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**INFORMATION MANUPULATION UNDER THE
CONDITIONS OF OVERLOAD IN PATRICK NESS'
CHAOS WALKING
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis focuses on the *Chaos Walking* trilogy by Patrick Ness and the theme of information overload explored in it through the elements of science fiction and the characters who engage with those. Information overload is important to the contemporary world because of how prominent the flow of information has become in the digital age. Although the plot of *Chaos Walking* also revolves around this issue, there are barely any sources discussing its depiction in this particular work of fiction, which is what motivates the following paper. This thesis argues that Ness uses the antagonist of the novel to demonstrate the negative effects that information manipulation may have under the conditions of overload.

The introduction of the thesis gives a brief background of the trilogy discussed and its author, after which the contents of the paper are separated into two chapters. The first chapter is a literature review used to give the reader an overview of information overload and other concepts discussed, while the second chapter is a literary analysis, which uses the three books in the *Chaos Walking* series as primary sources to develop a line of argumentation. Secondary sources consist of books and scholarly articles written on the topics of information overload, social media, and information manipulation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CW	Chaos Walking
TKoNLG	The Knife of Never Letting Go
TAaTA	The Ask and The Answer
MoM	Monsters of Men

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on *Chaos Walking* (CW), a young adult science fiction series written by an American-British author Patrick Ness and published in the years 2008-2010. According to Booker and Thomas (2009: 3), it is quite hard to give a proper definition to science fiction – also referred to as sci-fi, – which would effectively separate it from other similar genres, such as fantasy or horror. Gunn (2004: 5), for example, defines it as the works of fiction that challenge their readers to ask certain ‘hard questions’ about the functions of the real world by being set in worlds that are different from it in some ways. Fiction such as this is also referred to as a literature of ‘cognitive estrangement’, which in itself is defined as “a literature that places readers in a world different from our own in ways that stimulate thought about the nature of those differences”. While Gunn’s definition might appear too broad, since all fiction is set in an imaginary world or under imaginary circumstances, what sets science fiction apart is that it uses cognitive estrangement as the main objective of its text. (Booker & Thomas, 2009: 4) The Oxford English Dictionary defines science fiction simply as a genre of fiction “in which the setting and story feature hypothetical scientific or technological advances, the existence of alien life, space or time travel, etc., esp. such fiction set in the future, or an imagined alternative universe” (OED, 2023).

Science fiction contains within itself a variety of subgenres that may or may not overlap with each other in a single literary work (Booker & Thomas, 2009: 12). CW qualifies as a dystopian series, which, according to Booker and Thomas (2009: 65) refers to a world in which society’s attempt to resolve all its political and economic problems ends in a nightmare rather than a dream life. As such, dystopian fiction discusses political and social problems of the real world by extending or exaggerating them in extreme fictional settings.

In a less prominent way, CW is also a ‘space opera’: a subgenre of science fiction that revolves around adventures in outer space (Booker & Thomas, 2009: 40). The events of the series take place in an uncertain future on a planet referred to as New World, where people settled around twenty years before the start of the first novel, after having left Earth, referred to as Old World. Despite some clear differences from the real world, such as the existence of the native intelligent species, the story starts off in an Earth-like setting of a farm and carries on without too much focus on the humanity’s technical advances and the history of space travel. The author himself confesses that he enjoys the fact that some readers get quite far into the first book before realising that they are reading about a different planet (Levy, 2009).

The *Chaos Walking* series consists of three books: *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (TKoNLG) (2008), *The Ask and the Answer* (TAaTA) (2009), and *Monsters of Men* (MoM) (2010). They follow the story of Todd Hewitt, a teenage boy from Prentisstown: an isolated settlement on New World where all women died soon after he had been born, leaving only a few hundred men, the number of whom is gradually falling. A distinguishing characteristic of New World, which is prominent throughout the entire series, is that men can hear each other’s thoughts in a never-ending Noise. The so-called Noise consists of both words and pictures, thoughts and memories, and although one can try to mask his own, nobody can escape being exposed to the Noise of others. A quote from the first book gives the trilogy its name: “The Noise is a man unfiltered, and without a filter a man is just chaos walking” (Ness 2008: 42). Throughout the series, the characters also repeatedly refer to the state of the world as a twirl of continuous, overwhelming information. In an interview with Michael Levy in 2009, after the publication of TAaTA, Ness admits that he started writing with information overload in mind:

“With the Internet, with texting, with networking sites, there’s already information everywhere. The next logical step is, what if you couldn’t get away? How difficult would it be if you could hear what everyone was thinking all of the time? And how much more difficult if you were a teenager, when your thoughts are

tumultuous, when privacy is important? I thought this would be pretty awful. So that's where it started, with the idea of information overload.”

