

# A "quantum" approach to rational inattention

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I propose a model of rational inattention where the choice variable is a deterministic function of the exogenous variables, and still only a finite amount of information is being used. This holds provided the choice variable is discrete rather than continuous; that is, the mapping from the realization of the exogenous variables to the endogenous ones is piece-wise constant.

Thus, limited information is now a source of lumpiness in behavior, rather than a source of noise. A central result is that the mutual information between the exogenous variable and the endogenous one is simply equal to the entropy, in the usual discrete sense, of the endogenous variable.

The approach is illustrated with two applications: a general linear-quadratic problem with a uniform distribution, and a simple static model of price-setting where individual price setters face aggregate monetary shocks and idiosyncratic productivity shocks.

Keywords: Rational inattention, lumpy adjustment, price-setting, monetary policy, mutual information, entropy

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# 1 Introduction

In a series of seminal papers, Sims (2003,2006) has proposed a novel approach to bounded rationality. It is based on the view that people face information capacity constraints defined using Shannon's (1948) theory of information. More precisely, the number of bits that one can use to process the exogenous variables (like income) into the endogenous ones (like consumption) is limited. That informational requirement is defined by Shannon's mutual information concept, which tells us the amount of information obtained on a variable when one observes another, correlated one.

As a consequence of that information constraint, the endogenous variable is noisy compared to the optimal behaviour that would prevail absent an informational constraint. Thus, in many applications (such as Luo (2008), who studies a consumption problem, and the papers cited below on price-setting) the agents rationally allocate this noise so as to maximize its utility subject to the information capacity constraint. The more noisy is the endogenous variable in a given zone of the distribution of exogenous variables, the less the agent pays attention to that zone and the greater the informational capacity left for processing other zones.

As pointed out by Sims, the reason why noise must inevitably arise is that if the distribution of the exogenous variables is continuous, then an infinite amount of information would be needed to process a deterministic mapping from the exogenous variables into the endogenous ones.

In some settings, the noise is inherent to the problem of measuring a signal and the agents' informational capacity is used to reduce such a noise. In other settings, though, the result that behaviour adds noise to the exogenous variables is unpalatable. If the realization of the latter is perfectly observed then the agent would have to generate the noise artificially, but then it is problematic to ignore the information needed to generate such noise. It would then be more reasonable to assume that the behaviour of the agent remains deterministic while the information processing constraint prevents it from

targeting the optimal behaviour. However, that is not what is happening in the rational inattention literature.

In this paper, I propose an alternative approach to that issue. The idea is that the choice variable may be a deterministic function of the exogenous one and still make use of a finite amount of information if the choice variable is discrete rather than continuous; that is, the mapping from the realization of the exogenous variables to the endogenous ones is piece-wise constant, reflecting the fact that the agent can only elect a finite number of values for the choice variable, because of the informational constraint.

Thus, limited information is now a source of lumpiness in behavior, rather than a source of noise. The state space faced by the agent is partitioned into clusters and all points in the same cluster yield the same action. Of course, limited information is not the only source of lumpy behavior; it is well known that there are other sources, such as fixed or linear adjustment costs. But the approach proposed here yields many potentially testable predictions: In general, we expect that the greater the information processing ability of an economic entity, the less lumpy its behavior.

Another central result (Section 2) is that the mutual information between the exogenous variable and the endogenous one is simply equal to the entropy, in the usual discrete sense, of the endogenous variable. That is, the mutual information does not depend on the exact mapping from the exogenous variable to the endogenous one but only on the probability weights of the (discrete) distribution of the latter.

Sections 3 and 4 illustrate the kind of results that my approach would deliver by applying it to two simple examples: a general linear-quadratic problem with a uniform distribution, and a simple static model of price-setting where individual price setters face aggregate monetary shocks and idiosyncratic productivity shocks. The literature that has studied this issue (in particular, Mackowiak and Wiederholt (2009a,b), Paciello (2007)) uses Sim's noisy approach and has shown that under rational inattention prices were "sticky" in the sense that the aggregate price level was not reacting

one for one to the aggregate money stock<sup>1</sup>. However, prices are not lumpy: even a small monetary shock will generate a small (but non neutral) response of individual prices (one notable exception is Moscarini (2004))<sup>2</sup>. Here, in contrast, rational inattention leads to lumpy price-setting behavior; for prices to change, the shocks faced by a firm must be large enough to trigger a move to a different cluster.

Section 5 provides a more general discussion and concludes.

## 2 Continuous and discrete entropy and mutual information

It is somewhat important to realize that there are two different concepts of entropy. For a discrete distribution with  $n$  outcomes and probabilities  $p_i$ ,  $i = 1, \dots, n$ , we may define entropy as

$$S = - \sum_{i=1}^n p_i \log p_i.$$

On the other hand, for a continuous distribution with density  $f(x)$ , we may define entropy as

$$H(f) = - \int f(x) \log f(x).dx.$$

The reason why the two concepts do not coincide is as follows. A discrete distribution is always the limit of a sequence of continuous distributions, as they become more concentrated around the discrete outcomes. However, the continuous entropy  $H$  of those approximations does not converge to the corresponding  $S$ . Instead, it converges to  $-\infty$ .

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<sup>1</sup>The same result is reached by Saint-Paul (2005) in a world where firms are irrational and experiment alternative price-setting rules, while exerting local spillovers on each other.

<sup>2</sup>In that paper, lumpiness arises for different reasons than here. Time is continuous and there is a constraint on the flow of information processed by the agent. the exogenous variable follows a diffusion process. A noisy signal of that variable can be obtained at a cost. The cost structure of information is such that the signal will be drawn infrequently, at discrete dates. Thus there is lumpiness "in time" rather than in the state space. Consequently, the model is similar to that of Mankiw and Reis's (2002) sticky information paper.

Take for example the extreme case where  $x = 0$  with probability 1. Clearly,  $S(x) = 0$ . This discrete distribution is the limit of the continuous one defined by density  $f_\varepsilon(x) = f(x/\varepsilon)/\varepsilon$ , for any density  $f()$  over  $(-\infty, +\infty)$ , which is regular and has  $f(0) > 0$ , as  $\varepsilon$  goes to zero (in terms of distribution theory, these distributions converge to a Dirac function  $\delta(x)$ ). Furthermore,

$$H(f_\varepsilon) = H(f) + \log \varepsilon,$$

so that

$$\lim_{\varepsilon \rightarrow 0} H(f_\varepsilon) = -\infty.$$

Entropy is lower, the more concentrated the distribution. For both discrete and continuous distributions, the most concentrated one is when all the mass is at a single point. But the lower bound of  $S$  is zero, while that of  $H$  is  $-\infty$ .

