



# Calculated overcommunication: Strategic uses of prolixity, irrelevance, and repetition in administrative language

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Received 17 October 2014; received in revised form 20 May 2015; accepted 25 May 2015

## Abstract

Oversupply of information, irrelevance, and repetition in political and administrative text and talk have received considerable scholarly attention, but the tendency to date has been to analyse these phenomena separately. In this article, I argue that it would be fruitful to explore these aspects in combination, as constitutive dimensions of calculated overcommunicative behaviour in public administration. Based on a multidisciplinary review of literature on cognitive manipulation, prolixity, (ir)relevance, discourse repetition, and administrative behaviour, I propose an original ‘overcommunication framework’ for explicating certain discursive macro-strategies of positive self-presentation used by public officeholders. In particular, I discuss how governments may use calculated overcommunication to avoid or deflect blame, to signal democratic openness, and to perform swiftness. By problematising the notion of ‘overcommunication’ and introducing it into discourse studies, I seek to open up new avenues of understanding and investigating political and organisational communication.

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*Keywords:* Overcommunication; Discursive strategies; Manipulation; Blame avoidance; Cooperative Principle; Government communication

## 1. Introduction

Governments generate and process increasing amounts of information that they make publicly available through numerous channels and in various genres and forms of text, talk, and images. Information workers like journalists as well as other citizens may easily become overwhelmed by this rapid and massive flow of news releases, policy papers and reports, fact sheets, tweets, and sound bites. Many may feel that they are presented more than they can reasonably process. Is it reasonable to suggest that governments sometimes ‘overcommunicate’ strategically, i.e. on purpose? Why and how would they do so?

In this article, I put forward the notion of ‘calculated overcommunication’, and suggest that this could be embraced by analysts of political discourses as a useful analytic concept that would further our understanding of the uses and effects of discursive manipulation in public life. I theorise ‘overcommunication’, a notion new to pragmatics and critical linguistics, and discuss how it may be used strategically in government communication, that is, in the context of public information management and language use of executive state institutions. I problematise the common-sense understanding of what may constitute ‘providing too much information’ and attempt to shed more light on the cognitive underpinnings, linguistic resources, and strategic (socio-political) functions of possibly overcommunicative behaviour by governments. In doing so, I hope to make a contribution to the taxonomies of discursive strategies discussed in

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political linguistics.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I complement and counter-balance the commonplace approaches in social science which have focused on criticising government undercommunication and secrecy, that is, officeholders' tendency to avoid publication or to significantly limit the amount of information published.<sup>2</sup>

As an initial working definition, I suggest that the notion of 'overcommunication' can be used to describe a communicative situation or process in which a hearer/reader who is being addressed – or a critical observer/analyst of a particular communicative situation or process – perceives that 'too much information' is provided by the speaker/writer, and/or that what is said or written is overly repetitive or irrelevant. 'Calculated overcommunication' can be tentatively defined as a macro-strategy which incorporates strategic provision (i.e., based on a more or less formal goal-oriented plan) of what might be 'too much information' for certain audiences, and/or strategic uses of excessive repetition and irrelevance in language.<sup>3</sup>

A basic distinction can be made between overcommunication in a single text or talk (e.g., a speech which contains too many irrelevant details) on the one hand, and overcommunication instantiated as an overall excessive volume or frequent repetition of messages as part of a larger complex of text or talk, on the other hand. It should be also stated at the outset that the very prefix *over-* in the term 'overcommunication' presupposes a norm. Obviously, it is not easy to define what is the 'right amount' of communication, and when exactly 'too much communication' breaks some rule, principle or convention. It is intuitively impossible to draw a simple universal line between sufficient and redundant, informative and overinformative, or relevant and irrelevant communication. And even when evaluating communication in a specific, relatively well-defined situation, the analyst has to take into account a multitude of variables as well as their interaction. Therefore, especially recognising that I am undertaking an exploratory research here, sweeping normative statements or definitive conclusions should not be expected.

However, I will look at how similar (but certainly not corresponding) concepts have been previously used by linguists with varying degrees of normativeness, e.g., overinformativeness, overcompleteness, overlexicalisation. And following the critical tradition, I presume that certain instances of (especially institutional) calculated overcommunication, which are ultimately geared towards positive self-presentation, may be diagnosed as distorted communication or 'disorders of discourse' (Wodak, 1996:24–32). For example, overcommunication can be strategically used by public authorities to impair or bias understanding of certain information, and can thus amount to manipulation, especially if it hurts the interests of less powerful groups in society.

I will start by briefly discussing what may constitute strategic action (and thus 'calculatedness') in language use of public authorities, and outlining some cognitive and pragmatic underpinnings of discursive manipulation strategies. Next, with the goal of situating the concept of 'overcommunication' in existing research, I will review approaches to overinformativeness and prolixity, irrelevance, and excessive repetition – the three 'dimensions of overcommunication' as advanced here. I will complement this with giving consideration to plausible socio-cultural rationale for overcommunicative behaviour in public administration, and conclude by synthesising the ideas presented in previous sections into a provisional interpretive framework of calculated overcommunication.

## 2. Calculatedness and manipulation

Governments use language in an attempt to influence the judgements, decisions and actions of the people, to convince them to adopt certain opinions, and to build trust in particular institutions and officeholders. In Habermasian normative terms, such language use mainly belongs to the category of *strategic action*, that is, of "exerting influence on the decisions of [a] party on the basis of a calculation of success" (Habermas, 1998:120). This is opposed to the ideal of *communicative action*, which is oriented towards reaching mutual understanding and rationally motivated agreement between parties in the absence of coercive force.

The multiple ways one could influence and manipulate others' perceptions and behaviour has received vast academic attention, with approaches ranging from philosophy (e.g., Martin, 2002) and psychology (e.g., Cialdini, 2009) to argumentation theory (e.g., Rigotti, 2005), pragmatics (e.g., Maillat and Oswald, 2009) and various streams of discourse studies (e.g., Chilton, 2011; Hart, 2013; van Dijk, 2006). The "calculation of success" of a manipulator is partially based on her implicit or explicit understanding of human cognition. For instance, van Dijk (2012:589) claims that "human beings are able to 'read the mind' of others through plausible and often reliable reconstructions of the mental models of others".

<sup>1</sup> Such discursive strategies include, among many others, the ideological square (van Dijk, 1998:267), calculated ambivalence (Engel and Wodak, 2009), the strategies of legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007), and the strategies of denial (van Dijk, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Schröter (2013) for a discursive study of silence and concealment in political life.

<sup>3</sup> My choice to use the term 'calculated overcommunication', rather than, for instance, 'strategic' or 'intentional overcommunication', is inspired by Engel and Wodak (2009), who similarly devised the notion of 'calculated ambivalence', and Habermas (1998), who writes of a 'calculation of success' as a characteristic of strategic action. The adjective 'calculated' seems to better capture the sense of ambivalence and selfish scheming that characterises overcommunicative moves which I describe in this article.

