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This is a copy of an published version of an article published in Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 2017, pp. 23-41

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PARODY MICROBLOGGERS AS CHRONICLERS AND COMMENTATORS ON RUSSIAN POLITICAL REALITY

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In the political environment of contemporary Russia, government-controlled media dominate the discourse. However, the Internet still provides a platform for – and visibility to – alternative voices and ideas. Parody microblogging is a popular recent phenomenon of Russian-language social media. Users with satire accounts utilize the names of power holders, publish links to the news, and provide opinion and contextualization, as well as offering satirical commentary on corruption, the management of the country and media propaganda. This article studies the function of parody framing in critical microblogging in the Russian-language Twitter. It discusses accounts spoofing the elites as tactical media that disrupt the hegemonic discourse and interpret political reality for the Russian digital audience.

The Russian political environment of the 2010s is marked by a high level of state dominance over traditional and Internet media outlets, encompassing professional and amateur communication channels. This is the result of over a decade of government efforts to seize control over words and representations. The media have been “the primary weapon”¹ and “the main power tool”² in Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. Since the late 1990s,

¹Arkady Ostrovsky. 2015. *The Invention of Russia: the Journey from Gorbachev’s Freedom to Putin’s War*. London: Atlantic Books.

² Mikhail Zygar. 2015. *Vsya Kremlevskaia Rat’: Kratkaia Istoriia Sovremennoi Rossii*. Moscow: Dr. Anastasia Denisova is a Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Westminster. Before starting her academic career, she worked as a journalist in Russia for over a decade. She is currently researching the role of Internet memes as a casual artful means of political resistance in the restricted Russian media environment. Email: a.denisova1@westminster.ac.uk

when Putin became prime minister, he has secured state ownership or supervision of the main national media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers and information agencies.³ Zygar⁴ and Pomerantsev note that the state-instructed media continuously portrayed Putin as a forceful, fearless, epic leader, and therefore embedded this image (Zygar calls it “Putin’s myth”) in the public consciousness.⁵ The President’s administration even launched a multi-language broadcasting outlet, RT (Russia Today), for the international audience, in order to propagate Putin’s myth abroad.⁶

The 2010s brought a new challenge to the state’s hegemony over media discourse. The elites had to decide how to control the discourse on multiple online media, including social networking platforms and non-professional blogs.⁷ The early 2010s seemed an emancipating time for resistant-minded Russian citizens: they were able to discuss corruption and mobilize for a protest against the government. In December 2011, around 100,000 people gathered in the central square in Moscow for a demonstration.⁸ These discussions of corruption, reports of wrongdoing by the state and the promotion of opposition politicians and journalists continued throughout the first half of 2012, with further offline protests spreading in large Russian cities. The state, however, responded harshly to rising dissent activism, prosecuted many members of peaceful demonstrations and prohibited any unsanctioned public gathering that exceeded six individuals.⁹ The authorities confounded the work of the few remaining liberal media,¹⁰ orchestrated an editor change at leading news portal Lenta.ru in 2014¹¹ and put economic pressure on the online channel TV Rain. Moreover, the elites tried to curb the digital deliberation by a series of Internet-directed measures. The laws obliged popular bloggers and microbloggers (those with more than 3,000 visits per day) to register with the government watchdog,¹² and enforced a broad anti-extremism law that

cow: Intellektual’naia literature.

³ Peter Pomerantsev. 2015. “The Kremlin’s Information War.” *Journal of Democracy* 26(4): 40-50. Zygar. *Vsia Kremlevskaia Rat’*.

⁴ Zygar. *Vsia Kremlevskaia Rat’*. Pomerantsev. *The Kremlin’s Information War*.

⁵ Ostrovsky. *The Invention of Russia*.

⁶ Pomerantsev. *The Kremlin’s Information War*.

⁷ Ostrovsky. *The Invention of Russia*.

⁸ BBC. 2011. “Russian election: Biggest protests since fall of USSR.” 10 December 2011.

⁹ Aleksandr Sherstobitov. 2014. “The Potential of Social Media in Russia: From Political Mobilization to Civic Engagement.” *EGOSE ‘14: Proceedings of the 2014 Conference on Electronic Governance and Open Society: Challenges in Eurasia*: 162-6. <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2729104.2729118>.

¹⁰ Zygar. *Vsia Kremlevskaia Rat’*.

¹¹ BBC. 2014. “Russia Lenta.ru editor Timchenko fired in Ukraine row.” 12 March 2014. At <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26543464>, accessed 1 April 2016.

¹² Anastasia Denisova. 2016, forthcoming. “Democracy, Protest and Public Sphere in Russia after the 2011-12 Anti-Government Protests: Digital Media at Stake.” *Media Culture & Society*. Nastya Chernikova. 2014. “Aifon v Karmane Vatnika [iPhone in the Vatrik Pocket].”

applied to any expression of discontent or criticism of the government's politics.¹³ As a result, the same laws that refer to the media bind popular microbloggers. Nonetheless, they can still employ Aesopian language to express their criticism of the state.

