Research Committee 51
on Sociocybernetics
ISA International Sociological Association

RC51 *Newsletter*

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Editors' Introduction

Dear RC51 members:

This issue is dedicated to this year's RC51 international conference held in Urbino. You will find an extended abstract of the Walter Buckley Memorial Award 2019 winner Isabel Kusche and an original essay by Norman M. Kearney, a participant of the Urbino conference. We also had an artistic performance by Martina Raponi during the conference. It was an experimental performance which reflects her sociocybernetic insight. This issue includes Martina's report on her performance. James Hay and Bernd R. Hornung sent us their follow-up notes for their presentations in Urbino. We are glad to share those contributions related to the Urbino conference!

Our sociocybernetic activities spread beyond the ISA events. The members of RC51 are working actively and interdisciplinarily with people in local societies and international researchers. We decided to include special reports on such sociocybernetic activities. We will welcome your reports on activities from all corners of the world. Feel free to contact us if you have an idea in mind.

Next year, ISA will hold its 4th Forum of Sociology in Porto Alegre, Brazil. RC51 will have a variety of sessions there. We are looking forward to seeing you in Porto Alegre!

Best regards,

Toru Takahashi and Andrew Mitchell
RC51 Newsletter Editor
rc51newsletter@sociocybernetics.org

Letter from the President

Dear RC51 Members,

During the second part of 2019, the RC51 has been very active.

In the first part of the year we worked very hard to launch a **Monograph in Current Sociology (Volume 67 Issue 4, July 2019).** This monograph consists of two parts (see page 19 of this issue). The first part introduces the main conceptual tools traditionally ascribed to sociocybernetics, with contributions from our members *Bernard Scott, Bernd R Hornung, Chaime Marcuello, Luciano Gallón, Fabio Giglietto* and *Patricia Almaguer-Kalixto*. The second part illustrates how these tools can be applied to understanding and addressing specific issues in contemporary society. These range from better understanding of the media system after its profound digital transformation, to the role of the media in a more inclusive society. The governance of collective recovery efforts after natural disasters, problems that arise in strongly polarized societies, and the closely related problem of the spread of misinformation are also addressed, as well as the implementation of action research with a sociocybernetics perspective. These key contributions came from *Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Laura Gemini, Jesper Tække, Toru Takahashi, Michael Paetau, Laura Iannelli, Augusto Valeriani, Luca Rossi, Margarita Maass* and *José A. Amozurrutia.*

You can check the table of contents at https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/csia/67/4, and on page 19 of this newsletter. Remember that as an ISA member, you can download the full articles free charge by logging on at the ISA website and entering by the "ISA SAGE Publications" link to Current Sociology. We look forward to you reading them and to your feedback, as well as their diffusion within your networks in order to enlarge our community of knowledge.

During the summer, we had our **15th International Conference of Sociocybernetics titled "Dark Ages 2.0, Social Media and Their Impact"** in Urbino, Italy. May I take this opportunity to thank the local organizing committee and the *Universitá Degli Studi di Urbino Carlos Bo* for their warm welcome and consideration. You can download the booklet of the conference here or on our website. A new issue of the Journal of Sociocybernetics is being prepared with selected papers presented there. You can read a review of the Conference by new member Norman M. Kearney in this newsletter.

After the conference we have been working to launch our new website www.sociocybernetics.org and we thank *Manuel Meza* for his efforts. If you have any comments or suggestions please contact him at secretariat@sociocybernetics.org. On the website you will find the RC51 sessions prepared for the **ISA2020 Forum at Porto Alegre** (see also page 20 of this issue). And further information about our activitites.

For those using social networks we have now *@rc51sociocybernetics* on Instagram and *@RC51sociocyber1* on Twitter to spread information about our activities. Thanks to Martina Raponi for her efforts on this front. We are just getting started with our engagement with social media so please add us and feel free to take part. If you are not an avid social media user there is no need worry as our traditional means of communication (RC51 newsletter, emails, etc), will remain as the main means for us to communicate with our members.

We hope you find the activities within ISA RC51 interesting. We invite you to share your own research projects and new publications where you are engaging the sociocybernetics perspective to address complex social problems.

