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FAKE NEWS: The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict

The crisis in Ukraine has accentuated the position of Russian television as the government's strongest asset in its information warfare. The Internet, however, allows other players to challenge the Kremlin's narrative by providing counter-narratives and debunking distorted information and fake images. Accounting for the new media ecology – through which strategic narratives are created and interpreted, this article scrutinizes the narratives of allegedly fake news on Channel One, perceiving the fabricated stories as extreme projections of Russia's strategic narratives, and the attempts of the Ukrainian fact-checking website Stopfake.org to counter the Russian narrative by refuting misinformation and exposing misleading images about Ukraine. Secondly, it analyzes how Twitter users judged the veracity of these news stories and contributed to the perpetuation of strategic narratives.

KEYWORDS: Strategic narrative, information war, news verification, Russian television, Twitter, fake news.

Introduction

The Ukrainian crisis has triggered claims that Russia has raised information war to a new level. The claims arise because it has effectively managed national and international perceptions of the conflict through its use of mainstream media and by controlling Internet discussions, using a large amount of resources to do so (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015). Russian mainstream television has taken a key position in advancing the strategic narratives of the government, presenting stories about the cause, nature and resolution of the conflict to domestic and international audiences. These narratives have centered, on the one hand, on the hostility and self-interest of Western states behind the regime change in Kiev, and, on the other, on the idea of a fascist threat spreading in Ukraine (Cottiero et al. 2015; Hansen 2015). Much of the discussion about Russia's information war focuses on the government-led creation of confusion and disinformation in the media (e.g. Pomerantsev and Weiss 2015).

The aggressive media campaign has been effective in that approximately 70% of Russian viewers believe that the events in Ukraine are covered by the government-owned channels truthfully and without bias (Levada Center 2015; VCIOM 2014). The number of Russians citing television as their main source of information is about 90%, and the majority of them are also more likely to trust their source (Volkov and Goncharov 2014). Channel One (*Perviy kanal*), which is accessed by up to 98% of population in Russia (Russian Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications 2012), has been the leading news source since 2009 and a great majority of Russians (82%) prefer this channel to any other media (Levada Center 2015).

The Internet has turned the modern information warfare into a global multimedia forum where rival voices struggle to be heard (Cottle 2006), making it increasingly difficult to impose hegemonic narratives or framings on a conflict (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014; Kaempf 2013). While the Internet provides new opportunities for top-down strategic narrative work, it also nurtures the routine contestation of strategic narratives

and the management of information by new set of elite and citizen actors (Bolin, Jordan, and Ståhlberg 2016).

Accounting for the new media ecology through which strategic narratives are created, projected and interpreted (see Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014), we will first look at the narratives of fake news on Channel One, perceiving the fabricated stories as projections of Russia's strategic narratives, and the attempts of the Ukrainian fact-checking website Stopfake.org to counter the Russian narrative by refuting misinformation and exposing misleading images about Ukraine. Secondly, we will analyze the reception of both Channel One "fake news" about the Ukraine crisis and their debunkings by Stopfake among Twitter users.

Crowdsourced information warfare

StopFake was launched in March 2014 in Kiev as a crowdsourced project to fight misinformation emanating mostly from Russian media and the Internet. It started as an initiative of journalism students but was joined by other professionals and computer-savvy Internet users from Ukraine and elsewhere. The community mobilizes ordinary Internet users to engage in detecting and revealing fabricated stories and images on the Ukraine crisis through a "Report a Fake" button. Currently the website has a comparatively large audience: approximately 1.5 million unique visitors a month (SimilarWeb.org) and 151,000 followers across different social media platforms (StopFake.org).

The volunteer contribution to the StopFake community is not unique in contemporary warfare. Part of the paradigmatic change in today's wars is that ordinary people have become complicit in creating and contesting war narratives (Hoskins and O'Loughlin; Kaempf 2013). While Soviet propaganda was able to control information flows, in the new global media ecology Russia's strategic narratives are fragile as they challenged by alternative domestic information sources, international news and other transnational actors (Oates 2014). Digital communication technologies have contributed to the "privatization of propaganda" (Bolin, Jordan and Ståhlberg 2016) as well as

nurtured general digital suspicion (Andrejevic 2013; Kuntsman and Stein 2011), emerging in the contexts of political conflicts and war, particularly in relation to photographic authenticity.