Let us now turn to mutual information, which plays a key role in the theory of rational inattention. We consider two random variables  $x$  and  $y$ . Their densities are  $g()$  and  $f()$ , respectively. For any realization of  $x$ , we denote by  $f(y | x)$  the conditional distribution of  $y$  and its entropy is

$$H(y | x) = - \int_y f(y | x) \log f(y | x) . dy.$$

This can be averaged over  $x$ , which allows to define the conditional entropy of  $y$  :

$$H_x(y) = \int_x H(y | x) g(x) dx.$$

Now it can be easily shown that the entropy of the joint distribution of  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $H(x, y)$ , is such that<sup>3</sup>

$$H(x, y) = H(x) + H_x(y) = H(y) + H_y(x).$$

Consequently, we have that

$$H(y) - H_x(y) = H(x) - H_y(x) = M(x, y),$$

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<sup>3</sup>In fact, that property is one of the axioms imposed by Shannon to derive his functional form for entropy.

which is the *mutual information* between  $x$  and  $y$ . This quantity tells us how much knowledge of one variable reduces the entropy of the other, on average. If the two variables are independent, then  $M(x, y) = 0$ . On the other hand, if one had  $y = x$ , then the joint distribution is degenerate and  $f(y | x)$  becomes equal to the Dirac function  $\delta(y - x)$ . Hence all the  $H(y | x)$  are equal to  $-\infty$  and so is  $H_x(y)$ . We then have that  $M(x, y) = +\infty$ . This means that knowledge of  $x$  gives us an infinite amount of information about  $y$ . The same conclusion would be reached if instead of  $y = x$ , there was any other mapping which allowed to retrieve one variable from the other.

The theory of rational inattention, as proposed by Sims, assumes that an agent receives a signal  $y$  (say, income), which must be processed into a decision variable  $x$  (say, consumption). The agent's ability to process information is limited and that limit takes the form of a constraint on the mutual information between the two variables:

$$M(x, y) \leq K.$$

Since  $M(x, y) = +\infty$  if  $x$  is a deterministic function of  $y$ , this constraint cannot be matched. The endogenous variable must be related to the exogenous one in a noisy fashion for the information capacity constraint to be matched. In other words, processing a continuum of real values with perfect precision requires an infinite amount of information.

I now show that there is an important exception to that principle, and this is the case when  $x$ , while being a deterministic function of  $y$ , only takes a finite number values. There is then no longer a mapping from  $y$  to  $x$ . While  $x$  can be retrieved from  $y$ , the converse is not true. In such a case, the mutual information between  $x$  and  $y$  remains finite, and is in fact equal to the discrete entropy  $S$  of the random variable  $x$ .

Let us consider a collection of values of  $x$ ,  $X = \{x_1, \dots, x_n\}$ , and assume that any  $y$  is assigned to one of those values, called  $x(y)$ . For any  $x \in X$ , we define  $T_x = \{y, x(y) = x\}$ . To avoid manipulating infinite quantities, I will consider my deterministic assignment as the limit, for  $\varepsilon \rightarrow 0$ , of the random

variable  $x$  defined by its conditional distribution:

$$f_\varepsilon(x | y) = \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x(y)}{\varepsilon} \right).$$

Here again,  $\hat{f}()$  is any regular density such that  $\hat{f}(0) > 0$ . We are again in a situation where the conditional of  $x$  is a Dirac, now around  $x(y)$ , and we approximate it by a density which becomes increasingly concentrated around  $x(y)$ . To fix ideas, one can just take the standard normal density for  $\hat{f}()$ .

The conditional entropy of  $x$ , if  $x$  is distributed as  $f_\varepsilon$ , is

$$\begin{aligned} H_y(x; \varepsilon) &= - \int_y f(y) \int_x \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x(y)}{\varepsilon} \right) \log \left[ \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x(y)}{\varepsilon} \right) \right] dx dy \\ &= - \int_y f(y) \int_z \hat{f}(z) \log \left[ \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f}(z) \right] dz dy \\ &= H(\hat{f}) + \log \varepsilon. \end{aligned}$$

So, clearly,  $\lim_{\varepsilon \rightarrow 0} H_y(x; \varepsilon) = -\infty$ .

Consider now the entropy of  $x$ , given  $\varepsilon$ , denoted by  $H(x; \varepsilon)$ . The unconditional density of  $x$  is

$$g_\varepsilon(x) = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x_i}{\varepsilon} \right) F(T_i).$$

Thus,

$$\begin{aligned} H(x; \varepsilon) &= - \int_x g_\varepsilon(x) \log g_\varepsilon(x) dx \\ &= - \sum_{i=1}^n \int_x \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x_i}{\varepsilon} \right) F(T_i) \log \left( \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f} \left( \frac{x - x_i}{\varepsilon} \right) F(T_i) \right) dx \\ &= - \sum_{i=1}^n \int_z \hat{f}(z) F(T_i) \log \left( \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \hat{f}(z) F(T_i) \right) dz \\ &= H(\hat{f}) + \log(\varepsilon) + S(X), \end{aligned}$$

where  $S(X)$  is the discrete entropy of the random variable whose realization is  $x_i$ , with corresponding probability  $p_i = F(T_i)$ . Thus  $H(x; \varepsilon)$  also

converges to  $-\infty$  when  $\varepsilon$  becomes nil, however, the mutual information remains finite and

$$M(x, y; \varepsilon) = S(X).$$

This is independent of  $\varepsilon$  and equal to the discrete entropy of the random variable  $x_i$ . Obviously, it remains equal to that as  $\varepsilon \rightarrow 0$ . Hence the mutual information of our assignment process is finite.

### 3 The linear-quadratic case

I now apply these ideas to the linear-quadratic case. In its simplest case, the agent receives a continuous signal  $y$  with density  $f(y)$  and associated measure  $F(M) = \int_M f(y)dy$ , and wants to approximate it (in the least squares sense) by a deterministic function  $x(y)$  which is constant over each subset of a finite partition of the domain of  $y$ . Thus, using the preceding derivation for mutual information in the discrete case, we can formulate the problem as follows (in the sequel I will use natural logarithms in the definition of entropy. Thus  $K$  is expressed in bits /  $\ln 2$ ).

$$(P) \quad : \quad \min_{n, S=(x_1, \dots, x_n), x(): \mathbb{R} \rightarrow S} E(x(y) - y)^2$$

$$s.t. \quad - \sum_{i=1}^n F(x^{-1}(x_n)) \ln F(x^{-1}(x_n)) \leq K$$

A first property, which is unsurprising given the convexity of the loss function, is that the optimum must be such that the sets  $x^{-1}(x_n)$ , denoted by  $S_n$ , have a convex interior.

Lemma 1 – *Consider a solution to (P). Then  $C(\hat{S}_n) = \hat{S}_n \cup \partial \hat{S}_n$  is convex.*

Proof – see Appendix.

Lemma 1 tells us that the  $S_n$  must be intervals, except for closed subsets of measure zero. In practice those subsets are irrelevant so we will focus on solution that are piece-wise constant.



Lemma 2 –  $x_n = E(y \mid y \in S_n)$ . Therefore  $x(y)$  is non decreasing.

Proof: the first part is straightforward from the optimal choice of  $x_n$ . The second derives from the fact that the  $S_n$ s are intervals except for subsets of measure zero.

