, propaganda, noocenosis, semiocentrism*

Introduction. Problem Statement

The war and the propaganda that accompanies it have highlighted the problem of harmful or pathogenic text. With the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which is a major European war of global and historical significance, we again see that the fictitious narratives on which Russian propaganda is based can cause intense suffering to millions of people. In this article, we explain a distinction between the concepts of harmful and pathogenic text, placing them in the context of *noocenosis* and *semiocentrism* [1]. These concepts form a framework that, in our view, can complement the methodology of media studies.

In 1996, our book «Pathogenic Text» was published in Ukrainian (Potyatynyk, 1996). Since then, the concept used in the title has entered academic discourse. It makes sense, therefore, to summarise its use by outlining our current interpretation of it and answering the question of how the term differs from the more familiar «harmful content».

We will start with a simple question: Why should the audience (society) be protected from the negative effects of the media? Doesn't this insulation sound unnatural, given that the media are part of society? The contradiction here lies in the fact that media are hardly discrete entities inhabited by unique individuals. These people live among us. This is especially true when it comes to such a dominant media segment today as social media. And yet, attempts to shield the audience from the media seem quite common among a great number of media educators.

Here we deliberately avoid media educational trends that put special emphasis on the creative use of the media, i.e. co-creation. Instead, we focus on an approach that is called protectionist or defensive. Historically, this approach has dominated media education practices. Particularly telling in this sense is the title of David Buckingham's article *Media Education in the UK: Going Beyond Protectionism* (Buckingham, 1998). The very intention of «going beyond» testifies to the powerful gravitational field of the defensive approach. Incidentally, it originated long before the term «media education» emerged. The first attempts in this direction can be traced back to *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* – a book by Frank Leavis and Dennis Thompson published in Britain almost 90 years ago, 1933 (Leavis, 1948). The publication contained exercises based on extracts from media texts of the time, which later became an integral part of media education methods. The authors were very critical of the manipulative practices of commercial media, which, in their opinion, speculated on human emotions and appealed to cheap pleasures, undermining the foundations of high culture. The authors thus taught their audiences to be aware of such pernicious effects and resist such degrading influence. Citing this work, Halloran and Jones (1968) and Masterman (1980) adopt the metaphor of cultural inoculation, which they believe should foster immunity to the harmful effects of the media (Halloran, 1992).

However, the theory of inoculation in human communication itself was proposed by McGuire in 1961. It was about immunity from false persuasion or misinformation. The researcher was motivated, to some extent, by the events of the Korean War that was unfolding at the time. At some point during the war, a group of Americans who had long been held captive by the communist regime were given a choice, after a series of diplomatic negotiations, to either remain in communist Korea or return to the United States. Nine of them decided in favour of the former. This came as a surprise to the US public, which suspected that the captured Americans had been brainwashed. So McGuire, then still a young researcher, took it upon himself to try and answer the question of how to enhance people's mental resistance to propaganda (McGuire, 1961).

Later, media educators extrapolated the method of cultural vaccination to other phenomena, e.g. virtual aggression, eroticism, violence, etc. However, as in propaganda, the problem often lies in the difficulty of drawing the line between harmful and neutral, between art and its vulgar imitation. Take *Pulp Fiction*, a 1994 neo-noir comedy-crime movie by Quentin Tarantino, considered by many a masterpiece that is almost always in the top ten of the best 250 movies on IMDb. At the same time, the film is packed with brutal scenes and gruesome images and because of that, has often been criticised for «glamorising violence». Art – cinema, painting, comics, and even cartoons – is quite often contradictory in its impact. The same applies to erotic aspects of culture. The line between what is viewed as art and, on the other hand, forbidden by law or, indeed, morality, is often blurred.

If we consider this issue through the prism of individual human life stories, it is obvious that people sometimes become unwittingly involved in criminal activities as a result of various life

circumstances, including financial. And the projects that attract these people unfold at different levels: production, business, and ultimately purely human in the sense of community of actors, directors, cameramen, managers, designers, and more. From the outside, it seems that such projects are self-sufficient. People may replace one another, but the project goes on, picking up steam and expanding. This illustration shows that the media are, to some extent, autonomous.

Thus, can the destructive influence of the media always be considered a result of the deliberate and malicious actions of certain individuals? Of course, in the era of hybrid wars, when «troll farms» or «troll factories» are actively used by state actors, through which large-scale propaganda manipulations are carried out, such as informational anti-Ukrainian operations by the Russian Federation after 2014 or Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election, a network user inadvertently reposts unverified information and her followers and friends cause a viral spread of the false message. Moreover, an average individual, caught up in a certain flow of information, essentially becomes subordinate to it. And although this subordination is not always obvious, especially when it is accompanied by active interaction within the social «bubble», when the narratives shared by the participants of the bubble resonate in the mind, it creates the illusion of choice and intellectual freedom while in fact perpetuating a silo mentality.

