

Peter Deutschmann,  
Jens Herlth,  
Alois Woldan (eds.)

# “TRUTH” AND FICTION

Conspiracy Theories  
in Eastern European Culture  
and Literature

[transcript] Culture & Theory

Peter Deutschmann, Jens Herlth, Alois Woldan (eds.)  
“Truth” and Fiction

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## **“Truth” and Fiction**

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# **Odessa 2014: Alternative News and Atrocity Narratives on Russian TV**

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*Eva Binder/Magdalena Kaltseis*

## **Keywords**

Ukraine crisis; Russian television; propaganda; TV news; TV talk shows

On 2 May 2014, the city of Odessa<sup>1</sup> was shaken by violent clashes between two warring political groups. Among the total number of 48 fatalities, six people died during the street clashes, while 42 people fell victim to the fire in the Trade Union building that spread a few hours later. Roughly speaking, the two opposing groups consisted of protesters of a pro-Russian (or anti-Maidan or pro-federalism) orientation on the one hand, and of pro-Ukraine (or pro-Maidan or pro-unity) activists on the other. However tragic the incident was in itself, it also marked a crucial point in the heated sentiments of spring 2014. The event was instantly converted into a psychological weapon in the political and military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, backed up by an unprecedented propaganda campaign launched by public Russian TV. Accordingly, the coverage of the tragedy on Russian TV screens was enormous and intense, while the question of what had ‘really’ happened required months of investigation<sup>2</sup> and could not be answered when public interest in the case was at its peak.

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1 Except for ‘Odessa,’ the English translation of the Ukrainian city ‘Odesa,’ all other toponymies in this article are referred to by their Ukrainian names.

2 In April of 2014, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe established an International Advisory Panel (IAP), which was to supervise the Ukraine authorities’ investigations into the violent incidents that occurred during the protests on the Maidan in Kiev from 30 November 2013 onwards (Report of the IAP 2015: 5). Accordingly, the IAP reviewed the investigations that were conducted in Odessa and presented a reliable report on the findings.

The Odessa events of 2014 and their representation on Russian TV can be regarded as highly revealing against the backdrop of questions concerning today's mass media communication and constructions of reality. In the analysis that we have undertaken, we will go a step further by scrutinizing the 'fabrication' of facts—a process that is frequently encompassed by conspiracies and conspiracy theories and which will be referred to in our study as 'alternative' news. In so doing, the Odessa case will serve as an example, and as a model, in order to better understand how alternative news is created and how it is spread effectively by contemporary mass media, for which attention is a hotly contested commodity.

## **1. Persuasive Mass Communication in a Hybrid Media System**

Despite the rapid growth of internet users in the last two decades, public TV by far still remains the most efficient nationwide means of mass communication in Russia. According to opinion polls, the vast majority of Russia's population relies on TV as a source of political information. The two main state-run channels, *Pervyi kanal* (Channel One) and *Rossiia-1*, have a nationwide reach of 99% and

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ble report on what had actually happened on 2 May 2014. On this day, local pro-Ukraine activists and city residents (about 2,000 people) wanted to "hold a rally in support of a united Ukraine" before the start of a football match in Odessa (Report of the IAP 2015: 11). While marching towards the football stadium, the rally was assaulted by approximately 300 pro-Russian protesters near Hrets'ka Square. In these violent clashes, the pro-Ukraine protesters finally gained the upper hand and pursued the retreating opponents towards the pro-Russian protesters' camp at Kulykove Pole Square. Facing the approaching pro-Ukraine protesters, pro-Russian activists fled into the nearby Trade Union building. The pro-Ukraine activists "destroyed and set fire to the tents of the AntiMaidan camp," while the pro-Russian protesters who were inside the Trade Union building exchanged shots and Molotov cocktails with their opponents outside (Report of the IAP 2015: 13). At around 7:45 p.m., a fire broke out, spreading rapidly, the fire brigade arriving only at 8:09 p.m. In the report, the number of victims and their cause of death was summarized as follows: "48 persons died (seven women and 41 men). Six persons died as a result of firearm injuries they had received during the clashes on and around Hrets'ka Square and 42 died as a result of the fire in the Trade Union building. Of those 42, 34 died as a direct result of the fire and eight died as a result of jumping or falling from a height; no other violent cause of death was established." – Report of the IAP 2015: 15.

95% respectively. TV's leading role has led to perceptible, far-reaching consequences when Russian TV screens had to deal with the conflict in Ukraine from the end of 2013 onwards. The Russian sociologist Denis Volkov describes the effects of political influence on mass media as follows: "With the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, the propaganda tone in broadcast rose dramatically, and for nearly two years, TV channels worked in emergency mode."<sup>3</sup> However, it would be too simple to equate the proclaimed 'information war' with the state control over mass media in Soviet times. The same can be said with regard to propaganda strategies and techniques which in 2014 were definitely not new in their general features, but which had changed significantly with respect to their potential impact and to new possibilities of dissemination.

It is commonly agreed that contemporary media systems are characterized by complexity and hybridity. This implies, according to Andrew Chadwick, "incessant processes of boundary-drawing, boundary-blurring, and boundary-crossing, as the logics of older and newer media interact, compete and coevolve."<sup>4</sup> A direct consequence of this "boundary-blurring" and "boundary-crossing" on Russian TV screens appears to be the blending of professional and non-professional media and media producers, the specific placement of which can be utilized to enhance the audiovisual media's manipulative effects. Amateur videos have become an integral part of the visual material used in news broadcasts and they are exploited for the immediacy and authenticity that they seemingly convey. Further crucial elements of the interaction between older and newer media on Russian TV include the numerous references to the 'new' social networks that are made in the supposedly 'old' media of television. This, again, allows for additional manipulative effects, through the launching of impious verbal abuse as a form of 'factual' commentary by a political opponent on current events for example.<sup>5</sup>

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3 «С началом украинского конфликта резко вырос пропагандистский накал вещания, и почти два года телеканалы работали в чрезвычайном режиме». – Volkov 2016.