Some studies looking at the role of social media during periods of political turbulence in Russia question the impact of the Internet on politics in Russia. They show that there is no distinctive difference between opinions shared by television viewers and Internet users (Cottiero et al. 2015). Moreover, over 80% of Russians share negative attitudes toward politically controversial content being available online (Nisbet 2015). Other studies, in contrast, propose that the Internet provides new opportunities for civic discussion that is significantly different from that provided by the traditional mainstream media (Kelly et al. 2012; Etling et al. 2014, 1). Twitter has become integrated into the new media ecology as one of the information warfare battlefields. On Twitter any (dis)information from governments, militaries or other official sources is met with counter-propaganda campaigns (e.g. Zeitzoff, 2014). In Russia, Twitter is widely recognized as a crucial tool in the political protests against the results of the December 2011 Duma elections. Russian users used Twitter to bypass mainstream narratives, to spread the word about their own voting experience and posted links to videos and stories about election violation.

Methods

The study consists of two complementary strands. The first strand looks at allegedly fake news stories on Channel One as a proxy for Russian strategic narratives and the Stopfake debunkings of these stories as counter-narratives. The search through the StopFake website (both its Russian- and English-language versions) returned 339 items in Russian and 260 items in English between 1 December 2013 and 1 February 2015. Channel One was identified as the source of fake news in 31 reports in Russian and 30 reports in English (the reports were identical in both languages). We selected the ten most popular debunked news stories that were shared on social networks, i.e., the reports which the Channel One website displayed as having received the biggest numbers of shares, likes or recommendations.

The other strand consists of the content analysis of 6,043 tweets produced by 5,391 users. We used followthehashtag.com to collect the tweets published between 1 December 2013 and 1 February 2015, which contained the URLs (including shortened versions) to the ten selected news reports on the Channel One website and the URLs to the reports debunking them on the StopFake website (in total twenty URLs).

The analysis considers how credible the Twitter users found the Channel One news reports and their discrediting by StopFake. The sentiments contained within all individual Russian, Ukrainian and English language tweets were categorized as either explicitly trusting or distrusting the news story. Neutral tweets were classified as those which did not express an opinion either way.

Fake news as strategic narratives

Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014). While often drawing on the past, a strategic narrative is future-oriented and constantly re-negotiated and challenged (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014). We believe that false news stories may represent the distillation of the Russian state narrative, having the purpose of supporting already constructed identity claims, rather than reporting on events. Fake news often take the form of propaganda entertainment (kompromat), which is a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context (Oates 2014).

The importance of the World War II as a symbolic resource of nation building has been noted by, for example, Malinova (2014). At the core of the narrative is the victory in the Great Patriotic War, which is seen as the most “sacred achievement” in Russia’s history. Consequently, labelling somebody “fascist” is a powerful way of appealing to the values of Russians, who associate WWII with fascist horrors and crimes (Cottiero et al. 2015). In mainstream Russian media, the threat of fascism being spread in Ukraine was initially related to the ultra-nationalist

movements in the EuroMaidan protests. However after the Ukrainian presidential elections in 2014, the “fascist” label started being attached to the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian soldiers. At the same time, the Ukrainian army was termed “executioners”. This was the term used during WWII for the special Nazi units that became infamous for savage reprisals against civilians. Executioners often included locals who collaborated with Nazi Germans. Channel One explicitly exploited the notion of “executioners” in its reporting on the Ukrainian army’s actions in Eastern Ukraine and also did so implicitly while reporting on the Ukrainian government.

The most scandalous reportage of Channel One is often cited as an illustration of the Russian information war against Ukraine (12 July 2014). It introduces a young woman as a refugee from the eastern Ukrainian town of Slavyansk from where she has fled with her four children from a Ukrainian army “atrocities”. According to the eyewitness, the Ukrainian soldiers gathered locals on Lenin square and crucified a three-year old boy on a bulletin board and left him to bleed out while his mother was forced to watch and then tied to a Ukrainian tank and dragged around the square until she died. Her story of the Ukrainian soldiers was filled with references to Nazi past:

When they entered the town, there was not a single rebel there, but they shot, marauded. Even fascists did not do that. They are the great grand-children of the SS-volunteers of ‘Galician’ division. I am saying this because I am originally from Zakarpatye, and old people there say that fascists never did what those SS-volunteers from the ‘Galician’ division did to people. They [‘Galician’ volunteers] were local, they tortured other locals, raped women, killed children. Now these [Ukrainian soldiers] are their great grand-children. They [“Galician” volunteers] returned, rose from the ashes.