Information overload is one of the many key themes in *Chaos Walking*, and it is the one that this paper will focus on. This thesis will argue that Ness uses the main antagonist of the trilogy, David Prentiss, to depict the harmful effects that information overload has on people's mental health, particularly in a situation where one disregards their own limits in favour of acquiring control over other people. Prentiss is the mayor of the town that Todd grows up in, and, although he later goes on to conquer all the other settlements on New World, thus taking on the status of the President, the narrative keeps referring to him solely as the Mayor. In TKoNLG, although his character is already perceived as a threat by Todd and the second protagonist, a young girl named Viola, the Mayor himself barely makes an appearance, and he does not directly interact with the main characters until the very last scene. Throughout the second and the third books of the trilogy, he is a dictator who is shown to have remarkable skills in psychological manipulation. Moreover, he is able to manipulate Noise as well: silencing his own so that nobody can read his thoughts, sending ideas into other people's heads to make them follow his orders, even using it as a powerful weapon by physically overwhelming his opponents with Noise. His power seems to be achieved through various thought exercises that consist of “counting things and imagining perfect shapes and saying orderly chants”, as Todd describes it in TKoNLG (Ness 2008: 27).

Despite the great power and abilities, however, the Mayor meets a grim fate at the end of the trilogy, soon after his goal gradually changes from controlling the entire world to destroying it along with himself. This paper will analyse the course of actions that the character of Mayor Prentiss takes throughout the novel, as well as his attitude towards information, to argue that Patrick Ness uses him to demonstrate the negative effects that information manipulation may have under the conditions of overload. The theme of

information overload is very important in the contemporary world, as, as was quoted earlier from the author of the books himself, the world of the 21st century is one filled with information every step of the way, and it is getting harder to avoid that flow with each passing year.

This paper consists of two major parts: literature review, and literary analysis. The first chapter, literature review, will define the concept of information overload, as well as break down the ways in which it can affect a person's mental health and the ways that can be used to prevent that. It will also define the concept of information manipulation and tie the two terms together to explain why information overload is particularly bad in the age of social media. Then, the second chapter, literary analysis, will use the gained knowledge to break down the actions that the character Mayor Prentiss undertakes in Patrick Ness' *Chaos Walking*, in order to answer the question of why his utilisation of information overload fails, leading to his own demise.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter of the thesis will focus on the previously researched theory and delve into the concept of information overload, its origins, and implications. After defining information overload itself, this chapter will also define such terms as information manipulation and later privacy, and link them to the main concept discussed, particularly in the context of digital age and social media. The sources chosen for this literature review can be divided into three groups accordingly to one of the three above-mentioned terms that they define, but all of them focus on the importance of information in the digital age. The aim of this literature review is to get the readers familiar with the causes of and the severity of information overload in the contemporary world.

1.1. Information overload

First of all, it is important to give a definition to the phenomenon that is information overload. Overload in its more general meaning refers to a level of information, people, or objects that is so numerically high that it cannot be properly processed (Fu et al 2020: 3). In case of specifically information overload, Bawden and Robinson (2020: 3) define it as “that situation which arises when there is so much relevant and potentially useful information available that it becomes a hindrance rather than a help”. Fu et al (2020: 4) concur with that, as they define information overload as a conflict between the amount of information that an individual can process and the amount that is waiting to be processed. Information overload is also known by other names, such as information pollution, information anxiety, information overabundance, and many others. In more specific cases the phenomenon can also be referred to as social media fatigue, communication overload etc. (Bawden & Robinson 2020: 5). As is evident by it being a hypernym to social media fatigue, information overload is a pressing issue in the era of the

Internet. Most of all, Bawden and Robinson (2015: 4) explain that by referring to the current era of civilization as ‘hyper-history’, in which society can no longer function without communicative devices and the amounts of information that are stored on them.

The concept of information overload, however, is not new. According to Bawden and Robinson (2020: 4), it has been talked about since the end of the 19th century, originating from the works of a German sociologist and philosopher George Simmel. For over half a century from that point it existed solely as a concept that would be acknowledged without being referred to by name. For example, at the Royal Society’s Scientific Information Conference in 1948, a fear of information overload and the lack of control over it was widely expressed. (2020: 8) Only in 1964 did an American social scientist Bertram Gross use the now-established term for the first time, in the context of technological information-processing systems and the limits of their capabilities (2020: 6). That aside, there are claims that information overload itself has been something that people had dealt with even before it became a topic of open conversation in the 20th century. For example, Groes (2016: 1484) in his work mentions the words of Alex Wright, who argued that the age of information began with the first signs of complex, intelligent life. While Bawden and Robinson do not go that far back, they do claim that information overload has continuously been an issue in the circle of scholars throughout the entirety of recorded history, due to the never-ending additions to the already existent data.

Bawden and Robinson (2020: 14) distinguish between four causes of information overload. One of them is of course the amount of information, another one has to do with the diversity and complexity of said information. Pervasive or pushed information can also cause the overload, and finally there are individual factors that vary from person to person. The first two factors become a problem when the volume and extent of information available prevents people from being able to easily find and choose the information they

need, as well as distinguish between reliable and unreliable, accurate and inaccurate sources (2020: 16). The worry about the ability to find necessary information among many more useless units can often cause stress, leading to a situation where having too much freedom of choice appears to be worse than having little to no choice at all. Groes (2016: 1481) stresses the fact that regardless of how open access to information seems to be, it is all the harder to make sense of and interpret that information correctly under the conditions of overload. In saying that, he differentiates between the concept of information and the concept of knowledge, noting that the former has to go through complex thought processes before turning into the latter.

