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# FAKE NEWS AS META-MIMESIS: IMITATIVE GENRES AND STORYTELLING IN THE PHILIPPINES, BRAZIL, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

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## **Abstract**

We propose to consider “fake news” as a genre with its own conventions and narrative devices dependent on those of mainstream journalism. Departing from genre theory, “culture jamming” practice and Barnhurst and Nerone’s (2002) concept of journalist modernism rooted in Louis Althusser’s idea of form as the principal expression of ideology, we intend to highlight empirically how mainstream media storytelling is hacked, imitated and hijacked by “fake news” in the four countries that are known to have populist leaders and significant circulation of viral disinformation. Focused on empirical cases from Brazil under Bolsonaro, the Philippines under Duterte, Russia under Putin and Ukraine under Zelensky, this article draws significant comparisons between different cultures and traditions of journalist storytelling in the global peripheries concluding that while “fake news” can be subverting mainstream or integrating with it, even the most distant cases share the common basis of meta-mimesis, imitation of other texts. By way of distancing from the overpublicised cases of Donald Trump or Brexit, we also contribute to de-Westernizing media studies.

## **Keywords**

fake news, genre, culture jamming, Brazil, Philippines, Russia, Ukraine

## **1. Introduction**

The 2020 US presidential election saw the incumbent Donald Trump defeated. Even though it seems that his *kairos* – the opportune moment one can seize and turn into success – may have passed, this is far from certain. Yet no matter what future is awaiting Trump and his movement, there are much fewer grounds to expect the downfall of other strongmen around the world who modelled themselves after him and whom he sometimes modelled himself after. “Fake news”, alternative facts, conspiracy theories – a range of phenomena that seem inherently linked and captured under the apt if vague concept of post-truth – have been and remain significant tools for these leaders, their regimes and followers.

While the much-publicized cases of viral disinformation in the West have already received disproportionate attention, research on “fake news” in other national contexts is scarce (especially in English while the body of research on fake news may be large at least in some national language such as Portuguese). Studying these contexts is of great import not only because

they evade academic focus. Unlike Trump, other leaders who learned how to ride the populist wave are confidently remaining in power, and it is in this secure obscurity that new strains of “fake news” are tested on greater numbers of people than in the US, the UK or any EU country, before being exported to the West. This is why de-Westernizing media studies and refocusing on the peripheries should be a priority today more than ever.

In this study, we concentrate on a definitive aspect that makes “fake news” work: how mainstream media storytelling is hacked, imitated and hijacked (whether successfully or not). In order to be perceived as “news” by part of the audience, viral disinformation is forced to demonstrate certain features characteristic of good-faith journalism or other information products. Thus, the very possibility of “fake news” arises within “real news”. In order to trace how it works in different cultures and traditions of journalism, we focus on the four countries that are known to have populist leaders and significant circulation of viral disinformation: Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2018-present), the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte (2016-present), Russia under Vladimir Putin (2000-present), and Ukraine under Volodymyr Zelensky (2019-present).

Moreover, it is interesting to observe how imitation of mainstream narrative forms is functioning in the contexts of media systems that have been quite distant from both the Anglo-Saxon and the continental European models, despite sustained efforts at replicating one or the other (or both). Likewise, it is captivating to identify the parallels and discrepancies between the countries that each has its own distinct narrative tradition, journalist professional culture, different IT infrastructures and mainstream media outlets’ modes of ownership.

## **2. The form of “fake news” and media jamming: Theoretical premises**

“Fake news” has been studied extensively from a number of perspectives. Some of the earlier studies focused on the Russian disinformation against Ukraine and the fact-checking counter-effort,<sup>1</sup> other applied quantitative framework to large datasets of fake news from the US,<sup>2</sup> others still studied patterns of diffusion,<sup>3</sup> or approached the problem qualitatively and conceptually.<sup>4</sup> However, Jankowski’s call three years ago for more empirical studies defining concepts, developing typology, studying “narrative styles” etc.<sup>5</sup> – can hardly be seen as fully answered. Researchers focused on deception and elements of facticity as defining in fake news<sup>6</sup> yet almost never explored it within genre theory and analysis, the gap this contribution addresses.

We propose considering “fake news” as a genre. Genre is a conventional form of speech used in a typical situation. As “most genres imply a combination of purpose and form,”<sup>7</sup> different genres – an official oath, a keynote, a research paper or a love letter – differ widely in thematic and narrative structure, style, lexical corpus, and other conventions viewed as effective in gratifying the need that necessitated their use.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the notion's long history since the times of Plato and Aristotle,<sup>9</sup> the conceptualization of genres remained weak until the recent decades. Carolyn Miller (1984) in her seminal essay advanced an "ethnomethodological" approach, whereby the identification of certain textual templates as "genres" by users is accepted rather than questioned because "the 'de facto' genres, the types we have names for in everyday language, tell us something theoretically important about discourse."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the recognition of "fake news" as a different type of text evident from the term's widespread currency "in everyday language" is already a sufficient reason to consider it as a such "de facto" genre.

In theoretical terms, however, genre needs to pander to a certain socially accepted purpose in order to be classified as such. An essentially personal motive is socially legitimated through expression in a conventional, typified form (I am writing a research paper to make my findings known and strengthen my position as a scholar; I write a love letter to express my feelings and forge a relationship). The conventional form required by genre not only aims at achieving the communicative purpose, it is what informs the audience about this very purpose. "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret [...] form becomes a kind of meta-information [...]."<sup>11</sup>

The rhetorical situations where journalism and "fake news" arise are different, even opposite in terms of pragmatics. From the locutor's perspective, journalism satisfies the need to provide factual information where it is lacking while "fake news" responds to the perceived situational demand to deceive the audience. This latter motive can hardly be legitimated by the audience as a social purpose, and effective deception requires presenting false statements under the guise of a factual genre. Therefore, the "how" of this rhetorical action on the level of syntactics (its form) is achieved by posing as if it were a text in a journalism genre, thus behaving exactly as if the rhetorical situation was to allay the information exigence. In order to persuade its audience that it is news, "fake news" must imitate the form of actual news. Imitation and mimicry are at the heart of "fake news" just as Aristotelian *mimesis* is at the heart of fiction; but while a fictional text seeks to imitate life, "fake news" texts imitate other texts, those of actual news. It is a *meta-mimesis*.