I now focus on the case where  $f()$  is uniform over  $[0, 1]$ . It is then possible to fully characterize the equilibrium:

Theorem 1 – *Assume  $f()$  is uniform. Then an optimal policy is such that*

(i) *The interval  $[0, 1]$  is partitioned into  $N$  adjacent intervals  $[y_n, y_{n+1}]$ ,  $y_0 = 0, y_N = 1$ .*

(ii)  *$N = INT^+(e^K)$ , where  $INT^+(z)$  is the smallest integer  $m$  such that  $z \leq m$ .*

(iii)  *$N - 1$  intervals have the same length  $\Delta$ , where  $\Delta$  is the smallest solution to*

$$-(N - 1)\Delta \ln \Delta - (1 - (N - 1)\Delta) \ln(1 - (N - 1)\Delta) = K,$$

*while the remaining interval has length  $1 - (N - 1)\Delta$ .*

(iv)

$$\Delta < 1/N < 1 - (N - 1)\Delta$$

(v) *For  $y \in [y_n, y_{n+1}]$ ,  $x(y) = x_n = \frac{y_n + y_{n+1}}{2}$*

(v) *The resulting value function is  $V = (N - 1)\Delta^3 + (1 - (N - 1)\Delta)^3$*

(vi) *The arrangement of those intervals is irrelevant.*

Proof — See Appendix.

Note that if capacity  $K$  is such that there is an integer number of bits, then  $K = k \ln 2$  with  $k$  integer, and  $e^K = 2^k$ . In this important special case, the optimal solution, quite naturally, consists in splitting the interval into  $2^k$  intervals, since one needs exactly  $k$  bits to encode the actual interval to which  $y$  is assigned. Furthermore, in this limit case where the capacity constraint is marginally binding for  $N = 2^k$ , all intervals will have the same length  $1/2^k$ .

If  $K/\ln 2$  is not integer, then partitioning into equal intervals is not optimal. Instead, we have one more interval than the largest number of intervals

that would allow us to have an equal partition while meeting the informational constraint. We pick  $N - 1$  equally sized intervals of length  $\Delta$ , and the remaining one has length  $\Delta' = 1 - (N - 1)\Delta > \Delta$ .  $\Delta$  is such that the informational constraint binds with equality.

## 4 An application to price-setting

We now discuss the implications of the approach derived above for the problem of price setting and the effects of monetary policy.

Let us consider the following static version of the standard new Keynesian model<sup>4</sup>. There is a continuum of consumers-yeoman farmers of total mass 1. They are indexed by  $i$  and they monopolistically supply an atomistic good with the same index  $i$ . Thus there is also a continuum of goods of mass 1. The utility function for individual  $j$  is

$$V_j = E \ln \left[ \left( \int_0^1 c_{ij}^\alpha di \right)^{\frac{1}{2\alpha}} \left( \frac{m_j}{p} \right)^{1/2} X^{-\psi} - z_j x_j^{1+\mu} \right],$$

where  $E$  is the expectations operator,  $c_{ij}$  consumption of good  $i$ ,  $m_j$  money holdings,  $p$  the aggregate price level,  $z_j$  an idiosyncratic supply shock and  $x_j$  the supply of good  $j$ . The term in  $X^{-\psi}$  is a negative congestion externality, where  $X$  is aggregate real output (defined below) and  $\psi \geq 0$ . This will allow me to pick the value of  $\psi$  so as to focus on a special case which is computationally much simpler, while what is lost by doing so is independent of the point being illustrated here.

For simplicity, the aggregate price level that deflates money holdings in the utility function is assumed to be equal to the price index that is dual to the aggregate consumption index

$$c_j = \left( \int_0^1 c_{ij}^\alpha di \right)^{\frac{1}{\alpha}}$$

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<sup>4</sup>See Weitzman (1985), Blanchard and Kiyotaki (1987).

$$p = \left[ \int_0^1 p_i^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} di \right]^{-\frac{1-\alpha}{\alpha}}.$$

The usual derivations concerning demand functions and aggregation are made in the Appendix. We can show that each yeoman farmer maximizes the indirect utility function given by:

$$E \ln \left[ p_j^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} - \phi_j p_j^{-\frac{1+\mu}{1-\alpha}} \right], \quad (1)$$

where  $\phi_j$  is a composite shock defined by

$$\phi_j = z_j M^{\mu+\psi} p^{1-\psi+\frac{\alpha\mu}{1-\alpha}} \quad (2)$$

is a composite shock and the second term is treated as constant by the agent since it is independent of his pricing policy.

From now on, I will assume that  $\psi$  is such that the composite shock does not depend on the aggregate price level:  $\psi = 1 + \alpha\mu/(1 - \alpha)$ . Thus,  $\phi_j = z_j M^{\frac{\mu+1-\alpha}{1-\alpha}}$ ; spillovers in price formation across firms are shut down, which greatly simplifies the analysis. It is then useful to define  $\gamma$  as  $\gamma = \frac{\mu+1-\alpha}{1-\alpha}$ .

As a benchmark, we can derive the flexible price equilibrium with no informational constraint where a different price is set for each realization of  $\phi_j$ . The FOC for price-setting is equivalent to

$$\begin{aligned} p_j &= \left( \frac{(1+\mu)\phi_j}{\alpha} \right)^{1/\gamma} \\ &= \left( \frac{1+\mu}{\alpha} \right)^{1/\gamma} z_j^{1/\gamma} M. \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Integrating we get the aggregate price level:

$$p = M \tilde{z}^{1/\gamma} \left( \frac{1+\mu}{\alpha} \right)^{1/\gamma},$$

where  $\tilde{z}$  is an aggregate of  $z$  defined as

$$\tilde{z} = \left[ \int_0^1 z_j^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha+\mu}} dj \right]^{-\frac{1-\alpha+\mu}{\alpha}}.$$

Thus money is neutral, the aggregate price level is proportional to  $M$ , and real aggregate output is constant and equal to

$$X = \frac{Y}{p} = \frac{M}{p} = \left( \tilde{z} \frac{1 + \mu}{\alpha} \right)^{-1/\gamma}.$$

Output is lower, the larger the aggregate cost index  $\tilde{z}$ , the larger the elasticity of the disutility of effort  $\mu$ , and the lower the elasticity of demand for the individual goods, i.e. the larger the markup over marginal cost  $1/\alpha$ .

The New Keynesian literature takes this framework and imposes some nominal price rigidity. I now introduce capacity constraints in processing information along the lines discussed above and derive the associated behaviour of output and the price level.

Under rational inattention, people do not have the information processing ability to pursue a rule like (3) for any value of  $\phi_j$ . Instead they are going to pursue a rule such that the mutual information between  $p_j$  and  $\phi_j$  satisfies a capacity constraint. Let us assume that, as in the above analysis, they pursue a discrete deterministic rule and partition the support of  $\phi_j$  into intervals  $I_k = [\bar{\phi}_k, \bar{\phi}_{k+1}]$  such that a constant value of  $p_j$ , denoted by  $\bar{p}_k$ , is pursued within each interval. We assume  $k$  varies between 0 and  $N + 1$ , with  $\bar{\phi}_0 = 0$  and  $\bar{\phi}_{N+1} = +\infty$ .