The narrative referring to Ukrainian soldiers as executioners worse than fascists was also used in two more of the ten reports analyzed. One was published with the title: “Seventy years ago

the Soviet army liberated Ukraine from fascists” (2 November 2014). The story was built around the accounts of old people from Donbas. They were shown poorly dressed and crying, and with their destroyed houses in the background. They constantly repeated that the Ukrainian army was even worse than the fascists. All the imagery was combined with alarming music and alternated with documentary episodes from WWII. Based on the words of one of the elders, the reportage claimed that the Ukrainian soldiers were fighting in Donbas because they “were promised a parcel of land and two slaves”.

“Banderovtsy” is another important trope in the strategic Russian narratives on the Ukrainian crisis. Banderovtsy are followers of Stepan Bandera, leader of the nationalist faction who strove to eliminate all ethnically non-Ukrainians from Ukraine and collaborated with Nazi Germany for this purpose. After EuroMaidan where some extremist movements did use Bandera’s image as their symbol, the Russian media started developing a narrative that Ukrainian national unity could lead to human rights violations and the rebirth of fascism. Channel One published a news report (14 November 2014) about the public speech of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Odessa, saying that he called Odessa a “banderivtsy city” adding that “nothing could be a better compliment for the city”. The compliment was ironic and meant to be a reference to the Russian media, where anything Ukrainian could be labeled as “banderivtsy”. Meanwhile, the report continued with a fragment where the President spoke about the “severe economic pressure on Ukrainian citizens living in Donbas”. This fragment with Channel One’s interpretation was quickly spread around the Internet with the title: “Poroshenko: Children from Donbas Will Be Sitting in Cellars”.

Crimea became another symbol of the glorious history of Russia. Generally, it was included in the narratives related to Russia’s revenge for the siege of Sevastopol in WWII and the annexation was often referred as “The Third Defense of Sevastopol” (The Defense of Sevastopol is a “sacred” WWII battle that resulted in considerable losses for the Soviet army). After the annexation, a news report (12 May 2014) pictured how Crimea became more prosperous after joining its historical motherland and was literally overwhelmed with tourists from different countries during the May

holidays in 2014. Another report broadcasted a few days earlier (7 May 2014) pictured Crimea as threatened by Ukraine allegedly building a dam to block the North Crimean water channel, thus trying to prevent Crimeans having access to fresh water.

The “West versus Russia” narrative in the Russian foreign policy and propaganda has received much scholarly attention (e.g. Cottiero et al. 2015; Malinova 2014). This is a narrative based largely on binary terms and a well-established set of stereotypes, according to which Russia is spiritual, moral and loyal to traditional values, while the West is immoral and acts only in its vested interests (Malinova 2014). Within this narrative, the West is not only the antithesis of Russia, but is also portrayed as a threat and an aggressive enemy. Four of the selected news stories were used to strengthen this strategic narrative. One report (1 March 2014) was based on the statements of Russian senators, who accused the United States and Europe of creating the crisis in Ukraine and presenting a threat to Russia’s security. One senator is reported as having said: “I have heard in various media outlets that President of the United States Obama threatens Russia and says Russia will pay a heavy price for its policy.” The senator also reassured his audience that they were aware of the fact that “Ukrainian Maidan militants” were trained in Lithuania and Poland. The news piece was summed up with an image of people crying in a train, who were described as Serbians leaving their homes back in the 1990s.

Another accusation was connected to the shooting down of Malaysian Boeing MH17. Mikhail Leontiev, a famous TV host and a Vice President of RosNeft, in his programme Odnako, which he co-owns with Channel One, presented a “sensational image” (14 November 2014): This was an aerial photo claiming to show a jet fighter firing a missile at MH17. According to Leontiev, this photo was supposed to refute the widely held view in the West that MH17 had been shot down by a BUK missile fired by Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. The report openly shifted the blame to Ukraine and other countries, which purportedly supported Ukraine in this crime.

A lighter version of “propaganda-entertainment” was a report that propagates the anti-Western narrative and hostility between Ukraine and Russia in the cultural field. The news story (20

November 2014) claimed that Ukraine would not continue with the Russian tradition of celebrating New Year's Eve with Father Frost and his granddaughter Snegurochka. Rather Ukrainians wanted to join the Western world as soon as possible and welcomed Santa Claus to celebrate with them. The report was ironic and made Ukrainians look awkward in their desire to join a world they did not belong to.