"Fake news" as a genre is thus fundamentally meta-mimetic, non-autonomous and dependent on conventions of genuine news, which is evident also in the common nomenclature used for purposefully erroneous messages, where "information"/ "news" always constitutes the root: "disinformation", "fake news", "misinformation" etc. Untangling this semantic further, we note that the opposite of "fake" is not necessarily "true" (its opposite would be "false"), it is the original, like the fake/original binary in art and aesthetics.

"Fake news" arises straight out of the genres of *bona fide* journalism, taking their form while subverting their purpose. If we follow Wittgenstein (1953) and consider all utterances as

language-games that acquire meaning insofar as they follow rules of the situation, “fake news” can be seen as pretending to play one game while in reality it plays another. In a different situation with a different purpose, the same non-factual text would pass harmlessly as a satire or joke.

“Fake news” thus represents a breach of what Lucrecia Escudero called “fiduciary contract”.<sup>12</sup> It is based on the theory of a “reading contract” by Eliseo Verón (1985) who proposed that the reader must accept and activate a certain semiotic program offered to them by the text<sup>13</sup>. Fiduciary contract “implies *a priori* acceptance of the media narrative as true” while the actual verification may be delivered *a posteriori* “based on the legitimacy that media have as institutions”<sup>14</sup>. Without such contract, “the discourse of the news shares many properties with fictional discourses”.<sup>15</sup> Once this contract is violated, we are tempted to add, what remains of news is “fake news”.

Readers are used to certain forms out of habit, enabling them to tell the difference between a piece of news and a love letter, but it is in fact the repetition of this form that blinds towards the element of “truth” in it. Habit becomes the tool of manipulation preventing readers from unmasking it. It requires an act of dehabitation to be able to distinguish what makes the “fake news” fake.

The morphology of journalist genres is inherently linked to the professional culture and ideology behind journalism. The theory of media form and journalist modernism by Barnhurst and Nerone (2002) considers form and narrative to be the principal vessels of ideology as “the imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”<sup>16</sup> Barnhurst and Nerone suggested that news is defined by its form rather than its content; a set of narrative devices and genre conventions, along with “persisting visible structure”, such as visual organization, layout etc. The professional ideology of journalist objectivity, impartiality, separation of fact and opinion is also revealed in its media forms.

This professional ideology is not a given but a result of a historical disposition, an era of “journalist modernism” that arose in the early 1900s and simultaneously included rational and simplified design, an objectivist stance and ideas about journalism’s role in society (“the fourth estate”). It also conformed to the standardized narrative built around headline, lead and body, the inverted pyramid ordering of content from most important to least important,<sup>17</sup> and a clear thematic structure divided into main event, consequences, circumstances, previous event, history, verbal reaction, evaluation, and expectation.<sup>18</sup> This contrasted with a greater narrative and design variety of the Victorian era, and its more partisan press.

The imitative and subversive relationship of “fake news” to the embattled professional ideology of journalist modernism can be compared to “culture jamming” that according to Leah Lievrouw, “captures and subverts the images and ideas of mainstream media culture”<sup>19</sup>. We propose to develop this concept and suggest that “fake news” manifests a culture jamming of

professional media culture, or a *media jamming*. It “takes the form of popular culture, but with the purpose of subverting and critiquing that culture”,<sup>20</sup> which is exactly what fake news does to the mainstream media: “monkeywrenching the media machine”.<sup>21</sup> Since its conception, culture jamming was seen as progressive by default, “the rupture and derangement of ideological spectacles and taken-for-granted assumptions.”<sup>22</sup> We extend this to a general disruption of any mainstream culture by the means of that very culture, regardless of the ideological positions involved.

One of the remarkable lessons of culture jammers, and a similarity with the current “fake news” practice, is “how effectively they have deployed humor, irony, fun, play, and absurdity as means of (even a weapon for) exposing social, political, and economic problems, attracting adherents, and moving them to action.”<sup>23</sup> Researchers have noted the role of creativity, conceptual depth and absurdity in the success of “fake news” as “deep stories”.<sup>24</sup> And while “progressive” culture jamming was easily co-opted by the capitalist mainstream as a cool counterculture in “reverse jamming”<sup>25</sup>, this is unlikely with mainstream media jamming by “fake news”.

Departing from these premises, we are now going to look at cases from Brazil, the Philippines, Russia and Ukraine, trying to pinpoint how exactly mainstream media storytelling and culture are hacked and jammed by viral disinformation across different platforms as post-truth narratives often unfold simultaneously on various mediums following Henry Jenkins’ model of transmedia storytelling.<sup>26</sup> Recognising the differences in cultures and meaningful material, each case has a different orientation, focusing on YouTube shows in the Philippines, manipulated visuals in Brazil, imitative televisual simulacra in Russia, and hybrid ecology of “fake news” in Ukraine. We believe this does not affect comparability as our focus is not on genres of individual texts in country-specific “fake news” corpora, but on the diversity of storytelling forms of the fake.