While the volume of information has historically been the cause most associated with overload, just the amount does not always cause stress on its own, since people first need to be exposed to it. According to Bawden and Robinson (2020: 17), a problem occurs when information is being pushed, often continuously, to the people who were not actively seeking it themselves, which leads to overload and stress which could have been easily avoided otherwise. With that in mind, it is important to realize that, whether the intention has anything to do with information overload or not, the pushed aspect of the information flow is often a purposeful strategy of a third party.

1.2. Information Manipulation

Due to some of the techniques that it uses, media manipulation often goes hand-in-hand with unwanted, pervasive information. Levitskaya and Fedorov (2020: 74) define manipulation as illegal dominance and control over another person's consciousness, which involves influence over their ideology, knowledge, understanding of said knowledge, and formation of new ideas. Fitzpatrick (2018: 48) adds to that definition by explaining media manipulation in particular as the type of manipulation that is achieved through spread of

propaganda and suppression of opposing information from the public. Media manipulation is also often achieved through the spread of misinformation and disinformation. While disinformation is created to deliberately spread harmful false information, misinformation is only the further spread of those or other fabrications without the underlying intention of deceit. Levitskaya and Fedorov (2020: 73) also specify that, in case of the latter, information does not always have to be entirely false; rather, it is the generalization of a fact and its use in a wrong context that makes certain information harmful instead of helpful. In that case, what makes the matters worse is that such misleading information tends to stay in someone's memory for a long time. Bawden and Robinson (2020: 27) also note that it is overload which often leads people to not double check their sources and therefore spread information without reading it carefully.

The same as information overload, the problem of media manipulation did not start with the digital age. Kenzhekanova et al (2015: 325) claim that the concept of manipulation has existed since the beginning of the human language, and that words have always been used as a tool to influence others. Fitzpatrick (2018: 50) writes that European Royalty must have participated in media manipulation to spread their messages as early as 1486, soon after the invention of printing press. Nowadays, the accessibility of information through the Internet allows for a variety of opinions and ideas to be spread around; however, there is a downside to that accessibility as well. For example, Zurbriggen et al (2016: 251) write that "social media affordances eliminate the possibility of knowing who one's audience is", and Levitskaya and Fedorov (2020: 74) express a similar concern over the fact that "any person or group can influence a large number of people online", which often leads to rapid spread of misinformation that was not checked by the original poster or even to the spread of purposefully made-up disinformation. Moreover, nowadays it does

not even have to be a real person spreading so-called fake news, since there are plenty of automated bot accounts created specifically for that purpose (2020: 71).

Since media manipulation mainly exists in political context, the reason for it lies in the fight for power. Kenzhekanova et al (2015: 321) conclude their discussion of political discourse by saying that people seem to be repelled by power as much as they are attracted to it. This statement aligns with the claim of Bawden and Robinson (2020: 9), who write that a big source of power in the world is information – however nowadays, due to the growing issue of information overload, it is a source of confusion and stress as well. Moreover, they argue that in the modern world “having power means knowing what to ignore”, which is not always easy (2020: 26). For example, Fitzpatrick (2018: 46) in his article describes the concept of an ‘echo chamber’, which occurs when people, in an attempt to avoid information overload via pervasive news, only seek out and read online posts of people who seem to share the same views that they do. While in some cases such an attitude may prove to be informative, as well as effective against stress and irritation that comes with the exposure to many opposing opinions, Fitzpatrick (2018: 55) expresses concern that containing themselves into an ‘echo chamber’ may be affecting personal morality of the Internet users. An ‘echo chamber’ is also more likely to expose users to mis- or disinformation since, according to the research done by Levitskaya and Fedorov (2020: 71), people often share stories that support their preexisting beliefs without regard for whether those stories are real or not. Moreover, disinformation campaigns and propaganda in general have to be based off the ideas that people have already thought of in order to have a successful effect on the collective consciousness. While some people may genuinely trust the fake stories to be real, Fitzpatrick (2018: 53) does also mention the theory of ‘belief perseverance’, which argues that people have a hard time letting go of their preexisting beliefs, even if the incorrectness of certain information was exposed

before them. As such, people who shield themselves from information overload by choosing to blindly believe select information may actually end up falling victim to information poverty instead. Bawden and Robinson (2020: 23) describe information poverty as being a metaphorical evil twin of information overload, and they note that those suffering from it are “unable to make good decisions or take effective action because they lack the information and data to enable them to do so”.

As such, the acquisition of power and control is the driving force behind any sort of manipulation, to which information serves both as an objective and as a tool. Although the Internet already allows for a wider access to information than ever before, there are many groups and individuals who misuse the fact to take advantage of other people, often not only by the means of manipulating the media and its flow but also by the means of violating someone else’s privacy.

