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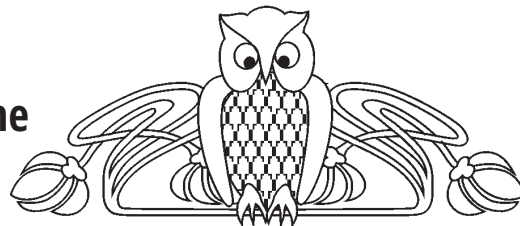
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Article

Media prank: For nobody to trust anyone



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Abstract. Modern media demonstrate a distinctive feature when professional and official news agencies neighbor with amateur analytical Internet platforms. News outlets, social networks and video hosting services influence each other and create a mixed worldview. They also compete for their customer, for the likes that they would get and for the dislikes for their opponents. The subject of this paper is pranks and hoaxes in media, the description of practical jokes in the Russian political discourse from the journalistic, sociological, psychological, legal, linguistic viewpoints and locate them in the modern communication. In the course of the research the author comes to the conclusion that pranks and hoaxes in media should not be referred to as either a brand new journalism or a new type of interviewing. They are a means of provocation and social atomization. Practical jokes in media are *political cloutlighting* and belong to *culture jamming* activities. Pranksters do not provide information to society. Designed pranks and hoaxes might function as trial balloons for the third parties and as a way of influencing the audience in order to bias people against the prank victim. Humor in media pranks sidetracks people from debating about urgent issues and making the right decisions on them. As a result, practical jokes first undermine the credibility of one news outlet, and then destroy the whole system of communicating news. The habit of playing pranks on people in media inevitably leads to lowering the moral norms among those who execute pranks and those who consume them.

Keywords: media prank, prank journalism, cloutlighting, freedom of expression, culture jamming

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Научная статья

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Медиа-пранк: Чтобы никто никому не верил

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Аннотация. Современные медиа демонстрируют специфическую особенность, когда профессиональные и официальные новостные агентства соседствуют с любительскими аналитическими интернет-платформами. Новостные сайты, социальные сети и видеохостинги оказывают влияние друг на друга и создают совмещенную картину мира. Объект настоящей статьи – медиа-пранк, цель – описать практические шутки в российском политическом дискурсе с позиций журналистики, социологии, психологии, права, лингвистики и определить их место в современной коммуникации. Автор приходит к выводу, что ошибочно относить медиа-пранки к новой журналистике или к новому виду интервьюирования. Пранки – средства провокации и социальной атомизации. Практические шутки в медиа являются политическим клаутлайтингом. Их место среди «глушителей культуры». Пранкеры не предоставляют информацию общественности. Спланированные пранки могут функционировать как средство предварительного мониторинга общественного мнения для третьих лиц, так и метод воздействия на аудиторию с целью представить жертву пранка в негативном свете. Практические шутки сначала подрывают авторитет источника информации, затем разрушают всю систему новостного оповещения. Юмор в медиа-пранке отвлекает людей от обсуждения злободневных проблем и принятия правильных решений по ним. Привычка разыгрывать людей в средствах массовой информации неизбежно влечет понижение моральных норм как у тех, кто производит пранки, так и у тех, кто их потребляет

Ключевые слова: медиа-пранк, пранк-журналистика, клаутлайтинг, свобода выражения, глушение культуры

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In today's epoch of the post-truth and post-modern it has become vital to acquire the knowledge and skills of sorting out the retrieved information. An educated person must demonstrate a proven ability of cognitive thinking concerning the stories in the media since a front-page scoop may turn into manipulative and hazardous data. The subject of this article is *media pranks* in the Russian political discourse, hereinafter collection, preparation, and distribution of telephone and video pranks as a product of mass media in the sphere of national and international politics. On the one hand, prank is a malicious mischief, on the other hand, it is an amusing tool of propagating ideas to the public.

It is empirically evident that media pranks appeared simultaneously with media. And they have been together ever since. We remember *The Sun's* great moon hoax in 1835 about four-foot-tall bat-like creatures and Italian spaghetti trees during a harvest season on April Fool's Day in 1957 [1]. Even renowned writers were witnessed to perpetrate pranks. In 1844 Edgar Allan Poe made up a tale for *The Sun* about a balloon crossing the Atlantic Ocean in three days. As a newspaper reporter Mark Twain wrote many hoaxes, including a fake article in Nevada's *Territorial Enterprise* in 1862 about a misguided coroner trying to determine the cause of death of a petrified man. Among great hoaxers we find Jean-Paul Sartre, Abbie Hoffman and Allen Ginsberg, Joey Skaggs, The Negativland band, Guerrilla Girls, The Yes Men, and Robbie Conal.

