THROUGH THE LENS OF DREAD: EXPLORING THE MEANING-MAKING OF FEAR IN THE MEDIASPHERE

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Edited by Merit Maran, Mari-Liis Madisson
and Andreas Ventsel

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FEAR IN THE MEDIA AND THE MEDIA OF FEAR: A FEW INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Andreas Ventsel, Mari-Liis Madisson and Merit Maran

In the contemporary mediasphere, a semiotic and communicative environment shaped by media systems, cultural meanings are constantly produced, circulated, and contested. The term 'mediasphere', coined by John Hartley (1996) builds on Lotman's ([1984] 2005; 1990) concept of the 'semiosphere' – the total cultural environment comprising all forms of communication, from language to myth. It denotes the subset of this environment shaped by mass media, encompassing both factual and fictional content and contains the public sphere and its proliferating 'sphericules', emphasizing that public discourse is embedded within broader, mediated cultural meanings (Hartley 2002: 142). In the digital age, the term 'mediasphere' refers to the entire media environment – encompassing traditional media, social media, and online platforms – where people interact, create, and consume content, including news outlets, social networks, audiovisual platforms, blogs, podcasts, and more.

Within this space, terms like 'fear', 'panic', 'risk', and 'threat' have become ubiquitous, giving rise to extensive discourse across disciplines about what is now widely known as the 'culture of fear'. The culture of fear encompasses a range of experiences, from the unease and discomfort caused by unwelcome remarks and social tension to a heightened sense of vulnerability and powerlessness, such as the fear of crime or terrorism (Furedi 2019: 11). Communication scholar Manuel Castells (2009) posits that in a networked society, fear has evolved into a crucial component of communication. The mediatised spread of fear underscores the communicative nature of contemporary globalisation, where violence proliferates through communication networks, fostering a culture of fear (Castells 2009: 417). This

volume seeks to illuminate and critically examine this nebulous issue by analysing how various modes of perceiving and expressing fear, along with scenarios of threat and risk, have become integral to meaning-making and policy formation in our media-saturated society.

One fundamental mechanism underpinning fear is uncertainty and the ensuing sense of insecurity. At first glance, it may appear that as education levels rise, societal insecurity would diminish. However, upon closer examination, the situation proves more complex.

Sociologists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Gerard Delanty (2000: 159) have argued that the knowledge acquired through mass education, along with individually cultivated cultural resources, continually heightens the perception of risks. This, in turn, fosters a generation of confident actors who are prepared to engage in the societal processes of interpreting risks and dangers while simultaneously challenging traditional explanatory frameworks. Cultural anthropologists Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) emphasise that the perception of risk stems from conflicts between idealistic yet under-considered beliefs (such as faith in human goodness, equality, and the purity of heart and mind) and pragmatic, self-serving ambitions. Additionally, it has been noted that the risks characteristic of the late modern era have emerged from the very structures of contemporary society itself (Beck 1992). We might point here to the radically transformative future scenarios that have arisen explosively in the context of climate change and the development of artificial intelligence (AI). In the media landscape, one can encounter both discourses denying the anthropogenic nature of climate change and imminent apocalyptic visions of the Anthropocene, alongside utopian hopes related to AI and dystopian Orwellian nightmares.

In the context of understanding the emergence of such contrasting discourses, Estonian sociologists Maie Kiisel and Külliki Seppel have noted that various societal groups – including writers, lawyers, politicians, civic activists, and entrepreneurs – have begun to support the work of experts. However, the divergent risk assessments

produced by these groups may generate confusion rather than mitigate risks. As Kiisel and Seppel (2017: 197) observe: "This, in turn, undermines the autonomy of scientific authority, which was a fundamental pillar of the modern industrial society." It is important to recall that one of the hallmarks of post-truth rhetoric is a profound scepticism towards the expertise that was previously regarded as authoritative. In opposition to the mainstream, which includes recognised experts across various fields, a trend has emerged that American folklorist Robert Glenn Howard has termed the rise of vernacular authority. Unlike institutional authority, vernacular authority is primarily characterised by an individual's trust in a claim precisely because it has not been endorsed by an institutional authority – be it formal institutions like the church, journalistic corporations, or similar entities (Howard 2011). The belief that the mainstream and the elite are inherently deceitful and solely serve their narrow, factional interests imbues this opposition with a certain Robin Hood-like romanticism, functioning as a guarantee of truthfulness.