1.3. Benefits and Faults of Social Media

The possession of privacy is another thing that comes with the possession of information. Zurbriggen et al (2016: 249) define privacy specifically as the ability to control who and under which circumstances gets access to the personal information about oneself. Moreover, they claim that the personal autonomy that comes with privacy allows people to avoid getting manipulated. Another definition discussed in the article goes on to say that since the concept of privacy is not only about shielding one’s information but also about sharing it with and seeking it from others, it requires dialectal interactions between the people involved to establish the right boundaries. That last point is important since, Zurbriggen et al (2016: 255) write, while most people care greatly about their own privacy, they simply lack the skill to ensure that their boundaries are respected and that they themselves do not give away excessive information without meaning to. This leads to what

the article refers to as the privacy paradox, which has gotten worse since the beginning of the social media age. Social media has affected people's attitude towards privacy to such a degree that some argue against people's right for privacy being relevant and the norm in the contemporary world, trying to encourage people to further share their personal information instead (2016: 248). Although most Internet users may not admit to having such a belief themselves, it is evident that many put online blogging above their own privacy. Feng et al (2015) conducted a research that centered around the fact that information overload on social media, which within the article more specifically refers to the amount of people able to post certain texts or images and the amount of people sharing those, has people competing for attention. Fu et al (2020: 2) refer to that also as the fear of missing out on something when everyone else is consistently, and maybe even excessively, participating in the information exchange online.

Social media has many benefits – Zurbruggen et al (2016: 249) summarize those as connectivity, visibility, social feedback, and persistence, – but it also has its own faults. When O'Reilly et al (2018) interviewed school-age kids about their opinion on how social media affects their own as well as other adolescents' mental health, the results were mixed, and what the interviewers noticed was that a lot of opposing opinions came through from the same responders. As such, while, for example, the interviewed teens brought up cyberbullying and the exposure to other people's risky or antisocial behavior as one of the risks of the Internet, they at the same time praised social media's capacity to reduce stress and help people find and maintain connections. While the article itself listed excessive advertisement and the pervasive influence of other third parties as one of the concerns, neither information manipulation nor information overload was really brought up by the kids themselves, as they do not seem to be so strongly aware of that issue (O'Reilly et al 2018: 602). Nevertheless, the research done by Fu et al (2020) and Zhang et al (2020) are

just some of the examples that prove information overload to be one of the key things that may drive users away from social media. Zhang et al (2020: 232) in particular talk about information relevance, saying that people are more likely to spend their time on a website where information is catered to their personal interests; however, the article does also note that even when information is relevant, an excessive amount of it often still leads to social fatigue; and, of course, when information is not relevant, there is a problem of spam, gossip, etc. clouding people's vision (Fu et al 2020: 2).

According to numerous sources, information overload may affect both mental and physical health of an individual, leading to exhaustion, which in turn leads to the loss of efficiency in undertaking various tasks (Bawden & Robinson 2020: 13) (Zurbriggen et al 2016: 251) (Groes 2016: 1482). The exhaustion can be more specifically caused by the fear of social death or by the difficulty of decision-making processes, and Bawden and Robinson (2020: 24) also note that "the feeling of overload is [...] accompanied by a perceived loss of control over the situation". This aligns with some of the negative effects of social media, which Fu et al (2020: 3) list as tiredness, stress, anxiety, and depression. It can be concluded that information overload indeed plays a big role in affecting people's experience with using the Internet, since the activities that social media in particular offers often require a lot of the user's time and attention.

1.4. Possible Solutions

As for how to deal with the effects of information overload, Bawden and Robinson (2020: 27) open their discussion of solutions by quoting S.D. Neill, who wrote that "there is no cure [for information overload]". However, while it seems to be true in a sense that the information flow cannot be stopped, and therefore the existence of overload and its presence in people's lives is inevitable, there have always been ways that people have

found to diminish the negative effects on themselves. For example, reading techniques such as skim reading and browsing through books have been used by people for centuries in order to get the needed information quickly, without overwhelming oneself with long texts in their entirety. Similarly, encyclopedias were invented in the 18th century in order to summarize and give people access to specific units of information. (2020: 7) Bawden and Robinson (2020: 28) propose many different ways for people to cope with information overload in the contemporary world as well, summarizing the items on the list as “processes and systems to give people the right information at the right time to make a decision”. Those include personal filtering and withdrawal from information, which has already been discussed in this chapter, but also information architecture, which refers to designing website interfaces to be more user-friendly and easier on the eyes, and other technical solutions. In the end, information literacy – accompanied by digital and media literacies – is brought up. This concept can be best summarized as the building up of one’s own confidence in their reading skills, since someone who trusts themselves to properly choose, ignore, and skim-read is less likely to get overwhelmed. While that sounds too vague to be a proper functioning solution, what Bawden and Robinson (2020: 37) propose is to always slow down and take the appropriate time to think, process, and proceed, which of course varies from person to person. That can be most effectively achieved if there is an opportunity to make ‘read later’ lists, queue or put tasks aside for later instead of doing everything at once. Finally, there is also an idea of ‘forgetting and destroying’; after all, not everything has to be remembered all the time.

In conclusion, while information overload seems to have had always existed, that does not mean that it is not evolving as a problem nor that there cannot be new ways to deal with it today. Although there are technical tools to help reduce the information flow on the Internet, a major part of avoiding stress and anxiety that comes with overload still

has to be achieved by each person individually. With the information manipulation and the risks of losing one's privacy, it is important to be careful and not to exceed one's own limits.