Mental models – subjective representations of people’s personal experiences – are grounded in more stable social representations: shared knowledge, norms and values (van Dijk, 2009, 2012). Therefore, to exert more extensive and long term influence on people’s decisions, strategic actors try to control the formation of the *socially shared commonsensical frames of interpretation* (i.e., ideologies; see van Dijk, 1998, 2006; Verschuere, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

From a pragmatic point of view, manipulative communication can be minimally defined as “a twofold process by which a context-selection constraint is combined with the target utterance in order to (i) force its interpretation within a limited context, and (ii) effectively block access to any alternative contextual assumptions” (Maillat and Oswald, 2011:71). Recipients’ context selection can be constrained by making certain propositions more salient through increasing their contextual accessibility (i.e., lowering processing effort) and strength (i.e., increasing contextual effects). This can be achieved by using various cognitive illusions and biases in thinking, judgement, and memory (see Pohl, 2004; also Lakoff, 2008:223–229) as well as emotional fallacies in argumentation (see e.g., van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992; Walton, 2008).

For example, if a speaker asks a question, the hearer has a natural tendency to react by performing a question-answering task. Or, in a context of an event which is highly emotional, meaningful, or ‘vital’ and thus ‘cognitively overwhelming’ for the hearer, any unrelated target utterance by a speaker can be ‘cognitively erased’ – it seems to disappear as if into a ‘cognitive black hole’ (Maillat and Oswald, 2011:78).

What is useful about this pragmatic approach is that it accounts for instances of manipulation where a manipulator wants to distract an audience from relevant information (and thus prevent people from forming certain representations) rather than to present some sort of manipulative or untrue content. This kind of distraction, I suggest, is one of the crucial features of calculated overcommunication.

An important phenomenon related to such distractions is ‘information overload’, which has been predominantly treated by scholars of cognitive neuroscience (e.g., Klingberg, 2008) and organisational studies (e.g., Sutcliffe and Weick, 2008).<sup>5</sup> The human brain has limited capacity for processing and retaining information, and overload occurs when the amount of input (volume of information) a person may need to deal with exceeds this capacity.

Information overload may result in an inability to distinguish relevant stimuli from irrelevant ‘noise’, which in turn may lead to negative affect (feelings of stress and confusion) and increasing errors in judgement (see Eppler and Mengis, 2004). From the point of view of a strategic communicator, such overload can be elicited in an audience by manipulating the characteristics of presented information (e.g., increasing its amount, ambiguity, and complexity, or decreasing its contextual relevance) as well as processing capacity of the recipients (e.g., introducing competing tasks and pressures of time and performance).

In addition, among the many robust subliminal phenomena, cognitive illusions and biases described in psychology literature, the ones which seem to provide sound rationale for resorting to calculatedly overcommunicative behaviour are *validity effect* and *mere exposure effect*.

*Validity effect* occurs when repetition of statements of fact or opinion, either exactly or with some variation, automatically increases the perceived validity of these statements (Hackett Renner, 2004). Statements tend to be regarded as more true even if they are only *believed* to be repeated. Furthermore, repetition is linked to the feeling of familiarity of repeated information and the feeling of being knowledgeable about that information. This suggests that repetition may have an impact of deterring critical thinking about the presented information. Hart (2013) points out that the validity effect, in combined operation with confirmation bias (tendency to interpret information in such a way that is congruent with previously established hypotheses), may account for *naturalisation* (Fairclough, 1989), a process by which certain practices and discourses become commonsensical in society.

*Mere exposure effect* occurs when a repeated, unreinforced exposure to a visual, auditory or other stimulus leads to increased liking for that stimulus (Bornstein and Craver-Lemley, 2004). The effect is limited by boredom: the effect is relatively stronger when a stimulus is more complex, presented in randomised sequence, and not too many times. Use of repetition in advertising and propaganda is generally explained in terms of mere exposure effect. Marketing researchers test and analyse the frequency and number of advertisement repetitions to maximise its effectiveness.

The way people in power take advantage of such fallacies in thinking, and manipulatively constrain audience’s contexts of interpretation of certain utterances is at the heart of studies into unconscious reasoning, emotions and affect in political communication (e.g., Westen, 2007; Lakoff, 2008). To understand why and how manipulation is used in

<sup>4</sup> People’s ability to simulate other minds in their own mind (van Dijk, 2009, 2012) provides a cognitive basis not only for pursuing strategies of discursive manipulation but also for critical analysis of the application of these strategies. For an overview of some related useful concepts from cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, e.g., ‘theory of mind’ and ‘Machiavellian intelligence’, see Chilton (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Various terms have been used as synonyms or near-synonyms of ‘information overload’ (see Eppler and Mengis, 2004:329), for instance, cognitive overload, sensory overload, communication overload, information fatigue, overkill, overabundance, overflow, and ‘information anxiety’ (Wurman, 2001).

administrative text and talk, attention has to be paid to culturally shared assumptions in communicative situations as well as social and emotional aspects of political life which propel overcommunicative behaviour.

### 3. Overinformativeness and prolixity

A useful starting point for conceptualising overcommunication is to consider Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle and his notion of 'overinformativeness' in particular. According to the Cooperative Principle, human linguistic communication is based on a tacit assumption of cooperation between interactants, that is, a shared goal of exchanging meanings, and behaving in accordance with some rough general principles or 'conversational maxims'.

Contributions to conversations are normally expected to be truthful, relevant, sufficiently informative, and clear. Importantly, these assumptions underpin not only conversational implicatures but also lying and deception (Chilton, 2004). In terms of the Cooperative Principle, verbal manipulation can be seen as a communicator exploiting for her own good a recipient's presumption of her cooperation.

Particularly relevant to understanding overcommunication are the following two maxims proposed by Grice: the *maxim of quantity*, which concerns expectations about informativeness, and the *maxim of manner*, which postulates expectations related to perspicuousness.

#### 3.1. Overinformativeness: the maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity has two sub-maxims: (a) make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange; (b) do not make your contribution more informative than is required (Grice, 1989:26).

Chilton (2004:34) points out that the formulation of this maxim raises questions: "'Required' by whom? What are 'current purposes'? And for which 'exchange'?" Obviously, different participants in different situations and stages of linguistic interaction may have different information needs in terms of quantity – and all of this has to be taken into account if an attempt is made to take a normative stance and to provide critical analysis.

Importantly, overinformativeness or redundancy in text and talk may be regarded as a useful inference trigger as well as a possible obstruction to understanding (Weizman and Fetzer, 2011). In Grice's (1989:26–27) own words:

It might be said that to be overinformative is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time. However, it might be answered that such overinformativeness may be confusing in that it is liable to raise side issues; and there may also be an indirect effect, in that hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular *point* in the provision of the excess information.

In political interaction, such 'indirect effects' are of particular interest because implicatures "enable speakers to do such things as convey meaning without taking explicit responsibility, and to convey in-group meanings, where only members 'in the know' might be able to work out the intended implicatures" (Chilton, 2004:35).

For example, van Dijk (1977, 1998) has put forward a normative concept of 'overcompleteness' to refer to instances when certain excessive information has been added to text or talk calculatedly to evoke group polarisations, that is, *Us* vs. *Them* oppositions.

Discourses may be relatively overcomplete when they express propositions that are in fact contextually irrelevant for the comprehension of an event (that is, for the construction of a model), but which are nevertheless included in the semantic representation of a description. . . . We may assume that this will typically happen when such overcomplete information negatively reflects back on outgroups (or positively on ourselves). The standard example in reporting on ethnic affairs is to mention irrelevant ethnic group membership in crime reporting. (van Dijk, 1998:268)

An instance of overinformativeness, 'overcompleteness' can be thus regarded as a certain type of overcommunication, which is used by the speaker/writer as part of an overall strategy of positive self-presentation. (Clearly, the notion of 'irrelevance' is central to this concept. I will return to this below).