StopFake: debunking the Russian narrative

Amongst the deluge of information and disinformation, there is, as Andrejevic (2013) argues, a desire to get to the real truth. In the context of conflict reporting, this desire can stem from the journalistic ideal to seek the truth, or from ideological and political commitments (cf. Sienkiewicz 2015). StopFake makes use of novel digital means to question potentially false narratives originating from mainstream media or circulating in the Internet and advances their own version of the truth. The verification of news, in this way, becomes not only a tool through which fact-checkers attempt to tell the truth, but also a form of ideological voluntary assistance contributing toward the political goals of governments or other actors (see Bolin, Jordan, and Ståhlberg 2016; Sienkiewicz 2015).

StopFake's debunking methods vary from report to report. One of the basic methods is pointing out the baselessness of the evidence. For example, as a response to the claim about "a parcel of land and two slaves," StopFake declared that "a mosaic of fragments of soldiers' conversations" could not serve as proof of the claim. In the same way, they argued that the helmet with a Nazi symbol pictured in the same report cannot be proven as being worn by a Ukrainian soldier because of the lack of other identifications on the uniform or details about where and when the image was taken.

Another debunking practice is based on spotting inconsistencies in details. Thus, in the "crucified boy" story, StopFake points to the fact that there is no Lenin square in Slavyansk, which is the square where the public execution supposedly took place. Another example is from the story

about “a parcel of land and two slaves”. StopFake claimed that at the time when the Channel One report was made, the separatist forces of Donetsk, not the Ukrainian army, had already destroyed the village.

One of the most powerful debunking methods is presenting a counter-narrative or their own evidence that Channel One’s images are manipulated, fabricated or taken out of the context with the purpose of strengthening a false message. While debunking the “crucified boy” story, StopFake presented a nine-minute video of the journalist from the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. The journalist visited the scene of the purported incident in Slavyansk and interviewed residents. The video shows a number of people saying they have neither seen nor heard anything about the crime.

Image verification is at the core of today’s digital suspicion and the community revealed that several images were not what they purported to be. For instance, a photo depicting a long shallow ditch full of dead bodies, reported on Channel One as civilians killed by the Ukrainian army, was discovered by StopFake to pre-date the current conflict by nearly two decades. To prove this, StopFake published the original image, showing a Russian soldier standing over the mass graves of civilians in Chechnya in 1995 during Russia’s own battle with separatists in the contested North Caucasus republic. For the sake of Channel One’s argument, the soldier was cropped out and the image was reframed as a result of a Ukrainian army attack.

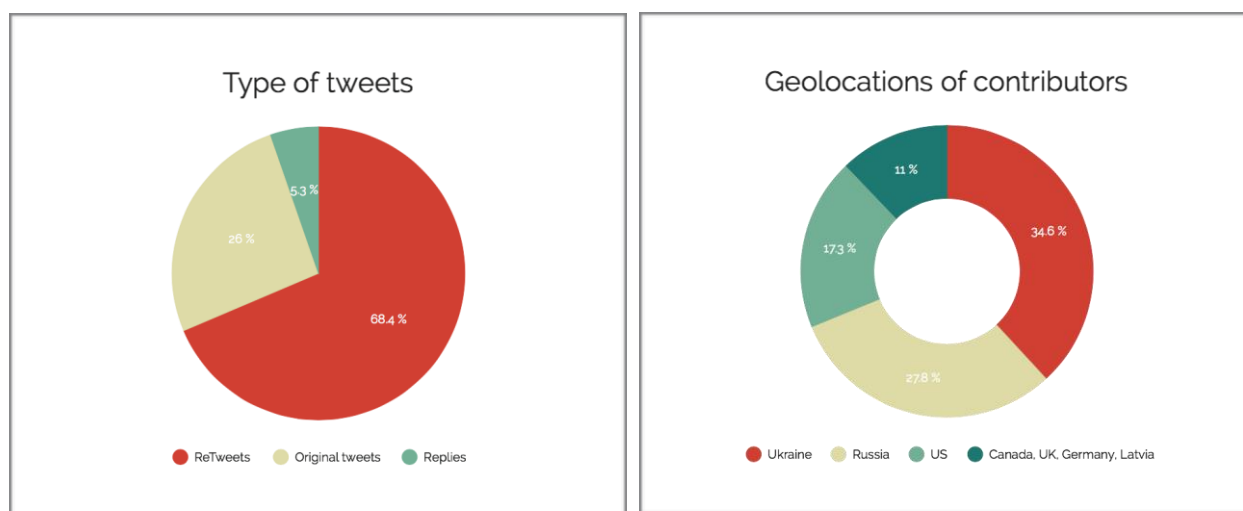
Regarding the “sensational photo” presented as a proof of Ukraine’s guilt for MH17’s crash, StopFake put a great deal of effort into convincing its audience of the inauthenticity of the image. They claim that the photo has been artificially constructed with photo manipulation software and present several explanations as why the image cannot be authentic. The fact-checkers argued that a background fragment of cloud and the crop formations in the satellite photo exactly matched a patchwork of Yandex and Google Map satellite images from 28 August 2012. Secondly, the image depicts MH17 with the Malaysian Airlines logo in the wrong place, while the shape of the plane itself is also incorrect. Thirdly, on the image neither the Boeing nor the jet fighter have vapor trails