The distribution of the composite shock  $\phi$  has density

$$g(\phi) = \int_0^{+\infty} f(M) M^{-\gamma} h(\phi M^{-\gamma}) dM. \quad (4)$$

Individuals select the number of intervals, their bounds and their associated price levels so as to maximize:

$$\max_{N, \{\bar{\phi}_k, k=1, \dots, N\}, \{\bar{p}_k, k=0, \dots, N\}} U = \sum_{k=0}^N \int_{\bar{\phi}_k}^{\bar{\phi}_{k+1}} g(\phi) \ln \left[ \bar{p}_k^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} - \phi \bar{p}_k^{-\frac{1+\mu}{1-\alpha}} \right] d\phi, \quad (5)$$

subject to the information capacity constraint

$$- \sum_{k=0}^N \left( \int_{\bar{\phi}_k}^{\bar{\phi}_{k+1}} g(\phi) d\phi \right) \ln \left( \int_{\bar{\phi}_k}^{\bar{\phi}_{k+1}} g(\phi) d\phi \right) \leq K. \quad (6)$$

An equilibrium is therefore a set  $\{N, \{\bar{\phi}_k, k = 1, \dots, N\}, \{\bar{p}_k, k = 0, \dots, N\}\}$  which maximizes (5) subject to (6). The solution to this problem then delivers the aggregate price level as a function  $p(M)$  of the realization of the aggregate money stock. Given  $M$ , a price-setter  $j$  is in interval  $I_k$  iff  $\bar{\phi}_k \leq z_j M^\gamma < \bar{\phi}_{k+1}$ , which occurs with probability  $H(\bar{\phi}_{k+1} M^{-\gamma}) - H(\bar{\phi}_k M^{-\gamma})$ . Therefore, the aggregate price level  $p(M)$  is given by

$$p(M) = \left( \sum_{k=0}^N (H(\bar{\phi}_{k+1} M^{-\gamma}) - H(\bar{\phi}_k M^{-\gamma})) \bar{p}_k^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} \right)^{-\frac{1-\alpha}{\alpha}}, \quad (7)$$

where by convention  $H(+\infty) = 1$ . This in turn allows to compute output  $X = M/p(M)$ . Note that the assumption made on  $\psi$  guarantees that the environment faced by each price-setter only depends on the exogenous variables and not on the prices set by other agents<sup>5</sup>. This greatly simplifies the computations.

I solve for such an equilibrium numerically, performing global optimization on all the possible partitions of the domain of  $\phi$  into a finite number of intervals which match the informational capacity constraint. To keep things tractable the possible values for the jump points have been discretized<sup>6</sup>.

Table 1 reports some summary statistics for the simulations. I start from a benchmark numerical exercise where both  $f(\cdot)$  and  $h(\cdot)$  are log-normal, with  $E \ln M = E \ln z = 0$  and  $\text{Var}(\ln M) = \text{Var}(\ln z) = 1$ . The other parameters were  $\mu = 1$  and  $\alpha = 0.5$ .

I first start by simulating this economy for  $K = 1.2$  and I gradually loosen the information capacity constraint by increasing  $K$ . Table 1 reports the corresponding number of clusters along with the variance of log output. Figure 1 reports the behavior of output as a function of the monetary shock

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<sup>5</sup>Otherwise, the shock  $\phi$  and its distribution  $g(\cdot)$  would themselves depend on the aggregate price level, and there would be no closed-form formula such as (7) for the latter—one would then need to search for a fixed point equilibrium rather than just an optimum.

<sup>6</sup>More precisely, there are  $\bar{N}$  possible values of  $\bar{\phi}_k$  separated by a probability weight of  $1/(\bar{N} + 1)$ , i.e. if those eligible critical values are denoted by  $\tilde{\phi}_j$ ,  $j = 1, \dots, \bar{N}$ , then  $\int_{\tilde{\phi}_j}^{\tilde{\phi}_{j+1}} g(\phi) d\phi = 1/(\bar{N} + 1)$ .

In the simulations, one has picked  $\bar{N} = 20$ .

$M$ . We see that for a wide range of values of the money stock the curve is quite flat: despite the small number of clusters, heterogeneity due to idiosyncratic shocks is enough to yield near neutrality at the aggregate level, a not unusual result (Caplin and Spulber (1987), Caballero and Engel (1993), Burstein and Hellwig (2007)). The curve is hump-shaped: at small (resp. large) values of  $M$ , most firms charge their minimum (resp. maximum) price, and an increase in  $M$  boosts output. For intermediate values, a composition effect creates a force in the opposite direction, as some firms move to a cluster with a higher price. This composition effect creates a zone where money growth is contractionary, which also happens in other models of price rigidity.

Figure 2 compares the flatter portion of the output curve between a low information ( $K = 1.2$ ) and a high information ( $K = 1.5$ ) regime. We see that output is substantially flatter in the latter case. Nevertheless, as Table 1 shows, for local increases in capacity, the variance of output may well go up.

It is also interesting to look at the distribution of individual prices. They are reported in Figures 3 (for  $K = 1.2$ ) and 4 (for  $K = 1.6$ ). The dimension of each rectangle along the y-axis is the price and along the x-axis it is the probability weight associated with the corresponding interval of values of  $\phi$ . We see that the probability weights on each price are decreasing with the price, meaning that price-setters are devoting more attention to situations where the required price is higher. This is presumably due to the marginal disutility of labor schedule: the utility cost of not paying attention to these states is high because if one charges too low a price the labor input must be very high<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>This clearly rests on my assumption that demand must be met; this might not remain realistic for very high realizations of the demand shock.

Entropy	#of clusters	Variance of output
1.2	4	0.17
1.3	5	0.18
1.4	5	0.187
1.5	5	0.1
1.6	6	0.1

Table 1.

Table 2 analyses the effect of an increase in the variance of monetary shocks on the distribution of individual prices for  $K = 1.4$ . We compare the benchmark situation to one such that  $\text{Var}(\ln M) = 2$  and  $E(\ln M) = -0.5$  (Implying that  $E(M)$  is the same as in the benchmark). We see that the increase in the variance of money shocks compels price-setters to devote more attention to high realization of those shocks<sup>8</sup>: the upper-tail of the distribution of the composite shocks is split into more, and finer, clusters, while the first interval is coarser. Also, the variance of log output increases from 0.19 to 0.49.

Table 3c performs the reverse exercise of dividing the variance of monetary shocks by 2, while again adjusting the mean log of  $M$  to hold  $E(M)$  constant. We see that the number of clusters is the same, and so is their size, but the order is changed: the second cluster gets the biggest weight, while more attention is paid to low realizations of the shock than before. The intuition for this result is unclear.