The modern media pranks under consideration inhere primarily come from crank calls. Nowadays professional pranksters dramatically advance telephone hoaxes with broadcasting video and sound files. In the Russian media they are primarily Vladimir Krasnov nicknamed Vovan and Aleksey Stolyarov aka Lexus – hereinafter *Vovan and Lexus*.

Vovan received a journalistic and legal training, Lexus in economics and law. They have been playing pranks since 2000s, political pranks since 2011. They both do TV shows named *Stars Save the Earth* and *Show Vil* at *rutube.ru* where they ridicule their victims. Until March 2022 they had a YouTube channel which after fooling British ministers was deleted [2]. Among the subjects of their pursuit there have been international and national politicians and celebrities. In 2017 they were elected the members of The Expert Council for the Development of the Information Society and the Mass Media within the Youth Parliament at the State Duma of the Federal Council of the Russian Federation.

Vovan and Lexus's activity has been studied by scholars and practicing journalists and have been given arrays of critical traits. The Russian media discourse labels Vovan and Lexus' busi-

ness as *prank journalism* [3, p. 361; 4, p. 39–40; 5, p. 102] and a brand new journalism [3, p. 361].

L. V. Dementieva and E. N. Nizovkina study media pranks as a new tool of interviewing [6, p. 101].

L. V. Vdovichenko analyses extralinguistic principles of political pranks [4]. L. R. Duskaeva and E. A. Shcheglova explore comic text-pranks, their production and influence [7].

T. V. Chernova analyzes prank as a speech genre or entertainment discourse in its culturological context [8].

M. Dery considers *pranks* as *culture jamming*. *Jamming* is a slang word for illegal practice of electronically interrupting radio broadcast, conversations between fellow hams or the audio portions of television shows. The pranksters here expose the ways in which corporate and political interests use the media as a tool of behavioral modification. *Cultural jamming* equals *artistic terrorism* directed against the information society [9].

J. M. Bing, L. R. Duskaeva and E. A. Shcheglova, C. Harold explore pranking as a strategy of rhetorical protest and social satire activism which create provocative and manipulative discourse [10, p. 97; 7, p. 241; 11, p. 189].

M. Karpińska-Krakowiak and A. Modliński recognize practical jokes as an innovative form of digital advertising – *prankvertising* disseminated by brands [12, p. 32].

J. Lindsay, Y. Jarrar, A. Awobamise, S. Nnabife, G. E. Nweke research pranks as an abusive social media trend – cloutlighting [13, 14].

K. McLeod suggests a mathematical formula where pranks = satire + performance act × media, in other words: playful critique performed within public sphere and multiplied by media [15, p. 1725].

R. E. Elmirzoev explores media pranks' constructive and destructive features under criminal law [16, p. 196]. S. G. Vatletsov studies pranks as a form of an invective [17, p. 14] and describes non-pecuniary damage caused by pranksters in private and public law [18].

The use of different term labels reflects the fact that media pranks are far from academic unity and thus needs further exploration. This is the basis of the present study. The objective of this article is to describe Russian media pranks as works of art or the art of hoax and locate practical jokes in the modern communication. With that in mind, the following research questions are proposed:

1. Does a professional media prank equal professional journalism?
2. Being borrowed from English, are terms *prank* and *prankster* understood the same in the Russian languages as in the original one?



3. What are the professional, sociological, and legal aspects of media prank?

4. What is psychology of pranksters' activity?

5. Where can media prank be located as a type of communication?

Novelty of the study is defined as an expansion of the theoretical material: here has been elaborated the term *media prank*; suggested its professional, social, and legal features; outlined psychology of pranksters' activity; since a discourse is considered as a form of social action, here has been schematized behavioral models of pranksters and their victims as *loyalty* and *alienation*. The proposed hypothesis is that media pranks and hoaxes are invective by its nature and they do their contribution into social atomization. The findings of this research may be applied in field of journalism, theory and practice of communication, and text linguistics.

The present research reflects a Critical Discourse Analysis approach [19], which involves a combination of linguistic, semiotic, and discourse analyses. In order to present a single perspective of media pranks it is an inter-disciplinary and inter-textual study from sociology, psychology, and law.