In the realm of social media, several spoof accounts of popular political actors have gained visibility. Such microblogs as the mock account of the Russian President, Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, the moustache of the President's representative and Joseph Stalin, attract between 200,000 and 1,600,000 readers. These microblogs are by no means the leaders of the Russian-language Twitter: pop culture personalities and government mouthpieces dominate the statistics. Television presenters Ivan Urgant and Pavel Volya have nearly 5 million followers each. In the political domain, the top accounts are those of the prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev (5 million); the President of Russia (3 million); and the state-owned channel Pervyi kanal and the state-indoctrinated news programme Vesti.ru on the channel Rossiya (3 million each).¹⁴

Parody microblogs of the Russian-language Twitter may not be at the top of the statistics, but they encourage an intriguing balance in the online visibility of the hegemonic state and the opposition. A few years ago, when the prank profile of the president appeared on Twitter, it became more popular than the leader's authentic account.¹⁵ The ex-president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, attracted 1,110,000 followers to his official Twitter feed @MedvedevRussia, while the spoof @KermlinRussia – born as a parody of Medvedev – drew over 1,500,000 followers. This example demonstrates that the digital space can empower alternative voices to pass their message to the audience and compete with hegemonic mouthpieces on equal terms. Though there has been limited research on Twitter accounts that spoof Russian leaders,¹⁶ these profiles present a phenomenon of alternative communication that deserves further study. In the Russian case, the microblogs that mock the elites sometimes turn into independent

The Village, 23 April 2014. At <http://www.the-village.ru/village/business/story/157495-ip-hone-v-karmane-vatnika>, accessed 10 April 2016. Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman and Henry E. Hale. 2014. "Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30(1): 1-26. Sherstobitov. 2014. "The Potential of Social Media in Russia: From Political Mobilization to Civic Engagement."

¹³ Andrey Malgin. 2014. "Vnimatelno Chitayem Zakon o Bloggerakh, Prinyatyi Vchera Dumoi [Let Us Carefully Read the Blogger Law that Was Passed by Duma Yesterday]." *Echo of Moscow*, 23 April 2014. At <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/avmalgin/1306048-echo>, accessed 10 July 2014.

¹⁴ SocialBakers.com. 2016. Twitter Statistics for Russia. At <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/russia>, accessed 26 August 2016.

¹⁵ Ivan Tyutyundzhi. 2011. "Fenomen KermlinRussia v rossiyskom informatsionno-politicheskom prostranstve." *Sotsiologiya Vlasti*, 5: 51-53.

¹⁶ Tyutyundzhi. *Fenomen KermlinRussia*. Julia Ioffe. "Meet the President." *Foreign Policy*. 3 January 2011. At <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/meet-the-president>, accessed 10 August 2016.

opposition mouthpieces known for their “merciless mockery of Putin and other government officials.”¹⁷

In this research, I investigated the role of parody framing in the political communication of the leading oppositional spoof accounts in the Russian Twitter. The research question was: How do popular spoof microbloggers employ parody framing in political criticism and commentary on the news in the Russian-language Twitter? I inquired how each account holder engaged (or not) with the impersonated character; what style of communication and humor they endorsed; whether they preferred commenting on the immediate news or issuing remarks on the issues of Russian politics in general; whether they were sharing links and retweeting others, or focusing on personal expression. I have performed content and textual analysis of 700 tweets from the four most popular critical political spoof accounts on Russian Twitter. In this analysis, I investigated the assumption that Russian parody microbloggers of the 2010s act as tactical media outlets, provide analytical commentary and contextualization to the news and use the parodied persona as a one-off bait to attract an audience rather than a source of playful impersonation.

The article starts with an analysis of the existing studies on parody and satire in the digital age: it discusses the theory on connective action, media gatekeeping and tactical activism in relation to the spoof microbloggers, and evaluates the role of parody political Twitter accounts in liberal and non-liberal regimes. Then the methodology is explained, and the results are provided. The analysis of the main themes and style of humor; approaches to impersonation and contextualisation; and varying degrees of topicality and interconnectivity with other accounts makes possible new conclusions about the role of Russian political parody microbloggers as mouthpieces for political commentary and free speech online.

The Role of Parody in (Challenging) Power Relations

Classic literary studies¹⁸ regard parody as a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, it assists the hegemony by confirming the status of the elites as power holders.¹⁹ On the other hand, it has revolutionary potential to destabilize existing power relations²⁰ by pointing to the weaknesses of leaders. This ambivalence constitutes the “praise and blame” ethos of

¹⁷ Marc Bennetts. “Satire is Thriving in Russia, While Many Russians Aren’t.” *Newsweek*. 2 May 2016. At <http://europe.newsweek.com/russia-political-satire-vladimir-putin-ntv-454525?rm=eu>, accessed 8 August 2016.

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon. 1994. *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge: 3-4; 28-34. Simon Dentith. 2000. *Parody*. New York: Taylor and Francis. Margaret A. Rose. 1993. *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Tim Highfield. 2015. “News via Voldemort: Parody accounts in topical discussions on Twitter.” *New Media & Society*, March: 1-18.

²⁰ Hutcheon. *Irony’s Edge*.

parody and satire.²¹ Parody resonates with the conventional cultural codes and stereotypes yet allows the introduction of new ideas and criticisms in the discourse.

Another important feature of parody for political communication is intertextuality. It connects people, ideas and elements of culture.²² Previous studies on the use of parody in subversive politics have revealed that parody incorporates references to local culture,²³ history, popular stereotypes and folklore, and draws links to the immediate political context. Parody appeals to audiences that share critical sentiments toward the objects of parody. It enables resistant individuals to escape the radar of state censors,²⁴ comment on topical events²⁵ and participate in joyful or even “silly citizenship,”²⁶ which blurs the trivial and political. Spoof accounts in social networks are a postmodernist practice: they allow revealing one’s interpretation of events, while playing a character and adding new layers of meaning to the interpretation.²⁷ In his studies on the post-socialist USSR, Yurchak²⁸ noticed the emergence of a specific type of satire, “stioob”. It refers to the humorous texts with “such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”²⁹ The ethos of a metacommentary connects the resistant political deliberation of the late USSR to the spoof political accounts of Twitter in the 2010s.