One way or another, from the standpoint of media education, there is often a sense that there is society, on the one hand, and «malicious» media, on the other. This view contrasts sharply with the mood within journalistic circles, which for the most part, associate their activities with serving society or, at the very least, meeting its information needs. However, we must recognize that the media as a public institution with its written and unwritten editorial rules, algorithms of social networks, and many self-deploying projects, indeed have a certain self-sufficiency and autonomy, which we will try to explain through the prism of «*semiocentrism*» [1] and «*pathogenic text*» (PT). We will also compare it with a more common concept in the English-language academic mainstream, one of «harmful» content. The four points below outline our basic understanding of the pathogenic text.

1. The concept of «pathogenic» can have a neutral connotation, contrary to some readers' expectations.

2. Connection with the idea of *noocenosis*.

3. Latent text.

4. Consideration of the concept of pathogenic text and *noocenosis* as possible elements of the methodology of media research in general and the philosophical foundation of media education in particular.

The word «text» is used in two meanings: the first – metatext, which essentially defines human life, and the second – is the usual understanding of the text as a means of communication along with video, graphics, or audio. The first, i.e., philosophical meaning, will be capitalized, as 'Text'.

Dissemination of the Concept and its Critique

First of all, we would like to thank many researchers, primarily Ukrainian, who analyzed the problem of *pathogenic text* (PT) in their works or used this concept in their research, most notably *Kateryna Serazhym, Ihor Mykhailyn, Serhiy Kvit, Oleksandr Fedorov, Floriy Batsevych, Maryan Zhytaryuk, Tetyana Kuznetsova, Emilia Ogar, Yuriy Bidzilya, Natalia Gabor, Volodymyr Demchenko, Myroslava Chabanenko, Maria Butyrina, Natalia Voitovych, Svitlana Boyko, Natalia Lishchynska, Paraska Dvoryanyyn, Oksana Kosyuk, Pavlo Alexandrov, Iryna Kyryk, Liliya Shutyak, Yuriy Vaskivsky, Maryana Kitsa, Olga Rak, Svitlana Boyko, Maryna Kononenko, Maryna*

Osyukhina, Oleksandra Andreeva, Svitlana Melnyk, Anastasia Kovalevska, Maya Nagorniyak, Anna Sulim, and Lyudmyla Teodorska. We would also like to use this opportunity to thank other scholars who might have used the term and analyzed the issue of PT. References to some relevant publications by these authors are provided [2].

Some authors, such as Maya Nagorniyak, made the concept and classification of PT part of the methodological framework of their research (Nagorniyak, 2013). Others have sought to elaborate the concept of the PT itself by building on or, indeed, criticising our classification.

Larysa Massimova offers her own criteria, notably a textual strategy that wastes the reader's very real-time. The formal sign of such a strategy is the violation of the Spatio-temporal interaction (continuum) of the text, as a result of which the real image of the world is distorted" (Massimova, 2010).

Svitlana Boyko (The Institute of Psychology of the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine) summarises a discussion around this concept in her article *Functional Analysis of Pathogenic Texts: on the Problem of Psychological Aspects of Media Education*: «A further development of the topic has exposed all the complexity and depth of the problem. While Kateryna Serazhym («Journalistic Text of pathogenic nature») pursues her research in the traditional way, focusing on the manipulative nature of the PT, Floriy Batsevich believes that «the identification of the pathogenic text defies distinct criteria and is, therefore, largely subjective» («Fundamentals of Communicative Linguistics», p. 153). B. Potyatynyk himself, in his work «Media: Keys to Understanding», develops the idea that any text is ultimately pathogenic. In our opinion, the concept of pathogenic text has a non-linear nature and specific features of hypertext, i.e., it «contains a system of connections and transitions that can lead to unexpected conclusions» (Boyko, 2011).

We tend to agree with Svitlana Boyko about the nonlinear nature of the PT. Moreover, our considerations about the almost detective story of the identification of the PT and its elusiveness essentially point to its nonlinearity (we, however, approach it in a slightly different way and will return to it later on in the context of the *noocenosis*). Finally, in our update, we will revisit the said nonlinearity and somewhat expand on it conceptually.

(Non) Pathogenic Text

In scholarly discourse, the text has dozens of definitions and interpretations. Here we talk about a semiotic text. A text that resonates in the mind, as schematically described in the Frege triangle (sign-denotation-concept), i.e., a text that produces, perceives, comprehends, interprets, etc. human consciousness. Traditionally, in semiotics, in addition to alphabetic or hieroglyphic writing, pictures, notes, videos, music, rituals, digital messages, tables, and so on also constitute text, i.e., everything that is perceived by consciousness. By the same token, electronic, digital, or cybernetic forms of 'consciousness' also qualify as text today.