Best regards,

Patricia Almaguer
RC51 President

Walter Buckley award winner's presentation summary:
Political self-observation and privacy: Dark ads and the dark social
Isabel Kusche

Privacy issues in relation to data-mining on the internet and big data analytics are usually framed as a matter of individual rights and their possible violation. Their academic assessment has so far mainly drawn on Foucault and focused on concepts like surveillance and algorithmic governance. This paper proposes an alternative perspective, which is anchored in the notion of functional differentiation. It places the problem of privacy in the context of safeguards against societal de-differentiation and identifies so-called dark ads (Revell 2017) and the dark social as phenomena that undermine the established mode of political self-observation. The paper draws on recent publicized examples of a potential negative impact of dark ads and the dark social on democratic political processes, e.g. in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the 2018 presidential campaign in Brazil. It uses Luhmann's theory of social systems, namely his reflection on the function of basic rights in general and ballot secrecy in particular, to identify circumstances in which the business model of internet and social media platforms is likely to undermine the autonomy of the political system.

Luhmann (1986) pointed out that basic rights are an essential institution of contemporary societal communication since they protect functional differentiation against a potential for de-differentiation. He identified the political system, more specifically the state, as the source of this potential, and until recently concerns about breaches of privacy and surveillance primarily revolved around the state. The question is whether concerns about privacy related to internet and social media platforms also indicate a new potential for de-differentiation.
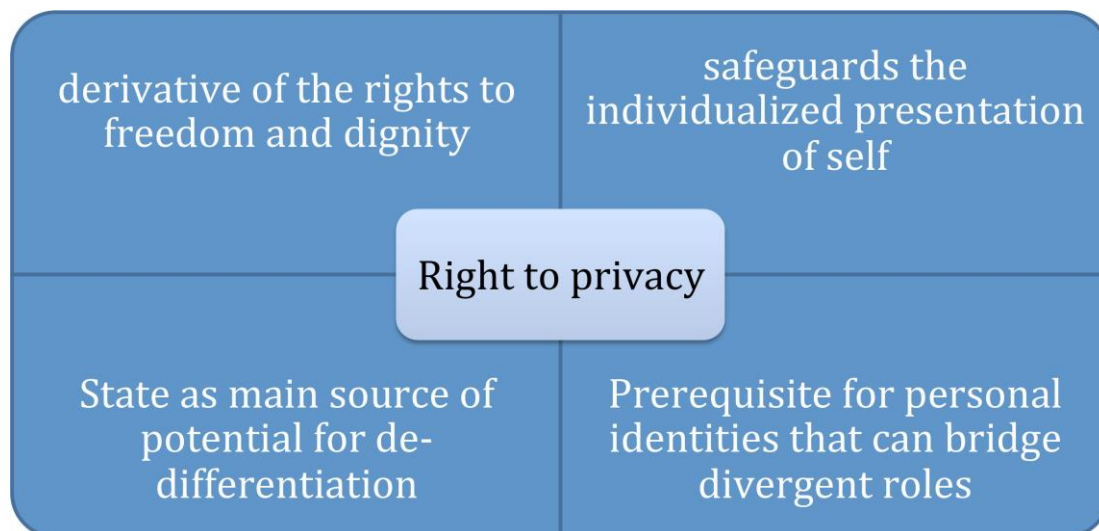

