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Visual political irony in Russian new media

Anna G. Sanina *,[1]

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT

In modern Russia, official political discourse is routinely confronted by challenges from internet-based means of communication. Novel forms of political dialog have become widespread in new media, especially in terms of dialog initiated by "ordinary" people, who use irony and visual images to express their dissatisfaction with politicians' activities. This study suggests the characteristics of a special aspect of a computer-mediated political discourse in Russia. It demonstrates contextual and instrumental features of a visual political irony in new media based on a case study of the LiveJournal Internet community "Potsreotizm". An analysis of the instruments that members of this Internet community use to create visual irony leads to the conclusion that in the virtual space, myths and concepts created by the political elite are being constantly interpreted with the help of irony and humor, and people increasingly treat these myths and concepts critically at the level of daily social routine. Reflection, context and visual representation, which are necessary to create ironical discourse, offer original vocabularies for organizing public dialog within new media. Community members' worldviews are not preordained by the state but are shaped by cultural, social and cognitive processes in virtual forms of communication.
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1. Introduction

An intensive development of Internet technologies, including digital media and social networks, has been transforming the traditional model of the mass distribution of a one-way message using television, radio and the print press. Web 2.0 creates a modern generation of Internet communities that include not only the creation and distribution of content but also a social element of sharing and commenting on it. Together with different forms of electronic and mobile communication, it has enabled a huge increase in a novel form of mass interaction – new media. As Benkler (2006) argues, the benefit of a networked communication is that it alters a society's media architecture by allowing multi-directional information flows in which individuals can become active creators and producers of politically relevant information via online participation. The Internet audience becomes involved in the creation and distribution of meaning, thus moving from the communications model of "one-to-many" to "many-to-many", which changes traditional "top–down" models of communication and creates a new "participatory" type of political culture (Landow, 1997).

New media are described as having democratizing potential, and the use of mediated political communication is being widely cited as transformative for state–society relations (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Mummery and Rodan, 2013). Kaltenborn-Stachau (2008) stresses that this new type of political communication can potentially help improve people's expectations, build trust in state institutions and authorities, form an inclusive national identity and foster an engaged and participatory citizenship and reflexivity. However, as Aday et al. (2010) note, policymakers and scholars know very little about whether and how new media affect contentious politics despite the obvious potential for transforming the way people think and act, mitigating group conflict or facilitating collective action.

As a rule, political communication is viewed in analytical research as a politician-to-audience address. The audience has minor roles as political leaders. Therefore, the most popular subject of research in political communication studies is the speech activity of members of authority (e.g., Kendall, 1995; Wilson, 2003; Joseph, 2006). The study of the opposition discourse appears to be less popular (Sinelnikova, 2010). Furthermore, less attention is paid to communication activities that go in the other direction – from the audience to politicians.

This low interest by researchers can be explained by both the short lifetimes of Internet-related phenomena and a general tendency to regard computer-mediated communication as trivial because it primarily occurs in mass media and culture (Baran, 2012). Meanwhile, new forms of political communication have become widespread in Internet, especially in the area initiated by

* Correspondence address: Promyshlennaya street 17-228, 198099 St. Petersburg, the Russian Federation. Tel.: +7 911 0057805, +7 812 7860129.
E-mail address: anna.g.sanina@gmail.com
[1] Home address: Frunze street 27-7, 196135 St. Petersburg, the Russian Federation.

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people and not politicians. For example, the role of irony and visual images has increased in the expression of political protest and dissatisfaction with politicians' activities.

Bennett (2008) and Chastva (2006) describe these modern forms of political protest as having strong potential to attract media attention, educate the public and build community among activists. The fact that visual irony can become a strong argument in politics is evidenced by the scandal in 2005–2006 involving the caricature of the Islamic prophet Mohammed published in the Dutch newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. After this case, visual irony became a popular object of studies in political communication science (e.g., Müller and Özcan, 2007; Lægaard, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Lindekilde et al., 2009).

This study analyzes a special aspect of a computer-mediated political discourse in Russia. It demonstrates contextual and instrumental features of a visual political irony in new media based on a case study of the LiveJournal Internet community. Irony in Russian political discourse has its own traditions, which were already present in Russia during the Tsar epoch and further shaped during Soviet underground communication (e.g., caricatures, anecdotes). The recent forms of political communication appearing in new media continue these traditions while also possessing their own ways of creating irony that are characteristic of neither a political anecdote nor political caricature. In the following article, we will examine how this irony is created and demonstrate the specifics of visual political irony and the instruments used by the modern new media to create it.