Current thinking in many areas of humanities leads us to understand the term «Text» as all the information we receive through the senses. Given that writing originated from icons, pictographs, conditional drawings, and the like, we have to acknowledge that a series of «moving» images offered by movies or television is also Text. This begs the question of what is the fundamental difference between virtual images of television and real pictures of surrounding reality? This is not an easy question to answer, especially when you consider the latest technological advances that create the illusion of reality. This is the reason why at one point, an idea emerged to view as Text any information that a person receives through any channels of perception. Indeed, internal information – memory and cognition – can also be subsumed here, information that is integrated

with what comes from the outside and ultimately winds up on the «screen» of our consciousness. The emergence of new technologies, which have made computer-human interfaces increasingly sophisticated through the use of brain chips, Neuralink being just one example, effectively eliminates the difference between internal and external information.

In this sense, a starlit sky is also a Text. However, to avoid the pitfalls of such a broad interpretation, we will draw a distinction based on the text's origin: an essential hallmark of the semiotic Text is its man-made nature. We are talking about semiotic systems produced by man or his electronic (cybernetic) tools. The latter (bots, artificial intelligence), as we know, can generate Text autonomously, «at their discretion», although man is capable of programming this «discretion». At least for now. So with AI, we are dealing with indirectly man-made content.

Now a few words about the concept of pathogenic Text. We do not find such a term in English-language literature. Instead, the concept of «harmful content» is used [3]. But in fact, it is a narrow interpretation. Pathogenic does not necessarily mean harmful, and we will try to show this, particularly in the context of *noocenosis*.

«Pathos», from which «pathogenic» derives, in translation from Greek, means suffering. From this (etymological) standpoint – which is obviously very arbitrary – the current semantics of «pathogenic» (such that it causes suffering) is quite close to its roots. This sense, however, cannot be automatically conflated with the meaning of «harmful». The pathogenic text does not necessarily presuppose «harmful content» in and of itself. There is no denying that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is widely interpreted as calling for a radical change of behaviour and a revolution of values, can cause suffering — like any major change or, indeed, revolution, for that matter. After all, as Siddhartha argued, «Life is suffering». The kind of intellectual dramaturgy these considerations are connected with the ambiguity or, more precisely, the elusiveness of the PT.

It seems evident that a Text, like a virus, can significantly change the program of human functioning, bringing, for example, not only the joy of creative inspiration but also causing suffering. To prove this, one does not need to resort to extreme examples, such as religious war or other ideological motivations. Note that such diverse phenomena as the evolution of civilisation, the search for meaning in life (as well as frustration along the way, even suicide) are closely related to the functioning of the Text. That is, the pathogenicity of the Text and its ability to cause suffering may be baked into the human condition. It is kind of a trade-off for a highly developed intellect, consciousness, and civilisation.

The first step is to determine what kind of deviations the Text can generate. Physical? Mental?

Changes in the way of life and, consequently, in people's physiology, which came with the emergence of, say, writing and subsequent development of the media, are obvious. They contributed to the fact that man was excluded from nature, as it were, at the same time being placed above it and opposed to it. And the tragedy of this truth is that man, fighting it out with nature, has nevertheless remained part of it, which essentially means he has been in competition with himself. One is tempted, therefore, to claim that any Text is pathogenic.

Against the background of the philosophy of existentialism, positing that the Text and the related intellect are a disease – a disease of nature and of a living being, will hardly sound like a revelation. In the Biblical sense, the Text and the intellect can be seen as a sin and, at the same time, as a punishment for the banishment from Paradise. As we know, the Lord forbade the first people to take fruit from the tree of «knowledge of good and evil» (Genesis, 2.17). The informational meaning of the forbidden fruit was also epitomised by the Tempting Serpent. Awareness of nudity from today's perspective may look, of course, dramatic as it marks a transition from an unconscious paradise of an animal to a conscious awareness – and therefore suffering – of a human. Consciousness is a way out of the animal «paradise». However, much more tragic was the

realisation of evil, sin, and, most importantly, death, the finiteness of existence («Dust you are and to dust you shall return», Genesis 3:19). The Text and the related intellect have, in a sense, disrupted human life. They have filled it with anxiety and suffering, and in this sense, we can talk about the text and the associated intelligence as an affliction. That said, we have hopes, dreams, and a romantic path to the unknown, and all this is also inextricably linked with the intellect. Given this duality, and if we agree that the Text is pathogenic and the intellect is the affliction it leads to, most people would say it is a beautiful incurable disease.