Cluster	Price	Weight
1	0.95	0.43
2	1.96	0.24
3	3.74	0.19
4	7.0	0.095
5	23.63	0.048

<sup>8</sup>That is because of the skewness of the log-normal distribution along with the increasing marginal disutility of labor property. But for even larger increases in the variance of money shocks, the price setters will also spend information capacity on the lower tail of the distribution. Thus, for  $\text{Var}(\ln M) = 4$ , cluster 1 has a minimal weight of 0.048.

Table 2a –  $K = 1.4$ , benchmark.

Cluster	Price	Weight
1	0.76	0.52
2	1.67	0.19
3	2.84	0.095
4	4.99	0.095
5	8.66	0.048
6	47.4	0.048

Table 2b –  $K = 1.4$ ,  $\text{Var}(\ln M) = 2$  and  $E(\ln M) = -0.5$ .

Cluster	Price	Weight
1	0.81	0.19
2	1.93	0.43
3	3.65	0.24
4	6.02	0.095
5	13.45	0.048

Table 2c –  $K = 1.4$ ,  $\text{Var}(\ln M) = 0.5$  and  $E(\ln M) = 0.25$

## 5 Discussion

The general message of this paper is that information processing constraints yield lumpy behavior. Thus, when the exogenous variables change, inattention results in inaction, while in the standard approach it is associated with inadequacy, i.e. embodies excess noise. In both cases, the endogenous variable does not react enough to the exogenous one, although here there will be a jump if one crosses the frontier between clusters.

The existence of lumpiness in the adjustment of economic variables has been documented in a number of areas. For example, Doms and Dunne (1998), studying investment at the plant level, find that "Many plants occasionally alter their capital stocks in lumpy fashions. Of the plants in a balanced panel, over half experience a capital adjustment of at least 37 %



in one year, and by 50% in two consecutive years". In the area of price setting, Klenow and Kryvstov (2008) find (table III) that individual price changes are usually large, with a mean size of 14 %. Dhyne et al. (2006) report similar findings, along with substantial heterogeneity in the degree of lumpiness of price adjustment across sectors. Finally, evidence of lumpiness in employment can be found in Davis et al (1996) or Caballero et al. (1997). The latter, in particular, found that the distribution of employment changes is typically bimodal.

Of course, rational inattention is not the only reason why there could be lumpiness. The above literature has mostly focused on fixed and linear adjustment costs and rational inattention and adjustment costs are not mutually exclusive mechanisms. The rational inattention mechanism may be of particular interest when large adjustment costs are implausible, as in the area of price setting. Furthermore, a range of novel predictions may be generated regarding the determinants of lumpiness: The greater an economic agent's ability to process information, the less lumpy its behaviour. Thus one may speculate that advanced information technologies have reduced lumpiness<sup>9</sup>, or that firms with a greater fraction of highly skilled workers have less lumpy behavior – this may help explain, for example, the finding by Doms and Dunne (1998) that smaller plants have a more lumpy adjustment, if one is willing to believe that smaller plants employ fewer skilled workers, or by Dhyne et al (2006, fig. 1) that some sectors (like gasoline) have much less lumpy price adjustment than others (like haircuts).

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<sup>9</sup>This is the message of the empirical study by Bartel et al. (2005) in the space of product diversity.

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## APPENDIX

Proof of Lemma 1.

Consider  $y \in \mathring{S}_n$  and  $y' \in \mathring{S}_p$  for  $p \neq n$ . A swap between  $y$  and  $y'$  would be marginally improving iff

$$(x_n - y')^2 + (x_p - y)^2 < (x_n - y)^2 + (x_p - y')^2,$$

or equivalently

$$(x_n - x_p)(y - y') > 0.$$

Let us now assume that for some  $n$ ,  $\partial\mathring{S}_n$  is not convex. Then we can find  $y, y'' \in C(\mathring{S}_n)$ , and  $\lambda \in (0, 1)$  such that  $y' = \lambda y + (1 - \lambda)y'' \notin C(\mathring{S}_n)$ . Since  $y$  and  $y''$  are limits of sequences of elements of  $\mathring{S}_n$ , we can simply assume they are themselves interior. Since  $y' \notin C(\mathring{S}_n)$  and  $C(\mathring{S}_n)$  is closed, there exists an interval  $I' = (\lambda - \varepsilon, \lambda + \varepsilon)$  such that  $y'(\lambda') = \lambda' y + (1 - \lambda')y'' \notin C(\mathring{S}_n)$  for all  $\lambda' \in (\lambda - \varepsilon, \lambda + \varepsilon)$ . Since  $y, y'' \in \mathring{S}_n$ , we can construct two intervals  $J = (y - \eta, y + \eta) \subset \mathring{S}_n$  and  $J'' = (y'' - \eta, y'' + \eta) \subset \mathring{S}_n$  and furthermore choose them such that they do not intersect  $J' = y'(I')$ . Finally there exists a mapping  $y(\cdot)$  from  $I'$  to  $J$  and  $y''(\cdot)$  from  $I'$  to  $J''$  which allows us to index those two sets by  $\lambda'$ .

For  $\lambda' \in I'$   $(y'(\lambda') - y(\lambda'))(y'(\lambda') - y''(\lambda')) < 0$ . Thus, either  $(x_n - x(y'(\lambda')))(y(\lambda') - y'(\lambda')) > 0$  or  $(x_n - x(y'(\lambda')))(y''(\lambda') - y'(\lambda')) > 0$ . Let  $y^*(\lambda')$  be the element of  $\{y(\lambda'), y''(\lambda')\}$  such that the inequality is satisfied. Consider now the new assignment which, for all the  $\lambda'$ s, replaces  $x(y'(\lambda'))$  with  $x_n$  and sets  $x(y^*(\lambda')) = x(y'(\lambda'))$  instead of  $x_n$ . Each of those swaps is marginally improving the objective function by an amount which is bounded from below by a strictly positive number, since there is a finite number of values of  $x_n$  and  $|y'(\lambda') - y^*(\lambda')|$  is also bounded away from zero. Integrating those gains over  $I'$  and noting that  $y(\cdot)$  has full support, we see that the objective function must improve by a strictly positive amount, which contradicts the initial optimality condition. Thus  $C(\mathring{S}_n)$  must be convex. QED.

Proof of Theorem 1.

