Triggering turbulence: Thoughts on Creating chaos online
by Sandra Braman

Abstract
The analysis of Russian trolling in Asta Zelenskauskaité’s book Creating chaos online (University of Michigan Press, 2022) moves the rich literature on dis- and mis-information forward by making visible assumptions that underlie much of the rest of that literature — that those involved with this information believe it to be true, that it takes just one step to go from false information to social chaos, and that the goal of those producing and distributing that information are doing so in order to get “alternative” facts out there — and demonstrating that these assumptions do not necessarily hold. In this work, the author spawns a new research agenda regarding the multiple dimensions of masking and distinct steps in getting from here (social stability) to there (social chaos). The work treats what happens online as theater, and so also stimulates in this reader the critical question first raised in the 1990s — how should we understand what we see online if the screen is a window, not a stage?
Characteristics of the voluminous and growing literature on dis- and mis-information — the first with harms deliberately intended, the second not necessarily so — are familiar. It is assumed that readers, viewers, and listeners assume that what they are reading, seeing, and hearing is true. It is expected that the analysis will address the disruptiveness wrought by the production, distribution, consumption, and use of these types of information. Subjects of study — “fakes,” whether news, deep, or other — are typically framed as positive assertions of fact, albeit “alternative.”

Acknowledging these characteristics is not to discount the importance of this literature. Indeed, the systematic probing of how and why false information is being so massively and effectively produced, circulated, and used, and of the effects of these behaviors and communications has been, in my view, one of the great successes of government and private foundation social science research funding programs. These
Triggering turbulence: Thoughts on Creating chaos online

But Zelenskauskaitė starts on an altogether different foot. In *Creating chaos online* (2022) she shows us what can be learned, of value to us all, by a researcher who starts with other assumptions and expectations, and who understands the research subject to be a specific moment in dynamic social processes rather than any kind of assertion of fact. In the U.S. legal system and in many others, several factors are involved in any determination of whether or not a statement should be treated, for evidentiary purposes, as a “fact” — whether or not it was asserted as such, whether or not the statement is specific (*e.g.*, “John stole my wallet” rather than “John is a thief”), and whether or not the statement is verifiable. (And in the U.S., at least, simply saying that something said is an opinion does not prevent it from being determined to be a fact for legal purposes.) Those born, as Zelenskauskaitė was, in what had been a Soviet society, Lithuania, shortly after it became independent in the late twentieth century, grew up not only not assuming that what was said, even in school textbooks, was true, but actually being taught that much of what was said was false. The students’ jobs, then, were picking out the good bits for the particular purposes of a given class. Research on dis- and mis-information in that environment by definition must have different kinds of questions to ask from those that have to date been dominating in the scholarly literature, though it would share social concerns and policy issues.

This author does still arrive at, and indeed titles her work with, the achievement of chaos. But, from a systems theory perspective, rather than leaping from identification of false assertions of fact to chaos in one step, as is the case in so many discussions of research findings, she acknowledges that many steps are involved in processes of system change as it first becomes turbulent, then increasingly so, before turning utterly chaotic. Military theorists thus distinguish between “sensitivity,” perturbations to a system, and “vulnerability,” disruptions so profound that they change the nature of the system involved altogether. The goal of those who create and perpetrate false information may not be the replacement of facts that are true, but something else altogether, the creation of uncertainty that, as exacerbated, sustained, and spread across evermore domains of social life becomes cognitively, epistemologically, and ontologically disturbing.

The importance of the specific moment of the start of system transformation processes is recognized in systems theory, and now in popular culture, in the concept of the butterfly effect, but research collecting such butterflies and linking them to their effects has been rare. This is where Zelenskauskaitė begins, focusing on the means by which any confidence one has in information, one’s interlocutors, institutions, or processes, is first pried open. The word “cusp” comes to mind, repeatedly. She describes her research corpus, comments on news items, chosen because Russian troll use of the genre was so notable during the 2016 U.S. presidential election analysts, as “in the margins” (p. 8). There is the cusp between Soviet and post-Soviet reality, and that between youth and maturity. Cusps of such kinds can be observed; it was in 1990, in Budapest, that I was privy to an extended discussion, on the steps of a museum in front of an heroic statue that had been toppled, between a mother and daughter as they told each other the quite different stories each had heard about who the person depicted in that statue was, why the statue had been raised in the first place, and why it had been forcibly taken down by “the people.”

Rather than with false assertions of fact, Zelenskauskaitė literally begins her book with the word “denial.” The boomeranging back and forth between who is claiming what about whom quickly generates a hall of mirrors, as in a carnival fun house, in which a person first sees themselves extraordinarily thin and tall, then bizarrely short and wide, and then waving all about. This is a third context, distorted versions of oneself produced technologically by personal choice, to add to the other performative spaces that frame Zelenskauskaitė’s analysis of what it is that trolls are doing — the theater, and masquerades. Erving Goffman’s (1967, 1959) theory of facework and Brenda Danet’s (1998) on the networked screen as theater provide Zelenskauskaitė’s theoretical framework. She might also have drawn on the word of Brenda Laurel (1991), the person most associated with treatment of the networked computer screen as a theater.