2. Irony in Russian political discourse

2.1. Traditional forms of irony: anecdote and caricature

Anecdote and caricature are the traditional forms of expression of political irony that were already widely used in Russia before the creation of the Soviet Union; however, their popularity did not peak until the 1920s (Shmeleva and Shmelev, 2009). They depict current social and political issues in concentrated form, either visual or verbal, whereas irony serves as a form of self-assertion. Mocking the oppressing reality presents the anecdote storyteller and listener with the possibility of experiencing freedom and a feeling of revenge against authorities (Shturman and Tiktin, 1985). Anecdotes and caricatures place a nominal enemy an awkward situation, depict him or her in bad light, distort his or her external features, exaggerate his or her speech mannerisms, etc. Published unofficially, they mocked the authorities and reflected the community's opinion about the current political situation that it was otherwise not possible to express.

During the Stalin era, one could be sentenced to up to ten years imprisonment for a political anecdote or an ironizing illustration (Shturman and Tiktin, 1985). In the 1960–1970s when political irony became less dangerous, it turned into a mass genre that to some degree replaced political discussions: all types of anecdotes (about family relations, everyday life, different ethnic or social groups) were essentially anti-Soviet (Shmeleva and Shmelev, 2005). Anecdotes about political leaders of past and present, such as Lenin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Stalin and Gorbachev, became well-known and widespread (Andreevich, 1951; Brandenberger, 2010; Kozintsev, 2009; Narskiy, 2013).

During Russia's first post-Soviet decade as an independent country (1991–2000), ironizing anecdotes and illustrations that criticized Russian politicians became especially popular. However, as the so-called Putin era began in 2000, the amount of political caricatures and anecdotes published in the mass media dramatically decreased. Political caricatures occur intermittently and are therefore subject to both internal censorship and the financial limitations of mass media (Ainutdinov, 2008). Furthermore, traditional techniques of producing caricatures and anecdotes in printed media, which originally employed caricature painters and pamphlet writers, have become unconventional as new information technologies and new media have become widespread. Throughout the last century, there was a rapid shift from graphic to photographic depictions, which have now been replaced by post-photographic depictions, which are the digital technologies that transform a personal look at any political event into virtual dialog (Krutkin et al., 2007).

At present, demotivational posters (illustrations consisting of a picture in a black frame and a commenting sign underneath, formatted in a special way) and photoshoppings (illustrations edited using bitmap or vector graphics editing programs that are usually of ironic character and based on popular photos from the news) have become increasingly widespread, successfully challenging traditional caricatures.

2.2. Political irony in Russian new media

During the first decade of the 21st century, the Internet began to serve as an underground hiding place for political irony. Virtual space, lack of censorship and anonymity provided an immense expansion of ironical illustrations and texts with well-developed satirical context related to current political situations and authorities.

Among the most popular and widespread examples of political irony with a virtual localization are the following:

1. Caricatures and Internet blogs by caricature painters. Caricatures that appear in new media become an independent product of information, the main aim of which is to represent political subjects using a comical approach. Among such blogs, a blog by caricature painter Sergei Elkin is widely known (http://ellustrator.livejournal.com). Since the 1990s, Elkin has worked for various print media, including *Izvestiya*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *The Moscow Times*, *Vedomosti*, *Politru*, *The Guardian* and *The Economist*. The subjects of his caricatures and illustrations are primarily politicians, businessmen and government officials. As of January 2014, Elkin's blog has more than 15000 registered followers.
2. "Political demotivators" is a specific hybrid genre that is widespread in virtual space. A demotivator is an illustration consisting of graphic component in a black frame and a slogan that explains the picture. The genre of demotivators can be defined as a parody of the inspirational posters that were common in schools and offices at the end of the 1990s, first in the USA and then worldwide, with the intention of promoting higher performance. Demotivators have a precise composition and consist of three main elements: an image, a black frame and a slogan, which itself represents an unexpected interpretation of the main illustration (painting). The slogan often violates logic and has a meaning that is emotionally contradictory to the main image itself. This often results in humorous, ironical and burlesque meanings. This sort of contradiction (thesis versus antithesis) is central to the very nature of demotivators, which replace the motivation that exists in real motivational posters with irony (this is why they have also been called "fake motivational posters", (Baran, 2012)).
   The creation of a demotivator is a very simple process that can be performed by almost any Internet user. Although such posters can be found almost everywhere on the Internet, including new media, most of them can be found in the form of systematized collections on special sites dedicated to humor.[2]
3. The "Persident of Ruissa" Twitter account (anagram of President of Russia; https://twitter.com/KermlinRussia) is a microblog that was registered in the summer of 2010. As of

[2] Websites featuring Russian political irony include http://demotivators.to/p/tag/, http://vk.com/info_kriminala_net and http://vk.com/polit_dem.

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