#### 3.2. Prolixity: the maxim of manner

The maxim of manner – a maxim concerning the 'how' of interaction – is formulated simply as: be perspicuous. It has four sub-maxims: (1) avoid obscurity of expression; (2) avoid ambiguity; (3) be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); (4) be orderly (Grice, 1989:27).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Grice (1989:27) proposed four sub-maxims of manner, but pointed out that one might also need others.

The third sub-maxim – the expectation of prolixity avoidance – appears to be most directly related to the concept of overcommunication as advanced here. Similarly to overinformativeness, non-observance of this sub-maxim may have various effects depending on the particular audience and context: it can be regarded as a time-waster, it can evoke a ‘search for the point’, or exclude certain audiences that may be unable or unmotivated to unpack the verbose text or talk.

It is worth noting that, at least in certain cultures, prolixity tends to be regarded as a strictly negative feature of text and talk, often linked to an assumption that people can conceal a fact or a purpose by obscuring their meaning with verbiage.

For instance, in his well-known essay “Politics and the English Language”, [George Orwell \(1968:166\)](#) laments the ‘inflated style’ of political speech and writing, which tends to contain long, meaningless and often Latinised passages: “A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details”. He advises every writer to ask himself [sic] in every sentence that he writes: “Could I put it more shortly?” ([Orwell, 1968:165](#)) and postulates, among others, the following rules: “Never use a long word where a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out” ([Orwell, 1968:169](#)).

Similarly, in an influential prescriptive American writing style guide, [Strunk \(1918\)](#) advocated concision in writing. Plain language guidelines (for recent examples specifically targeted to U.S. government officials, see [Myers \(2008\)](#), and the federal website [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)) instruct the writers to avoid overloaded sentences, to replace wordy expressions and long words with short ones, and to delete redundancies. Furthermore, conversation analysts observe that long, detailed descriptions of events and circumstances are “most frequently considered a conversational liability, as in ‘Let’s skip the details and get down to business.’” ([Tannen, 2007:145](#)).

The wealth of such calls and guidelines for conciseness alludes to ‘being brief’ as a feature of language use which requires particular effort on the side of a communicator. This realisation was famously illustrated by French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal in his satirical book *Lettres Provinciales* (first published in 1657), where he wittily included the following apology in a lengthy letter:

My letters have not usually followed each other in such rapid succession, nor have they been in general so long; the little time I have had is the reason of both. I should not have extended this so much, but that I cannot command leisure to shorten it. ([Pascal, 1816:326](#))

Summing up the argument so far, in terms of the Cooperative Principle, the notion of ‘calculated overcommunication’ can be used to refer to instances of strategic non-observance of the maxim of quantity (i.e., if one makes her contribution more informative than is required), and/or of the third sub-maxim of manner (i.e., if one is not brief and does not avoid unnecessary prolixity).

It is admittedly difficult to interpret whether a particular non-observance of these maxims is a violation (with a manipulative intent to abuse of the recipient’s presumption of linguistic cooperation), a flouting (with an intention to create some kind of an implicature) or an infringement (unintended failure to observe the maxims) on the side of the speaker/writer. Determining which maxim is being invoked is not easy either, especially because the maxims are not mutually independent. Indeed, [Grice \(1989:371\)](#) suggests that when evaluating the quantity of information in interaction, primary consideration should still be given to relevance:

To judge whether I have been undersupplied or oversupplied with information seems to require that I should be aware of the identity of the topic to which the information in question is supposed to relate; only after the identification of a focus of relevance can such an assessment be made.

Therefore, I will now move on to the discussion of relevance and irrelevance in communication.

#### 4. Irrelevance

[Grice \(1989:27\)](#) argues that cooperative behaviour involves following the *maxim of relation* (‘Be relevant’), but admits that identifying the (changing) meanings of ‘relevance’ in the course of particular transactions in various contexts can be “exceedingly difficult”.

A cognitive psychological alternative to Gricean theory, *relevance theory*, devised by [Sperber and Wilson \(1995\)](#), subsumes the maxims of quantity, manner, and relation under a single principle of relevance. In terms of this theory, relevance can be defined as people “getting the best cognitive return on the effort they put into processing linguistic material” ([Chilton, 2004:21](#)). What is relevant or not, however, depends upon the state of knowledge (i.e., available background information) of a hearer or reader when they encounter an utterance – relevance is relative and subjective. Other things being equal, people pay less attention to inputs which seem to be less rewarding as they need greater effort of perception, memory, and inference. This explains why “the mass of potential stimuli is dormant for us” ([O’Halloran, 2003:200](#)).

Sperber and Wilson draw attention to a crucial feature of human interaction which they call the ‘communicative principle of relevance’: that by the very act of making an utterance the speaker is conveying that what she has said is worth



listening to. Two related assertions by Sperber and Wilson seem to be particularly useful for advancing discussion about overcommunicative behaviour. I will address these in turn.

As we all know, the world is full of bores. The principle of relevance does not say that communicators necessarily produce optimally relevant stimuli; it says that they necessarily intend the addressee to believe that they do. Even bores manifestly intend their audience to believe that they are worth listening to. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:158)

Here, Sperber and Wilson seem to point to a paradoxical interplay between relevance and boringness in interaction: We tend to assume that the speakers and writers, who address us, want us to process their provided input, even though we know that they often produce text and talk that is boring or irrelevant for us.

Importantly, this assumption makes it worthwhile, for instance, for an officeholder to calculatedly provide a lot of boring text or talk in order to divert the audience's attention from some possibly embarrassing or blameworthy information, as the accusations of being intentionally irrelevant can be plausibly escaped. This is reiterated in the following quote:

Theoretically, a communicator can communicate her presumption of relevance in bad faith, just as she can communicate any assumption in bad faith. However, it is generally true that ostensive communicators try to be optimally relevant. When addressees are disappointed in their expectations of relevance, they rarely consider as a possible explanation that the communicator is not really trying to be optimally relevant. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:159)

In other words, the overall expectation of relevance underpins the 'deniability' of (certain types of) strategic language use by powerful groups or individuals.<sup>7</sup>

These observations seem to have disquieting implications for the work of a political discourse analyst: In order to explicate the application of potentially harmful discourse strategies by public authorities, the analyst should rather counterintuitively pay special attention (at least occasionally) to institutional text and talk that she knows is boring and prolix, and thus appears to her as less rewarding in terms of cognitive return.

What constitutes irrelevant or boring information in the context of public communication by executive governments? To begin, I suggest borrowing insights about what people generally might perceive as interesting or relevant in communication from two different domains: the concept of *tellability* used in literary theory (particularly in narratology), and the *news values* examined mainly in journalism studies to explain news selection and construction processes in media organisations. Intuitively, discursive choices which work against tellability and newsworthiness should generally result in increased irrelevance and tediousness of produced text and talk.

#### 4.1. Tellability reversed to 'pointlessness'

The term 'tellability' was introduced by the sociolinguist William Labov, and has been used to refer to the set of principles which contribute to interest value of a story (Ryan, 1991). Below I summarise some ideas from Ryan's (1991:152–156) useful overview of pragmatic principles and formal properties of a narrative content that support tellability and ensure that the story 'has a point'. Even though Ryan writes about narrative fiction, these principles may also be applicable to non-fictional text and talk.