Figure 1: The right to privacy in the context of basic rights

Luhmann (1986) saw the differentiation of the political system protected by political basic rights, especially universal franchise. Internet and social media platforms obviously do not affect the right to vote as such; nevertheless they may diminish its significance for safeguarding the autonomy of the political system. This safeguarding effect has always depended on the secrecy of the ballot, which implied that politicians and political parties had no direct knowledge of who had voted for or against them (Luhmann 1969). Inferences were of course not only possible but part and parcel of political competition. They were however based on observations of public opinion, itself a communicative construction relying on mass media coverage of politics and published opinion surveys (Luhmann 2005). In other words, the eventual safeguard of political autonomy was the privacy of the act of voting, while its realization in political communication relied on the self-observation of politics in the medium of public opinion.
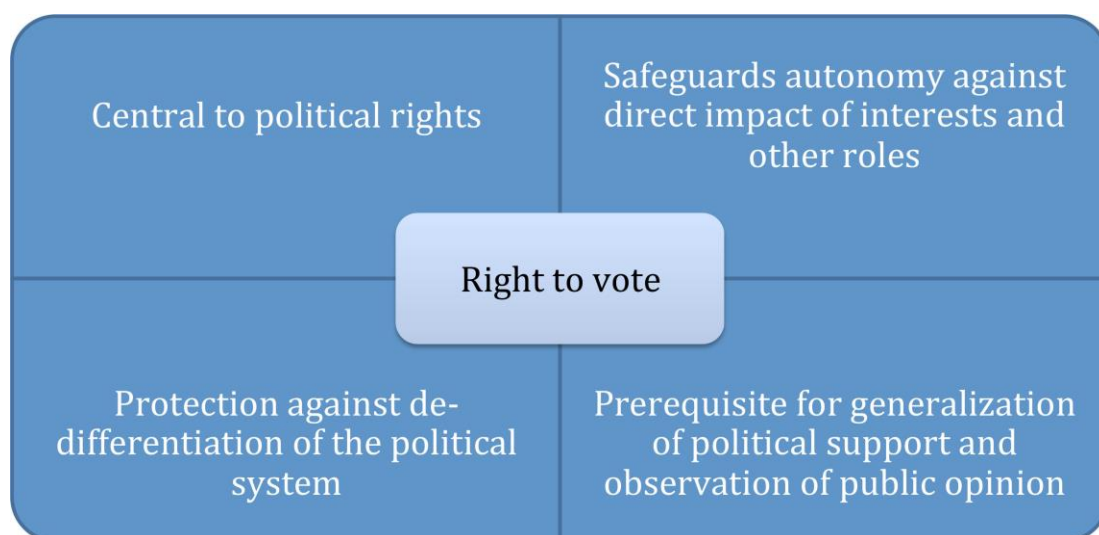

Central to political rights	Safeguards autonomy against direct impact of interests and other roles
Right to vote	
Protection against de-differentiation of the political system	Prerequisite for generalization of political support and observation of public opinion

Figure 2: The right to vote in the context of political basic rights

On the one hand, social media intensify the self-observation of the public aspects of politics. But on the other hand, they create opportunities for quasi-private communications to large audiences and thus undermine self-observation. The business model of the major platforms is built on such non-public communication in the form of targeted advertising (Zuboff 2019). When actors buy targeted political ads, the effect is a novel type of private influence on political outcomes.

A first approach to think about this influence is through an analogy with lobbying. Lobbying uses non-public communications to influence political decisions of professional political actors in parliament and government. Targeted political advertising online equals the expansion of addressees of lobbying to the laypersons of politics, the voters, who make a significant political decision at the ballot box.

The non-public character of lobbying communication has always been a concern, and in recent years many countries have introduced legislation to make at least some of its parameters accessible to the public (Holman & Luneburg 2012). Voluntary initiatives such as Facebook's Ad Library, have begun to implement a similar type of partial transparency for targeted advertising.

However, the impact of lobbying is also restricted by the fact that decision proposals and policy initiatives informed by lobbying are eventually exposed to public scrutiny when they are tabled in cabinet or parliament. They remain integrated in the routine processes of political self-observation and public scrutiny. Political competitors can use second-order observation (Luhmann 2005), identify the distinctions underlying a proposal and link them back to particular interests. This is not the case for targeted political advertising, which aims at influencing the private act of voting. Instruments like access to all ads that an organization has run and to an archive of political ads can doubtlessly re-introduce an element of self-observation as they render targeted ads accessible to journalists or other interested parties. Yet apart from the question whether the information provided in this way is sufficient, this potential for public scrutiny is not built into the democratic process in the same default way as in the case of political decisions that professional actors propose or take.

A second type of non-public communication, users' sharing of social media content with their friends on social media, adds to the impact of dark ads, but can also create problematic effects of its own. On the one hand, sharing transforms paid content into free content and increases the reach of non-public communication. On the other hand, putative news about political actors or events can spread under the radar of public scrutiny no matter what their origin is, especially in so-called dark social media, where sharing cannot be tracked by web analytics (Swart et al. 2018).

In sum, semi-transparent 'dark ads' and a fortiori the dark social complicate the role of the right to privacy in safeguarding the differentiation of the political system. On the one hand, Facebook has recently announced "a privacy-focused vision for social networking" (Facebook 2019), promising to extend end-to-end encryption from WhatsApp to private interactions on its other social networking platforms. This corresponds to Luhmann's (1986: 53-83) original concern about safeguarding the individualized presentation of self and maintaining a distinction between frontstage and backstage.