4 Chadwick 2013: 184.

5 In the Odessa case, a demonstrative example of this strategy of referring to social networks on TV in order to vilify political opponents is the news broadcast of 3 May entitled "The Odessa events did not leave anybody cold, but everyone reacts differently to what happened." One of the messages supposedly posted on Twitter and quoted in the news item reads as follows: "Evromaidan @Dbnmjr: 'Odessa, I'm proud of you! Ten thousands of townsmen cleanse their land of pro-Russian activists. Kiev and the whole Ukraine are with you #Odessa'" («Євромайдан @Dbnmjr: "Одесса,

One of the most effective propaganda strategies is repetition, which to some extent was reliably utilized by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. In his famous *Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the German diarist Victor Klemperer scrutinizes the propagandistic use of language in Nazi Germany, highlighting the power of repetition:

No, the most powerful influence was exerted neither by individual speeches nor by articles or flyers, posters or flags; it was not achieved by things which one had to absorb by conscious thought or conscious emotions. Instead Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously. ... And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, today's television broadcasting with its 24-hour news cycle, round-the-clock transmission and its numerous channels provide the ideal conditions for maximum propagandistic impact. In addition, Russian state-run TV has developed highly appropriate programming in order to reach its viewers "mechanically and unconsciously" by repetition. The two main channels, *Pervyi kanal* and *Rossiya-1*, both offer their primetime news *Vremia (Time)* and *Vesti (News)* at 9 and 8 p.m. respectively. Both news programs are preceded by talk shows: *Priamoj ejfir (On Air Live)* with a starting time of between 6:15 and 6:30 p.m. on *Rossiya-1*, and *Pust' govoriat (Let Them Talk)* starting around 7:45 p.m. on *Pervyi kanal*.

Apart from repetition, propaganda strategies in audiovisual media rely on both argumentation and rhetoric on the one hand, and emotional effects achieved and enhanced by specific means on the other. Thus, when questioning audiovisual media's potential impact, it appears to be crucial to analyze both the rhetorical-argumentative and the rhetorical-affective structures of TV broadcasts. Regarding the rhetorical-affective side, visual material in general and images in particular are commonly regarded as equally powerful as, or even more powerful

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горжусь тобой! Десятки тысяч горожан очищают свою землю от колорадов. Киев и вся Украина [sic!] с тобой #Одесса»». – “Sobytiia v Odesse nikogo ne ostavili ravnodushnym, no reagiruiut na sluchivsheesia po-raznomu”, *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

6 Klemperer 2002: 15.

than, argumentative verbal discourse. Images are supposed to draw the viewer's attention more effectively and are thought to be remembered more accurately and for a longer period of time.<sup>7</sup>

One of the first film theorists and practitioners who explored the emotional impact of particular images, as well as film as a whole, was Sergey Eisenstein. There is no doubt that Eisenstein anticipated the affective logic of contemporary mass media with his "montage of attractions" which he formulated in 1923 while still engaged in theatrical work. For Eisenstein, "attractions" are impact factors produced by cinema—images that have the potential of attracting intensified attention and of "subject[ing] the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact."<sup>8</sup> By being deliberately exposed to "aggressive" moments in theater, the spectator was supposed to experience "emotional shocks." As a consequence, she or he would "perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated—the ultimate ideological conclusion."<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein's first films, *Stachka* (*Strike*, 1925) and *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925), can actually be regarded as experimental laboratories for two different types of "attractions," namely for shocking pictures (in particular images of violence against children) on the one hand and scenes of atrocity and violence that are unfolded by narration on the other.

With regard to propaganda strategies developed for TV specifically, we can assume that placing a talk show before the primetime news opens up the possibility of emotionally 'attuning' the TV viewers to the 'factual' information that follows. The melodramatic stories conveyed in talk shows, dealing with love, family or friendship, aim to affect the viewers, stirring their feeling of happiness, shock, disgust, astonishment or fear. Returning to Eisenstein's understanding of sensual and psychological impacts, then, we can say that the talk shows emotionally prepare the TV audience to perceive what will be transmitted on an ideological level in primetime news.

This particular affective function of talk shows on Russian TV has been described by Anna Kachkaeva, a media scholar at the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics. She argues that "[w]hile policymakers and straight news shows define the agenda, the political talk shows provide 'emotional support'. ... They just support the atmosphere that exists and heat it up."<sup>10</sup> This is definitely

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7 See Dauber/Robinson 2015.

8 Eisenstein 1974: 78.

9 Ibid.

10 "Russia's TV talk shows smooth Putin's way from crisis to crisis." – *The Washington Post* (Newspaper article, 2015).

one reason why talk shows on Russian TV are not only numerous, but also occupy a significant part of the daily airtime—up to 11 hours on *Pervyi kanal*, to be precise. Moreover, a number of new politically oriented talk shows were launched during the Ukraine crisis, such as *Tolstoy. Voskresen'e* (*Tolstoy. Sunday*),<sup>11</sup> *Vremia pokazhet* (*Time Will Tell*), *Struktura momenta* (*Structure of the Moment*), *Pravo znat'*! (*The Right to Know!*) and *Spisok Norkina* (*Norkin's List*). The sudden increase in 2014 of broadcasts that had a focus on political and social issues is confirmed by Iuliia Dolgova, a researcher at the Department of Journalism at Moscow State University:

In February of 2014, the situation escalates dramatically in Ukraine, where the political crisis changes into a phase of active hostilities between the opposing forces. In this period, the numbers of broadcasts on political and social issues begin to increase. Many of these broadcasts primarily deal with the ongoing events in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

In comparison to the media landscape of the 1920s, the time at which Eisenstein developed his theories on film, media, and art, the extent to which today's everyday life is permeated by the media appears to be incomparably higher. The journalist and social scientist Sergei Medvedev goes even further by suggesting a totality of impact by comparing Russian TV to the air that we breathe:

TV is like air or water. And suddenly all the water running out of the tap is flavored with vanilla. Or with blood. Exactly the same happens with TV. The air of the media and the information that we breathe is usurped with propaganda.<sup>13</sup>

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11 The title of this show was based on the name of its presenter, Petr Tolstoy (a great-great-grandson of the writer Leo Tolstoy) and is also a play on words. The show was broadcasted on Sundays, and the Russian word for this day of the week is identical to the Russian title of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* (1899).