Lemma 1 implies that any optimum must be a partition by intervals, up to a set of measure zero. It follows that one cannot improve on such a partition. By Lemma 2, for any partition the optimal  $x_n$  must be  $\frac{y_n+y_{n+1}}{2}$ , which proves (v). Next, computing the value function for such a configuration, we get that

$$E(x(y) - y)^2 = \frac{1}{12} \sum_{n=0}^{N-1} (y_{n+1} - y_n)^3. \quad (8)$$

For a given  $N$ , we minimize (8) subject to

$$\begin{aligned} y_0 &= 0, \\ y_N &= 1, \\ - \sum_{n=0}^{N-1} (y_{n+1} - y_n) \ln(y_{n+1} - y_n) &\leq K. \end{aligned}$$

The FOCs are:

$$(y_n - y_{n-1})^2 - (y_{n+1} - y_n)^2 = \lambda(\ln(y_n - y_{n-1}) - \ln(y_{n+1} - y_n)), \quad 0 < n < N. \quad (9)$$

Note that absent the capacity constraint, optimality would imply that  $y_n - y_{n-1} = y_{n+1} - y_n$ . All intervals would then be of constant length  $1/N$  and the resulting entropy would be  $\ln N$ . Thus, if  $\ln N < K$ , then  $\lambda = 0$  and the optimal solution is the unconstrained one. However, one can always improve on this by picking a larger  $N$ , since the initial configuration can always be replicated by collapsing the additional interval to a set of measure zero by equating their bounds. Therefore the optimal  $N$  will be such that  $\ln N \geq K$ , i.e. the capacity constraint will be binding. Let us then consider such an  $N$ . Call  $\Delta_n$  the length of interval  $n$ . The FOC (9) implies that  $\Delta_n^2 - \lambda \ln \Delta_n$  is invariant across intervals. Since the function  $X^2 - \lambda \ln X$  is U-shaped,  $\Delta_n$  can at most have two values, let us call them  $\Delta$  and  $\Delta'$ . Clearly, the invariance property is then satisfied for  $\lambda = \frac{\Delta'^2 - \Delta^2}{\ln \Delta' - \ln \Delta}$ . Without loss of generality, assume  $\Delta \leq \Delta'$ . Let  $q$  the number of intervals of length  $\Delta$ . Since the whole  $[0,1]$  interval must be partitioned, it must be that

$$q\Delta + (N - q)\Delta' = 1$$

and

$$-q\Delta \ln \Delta - (N - q)\Delta' \ln \Delta' = K.$$

Eliminating  $\Delta'$ , we get

$$\Delta' = \frac{1 - q\Delta}{N - q},$$

and we see that  $\Delta$  must solve

$$\phi(\Delta) = -q\Delta \ln \Delta - (1 - q\Delta) \ln \left( \frac{1 - q\Delta}{N - q} \right) = K. \quad (10)$$

The function  $\phi(\Delta)$  is increasing and then decreasing and reaches its maximum at  $\Delta = 1/N$ , at which point we also have  $\Delta' = 1/N$ . Therefore, there is at most one solution  $\Delta$  such that  $\Delta \leq \Delta'$ . Furthermore,  $\phi(0) = \ln(N - q)$  and  $\phi(1/N) = \ln N$ . Therefore, there exists a solution for  $\Delta$  provided

$$\ln(N - q) < K \leq \ln N.$$

In particular, for any  $N$  the set of values of  $q$  for which this holds is non empty.

Despite that  $q$  is integer, equation (10) also defines a value of  $\Delta$  for any real number  $q$ . Furthermore,

$$\frac{\partial \phi}{\partial q} = \Delta(\ln \Delta' - \ln \Delta) + \Delta - \Delta' < 0.^{10}$$

Since  $\phi'(\Delta) > 0$ , it follows that  $\frac{d\Delta}{dq} > 0$ .

Next, note that the resulting loss function, up to a positive multiplicative constant, is equal to  $V = q\Delta^3 + (N - q)\Delta'^3$ . Differentiating, we get

$$\begin{aligned} dV &= (\Delta^3 - \Delta'^3)dq - 3q\Delta'^2d\Delta + 3\Delta'^3dq + 3q\Delta^2d\Delta - 3q\Delta'^2d\Delta \\ &= (\Delta^3 - \Delta'^3)dq + 3\Delta'^2(\Delta' - q)dq + 3q(\Delta^2 - \Delta'^2)d\Delta. \end{aligned}$$

Since  $\frac{d\Delta}{dq} > 0$ ,  $\Delta < \Delta'$ , and  $\Delta' < 1 \leq q$ , all terms are negative if  $dq > 0$ . Therefore,  $V$  is a decreasing function of  $q$ ; given  $N$ , the optimal value of  $q$  is the largest possible one, i.e.  $q = N - 1$ . The resulting loss function is then

$$V = (N - 1)\Delta^3 + (1 - (N - 1)\Delta)^3, \quad (11)$$

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<sup>10</sup>It can be checked that this expression is always negative by noting that it would be equal to zero at  $\Delta = \Delta'$  and that its derivative with respect to  $\Delta'$  is  $\Delta/\Delta' - 1 < 0$ .

and  $\Delta$  now solves

$$\tilde{\phi}(\Delta) = -(N-1)\Delta \ln \Delta - (1 - (N-1)\Delta) \ln(1 - (N-1)\Delta) = K. \quad (12)$$

What is the optimal value of  $N$ ? First of all, differentiating  $\tilde{\phi}$  with respect to  $N$  and  $\Delta$  we get

$$\frac{d\Delta}{dN} = -\frac{\Delta}{N-1} \left(1 + \frac{1}{\ln \Delta' - \ln \Delta}\right) < 0. \quad (13)$$

Next, differentiating (11) and using (13) we get that

$$\frac{dV}{dN} = \Delta^3 - 3\Delta\Delta'^2 + 3\Delta(\Delta'^2 - \Delta^2) \left(1 + \frac{1}{\ln \Delta' - \ln \Delta}\right).$$

This expression is positive if and only if

$$2\Delta^2 < \frac{3(\Delta + \Delta')(\Delta' - \Delta)}{\ln \Delta' - \ln \Delta}.$$

Calling  $\theta = \Delta'/\Delta > 1$ , this is equivalent to  $\ln \theta < 3(\theta^2 - 1)/2$ , which is always true.

Thus  $dV/dN > 0$ . Consequently, the optimal value of  $N$  is the smallest one such that  $\ln N \geq K$ , i.e.  $N = INT(e^K)$ .

QED

Derivation of (1)-(2).

The budget constraint of the individual is

$$\int_0^1 p_i c_{ij} + m_j \leq y_j + s_j,$$

where  $y_j = p_j x_j$  is his income and  $s_j$  is rebated seigniorage. In equilibrium the total money stock is  $M = \int_0^1 m_j dj$  and we assume for simplicity that seigniorage is rebated proportionally to the value of output produced by the individual:

$$s_j = M \frac{y_j}{Y}, \forall j,$$

where

$$Y = \int_0^1 y_j dj$$

is GDP. Aggregate real output is defined as  $X = \left( \int_0^1 x_j^\alpha dj \right)^{1/\alpha}$ .

We assume that the money stock is drawn from a distribution with density  $f(M)$  and c.d.f  $F(M)$ . We also assume that the idiosyncratic shock is drawn from a distribution with density  $h(z)$  and cumulative  $H(z)$ .

Solving for the consumer's optimal consumption and money holdings yields, after a few steps, the following relationship:

$$c_{ij} = \frac{m_j}{p_i^{\frac{1}{1-\alpha}} p^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}}}. \quad (14)$$

Aggregating across individuals, this gives the demand curve for good  $i$  :

$$C_i = \frac{M}{p_i^{\frac{1}{1-\alpha}} p^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}}}. \quad (15)$$

We assume that all producers meet demand. Therefore,  $x_j = C_j$ . Next,

$$\begin{aligned} Y &= \int p_j x_j dj \\ &= \int p_j C_j dj \\ &= M. \end{aligned}$$

We can also check that  $X = \left( \int C_i^\alpha di \right)^{1/\alpha} = M/p$ .