Furthermore, not only intertextuality, but the convergence of communicative platforms is taken into account. Users access their social network profiles from various gadgets, including mobile phones. As a result, they may mix the identities they present, occasionally tweeting personal observations under the mask of the spoof persona. This concept of the “context collapse,”³⁰ variable self-representation in different social media, links the research on spoof Russian Twitter accounts to identity studies. This spontaneous, technology-enabled phenomenon of digital commentary on immediate events sheds more light on the importance of casual communication for political activism.

²¹ Sangeet Kumar and Kirk Combe. 2015. “Political Parody and Satire as Subversive Speech in the Global Digital Sphere.” *The International Communication Gazette*, 77(3): 212.

²² Rose. *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*, 1.

²³ Kumar and Combe. *Political Parody and Satire as Subversive Speech*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Highfield. *News via Voldemort*.

²⁶ John Hartley, as cited in Highfield. *News via Voldemort*, 2.

²⁷ Highfield. *News via Voldemort*

²⁸ Alexei Yurchak. 2006. *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

³⁰ Alice Marwick and danah boyd. 2010. I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1): 114-133.

Theories on connective action³¹ and the “cute cat theory of digital activism”³² explain how everyday social media communications can obtain ideological value. In the era of digital networks, individuals can connect to each other without the intermediaries of established political parties, movements or professional media. In collective action, users create a collective critical and resistant discourse by contributing to the shared digital sphere from personal accounts. Humorous communication, such as satirical blogging and sharing of entertaining viral texts (including the images of cats, dogs, emotions and so forth), can draw attention to serious issues.³³ Satirical communication uses allegory and pseudonyms, does not place direct blame and often shapes criticism in a light-hearted form.³⁴

Moreover, the tenet of joyful masked communication permits studying spoof political accounts in the lens of the carnivalesque resistance. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on the carnival as a form of dissent³⁵ derives from his studies of medieval times. Bakhtin identifies carnival as a legal activity that allows for the promotion of alternative discourse, multiplicity of styles, and an intentional polyphony (“heteroglossia”). The elites are aware of the carnival yet approve of it in order to let the protest public let off steam. The proliferation of prank political accounts in the realm of social networks has echoes of Bakhtin’s³⁶ conceptualisation of the carnival as a “second life, organised on the basis of laughter.” In restricted environments, digital networks often function as the parallel media reality for the dissent public: they reimagine political leaders in a humorous, even absurd, way, and by doing so discuss their real actions. Prank microbloggers raise the visibility of alternative discourses and fill the mainstream environment of a commercial network with subversive points on hegemonic politics. However, criticism of Bakhtin’s original concept can be also addressed toward the digital rebirth of a carnival. As Max Gluckman³⁷ stressed in his classic argument, carnival cannot be progressive and conservative at the same time. The elites maintain control over the time and place of the carnival, therefore this public manifestation of discontent tends to reaffirm the existing power relations. White accordingly notices that, from this

³¹ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. “The Logic of Connective Action: The Personalization of Contentious Politics.” *Information, Communication & Society*, 15 (5): 739-768.

³² Ethan Zuckerman. 2013. “Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression.” In Danielle Allen and Jennifer Light, eds, *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Clay Shirky. 2011. “Political Power of Social Media-Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change.” *Foreign Affairs*, 90.

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin. 1984. *Rabelais and his World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ Max Gluckman. 1965. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Oxford: Blackwell.

perspective, carnival serves as a safety valve for the power holders³⁸ – they allow the resistant crowds to let off steam and then return to the *status quo*.

When parody account holders interpret the news for their followers, they also step into the territory of professional media. Parody microblogging can be interpreted as tactical media. This concept, which merges media production with political activism, was born in the mid-1990s. David Garcia and Geert Lovink³⁹ defined tactical media as “do-it-yourself” independent channels within hegemonic media platforms, or the stand-alone alternative media produced by non-professionals. “Tactical media are media of crisis, criticism and opposition”⁴⁰ and promote voices that are otherwise excluded from the discourse. Russian spoof microbloggers collect and share links, contribute commentary and additional data, interact with other users and respond to followers. Jane Singer⁴¹ refers to this phenomenon as “user-generated visibility” and “secondary gatekeeping.” These terms explain the practices of social media users when they obtain the news from the available professional outlets, evaluate it and decide whether to share it in their personal accounts.⁴² In the Russian case, “secondary gatekeeping” often results in either “upgrading” or “downgrading” the visibility of the news and events to the social media audience.

Therefore, leading a parody microblog is a social and political communicative practice. Two main features influence the popularity of parody tweets: references to the persona who is the object of parody, and topicality that links this persona to the immediate context.⁴³ The role of parody microblogging with high level of topicality (responses and comments to the immediate news or events) differs from country to country, depending on the political and media environment. The existing research on spoof microblogging in the UK⁴⁴ and Australia⁴⁵ shows that users impersonate public personas to attract attention, but then utilize their accounts as entertaining outlets for sharing jokes. The tweets with good humor, strong topicality and no in-character allusions are most popular with the audience.⁴⁶ However, in more restricted media environments,

³⁸ Allon White. 1987. “The Struggle Over Bakhtin: Fraternal Reply to Robert Young.” *Cultural Critique*, 8: 217-241.

³⁹David Garcia and Geert Lovink. 1997. *The ABC of Tactical Media*. At http://preview.sarai.net/events/tml/tml_pdf/abc_tactical.PDF, accessed 11 August 2016.