Harmful, as noted above, is not always pathogenic. If we interpret pathogenic as «harmful», the simplest way to identify pathogenic text is by looking at it through the prism of law and morality. From this perspective, the problem of PT can be solved if one abides by the laws and ethical norms adopted in any given country. From this viewpoint, the text that is prohibited by law or does not fit into the framework of the dominant public morality should be considered harmful. According to the formula «harmful is what is prohibited by law», the approach to the problem of pathogenicity is temptingly convenient and straightforward. But on closer inspection, it is easy to see that such an approach would be too one-sided. And it is easy to prove. Take, for example, the texts of totalitarian journalism in Nazi Germany, the USSR or in modern Russia. If you take a series of texts, their detrimental effect on the mental health of the nation and the rest of the world is undeniable. However, such texts did not contradict the legislation adopted in these countries. Works of Ukrainian dissidents of the 1960s were seen as anti-Soviet, which is to say harmful from the perspective of the Soviet state. At the same time, their writing – which reflects their fight – is rightly viewed now as heroic by most historians in independent Ukraine and beyond.

Thus, as we can see, the question of identifying any given text as either harmful or pathogenic is not entirely straightforward. Part of the reason is its isomorphism, fluidity, elusiveness, etc. This calls into question the appropriateness or efficacy of censorship, which is especially true if we consider that banning a particular text is probably its best endorsement. Everyone is well aware of how much publicity is generated when content is marked with labels like «Banned from television» or something similar.

A brief review of the history of censorship leaves no doubt that not all prohibitions were caused by the selfish motives of specific individuals who sought to retain their power and influence. Many of these prohibitions were born out of anxiety and concern about the pathogenicity of particular literature, which can push a person (recipient) to moral and spiritual degradation. Censorship understood as an attempt to control information flows, was often motivated by benign intentions. Prime examples of the pathogenicity of a text that did not initially seem to be considered harmful are the texts carrying utopian-communist ideas or revolutionary maximalism.

Noocenosis: Brief Notes on the Concept

The term «biocenosis» is generally attributed to Karl Mobius, a German biologist who first proposed it in 1877 to describe a set of plants, animals, and microorganisms that inhabit a specific area of land or water. All of these microorganisms are in contact with each other and the environment. Although direct analogies would be too simplistic, we can still talk about dynamic textual and informational structures that operate like a biocenosis.

Like biocenoses, any link in the *noocenosis* is necessary for the general information cycle. *Noocenoses* have their centres of attraction – the dominant cultural values, including the language of communication – and their ecotones, i.e., transitional zones. The development of global media, such as the Internet, can lead to the disintegration of traditional ethnic-territorial *noocenoses* and new ecosystems emerging, ones that are less associated with a particular area. At the turn of the

twentieth, but especially the twenty-first century, local information systems merged to form a single planetary dynamic system capable of sensitively responding to any information disturbances.

The complexity and ambiguity of the concept of pathogenic text reduce to almost zero the possibility of drawing analogies with natural ecology. Contaminating water with petroleum products or releasing life-threatening substances into the atmosphere is considered to be definitely harmful. The question of the harmfulness of the Text is not as simple as it may seem.

In the study of *noocenosis*, it is reasonable to expect that at the initial stages, researchers are going to borrow well-established terms that biologists commonly use to describe biocenosis: producer and consumers organisms, ecological niches, levels and tiers occupied by microorganisms, plants, and animals such as herbivores and predators, a saturation of the biocenosis. The latter characterizes the fullness or absence of certain vital links, which can be extrapolated into the information sphere. For example, in the *noocenosis* of Ukraine, compared to North American and Western European countries, the niche of analytical quality journalism is insufficient. At the same time, the segment of advertising or popular entertainment media is oversaturated.

The *noocenosis* can thus be analysed from different perspectives: quality and popular media, competition between various media (text, video, audio, television, radio, new media), themes that are addressed (economics, culture, politics, sports), etc.

It is difficult to deny that there is also a kind of eco-balance in the field of information. For example, the popular press is being criticised in intellectual circles. However, on the other hand, it has a significant impact on the quality of the media. We should not forget that the yellow press started such important media phenomena today as sports journalism or women's pages, i.e. it has contributed to a certain balance in the coexistence of different intellectual currents, genres, and views.

The concept of *noocenosis* can evoke associations with the media ecology, which, according to Neil Postman, «looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. An environment is, after all, a complex message system which imposes on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving» (Postman, 1970).

And yet, despite the different natures of biocenosis and *noocenosis*, it is still useful to resort to analogies.