- *Existence of a plot.* As a near-minimal condition of tellability, there must be a plot, and it "must present a conflict and at least one attempt at solving it" (Ryan, 1991:154).
- *Departure from actual world standards.* The story involves unusual, problematic, or scandalous events or actions.
- *Semantic opposition.* Sudden 'dramatic turns' in plot, reversals in the fortunes of characters, inversions between narrative states, contrast between the goals of characters and the results of their actions, self-contradiction (latter two evoke an effect called 'narrative irony').
- *Diversification of possible worlds.* The private worlds of characters (including their plans, dreams, wishes, fantasies) generate mutually incompatible courses of events, complexity of the story is increased by adding virtual embedded narratives (e.g., plans, pretended plans, sincere and fake beliefs of characters).
- *Violations of the reader's expectations.* The story's presentation includes narrative devices like prolepsis, analepsis, withdrawal of information, play with boundaries, opaque reference, ellipsis, ambiguity, and the double-entendre of puns.

<sup>7</sup> van Dijk (1992:91) notes in his treatment of different types of denial, that "intention denials. . . are strategically very effective, since the accuser has few ways to actually prove negative intentions".

More often than not, administrative text and talk essentially do not chime with these principles and are accordingly perceived by the majority of people as non-tellable and thus boring. Driven by the ambition of positive self-presentation, government institutions may try to invest some of their public communication (e.g., information about their achievements) with some 'dramatic' qualities to make it more tellable. However, in certain cases, officeholders may have incentives to avoid critical public attention to some problematic aspect of their activity (e.g., illicit financial transactions) and then they would rather seek ways to 'kill the story'.

Officeholders may sometimes strategically avoid using narrative elements in administrative texts (or their parts) that deal with possibly blameworthy events in order to decrease their tellability and make them narrative-resistant. In other words, I suggest that calculated overcommunication, if geared towards irrelevance or 'pointlessness', can be based on *strategic reversal of some of the tellability principles* in discourse production. For instance, potentially controversial (and thus relevant and tellable) events or circumstances can be publicly presented in administrative text or talk as usual and unproblematic, references to conflict can be kept to a minimum, and any turns in plot or embedded narratives may be avoided. In addition, a particular piece of unfavourable information can be made to seem relatively irrelevant by presenting the audience with a much more tellable – even if made-up – stories on some other topics (e.g., a dramatised 'external threat to the nation') that serve the government's interests.

#### 4.2. News values reversed to 'unnewsworthiness'

'News values' is a term used in news media profession and research to refer to various sets of occupational selection criteria and presentation guidelines (based on more or less explicit norms and beliefs) that determine which events are more likely to be chosen by journalists to become 'stories' in news media and which aspects of these stories should be foregrounded.<sup>8</sup> News values are deemed to reflect what kind of stories journalists tend to see as interesting and relevant for their audiences. Thus, if certain individuals or institutions wish to increase the probability of being included in the news media, they try to match these criteria (or at least some of them) in setting up and talking about their events.<sup>9</sup>

Bednarek and Caple (2012, 2014) describe linguistic resources that journalists use to construct newsworthy stories. These resources include, among others (with examples in brackets),

- *evaluative language* to foreground negativity ('tragedy'), prominence ('celebrity'), impact ('crucial'), and novelty ('unexpected');
- *references to emotion* to foreground negativity ('worried'), impact ('took their breath away'), personalisation (quotes from individuals who describe their emotions), and superlativeness ('they were petrified');
- *negative vocabulary* to foreground negativity ('damaged', 'crime');
- *intensification and quantification* to foreground superlativeness ('giant') and impact ('thousands were affected');
- *use of metaphor* to foreground superlativeness ('an army of volunteers');
- *temporal references* to foreground timeliness ('today').

The non-observance of news values by (*calculatedly*) *avoiding the use of such linguistic devices* in public discourse production may decrease the perceived newsworthiness of the subject matter, possibly making it seem rather irrelevant or boring. Edelman (1977:99) observes that "a stock official response to public anxieties is that the action that arouses them is 'routine'" – a response aimed at framing the problematic action as one bearing very little news value.

Importantly, brevity is also sometimes regarded as a news value (see, for instance, Preston, 2009:58). This suggests that prolixity in text and talk can be used calculatedly to avoid interest of the press. Providing an abundance of information may produce an opposite effect to that of the 'scarcity principle' described by psychologists: "Our response to banned information is to want to receive that information to a greater extent and to become more favourable toward it than we were before the ban" (Cialdini, 2009:210). So, paradoxically, at least in some circumstances, routine, nondescript publishing of information may be a more effective move for hiding its content than limiting access to it.

The very realisation that a lot of information about an event, situation, or plan is (or seems to be) publicly available, may decrease its news value. Journalists are trained to look for a 'scoop' or an 'exclusive', an 'uncovered' story that has not been reported yet by competing news organisations. Thus, overcommunication about certain issues can be strategically orchestrated to avoid these issues from feeding a potential media scandal.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It should be stressed that news values are not universal but specific to particular culture and also vary depending on the goals and target audiences of particular news organisations. Certain organisations may regard some news values more highly and neglect others altogether (e.g., tabloids may place more value on visual attractiveness and celebrity than on the magnitude of an event).

<sup>9</sup> For a treatment of media management practices by political institutions, see e.g., McNair (2007).

<sup>10</sup> This kind of media management activity with the goal of reducing surprise and recency value of controversial policy announcements by the UK government has been called 'selective trailing' in the report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (2009).

#### 4.3. 'Red herring': irrelevance in argumentation

Relevance is an essential concept in argumentation theory, and allegations of irrelevance are among the most common criticisms in argumentative dialogue (Walton, 2008). In argumentation, if a participant says "That's irrelevant!", then it usually implies that the opponent has either (a) misidentified the proper conclusion to be proven in that particular debate and has thus committed the traditional fallacy called *ignoratio elenchi* (which means 'ignoring the issue' or 'irrelevant conclusion') or (b) in a particular question-reply sequence, provided a reply that was not an answer to the specific question asked.

The former can be called a criticism of 'global irrelevance' (presupposing that there is a specific agenda, i.e., a set of issues defined as boundaries of the discussion) and the latter a criticism of 'local' or 'question-answer irrelevance' (Walton, 2008). However, determining global irrelevance in argumentation is not always straightforward, because participants may have very different preconceptions of what the issue of a case should be, or they may not have a designated standpoint to prove. In addition, proposals may be criticised for lacking 'probative relevance' (Walton, 2008:103), alleging that they do not play any part in proving or disproving the conclusion in the argument.

Fallacies of relevance in argumentation are seen broadly as "forms of argumentation that offer no logical justification for the opinion expressed" but nevertheless "prove to be capable of persuading an audience" (van Eemeren et al., 1996:68). This kind of moves generally violate a pragma-dialectical rule of rational discussion, which postulates that a party may defend his standpoint only by advancing argumentation relating to that standpoint (see van Eemeren et al., 1996:300–301).