Furthermore, aggregating (14) across goods we see that the aggregate consumption index for individual  $j$  is equal to

$$c_j = \frac{m_j}{p}.$$

We also have that  $\int_0^1 p_i c_{ij} = m_j = p c_j$ . Substituting into the budget constraint, we get that

$$\begin{aligned} m_j &= \frac{y_j + s_j}{2}; \\ c_j &= \frac{y_j + s_j}{2p}. \end{aligned}$$



Noting that  $s_j = M \frac{y_j}{Y}$  and  $y_j = p_j x_j$  we get an indirect utility function

$$\begin{aligned}
V_j &= E \ln \left[ c_j^{1/2} \left( \frac{m_j}{p} \right)^{1/2} \left( \frac{M}{p} \right)^{-\psi} - z_j x_j^{1+\mu} \right] \\
&= E \ln \left[ \frac{p_j x_j (1 + M/Y)}{2p} \left( \frac{M}{p} \right)^{-\psi} - z_j x_j^{1+\mu} \right] \\
&= E \ln \left[ \frac{p_j x_j}{p} \left( \frac{M}{p} \right)^{-\psi} - z_j x_j^{1+\mu} \right]
\end{aligned} \tag{16}$$

It is this quantity that the individual maximizes when setting his price  $p_j$  subject to the demand curve (15). Substituting this demand curve into (16) we can rewrite the objective function of the producer as

$$\begin{aligned}
V_j &= E \ln \left[ \left( \frac{p_j}{p} \right)^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} \frac{M}{p} \left( \frac{M}{p} \right)^{-\psi} - z_j \frac{M^{1+\mu}}{p_j^{\frac{1+\mu}{1-\alpha}} p^{-\frac{\alpha(1+\mu)}{1-\alpha}}} \right] \\
&= E \ln \left[ p_j^{-\frac{\alpha}{1-\alpha}} - \phi_j p_j^{-\frac{1+\mu}{1-\alpha}} \right] + E \ln \left[ p^{\frac{2\alpha-1}{1-\alpha} + \psi} M^{1-\psi} \right],
\end{aligned}$$

where  $\phi_j$  is defined by (2). This clearly amounts to maximizing (1).