and it looks as if their engines are turned off. Finally, the image was found to have been published a month earlier on Internet forums.

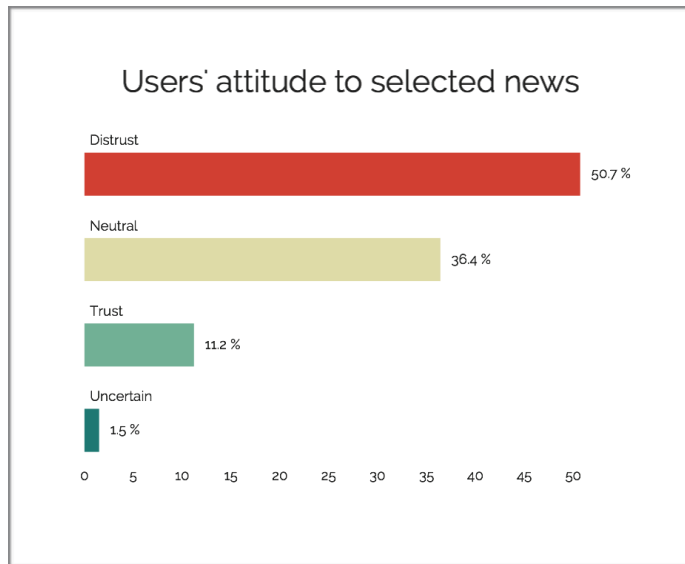
Tweeting trust and suspicion

Out of 6,043 tweets that we have collected, the original tweets constitute about 26% (N=1,596); the biggest percentage consists of retweets, 68.4% (N=4,132); and the smallest percentage of tweets are replies to the original tweets, which is 5.3% (N=321). The tweets that include Channel One URLs prevail over those which contain StopFake URLs (87.7% vs. 12.3%). The tweets which contain the references to Channel One are mostly “distrust” comments (54.8%) or neutral (31%), while the tweets with a reference to StopFake are mostly neutral (81.8%) or “distrust” for Channel One content (16.8%).

Not all Twitter account holders make their personal information available, but according to the publicly available data, most of the analyzed tweets were posted from Ukraine (34.6%), Russia



(27.8%) and the United States (17.3%). Contributors from Canada, United Kingdom, Germany and Latvia constitute around 11% in total. It should be noted that all comments expressing trust were from users based in Russia, while users based in Ukraine (tweets in Ukrainian) expressed only distrust. There were also tweets that only repeated a title or a phrase reflecting the news storyline and then provided a link to the news piece (36.4%); they were classified as neutral.



Our content analysis of the tweets shows 50.7 % of distrust to the Channel One news. Fake news encouraged sarcastic, ironic comment. The strongest emotions for comments expressing distrust were sarcasm (44.5%) and disgust (38.7%), often targeted at propaganda on Channel One in general or the specific content of a news story. Sarcastic remarks were made with the intention of making the bizarreness of the news conspicuous: *“Russian soldiers: Why do Ukrainian soldiers get two slaves and we don’t? That’s not fair!”* Disgust was expressed through exclamations such as “ugh” or expressing explicit contempt towards the content:

You think Russian propaganda is always the same crap? No! Before, Ukrainians were Nazis. Now they're worse.#ugh. <http://t.co/ZW5NNZA5Mg>