A major fallacy of relevance, which I would categorise as essentially overcommunicative, is called 'red herring'. Red herring fallacy is an argumentative move designed to distract the audience by introducing a diversion (sometimes with an emotional appeal) and straying away from the real conclusion to be proved (Walton, 2008). This may entail bringing in irrelevant premises or simply 'wondering off track' to another issue or not to any conclusion at all. This kind of strategic diversion may involve other types of failure of relevance in argumentation, e.g., appeals to popular feelings, force, and pity, which Walton (2008:105) calls "powerful tricks for distracting an opponent".

Conversation analysts use the term 'evasion' to refer to semantically irrelevant utterances provided in response to explicit or implicit questions in various communicative situations. In his study of linguistic deception, Galasiński (2000) distinguishes between two kinds of evasion: *overt evasion* occurs when the speaker explicitly indicates that she is going to be uncooperative (e.g., by politely refusing to give an answer), and *covert evasion* when the speaker tries to hide that she is only pretending to say something relevant. Only the latter type of evasion should be seen as deceptive and manipulative. Journalists who conduct broadcast news interviews with officeholders usually take pride in spotting and quickly countering such covert moves. However, sometimes interviewers may decide to let the interviewee go on speaking on an irrelevant topic simply "in the interest of moving the interview forward" (Clayman and Heritage, 2002:242). This observation usefully reminds us that in certain conversational settings other participants may make moves that ultimately support officeholders' overcommunicative behaviour.

In conclusion of this section, I suggest that calculatedly overcommunicative behaviour has a twofold relation to irrelevance. Contextually irrelevant text and talk can be manipulatively used by a writer/speaker either to create or alter certain preferred frames of interpretation (e.g., in case of overcompleteness) or, on the contrary, to distract or unmotivate an audience from paying attention to certain information and thus to impede discourse understanding and the formation of related interpretive frames that are not beneficial to the manipulator (e.g., in case of using a red herring).

## 5. Excessive repetition

The third dimension of overcommunication, as advanced here, is excessive repetition: repeating something over and over again too many times. When exactly is repetition perceived as 'excessive' depends on the context model of a particular hearer/reader – just like with the notions of overinformativeness and irrelevance discussed above, universal measure is not available.

Linguistic repetition can be defined as the recurrence and recontextualisation of words and phrases in one particular conversation or text (synchronic repetition or intratextual patterns) or in another, later conversation or text (diachronic repetition or intertextual patterns). Repetition in conversation can be further described in terms of fixity (exact repetition – repetition with variation – paraphrase), temporal scale (immediate repetition – delayed repetition); and whether it is self-repetition or allo-repetition, i.e., repetition of others (Tannen, 2007:63–64).

In her concise general overview of linguistic, literary theory, and anthropological approaches to repetition, Johnstone (1987) suggested that research into discourse repetition could be seen as falling under the following four categories based on their focus:

1. *repetition as a discourse-cohesive device*: how repetition is keeping talk 'glued together' and how new information is 'hung on familiar structure of repetitions';



2. *the semantic effects of repetition*: how repeated items affect one another, e.g., lexical couplets, syntactic parallelism, tendency to see a semantic relationship between two or more terms if found in structurally identical settings;
3. *repetition in language learning*, linguistic socialisation, and language teaching;
4. *repetition as a rhetorical device*: how assonance, alliteration, epanalepsis and other devices “make discourse sound elegant”, help to create “rhetorical presence”, contribute to “the linguistic foregrounding of an idea which can serve to make it persuasive even without logical support”, and “make things believable by forcing them into the affective field of the hearer and keeping them there” (Johnstone, 1987:208).

More recently, Tannen (2007) pointed out that repetition is analysed under an overarching research domain of *intertextuality*. The works in this area focus on “the fundamental relationality of meaning in language” (Tannen, 2007:15) and are generally concerned with social processes and political ideologies, for instance, examining the role of repetition in creating identities in interaction, connecting intertextuality to the notion of framing, and combining it with theories of power (e.g., the works following the tradition of critical discourse analysis).

In a conversation, repetition has a function of automaticity and efficiency. It allows a speaker to produce “more language, more fluently” (Tannen, 2007:58) thus making it easier for her to extend her hold on the floor. Repetition also helps comprehension: if there is a lot of repetition in a talk, it contains relatively less new information for the hearer to unpack in each moment. Most importantly, repetition “serves an over-arching purpose of creating interpersonal involvement” and can be seen as a “verbal analogue to the pleasure associated with familiar physical surroundings” (Tannen, 2007:61–62).

These functions are essential in rhetorical persuasion and manipulative text and talk. Therefore, unsurprisingly, uses and effects of repetition have been in focus of some critical linguistic work. Jäger and Maier (2009:38) claim that for an analyst who is interested in power issues, “what is important is not the single text, the single film, the single photograph and so on, but the constant repetition of statements”, because a single text usually has negligible effects.

An important assumption shared by critical analysts is that patterns of repetition in lexical composition can be linked to the social circumstances of discourse production. For instance, proliferation of synonyms or synonym-like words for one concept in a text or talk – a phenomenon called ‘overlexicalisation’ (Halliday, 1978:165; Fowler, 1996:218–20) or ‘overwording’ (Fairclough, 1989:115) – has been interpreted as a signal of speaker’s or writer’s preoccupation with some problematic aspect of reality.

Frequencies of the use of certain words or phrases in texts can be verified by applying the tools and methods of corpus linguistics (see, for instance, Baker, 2006). Such lexicometric analyses of repetition can be intratextual (e.g., focusing on a particular public speech or policy document) or intertextual (e.g., examining a corpus of numerous speeches or policy documents produced over a certain period of time). Consulting corpora of, for example, public speeches by heads of government departments, can provide useful insights into their repeated lexical patterns, which can be seen as evidence of typical or ‘common sense’ evaluative meanings and stereotypes shared by their discourse communities. Corpus linguists take note of a phenomenon called *semantic prosody*: instances when words or phrases acquire some of the either negative or positive meaning(s) of other words or phrases they are frequently surrounded by and thereby influence the recipients’ attitudes to the subject matter.

### 5.1. Repetition and redundancy

Even though repetition seems to be ubiquitous and necessary, Western cultures are characterised by a generally negative attitude towards repetition in language use. For instance, Johnstone (1987:206) observes that

mainstream Americans, and other Westerners, disparage or mock the style of others by saying that they are ‘redundant’, that they ‘repeat themselves’, or that they ‘just keep saying the same thing over and over’. A conversationalist can be quickly silenced with the words ‘You already said that’. . . . In our rhetorics and in writer’s handbooks, repetition is treated as an optional stylistic device, to be used sparingly for ornamenting an already-constructed speech or essay.

Such views may be related to the general expectation of conciseness and prolixity avoidance in cooperative interaction (as discussed above). However, in some cultures “repetition is seen as rhetorically powerful because words and thoughts, per se, have creative or controlling power” (Johnstone, 1987:208). And repetition is a particularly frequent characteristic of highly formal or ritualised text and talk.

The use of repetitive motifs in public speaking may be justified in terms of a wish to improve cohesion and discourse comprehension. However, in his treatment of language use in politics, Edelman (1985) expressed a strongly negative sentiment towards certain instances of repetition.