However, framing the problem of privacy as a matter of safe encryption of messages ignores the challenges that the business model of internet platforms actually poses for the differentiation of the political system. As long as it includes the possibility to use inferred data about users to target them with political ads, it renders second-order observation for both professional politicians and voters more difficult (although by no means impossible). As long as there is no limit on the influx of money into this type of political campaigning, it is an inroad for highly particularized but well-funded interests to try and influence the private voting decision in ways that are opaque precisely because voters are targeted as individuals.

More end-to-end encryption may even increase this problem by virtually offering more campaign messages the cover of the dark social. Finally, as long as the decisions about what to encrypt, what kind of advertising to permit and what kind of financial disclosure to require are completely in the hands of one or a few large private companies, these companies take on a function in safeguarding the differentiation of the political system. They are likely to be quite bad at it, compared to basic rights, not because of unwillingness or bad intentions, but merely due to the difference between organizations that constantly have to make decisions (Luhmann 2000) and constitutionally enshrined rights, removed from the continuous production of collectively binding decisions. Against this backdrop, the political regulation of internet platforms and their business model as well as political campaigning online are matters of the utmost urgency.

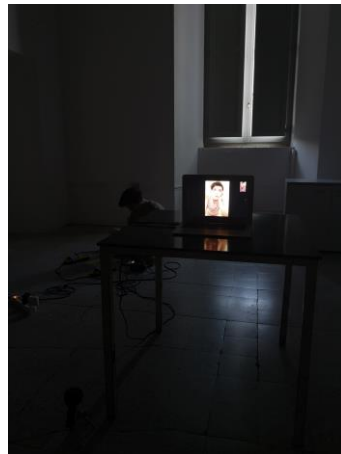# Report: FLATWIRED - YOUR DAUGHTER IS THE DEVIL
Martina Raponi

Performance and presentation by Martina Raponi at the RC51 Conference Dark Ages 2.0: Social Media and their Impact

RC51 offered the opportunity to member Martina Raponi to test the possibility of connecting artistic practice to the theoretical presentation of research and ideas.

In the framework of Dark Ages 2.0, conference held in Urbino in June 2019, the local organisational committee facilitated the set up for a performative intervention outside of the conference space, including it into the schedule in order to create a valuable connection to the theoretical presentation during the conference.

FLATWIRED by Martina Raponi has been an exercise in performing the outcomes of the artist's initial observations for the research underpinning her future art work Your Daughter is the Devil. This research - presented during Dark Ages 2.0 - is a reflection on the notion of the self in the age of algorithmic music streaming and identity building, especially in connection algorithmically crafted playlists which assume the historical memory of an individual and his/her music taste in the past - before the smartphone and before streaming apps.

The performance allowed entry points to the research to be opened up which wouldn't have been possible to explain only through a theoretical presentation. This is true especially for artistic research, which demands at times the taking of detours and side roads in order to reconnect to an artistic interpretation of the world - and of theory.

The theoretical presentation, which followed the performance - allowed me to explain most of the understatements of the performative intervention, reaching a level of complexity and layering which fits the RC51 framework.

RC51 sets an important landmark in supporting this kind of transversal interventions, pairing scientific experiences with artistic research which reflect on complexity, systems, and aim at feeding back into society and contributing to it.

At home in a faraway land: My encounter with Sociocybernetics
Norman M. Kearney

Earlier this year, I asked my supervisor a fateful question. "Vanessa, what am I?" I could not have known that her answer would lead me to spend a week in the picturesque medieval Italian city of Urbino for the 15th ISA RC51 Conference on Sociocybernetics. "I think you might be a sociocyberneticist," Vanessa replied. As you can see, my question was not an ontological one. With a BA in philosophy and political science, an MA in political economy, doing a PhD in social and ecological sustainability, and writing my doctoral thesis on computational models of societal evolution, I was having an academic identity crisis. I knew that Vanessa would be able to help me position myself in the academic world, given her highly interdisciplinary background, as well. I have to say, though, that her reply initially raised more questions than it answered (e.g., socio-wha?). These questions would soon be answered at the RC51 conference and upon reading this year's special issue in *Current Sociology Monograph*, which I highly recommend for newcomers.