One key component of the culture of fear is the role of the media – not only in transmitting fears but in actively shaping them through practices like clickbait headlines, overemphasising conflict, and negatively framing stories. This media-driven amplification of fear has become especially evident in the wake of events like Donald Trump's 2016 election victory and the Brexit referendum, which heightened concerns about digital threats, particularly the risks associated with social media. These developments have fuelled discussions about the 'post-truth' era, alternative facts, and conspiracy theories, along with growing anxiety over their potential to distort public opinion and lead to dangerous consequences through misinformation. Additionally, fears related to cybersecurity and information technology have emerged, focusing on data security, hacking, the protection of digital infrastructure, and the pervasive influence of personal (smart) technology. These fears are often rooted in the perception that the digital realm operates as a lawless zone, undermining trust in civil order and eroding social solidarity.

These perceptions of threats are often reinforced by media campaigns that dramatise the moral chaos stemming from rapidly globalising economies (Sandywell 2006: 48). In public (media) communication, fear is frequently employed as a tactic to draw attention to issues and motivate action. Sociologist Frank Furedi argues that the media itself has become a target for the very fear narratives it is often accused of spreading. At times, the fear that the media generates seems greater than the actual content being disseminated. The wave of anxiety over biased news and cultural information warfare characteries the atmosphere of suspicion surrounding 21st-century journalism, where other news sources are particularly perceived as dangerous (Furedi 2019: 28). Given that the Internet, as a faceless system, lacks a clear centre or location, and that attributing intentionality in communication has become increasingly difficult in the context of social media, there is a tendency to resort to conspiracy theories. These theories often depict the dominance of dark forces over individuals and entire societies (Sandywell 2006: 49; Madisson, Ventsel 2021).

The aim and the structure of the volume

This collection, "**Through the Lens of Dread: Exploring the Meaning-Making of Fear in the Mediasphere**", uniquely emphasises a qualitative, meaning-oriented approach to the study of fear, offering a fresh perspective on how fear is constructed, communicated, and internalised within contemporary media landscapes. Through versatile theoretical approaches, diverse contexts, and multidisciplinary perspectives we seek to illuminate the complex nature of fear and explore the role that various forms of media play in fear-driven meaning-making processes on individual as well as societal levels. By focusing on the nuances of fear as a semiotic and discursive phenomenon, we provide an important complement to traditional sociological approaches that primarily focus on the macro-level of society and culture, offering a more nuanced understanding of how

fear shapes meanings both for individuals and broader interpretive communities. This contextual and dynamic approach is crucial for unpacking the complex interplay between media, society, and the affects that drive our engagement with the world. This collective work serves as a platform for continuing the discussions which were initiated at the 13th annual Lotman conference, "Fear in Culture and Culture of Fear", held at Tallinn University in June 2023.

In the following, we will briefly introduce what readers can expect to find in this collection. The collection is divided into three thematic sections, each of which explores different aspects of the culture of fear discussed earlier. These sections cover topics such as the threat scenarios associated with misinformation and conspiracy theories, the role of the media in spreading fear discourses, and the fear narratives related to artificial intelligence, among others.