12 «В феврале 2014 г. резко обостряется ситуация на Украине, где политический кризис переходит в фазу активных действий противоборствующих сторон. В этот период на российском телевидении начинает расти количество передач общественно-политической тематики, выпуски которых посвящены преимущественно событиям на Украине». – Dolgova 2015: 163.

13 «[Т]елевидение ... – это как воздух или вода. И вдруг вся вода из крана начинает течь с привкусом ванили. Или с привкусом крови. И то же самое происходит с телевидением. Это тот медийный, информационный воздух, которым мы дышим, и он узурпирован пропагандой». – “Effekt zomboiashchika” *Radio Svoboda*, 8 November 2017.

## 2. Odessa 2014 in Primetime News and Talk Shows

This section will analyze the coverage of the events that unfolded in Odessa in May 2014 by *Pervyi kanal*'s primetime news *Vremia* and in TV talk shows. From a quantitative angle, the coverage of the Odessa events in *Vremia* was extensive: Starting with a newsflash on the fire on the evening of 2 May, there was a total number of 23 news items dedicated to Odessa between the date of the fire and 11 May, the total running time amounting to ca. 109 minutes. Several broadcasts stretch over 7 minutes and more—the most extensive one running 12:54 minutes on 11 May. Additionally, this increase in attention on the Odessa events was sustained right until the end of May by dedicating newsflashes and two features, on 15 and 23 May, to the fire in Odessa.

As far as talk shows are concerned, four programs on the two main state-run TV channels addressed the Odessa events in May of 2014: On *Rossiia-1*, the news appeared on the talk show *Priamoi éfir (On Air Live)* on 5 and 12 May, as well as on *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent (Special Correspondent)* on 20 May. On *Pervyi kanal*, they featured on the show *Politika (Politics)* on 14 May. *Priamoi éfir*,<sup>14</sup> placed right before the primetime news on *Rossiia-1*, can be classified as a ‘confessional’ or ‘daytime’ talk show,<sup>15</sup> its focus being on the life stories of ordinary citizens as well as social problems, such as crime, drug abuse or prostitution. In comparison to *Priamoi éfir*, *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* and *Politika* are political talk shows with guests who primarily work in the area of politics or the economy (e.g., members of parliament, political experts, etc.).

From the viewers’ perspective, TV news programs are expected to focus on hard news and to present information in a more or less impersonal and objective way. By contrast, talk shows are television *shows*, which are *per se* characterized by the phenomena of “boundary-blurring” and “boundary-crossing” between information and entertainment, facts and fiction. By assembling different guests, and by giving a voice to people ranging from eyewitnesses to experts, there is practically nothing that cannot be stated in TV talk shows. In their study on threat narratives on Russian TV, the members of the non-governmental organi-

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14 *Priamoi éfir* started broadcasting in April 2011 on *Rossiia-1*. From 2013 to 2017, the host of the talk show was Boris Korchevnikov, who then became the general director of the orthodox TV channel *Spas (The Savior)*. *Priamoi éfir* is the equivalent of the popular *Pust' govoriat* on *Rossiia-1*, which has been on air on *Pervyi kanal* for more than a decade. Both are broadcasted right before the primetime news and, according to opinion polls, enjoy great popularity; see Levada 2015.

15 See Haarman 2001: 34; Shattuc 2015: 194–98.

zation ‘Ukraine Crisis Media Center,’ Makukhin, Tsybulska, and Kavatsiuk stress the role played by talk shows in the spreading of disinformation:

Television talk-shows became a real godsend for the Russian disinformation machine. The political talk show format allows [the] Kremlin to launch necessary messages in the informational field and avoid accusations of misinformation and propaganda. Continually repeated, these messages become part of public discourse. The talk-show format also allows to give voice to the most [sic] radical messages without taking responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

On a more general scale, TV talk shows can be characterized in terms of tabloidization, the three decisive techniques of which are dramatization, personalization, and emotionalization. According to Timberg et al., among TV talk shows’ guiding principles, whether they are live or taped, is their “present-tense immediacy.”<sup>17</sup> The title of the Russian talk show *Priamoi èfir* clearly addresses this principle. In contrast to the impersonal tone that dominates TV news, talk shows create a more private and intimate atmosphere as the host addresses the public directly, speaking “to millions as if to each alone.”<sup>18</sup>

By focusing on the two different TV formats, news and talk shows, we will demonstrate how the affective potential of the ‘real’ Odessa events was enhanced, intensified, and maximized on Russian TV, as well as how TV viewers were manipulated by alternative news and by images and narratives indulging in atrocity. While we will focus on the rhetorical-argumentative structures of the messages for the analysis of alternative news, the discussion of atrocity narratives will shed light on the rhetorical-affective side of the Odessa coverage. With regard to the talk shows that addressed the Odessa events, the main focus lies on the *Priamoi èfir* issue of 5 May 2014 for two reasons: First, this issue can be qualified as a striking example of TV sensationalism; second, it was the first talk show on either of the two main TV channels dedicated to the Odessa events.