Theater, masks, and masquerades can differ along significant dimensions. Are those masked performing
Triggering turbulence: Thoughts on Creating chaos online

according to fixed scripts, improvising, or acting in an utterly antinomian manner, having been given permission by the combination of masking and exceptional circumstances whether marked by place (a funny house, or a masquerade ball) or, in Dionysian cultures, by calendar? Are only a few people designated to be those who wear masks, can anyone who chooses wear a mask, or does everyone wear a mask? Are masks being applied to people, voluntarily or not, or do people mask themselves? Are those who wear masks aware that they are doing so? (Classical Marxists would have it that they are not.) Is the purpose of the mask to provide insight into empirical reality, or to obscure it? Addressing such questions will hopefully be central among those who take Zelenskauskaité’s work further.

Zelenskauskaité makes several conceptual moves of value in this book. The legal concept of conspiracy, defined in U.S. law as the agreement of two or more people to engage in prohibited conduct, takes on additional coloration with Zelenskauskaité’s notion of “coordinated inauthentic effort” (p. 2). The word “prohibited” as distinct from “illegal” is key here, for the news comments presented here as of concern for election-disruptive effects of the spread of the questioning of facts and of falsity — two different processes, as this author emphasizes — are often not illegal under the law although they may contravene contractually-based terms of service that provide the rules of the pertinent communicative road. We may have thought we were done with what architect Richard Moore once called “the 25 posties” (theories of postmodernism), but Zelenskauskaité reports on the experience of being post communication, unable to speak. And trolling comes in layers; here, the trolling of trolls is of particular importance.

There is a context. Each of the steps in Lockean fact production has been transformed as a result of the use of digital technologies, informational meta-technologies qualitatively different in kind from industrial technologies and pre-industrial tools in terms of the degrees of freedom of the affordances they provide for relationships with the material world, with the social world, and with ourselves (Braman, 2012). One way of mapping the social science literature on dis- and mis-information would be to map each item onto the steps of information creation, processing, flows, and use, as Geers, et al. (2023) do, yielding research-based analysis of the kinds of interventions most likely to be effective at each step of this process for which the research has been done, and calling out those for which it has not but is needed.

The focus in this book is on presentation of the facts as “sensed,” with a broad appreciation of the kinds of sensing that might be involved. Michael Schudson’s The good citizen (1998) upended our assumption that being “informed” as a citizen meant the particular kind of thing it meant during the 1960s and 1970s, when calls for more access to government information were rife, by demonstrating that that was period-specific, only one among the things that being an informed citizen has meant across the history of the United States. In the same way, this analysis of what is driving Russian trolls, whether automated or human, complicates our understanding of what is motivating, triggering, and inspiring the actions of Russian hackers, making visible variations, layering, and change.

Some questions remain unanswered. Because Zelenskauskaité consistently refers to “Russian trolls” as the source of the behaviors she is analyzing, it isn’t clear whether she believes that there are traits specific to trolls on behalf of Russia that differ from those of trolls serving other governments or other purposes. And in some places one might disagree. I do understand that the location of IP addresses is among the kinds of evidence forensic analysis of network communications will look for, but it is not evidence that can stand on its own. Everyone is advised to use VPNs to protect their privacy and security, and it is precisely the point of these services that they hide your IP address.

Theoretically, this work shows us both the sustained value of thinkers such as Goffman and Danet, and where their ideas now need further elaboration. George Dyson (2020) concludes his analysis of what it will be like to live as a human in an environment filled with generative and learning AI by suggesting that it could stimulate another spurt of human cognitive growth. Goffman’s theories of the face and facework remain valuable today, and always will, but needs further articulation to fully take into account the kinds of masking of masks we learn about here.

Of particular importance to those who think about the legal and policy implications of the phenomena and
the processes Zelenskauskaitė describes in the domain of dis- and mis-information, Danet (1980) is also known for her work on the uses of language in the law; Zelenskauskaitė may want to incorporate this into her theoretical frame going forward if she does further work on disinformation because of its emphasis on the distinction between presenting facts and various kinds of play. In the 1990s, both Danet and Laurel were also actively in conversation with thinkers such as Hafner and Markoff (1991) and the great Allucquére Rosanne Stone (1995), who understand the networked screen as a window, not a stage. Zelenskauskaitė concludes her book with thoughts about what it is that news organizations and their readers can do in the face of the kinds of Russian trolling her research reveals. If the screens she is talking about are windows, not theater, what would the implications of her research findings be? 

About the author

Sandra Braman is Professor of Communication and the John Paul Abbott Professor of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University. Her research on information policy has been supported by the NSF and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. Her book, Change of state: Information, policy, and power (MIT Press, 2006; doi: https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1783.001.0001), won the 2022 International Communication Association Fellows Book Award for a Book of Enduring Value.

E-mail: braman [at] tamu [dot] edu

References


---

**Editorial history**

Received 22 November 2023; revised 30 November 2023; accepted 1 December 2023.

---

This paper is licensed under a [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Triggering turbulence: Thoughts on *Creating chaos online* by Sandra Braman.

*First Monday*, volume 28, number 12 (December 2023). doi: [https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i12.13386](https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i12.13386)