2. THE FALL OF MAYOR PRENTISS

With the first book in the *Chaos Walking* series having been published in 2008, there has already been a fifteen-year period allowing for the concepts explored in it to be academically analyzed. Among the themes that the articles covering CW typically focus on are the trilogy's depiction of settler colonial history, psychological trauma, and power dynamics. The theme of information overload, while it does get at least a mention in most of the articles, has not gotten much coverage for itself yet. For example, Kertzer (2012: 11) claims that the male population of New World suffers from collective trauma caused by information overload and the lack of privacy, while Love and Fox (2020: 302) believe it to be "the source of strife for men" and the thing that they fight over, but none of them talk about the phenomenon in detail. Groes (2016: 1503) only briefly mentions Patrick Ness as one of the authors that are known to use the theme of information overload in their work, without elaborating on it. As such, this chapter of the thesis will focus on literary analysis into this exact issue, with primary sources being the 3 books from Ness' *Chaos Walking* series. This chapter will start with a quick overview of Noise in CW and then gradually go over the character of Mayor Prentiss and his relationship with the overload, from his introduction as a character to his eventual death. The aim of this analysis is to see how Ness depicts information manipulation under the conditions of overload through the antagonist of his trilogy.

2.1. Noise and How It Manifests Itself

First of all, it is important to establish that Noise in the universe of CW functions as a stand-in for contemporary information overload. The most direct indicator would be that Ness refers to it by its official term in TAaTA, through the words of the Mayor, who tells Todd that they are living in "this world of numbness and information overload" (Ness

2009: 457). This is the only instance in which this term is explicitly named in the books, and it makes sense that Ness puts it into the mouth of the Mayor, who is the most engulfed in the Noise out of all the characters in the trilogy. However, that does not mean that the connection to the phenomenon cannot be drawn before that. Throughout the first book, narrated exclusively by Todd, who was born into New World, Noise is gradually explained through the means of little bits of information that are completely natural to Todd and alien to the reader. Later, it is Ben, who did not deal with it in his own formative years and who instead had to adapt to live with it, that defines it more clearly: “[This place is] information, all the time, never stopping, whether you want it to or not” (2008: 391). These same words are echoed by Viola in MoM (2010: 91), when she needs to explain it to the new settlers. This definition aligns with the ones given in the first chapter of this thesis, especially in the context of the Internet and social media, where the flow of information cannot be controlled. Another parallel can be drawn in the way that the human settlers have only lived in the world of Noise for a couple decades, which parallels the short amount of time in which the Internet has spread around the world and has changed the ways in which people communicate. In this case, Todd represents the young people of contemporary world, such as those interviewed by O’Reilly et al (2018), who, despite being able to recognize the dangers and the harmful effects of information overload, struggle to define it the way that older generations would have.

When it comes to the Mayor, the first scene in which he is introduced as a character immediately sets him apart from everyone else. The narrator, Todd, describes his Noise as “awful clear and I mean awful in the awful way”, pointing out that while the narrative until that point has claimed that an average man’s chaotic, unfiltered Noise is impossible to deal with, the Mayor’s idea of order is nevertheless much more threatening and eerie than the free flow of a man’s thoughts (2008: 27). The word ‘clear’ here is interesting. While it can

be used in the meaning of ‘see-through’, and although that meaning applies in this scene in a sense that his Noise reveals precise, repetitive chants such as “I am the circle and the circle is me” that are not hidden behind layers of other thoughts like the Noise of other men, that does nothing to reveal the Mayor’s actual persona. In the same chapter, Ness describes some of the other men of Prentisstown, and it is precisely the chaos of their thoughts, the unfiltered bluntness, that allows the reader to get to know them very quickly: for example, Mr. Phelps’s Noise is filled with the feeling of dread and with longing for his late wife (2008: 23), while Mr. Hammar is immediately established as a very violent man, whose thoughts are filled with ugly and bloody pictures (2008: 24). When it comes to the Mayor, Ness does not reveal anything about him as a person; instead, the narrative makes an assumption that Prentiss is trying to shape Noise – and as such, information – into a weapon, but his methods and intentions are not yet clear outside of Todd’s descriptions of the Mayor’s orderly chants and his own, seemingly irrational, fear when faced with them.

The Mayor’s thoughts not being revealed to the reader is not something exclusive to his introduction scene. When Todd faces him at the end of TKoNLG, Prentiss has no Noise at all, and neither does he for the rest of CW. At the beginning of the TAaTA prologue, Todd is unable to even see him – Ness only describes the sound of his voice from the shadows, which once more highlights the unreadable nature of the character. His silence is different from that of the women of the novel, who are biologically unable to produce any Noise, and from that of his soldiers, who are taking an artificially produced ‘cure’ from it. While the former is innate, and the latter represents a choice, the Mayor does not just choose to maintain his privacy, he actively makes an effort towards that choice. Although Ness’ narrative continuously judges Prentiss for his passive role in the war, wherein he makes his soldiers do all the dirty work for him while he watches from the sidelines, his strongest character trait undeniably lies in the way that he is able to maintain

a certain order, both for himself and for his subordinates. In his own words: “I have two maxims that I believe. One, if you can control yourself, you can control others. Two, if you can control *information*, you can control others” (2009: 453).

2.2. If You Can Control Information, You Can Control Others

Mayor Prentiss is a character driven by his desire to control, and, in the process, by his desire to acquire information – all the information that he can use to his own advantage. Of course, his attitude towards information is heavily interconnected with his attitude towards privacy. While he clearly cares about his own, which is evident by the fact that he has learnt to conceal his own Noise, the privacy of others and their most intimate thoughts mean nothing to him, to the point where he clearly states that he believes privacy to be “a privilege for those who’ve earned it” as opposed to it being a human right (2009: 160). With just this one line, Ness establishes him as a parallel to the people described by Zurbriggen et al (2016), who disregard privacy as something that has no place being relevant in the age of social media – or, in this case, in the world with Noise.