### **3. Alternative News**

As Russian-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev and his colleague Michael Weiss have pointed out, after the decline of the “grand narratives” of socialism, ideology in post-Soviet Russia has come to resemble “an interchangeable and

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16 Makukhin/Tsybulska/Kavatsiuk 2018: 31.

17 Timberg et al. 2002: 4.

18 Ibid.

contradictory set of accessories,”<sup>19</sup> in contrast to Soviet ideology, which “presented a coherent, self-sufficient, and seamless world-view.”<sup>20</sup> This has serious consequences for the credibility and reliability of facts or about what is presented as fact in Russian mass media, as Gleb Pavlovskii, a former consultant to Vladimir Putin, states: “Even if they [the Soviet propagandists] were lying, they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’ Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.”<sup>21</sup> Viewed from the perspective of current international discussions on filter bubbles, social media and troll factories, Russian mass media communication during the Ukraine crisis marks a turning point in what is publicly claimed and regarded as true or false, fact or fiction. This challenge, which emanates from contemporary media realities, has found its expression in the term ‘alternative facts’ or ‘alternative news,’ which can be understood as pieces of information that appear to be uncertain—either because they are highly biased or because they have been deliberately fabricated and disseminated. Conspiracy theories, unlike alternative news, lean towards totality and face the world’s ‘big’ questions and relations. In mass media communication, both phenomena coexist and complement each other.

The first report on primetime news of 2 May was little more than a description of what had happened on that day in Odessa and what was still ongoing. However impersonal and matter-of-factly it might have appeared, the report already included hints about how the event would be interpreted in the days that followed, and how it would be linked to the Russian media’s discourse on the Ukraine crisis more generally:

The activists of the “Right Sector” and “Self-Defense” from Kharkiv and Kiev, who earlier this day provoked mass riots in the center of the city, set fire to the tent camp of the anti-Maidan. In the camp at the square of the Trade Union building people collected signatures for a referendum and for the status of Russian as official language. The fire spread to the building. Neither the police, nor the fire brigade can be seen.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Pomerantsev/Weiss 2014: 5.

20 Arkhangelskiy 2016.

21 Pomerantsev/Weiss 2014: 9.

22 «Активисты “Правого сектора” и “Самообороны” из Харькова и Киева, которые ранее сегодня спровоцировали массовые беспорядки в центре города, подожгли палаточный городок Антимайдана. Это на площади перед облсоветом профсоюзов, там собирали подписи за референдум и государственный статус для русского языка. Огонь перекинулся на здание. Ни милиции, ни пожарных не видно».

The first report already exhibits a rhetorical-argumentative structure by presenting what happened in binary categories: On the one side, there are the “activists” (note the rather neutral word used here) who came from outside (from Ukraine’s largest cities Kharkiv and Kiev), and the “anti-Maidan protesters” on the other. In the news broadcasts that followed, the events of Odessa were represented in the—by then already established—friend-foe pattern of Ukraine “nationalists” (*natsionalisty*), “fascists” (*fashisty*), “radicals” (*radikaly*), “Ukraine ultras” (*ukrainskie ul’tras*), “neo-Nazis” (*neonatsisty*), or “Euromaidan” (*evromaidan*) on the one hand, and of “supporters of federalization” (*storonniki federalizatsii*) and “activists of an anti-fascist meeting” (*aktivisty antifashistskogo mitinga*) on the other.

From the first report in the primetime news of 2 May onwards, the set of statements and narratives that was developed from the news coverage of *Vremia* can be summed up as follows: The peaceful, local (i.e., Odessan) supporters of a federal Ukraine were attacked by nationalist and fascist radicals from outside and were literally slaughtered.<sup>23</sup> The police and other Ukrainian governmental institutions did not act and react adequately. They did not turn up when the Trade Union building caught fire (as was clearly stated in the first report) and in the days that followed, they did not conduct the necessary investigations. There are two central ‘alternative narratives’ developed in *Vremia*: One refers to the fights that took place in the streets of Odessa, the other one depicts what happened during the fire in and around the building.

In his report of 4 May,<sup>24</sup> Pavel Pchelkin presents the first narrative that would be repeated in the numerous broadcasts that followed until 23 May, when

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– “V Odesse gorit zdanie obloveta profsoiuzov” (“The Trade Union building in Odessa is burning”), *Vremia*, 2 May 2014.

23 In the news broadcasts, the term “carnage” (*boinia*) is repeatedly used for what happened in Odessa. This is particularly the case in the first broadcast of 3 May, in which the word is used six times: first for establishing the image (it was a “real” [*nastoishchaia*] and a “bloody” [*krovavaia*] carnage), then already rather matter-of-factly in phrases such as “during the carnage” or “from the place of the carnage.” – “V Odesse boeviki Pravogo sektora zazhivo sozgigli protestuiushchikh v Dome profsoiuzov” (“In Odessa combatants of the Right Sector burnt the protesters in the Trade Union building alive”), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

24 See “Odesskaia tragedia ostavljaet mnogo voprosov” (“The Odessan tragedy leaves many questions”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014.

the last lengthy news item<sup>25</sup> on the Odessa events was broadcasted. According to Pchelkin's reasoning, which is backed up by audiovisual material and presented with the support of animation (see Figure 1), the two conflicting groups were infiltrated by Maidan agitators and professional combatants of the Right Sector. The combatants who mingled with the pro-Russian activists were wearing camouflage Saint George's ribbons. Their aim was to provoke the opposing crowd of football fans and to lead them in the direction of Kulykove Pole where they attacked the tent camp. The second narrative was developed with regard to the fire in the Trade Union building and runs as follows: The Right Sector's combatants invaded the building, set it on fire, and committed a number of atrocious murders ranging from the use of gas to carving up bodies.<sup>26</sup> Both narratives provide alleged evidence for a conspiracy behind the Odessa events—as a plan plotted by the Ukrainian Security Service and its secretary Andriy Parubiy, as claimed in the news broadcast of 6 May.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, it became the self-proclaimed task of Russian (TV) journalism to “disclose secret links” (*raskryt' tainye sviazi*), as

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25 See “Oni napisali ubiistva—stsenaristy odesskoi tragedii” (“They wrote the murder—the screenwriters of the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 23 May 2014.