Take, for example, the phenomenon of waterlogging. There were times when various countries, including the former Soviet Union, tried to drain wetlands and turn them into pastures or arable land. In other words, marshland was considered undesirable. This view has now changed drastically, with Germans looking to restore the lost marshlands in the Elbe area, as it is believed that they can, to a considerable degree, prevent catastrophic flash floods. Wetlands are able to trap rainwater by sopping up excess water and even filtering it through a layer of peat. In this way, the groundwater level is regulated. In addition, according to biologists, wetlands have an impact on the reduction of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, thus slowing down global warming.

The same attitude towards «undesirable» phenomena, in our view, can be extrapolated to the system of *noocenosis*, to the so-called «swamps» of the information sphere. What immediately comes to mind here is information phenomena that tend to cause irritation, distress and, indeed, outrage, in some segments of society: screen aggression and violence, erotica, advertising and the like. In our view, however, these should be treated as an integral part of the *noocenosis* that naturally develops in society. This is not to suggest that excessive proliferation of these areas cannot become threatening under certain conditions and upset the *noocenosis* balance. It certainly can, and if and when it does, the restrictive action of legislative, media-critical, or moral-ethical institutions is a natural response. But in any case, this reaction must consider statistical and sociological

research designed to answer whether the *balance* has been disturbed and to what extent. On the other hand, it is essential to point out that nothing in the information space should be seen as sacrosanct or a holy cow. *Competition* between different text streams and a reaction to the excessive expansion of one of them are also natural.

Let us take – for the sake of argument – erotically tinged themes, which have claimed more and more media space since TV emerged as the most influential medium. We can, of course, agree with David Herbert Lawrence, contrasting «good» erotica with «bad» pornography (Lawrence, 1948). Still, there is no getting away from the transgression with which Georges Bataille associates erotica, i.e. crossing boundaries, prohibitions, an almost mystical experience of immersion in an erotic experience (Bataille, 1986). Before us is a continuum that is not subject to a clear demarcation, a neat division into good and bad parts. Pathogenic text, therefore, as a philosophical concept *should not be equated* unequivocally with a harmful text in a legal sense.

Or another example. Promoting a healthy lifestyle or patriotic feelings, especially when a war is being fought, may be appropriate, as opposed to unrestrained propaganda, an exaggerated and blanket information campaign backed by tight control and repression, as was practiced in the former Soviet Union, and is the case in present-day China, North Korea, Russian Federation, etc.

Or yet another example: fakes that have always «lived» in the *noocenosis*. Over the past decade, their explosive and unbridled proliferation has raised alarm bells with media criticism and media literacy, which are tasked with verifying and restricting the flow of false information. But as such, fakes have always been there, in limited amounts. There have always been April Fools' hoaxes and strains of humour that got under the skin of many. When considering these and other similar topics, it is essential to examine the ecological picture within the *noocenosis*: What is the status of these topics? Is there anything that counterbalances them? And most importantly, is the dynamic within it on track to achieve or return to equilibrium?

When thinking about the *noocenosis*, it is difficult to avoid the notion of text replication. Almost half a century ago, Richard Dawkins published his «The Selfish Gene» (Dawkins, 2016). The author resorted to a somewhat risky analogy for a biologist: the famous 11th chapter introduced the concept of meme – a cultural replicator. According to the author, the meme – like the gene that inhabits and subordinates living organisms to replicate – also exploits the human psyche for the sole purpose of survival and reproduction. Dawkins' followers built a whole branch – memetics, which never gained a recognised scientific status.

Noocenosis requires conceptualisation. Different information levels and tiers, their saturation and occupancy can be «exported» from the biosphere to the noosphere. However, significant differences immediately catch the eye and we do not have to go far to see them. Let us take, for one, the concept of producers and consumers. In biology, these are reasonably well-defined and stable categories, whereas in the *noocenosis*, things are far more complicated. For example, in the age of social networks, viewers, listeners, and readers cease to be pure consumers contributing to text production. And what can we consider agents or components of the *noocenosis*? Video, audio, text? Thematic streams? Or symbiotic entities that are the result of the interaction of the human psyche and textual structures?

In short, we have a more fuzzy dynamic system with mutual transitions and intertwined information flows. What follows from this is that the concept of *noocenosis* will require appropriate terminology and rigorous research methods.

Is the *noocenosis* subject to regulation?

It seems that this question is somewhat irrelevant because we are part of the *noocenosis*. As the saying goes, «Do not ask fish about the properties of water», a quote attributed to Marshall McLuhan. On the other hand, the description and analysis of the *noocenosis* seem to put us above it

and prompt certain attempts at regulation. They are often misguided, especially in the case of unceremonious intrusiveness and imposition, such as those practiced in Nazi Germany or the USSR. They proceeded from the fact that the text is a human creation and that the creator is completely controlling his creation.

