

ISSN 2633 1640

**Volume 44(2) Winter 2023**

**Prof. Frank Stowell, University of Portsmouth, UK**

**Editor-in-Chief's Editorial**

**SYSTEMIST**

**Publication of  
The UK Systems Society**

**Published by the UK Systems Society**

---

**Registered office:** Sidelands, Nutgrove Lane, Chew Magna, BRISTOL, BS40 8PU

**Registered Charity, No: 1078782**

**President**

Professor Frank Stowell

**Treasurer & Company Secretary**

Ian Roderick

**Secretary to the Board**

Gary Evans

**Editor-in-Chief: *Systemist***

Professor Frank Stowell

University of Portsmouth

Portsmouth

Hampshire PO1 2EG

Email: [editor-in-chief@systemist.org.uk](mailto:editor-in-chief@systemist.org.uk)

**Managing Editor: *Systemist***

Dr Christine Welch

Gatcombe House, Copnor Road

Portsmouth PO3 5EJ

Tel: +44 2392 16 0254

Email: [editor@systemist.org.uk](mailto:editor@systemist.org.uk)

All material should be submitted electronically, following the instructions on the Journal website [systemist.org.uk](http://systemist.org.uk). In case of any difficulty, please email the Managing Editor in the first instance. Material should be in word processed form, e.g., Microsoft Word .doc or docx. The font size must be 12 and in Times New Roman, with all figures and tables in a format that will be still legible if reduced by up to 50%. Please supply separate files for figures, in .jpeg or .tiff format.

All materials must conform with the Harvard Referencing System. DOI must be included for all references where possible. A title page must be provided and should include the title of the paper, authors name(s), affiliation, address, and an abstract of 100-150 words. Material published in *Systemist* does not necessarily reflect the views of the UKSS Management Committee or the editors.

# **Systems thinking and Practice 2024**

## **Is Systems thinking and practice taken seriously?**

It is early 2024 and already we face multiple challenges (we used to call them problems). One would think this is where Systems ideas could be used to help make sense of them. The disorder created by many conflicts and civil unrest seem to need Systems thinking and practice. Yet there are so few examples of how we have/should address these arising from the systems community leads me to ask the question, is Systems Thinking and Practice only of academic interest? Over the years this journal has encouraged systems practitioners to share their experiences. Very few do. Much is said and written about the need for interdisciplinarity which one imagines a systems practitioner would be an ideal candidate, but there are few examples and even fewer accounts where this is the case. The different opinions expressed by members can become overwhelmed by the dominance of the traditional techniques from reductionist science. Systems thinking is left in the cold.

## **Lack of Holistic thinking**

There seems to be a distinct lack of thinking about ‘things’. In social communities often genuine concerns are distorted by disproportionate responses. Examples of this can be seen in the many factions demonstrating their fears about the perceived damage we are doing to the environment. While this is an understandable anxiety there seems to be little coherence between the many expressed concerns. Daubing something with paint or walking slowly in the middle of a busy thoroughfare does little more than cause distraction from the subject and create hostility towards the protestors. The group that shouts the loudest seems to get the most attention and opinions are adopted without question each person translating it into a cause of their own (witness the placards from different groups within the crowd). It seems an example, to quote Mark Twain, that people are going along with a protest because ‘...*who can holler the loudest without knowing what he is hollering about?*’ Often the focus is upon a ‘hot topic’ taken out of context, these range from prohibiting the use of fossil fuels through to banning plastics. The unifying factor seems to be a need to protest, a sort of animation of civil apprehension about an unsure future.

If we take ‘plastic’ as an example, while there is evidence of the damage plastic is doing to our environment a total ban would be reckless and dangerous. Yet the protestors seem to ignore this and fail to come up with a functional way of dealing

with it. For example, I am minded of a group of post-graduates studying waste as part of their syllabus were shocked when the tutor suggested they spend the afternoon picking up plastic waste as a way of experiencing its impact upon the environment. Ironically it seems they did not associate themselves with the problem. It cannot be simplified by just blaming 'plastic' as there are wider issues to consider. We need to think holistically. It is not simply blaming plastic for causing environmental damage, we should consider our role and how we manage it.

What has systems got to say about environmental matters? It is worth reflecting that in 1997 the UKSS conference on Sustainability attracted close on 100 submissions, in 2023 despite being a well-attended and successful conference, on a similar topic, attracted barely one tenth of the 1997 conference submissions. Is this a reflection of the lack of interest in systems, the environment or both? Yet the frequent protests on environmental matters continue to make headlines. We systemists seem to have little to say.

### **Is Digitization distorting how we view the world?**

People are seemingly easily carried along with the need to protest. The only unifying thing seems to be a desire to protest. Kierkegaard likened this to a kind of ventriloquism where people take refuge in doctrines and dogma which they repeat without attaching any real significance to what they were saying (ibid, p.38). A contributing factor is digitization. We view the world through the prism of digital technology. Social media can be used as an attempt to transform a situation that the transmitter feels unable to control into one where they feel able to control. In the hands of a few it can create confusion and dismay. An example of this is the misinformation spread during the Covid-19 pandemic. Salem, (2021) found that the vast majority of Covid-19 anti-vaccine misinformation and conspiracy theories originated from just 12 people who have a combined following of 59 million people across multiple social media platforms, with Facebook having the largest impact. In a paper I had published recently (entitled *Digitization and the shaping of Society – A Soft Systems Study*) I describe a pilot study that revealed three aspects of digitization worth exploring further. First, there is tendency to accept fiction/hearsay as fact. Second, the tendency to want answers immediately has created a culture of 'instantaneousness', and third, rumour gains credibility the more it is circulated. Thinking systemically provides the receiver with the time to consider the 'system' under discussion, what it is, its boundary, who makes it up and the context in which this 'system' operated. My 'quick and dirty' study yields many insights and importantly is an example where using systems ideas might be

a way of exploring complex issues that we face today. Come on Systemists let's hear your ideas.

## **References**

- Kierkegaard, S., (2000), *The Essential Kierkegaard*, (Ed H.V. Hong and E.H.Hong), Princetown University Press, Princetown, New Jersey
- Salam, E ., (2021) The Majority of Covid misinformation came from 12 people, The Guardian, (2021)
- Stowell, F.A., (2023), Digitization and the Shaping of Society – A Soft Systems Study, Systemic Practice and Action Research <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-023-09667-7>

---

## **UK SYSTEMS SOCIETY**

---

**Directors:**

Prof. Frank Stowell  
Ian Roderick

**Committee members:**

Shavindrie Cooray  
Gary Evans  
Penny Hart  
Pam Hearne  
Petia Sice  
Christine Welch

---

## **UKSS Gold Medallists**

---

**Professor Russell Ackoff**  
**Professor Stafford Beer**  
**Dr Fritjof Capra**  
**Professor Peter Checkland**  
**Professor C. West Churchman**  
**Professor Humberto Maturana**  
**Sir Geoffrey Vickers**

***Systemist* is a publication of  
The United Kingdom Systems Society**