26 Different stories behind this “mass murder” (Iuliia Ol'khovskaia in her report of 7 May) are primarily conveyed—mostly by eyewitnesses—in the lengthy reports of 6 and 7 May; see “V Odesse kolichestvo pogibshikh v Dome profsoiuzov mozhet byt' bol'she, chem utverzhdaют ofitsial'nye vlasti” (“The number of dead people in the Trade Union building might be higher than the official authorities claim”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014; “Mezhdunarodnye eksperdy obnarodovali novye dannye o tragedii v Odesse” (“International experts revealed new facts about the Odessan tragedy”), *Vremia*, 7 May 2014). Additionally, the report of 6 May opens up another productive field of uncertainty and speculation by contesting the official Ukrainian death statistics. Numbers varying from 60 to 200 fatalities, once again purported by eyewitnesses and interviewees from Odessa in several news broadcasts in the days that followed, were utilized to spread distrust in the Ukrainian political institutions. The same subject is taken up by talk shows, as in the *Politika* issue of 14 May, where the alleged eyewitness Dmitrii Odinov, the leader of the Odessan self-defense militia, claims that more than 218 people died during the Odessa events.

27 See “Poiaivilos’ video, na kotorom sekretar’ SNBO i predvoditel’ sotni Maidana ob-suzhdaiut sotrudnichestvo” (“A new video appeared, on which the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the Maidan Hundreds commander discuss collaboration”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014.

news presenter Ekaterina Andreeva stated on 23 May when introducing the report with the telling title “Oni napisali ubiistva—stsenaristy odesskoi tragedii.”<sup>28</sup>

*Figure 1: Animation*



*Vremia* (News broadcast, 6 May 2014)

The friend-foe pattern is equally conveyed in talk shows, but it is expressed in a more vulgar, highly metaphoric language. Thus, when addressing the Kievan government, the Ukrainian army or the Ukrainian Security Service, talk show participants label their representatives “ugly creatures” (*urody*), “jerks” (*pridurki*), “gangsters” (*bandity*), “monsters” (*izvergi*), “beasts” (*zveri*) or “non-humans” (*neliudi*). In contrast to this, the pro-Russian victims of the Odessa events are termed “peaceful people” (*mirnye liudi*), “simple people” (*prostye liudi*), “orthodox people” (*pravoslavnye liudi*), “heroes” (*geroi*), or even “angels” (*angely*). The fire in the Trade Union building is referred to as a “lethal fire trap” (*smertel’naia ognennaia lovushka*) and a “planned carnage” (*boinia splanirovannaiia*) which resulted from an “extermination order” (*prikaz na unichtozhenie*). Additionally, religious metaphors are used as the Odessa events are referred to as “hell” (*ad*), “ritual murder” (*ritual’noe ubiistvo*), or a “special satanic action” (*spetsial’naia satanicheskaiia aktsiia*).

With regard to the two central narratives conveyed in the news broadcasts, the talk shows focused solely on the second narrative of the “carnage” in and

28 “They wrote the murder—the screenwriters of the Odessan tragedy”; see footnote 24.

around the Trade Union building, where “organized killers” (*organizirovannye ubiitsy*) and “fascist Ukrainian nationalists” (*fashistskie ukraainskie natsionalisty*) gassed, tortured, burnt and massacred peaceful people. The talk shows utilized the affective potential of the inadvertent disaster and maximized its emotional effects by extending upon already circulating narratives and by enhancing their thrilling and horrifying moments. Accordingly, the number of puppet masters behind the alleged plan is expanded to include perpetrators from outside Ukraine. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, Evgenii Fedorov, the deputy of the Russian State Duma, even spoke of a “foreign intervention” (*inostrannaia interventsiiia*): “This is a foreign intervention, achieved by a coup d'état and punitive actions with the help of local punitive forces. ... This is an intervention from outside, both against Ukraine and Russia.”<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that the speaker repeats the catchword “punitive action” (*karatel'naia operatsiia*)—a term used previously by Vladimir Putin in his famous Crimean speech on 18 March, in which the keywords for the official rhetoric on the Ukraine crisis were coined; these included “fifth column” (*piataia kolonna*), “neo-Nazis” (*neonatsisty*) and “national-traitors” (*national-predateli*).<sup>30</sup>

The ‘alternative narratives’ presented in the news broadcasts were not only enhanced and expanded in the talk shows that focused on the Odessa events, but were also linked to anti-Western conspiracy theories. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, invited experts repeatedly claimed involvement by the United States. Among these accusers was Aleksandr Iakovlev, a journalist working for the tabloid newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, who stated: “Let's be honest. The punitive action has been ordered, the customer being situated across the ocean.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, alleged outside intervention was implied when Ukraine was referred to as a “hostage” (*zalozhnitsa*) in the *Politika* issue of 14 May, or when it was claimed that Ukraine had been supported by foreign specialists in *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May. To complete the picture, the circle of conspirators extended to inde-

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29 «Это иностранная интервенция, путём государственного переворота и карательных операций с помощью местных карательных частей. ... Это интервенция иностранная, и против Украины и России». – “Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn' XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn' of the 21st century”), *Priamoi éfir* 5 May 2014.

30 See “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii” (“Address by President of the Russian Federation”), 18 March 2014.