⁴⁰ Ibid., para. 3.

⁴¹ Jane Singer. 2014. “User-Generated Visibility: Secondary Gatekeeping in a Shared Media Space.” *New Media and Society*, 16(1): 55-73.

⁴² Ibid., 1.

⁴³ Highfield. *News via Voldemort*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Jason Wilson. 2011. “Playing with Politics: Political Fans and Twitter Faking in Post-Broadcast Democracy.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(4): 445-461.

⁴⁶ Highfield. *News via Voldemort*, 14.

where the elites suppress public criticism of their actions, parody micro-blogging obtains more political weight. In South Korea, mock political accounts on Twitter criticize the hegemony and expose the absurdity of the existing political system.⁴⁷ In Russia, spoof accounts of the power holders have a similar ethos – they provide critical commentary that has been excluded from the public space.⁴⁸

This research does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of political parody in the Russian-language social media. Each social network available for the Russian audience has its particular communication characteristics and diverse demographics. Nonetheless, Twitter has proven to be a particularly fruitful network for political research in Russia, as it can sustain a “crossroads of discourses:”⁴⁹ open communication with minimal privacy setting permits the counter-flows of opinion and ideas. Unlike Facebook, with its inclination toward echo chamber formation in the Russian context,⁵⁰ Twitter can serve as the meeting point for users with varying political views who come from various backgrounds and locations. The audience of Russian-language Twitter amounts to 5 million people,⁵¹ many of them from among the young and middle-age citizens who prefer Internet to television (18-45).⁵² Although there is a tendency for the Russian Twitter to replicate and echo many motifs from the mainstream media, it nonetheless has a capacity to maintain long-term discourses on the political alternatives.⁵³

Methodology

My research focused on the four most popular parody accounts of the Russian-language Twitter that criticize the government and offer alternative interpretations of the news. I have chosen these accounts by the open statistics of Twitter popularity (they have between 300,000 – 1,600,000 followers) and references to the established political leaders or institutions in the username and framing. The most prominent liberal parody

⁴⁷ Chang Sup Park. 2013. “Political carnivalism and an emerging public space: examination of a new participatory culture on Twitter.” *International Journal of Electronic Governance* 6.4: 302-318.

⁴⁸ Ioffe. *Meet the President*.

⁴⁹ Svetlana Bodrunova, Anna Litvinenko, Dmitry Gavra and Aleksandr Yakunin. 2015. “Twitter-based Discourse on Migrants in Russia: The Case of 2013 Bashings in Biryulyovo.” *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 5: 97-104.

⁵⁰ Svetlana Bodrunova and Anna Litvinenko. 2016. “Fragmentation of Society and Media Hybridisation in Today’s Russia: How Facebook Voices Collective Demands.” *Zhurnal Issledovaniy Sotsialnoi Politiki*, 14(10).

⁵¹ Bodrunova, Litvinenko, Gavra and Yakunin. *Twitter-based Discourse*.

⁵² Pomerantsev. 2015. “The Kremlin’s Information War.”

⁵³ Anastasia Denisova. 2016. “Democracy, Protest and Public Sphere in Russia after the 2011-12 Anti-Government Protests: Digital Media at Stake.” *Media, Culture and Society*, December.

account on Russian Twitter is @KermlinRussia (1,630,000 followers). It started in 2010, spoofing the account of then-President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev,⁵⁴ but later evolved into a source of continuous criticism of the government and corrupt elites, with the most scorn directed at President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle.⁵⁵ The second most popular account from the sample, @StalinGulag (368,000 followers) pretends to tweet on behalf of the late Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin; the account holder criticizes the decisions of elites, mocks propagandistic media and contemplates the passive and naïve Russian population. The third account examined is @Fake_MIDRF (182,000 followers), which tweets on behalf of a non-human entity, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The account holder uses the photograph of Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov as the account's profile picture. He or she provides daily commentary on the news and complains about the corruption of Russian power holders. The fourth account in the study, @Sandy_mustache (220,000 followers), impersonates the mustache of Dmitry Peskov, the spokesperson of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The account holder utilizes the drawn image of Peskov as the profile picture and publishes commentary on the political and economic news, as well as cartoons and original aphorisms on Russian politics and national stereotypes.

The sample includes 2,800 recent tweets from all four accounts (700 each), retrieved by June 21, 2016. I did not set the starting date of data collection, but established the finishing date as June 21. It enabled me to compare an equal number of texts that parody microbloggers were posting simultaneously while responding to the same news and events. The uneven distribution of texts in time among accounts demonstrated different blogging patterns: for instance, @StalinGulag produced 700 tweets just within two months, from April 18 to June 21, while @KermlinRussia was much less frequent in its blogging. It took @KermlinRussia six months (from December 12, 2015 to June 21, 2016) to release 700 tweets. My data constitutes a non-representative sample, as the findings cannot be generalized to the whole number of parody accounts in the Russian Twitter. However, these microblogs are the most popular, which means that the findings on them create a solid basis for inductive analysis.⁵⁶ Due to the exploratory character of my research goal – to comprehend the role of the parody framing in the spoof microbloggers' political commentary – the inductive approach was the most viable. It enabled me to extract ideas from records and generate a conceptual understanding of the ongoing social processes.⁵⁷ Within the sample of 700 tweets, the saturation of data

⁵⁴ Lenta. "Yekaterina Romanovskaya pokinula proekt "Perzident Roissi". *Lenta.ru*. 4 November 2014. At <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/11/07/kermlin/>, accessed 9 August 2016.