### **3. The Philippines: constructing newsliness**

We concentrate on the appropriation of the news genre by pro-Duterte content creators on YouTube to obtain legitimacy in promoting his administration, and to attack the media and critics of the government. The analysis of YouTube channels and videos as “fake news” needs to be situated within the turbulent relationship between President Rodrigo Duterte’s populist government and the media, as well as the surge in YouTube engagement in the country. Duterte’s regime is marked by attempts to intimidate news organizations and activists critical of the administration’s violent “war on drugs”, his misogynistic remarks, and more recently, the shortcomings of the pandemic management. This has led to legal cases filed against news organizations such as *Rappler*, and the non-renewal of the franchise of the media giant, *ABS-CBN*.<sup>27</sup> This relationship between Duterte’s government and the media, and the cultural norms privileging the “broadcast yourself” culture on YouTube, facilitated an environment conducive to

challenging traditional news gatekeepers and open to “alternative news sources”. Amid the tremendous growth of YouTube in the Philippines,<sup>28</sup> these “news” channels broaden their reach and are monetized with thousands of engagements through their creative appropriation of the news genre, while remaining obscure from regular fact-checking and scrutiny.

In this analysis, we highlight three ways of appropriating the news genre by YouTube content creators: 1) categorization, or the explicit use of the “news” label through the work of both content creators and the platform; 2) the use of the key elements of a regular television or radio broadcast; and, 3) the use of live news hybrid formats such as the “*teleradyo*” (the televised version of a live radio infotainment-style program). The case concludes by highlighting how the referencing, sharing, and circulation of such videos by multiple YouTube channels and social media influencers constitute “alternative influence networks”<sup>29</sup> that reinforce their legitimacy as news.

Among the pro-Duterte YouTube channels appropriating the label of news directly are DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters) News Info (537K subscribers), DDS News channel, SMNI (Sonshine Media News Channel) (319K subscribers), DDS News Patrol (a pun on a popular news show, *TV Patrol*), DDS News Worldwide (53.8K subscribers), *Banat Balita* (*balita* is a Filipino term for news) (212K subscribers), and Philippines Trending News (253K subscribers). Anyone can create a news channel on YouTube, and the categorization of content as news is based on the content’s categorization by the creators and the platform’s algorithmic identification of content labeled as ‘news’ in the platform recommendation system. Therefore, their visibility and legitimacy as news are amplified thanks to the platform’s loose governance mechanisms.

These channels appropriate elements of the news genre with varying intensity. The one that achieves the closest look and feel to a news broadcast are videos from SMNI, although other channels also mimic traditional news broadcasts. SMNI uses many elements from news genre conventions: from the tagline “Truth that matters” along with a “station ID” common for broadcast networks, to having newscasters in full business suits and adopting the marching tone of voice typical of Filipino newscasters, to the cityscape backdrop reminiscent of news studios, to the running footer, “Breaking News”. SMNI is aired in selected regional and cable channels although it maintains its own digital version on YouTube, which compels them to aim for an authentic broadcast news appearance.

At the initial glance, it would be hard for a regular viewer to not construe this channel as “news”. Upon close analysis however, one realizes how this channel engages propaganda and manipulation, common elements of “fake news”.<sup>30</sup> The topics covered by this channel are selective and include those pertaining to the critics of the government or the administration’s good deeds. Headlines and video titles also evidently favor the administration. In an example of the SMNI video with a click-bait title “*VP Leni at oposisyon sa kangkungan pupulitin*” (“Vice



President Leni [Robredo] and the opposition will emerge in the spinach dump”),<sup>31</sup> the broadcaster, in his formal outfit, admonishes the Vice President and the opposition using derogatory language and the second person pronoun to directly address the object of the attack – “ikaw” (you in singular form) or “kayo” (pertaining to the members of the opposition using *you* in plural form) – rather than the third person pronoun traditionally used in regular news broadcasts. The six-minute video does not include any other news or information other than the broadcaster’s rant towards the opposition. By borrowing the style symbolic of traditional news formats, these videos draw from the legitimacy and credibility associated with news to attack the government’s critics or commend the administration’s “achievements”. However, the use of news conventions for propaganda promotes a political agenda while hiding behind the veil of news objectivity, and therefore achieves the goal of persuading, rather than informing.<sup>32</sup>

We now turn to how pro-Duterte YouTubers use news media conventions to make a direct attack on the media, which can be construed as *culture jamming*.<sup>33</sup> During the heated debates concerning the franchise renewal of the media network ABS-CBN, the highly followed YouTube channel of pro-Duterte commentator *Banat By* and its more explicit news version, *Banat Balita*, aired a live YouTube broadcast to justify the non-renewal of the franchise,<sup>34</sup> situating this within the media’s overall critical stance towards the government. One would notice how the layout of the video strikingly resembles the DZMM *Teleradyo* format (ABS-CBN’s hybrid format of TV and radio news program aired on radio and cable channels) – with the hosts and guest in talking heads shots on a graphic backdrop using professional microphones and headphones, accompanied with a banner of the show title at the bottom of the screen.<sup>35</sup> The show, in its entirety critical of ABS-CBN network and justifying the denial of its franchise, also included an ‘exclusive’ interview of a resource person – a style typical of regular newscasts – to render authority to the content, albeit handpicked to privilege their preferred political narrative. The commentators consistently echo a one-side political view coupled with ad hominem attacks. The YouTube live feature affords the elicitation of audience engagement in real time, right when the story is at its peak. As “broadcasters,” the YouTubers give “shoutouts” to acknowledge their viewers and read their comments and questions aloud – a feature more common in Philippine radio broadcasts and less so in TV broadcasts due to limited airtime. On YouTube, they are able to blend TV, radio, and social media, producing content that is not restricted by the limitations of bandwidth or airtime while maximizing audience-engagement strategies to make this content more dynamic and affective.