31 «У карательной операции есть заказчик. ... Заказчик карательной операции находится за Океаном, давайте скажем это честно». – “Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn' XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn' of the 21st century”), *Priamoi éfir* 5 May 2014.

pendent Russian media, in particular to the radio station *Èkho Moskvy* and the TV channel *Dozhd'*, when, in the *Priamoi èfir* issue of 27 May, the military columnist at *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, Viktor Baranets, called these media the “mouthpiece of the Kievan junta or the European Union.”<sup>32</sup>

In news broadcasts and talk shows alike, the central technique of disseminating alternative news and spreading rumors was to involve eyewitnesses, local interviewees, and invited ‘experts.’ The appearance of allegedly authentic people on screen opens up the possibility of transmitting statements about reality and expressing emotions that could never be articulated by the authoritative voice of state institutions. The montage of three women and their statements on the Odessa tragedy in the first news report, of 4 May, clearly shows how the voice of the ‘people’ is deliberately used to shape public sentiment and to enhance circulating narratives.<sup>33</sup> While the first woman embodies the popular outrage by demanding: “We are a peaceful city, we want to live here! We don’t want war!” The second voice names the crimes that have been committed by exclaiming: “People jumped out of the building, they murdered, they beat them, finished them off—this is a genocide of their own people!” Finally, the third woman offers a rational explanation of what happened: “This is not accessible to the intellect. To detain, burn people, and to find pleasure in it. In order to do this, you have to be a fascist.”<sup>34</sup> (see Figures 2 and 3)

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32 «В тылу нашего государства, точнее в центре Москвы орудует рупор ... Киевской Хунты или Европейского союза». – “Uzniki khunty: Za kem ochotiasia karta-teli?” (“Prisoners of the junta: Who are the chastisers hunting for?”), *Priamoi èfir*, 27 May 2014.

33 See “Odessy shturmovali militsiiu, chtoby ottuda vypustili protivnikov Kievskoi vlasti” (“Odessans assaulted the police in order to release the opponents of the Kievan government”), *Vremia*, 4 May 2014.

34 (1) «Мы мирный город, мы хотим здесь жить! Мы не хотим войны»; (2) «Люди выпрыгивали из зданий, они убивали, они их били, добивали — это геноцид своего народа!»; (3) «Ведь это умом не достижимо. Взять, сжечь людей и получать от этого удовольствие. Для этого нужно быть фашистом».

Figure 2



Vremia (News broadcast, 4 May 2014)

Figure 3



Vremia (News broadcast, 4 May 2014)

Talk shows exploit techniques of fictional genres and other TV formats and must, therefore, be situated in an interspace between the factual and the fictional. Although the invited guests are ‘real world’ people, they act as if they are on a stage and, thus, are subject to the rules of that particular talk show’s format. The oscillation between factual and fictional becomes particularly apparent in the huge number of guests invited for the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 5 May, as well as in the roles they play in their ‘real’ lives and on stage. With regard to their ‘real life,’ they can be assigned to three different fields: The first group consists of ‘experts,’ including journalists and writers; the second group are people involved in politics, such as activists from militias, armed volunteer groups, non-governmental organizations, or deputies of the Russian Parliament; finally, there is the huge group of eyewitnesses. However, when taking a closer look at the latter group, eyewitnesses often turn out to also be members of militias, armed volunteer groups, or non-governmental organizations. By presenting and giving a voice to representatives of militias or NGOs, Russian TV demonstrates that there is an active mass movement against the Euromaidan in Ukraine. This stress on anti-Maidan-activism can be regarded as part of a general strategy which was, and still is, pursued in Russian political discourse and subsequently in mass media; it aims to confront Western democracies with their own “mirror image.”<sup>35</sup> In the political crisis of 2014, this strategy inverted the Western perception of what was happening in Ukraine by asserting that fascists were the driving force at the Maidan in Kiev, and that pro-Russian democratic civic movement is being repressed by those who came to power in Kiev after the Euromaidan.

Although the talk show guests seem to only represent themselves, and are therefore regarded as authentic, their on-screen appearance is simultaneously clearly marked as theatrical—staged for the particular *show* the spectators expect. As actors on screen, they exhibit strong emotions like anger and grief by yelling, crying or jumping up with rage and in so doing heat up the atmosphere

<sup>35</sup> Baunov 2016: 13.

in the studio. In addition to this, their performance is subject to the rules and techniques of a particular genre or format which, in our case, include hyperbole and the burlesque as characteristics.

A vivid example of the blending of real-live-roles, staging, and genre rules is Tamerlan Surovyi, an activist of the self-defense militia in Odessa, as well as an alleged eyewitness of the events. He appears three times in three different talk shows addressing the Odessa events: first in the two *Priamoi ejfir* shows on 5 and 12 May, and finally in the *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* issue of 20 May (see Figures 4 to 6). The most obvious signal of his fictionality is the activist's name: His first name, Tamerlan, is reminiscent of the fourteenth-century Turco-Mongol conqueror and military leader of the same name, while his surname, consisting of the adjective *surovyi* (harsh, severe), elicits associations with both heroic figures of medieval history (such as Ivan Groznyi) as well as the characters of popular fiction or comics.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Tamerlan Surovyi greatly resembles a character from a TV series who moves from one talk show to another and should be recognized as such by spectators. Furthermore, Tamerlan Surovyi's appearance is masked in a theatrical fashion, his face never being fully visible, but covered with a balaclava or by sunglasses. This mask, of course, also signals that Tamerlan has to conceal his 'real' identity so as not to run into danger. Similarly, other talk show guests are also disguised, their masks leaning towards the burlesque, which is particularly true of the guests with head bandages—a blunt, eccentric sign of direct involvement. In this way, eyewitnesses combine the humoresque with the atrocious<sup>37</sup> and function as one more means by which to transform the real events of Odessa into attractions in Eisenstein's sense and, as a whole, into a TV spectacle that is able to capture the spectators' attention.