⁵⁵ Ioffe. Meet the Persident. Bennetts. Satire is Thriving in Russia.

⁵⁶ Alan Bryman. 2014. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁷ W. Laurence Neuman. 2014. *Social Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Ap-*

was reached. (Saturation refers to the point in data collection when a researcher realizes that she has collected enough evidence and that adding new participants or texts would not bring any new themes or substantial alterations from the existing codes.)⁵⁸ Within the collected sample, each parody microblogger exhibited their interest in a diverse array of subjects, used various styles of political commentary, made uneven references to the source of parody and exploited humor in many ways.

The main themes were coded manually and categorized in the following schema: topical, political, topical and political, character-specific, self-exposure, retweets and external links. The tweets that responded to recent events and statements were coded as “topical”; they may or may not relate to the parodied persona. “Political” tweets contained criticism of the Russian elites; they may or may not relate to the immediate news and events. “Topical and political” tweets responded to the news and incorporated political criticism or contextualization. Contextualizing is the broad term to identify the tweets that link current events and statements with the wider context; they often inform the audience of the hidden agenda or provide additional facts and ideas to stimulate critical interpretation. “Character-specific” tweets are those relating to the persona/institution/entity that the account pretends to represent: they interpret the events from the character’s point of view or incorporate references to certain stereotypes or known traits of the parodied persona/institution.⁵⁹ “Self-exposure” identifies the occasional tweets containing mentions of the account holder’s authentic personality or thoughts. In these instances, the microblogger steps out of the parodied character and talks about personal experiences, relationships with other people or Twitter accounts or shares insights in their professional or personal life.

The collected data was further scrutinized according to the number of retweets or responses to other Twitter users, and the number of external links shared. This part of coding enabled me to analyse the interconnectivity of the chosen parody microbloggers with other Twitter accounts, media outlets, other social networks or Internet resources. It showed whether spoof account holders preferred to focus on their self-expression and opinion, or endorse and promote the ideas and jokes of others. By adding this element to the content analysis, this research aimed to distinguish the microbloggers with a self-centred ethos from those that function as hubs of information and analysis.

In order to enrich the understanding of the style of critical commentary and pattern of the microbloggers’ self-expression, I have performed

proaches (Vol. 13). Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 177-178.

⁵⁸ John W. Creswell. 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 77.

⁵⁹Highfield. *News via Voldermort*, 6-7.

textual analysis on a sample of tweets that were topical and political at the same time. I have picked a case study that attracted commentary from all four accounts: the viral quote of the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev about pensions. In 2016, the Russian Prime Minister created many headlines with the announcement that there was no money in the budget to increase pensions.⁶⁰ The politician was on an official visit to Crimea, walking in front of television cameras, when a pensioner approached and complained about the government's failure to index pensions. Medvedev replied: "There is no money. But be strong. All the best. Have a good day, and good health." The video of this meeting went viral on the Internet: 3.5 million people watched it on YouTube within two weeks.⁶¹ Many social media users picked on Medvedev's words to criticize the government and discuss the bold character of the power holders' rhetoric. The comparative study of the topical and political tweets that involved references to Medvedev's statement revealed the common trends and differences in the microblogging approaches of all four accounts. This enabled me to see how the spoof account holders present the news, provide context or explanation, or exploit news and events as the starting point to discuss other grievances and make jokes about politics.

Lastly, through content and textual analyses, I evaluated how spoof accounts mobilize parody framing to shape their political commentary and whether hoax identity plays any role in their satirical communication.

Results: Russian Parody Microbloggers as the Mouthpieces of Contextualisation and Criticism

Russian parody microbloggers have developed personal styles of expression and approaches to blogging. All four accounts studied were different in the ways they responded to the news and interacted with the audience, other Twitter users and external Internet sources. They utilized the framing of the official mouthpiece of the President of Russia, a fake Ministry of Foreign Affairs account, moustache of the President's spokesperson and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Although three out of four accounts hold the names of existing personas and institutions, they held little or no references to the sources of their prank in their communication. According to the content analysis, neither @KermlinRussia, @Fake_MIDRF or @StalinGulag pretended to "be" the person or institution that they referred to in their name – they did not try to convince the audience that they were the account of the president, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Soviet leader. There were no allusions to the parodied individuals and institutions in the sample. Only @Sandy_mustache featured three references to the

⁶⁰BBC. "Russian PM: 'No money for pensions, but have a good day!'" *BBC Trending*. 23 May 2016. At <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-36482124>, accessed 9 August 2016).

⁶¹BBC. "*Russian PM: 'No money for pensions'*".

pranked spokesperson of the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov. Among the character-specific tweets were, for instance, the hint to the corruption scandal that involved the spokesperson and his wife Tatiana Navka:⁶²

“Tanya, if they ask us about the offshore [accounts], tell them that you do not know the person with this surname. And that the gypsies have stolen your passport in the suburban train” (Таня, если спросят про офшор, скажи, что не знаешь человека с такой фамилией. А паспорт украли цыгане в электричке). (@Sandy_mustache, April 4, 2016)

In another instance, the account holder pointed to the fact that, though Dmitry Peskov had shaved off his famous moustache, the account @Sandy_mustache remained popular.

“Tanya, have you seen my moustache? – Have a look on Twitter” (Таня, ты не видела мои усы? – Поищи в Твиттере (@Sandy_mustache, February 20, 2016).