However, the idea that some people seem to be able to control text creation by other people is entirely illusory. Meanwhile, this illusion has played and continues to play a disastrous role in human history. For millennia, it has been thought that the text can be controlled in the most vulgar ways, for example, by withholding certain information or destroying massive amounts of «harmful» text (preferably together with its biological carriers). The criteria for «harmful» or, conversely, «beneficial» text have always been readily available. This somewhat erroneous view has been used to build a relationship between man and text over the five millennia of written history. For the most part, this view still holds.

Semiocentrism

In our view, the notion of *semiocentrism* and latent text will also be necessary if we are going to get to the bottom of what *noocenosis* is.

The impact of the Text on a person can be considered on two levels.

The first is the level of content, of what we perceive and what we are talking about. However, if we were to abstract from the specific meaning of words, we would discover a more profound, as it were, «physical» dimension of the Text as a specific matter, a certain essence, programmed to grow, to build «mass» at the expense of human energy.

If we view this issue from the perspective of Christianity, only a tiny part of the information, particularly the first words (or the Word, which, according to the Bible, was original), can be considered a pure act of expression. All the following words, by and large, are the product of two parents – Man and the previous information, the previous Text, which in some way adjusted the human consciousness, or in other words, «fertilized» it. It may be true that man has control over Text. So is the fact that the Text, understood as all information surrounding us, keeps a person under control, by programming his psyche and stimulating his thinking accordingly.

PT, in this sense, is a semiotic structure that has built-in mechanisms of reproduction and self-expansion. The mass of this Text has been growing throughout the history of humanity, and the more it captivates us, the more it stimulates the feverish, exponentially accelerating creation of new texts. In this sense, modern man will never get rid of the text virus in his life. I would go even further and speak about enslavement by the Text.

The history of human civilisation can be interpreted in terms of the self-development of specific sign-symbolic structures, including man. We consider *semiocentrism* as one of the perspectives when it comes to views on the text. Today, these views are unconditionally dominated by anthropocentrism: the text is a product and, at the same time, a tool of man in achieving his goals in the field of communication. In theological sciences, of course, the central place is occupied by *theocentrism*. It is worth noting that another perspective – *semiocentric* – without replacing or displacing the previous ones can be a good addition, lending media research multidimensionality and volume.

Moreover, it can offer a completely different look to the concept of noocenosis. After all, it is not just about heterogeneous «letters of happiness». While such a letter pushes only two of our buttons – the fear of negative consequences and the hope that sending it to new recipients will bring good luck – other texts make our mind play out all kinds of narratives, pushing the buttons of kindness, courage, optimism, desire for self-realisation, etc. These texts replicate, as was noted

before, by exploiting human psychological resources or cybernetic resources of electronic systems. Many projects in history have been, in fact, a kind of happiness letters playing out in the semiosphere, the World Wide Web is one of them.

The thesis that we are constantly in the grip of discourses that we do not seize the idea, but the idea seizes and drives us instead, is not new. After all, people often believe that they are guided by providence, that they are fulfilling some mission (creative, political) entrusted to them by a higher power. The idea that man is not an actual and full-fledged agent when it comes to text creation is very old. In the interpretation of French structuralists (R. Barth, K. Levi-Strauss, J. Lacan), such a subject is anonymous structures, a discourse that programs us. This question is directly addressed by Michel Foucault: «What is the author? (...) We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity» (Foucault, 1969). However, the key to the poststructuralist view of this issue was Roland Barthes's essay «The Death of the Author» (La mort de l'auteur, 1967). At the beginning of the essay, Bart analyses a quote from Balzac's short story, which expresses a romantic passion for women. The question of who owns this statement – Balzac, his character, or whether it naturally follows from the discourse of the era? – remains open. Like the ancient narrators of fairy tales, the writer, as Bart believed, is only a scribe, a mediator who transmits, composes, and recomposes the fragments that come to mind. Moreover, these fragments come from different spheres and cultures, entering into a relationship of cooperation or competition in the writer's imagination. In the essay, as mentioned earlier, Bart reinforces his reasoning with a reference to Mallarmé, who openly advocated the elimination of the author's cult of poetry, believing that the actual author is his language (Barthes, 1977).

The German sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann developed a vision of the media as an autonomous recursive and self-referential system («Media reproducing themselves as a system») that constructs social reality. Moreover, in his understanding, reality is not constructed by people, as thinking individuals, but by the media itself, as a self-reproducing system that uses human neural or cybernetic resources (Luhmann, 2000).

As we can see, the tradition of denying or belittling the agency of human consciousness has a long history.

From this point of view, the concept of *semiocentrism* is a generalisation of many theoretical conjectures about the illusory role of the author that – hopefully – provides logical reasoning about the subject-object relationship between Man and Text.