The Mayor’s role in the story is that of a media manipulator. Because the nature of Noise is such that it “says one thing and a completely opposite thing at the same time”, making it sometimes impossible to actually gain any valuable information and the absolute truth from it, he does not stop at just reading people’s thoughts (Ness 2008: 42). He is generally portrayed as a masterful manipulator, one who knows exactly how to phrase his own words so that people believe him, at least for long enough that their trust or hesitation benefits him. Ness develops that manipulation gradually. The beginning of TAaTA spends a lot of time establishing the Mayor’s skills at playing with people’s emotions, something that Todd as the narrator describes as him “putting bandages on the crowd” (2009: 44), referencing his own experience with the Mayor, which can also be summed up as the stick

and carrot approach. His strategy relies on him convincing the people of New World that he is not their enemy, and that regardless of whether he had come to them with harmful intentions or not, they were the ones to surrender, allowing for him to be a merciful ruler, who now forgives them for such a mistake instead of immediately punishing them. His manipulation is all the more effective because of how low he starts: for example, he intensively interrogates Todd for Viola's name, a simple and seemingly meaningless question that nevertheless evolves into him getting Todd to work for him, despite the entirety of TKoNLG being spent running away from the Mayor and his ideals; similarly, he effectively establishes totalitarian regime on New World by starting with demands that seemed reasonable enough to the body of people.

Ness makes it very clear that the Mayor has a special talent for putting words into people's heads, and although that seems to be metaphorical at first, it is gradually revealed to be very much literal as well. By the end of TAAaTA, he has switched to physical mind control. While he can get people to do what he wants without them realizing they are doing it, the core of his powers lies in the strong feelings of self-loathing that he plants into other people's heads, making them keel before him. By making other people feel worthless, he establishes his own strength and authority in contrast with them. He himself believes that his power lies in the truth, which is "the best weapon of all. You tell a man the truth about himself and well, they find they have trouble accepting it" (2009: 453).

Part of the Mayor's manipulation relies on fear, and Ness uses the character's steed to further drive the point. While the Noise of animals on New World is far less comprehensible than that of human men, as their thoughts are shown to be less intelligent, they do nevertheless use it for communication, both with each other and with people. Ness introduces both Todd's horse, Angharrad, and the Mayor's horse, Morpeth, in the third chapter of TAAaTA. In that scene and further, the only Noise that can be heard from

Morpeth is a simple word “submit”, directed towards the other horses in order to instill fear into them and make them follow him – and as such, the Mayor – wherever it is that they are headed (2009: 48). Unlike Angharrad, who, throughout the book, develops into a friend for Todd, rather than just his horse, Morpeth’s only purpose in CW seems to be to channel the Mayor’s own thoughts, which are not otherwise revealed to the reader. This point is further proven by the fact that when Morpeth dies on a battlefield in MoM, and the Mayor gets a new steed, Juliet’s Joy, the narrative paints her as not just bossy, but irrational, if not crazy (2010: 167). Although Prentiss himself is written to be frustrated with the horse’s behavior, she is also used by Ness and his narrative to reflect the Mayor’s own attitude: at this point of the story, things are gradually spiraling out of his control, and yet he keeps trying to maintain his desired order, until eventually his actions and attitude cannot be described as anything other than irrational.

2.3. Overload and Other Shortcomings

Ness makes the Mayor commit a fatal mistake by desiring to control everything – the entire world’s flow of information. The culmination of MoM reveals that the reason that nothing ever escapes Prentiss is not the fact that he has loyal soldiers positioned everywhere, who would inform him about the events, but rather that he himself, over the course of Chaos Walking, has become capable of hearing all the Noise on New World after he “opened [himself] up to the voice of this world” (2010: 550). Interestingly, the choice of words here calls back to another discussion that occurred earlier in the novel, although the implications behind it are different (2010: 463):

“This planet is information. All the time, never-ceasing. Information it wants to give you, information it wants to take from you to share with everyone else. And I think you can respond to that in two ways. You can control how much you give it [...] Or you can open yourself up to it completely [...] And which way is the proper way, well, we’ll have to see.”

In this instance, the Mayor, of course, uses himself as an example of the former; in the first place, this conversation is sparked by his concern – and even fear – towards the possible consequences of ‘opening up’. The one that Ness uses as an antithesis for him is Ben, who has learnt the ways of the native species, the Land, and has thus become a natural Pathway for the flow of information on New World. Throughout CW, these two are contrasted mainly in the ways in which they both act as mentor or father figures to Todd – one of them being the man who raised him, and the other one being his general and leader, – but they also represent the opposing sides of the on-going battle of manipulation with communication, which is one of the central themes in MoM. After spending some time with the Land, Ben reunites with Todd and refutes his statement from the first book, which he used to explain the New World to Viola. Now, he is convinced that he has found the actual secret of Noise, which is “communication, real and open, so we can finally understand each other for once” (2010: 452). The Mayor never does come to the same conclusion, and as such, in that later scene, when he claims to have ‘opened up’ to the world of Noise, his way of doing that is missing the very essential point that is communication: while he indeed has opened himself up to absorb the world’s information, he does not let any of it, especially none of his own, out in turn – in other words, he does not function as a Pathway. When it comes to the pieces of advice given by Bawden and Robinson (2020) and referenced in the first chapter of this thesis, the Mayor virtually refuses to ‘forget and destroy’.