The remarkably low level of character-specific microblogging among the parody political accounts of the Russian-language Twitter reflects the global trend of this genre: users often employ the parody framing as a bait to attract the audience⁶³ and then publish tweets that bear no connection with the source of prank. The tweets that suggested self-exposure (those that revealed the personality and private experiences of the account holder) were more prominent: @KermlinRussia (2), @Fake_MIDRF (6) and @StalinGulag (6). In most cases, these tweets promoted the creative work of the account holders beyond Twitter, namely the mobile apps or the Facebook page of the same name. The profile page of @Sandy_mustache on Twitter even shows an email address with the note: “For advertising requests.” This detail suggests that the user is trying to turn their microblog into a commercial resource and acknowledges its popularity among the public. @StalinGulag, comparably, retweeted over a hundred tweets – but all of them were praise of his Twitter account and sense of humor (102 out of 104 retweets on his page are compliments to @StalinGulag). This also exemplifies the importance of self-expression and reward to the creative input of the parody microbloggers on Twitter. They seek recognition from the audience and try to boost their popularity.

“[I have attracted] 3,500 followers just over a few hours! My

⁶²In 2015, Russian president’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov married his partner in a prestigious Black Sea Resort. Anti-corruption activists pointed to the wedding photograph of Peskov wearing an expensive pair of watch worth £400,000. They questioned how the official with a declared annual salary of £93,000 could afford such an expensive timepiece, and accused him of corruption. Peskov denied the allegations and insisted that he did not pay for the watch – it was a gift from his wife. Source: Ronald Oliphant. “Vladimir Putin’s Spokesman in Luxury Watch Scandal.” *The Telegraph*. 3 August 2015. At <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11780027/Vladimir-Putins-spokesman-in-luxury-watch-scandal.html>, accessed 10 August 2016.

⁶³Wilson. 2011. “Playing with Politics: Political Fans and Twitter Faking in Post-Broadcast Democracy.”

channel in Telegram is a macho bachelor's cave where I can make jokes without choosing [politically correct] words telegram.me/stalin_gulag” (За несколько часов 3500! Канал в телеграмме- брутальная холостяцкая берлога, где можно говорит неподбирая слов telegram.me/stalin_gulag) (@StalinGulag, April 21, 2016).

“Whoever has ears, let them hear! Sandy_mustache in the mobile application SoundStreamsoundstream.media/listen/971362425 Mar” (Имеющий уши, да услышит! УсыПескова в мобильном приложении SoundStreamsoundstream.media/listen/971362425 Mar) (@Sandy_mustache, March 25, 2016).

@Fake_MIDRF and @KermlinRussia refrained from self-promotion. Nevertheless, they also included tweets that suggested self-exposure. For instance, they defined their own blogging style or remarked on the issue of authorship in social networks. When other users accused him of plagiarism, @KermlinRussia openly apologized for the “stolen” tweets,. This style of tweeting indicated that the account holder did not mind going completely “off character,” which further proved the insignificance of character-specific framing for this account. @Fake_MIDRF once explained the account's style to English-speaking journalists and users who noticed his satirical style on Twitter:

“@KevinRothrock The only healthy attitude to Russia's policymaking is via satire. Otherwise it's way too tragic” (@Fake_MIDRF, May 24, 2016).

“@IlvesToomas @ChristopherJM @SupportCrackdown on satirical Twitter accounts violates the principle of freedom of speech!” (@Fake_MIDRF, May 31, 2016).

The self-referential and self-promotional tweets demonstrate that the microbloggers are aware of their Twitter popularity. They consciously work on improving it (as the links to other resources suggest). The bait of the prank profiles enabled the parody microbloggers to attract followers, but it is persistent creative output that has kept their audiences growing. Interestingly, parody microbloggers sometimes acknowledge their status as hubs of communication on Twitter. For example, @StalinGulag announced in advance that he would hold a live commentary on the Eurovision-2016 competition, and @KermlinRussia, @StalinGulag and @Fake_MIDRF were all actively commenting live on football matches during the Euro-2016 Championship in France. Such live-tweeting was not uncommon during these events, but the communication of @StalinGulag, for example, contained appeals or instructions to the audience. This demonstrated how aware the user was of his popularity. He included many patronizing pieces of advice, such as encouraging viewers to get a drink, or go to bed, when there was not much hope left for the Russian team. However, this user rarely engaged in conversation with followers and preserved

a one-to-many pattern of communication. Similarly, the analysis of @Sandy_mustache's tweets also revealed a tendency to act as a one-to-many communication outlet: he retweeted other users only 62 times, and barely interacted with the commentators.

Two other accounts, @KermlinRussia and @Fake_MIDRF, were more active in holding discussions with other Twitter users. These parody microbloggers were also more "generous" in letting other users profit from their visibility – they shared 177 (@KermlinRussia) and 262 (@Fake_MIDRF) retweets of other users and many external links. In addition to the retweets, they generously distributed links to external resources in their Twitter feeds (@KermlinRussia, 199; @Fake_MIDRF, 304). These included links to liberal media, opposition blogs and anti-corruption investigations, which acquainted their followers with various critical ideas and facts. @Sandy_mustache, by comparison, shared only 104 external links and preferred to focus on its own commentary to the news and events. Nonetheless, all three accounts (@KermlinRussia, @Fake_MIDRF and @Sandy_mustache) were similar in their responses to the news agenda: they combined information, opinion and user-generated content on a daily basis. They monitored the news and quickly responded, often with interpretation and criticism of the elites. This style of communication resembled the work of media outlets that amalgamated links, ideas and discussions. @StalinGulag was the only account in the sample that did not include a substantial amount of external links or retweets, and performed as a standalone opinion mouthpiece.