The peculiarities of notions *prank* and *prankster* in the Russian discourse were revealed with the comparative analysis of their semantics in the Russian and English discourse.

The dataset under analysis was taken from online databases which are or were placed on the Internet platforms: *sniggle.net* (the cultural jammer's encyclopedia), *sharmuta.ru*, *prank.ru*, *prankru.net*, *banana.by*, *evilstar.ru*, *Vovan222prank*, *YouTube* and *rutube* (prank shows, interviews with Vovan and Lexus), *prankotadotcom* with Evgeny Volnov;

comedy shows on pranks: *VH1's 40 Greatest Pranks 4* produced by Hilary Spiegelman (2013);

movie on pranks: Yiuwing Lam *Prank* (2013) by Plan/RLJ Entertainment LLC;

book on pranks: Vovan and Lexus. *Po kom zvonit telefon* [For whom the telephone tolls]. Saint-Petersburg, Piter (2018).

On the basis of the literature review and dataset described above I state that *prank journalism* is the wrong term for the activity pranksters are involved in. Neither English nor Russian phrase *prank journalism* does not belong to the body of the terms which are used with a standard and conventional application in subject of professional journalism. These collocation is an oxymoron both in English as well as in Russian. *Prank* is an amusing, careless and deceiving *act*. *Journalism* is a professional, serious, accountable and truthful *institution*. Also, it is incorrect to compare the collocation *prank journalism* referring to the activity Vovan and Lexus regularly practiced (see: [3]) with Chris Good's story in *The Atlantic* entitled as *Prank Journalism at Its Best* (see: [20]). These are

different things. The text exemplifies the functioning of *prank journalism* as a stylistically motivated irony for a particular case of *deceit* without an intention of mockery.

According to M. Karpińska-Krakowiak and A. Modliński, *prank* is a ludicrous *event* or *act* done to entertain, amuse, or ridicule a victim who does not expect to be a subject of any mockery or comic situation [12, p. 32]. Moreover, Vovan and Lexus themselves find their methods professionally unethical [21] and appeal to students of journalism departments should rather seek for developing true journalistic skills than for playing provocative pranks. Otherwise it would cause a situation when *nobody would trust anybody* [22].

Stephen J. A. Ward claims that by existing journalistic standards, prank call is an unethical practice. But explaining how such standards apply in a world of news media and new practices is complicated. All in all, if you achieve the results who cares about the means? Journalism ethics does sometimes justify those reporters who use deceptive methods, such as lying to people about who they are, using hidden microphones or cameras. These are exceptional cases of great public interest and when there is no other way of obtaining a crucial information. Journalists might seek to minimize harm and legal risks. They consult editors and lawyers to make sure innocent third parties are not put in jeopardy. In any case, it demands accountability before the public [23]. Stephen Isaacs does not think that hoaxes present a problem. He finds it fairly amusing when media hoaxers pull off a stunt. He suggests that people simply ought to print corrections columns. When public admits an error, then it makes them more human (cited from M. Dery [9]).

Hence it follows that pranking and hoaxing dehumanize and devalue communication. For instance, in 2017, the pranksters called US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry. One of them introduced himself as head of Ukraine's government Vladimir Groisman. He ventured a business-like discussion of nuclear cooperation as well as current prices of oil and gas, Nord Stream 2, cyber attacks on US energetic systems, sanctions against Russia, and arranged visits. Later, the prank turned into a hoax of Ukraine's president Poroshenko who supposedly had invented a biofuel of hootch and manure. Then the impostors told that the odd product had already been presented to senator McCain and that a tanker with that biofuel had already been sent to Limpopo to support the rebels [24]. Limpopo is a province in South Africa. I guess, herein *Limpopo* rather refers to a fanciful country from a children's fairy-tale portrayed by a Russian writer K. Chukovsky and, thus increases its mockery effect.

I do not really think that mockery is the publicly wanted information. It rather contributes into



information noise and lasts as long as it is being transmitted than gives relevant facts. These data are close to flashes in the pan. Nevertheless, humor helps pranksters to take responsibility. At the same time fun entitles them to avoid guilt [25, p. 26]. J. Lindsay brilliantly describes pranksters' reasoning of their acts as a *narcissist's prayer*: That didn't happen. And if it did, it wasn't that bad. And if it was, that's not a big deal. And if it is, that's not my fault. And if it was, I didn't mean it. And if I did, you deserve it [13].