RC-51 is a 'big tent' community that welcomes a wide variety of topics and at the same time has a clear sense of identity. Sociocyberneticists apply cybernetics, the study of steering, to sociology, the study of societies. As such, sociocybernetics is the science of steering societies. As systems theorists, sociocyberneticists make use of systems concepts such as network, pathway, and attractor. They also embrace computer modelling, as well as other theoretical and empirical approaches. Presenting at the RC51 conference, I felt at home in a community that valued transdisciplinarity and shared my concern for research impact. Already since my recent introduction to it I have begun applying sociocybernetics to my research. I find its perspective and toolset helpful in organizing my thinking, analysis, and writing, and I would encourage anyone applying systems theory to social or social-ecological issues to check it out.

In regard to the RC51 conference, its structure and organization were well above average, and our hosts at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo were outstanding. Each speaker was allotted 45 minutes to present and take questions. As everyone knows, so much time per presenter is a rare – and refreshing – thing! The pace of the conference ensured that everyone had time to teach and learn from one another – something that is often lost in the frenzy of busy academic meetings. Coffee breaks, lunches, a conference dinner, and social excursions fostered a friendly and collegial environment. I left the conference having met many inspiring people from all around the world, whom I look forward to seeing again.

I will fondly remember my week in Urbino. The old walled section of the city can be walked from one end to the other in thirty to forty minutes (depending on how well you do with steep hills and cobblestone roads!). At the end of each night I walked the old city, its quiet energy providing ample stimulation for reflecting on the day's events. Tucked away beneath the towering stone buildings is an abundance of culinary delights. It seemed to be impossible to find a bad meal in Urbino! My last experience in Urbino was a meal with fellow participants at La Trattoria Del Leone' Di Lucarini Mauro, where you simply must go if you are ever in the city. I can see myself returning to Urbino someday for a writing sabbatical or a romantic getaway with my husband. Forget Venice.

Norman M. Kearney is a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo, supervised by Dr. Vanessa J. Schweizer. His doctoral thesis models societal evolution and test strategies for steering societies towards inclusive and sustainable development. This past summer, he was a visiting researcher at ZIRIUS, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Risk and Innovation Studies at the University of Stuttgart.

A Report from Zaragoza: IV International Conference on Sociology of Public and Social Policies
Toru Takahashi

On 23-24th May 2019, an international conference of social science, IV International Conference on Sociology of Public and Social Policies: Ideology, Idolatry, or Propaganda? Social, Economical and Legal Globalization, was held in Zaragoza, Spain. In this conference, we had two sessions organized by members of the ISA RC51 on Sociocybernetics. The sessions were intended to discuss interdisciplinary perspectives in social policy analysis and implementation.

Prior to the conference, Sari Hanafi, the president of the ISA gave a lecture titled "Migración y Refugiados en el Mundo Global: El caso de los países del Mediterráneo"at the same venue, the University of Zaragoza. He also participated in the sociocybernetic sessions as a presenter and discussant. We intensively discussed diverse topics such as the status of knowledge production in the Global South, social services in Kazakhstan, international disaster management in Japan, the Sustainable Development Goals and policy implementation in Spain, policies against cyber terrorism in Russia and Europa, corporate social responsibility in Russia, and Syrian-European migration.

As participants have different social, cultural and institutional backgrounds, it was a challenge for all of us to traverse such a variety of issues together. But the issues we discussed are global challenges today. The diversity of topics taught us the importance of theoretical and conceptual frameworks which improve our capability to find out comparability between cases from different parts of the world. Heinz von Foerster once wrote, "believing is seeing." He meant that we only see what we believe. We need sociological wits for observation if we want to step from behind our perspectives and reflect on our blind spots. But one does not have to have a sociological homme d'esprit. International sociological conferences and sessions always offer us opportunities to see what we have not seen before. From the lively sessions we had in Zaragoza, we also learned that the sociocybernetic approaches which combines empirical studies and their theoretical insights can contribute to building an international forum for sociologists who face global challenges in their societies.