Disgusting propaganda <http://t.co/75qdQ08i15> #MH17

The stories that received the highest level of distrust were about a parcel of land and two slaves promised to Ukrainian soldiers (95.6% of “distrust” tweets), the crucified boy (86.1% of “distrust” tweets) and Crimea being overwhelmed with tourists (48.1% distrust compared with 0.3% trust). Some comments, however, related to Channel One and its general policy of reporting

on the events in Ukraine: *“Who was doubting that Channel One never lied. Look here, this is proof: a link to the channel’s website.”* Some Twitter users who expressed distrust also provided evidence about the baselessness of the news reports by referring to other Internet users or verification sources, such as live web cameras, YouTube videos, news media and the official webpages of state organs and commercial organizations: *“I was doggedly looking for tourists with the help of all the web cameras in Crimea. In vain. Channel One managed, it did find a whole ‘wave of tourists’!”*

The number of users who expressed trust in Channel One did not exceed 11.2%. These posts were often emotionally neutral, i.e. expressed no emotions (43.4%) or expressed aversion (36.9%) towards the news story in general or particular characters in the report. Nevertheless, there were four news stories which were trusted more than distrusted according to the data. The news report about President Poroshenko threatening to keep Donbas children in cellars was among the most trusted, and also showed the minimum of suspicion about the truthfulness of the event (85.1% of posts expressed trust). The other news items were about Ukraine building a dam to block fresh water to Crimea (showed 20.1% trust against 0.5% distrust); a supposed atrocity by the Ukrainian army that reused an image from the Chechen War (38.6% trust against 30.7% distrust); and MH17 being shot down by a Ukrainian jet fighter (30.5% trust against 11.6% distrust). The tweets reacting to these news stories were negative in their opinion of the Ukrainian government, displaying the users’ indignation about events which they believed were true. The users used harsh language when referring to the official Kiev (“junta”), the United States (“americos”) and the Ukrainian President. News presenting “new proof” of the responsibility of the Ukrainian forces for shooting down the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 generated both neutral and hostile comments:

#Russia's channel 1 obtained sat footage of a #Ukraine jet shooting down #MH17

One more proof that Boeing was shot down by ukrops [offensive word for Ukrainians] under the command of the US.

Conclusions

In a diffuse media ecology, strategic narratives require continuous engagement to be able to cope with numerous opinions and rapidly changing news, and to keep their ability to shape the perception of emerging events for multiple audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014). In this light, fabricated and bizarre news reports circulating widely on Internet can be understood as agitation propaganda that is designed to provoke an affective response from the public. The set of symbolic resources and identity claims used by Channel One have been exploited to create legitimacy for the Kremlin's policy and to make a contrast between Russians and Ukrainians, who receive all the negative attitudes historically attributed to Nazi Germany. Channel One's narrative work also accentuates the contrast between the aggressive and immoral West representing a threat to Russia and Russia resisting the West's ambitions for world supremacy. The fact that television still enjoys extremely high popularity in Russia suggests that these narratives can be effectively integrated into public discourse in Russia.

However, strategic narratives do not always aim to make a rational point, and, in contrast to the claims of Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013), the power of strategic narratives does not solely rest on their credibility. Strategic narratives carried by Channel One's journalistically dubious stories can be seen aiming, in the first place, to appeal to emotions and to "blur" the border between what is real and what is not: in other words to form a context in which other messages can be communicated with greater ease (cf. Pomerantsev 2014; Oates 2014). At the same time, strategic communications are conditioned by the diffused media ecology in which narratives become evaluated and discussed by various political actors and general public. Conflicts provide fertile territory for controversy and suspicion to appear and the Internet provides ample opportunities for debunking falsehoods and producing counter-narratives. In this new media ecology StopFake represents a hybrid agent (Chadwick 2013) that integrates different functions (journalistic and political), genres, tools and objectives.

Twitter users, on the whole, are rather skeptical about the accuracy of mainstream media narratives from Russia. Many tweets suggest that they are aware of the strategic narratives, and while they may adopt the terms offered by Channel One for describing events and actors, they make clear that they distrust Channel One in general and some of its content in particular. Some users also demonstrate their own capability for contributing to the narrative work by pointing out the inconsistencies in the details of a report; by finding the images that have been used to create the allegedly fake news reports; by using verification sources available on the Internet to counter Channel One news, such as webcams; or by making their own report from the scene of an alleged event. In future research on mediated strategic narratives, it is important to consider citizen contestation and their contributions to the perpetuation or disappearance of narratives.

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