From such a *semiocentric* perspective, mediatisation can be regarded as an arbitrary proliferation of semiotic flows, which are, for the most part, independent of human will. In addition, we propose to consider semiosis at three hierarchical levels: physical, biological, and at the level of human consciousness.

However, a sizeable amount of this material compels us to put it in a separate publication tentatively entitled «*Semiocentrism* in the methodology of media research».

Latent Text

At the end, we will share some considerations about actual and potential semiotic systems, about «living» and «dead» text, and, first of all, about texts that we call latent.

One of the most prominent names in Assyriology, particularly in the history of deciphering the famous cuneiform texts – which at the end of the eighteenth century were collecting dust in the Louvre and the British Museum – was Georg Friedrich Grotend (1775–1853). Once, in his youthful zeal, he got into an argument with a friend, as a result of which he made a bet that he could decipher inscriptions that no one understood – Sumerian cuneiform. At the time, some even

suggested that those were not even letters but decorative ornament. Indeed, for George himself, copies of cuneiform were initially a set of dead characters. He had no idea how to approach and much less to read them: from left to right, from right to left, or from top to bottom. Less than six months on, however, the dead text spoke.

The ancient and completely forgotten Sumerian cuneiform, before its interpretation by Grotefend, was not in the semiotic space of human consciousness. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script was in a similar situation until, in 1799, the Napoleonic military found the Rosetta Stone, a stone tablet or stele on which the decrees of the Memphis priests were engraved in three languages, including ancient Egyptian and ancient Greek. It was an important clue that helped experts understand and learn about the whole world of ancient Egypt, whose writing for one and a half thousand years had remained undeciphered, incomprehensible, which is to say, latent.

Alternatively, let us now turn to relatively recent examples – the famous gold-anodised plaques with information about Earth and earthlings intended for aliens. The persistent efforts of Carl Sagan (an American astronomer and populariser of science whose parents emigrated to the United States from the town of Sasiv, near Lviv, before WWI) finally paid off when, in 1972–73, these plaques were sent into outer space aboard NASA unmanned spacecraft, Pioneer-10, and Pioneer-11. The former has now left the solar system and will pass relatively close to the star Aldebaran in about two million years. Of course, it is an open question whether there will be someone to read the epistles of the earthlings when they get there. But even if the answer is yes, there were discussions prior to the launch as to whether the aliens would understand, say, what the arrow means. The fact is that the spacecraft's route is marked on the plaque by an arrow in the direction of Jupiter and beyond – outside the solar system. Opponents have argued that the arrow, a purely human artefact derived from the ancient cultures of hunter-gatherers, may be utterly incomprehensible to hypothetical aliens. And what about more complex characters? Later, in 1977, an improved version of the message was launched into space – the Golden Disc of Voyager: a collection of 115 images and sounds of the planet, including musical selections from Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, words of the US President (Jimmy Carter), and UN Secretary-General (Kurt Waldheim) and greetings in different languages, including Ukrainian. Incidentally, long before that, in 1962 to be precise, words «Peace» and «Lenin» were sent into space by the USSR via a radar station using Morse code.

Today, even on Earth, not everyone is familiar with the names «the USSR» and «Lenin». For a segment of the world's population, these are latent texts. There is a strong probability that, in two million years, the text on the golden record from the Pioneer probe will seem similarly latent to whomever it finds its way to in the vicinity of Aldebaran if it ever gets there, to begin with. And incidentally, not only for hypothetical alien recipients but also for people here, on Earth, provided that humans survive until then.

All of this comes down to the idea that much of the text always remains outside the process of semiosis. Vast arrays of text remain latent, i.e. incomprehensible and unconscious, like a text that has been produced but not yet sunk into the collective psyche, i.e., does not yet resonate in the collective consciousness or, at best, resonates in a minimal part of the public. This issue – together with the question of texts transitioning from latent to active – should be primarily addressed and included in the descriptions of the structure of the *noocenosis*. To what extent is the text latent, and how do we go about measuring it? Do we take into account the number of views, and the number of purchased or borrowed books? Furthermore, what is a 100 percent latency? These issues are yet to be explored.

Philosophy of Media Education

Media education has a philosophical foundation of its own, which is yet to be developed.