AOIR SYMPOSIUM 'BELOW THE RADAR: Private Groups, Locked Platforms and Ephemeral Content, Urbino
Fabio Giglietto

The 15th conference of Sociocybernetics was held in Urbino, Italy from 25 to 29 June 2019. You can read a report about the topics discussed and the main outcomes in this newsletter. The day before the conference, the University of Urbino Carlo Bo also hosted the inaugural edition of a new series of events supported by the International Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR): Below the Radar: Private Groups, Locked Platforms and Ephemeral Content. This article is a report about this event. Flashpoint Symposia, as these new series of events have been called, consist in annual one day one stream conference hosted by a continent different than the one hosting the main annual conference of the association. With #AoIR2019 being hosted in Brisbane, Australia, Urbino - a European venue - was chosen to host the annual and inaugural Flashpoint Symposium.

The conference addressed three emerging challenges for internet research: locked platforms, ephemeral content and private groups. Permanence, replicability, scalability and searchability: these four affordant properties of networked publics have become foundational to how scholars think about internet content (Boyd 2008). During the last decade, these affordances still apply to much of the content produced and circulated within social media. However, online spaces seem to be heading towards a more circumscribed and unsteady form of publicness, as materials are less permanent, less searchable, and, for researchers, more difficult to scale and replicate (e.g.: closed Facebook groups, Whatsapp group chats, Telegram channels, and the ephemeral contents of Snapchat and Instagram Stories). Along with recent platform "lockdowns" that have led some authors to talk about a "post API era", this trend toward reduced access to online materials points out the need to discuss the impacts of these transformations on the future of internet studies.

The first AoIR Flashpoint Symposium investigated these platform-driven changes and emergent practices of everyday-life content production occurring "below the radar", or outside of previous standards of visibility and accessibility, thus calling into question theoretical, methodological and ethical developments in internet studies.

Around 60 researchers from all over Europe (and some from other continents as well) attended the event. The program was structured around two keynote speeches and three panels each dedicated to one of the aforementioned challenges. The event opened with a keynote delivered by Crystal Abidin (Curtin University) titled *Public Shaming, Vigilante Trolling, And Genealogies Of Transgression On The Singaporean Internet*. The first keynote was then followed by the three panels where a total of 13 papers have been presented. The second keynote speaker, Rebekah Tromble (Leiden University) delivered a talk titled *We Don't Know What We Don't Know: Navigating Platforms' Proprietary Black Boxes In Internet Research*. Finally a poster presentation was held immediatly before the conference dinner.

The full program of the event is avaiable at https://sites.google.com/uniurb.it/dms-week/aoir-symposium/program. The entire event was broadcasted live and the recordings are available at youtube.com/watch?v=qsnGTl8d3qU.
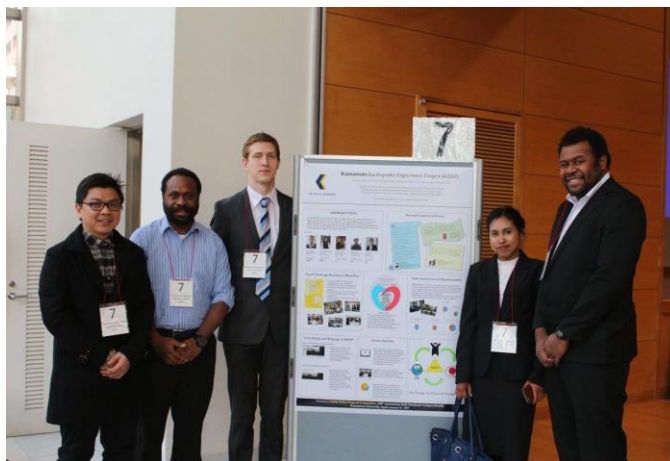
Kumamoto Earthquake Experience Project (KEEP)
Andrew Mitchell

In April 2016, two major earthquakes hit Kumamoto prefecture. Around 50 people were killed directly as a result of the earthquake, with hundreds more dying in the aftermath due to earthquake-related causes. Hundreds of thousands were forced, including myself, to seek refuge in evacuation shelters and await aid. The earthquakes are the third most expensive earthquake event in Japanese history were the most expensive natural disaster in 2016.

After life returned to normalcy and university started up again, I and a few other foreign students who took a class together on social capital spoke about what we'd been through. We decided from these conversations, and conversations with the class's professor, to start a project in order to record the experiences of the foreign residents in Kumamoto. Much was in the news about the earthquakes from the perspective of Japanese residents; the unique challenges that the foreign community faced was not being heard however. It was from this idea that the Kumamoto Earthquake Experience Project (KEEP) was formed.