And there is one more aspect that might slack Russian pranksters' a moral culpability – the words *pranker* and *prank*. They are borrowed from the English language into Russian. As known, foreign linguistic signs provoke to manipulation with their semantics since their contents are abstract, i.e. capable of easy replacements of their referents [26, p. 496]. In other words, Russian pranksters no longer perpetrate misdemeanor offence *telefonnoye huliganstva* (*prank calls, phone scams*) but they do something different. *Prank* begins to sound like a buzzword especially for those who is not into the field. In comparison the usual for the English discourse word *prankster* due to the suffix *-ster* preserves its negative connotation. The Russian pranksters were shrewd enough to replace *prankster* for *pranker* which sounds neutral in the Russian discourse.

Furthermore, Russian word *prank* reflects only a part of the game. The other part of the deceitful tricks is expressed by the word *hoax*, an act intended to trick or dupe, something accepted or established by fraud or fabrication [27]. The person who carries out the tricks and deceits is a *hoaxer*. *Prank* and *hoax* are the words widely and interchangeably used in the English media. Although J. M. Bing points out that *hoaxes* and *pranks* are similar in that both involve deception but they differ in that *pranks* usually involve some type of humor or amusement and *hoaxes* generally not [9, p. 98], for example, a *bomb hoax*. At the same time, it is possible to see word combination a *bomb prank* in the English media, too.

In any case, pranks and hoaxes are malicious acts and usually subject to criminal and tort law since they are invective and damaging [17, p. 12]. Legally pranksters usually go light. They refer to protection by freedom of expression principle guaranteed by Article 10 of European Convention on Human Rights. Moreover, it is the petitioner who has to prove the prankster's malice aforethought. The court for instance may oblige that the pranksters should delete the recorded prank from the Internet outlet and pay a fine to their victims.

But pranks and hoaxes in media do abuse freedom of expression principle. On 26 April 1995, European Court of Human Rights ruled that journalistic freedom also covers possible recourse to a degree of exaggeration, or even provocation but such activity

shall not contradict article 10 of the Convention for Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The Court pointed out that the freedom shall be subject to such formalities, restrictions, or penalties as are prescribed by law for the protection of health and morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence [28].

Truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, respect for others, public accountability are standards that cannot be applied to pranksters. These elements are true not only to professional journalism, but to all modern activism. They are universal and embodied in *Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists*. Media pranks and hoaxes do not comply with the majority of these rules but, first of all, to section 8 which states that journalists shall respect the dignity of the persons and inform the interviewee whether the conversation and other material is intended for publication. Section 2 provides obligation that journalists should distinguish factual information from commentary and criticism. Section 9 indicates that journalists' disseminated information must not contribute to hatred or prejudice [29].

The malfunction of pranks and hoaxes become apparent in comparison to a good-natured fun. For instance, a joke is a spontaneous harmless reaction to the stimulus – an event or a person. According to Joey Skaggs (an outstanding media prankster, activist, artist, educator) a prankster uses trickery to humiliate or embarrass somebody, usually just for kicks [30]. Guerrilla Girls, also famous prank activists, claim that humor gets people involved [cited from M. Bing 10, p. 98] in the ideas pranksters want to deliver. Pranksters and hoaxers demonstrate, though at its lowest extent, their sadistic motivation [31, p. 90] since their perpetrators get satisfaction from provoking and riding roughshod over their victims' emotions. The hyperbolic version of a prank was depicted in movie *Prank* by Yiuwing Lam where a harmless prank had deadly consequences.

On the other hand, prank is a method of self-expression. Joey Skaggs, for example, has been using media in the way a painter uses a canvas since the seventies of the previous century. This is how he exposes media's prejudices, irresponsibility, and vulnerability. The Yes Men, one more prank duo, aim humor to raise awareness about problematic social and political issues. They all are labeled *culture jamming* activists. Pranks they perform are the forms of propagating subjective ideas to the society on national and international levels. Vovan and Lexus follow them and do the same things.

From social-cultural viewpoint, pranks have been recognized as a category of play, as they attempt to blur the boundaries between artifice and reality, to reverse the typical social order and hierarchy of



everydayness, they are unserious, make-believe, and involve magnitude of surprise [32, p. 323]. Tricks in media have become viral in the epoch of the post-truth when, in accordance with K. C. Martin, objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotional and personal beliefs (cited from Kroet [33]), and when an expert opinion and an idle person's opinion are being smeared, too [4, p. 40].