The topics in this collection move from the general to the more specific. The first thematic section, "**Dread of Otherness**," explores the role of fear in identity formation, as fear often touches upon human insecurity and the perceived threats to one's identity. The collection opens with a chapter by Mihhail Lotman, "**Fear in the Perspective of Semiotics of Culture**", a visiting professor of semiotics at the University of Tartu and Professor Emeritus at Tallinn University. This chapter explores the theoretical foundations of the semiotics of fear, drawing from both the Peircean and Saussurean traditions. Human fear is inherently embedded in a specific cultural context, which can vary even within the same culture. Cultural integration means that fear becomes incorporated into the coordinate system of a given culture. From a semiotic perspective, several key questions arise: is fear a sign? If fear is not a sign but rather a meaning, what sign corresponds to this meaning, and does this meaning possess any specificity? If fear is neither a sign nor a meaning but instead the result of a semiotic process, what is the nature of this process, and how is fear related to it? Is fear a code or a message? In this chapter, the author provides a thorough analysis and introduces an innovative semiotic approach to examining and classifying fear from a semiotic perspective.

Laura Gherlone, a research scholar of the CONICET, Argentina, and an adjunct professor of Russian Literature a the Catholic University of Argentina, Buenos Aires, examines in her chapter, "**What About the Bogeyman? Collective Emotions, Everyday Life, and the Search for a Scapegoat: A Lotmanian Reading of the Digital Sphere**", how emotions, amplified by digital communication, influence public life and the creation of scapegoats. She argues that the digital sphere, with its interconnected and affective nature, acts as a space where collective emotions are reproduced and intensified, often leading to the "enemisation of the other" and the search for scapegoats. Gherlone uses the concept of the "bogeyman" to illustrate how fear is projected onto imaginary or real figures, creating a shared emotional response that can drive collective action. By revisiting Lotman's theories, she provides a framework for understanding how collective emotions, mediated through digital communication, shape contemporary social dynamics.

Continuing with the theme of migration and the fear of the unknown, Aizhamal Muratalieva, a lecturer of Media and Communications at McDaniel College Budapest and ESSCA Budapest and a PhD candidate in Communication Science at Corvinus University of Budapest, contributes a chapter titled "**Fear of Other: The Migration Coverage in Russian Media and The Construction of Xenophobic Discourse**." In her work, she examines how xenophobic discourse is constructed in the Russian media by identifying the discursive elements that depict migrants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a threat. Muratalieva explores the factors of 'otherization', such as ethnicity, religion, education level, and social and legal status that contribute to this portrayal.

The second part of the collection, titled "**Media Discourses of Fear and Safety**," centres on the media's role in constructing fear narratives. It opens with a chapter by Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel, researchers from the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu, titled "**Who's Afraid of Conspiracy Theories? Analysis of Fear Discourses in Estonian Media**". This chapter focuses on the Estonian media and examines the discourse of fear present in critical

narratives about conspiracy theories, comparing it to the discourse of fear found in 'Great Reset' conspiracy theories. Special attention is given to unveiling the semiotic principles that constitute these texts, demonstrating that seemingly opposing discourses are constructed using similar meaning-making mechanisms.

Conspiracy theories are often viewed as a primary form of disinformation, intricately connected to information influence operations. Communication scholar Sara Rebollo-Bueno, who is a lecturer at Loyola University Andalusia continues the exploration of information manipulation in her chapter titled "**Fear, Power, and Propaganda: The Culture of Fear on Trial in Propagandistic and Media Discourse**." This chapter analyses how fear functions within propagandistic discourses to create polarisation. It also delves into the ongoing debate surrounding the ethics of using such mechanisms in democratic states, with a particular focus on the current European context of increasing polarisation. The discourse of the Spanish far-right party Vox is used as a case study.

Mark Mets, a junior research fellow at Tallinn University and Tartu Literary Museum, examines in his chapter "**Mapping the Other in Estonian Radical-Right News onto Safe–Threatening and Weak–Strong Semantic Axes**" how Estonian right-wing media, particularly *Uued Uudised*, constructs the 'Other' as a threat. Using large language models, the study analyses articles from 2015 onward to track shifting targets of Othering – from migrants during the 2015 crisis to political groups, race, and nationality-based divisions. The analysis captures key events like the 2018 migration pact and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, revealing how right-wing media weaponises Othering over time. This research highlights the power of computational methods in understanding ideological narratives in politicised media.