It is also through the reinforcement of these channels by each other that they build “alternative influence networks,”<sup>36</sup> expanding their reach and solidifying their legitimacy as news. The potency lying within these channels’ ecosystem is critical for their political influence. For

example, *Banat By*'s live YouTube broadcasts, albeit not carrying the “news label” in its channel title, is actively re-shared in bite sized 5 to 10 minute videos across other DDS “news” channels, and by social media influencers within and outside YouTube. In these re-shares, the headlines, now with “Breaking News” banners, become more pointed in their framing and are more easily shareable among the community of supporters<sup>37</sup>. “News channels” and social media influencers also add click-bait and emotionally charged spins on headlines, sometimes with more direct expressions of hate against opposition figures.<sup>38</sup>

#### **4. Brazil: self-mimesis of “Bolsominions”**

The appropriation of the news genre by Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil since his election in 2018 follows similar contours to the Philippines but finds its main distribution in WhatsApp groups rather than YouTube. Unlike Trump, who relied mostly on Twitter and Facebook, Bolsonaro in 2018 turned to WhatsApp as 44% of approximately 120M WhatsApp users considered it their prime source of political news.<sup>39</sup> The application allows joining groups including hundreds of members, with easy sharing and replication of content. It has a user-friendly interface even in basic smartphones, offers encrypted chats, and does not require a high level of media literacy. It is also a cheaper alternative to subscription-based messaging services (SMS). The interface facilitates the dissemination of several content types including chain messages, news, memes, and links. In a country dominated by highly concentrated and generally distrusted mainstream media in a handful of conglomerates such as *Grupo Globo* and *Grupo Folha*, the application became an effective grassroots organizing tool to circumvent traditional news structures. WhatsApp extreme-right groups are administered by Bolsonaro's loyal volunteer army, known as “Bolsominions”, who use rhetorical techniques based on “fake news” stories aided by a well-organized apparatus of production, distribution and replication of digital content.

The turbulent relationship between the Bolsonaro government and the established media is the object of a so-called “cultural warfare” inherited from the 1964–1985 military régime. Bolsonaro, a retired officer belonging to a radical faction dissatisfied with democratization, was elected in 2018 with a conservative agenda in line with the global alt-right movement. It includes contempt for established media, scientific knowledge, and is anchored in nationalism and fundamentalist Christianity. The official government's media narratives promote disinformation in the public sphere, polarize public debates, and, more importantly, aim to create internal enemies in order to discredit and destabilize democratic institutions from within. While the media landscape in Brazil consists mostly of private news conglomerates which previously influenced election outcomes, the press is considered anti-patriotic and corrupt by extreme right and the government.

Bolsonaro himself attacks journalists, repeatedly accuses the “written press” of promoting fake news, and threatens to withdraw licenses and government advertising from oppositional media.

The government has instead relied on official social media channels and its supporters’ websites as the well-oiled “fake news machinery” including blogs, YouTube channels, and Facebook pages, among others. It is important to note that the government openly acknowledges itself as a producer of propaganda content, defining the aesthetics, styles and targets, and is the main influencer of WhatsApp groups. Their aim is to boost the President’s public image in an informal way using viral memes, micro-videos and images on several platforms. This content is then recirculated by automated bots operated by the government from the presidential palace. The President’s own communications office, an advisory board known informally as the “Cabinet of Hate” (“*Gabinete do Ódio*”), consists of communications, social media and advertising professionals paid by taxpayer’s money. It is also a family affair spearheaded by the president’s own sons, who are elected officials. The “Cabinet of Hate” and affiliated influencers use sophisticated image and video editing software to generate convincing and emotionally engaging digital content.

One of the most efficient channels for disinformation are WhatsApp chat groups which can include hundreds of users by invitation of a group host. They rely on a combination of a pyramid scheme and network strategies, whereby producers create malicious content and broadcast it to regional and local activists, who then disseminate the messages to public and private groups. From there, the messages are spread further, forwarded by believing individuals to their own contacts.<sup>40</sup> As families are often numerous and spread across the country, WhatsApp has become an extension of the family and often acts as an individual’s prime source of information. Spontaneous sharing is initiated by influencers, but its replicators have become known as the “*Tias do WhatsApp*”, or “WhatsApp aunties” – a metaphor for gullible older relatives spreading “fake news” within family groups. Others refer to these groups ironically as “WhatsApp universities” since many rely exclusively on their content as political education. The dynamic of pushing “fake news” within the intimacy of family is a driving force both to unite Bolsonaro supporters and polarize society by splitting opinions within the nucleus of family, which in Brazil includes extended family members. In fact, the WhatsApp family group is where disinformation tactics have been the most effective in defining a voter base.

The platform has radicalized Bolsonaro’s supporters since his 2018 election, providing echo chambers, conspiracy theories incubators and a source of governmental information. Pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups operate under the radar of regulations (and allegedly WhatsApp itself, creating a sort of “dark web”) as access to the groups’ content is limited. They claim the use of social media is a democratic right and condemn any attempts at regulation. Bolsonaro uses this web as a proof that his campaign was organic, driven by legions of ordinary content

producers, and free of corruption. However, a parliamentary commission set up in 2019 to investigate the use of public funds for pushing “fake news” during elections resulted in a removal of 35 accounts, 14 pages, 1 group on Facebook (883K followers), and another 38 Instagram profiles (917K followers) directly connected to the “Cabinet of Hate”.<sup>41</sup>

While numerous studies analyze textual content from these groups, less attention is given to the morphology and production of visual content such as images and memes, even though many studies’ data include images.<sup>42</sup> Our focus is on photographic content presented in either adulterated forms through photomontage or decontextualized photographs with captions. It is based on a study by Fabrício Benevenuto and his team together with Agência Lupa, a Brazilian fact-checking organization using a WhatsApp monitor application of The Federal University of Minas Gerais’<sup>43</sup> research project “Elections Without Fake”.<sup>44</sup> This study analyzed the truthfulness of 50 images most shared in 357 WhatsApp politically oriented “public” groups between 16 August and 7 October 2018, just before the first round of the presidential election.