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36 Tamerlan Surovyi is not the only nickname of this kind in talk shows. Another notable example is the allegedly wounded Vladimir Tverdyi (hard, strong) in *Politika* on 23 April 2014.

37 Aronson describes humor and atrocity as the two elements of Eisenstein's attraction; see Aronson 2003: 212.

*Figure 4: Tamerlan Surovyy and another eyewitness**Priamoi éfir*  
(Talk show, 5 May 2014)*Figure 5: Tamerlan Surovyyi**Priamoi éfir*  
(Talk show, 12 May 2014)*Figure 6: Tamerlan Surovyyi**Spetsial'nyi korrespondent*  
(Talk show, 20 May 2014)

#### 4. Atrocity Narratives

Images and narratives that convey atrocity and horror form the core of the rhetorical-affective side of the Odessa coverage. With regard to impactful factors, the atrocity narratives developed for the Odessa events can be divided into two groups: First, the fire *topos*, which is represented by the numerous amateur shots of the burning building and, as such, is reminiscent of the visual memory of the Second World War that has been primarily shaped by cinema. Second, we encounter images and narratives of the alleged carnage that went on inside the building, which are characterized by a representational gap due to, on the one hand, the improbability that such a life-threatening situation would be filmed at all and the impossibility of representing a traumatic experience of this kind on the other.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask how the news programs dealt with this specific gap, i.e., how they presented the unrepresented and unrepresentable.

Regarding the fire *topos*, a strong focus lay on the discursive level, while the visual material of the Trade Union building in flames was impressive by itself and had a voyeuristic appeal of being able to watch the catastrophe from a safe distance. In the first news report of 3 May, which provides a description of what happened, the visual sequences and the verbal messages transmitted by the off-voice commentary interact to create dense images of human suffering—of people “driven into a fire trap,” “burnt alive” or “jumping into death.”<sup>39</sup> Visually, the

38 For questions concerning ‘media’ and their possible involvement in traumatic processes see, e.g., Paech 2014.

39 «загнанные в огненную ловушку», «сгорели заживо», «разбились насмерть».

people's struggle to survive is represented by shaky amateur shots that show people escaping the fire by climbing the cornice.

Apart from the present-tense immediacy that emanates from the sight of a burning building, the emotional impact of the fire *topos* is created by linking the fire of Odessa to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The point of reference is the well-known Belorussian Khatyn', which has been commemorated in Soviet literature and cinema alike, as in the famous film *Idi i smotri (Come and See, 1985)* by Elem Klimov. In 1943, the German SS extinguished a whole village by locking the inhabitants up in a barn and setting it on fire. Those who were able to escape the flames were shot.

The link between Khatyn' and the burning Trade Union building was established immediately, but while the source of the established reference was mentioned in the first news report of 3 May—"What happened then is already described as a 'New Khatyn'" by journalists and bloggers"<sup>40</sup>—the similarities became more self-evident with every further repetition. Important elements of the Khatyn' mass murder were transferred to the present in order to enhance the correspondence, when in the news report of 3 May news reporter Ol'khovskaya stated that "those who tried to escape were shot."<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to the news broadcasts, talk shows again maximize the affective potential by working in terms of exaggeration. The first talk show about the Odessa events on 5 May was entitled "Odessa in May—Khatyn' of the twenty-first century"<sup>42</sup> and in the talk shows that followed—in *Priamoi éfir* of 12 May, as well as in *Spetsial'nyi korrespondent* of 20 May—further parallels to Nazi crimes were drawn by asserting that people inside the building were gassed with Teren, Chloroform or Sarin in Odessa.

The unrepresented and unrepresentable pictures of people dying in the fire or being—as the Russian TV news suggested to their spectators—slaughtered inside the building were substituted by presenting the result of the lethal fire. There is a set of about 15 different amateur photos depicting corpses, among them severely burnt bodies (see Figure 7). Together with the amateur footage of people stan-

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40 «То, что происходило дальше, журналисты и блогеры уже называют новой Хатынью». – “V rezul’tate stolknovenii i pozhara v Dome profsoiuzov Odessy pogibli 42 cheloveka, bolee 200 raneny” (“As a result of the clashes and the fire in the Trade Union building 42 people died in Odessa, more than 200 are wounded”), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

41 «Тех, кто пытался бежать, расстреливали». – *ibid.*

42 See “Maiskaia Odessa: Khatyn’ XXI veka” (“Odessa in May—Khatyn’ of the twenty-first century”), *Priamoi éfir*, 5 May 2014.

ding on the building's cornice, they form the visual core of atrocity images that were repeatedly presented in the news reports. Although the source of these pictures is usually indicated,<sup>43</sup> this does not tell us anything about their reliability or about who actually took them and where they were taken. The most controversial photo from the Odessa series depicts the corpse of a woman, her body bent over a table, which, in the mode of sensationalism, was identified as the body of a pregnant woman who had been strangled with a wire (see Figure 8).<sup>44</sup> In the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 5 May—a day before the photo was shown on *Pervyi kanal*—the story of atrocity was unfolded by the alleged eye-witness Galina Zapozhztseva, a retired Colonel of the Militia in Odessa:

She has been strangled with the cable of a teakettle. There were frames, when she was screaming, everybody was listening and yelling: “Shut her mouth!” She screamed: “Help me!” and then, they hang out a flag, a Ukrainian flag, from the window that the screams were coming from. That is to say that they strangled a pregnant woman under the Ukrainian flag.<sup>45</sup>

In comparison to news broadcasts, the effects of direct participation and giving evidence are enhanced in the talk shows. In *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, the set of atrocity pictures that circulated on *facebook*, *YouTube*, and numerous other websites were projected onto the studio screen. While the talk show host Boris Korchevnikov repeatedly requests the studio guests and the spectators to take a

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43 Some of the indicated links are still valid, as the blog in *Live Journal* (<http://rocorus.livejournal.com/225528.html>), others are of no value at all, such as “*You Tube.com*” or just “*facebook*.”