The final article in the media and fear discourses section is authored by two Swedish scholars, Jens Alvén Sjöberg (a doctoral student in media and communication science at Jönköping University) and Martina Gnewski (a doctoral student in the Department of

Communication at Lund University). In their chapter titled "**Social Media Communication to Create Public Safety and Oppose Public Fear: Insights into How Swedish Public Sector Organisations Convey a Sense of Public Safety via Instagram**", they explore how Public Sector Organisations (PSOs) navigate the challenges of a decreased sense of safety and heightened public fear. These issues are often linked to complex and interconnected problems in both our digital and non-digital environments. The authors investigate how PSOs should communicate within the mediated sphere to address public safety and fear, particularly focusing on strategies for maintaining or enhancing public safety and mitigating crises. Through the cases of the Swedish Police and Malmö City, they illustrate how PSOs approach public safety and fear, both directly and indirectly.

The final section of the collection, titled "**Infectious Fear in Times of Uncertainty**," focuses on how fear and anxiety are mediated and infect societies in times of crisis or periods of significant social change. One of the main causes of widespread societal fear is uncertainty. This can stem from specific crises or disasters that catch society off guard, as well as from revolutionary socio-technological changes that create insecurity about possible future scenarios. One such crisis was the global COVID-19 pandemic that struck in 2019. The section opens with a chapter by German anthropologist Katharina Eisch-Angus, a full professor at the University of Graz, titled "**In a Blur of Fear – From Dreams to Permanent Explosion: Towards an Ethno-Psychoanalytic Semiotics of Everyday Crisis Experience**." In her chapter, Eisch-Angus not only delves into the fear experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic but also adopts a broader perspective on the pervasive spread of fear in the context of various crises. Her work integrates ethnographic methods with Juri Lotman's semiotic theory, Foucault's diagnosis of a late-capitalist society of security, and Freud's insights into blurred inner and outer anxieties. Through conversations with neighbours and students, she highlights how personal anxieties intertwine with media narratives, creating a shared sense of uncertainty. Eisch-Angus illustrates how

crisis experiences increasingly establish a permanent liminal state of existence, and how circulating narratives of insecurity and uncertainty lead to explosive fusions of virtuality and reality.

The chapter by Hongjin Song, a junior research fellow in semiotics at the University of Tartu, titled "**Rumour Infection and Resonating Fear: Rumour Communication in a Thickened Reality**," addresses the anxiety and fear associated with the pandemic through the concept of rumour. During social media communication, rumours can spread either quietly or explosively, underscoring their infectious nature. The collective search for truth amid fear and conflicting authoritative narratives reveals the fragility of truth in the mediasphere. Song examines the interplay between fear and rumours to better understand collective reactions and the pursuit of truth, contributing to the broader scholarship on fear as a cultural phenomenon.

This volume ends with a chapter by Auli Viidalepp, a research fellow in semiotics at the University of Tartu and a visiting researcher at the University of Turin. Her chapter, "**Apotheosis, Apocalypse, and the Epistemic Collapse: Technology and Fear of the Future**," explores the fear discourses related to AI. Various narratives suggest that AI could bring about the end of the world, usher in digital transhumanism, or cause an 'epistemic collapse' due to the proliferation of fake content. Viidalepp analyses these fears through the lenses of technological determinism, Apocalyptic AI, and the semiotics of fear.

We acknowledge that the thematic divisions in this collection are inevitably provisional, and readers will likely find overlaps among the articles categorised under different themes. However, we hope that readers will understand the challenges faced by the editors, as such overlaps are natural given the central focus of the collection – fear. Fear and danger are perceptible yet not easily visible or empirically confined within clear boundaries. Often, these concepts serve as labels for uncertainty and the unknown, particularly regarding threats and the measures taken to counter them (Garland 2008; Furedi 2019). Consequently, the explanations of the phenomenon of

fear presented in this collection draw from multiple disciplines. We hope that through the diverse scholarly perspectives offered by the authors, this volume will contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of fear in the mediasphere and its various roles in the processes of cultural meaning-making.

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