Thus, humor in media pranks thwart people from debates on serious issues in making the right decisions. Joey Skaggs, The Yes Men, Guerrilla Girls, Vovan and Lexus – they all try to find their own path to the truth playing law enforcement agencies. Vovan and Lexus even rename their activity *civil intelligence* since they discover the truth about those who make political decisions and have whole destinies of nations in their hands as well as they unmask con men in various spheres of life [34].

But I am certain the discoveries of culture *jamming* activists risk to deal with their wishful thinking, ill-judgment, and stereotyping. Then, there is something more than a sense of humor that really matters here. Pranksters test their victims' self-esteem, values, and worldviews. Pranks do assess and bias their victims who may accept the criticism and will have to retreat peacefully. Such victims have to correct their behavior in accordance with the pranksters' critical recommendations [18, p. 47]. It means that the subject and the object of the prank have confirmed their common values and thus have performed a sort of invective ritual of loyalty [17, p. 15]. In 2017 the US Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations Kurt Volker when fooled by the pranksters admitted that they had had a fine sense of humor: "Some questions which they had asked me, the way they had asked me those questions... it was admirable" [35]. Those who share the pranksters' values call them best Russia's pranksters, Russia's alternative diplomats, litmus paper and male nurses of the society, accusative and investigative journalists, pranks journalists.

It goes without saying that not every person is ready to share the imposed values and the imposers' behavior and interpretation. It is needless to say that a victim may refuse to bear the disparagement humor. It provokes a conflict between the prankster and the victim where one party is always doomed to stigmatization and communication breakdown. Those who do not side with pranksters call them trolls, comedians, hooligans, villains, narrative punks, shame of (journalistic) profession, artistic terrorists.

And here I have come to the point which introduces the best term for *media pranks*. It is *clout-lighting*, a mixture of *clout* influence and *gaslighting* where *gas* is a prank [36, p. 139] and *gaslighting* is a form of psychological manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members

of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity; using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying. It attempts to destabilise the victim and delegitimise the victim's belief [13]. This notion comes from the social media sphere. But in the epoch of post-modern and post-truth when modern media show a distinctive feature when professional and official news agencies neighbor with lay analytical Internet platforms. News outlets, social networks and video hostings influence each other and create a mixed worldview, then *political cloutlighting* is the best term which precisely identifies and describes the phenomenon under consideration inhere. *Political cloutlighting* is a systematic teasing of high profile people in mass media by baiting them with pranks and hoaxes in order to alienate their victims from society or misdirect people from solving true social issues.

Of course, pranksters show up in the media outlets which have owners who employ and pay them especially in *prankvertising*, professional pranks staged by advertising agencies, planned ahead of execution and with anticipated results [12, p. 32]. Practical jokes might get a utilitarian function with making money, getting followers, scoring popularity-driven metrics. Here I endorse S. Ewen's position who vividly described the phenomenon as "devaluation of the human in favor of the commodity" (cited from Dery [9]). "Of course, we get fees", Vovan and Lexus admit. They are professional pranksters and make their living with systematic perpetration of pranks. Now and then the stunt duo is suspected of links to Russia's security services which they have always denied [37, 38]. They reply: "We do our job without orders from the government. We act as private persons. It's not the position of the Kremlin, despite some government workers like it. Some people from opposition also like it" [38].

In any case, the utilitarian function of pranks and hoaxes is not the subject of this research. The focus of this study is the playful deceit in media as works of art.

In conclusion, pranks and hoaxes in media must not be referred to neither a brand new journalism nor a new tool of interviewing. They are good old tools of provocation and social alienation into "us and them". A media prank is a form of political cloutlighting. It belongs to culture jamming activism. Pranksters do not provide the society with information but bias negative social assessment of their victims. Practical jokes jam first the credibility of the news outlets then undermine the whole system of news gathering. The habit of fooling around people in media inevitably will lead to low professional standards and moral norms and thus become dangerous for those who demonstrate inferior or immature media



consumerism. We all should keep in mind that today it takes efforts to make us do more critical thinking and remember that there are unaccountable people who deliver an inaccurate agenda for anybody to trust nobody.

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