Prentiss is an interesting character in that Ness allows him to recognize and understand the ways of the Land, and even to adapt them to their own needs, while at the core still keeping to his views and refusing to change his perspective. When he tries to use the Noise as a means of transferring knowledge to teach Todd how to read (2010: 328), he seems to acknowledge the advantages of connection that people can have with each other,

but acknowledging that in front of Todd is where it stops – outside of that interaction, he still prefers controlling his soldiers as opposed to teaching them, and he is still the same person who is willing to commit genocide against the native species. In the first place, him teaching Todd has much less to do with the main character's willingness to learn than it does with the Mayor deeming him more difficult to control. He completely gives up on his actual son, Davy, who bitterly implies that the Mayor's Noise-cancelling technique did not work for him (2009: 362), and instead is determined to make Todd his heir, claiming that Todd is "powerful enough to be the new me" (2010: 564) and that "people like us *have* to control people like them" (2010: 546). Davy, on the other hand, despite being a loyal follower of his father from the very beginning, is ignored at every attempt to communicate his wishes and concerns, instead berated both verbally and through the Mayor's Noise attacks.

When the Mayor eventually comes to the realization that information overload is harmful, that realization, too, leads him to the wrong conclusions. When he reveals that he has been able to hear 'everything', he admits how heavy and painful that burden has been on him, and he follows that confession up with "It's too much. Too much to control". He does not let go of his controlling personality even when Todd confronts him about that obsession, claiming that to stop trying is "not in [his] nature". (2010: 558) Moreover, he does not see the issue within himself and his actions but rather in the nature of other people. Here, again, Ness contrasts him and Ben by making the Mayor echo a revelation first said by the other man to Todd and later by Todd to Prentiss: "War makes monsters of men, you once said to me. Well, so does too much knowledge. Too much knowledge of your fellow man, too much knowledge of his weakness, his pathetic greed and vanity, and how laughably easy it is to control him" (2010: 546). Despite the initial quote already

having been used by the narrative to reprimand the Mayor's inhumane actions, he instead twists it around and pins the blame for his madness on people who are 'weaker' than him.

Regardless of it being his own fault, in the culmination of *Chaos Walking* Ness paints the Mayor as the main victim of information overload. It is then that Todd, and through him the reader, is allowed to get a glimpse of the man's Noise for the first and the last time, which is described as cold, empty, and hateful, surrounded by the crushing weight of the world (2010: 559). The Mayor's condition at this point of the story is foreshadowed by something said by, again, Ben, all the way back in TKoNLG: "And too much information can drive a man mad. Too much information becomes just noise" (2008: 391). The Noise of the Mayor is therefore just that – noise in its primary sense, made out of the many individual sounds the individuality of which does not matter anymore, now causing only disturbance. Ness writes the Mayor as a lost man, who is so overwhelmed by information overload that it sends him into a fit of destruction; the narrative deems him too far gone to be saved, seeing as the only way out he sees for himself is the destruction of either himself or the world beyond him – and he is too proud to go out without a fight. In the end, when the outcome of the battle is decisive, the decision to go out is his own. His death is symbolic, and it is also a lonely one; in it, Ness once again paints the Mayor as a character who is aware of the advantages of connection and communication but who is firmly set on following his own ways and being the one in control. He ponders on the fate of the world if it is to be led by the ways taught by Ben and the Land but admits that he is "glad that [he] shall never have to see it". (2010: 565) It is his own choice in the end to step into the ocean and be eventually consumed by it and the creatures within it, to be washed away by the flood – just like he was in life by the flood of information – and be gone forever (2010: 566).

2.4. The Choice of Communication

Ness makes a decision not to show the next stage of New World to the reader either – even in the epilogue, things are kept vague, with the emphasis on change and no way to see the uncertain future, although the characters are inclined to have hope, which is not entirely baseless. Although the main showdown of CW is that between Todd and the Mayor, where the emphasis falls much more onto the loss of the latter than the victory of the former, there is a battle of a much bigger scale occurring at the same time in between the Land and the human settlers. This time, Wilf, a man who has been a quiet supporting character throughout the novels, steps up. The battle is resolved – or rather, ends before it could start – by the means of open communication, in which both parties are willing to listen to each other. Whereas the Mayor saw certainty in the violence of war and in the inevitable victory of one party over the other, the rest of the characters choose peace, which they see as “the same chance that the man called Wilf saw it, as a *chance*, an *opportunity*, a way to live without constant threat” (2010: 538). Ness deliberately uses the vague word ‘chance’, not claiming that peace and communication is a magical way for things to get better but that it is nevertheless a step in the right direction. Neither of the confrontations in the culmination of CW end on a note of loud victory, but only one of them allows both parties to move on and face the future.