Chronic repetition of clichés and stale phrases that serve simply to evoke a conditioned uncritical response is a time-honoured habit among politicians and a mentally restful one for their audiences. The only information conveyed by a

speaker who tells an audience of businessmen that taxes are too high and that public spending is waste is that he [sic] is trying to prevent both himself and his audience from thinking and to make all present join in a favoured liturgy consisting of ritualistic denunciation of the symbols “taxes” and “spending”. (Edelman, 1985:124–125)

Excessive repetition of familiar knowledge can be thus regarded not only as an indicator of conformity but also as a strategy of blocking critical thought. Writer George Orwell has pointed to intertextual self-repetition in political speeches as a sign of ‘reduced state of consciousness’ of the speaker.

If the speech he [a politician] is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity. (Orwell, 1968:172)

This assertion accords with the idea that repetition in the production of talk functions to increase its efficiency through automaticity (Tannen, 2007). It also reminds us that unconscious reasoning and cognitive illusions should be studied in order to understand how repetition can be strategically used in persuasive and argumentative discourse.

### 5.2. Repetition as proof in argumentation

In argumentation, repetition of an argument is sometimes fallaciously treated as a proof. Various terms have been used to signify this phenomenon: presentation as proof (Johnstone, 1983), fallacy of repeated assertion, proof by assertion, argument by repetition, proof by exhaustion (of the listener), *argumentum ad nauseam* or *argumentum ad infinitum*.

In using this move, the proponent makes either or both of the following assumptions: first, that repetition makes the proposition more convincing (i.e., that an idea repeated enough times is taken as the truth due to the validity effect) and second, that tireless repetition of an argument (possibly by different people) brings an end to the discussion because the opponent gets bored, does not care to discuss the issue any more, and retracts her standpoint. More fatigue means less resistance.

The proof by exhaustion is frequently combined with an appeal to authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*; *ipse dixit*) and it amounts to evading the burden of proof, that is, presenting a standpoint as self-evident and giving a personal guarantee of the rightness. This fallacy thus violates a pragma-dialectical rule of rational discussion, which demands that a party that advances a standpoint must also defend it (see van Eemeren et al., 1996:300). In Bakhtin’s (1986) terms, such moves may be characterised as *monologic* attempts to close down dialogue and to leave less possibilities for critique and creative thought.

### 5.3. Repetition, propaganda, and conceptual change

Excessive repetition in public communication is frequently associated with the notion of ‘propaganda’, which tends to be seen as characteristic of totalitarian regimes and their manipulative language use in service of a cult of personality.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, wrote that

propaganda must . . . always be essentially simple and repetitive. In the long run, basic results in influencing public opinion will be achieved only by the man who is able to reduce problems to the simplest terms and who has the courage to keep forever repeating them in this simplified form, despite the objections of the intellectuals. (Manvell and Fraenkel, 1960:211)

Reduction of complexities in talking about problems may be achieved through constructing and repeating simple *Us* vs. *Them* oppositions. Moreover, repetition of what Skinner (2002) calls ‘evaluative-descriptive terms’ can be seen as a part of the technique of rhetorical redescription, which is designed to bring about a certain conceptual change. Skinner claims that “it is in large part by the rhetorical manipulation of [evaluative–descriptive] terms that any society succeeds in establishing, upholding, questioning or altering its moral identity” (Skinner, 2002:149).

In his book *The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist’s Notebook*, Klemperer (1947/2006:14) presents a telling example on Nazi use of the term ‘fanatical’:

If someone replaces the words ‘heroic’ and ‘virtuous’ with ‘fanatical’ for long enough, he will come to believe that a fanatic really is a virtuous hero, and that no one can be a hero without fanaticism. The Third Reich did not invent the words ‘fanatical’ and ‘fanaticism’, it just changed their value and used them more in one day than other epochs used them in years.

<sup>11</sup> For a good overview of historical, psychological, sociological, and ethical aspects of propaganda, see Marlin (2002).

To bring a more recent example, Bayley (2007), working in the domain of corpus assisted discourse analysis, provides an analysis of the use of the word ‘terror’ in American and British political speeches between 1960 and 2004, and shows significant differences in its frequency of occurrence as well as its meaning before and after September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

To sum up, even though excessive repetition can attract criticism and may be limited by boredom, adopting repetition as a part of calculated overcommunication strategy seems to have several benefits for a self-serving communicator. It allows a lot of text and talk to be produced with relatively small effort; to create feelings of interpersonal involvement, familiarity and liking among audiences; to increase perceived validity of propositions without providing arguments; and in some cases, to bring about desired conceptual change.

## 6. Overcommunication in public administration: a macro-strategy in service of positive self-presentation

So far I have discussed some mainly linguistic, psychological, and philosophical preliminaries which make it possible or viable for government institutions and officials to overcommunicate strategically. It is equally important, however, to consider the specific socio-political and cultural reasons or forces behind overcommunicative behaviour of public administrations in liberal democracies.

What motivates officeholders to oversupply text and talk, which is often irrelevant and delivered in excessively repetitious manner? Obviously, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive answer to this question within the limited space of this article. However, I will suggest three hypothetical reasons as possible starting points for future research.

I propose that calculated overcommunication could be seen as a macro-strategy in service of positive self-presentation, which is used by administrations (1) to avoid or deflect blame, (2) to signal democratic openness, and (3) to perform swiftness. I will examine each of these incentives in turn.

### 6.1. Blame avoidance

Avoiding blame and scandal can be regarded as a main driver of political and institutional behaviour (Weaver, 1986; Thompson, 2000; Hood, 2011). Due to the increased visibility of political leaders, changing culture of journalism, and the growing attention to the integrity of officeholders, “scandal has become an occupational hazard of life in the public domain” (Thompson, 2000:117).

How officeholders perceive and contain the risks (or damage) related to blame and scandal affects institutional policies and structures as well as their language use. In a bid to justify their existence and alleviate deepening distrust, government institutions are tempted to develop more and more ‘trust-economising devices’ (Thompson, 2000:254), that is, formal procedures which may (or may not) increase accountability in government. Government institutions hire (teams of) media consultants and formulate intricate media management strategies to improve their public communication flows, influence public agenda and safeguard their reputation. Proliferation of formal transparency rules and increase in resources devoted to public communication may contribute to the rise of overcommunicative behaviour.

The imperative of avoiding blame and minimising damage when scandals occur encourages officeholders to adopt discursive strategies of positive self-presentation. These strategies essentially involve emphasising favourable and de-emphasising unfavourable information about the self, but may also include emphasising negative aspects about others (e.g., scapegoating, shifting blame to those who blame).

Some of the most common communicative choices in public administration related to deflecting blame include denying the problem, providing excuses and justifications, launching counter-attacks, delivering quick apologies, diverting attention or burying information, and keeping low profile (Hood, 2011; Hansson, 2015).

When a scandal, involving a revelation and public criticism of an officeholder’s transgression of some moral norm, occurs, then the use of some of these moves may be publicly perceived as ‘second-order transgressions’ (Thompson, 2000:17). For instance, officeholders’ reactive attempts to cover up information about their financial mismanagement or to intimidate journalists may fuel the scandal instead of containing it. Therefore officeholders may regard calculated overcommunication as a safer alternative to keeping low profile.

I suggest that overcommunicative moves can be used calculatedly to avoid blame in the following ways, among others:

- Prolixity and repetition help the possible blame taker to ‘keep the floor’ in communication. The goal of producing a lot of text and talk is to leave possible adversaries no time or no space to make opposing statements, present negative information or to ask difficult questions. Simultaneously, it may give the audience an (often false) impression of openness and transparency, thus helping to deflect accusations of secrecy and, during a scandal, lower the risk of ‘second-order transgression’.