This dataset comprised 846,905 messages posted by 18,088 users, including 562,866 text messages, 107,256 images, 90,962 external links, 71,931 videos, 13,890 voice messages. Images were the second most shared type of content. Of the 50 most shared images, most contained photographs, and 56% were classified as false or misleading while only 8% were fully truthful. All images were presented either standalone or accompanied by captions or semiotically related text within memes. Eight images were marked as “*false*” when checked against original sources. These are usually photomontages using archival images of celebrities with collaged heads of Bolsonaro’s political enemies, taken out of their original context.<sup>45</sup> Sixteen images were classified “*true, but*” as authentic photos, usually of political opponents or cultural figures, yet presented alongside text pointing to conspiracy theories and unverifiable information, or else taken out of context. Four images were classified as “*unsustained*” whereby it was impossible to fact-check them; two images were considered “*true*”, usually with Bolsonaro himself. The remaining were either satirical images or mere illustrations of biased articles, thus out of scope of disinformation.

However, fact-checking agencies such as Agência Lupa are also targeted by pro-Bolsonaro media and the “Cabinet of Hate” as ideologically motivated in definition of what constitutes a fact. They allege that fact-checkers themselves define this on an ideological basis or driven by mainstream media interests, using sources the far-right consider questionable by definition (such as academic institutions).<sup>46</sup> This puts the entire notion of veracity, autonomy and objectivity in a spiraling loop where alt-right media content tries to convince that legitimate fact-checkers are part of a “fake news” enterprise. Some sites frame this as critical thinking and freedom of expression, which in essence relativizes the criticality of ideological opponents by *mimicking* critical thought and rhetoric that *looks like* criticality. But in fact, their recommendation

is that Bolsonaro supporters “fact-check” news and information against the “truest” source, which is the president’s own media production, making anything else “fake” by definition. This means that even though a supporter knows that the viral image is false by its appearance, if it comes from the “true” source, it no longer is a genre of “fake news”, but has become news itself. This loss of parameter and connection to reality, the loss of indexicality, and the believability embedded in the style of synthetic realism<sup>47</sup> reveals that the act of persuasion is in the act of *self-mimesis*. It is the repetition of the genre of “fake news” which for its creators, disseminators and receivers makes it “true”.

## 5. Russia: imitating history

Russia is often characterized as a hybrid regime that co-opts and imitates certain democratic procedures while avoiding rotation of individuals and groups that govern.<sup>48</sup> The television concentration in state-controlled media holdings and regime-friendly oligarchic groups was one of the first steps taken since Putin’s ascension to power in 2000. Since 2005, Russian media system has been subject to increasing political consolidation. But a truly dramatic change in Russian media ecology was delayed to 2014-2016, the hot stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>49</sup>

Nowadays Russian television market consists of 22 federal channels divided between three holdings: state-owned Gazprom Media, National Media Group (led by Alina Kabayeva, Putin’s friend and alleged mistress) and formally state-owned VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Company). The main role in broadcasting belongs to Gazprom Media that owns federal channels with the largest audience share. The Russian sociologist Anna Kachkayeva calls Russian TV “the pipeline television”, which is less of a metaphor than one would think: Gazprom Media’s television cables are literally laid along Russian gas pipelines,<sup>50</sup> an ostensible demonstration of the ultimate neoliberal fusion of media and industrial infrastructures.

Such intimate connection of Russian media with both state and business requires to modify Hallin and Mancini’s model and label Russian media system as polarized corporatist which is “a derivation and modification of the Polarized Pluralist Model.”<sup>51</sup> Due to the lack of political tools, Russian television is one of the key elements that consolidate the country. According to a recent study, 85% of Russians receive information from three basic federal channels – Pervyi (*First*), Rossiya 1 (*Russia 1*) and NTV. During the latest decade Russian TV has been producing an atmosphere of hatred, and, since the annexation of Crimea and first hostilities in Donbass, Russian television has incorporated a plethora of disinformation formats rooted in imitation.<sup>52</sup> Social media are tightly controlled by the communication oversight authority *Roskomnadzor*, with jail terms given to many ordinary Russians for as little as a meme or a comment on Facebook or V Kontakte.<sup>53</sup> Russia’s Kremlin-linked media businesses pioneered and perfected the technique of

trolling used to harass opponents, astroturf public opinion and employ bot-driven computational propaganda. Moreover, troll farms have become formally institutionalized and turned into lucrative businesses as well as propaganda vehicles, for example the infamous Internet Research Agency merging with *Fabrika media* and the *Patriot* media holdings (whose owner, Putin's personal friend, has also interest in the private military company active in Syria and Ukraine).<sup>54</sup> Mainstream and alternative media in Russia work in synch, whereby "[t]he mainstream has enveloped the extreme" and "chaos is embraced as a way to seize, define, and arrest the conflict's meaning", as observed by Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it makes sense to focus on the narratives circulated top-down and remediated by mainstream as well as social media, choosing three distinct genres: a TV newscast, a documentary, and a military parade.

Covering the situation in Ukraine, Russian media uses the frame of WWII which is extremely ideologized in contemporary Russian public discourse. It can be asserted that "the Russian-supported campaign in Donbass is predicated as a 'Little Patriotic War'—a repetition or re-enactment of "The Great Patriotic War".<sup>56</sup> Early on, Russian media reported about "threats from Ukrainians Fascists (Ukrofascists) to Russians" as well as "the struggle of militiamen (*opolchentsy*) against Kyiv's junta", dividing public discourse into good "us", whose "grandfathers fought [against the fascists]" and bad "others" – "Banderites", "fascists", "punishers" (*karateli*).<sup>57</sup>

Not only Russian television oversimplifies the reality, produces and replicates emotions – following Baudrillard<sup>58</sup> it seeks to produce the hyperreal, the image that precedes the reality. Russian mainstream channels actively embrace reconstructions, performances and "fake news". "The production of emotions" as genre has a specific nature that allows ignoring the hybridity of senses. As a result, news on Russian television contains mutually exclusive messages when the West is both enemy and partner of Russia, Ukrainian state does not exist but still represses ethnic Russians. The necessary "level of emotions" is attained due to increased airtime for news and political talk-shows as well as broadcasting such content in prime time.<sup>59</sup> Launched by TV, fake messages are remediated by social and digital media through transmedia storytelling.