Starting with a workshop in July 2016, we expanded our activities to include collecting essays, focus groups, questionnaires, and further events. This research culminated in the publishing of a booklet in March 2017, allowing anybody with an interest in the earthquakes to easily find out what some of our experiences were.

KEEP has garnered interest across Japan, especially from international centres or foreigner-focused NPOs who wish to hear first-hand what the experience of foreigners was during the earthquake and how measures to help foreigners can be improved. KEEP members still give presentations across Japan and regularly appear in media, keeping the problems foreigners face fresh in the minds of the Japanese nation.

This year I returned to KEEP's research activities as I wanted to know more about the Kumamoto Islamic centre's contribution to disaster recovery. I was surprised to find out that their relief efforts were hampered by evacuation shelter staff who refused their help. Some local residents even called the police in fear when they saw men in Muslim clothing in their neighbourhoods. This situation was eventually rectified by the efforts of the Kumamoto International Centre (KIF). I and my colleage are framing this through a general theory of trust, describing the problem as stemming from a lack of trust from the Japanese community to the Muslim one. This trust deficit was only overcome when a trusted Japanese organisation, the Kumamoto International Foundation, helped to bridge the gap.

So what does this have to do with sociocybernetics? Not much so far, though this is something I wish to change. Taking Toru's own recent effort on disaster recovery from a sociocybernetics angle as inspiration, I wish to explore the way in which KIF acted during the earthquake as a conduit for communication across organisations and individuals, and how it was able to use its own trust in order to facilitate connections between unknown parties (namely beween foreign and Japanese ones). KIF acted as a key organization in aiding foreigners in the immediate disaster recovery phase and is working hard to build resilience across communities whilst linking this with more centralised help. As such, I think this would be a perfect application of sociocybernetics principles. And, as a foreign resident of Kumamoto, I hope such a contribution can improve the resilience of the Kumamoto community at large.

If you wish to find out more about KEEP and our activities, please have a look at the following things

Facebook page: facebook.com/kumadaiquake/
KEEP Booklet: tinyurl.com/KEEPBo
KEEP TV interview: youtu.be/EPBCzJutw5c

Some literature suggestions from the Urbino conference
James Hay and Bernd R. Hornung

Sociocybernetics deals with social systems of human beings and "social" systems of phenomena which are only just coming into focus, including the "Internet of Things". The presentation of James Hay offers an excellent opportunity to explore this important topic. It theerfore seems useful and appropriate to share some of the literature he referred to in his presentation to the wider audience of RC51.

It also seems important to communicate a few key works proposed by Bernd Hornung in his conference presentation to reflect the future of human society, in particular the encompassing and ambitious book of our member John Raven about "The New Wealth of Nations", now available online.

SOME LITERATURE PROPOSED by **JAMES HAY**
Following his presentation
The Government of Things in the 21st-Century Technocene

For background information please consult:

The Cybernetics Thought Collective at the University of Illinois, A History of Science and Technology Portal Project, at: https://archives.library.illinois.edu/thought-collective/

FOUCAULT, Michel: Governmentality, in: SENELLART, Michel; FOUCAULT, Michel et al.: Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978, Picador - Macmillan, New York 2009 [1/1977].

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HUMPHREYS, Lee: The Qualified Self, Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., London UK 2018.

JOYCE, Patrick: The Rule of Freedom, Liberalism and the Modern City, Verso Books, London 2003.

LATOUR, Bruno; WEIBEL, Peter (eds.): Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., London UK 2005.
See Latour's Introduction "A Parliament of Things".

LEMKE, Thomas: "New Materialisms: Foucault and the 'Government of Things'," in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32: 4, 2015.

LUPTON, Deborah: The Quantified Self, Polity Press, Cambridge UK 2016.

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OTTER Chris: "Making Liberal Objects," in: *Cultural Studies*, 21: 4-5, 2007.

OTTER, Chris: The Victorian Eye, A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain 1800-1910, University of Chicago Press, Chicago Ill. 2008.

SCHRAMM, Wilbur L. (ed.): The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, revised edition, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill. 1971 [1/1954].