- Overcompleteness and repetition may be used as a part of a strategy of insinuating scapegoats, that is, constructing outgroups and shifting blame to them. Repeating a motif can result in establishing links of causality which frame someone as accountable for some problematic event or situation by means of semantic prosody and lexical cohesion instead of argumentation.
- Unfavourable information can be de-emphasised by presentational choices which seek to maximise its contextual irrelevance, for instance, by introducing an emotional distraction (a red herring) or by choosing to communicate 'bad news' in a situation where the audience is most likely to be distracted by a contextually highly relevant event (a cognitive black hole). Moreover, tellability and newsworthiness of a blameworthy event can be decreased by providing excessive (and boring) information in relation to it.
- Excessive repetition can be used to create an impression of audience involvement and to block critical thought. Officeholders may try to win an argument over a blame issue by making use of the validity effect and the mere exposure effect on the one hand, or by simply exhausting the opponent with verbose, irrelevant, and repetitive talk on the other hand.

Such backgrounding of possibly blameworthy information about the self is usually accompanied by actions designed to foreground favourable aspects or idealised images of the self. I adopt Goffman's (1969) view, rooted in the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism,<sup>12</sup> that government officials (among many other actors) are constantly looking for ways to make the effects of their work apparent to the public by 'dramatic realisation', that is, performing certain aspects of their work in an emphasised, more expressive way. In the social and cultural context of public administration, where much of the work is not easily observable or instantly tangible, and where its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens is constantly at stake, this essentially means performing (speech) acts which signal democratic openness and professional swiftness of the communicator.

## 6.2. Signalling openness

Transparency, openness, and freedom of information are notions which are used ubiquitously and have attained a 'quasi-religious' status in discourses about public administration and democratic accountability (Hood, 2006, 2007). These notions, even if used vaguely, are seen as essential and unquestionably positive characteristics of a modern democracy.

Therefore, it may seem that a government that provides more information about its activities nurtures a more informed citizenship, enables the people to hold their leaders more accountable, and can be thus regarded as more democratic. However, the supplied information may be relatively irrelevant for the audience, providing them negligible cognitive rewards; or it may be repetitive, intended only to create a sense of audience involvement rather than to stimulate democratic deliberation.

In addition, administrative codes (another type of 'trust-economising devices') tend to promote an expectation of 'completeness' in public communication of government institutions. This is viewed as an ingredient of propriety and 'service-mindedness' required from employees of democratic governments.

For instance, the *European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour* (2012), which institutions and bodies of the European Union, their administrations and their officials should respect in their relations with the public, includes an article titled 'Courtesy', which begins with the following paragraph (italics added):

The official shall be service-minded, correct, courteous and accessible in relations with the public. When answering correspondence, telephone calls and e-mails, the official shall try to be as helpful as possible and *shall reply as completely and accurately as possible* to questions which are asked.

What exactly constitutes 'completeness' cannot be universally defined and therefore a particular official participating in a particular interaction is left to negotiate its meaning in each individual case by herself. Such negotiation crucially involves a clash of the Gricean maxims. Officials may feel that when they deliver concise and simplified summaries (thus being brief), rather than more complex and detailed, non-summarising accounts, then their contribution may be perceived by the public as less informative and more ambiguous. The problem may be even more subtle, as Scollon (2008:53) explains:

If you speak casually or informally you can produce rapport more easily among the participants. . . . But speaking this way produces hierarchical constituent summaries of actions which are, in reality, not so closed or hierarchical. Conversely, speaking in a formal, careful manner which brings out the complexity of the actional process introduces a stiffness and distance which lies open to accusations of non-involvement and bureaucratic lack of concern.

<sup>12</sup> Perspectives and concepts originating in symbolic interactionism have been successfully integrated into discourse studies, see e.g., Wodak (1996, 2011).

However, democratic norms of transparency and service-mindedness generally seem to encourage officeholders to engage in ‘dramatic realisations’ of democratic governance which include producing excessive amounts of text and talk. Importantly, such norms also provide a convenient justification for calculatedly overcommunicative behaviour. Whenever someone accuses an official of verbosity or obfuscation, the blame taker can resort to the *topos of law* as an argumentative shortcut: “A lot of information has to be provided because a certain law/code/regulation requires one to do so.”

Accordingly, administrations in liberal democracies are more likely to get away with calculated overcommunication than with (sometimes seemingly minor) undercommunication, even though overcommunication may involve manipulative effects similar to those of secrecy or even lying.

### 6.3. Performing swiftness

Besides dramatic realisation of democratic openness, bureaucrats are publicly trying to convey a sense of being constantly busy and in demand. Wodak (2011:115–116) suggests that, to present themselves as important and successful professionals, employees in various (e.g., political, medical, educational) institutions engage in strategic performances of ‘swiftness’. While such performances can literally take a form of running along the corridors of an office building or a hospital (as observed by Wodak, 1996, 2011), the impression of swift action can also be created by producing massive and fluent flows of text and talk.

This impression is based on at least two assumptions. First, that an increased amount of text and talk produced at great speed by an official or organisation will be interpreted by the public as an indication of increased amount of work being done by that official or organisation. And second, that people tend to perceive those who (seem to) possess and process a lot of information, produce a lot of fluent and complicated talk and text, and provide instant answers to any questions thrown at them, as more resourceful.

In my view, this relates to Goffman’s (1969:74) notion of ‘mystification’ in an interesting way. He defines mystification as part of a performer’s impression management, which is aimed at evoking feelings of awe and respect among the audience towards the performer through keeping social distance between them. Hence, I suggest that ‘showing off’ with an overwhelming load of information may establish or confirm such distance between a government and citizens, and create awe among the latter in a similar way as does the careful concealment of official secrets.

Calculated overcommunication as a part of performing swiftness can be thus described in terms of the Cooperative Principle as systematic flouting of the maxims of quantity and manner by officeholders who make their contributions more informative and prolix than required, with the following intended implicature: “You can rest assured: We are working hard and we are on top of things”.

Furthermore, officeholders’ performance of swiftness through overcommunication seems to rest on an assumption that two critical aspects go unnoticed by their audiences: first, that providing more text and talk does not necessarily involve more effort (for instance, due to automaticity of repetition), and second, that longer texts are not necessarily more informative. Actually, discursive performance of swiftness may entail little cognitive rewards for the audience.

Critical commentators sometimes characterise such overcommunicative public performances with the notion of ‘bullshit’. This term was brought into academic usage by the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt in his scholarly essay titled “On Bullshit”. In this witty treatise on verisimilitude and deception in public communication, Frankfurt observes that

the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled – whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others – to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant. (Frankfurt, 1988:132–133)

To paraphrase this in terms of the Cooperative Principle: Officeholders’ preoccupation with their frontstage performance encourages them to violate, more or less calculatedly, the second sub-maxim of quality: “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”. This kind of bluffing can be seen as yet another phenomenon that induces overcommunicative behaviour in public administration.

## 7. Embracing the overcommunication framework

Below, I present a new analytic framework for understanding the links between dimensions of overcommunication and some macro-strategies of positive self-presentation in public administration (Table 1).