44 The identity of the dead woman, her age (actually 59), and the real cause of her death was disclosed by the Ukrainian StopFake project; see “Russia’s top lies about Ukraine. Part 2.” *Stopfake.org*, 10 July 2014.

45 «Она была задушена шнуром от чайника. Были кадры, когда она кричала, все слушали и кричат: “Закройте ей рот!” Она кричит “Помогите!” и потом из этого окна, из которого были крики, выставили флаг, украинский флаг. То есть под украинским флагом задушили беременную женщину»; see footnote 40. It is worth noting here that in the news report of 6 May, the connection between the female screams, the flying of the Ukrainian flag and the photo of the strangled woman was established simply by montage; see “V Odesse kolichestvo pogibshikh v Dome profsoiuzov mozhet byt’ bol’she, chem utverzhdaiut ofitsial’nye vlasti” (“The number of dead people in the Trade Union building might be higher than the official authorities claim”), *Vremia*, 6 May 2014.

look—“Posmotrite!”—, the alleged eyewitnesses complement the visuals by recounting what they have seen with their own eyes.

*Figure 7: Pixelated shock picture of a dead body*



*Priamoi éfir* (Talk show, 5 May 2014). The same picture was also shown in *Vremia* (News broadcast, 6 May 2014).

In the news, an analogous voyeuristic effect is achieved—though by contrary means—when the news anchorman, right before the visual material is presented for the first time in the primetime news of 3 May, directly addresses the spectators and expresses a warning: “We will show what has happened, but possibly not everybody should see it, particularly not children and sensitive people. Certain scenes are just not imaginable in a country in the middle of Europe in the twenty-first century.”<sup>46</sup>

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46 «Мы сейчас покажем, как все происходило, но возможно, что не всем стоит это видеть. Детям и впечатлительным зрителям уж точно. Отдельные сцены просто не мыслимы для страны в центре Европы в XXI веке». – “V Odesse boeviki Pravogo sektora zazhivo sozhgli protestuiushchikh v Dome profsoiuzov” (“In Odessa combatants of the Right Sector burnt the protesters in the Trade Union building alive”), *Vremia*, 3 May 2014.

Figure 8: Strangled woman



*Vremia* (News broadcast, 6 May 2014). The same picture was also shown in *Priamoi éfir* (Talk show, 5 May 2014).

Although the corpses in the pictures are pixelated, this does not lessen the emotional effect emanating from these images. What is visually not represented and not representable, is filled in by the spectators' imagination, and the particular thrill of these pictures that supposedly document the events definitely lies in the spectators' knowledge that this is real—no matter what is actually visible. Additionally, particularly in the talk shows, the eyewitnesses provide atrocity narratives to underline the visual material. Thus, in *Priamoi éfir* of 5 May, there are claims that a man has been “raped” and that his face has been “beaten to a pulp.”<sup>47</sup> Tamerlan Surovyi asserts that people inside the Trade Union building have been “doused with petrol” and “set on fire”.<sup>48</sup> The mode of exaggeration again determines the atrocity narratives told in the *Priamoi éfir* issue of 12 May, when the already mentioned Galina Zaporozhtseva asserts that cannibals have raged in the Trade Union building of Odessa: “Now we have the information ...

47 «его изнасиловали», «разбили все лицо».

48 «их сверху обливали бензином», «сжигали людей».

the factual information on cannibalism in the Trade Union building.”<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, a video is shown, depicting a group of men screaming “Come here, we will slightly grill them!”<sup>50</sup> and a man holding a pack of table napkins in his hands joins them. The burlesque display finally reaches its peak when artefacts are presented as evidence of the carnage, among them a sixteenth century torture device that was allegedly used to kill people in Ukraine.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Although manipulation by mass media is anything but a new phenomenon, the TV coverage of Odessa 2014 shows that there are new means and techniques, new formats and new strategies of making events visible and of representing the ‘real.’ As our analysis shows these new techniques are, above all, the results of the technological innovations of the past two decades which, at the present moment, appear to be most powerful when digital new means of mass communication merge with supposedly ‘old’ media. While the most effective means of mass communication in Russia today remains state-run TV, the propaganda campaign launched during the Ukraine crisis of 2014 heavily relied on social networks and internet platforms such as *YouTube*. Thereby, the production and dissemination of information was at least partly delegated to the users, proving themselves to be powerful instruments of manipulation, as were the textual strategies of transmitting alternative news and atrocity narratives. Thus, Marshall McLuhan’s assumption that in the age of mass communication intensity and immediacy are of much greater significance than content once again proves its validity.

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49 «Сейчас есть информация ... есть факты о каннибализме в доме профсоюзов». – “Den’ pobedy na barrikadakh: vystrely v minutu molchaniiia” (“The Victory Day on the barricades: shots in the moment of silence”), *Priamoi èfir*, 12 May 2014.

50 «Иди сюда, прижарим их!» – ibid.

51 Ibid.

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### **Abstract**

In early May of 2014, the city of Odessa became the scene of violent clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukraine activists, resulting in nearly 50 casualties. Commentators on Russian TV reacted immediately and presented a highly biased interpretation of what had taken place in Odessa. This article examines the representation of the events in Russian news broadcasts and TV talk shows. The focus lies on ‘alternative’ news and the ‘fabrication’ of facts on the one hand, and on atrocity narratives as a highly effective means of attracting and stimulating the viewers’ attention on the other. Furthermore, questions concerning the interaction of the supposedly ‘old’ media of TV and the ‘new’ digital media will shed light on propaganda strategies and techniques, which while definitely not new in their general features, have changed significantly with respect to their potential impact and to new possibilities of dissemination.