Russian media desperately needed a picture to boost "high level of emotions" during the initial, hot stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 2014, after the notorious fake story of a little boy crucified by Ukrainian soldiers, Russian state-controlled media disseminated another example of "fake news". This time Russian TV reported that Ukrainian government promised each of its volunteer fighters a plot of Donbas land and two slaves from local population.<sup>60</sup> The evening news story was positioned as a celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of expelling Wehrmacht from Ukraine, which helped draw direct parallels between Nazis and modern Ukrainian soldiers, even in their appearances and their faces. The parallels are purely emotional and lack any evidence or substantiation; the infamous allegation comes not from the journalist but is delivered

in a soundbite by a local official who reports he heard this from the soldiers themselves. In form, it follows the typical genre template of a television news story.

The broadcast was mocked in social media, did not procure the expected response,<sup>61</sup> and was ironically appropriated by Ukrainians as a catchphrase “a plot of land and two slaves”. But the next performance found its audience. On 24 August 2014 (the Independence Day of Ukraine), in Donetsk, the so-called DNR militiamen (*opolchentsy*) organized a parade of Ukrainian POWs. While the genre of military parade is a political/military/aesthetic form remote from news journalism, it certainly belongs to the genre of media events.<sup>62</sup> What makes it unique is the extreme imitative nature of this media event which replicated in detail “the Parade of the Defeated” on 17 July 1944, when 57 thousand German POWs had been forced to march along the central streets of Moscow. The Donetsk parade of the captured Ukrainians recreated the 1944 parade in minutest aspect: POWs were clothed in rags, and water carts followed them washing the streets exactly as it had been done in Moscow 70 years earlier. The video with marching Ukrainian POWs in Donetsk was also disseminated by news media.<sup>63</sup> This reinforced the message “Ukrainians=Nazis” by imitating the form associated with victory over the Nazis. The media event became a mimesis of another media event.

A different episode that marked the establishment of “fake news” as a genre in Russian media became the Russian propagandist pseudo-documentary “Proekt Ukraina” (“The Project Ukraine”), released in 2015.<sup>64</sup> Shot by Andrey Medvedev, a former propagandist of VGTRK and now a deputy of Moscow city *duma*,<sup>65</sup> this pseudo-documentary represents Ukraine as an artificial state created by the Austrian General Staff during WWI to weaken the Russian Empire. The 1991 independence as well as 2014 Euromaidan was also shown as a covert US operation against Russia. Medvedev included interviews with historians (some with a dubious background) to boost credibility and formal appearance of the genre. This imitative documentary united in one linear narrative all “fake news” about the artificiality of Ukrainian history, language and national genesis that previously were shared via Russian TV, web and social media. The film was called xenophobic by the Russian oppositional politician Vladimir Kara-Murza. Its release was also combined with a talk-show of Vladimir Solovyov, a well-known Russian propagandist.<sup>66</sup>

## **6. Ukraine: a parallel mediasphere**

Politically speaking, Ukraine is a democracy that changed six different presidents in 30 years. At the same time, its political system depends on oligarchic pluralism, in which the leverage on the political process is exerted by several groups whose interests clash and align intermittently. The political debate is typically populist, and traces of post-truth politics can be traced much further back than in mature Western democracies.

The media system in Ukraine has also formed as a product of this oligarch pluralism. Mainstream media outlets (such as TV channels) are oligarch-controlled and adhere to political parallelism by serving their owner's political interests,<sup>67</sup> reminding of Southern Europe's polarized pluralism. A number of smaller outlets (websites, YouTube channels and such), driven by ideals or profit, often sacrifice journalist impartiality and intervene in politics to expose corruption in their investigations.<sup>68</sup> Like the mainstream media, they display polarization and clientelist pluralism. Owner pressure and journalist corruption, or "envelope journalism" (covert promotion or defamation for illegal remuneration) are often identified as the key challenges to journalism.<sup>69</sup>

Viral disinformation in Ukraine blends very neatly into this polarized and partisan media system as clientelism, corruption and partiality are conducive of hyperpartisan communication.<sup>70</sup> "Fake news" becomes more than a staple of social media and obscure websites; it is integrated into and intertwined with the mainstream. This was clearly the case during the 2019 election campaign, when a transmedia narrative was created and delivered synchronously across a broad spectrum of media blending fiction and non-fiction genres, including mainstream news outlets, fictional TV series, "fake news" websites, and social media memes and videos<sup>71</sup>. Viber chats and especially Telegram channels are also major tools of disseminating viral disinformation, even though not as vital as WhatsApp in Brazil.

As an effect of hybrid media system, many "fake news" stories originated in mainstream media, especially on TV, for example, on 1+1, the leading TV channel by audience share (12.01 per cent in 2019),<sup>72</sup> that openly supported the challenger, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky. One of the notorious cases was a story alleging that the incumbent Petro Poroshenko murdered his own brother (in fact, he died in a traffic accident in 1997)<sup>73</sup> broadcast in a 1+1 show *Ukrayinski sensatsiyi* ("Ukrainians Scoops"). Promoted as a series of high-profile journalist investigations, the show was founded by journalist Oleksandr Dubinskyi, associated with oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi;<sup>74</sup> in 2019, Dubinskyi was elected MP on Zelensky's party list to be embroiled in a number of scandals and eventually sanctioned by the US.<sup>75</sup>