This framework is an attempt to illuminate relationships between some salient aspects of production (speaker/writer side) and understanding or interpreting (hearer/reader side) of text and talk, which can be conceptualised as constituting calculated overcommunication. It shows how officeholders can exploit certain biases in human thinking and judgement as well as certain culturally shared beliefs to emphasise favourable and de-emphasise unfavourable information about themselves.



Table 1

Overcommunication framework: dimensions and calculated uses of overcommunication in administrative language.

		Dimensions of overcommunication		
		Oversupply of information/ prolixity	Maximal irrelevance	Excessive repetition
Calculated uses of overcommunication	Avoiding blame	Keeping the floor, avoiding dialogue and rebuttal Insinuating scapegoats (via overcomplete representations) Creating an impression of openness and transparency (to avoid 'scoop' and 'second order transgressions') Exhausting the opponent	Introducing a red herring to distract the audience Using a cognitive black hole to bury unfavourable information Decreasing tellability of unfavourable information Decreasing newsworthiness of unfavourable information	Keeping the floor, avoiding dialogue and rebuttal Insinuating scapegoats (via semantic prosody and lexical cohesion) Exhausting the opponent Winning the argument based on validity effect and mere exposure effect
	Signalling openness	Creating an impression of openness, transparency and 'completeness' in information provision	Decreasing cognitive reward	Creating a sense of audience involvement
	Performing swiftness	Creating an impression of 'working hard' and 'being on top of things'	Decreasing cognitive reward	Creating a sense of audience involvement

Admittedly, like any model, this framework has its limits. In the preceding sections, I have drawn attention to the tendency of overcommunicative moves to be deniable by those who engage in them, indicating that it is not easy to hold someone responsible for manipulation. Let me reiterate the most salient tensions within the concept of overcommunication which underlie this challenge.

- Abundant supply of public information by government institutions is generally regarded as desirable and seen as an essential precondition of democratic rule. However, excessive provision of information to certain audiences may result in confusion or information overload, which, in turn, may hamper critical thought and derail critical discussions. The question of what is 'excessive' is not only quantitative and does not have a universal measurement scale – it should be analysed in relation to the question of contextual (ir)relevance.
- Irrelevance, however, is notoriously difficult to define. What is seemingly irrelevant for someone in certain circumstances, may be contextually relevant for someone else. Moreover, irrelevant text and talk can be used manipulatively in seemingly contradicting ways: either to promote certain preferred frames of interpretation, or to distract or unmotivate an audience from paying attention to certain information altogether.
- The use of repetition in text and talk is ubiquitous. Importantly, it fosters discourse understanding – this is why it is so common in teaching and learning. However, excessive repetition may also be applied with an intention to avoid critical discussion by keeping the floor and exhausting the opponent.

By devising this heuristic model, I hope to encourage empirical research into the combined and often intricate uses and effects of information oversupply, prolixity, irrelevance, and repetition in administrative communication. Overcommunicative behaviour and particular techniques of influence employed by administrations should be studied by combining textual analysis with ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, with a special focus on metadiscourses about overcommunication, for specific cases of alleged manipulation. In each case, attention should be paid to intertextual and interdiscursive relationships, extra-linguistic institutional and situational variables, and the broader historical and socio-political backdrop (see [Wodak, 2011](#)). It is likely that officeholders may have more incentives for manipulative conduct than the three elements of positive self-presentation suggested in this article. Of course, within the limited space of a journal article, the complex nature of each dimension of overcommunication in a variety of contexts, genres, and forms of text and talk cannot be discussed in sufficient detail. However, I offer a brief example to illustrate calculated overcommunication by a government officeholder who attempts to avoid blame.

Shortly after planes struck the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, Jo Moore, the special adviser to the UK transport secretary sent the following short email to her colleagues: "It is now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury. Councillors expenses?"

Some weeks later this message leaked, raised controversy in the press, developed into a widely mediated scandal (see, for instance, [Assinder, 2001](#); [Wintour, 2001](#); [Sparrow, 2001](#)), and led further to a Parliamentary inquiry into accountability of special advisers ([House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, 2002](#)). Why did this tiny memo cause such an outrage?

The special adviser's message was seen as a foremost proof that government was employing manipulative public communication practices, infamously known as 'spin doctoring'. Special adviser Moore knew that her department had to publish a possibly controversial policy announcement concerning councillors' pension rights, and she calculatedly chose to do it on the day when all eyes were on the televised images of the terrorist attack, so that the announcement would go unnoticed.

From a pragmatic point of view, this was "a manipulative attempt at constraining contextual selection to a context of *maximal irrelevance* . . . for the target utterance" ([Maillat and Oswald, 2011:77](#)) about councillors' expenses. In terms of bureaucratic risk aversion, this was a presentational strategy of 'changing the subject' to avoid blame (see [Hood, 2011:56](#)).

My framework brings these aspects together. The case can be understood as calculated overcommunication in the form of using a cognitive black hole (dimension of maximal irrelevance) to bury unfavourable information (blame avoidance element of positive self-presentation).

This example reminds us that overcommunication, as defined here, does not always involve production of 'too much' text or talk by a manipulator to perplex her audience – there are also instances when a manipulator rather chooses to communicate her message in a context where 'too much' (and more relevant) information on another topic is produced and presented by others. Furthermore, this is case in point why discourse analysts should try to look beyond denying, lying, and scapegoating as typical responses to blaming, and embrace new frameworks for understanding (often more covert) strategies of blame avoidance in public administration.<sup>13</sup>

## 8. Concluding remarks

Critics of government tend to pay generous attention to instances when powerful individuals and institutions engage in 'official secrecy' or provide less information than required for a particular purpose of exchange. Analysts often presume that the exclusion of certain propositions constitutes an attempt to block the recipients' access to certain knowledge. However, in this article I have argued that for a more comprehensive understanding of the uses and effects of discursive manipulation in public life, more research needs to be focused on describing and explaining various instances and aspects of excessive or contextually irrelevant supply of text and talk by government communicators.

To this end, I have devised an original analytic framework of calculated overcommunication in administrative language use. The framework brings together three pragmatic features which underpin the manipulative effects of overcommunication: oversupply of information, maximal irrelevance, and excessive repetition. Each dimension can be described as being related to particular affordances in terms of cognitive biases (e.g., repetition is related to validity effect) and cultural beliefs (e.g., there is a perceived link between abundant supply of public information and democratic openness), which officeholders are tempted to put in service of their positive self-presentation.

Furthermore, I have suggested that even though prolixity, irrelevance, and repetition in discourse are sometimes viewed negatively, certain socio-political and cultural attitudes and expectations may generally encourage over-communicative behaviour in public administration. Officeholders may perceive that they get rewarded for volume and 'completeness' of the information they produce rather than for their content being contextually relevant for certain audiences or contributing towards mutual understanding between interactants.

Developing comprehensive prospective critique of overcommunication is a difficult but necessary task. By combining insights and methods from pragmatics, discourse studies, and political science, we can explore in greater detail the manifold contexts, practices and effects of calculated overcommunication in public life.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Ruth Wodak for her helpful comments on earlier drafts, and I thank Teun van Dijk for useful suggestions at the outset of this work.

<sup>13</sup> For a useful general overview of linguistic approaches to blaming and denying, see [Wodak \(2006\)](#). A proposal to introduce [Hood's \(2011\)](#) blame avoidance framework into discourse studies is provided by [Hansson \(2015\)](#).

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