Figure 1

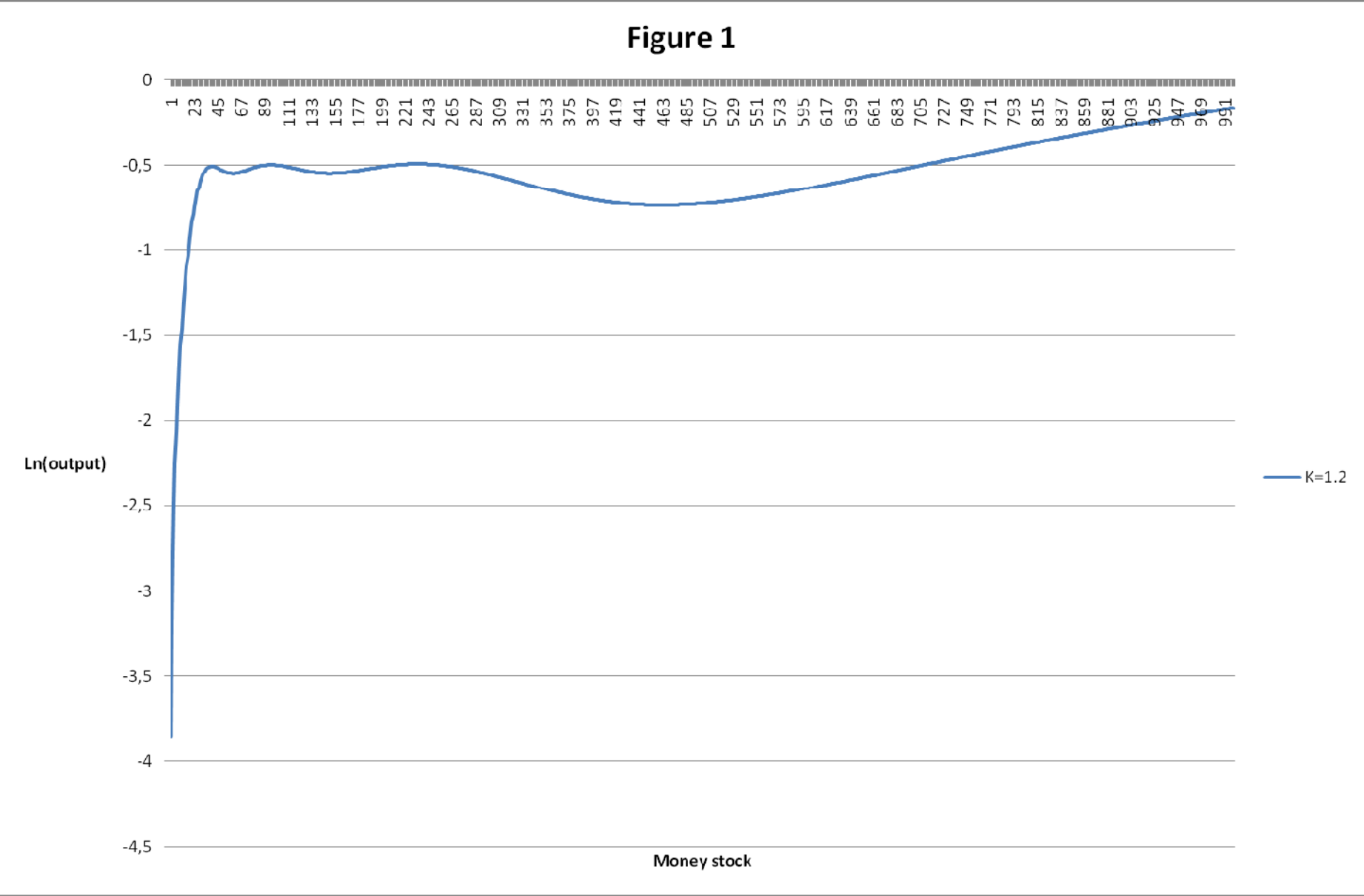


Figure 2

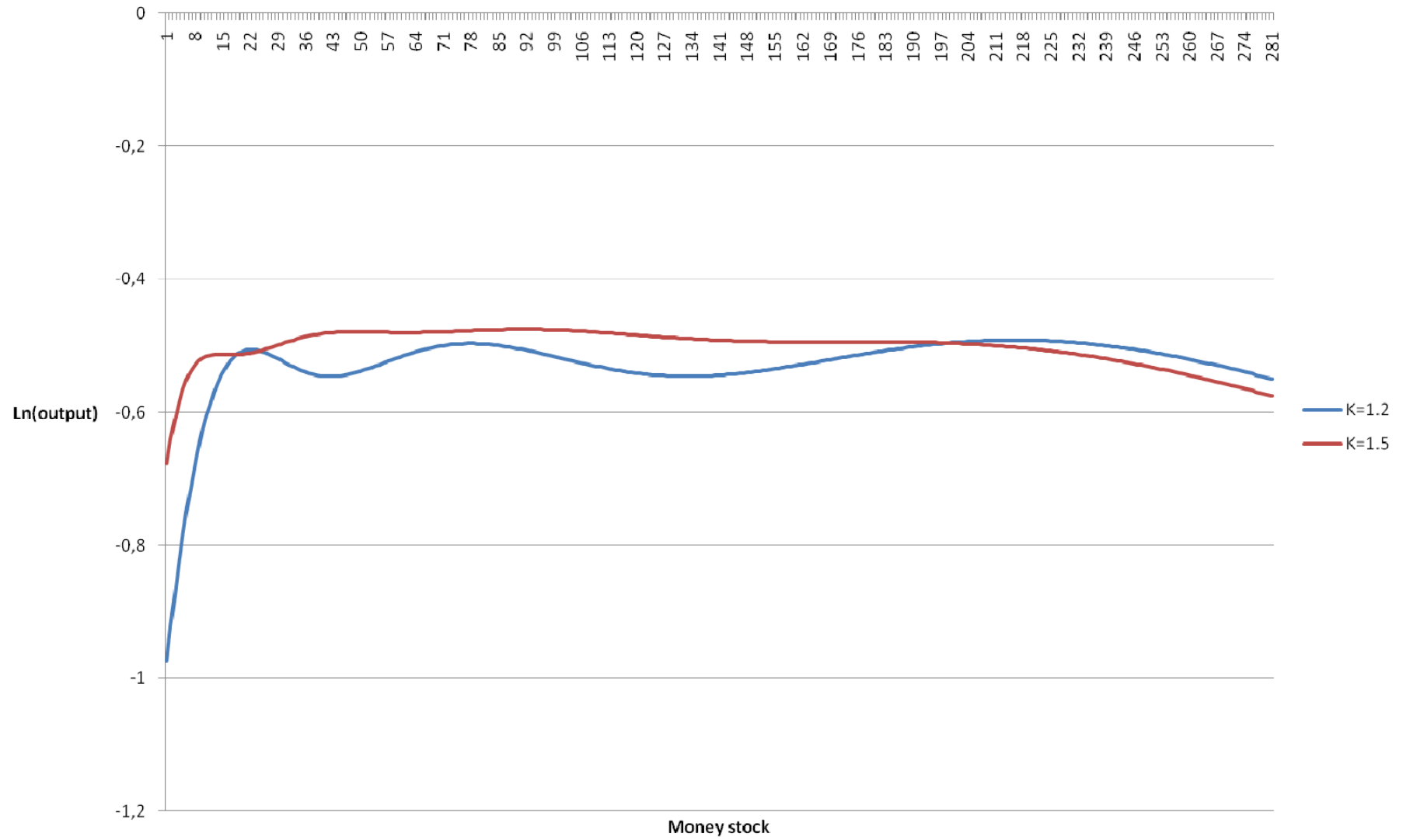


Figure 3

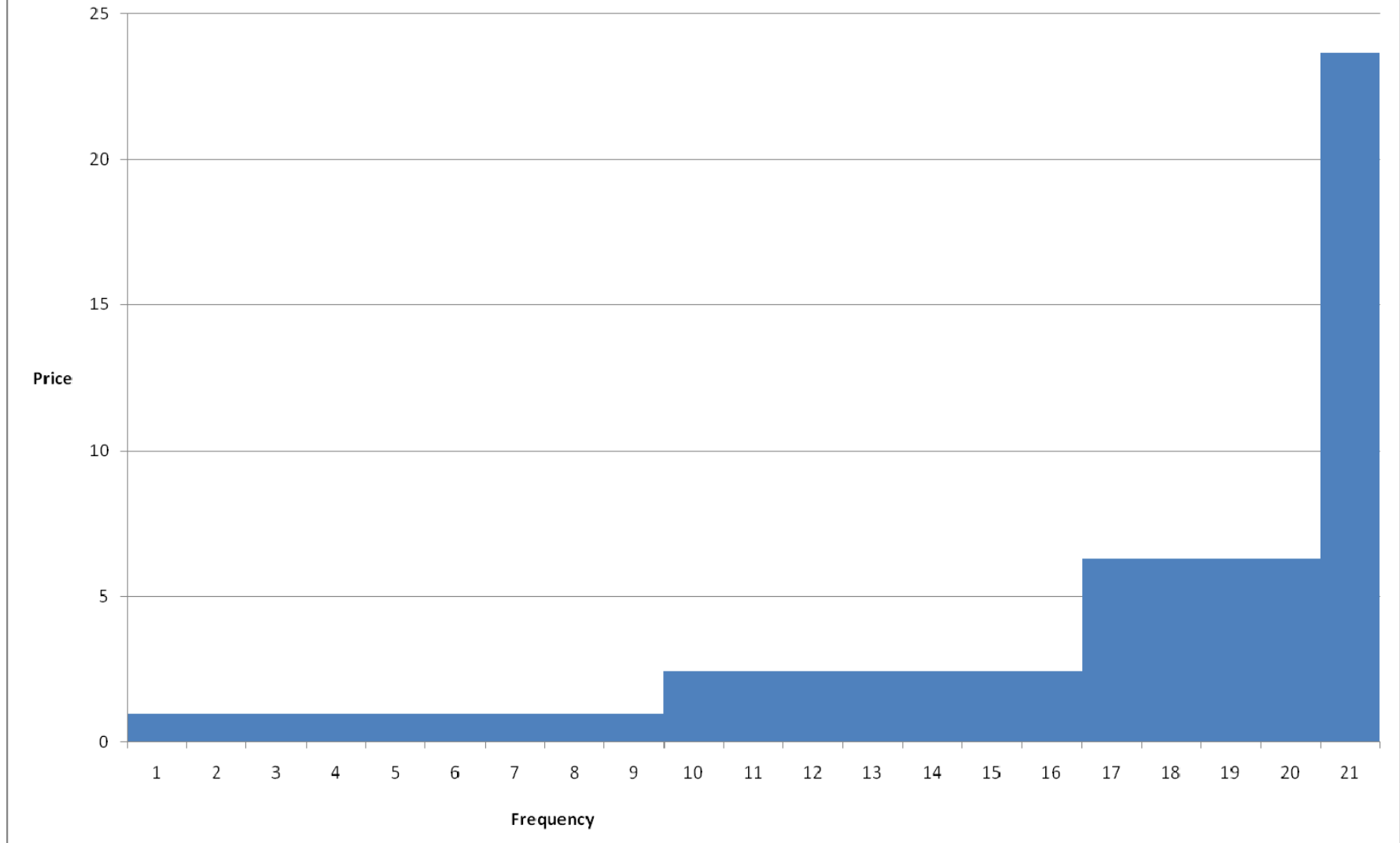


Figure 4