In this context, the concept of PT, based on the ideas of *noocenosis*, may be relevant to the philosophy of media education. However, such an approach may cause some confusion among media educators. After all, our understanding of the PT has little to do with criticism and classification of discursive phenomena, which are considered harmful (for people's sensitivities). On the other hand, the concept of *noocenosis* does not exclude a critical perception of it and/or attempts to limit information flows that are expanding too rapidly, threatening to upset an overall balance. However, this limitation should be seen in the context of a self-regulating *noocenosis* and a natural competition between different text streams, trying to move away from a narrowly selfish anthropocentric approach and recognising that the text may be pathogenic – under certain circumstances – for only some subjects or categories of subjects, biological or electronic. For example, pornography is prohibited by law in Ukraine. On the other hand, it is believed that it can be used for therapeutic purposes to help people with disabilities or people who suffer from sexual problems. As for screen violence (movies, computer games), there is no definitive scientific proof that it causes an increase in aggression in real life [4]. At the same time, what we do consider unequivocally harmful is the very philosophy of prohibition and censorship.

Brief Conclusions

As we can see, the concept of pathogenic text has been incorporated in some media studies since its introduction in 1996. In our view, the attempt by various authors to separate a purely applied understanding of the *pathotext* (based, say, on legal restrictions and prohibitions) from its neutral philosophical interpretation no doubt deserves attention. Pathogenic text is not necessarily synonymous with malicious text. We tend to think that *noocenosis* has many niches for various text creations working on different levels, within different intellectual registers, and serving all kinds of purposes, which compete for the attention of potential audiences.

To understand the *noocenosis*, the idea of equilibrium in this competition is crucial, an equilibrium being a condition that is constantly upset and restored. At the same time, we should not forget that one of the drivers of this competitive media reality is the built-in ability of the Text to automatically – with the use of mental and cybernetic resources – replicate and expand. This is what Richard Dawkins meant when he wrote about the meme as a «selfish gene» in the field of culture, or Douglas Rushkoff in *Mediavirus* (Rushkoff, 1996).

We have sought to bring this and similar interpretations of the text under a single umbrella – *semiocentrism*. That is, *semiocentrism* and *noocenosis* are the fundamental concepts of our understanding of the *pathotext*. These observations, however, may reflect the author's subjective view. It may well be that fellow researchers that choose to take up the issue of *semiocentrism* will take the conceptualisation of the proposed methodology in another direction entirely.

Notes & References

1. The ideas of *semiocentrism* and *noocenosis* are described in more detail in our books *Media: Keys to Understanding* (Потятиник, Б. (2004). *Медіа: ключі до розуміння*. Львів: ПАІС, 312.) and Potyatynyk, Borys. 1997. *Ekologiya noosfery*. Lviv: Svit. Ukr: Потятиник Б.В. Екологія ноосфери. Львів: Світ. 1997). However, as it seemed to us at the time, this material did not fit the structure of the book very well, so it was decided to present it in the form of a digression, as a secondary theme. In this article we present our current thinking on this issue.

2. Here is a short list of publications whose authors use the concept of «pathogenic text», include it in their research methodology, criticize our initial interpretation of the term or develop their:

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Ethics

The material presented in this article meets all the points and requirements put forward by the Ethics Commission of the Editorial and Publishing Department of the public organization "Scientific and Educational Center "SUCCESSFUL".

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Патогенний текст: семіоцентричний підхід

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Анотація

Більш ніж чверть століття тому концепт «патогенний текст» було запроваджено до медіастудій в Україні. У цій статті зроблено огляд наукових публікацій із використанням згаданого концепту. Огляд засвідчує, що поняття «патогенний текст» із часу його запровадження увійшов у деякі медіадослідження. Здебільшого його застосовують під час аналізу медіанасильства (ідеться про період до великомасштабної агресії РФ в Україні) або

ж у рекламі. Вважаємо, що реалії війни радикально змінили статус новин із графічними чи відеоелементами насильства, проте це виходить за рамки нашої статті. Деякі автори кладуть концепт патогенного тексту в методологічну основу свого дослідження. Інші намагаються розвивати саму концепцію, піддаючи критиці нашу класифікацію. Варта підтримки, із нашого погляду, спроба різних авторів відділити суто прикладне розуміння патотексту (базоване, скажімо, на правових обмеженнях і заборонах) від його нейтрального філософського трактування. За нашими спостереженнями, у сфері інформації є своєрідний екобаланс. Наприклад, популярна преса зазнає відчутної критики в інтелектуальних колах, проте, з іншого боку, вона має відчутний вплив на пресу якісну. Не варто забувати й того, що такі феномени, як спортивна журналістика чи жіночі сторінки, започатковані саме «жовтою пресою». Шкідливою ми схильні вважати саму філософію заборон і цензури. Тому йдеться про збалансоване співіснування різних інтелектуальних течій, жанрів, поглядів. Збалансовування (а не чистка чи заборона) може бути ключовим методом інформаційної екології. Публікації різних авторів на цю тему спонукають дещо переосмислити первісне розуміння патогенного тексту в контексті семіоцентризму.

Ключові слова: патогенний текст, пропаганда, медіафілософія, нооценос, семіоцентризм.

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