The high level of topical tweets in the sample (@Kermlin Russia, 269; @Fake_MIDRF, 163; @StalinGulag, 243; @Sandy_mustache, 55) reveals that parody microbloggers follow the news and offer their commentary. This commentary is likely to be political and suggest a certain point of view, as the majority of the topical tweets among all four users were also political (@KermlinRussia, 139; @Fake_MIDRF, 152; @StalinGulag, 119; @Sandy_mustache, 42). This finding supports the assumption that political parody microbloggers in Russia utilize their accounts to contextualize the news and explain the political background of events. They take references to the immediate news as their starting point in a discussion of the government's wrongdoings.

Many tweets by the parody microbloggers scorned what they considered the mainstream media's propaganda on patriotism and conspiracy theories. For example, these tweets by @KermlinRussia and @Fake_MIDRF mock the popular idiom "Russia is rising from its knees" that symbolizes the revival of a powerful Russia. The users cast doubt on the wealth and might of Russia as it is in 2016, and juxtapose the propagandist quote with recent statistics.

"Russia has risen from its knees and ran to find some food: according

to Nielsen, 47% of citizens are saving on food” (Россия встала с колен и побежала искать еду: по данным компании Nielsen 47% граждан начали экономить на продуктах питания) (@KermlinRussia, 20 May 2016).

“Russians are now earning less than the Chinese.” We were rising from our knees. We hit the chair with our heads. We fell flat on our faces in the mud” (“Россияне стали зарабатывать меньше китайцев” Вставали с колени. Ударились головой отабуретку. Упали в грязь ебалом плашмя) (@StalinGulag, 18 May 2016).

In another instance, @Sandy_mustache condemned recent legislative initiatives by the Russian parliament⁶⁴ that suggested withdrawing citizenship for the support of terrorism, limiting the activity of religious groups and increased access to private communications by security agencies (Eckel, 2016). The microblogger explicitly demonstrated the extent to which such laws can harm freedom of expression. He made a pun on the phrase “Next, please!” that one frequently hears at the cashier in the fast-food chain McDonald’s. In Russian, it sounds as “Free cashier!”, so the blogger made a pun on the connotations of the Russian word “free” (“svobodnyi”), which can both mean “available” or “unrestricted.”

“The phrase “Free cashier!” will be considered an extremist appeal” (Фраза “Свободная касса!” Будет признана экстремистским лозунгом) (@Sandy_mustache, April 25, 2016).

“Why pass the restrictive laws every day, when you can just take a sheet of paper and write down everything that is allowed” (Зачем каждый день принимать запретительные законы, когда можно на одном листочке написать всё что разрешено) (@Sandy_mustache, May 25, 2016).

“Mornings make adults commit suicide. Hey, Mizulina [Yelena Mizulina, the Russian MP known for promoting many restrictive laws], prohibit the mornings, I know you want to!” (Утро толкает взрослых людей на совершение суицида. Эй, Мизулина, запрети утро, я же знаю тебе хочется!) (@StalinGulag, 18 May 2016).

The tweets cited above exhibit the common communication style of satirical microbloggers: they link narratives to the idioms, news and previous wrongdoings of political leaders. They shape their criticism in a form of an aphorism or a pun, and often include quotes and facts.

The case study of Dmitry Medvedev’s quote about pensions and the social media response to it permitted me to compare parody microbloggers’ responses. When a pensioner asked Dmitry Medvedev about the indexation of pensions, he replied that there was no money for that in the budget and

⁶⁴Mike Eckel. “Russia’s ‘Yarovaya Law’ Imposes Harsh New Restrictions On Religious Groups.” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*. 11 July 2016. At <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-yarovaya-law-religious-freedom-restrictions/27852531.html>, accessed 9 August 2016.

finished the conversation by saying “But be strong. All the best. Have a good day, and good health” (BBC, 2016). Between them, the four parody microbloggers published roughly 30 tweets that contained (in full or in parts) the phrase “But be strong. All the best. Have a good day, and good health.” The majority of users utilized the quote to speculate on the corrupt authorities; they directed their blame either personally at Medvedev or the Russian elites in general.

“Dmitry Medvedev in a tuxedo tells the Russian pensioners: “There is no money. But be strong. Have a good day!” (Дмитрий Медведев во фраке говорит российским пенсионерам: «Денег нет. Вы держитесь тут. Хорошего настроения!») (@Fake_MIDRF, June 10, 2016).

“Dmitry Anatolyevich, no one can survive on a pension like this. – Do not worry, when the money arrives, we will do the indexation of our income. And you be strong!” (Дмитрий Анатольевич, на такую пенсию не проживёшь. — Не беспокойтесь, будут деньги, мы всё себе проиндексируем. А вы тут держитесь!) (@Sandy_mustache, May 23, 2016).

“[The essence of] Russia is the prime minister with an annual income of 8.8 million who tells the old people with a pension of 8,000 rubles that there is no money, but they should be strong” (Россия—это премьер-министр с годовым доходом 8,8 миллионов, сообщающим старикам с пенсией 8 т: денег нет, держитесь) (@StalinGulag, May 24, 2016).

Another important narrative that emerged out of the microbloggers’ mockery of Dmitry Medvedev was criticism of state media and popular propaganda themes. Parody accounts utilized Medvedev’s quote to comment on media assertions that Russia was wealthy and held a strong position on the global political arena. They also questioned the popular Russian media rhetoric that the United States of America was responsible for Russia’s economic and political troubles. @KermlinRussia connected Medvedev’s quote with a video by the government’s English-language channel RT (also known as Russia Today). This pro-Kremlin video speculates on what could have happened if Russia had not annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, and suggests a gruesome alternative scenario for the local population. By linking the prime minister’s announcement with the propaganda video, the microblogger points to the manipulation and lies of the government and its media. The microblogger disrupts the hegemonic media agenda and suggests alternative readings of its narratives and messages.