SIMINDON, Gilbert; MALASPINA, Cecile et al.: On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2017 [1/1958].
See also "Dephasing infrastructure", five week seminar centered on Gilbert Simondon's article "Sur la Techno-esthetique".

WIENER, Norbert: Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1954 [1/1948].

SOME LITERATURE PROPOSED by BERND R. HORNUNG
Following his presentation
A Sociocybernetic Utopia in Face of the `"Dark Ages 2.0"?

BREGMAN, Rutger: Utopia for Realists, And How We Can Get There, from Dutch by Elizabeth Manton, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York 2018 [1/2014 NL].
Available in more than 20 languages.

RAVEN, John: The New Wealth of Nations, Royal Fireworks Press, Edinburgh, Scotland 1995.
Available as PDF free of charge on:
http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/fulllist.html#new_wealth

RIEGLER, Alexander; MÜLLER, Karl H.; UMPLEBY, Stuart A. (eds.): New Horizons for Second-Order Cybernetics, World Scientific, New Jersey, London, Singapore 2018.
Unfortunately a bit expensive.

WIENER, Norbert: The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society, 2nd edition, Da Capo Press, Boston, New York 1988 [1/1950].
An old classic, pertinent to the contemporary world as in the fifties.

A Note on Heinz von Foerster and Ethics

An add-on to my presentation about "A Sociocybernetic Utopia", Urbino 2019

Bernd R. Hornung

I found an interesting statement of Heinz von Foerster about his research lab at the University of Illinois, which also might be true at least for the core part of RC51. I read the book "Part of the World, Fractals of Ethics" in German, so this is my own translation of the statement.

"These personal relations are what constituted the basis of the group at the Biological Computer Lab. All were friends; all were probably more or less naughty kids." (German edition p. 234)

When Heinz von Foerster says "naughty kids", he means unconventional creative scientists.

The book is only in part, and mostly indirectly, about ethics. It is basically the impressive and often amusing biography of Heinz von Foerster. It is his life told by himself in a dialogue with his co-author Monika Bröcker. "Ethics" and "morals" could be considered the same, "ethics" originating from the Greek language, "morals" from Latin. Heinz von Foerster, however, makes an interesting distinction. He conceives "morals" as rules imposed by somebody else, maybe human laws or maybe God, laws which are enforced by the threat of sanctions. "Ethics" is conceived as a behaviour of an individual which is not requested by some external source and which does not aim at an external reward (or at avoiding external punishment). In this sense ethics, to Heinz von Foerster, is something which is intrinsic, a behaviour resulting in a purely intrinsic reward and which, along with Wittgenstein, cannot be spoken about. This, in my view, is not enough, however, to define an act of ethical behaviour, as nothing is said about the substance, the contents of such a behaviour. The examples given are clearly "good" behaviours according to conventional standards, but nothing is said about criteria for what is this "good" or whether something could be ethical while not being "good" according to conventional standards.

Another key concept for ethical behaviour is the concept of undecidable questions. These are questions for which there are no rules, no logic, and no criteria telling how to decide. If such a question is decided, this happens in full freedom. A decision taken in full freedom, which could have been taken differently, implies full responsibility of the decider for his decision, but, according to Heinz von Foerster, not for all consequences which follow from it. The reason for this is, that it is in principle impossible to know all the consequences at the time of deciding. Responsibility is another key concept of Heinz von Foerster in his understanding of ethics.

Full responsibility, however, does not only following from deciding undecidable questions. It also follows from the constructivist view itself. Taking the constructivist position means that I am constructing the world and therefore I am responsible for this construction which is the world. Consequently I am also responsible for my fellow humans.

This, together with the basic concept of freedom to decide undecidable questions, leads to Heinz von Foerster´s ethical imperative: "Handle stets so, dass die Anzahl der Möglichkeiten größer wird!" (p. 349). In English this reads: "Act always so as to increase the number of choices." (p. 303 in Understanding Understanding) Being responsible for the world and fellow humans clearly implies to increase not only the number of my own choices and possibilities to act, but also those of my fellow humans – in other words, to increase the freedom of all of us.

These ideas about ethics, along with Immanuel Kant´s categorical imperative - "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law." (Kant p. 30) could well be used as a foundation for developing fully a cybernetic or sociocybernetic ethics.

Of course, many questions have to remain open in such a short note, but it may raise a discussion among the readers.

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