The show itself aired one week before the voting and has been massively viewed on YouTube (1,85M views). Branded as a "superexclusive" revelation, it features extremely dramatic music and a fictionalized narrative. Footage of Poroshenko is intercut with footage of suitcases with money, hands counting cash, and in one case, an image of heaped cash was inserted into a video of Poroshenko at a church service to give appearance he knelt and crossed himself before the money. The show constantly uses video and sound effects such as camera clicks and black-and-white footage with overlaid crosshairs in imitation of a hidden camera. The only witness, an exiled businessman under criminal investigation and self-admitted "Poroshenko's sworn enemy", speaks Russian but is completely dubbed in Ukrainian (movie-style, with no



remaining original speech), which makes impossible to understand what he is really saying. Another witness who testifies about the murder of Poroshenko's brother is also a fugitive pro-Russian politician from Moldova. Without any evidence, the incumbent president is accused of engaging in drug and prostitution business. These accusations are commented by an expert subsequently identified as a "fake" pollster.<sup>76</sup> The comments predict that Poroshenko would flee or go to jail if defeated (neither transpired as zero evidence of Poroshenko's corruption could be found by prosecution to date). Poroshenko is frequently mentioned together with fugitive Yanukovich officials, unpopular and convicted criminals. Chat messages – alleged proofs – are in fact designer-drawn, with animation and sound effects, and dubbed by actors' voiceover. In the top right corner, an advert of Zelensky's late night comedy show is constantly displayed, linking the negative and the positive parts of one transmedia narrative.

This fake "investigation" refers extensively to another one by a YouTube muckraking content creator *Bihus.info* (366K followers) that combine largely genuine investigations with occasionally dropped manipulative or falsified "revelations". Typical elements of journalist storytelling – a professional studio, stand-ups, soundbites, animated opening and closing sequences, uniformly designed titles – are integrated in their videos with elements of fictional storytelling such as dramatization or recreation of events, black-and-white footage to indicate the past, dramatic or suspenseful music, and personal attacks. All these features have also become adopted by mainstream television, as is evident from the analysis of the 1+1 show above. Rich infographic and well-designed visualizations mean to fill the gap in the missing information and reconstruct corruption links. However, they are not evidence as the authors are free to manipulate and introduce any elements, connecting any characters as they please. Much of the story is also told through recreation of the hacked messenger chats redrawn by designers and dubbed by actors' voiceover.

Other YouTube bloggers, like Anatoliy Shariy (2,43M followers), a petty criminal<sup>77</sup> turned blogger turned politician, mostly produce fake investigations or highly opinionated content. The pro-Russian Shariy earned popularity with investigations of an alleged paedophile brothel (debunked in court), drug and illegal game businesses; notably, he staged a fake attack on himself to boost popularity.<sup>78</sup> Unlike the Filipino bloggers, Shariy is distanced from the journalist genre. On the contrary, he appears to derive his authority not from imitating mainstream journalism but from being as different from it as possible. The graphic and editing are extremely simple. He is mostly facing the spectators frontally while a part of the screen is used to show screenshots or videos that he comments on casually. His free style is evident in his channel's slogan: "My videos about whatever I want".

"Fake news" is produced and amplified in "alternative influence networks" such as the media holding associated with Viktor Medvedchuk, a notorious Ukrainian oligarch and friend to

Vladimir Putin (Putin is the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter).<sup>79</sup> In spite of the connection, he managed to accrue a group of TV channels in Ukraine (112, ZIK and NewsOne) as well as website Vesti.ua, semi-free newspaper *Vesti*, radio Vesti FM and website Strana.ua. They are used systematically to spread conspiracy theories like one suggesting that Ukraine is controlled by the West via a clique of *Sorosiata* (roughly "Soros cubs"). Strana.ua in particular furnished many "fake news" stories. For example, in April 2020 they ran a series of six articles alleging that Pentagon owns secret bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine, a proposed place of origin of covid-19.<sup>80</sup> The articles are organized in a credible format of source-based journalist investigation. The existence of labs is referred to a pro-Russian MP, and the official US denial is misreported as concession. The final verdict is also outsourced to an "expert" (a pro-Russian journalist).

These outlets are complemented by a series of lower-profile websites, such as Znaj.ua launched in 2015 by a PR firm Pragmatico. It procured over 4M Facebook followers thanks to 1.6M USD spent on promotion; it was the most followed Ukrainian website during the 2019 campaign.<sup>81</sup> It was also advertised offline, with guerrilla stickers in the subway quoting the late rock star Kuzma, "Politicians are from another planet. They make up laws to keep us within a shed like a herd", to connect with primarily Ukrainian-speaking public disillusioned with the establishment. Since 2016, Znaj.ua has always been among the 10 most visited websites in Ukraine. In September 2019, Facebook removed its pages because they were run from fake accounts and used other forbidden practices. Only 16% of its news is estimated by fact-checkers as trustworthy.<sup>82</sup>

The website completely imitates the layout and design of a genuine news outlet: it has breaking news feed on a left-aligned column, a number of regional sections, and special themes. Publications are grouped in thematic sections, each featuring a photograph and an informative headline organized around subject/predicate structure. The text is narrated in a relatively neutral style, putting the most important information first. Like in Strana.ua, manipulation typically occurs in the oft-misleading headline and in quotations. On Znaj.ua, many news items are often based on social media posts without any fact-checking (this is also done by mainstream media on a smaller scale). Thus, affordances of a hybrid media system are mobilized for hyperpartisan and false content: social media posts have become normalized as newsworthy.

## **7. *Fictiocracy International*: Discussion and conclusions**

"Fictiocracy" is how Davide Banis diagnosed the current condition, speaking of a "political regime that, implicitly or explicitly, considers the distinction between fact and fiction irrelevant".<sup>83</sup> Inaugurated in the blurring of news and storytelling by Ronald Reagan's administration, this mode mobilizes the power of a story to abuse and violate the "fiduciary contract". Taking over

the journalist form and discarding its indexality, it blends it with storytelling forms developed in fiction and satire, leaving a hollowed and imitative shell.

