

A few days ago [Kazakh police detained a young man holding a poster in Abay Square in Oral, Western Kazakhstan](#). The poster, however, was blank, and Aslan Sagutdinov was later released without charged. Apparently the authorities could not agree what to charge him with. It's like this old Soviet joke. A policeman approaches and detains a man handing out leaflets in Red Square. Looking at the leaflets he finds them blank. "Why are they blank?", he asks. "Why write anything?", says the man. "Everyone understands."



During my PhD I published a paper with Simon Kirby and Graham Ritchie in which players in an interactive computer game had to find some way to communicate with one another despite no clear means by which to do so, and no pre-existing signals that could be used (Scott-Phillips et al., 2009). Exactly what was being communicated - and indeed the very fact that communication was even being attempted - had to be inferred wholly through consideration of the context in which the behaviour was observed. We did not realise that we were effectively simulating the suppression of free speech under conditions of political oppression! More recently, Tibor Tausz and György Gergely (2018) published an experimental study showing that 13-month-old infants make contextually appropriate inferences about meaning even in these sorts of wholly minimal contexts, where the signal itself is 'contentless' but its very existence is sufficient to infer intent and hence meaning.

Strictly speaking the case of Aslan Sagutdinov is not 100% minimal. He was holding a poster of a certain size, a common means of protest, and this fact about signal form must make some contribution to interpretation, however small. So this is not quite the sort of wholly limiting case that can be artificially induced in laboratory conditions. It is nevertheless close, and indeed the fact that the police saw fit to detain him despite his sign containing no actual words of protest is indeed evidence of just how effective and clear his message still was - and hence of how much potential human communicative abilities have as a means to create the common knowledge necessary for mass protest.

With thanks to Dina Baidildayeva and Simon DeDeo, who alerted me to this story. [See here for video.](#)

Scott-Phillips, T. C., Kirby, S., & Ritchie, G. R. S. (2009). Signalling signalhood and the emergence of communication. *Cognition*, *113*(2), 226-233.

Tauzin, T., & Gergely, G. (2018). Communicative mind-reading in preverbal infants. *Scientific Reports*, *8*(1), 9534.