“There is no money, but be strong and say thanks that you have not kicked the bucket yet (new video from RussiaToday)” (Денег нет, но вы там держитесь и скажите спасибо, что ещё не сдохли (новый ролик от RussiaToday): www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwEC1SuhpCo) (@KermlinRussia, June 9, 2016).

The third way to interpret and contextualize Medvedev's quote was to turn it into a meme, a viral catchphrase that one could use on any occasion. The repetition and redistribution of this meme for weeks after the statement reminded the audience of the government's unashamed rhetoric.

"The annual pay of players on the Russian football team is 1.8 billion rubles. And you be strong, have a good day <http://pbs.twimg.com/media/ClbHtpmWQAADv4u.jpg>" (Годовая зарплата футболистов российской сборной - 1,8 млрд рублей. Вы держитесь тут, хорошего вам настроения. <http://pbs.twimg.com/media/ClbHtpmWQAADv4u.jpg>) (@Fake_MIDRF, June 21, 2016).

"Go to bed. There is no money and it makes no sense to be strong" (Идите спать. Всё равно денег нет и держаться смысла тоже нет) (@StalinGulag, May 24, 2016).

"Money cannot buy a good mood!" (Хорошее настроение за деньги некупишь!) (@Sandy_mustache, May 24, 2016).

The Medvedev case study reveals that parody microbloggers utilize the news and statements in ways that vary from putting the events in a context that the propaganda media would never show to turning embarrassing moments for the government into viral hits. This activity resembles media gatekeeping, where journalists decide what to put in the spotlight and how to interpret it for the audience. Spoof accounts engage in "secondary gatekeeping" and upgrade the visibility of news that helps to criticize the government. Moreover, they employ their popular parody accounts as tactical media – they point to the issues of hegemonic politics and hold the authorities to account. By performing the latter, they take over the duty that the state-controlled media in Russia have abandoned.

Furthermore, the microbloggers highlight the absurdity and misleading nature of the government's claims. By doing so, they not only comment on the news, but object to the narratives of propaganda. In this confrontation, the parody accounts operate as classic satirists and innovative culture jammers at the same time. Following in the footsteps of the newspaper lampooners or cartoonists, they exaggerate certain sides of the discourse or traits of the main actors; they put the authorities under the magnifying glass. From the standpoint of culture jamming, they remix the elements of culture and exploit the viral nature of networked communication to spread their unconventional message. The parody account holders disrupt the hegemonic discourse and reveal the hidden meaning of what is being said and done. By contextualizing the quotes of the power holders and turning them into viral jokes, the microbloggers increase the political awareness of their audience. They create resistant narratives and educate followers through the continuous flow of critical communication.

Conclusion

Amalgamating the findings from textual and content analysis reveals that Russian parody microbloggers largely refrain from references to the parodied personas. They do not aim to impersonate the actors and institutions that they mention in the account framing. They currently utilize these usernames as brand names for communicating with Twitter crowds. Intriguingly, this study of the Russian parody microbloggers has demonstrated that parody is not as prominent as satire in their communication patterns. In order to explain this seeming inconsistency, one may consider the political environment of contemporary Russia. In the present limited media environment of Russia, holding a critical political account can be dangerous: both the state and pro-state groups may persecute or threaten the opponent of the Kremlin. For this reason, the parody framing serves as a protective shield rather than a source of playful impersonation. Hiding behind a pseudonym permits the account holders to stay anonymous and keep their identity from the communication watchdog or state supporters. Although they may need to report their passport details to the government,⁶⁵ they can at least be safe from pro-government activists.

In the present political circumstances, where the state controls the majority of the traditional and popular digital media in Russia, individual critical mouthpieces in social media are precious as the few remaining hubs of resistant ideas. This article has illuminated the prevailing patterns of criticism and communication styles, disclosed that users often immerse the news in an instant political commentary, link the events and their prerequisites, blame corrupt officials and juxtapose their words with the facts. Russian parody microbloggers comment on the news on a daily basis and pick the anti-government stories, which they then distribute to their followers with a critical judgement. They often aim to turn their oppositional criticism into a viral joke. This format exemplifies the longevity of the critical narrative in social networks, as users exploit it on many occasions and circulate it even weeks after the news event. The analysis revealed that parody framing in Russian microblogging has a different role from parody framing in liberal countries. Russian politicized spoof accounts shield their identity and promote alternative interpretations and political ideas. Western parody microbloggers seek to entertain their audience, while the Russian politicized prankers aim not only to amuse, but educate their followers on politics. Moreover, the low degree of impersonation and role play in Russian parody microblogging makes it possible to identify these microbloggers as independent tactical media rather than artists with playful self-expression; they serve as sources of information and political ideas.

⁶⁵Andrey Malgin. 2014. "Vnimatelno Chitayem Zakon o Bloggerakh, Prinyaty Vchera Dumoi [Let Us Carefully Read the Blogger Law that Was Passed by Duma Yesterday]."

Further research should help to analyze feedback from followers and commenters; examine whether they relate to the parodied personas or understand the spoof; investigate how they perceive the critical communication and respond to it; and determine which tweets attract like-minded individuals, and which texts encourage hate speech from supporters of the state. Overall, the research on parody microblogging in Russian Twitter has much potential to reveal the main themes and allegories of the existing (though narrow) resistant discourse in Russian-language social media.