In conclusion, the character of the Mayor is used by Ness to explore the harmful effects of information overload on someone who is way more focused on keeping the unstoppable flood of information in check rather than their own well-being. Because of the Mayor’s controlling and solitary personality, he is both a threat to other people, who might fall victim to his manipulation, and he is a victim of his own actions himself. From the moment of his introduction until the scene of his death, his obsession with maintaining a certain order prevents him from filtering out the information he actually needs and

therefore diminishing the effects of information overload on himself. In *Chaos Walking*, information manipulation is contrasted with effective communication, with the former being portrayed as an inevitable way to madness and loss of control due to the unstoppable nature of information overload.

CONCLUSION

Information overload is an issue that has arguably been around since the beginning of literacy and has therefore been affecting people's lives since the beginning of their own history. The special danger of overload lies within the fact that the quantity of information only grows with the evolution of humanity, the process being irreversible, meaning that it is important to be aware of the issue in order to develop new ways to deal with it as the society progresses further. As such, for example, various technical solutions to information overload in the form of interface regulations have been introduced in the digital age. Information overload is particularly prominent in the contemporary world due to the active use of social media and other such websites, some of the dangers of those lying within how easily they allow their users to manipulate the masses by continuously spreading false information and invading other people's privacy.

The theme of information overload in contemporary literature allows writers to explore the rapidly changing and increasingly loud world of today, particularly when combined with dystopian science fiction, which is already set to exaggerate major world problems. The aim of this thesis was, first and foremost, to analyse the character of Mayor Prentiss in Patrick Ness' *Chaos Walking* trilogy in order to answer the question of why his attempt in utilising information overload to his own advantage fails and instead leads him to his own death and, in doing so, to argue that the author uses him to demonstrate the negative effects that attempts in information manipulation may have on a person's mental health under the conditions of overload. In the process of the work, the line of argumentation was established. Ness writes the Mayor as the main victim of information overload, one who shows all the symptoms – such as exhaustion, irritation, and the feeling of the loss of control – due to being exposed to the everlasting flow of pervasive information for an interminable period of time. Although the phenomenon that is

information overload is referenced numerous times throughout the trilogy and affects all the characters in one way or another, Ness sets the Mayor apart from everyone else by making him into a control freak who believes that information can be turned into a weapon against others, that most people do not deserve to have privacy, and that he alone is meant to take charge over everything. This character is a reflection of media manipulators and a villain, but he is also used by Ness to warn his readers about the harmful effects that come with willingly consuming too much information that one does not need and with being generally overcontrolling. In the end, it is precisely because the Mayor gets too caught up in controlling others to engage in filtering of information that he gets overwhelmed and brings upon his own death.

The analysis performed in the second chapter of this thesis achieved its goal in supporting the argument given in the introduction, while the sources used in the literature review served as a good theoretical basis for explaining the phenomenon and shining light on its importance in the contemporary world. The work of Patrick Ness is relatively new, but it is precisely for this reason that the themes explored in it offer an insight into the society the way it is today, and both the *Chaos Walking* trilogy and the topic of information overload are worth discussing further.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Alisa Aleksina

Information Manipulation Under the Conditions of Overload in Patrick Ness' *Chaos Walking*

Infoga manipuleerimine ülekülluse tingimustes Patrick Nessi triloogias "Kaose planeet"

Bakalaureusetöö

2023

Lehekülgede arv: 35

Annotatsioon:

Järgnev lõputöö keskendub Patrick Nessi triloogiale "Kaose planeet" ja selles läbi ulme elementide uuritud infoülekülluse teemale. Infoüleküllus on nähtus, mis tekib siis, kui saadaoleva teabe hulk on üksikisiku jaoks liiga suur. See teema on tänapäeva maailma jaoks väga oluline, kuna infovoog on digitaalajastul muutunud silmapaistvaks ning sellest on võimatu pääseda. "Kaose planeedis" ei põhjusta ülekoormust mitte digitaalsed teabeüksused, vaid asjaolu, et kõik sellel väljamõeldud planeedil elavad mehed kuulevad üksteise mõtteid. Vaevalt leidub allikaid, mis arutleksid selle teema üle selles konkreetses ilukirjandusteoses, mis ajendabki järgmist lõputööd. See töö väidab, et Ness kasutab teose antagonist, Linnapea Prentissi, et näidata negatiivseid mõjusid, mida infoga manipuleerimine võib ülekülluse tingimustes avaldada.

Lõputöö sissejuhatus annab lühiülevaate käsitletavast triloogiast ja selle autorist ning töö põhiosa koosneb kahest peatükist. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade, mis kasutab infoülekülluse, infoga manipuleerimise ja sotsiaalmeedia teemadel kirjutatud artikleid ja raamatuid, et selgitada probleemi, selle ohte ja ajalugu, kuid käsitleb ka mõningaid võimalusi infoülekülluse lahendamiseks. Teine peatükk on kirjanduslik analüüs, mille põhiallikatena on kasutatud "Kaose planeet" triloogiat. See algab väljamõeldud maailma loomisest ja keskendub seejärel Linnapea tegelaskujule. Analüüsi tugevdamiseks kasutatakse kirjanduse ülevaates saadud teavet. Analüüsi sisu toetab sissejuhatuses välja toodud väidet.

Märksõnad: Patrick Ness, kirjandusanalüüs, info üleküllus, info manipuleerimine, ulmekirjandus

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