This can be accompanied by attacks on the mainstream media (as in the Philippines and Brazil) or integration of the mainstream and alternative media (as in Ukraine and Russia). Whereas in the former case “fake news” can be construed as culture jamming that embeds a radical intentionality of using elements of the mainstream culture “turn its features against itself”.<sup>84</sup> “Fake news” creators use the news genre to subvert it while articulating clearly in their content their resentment of the media, especially its gatekeeping functions. In the latter case, the partial merger of “the mainstream” and “the extreme” testifies to the original weakness and heteronomy of the mainstream, and a full-fledged hybrid media system. An integrated force of mainstream and fringe media outlets and social media create alternative influence networks that recycle and replicate the same posts, soundbites, concepts, associations, (fake) experts and pundits on all platforms. Together, they create an intertext united by a consistent transmedia narrative and making use of “deep stories”, archetypal to the point of reminding folklore.

“Fake news” capitalizes on social media logic with its inherent virality and shareability.<sup>85</sup> In the Brazilian context, it also capitalizes on the mediatization of the family. As the family became mediated by WhatsApp, the blurring of private/public allowed manipulative political communication to invade the family and the intimate sphere. In the Philippines and Eastern Europe, YouTube is more important as it combines the social media logic and the legitimating appearance of mainstream television (which has also moved to YouTube to a large extent). We are witnessing how content creators on YouTube strategically appropriate the news and public affairs genre to mask propaganda under the veneer of news objectivity. The platform made it possible for political information to be seen and shared outside the confines of traditional expertise and regulation, but it is also being appropriated by forces to advance partisan political commentaries as news while discrediting the narratives of the opposition or critical media. These YouTube channels’ use of professional news media conventions complicates how they should be distinguished, examined, and made accountable, especially when they work to undermine traditional media organizations. Their circulation within alternative influence networks makes them more potent. Despite calls for media and news literacy, this hybrid media environment makes it increasingly complex for users to make sense of what counts as “news”. These imply the importance of more thoroughly examining the continuing evolution of “fake news” production and circulation styles on social media and better understanding how the audiences construe and engage with such content.

Visual narratives are also a productive ground for falsification. Photomontage as a tool for political propaganda is not novel but part of the medium’s essence; photographs have

historically been manipulated to reinforce dominant ideologies, control history writing, or create misleading forensic evidence. Notorious cases include the erasure of Leon Trotsky from photographs where he appeared next to Lenin or the collaged portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald used as forensic evidence in the JFK murder trials. The list is extensive. This practice continues with digital transmutations, now including not only a superficial Photoshopping but also the increasingly mainstream algorithm-based manipulations of “deepfakes”.<sup>86</sup>

Photomontage is also part of the art historical lineage of culture jamming, likewise employing modes of (photo)graphic collage in its aesthetic expression. The conceptual difference with culture jamming is that manipulated images are part of neither protest aesthetics nor anti-capitalist critique even though tactics of disruption, *subvertising* and the “jamming” of signs and signifiers may have been appropriated from more anarchist types of guerrilla communication. When separated from its initial ideological purpose, culture jamming has become an aesthetic style signifying all collage with media artefacts, but its expression reveals its sources. Culture jamming is a style of exposure and denunciation of the materials it uses and remixes, whereas the manipulated images circulated by extreme-right supporters follow a style of opacity, hiding and concealing the sources it uses for deception, with the believability of photographic realism as visual prey. The photocollages shared massively in the Brazilian WhatsApp groups create a *trompe l’oeil* effect on the viewer, *mimesis* rather than representation, meant to not be noticed at first glance when the manipulation is well done.

Even though they can be fact-checked and their illusion is blatant to the trained eye, there is an issue of the believability of an image when perceived quickly on a scrolling feed amongst hundreds of others. Lev Manovich (2001) writes that the illusion generated by new media is the result of a synthetic realism whereby a computer-generated image is indistinguishable from a real photograph, which when combined with the temporal dynamic-constant of hypermedia reinforces this realism through repetition and oscillation between illusion and suspense reliant on the power of a dynamic, interactive mimesis. One way in which WhatsApp seeks to circumvent the believability of false images is by allowing users to click on an image in the feed and search for similar images directly on Google, using Google’s database and algorithms to fact-check it. While this is a step towards demystifying a suspicious image, this mechanism also falls prey to whatever the algorithms are able to match against an existing database which may itself contain arrays of other false images and visual debris. In this case, Google acts as a fact-checker requiring more media and algorithmic literacy to ascertain some kind of “original”; otherwise, it may keep users and viewers in an endless loop of falseness where indexicality may never be found.

In semiotic theory, the image’s indexicality according to Charles Peirce’s triadic model is the physical relationship between the photographed object and the resulting image which

confers a degree of accuracy and truthfulness – a trace of what was once “there”. In a deceptive photomontage, we need to be trained to look for the trace of deception beyond the immediacy of what is being represented. What makes images classified as “*true, but*” is precisely this threshold of believability where images are rendered legitimate enough so that they can be pushed beyond the fringe and enter mainstream discourse.<sup>87</sup> It is the artifice used in the “poor images” defined by Hito Steyerl (2009) as “an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image” passed on as a “decoy” testifying to the “violent dislocation, transfers and displacements of images (...) dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as a bounty (...) that spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification”.<sup>88</sup>

What unites these diverse “fake news” cultures is the imitation and meta-mimesis at the heart of its rhetorical purpose, and it seems the best way to make sense of practices so distant geographically and often mediatically yet so unmistakably similar. News, images and even media events in the empire of fake are all built upon imitation of other news, images and media events. Even when there is no imitation, like in the videoblogs by Anatoliy Shariy, the mainstream genre is expressed through its absence, as that which is despised and discarded. Mobilizing our predilection towards “the culture of the copy”,<sup>89</sup> the protean fake changes masks and shapes, sometimes playfully and shamelessly displaying its fakeness in an almost-revelation, like a kind of artform, in which the meta-mimesis of “fake news” is married with the power of vested interest – and this is how the fictiocracy is born.

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