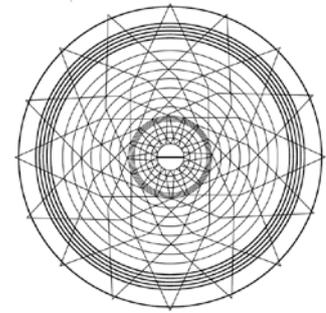


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*Political Storytelling in Digital Culture:
A Tool for Post-Truth Politics?*



POLITICAL STORYTELLING IN DIGITAL CULTURE: A TOOL FOR POST-TRUTH POLITICS?

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Abstract:

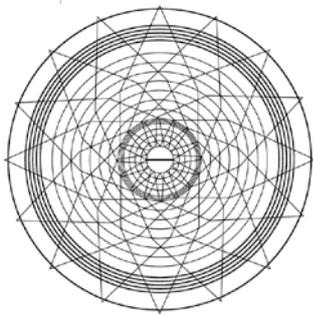
The following article presents the results of an individual academic research, dedicated to the analysis of structure, functions and effects of political storytelling in terms of the so-called “era of post-truth politics”.

The author would like to introduce some concepts and approaches to storytelling from the points of view of Russian literary studies and comparative literary criticism, which includes ideas and insights of major literary historians of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The author claims that these ideas are important, adaptable and relevant for the key ideas about storytelling that were drawn by Western social studies, as literature has a unique position and approach in the Soviet Union, being regarded as an “ideological add-on of society”.

The following analysis leads to schemas of deconstruction of the acts of political communication worldwide through the lens of so-called “shared narratives” (in the Western tradition) and “wandering (migrating) plots” (in the tradition of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union literary studies` tradition).

The last part of the article presents a narrative analysis of three cases of modern political communication in Norway, Russia and the USA. The intention of the author was to show three of the so-called “wandering plots” elements in the political communications of international leaders. The case of Norway covers the political communication of Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway, during the election rally in 2013. The case of Russia covers the political communication of the current President Vladimir Putin during the reconstruction of his biography in 2015. The case of the USA covers the political communication of Donald Trump, the elected president of the USA, during the election rally in 2016.

Keywords: political communication, political PR, digital culture, storytelling, post-truth, Russia, Norway, USA, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump



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Introduction

The following article is dedicated to modern politics and the political communications of modern leaders in terms of modern phenomena of the XXI century such as digital culture, information society and new media ecology. Each of these phenomena has its own effects on international politicians among: information overload, low interest in politics (especially among youths and millennials [Donsbach 2016]) and low level of understanding of nearly all political issues among the citizens, mediatisation of politics [see: Shomova 2016] as now politics should contest with memes and “friends news” on social media. As a result of that influence, the researchers of political communication have now begun to speak about the era of “post-truth” politics, which should also be considered as one of the core conceptions for this article.

According to the conventional opinion, fixed by several ground publications in quality world press, such as *The Economist* (2016) or *The Guardian* (2016), there were two major displays of post-truth policymaking during 2016 in the Anglo-Saxon Western world: “Brexit” in June and the election campaign of Donald Trump, now the 45th president of the USA.

The second case invited the attention of the author to the narrative side of this political rally, as one of the specific features of post-truth politics is the persuasion of potential voters not with the tools of facts and evidence but with the tools that affect the emotions of the voters.

In its turn, there are not so many effective tools to work with the emotions but there are definitely some that will inevitably work.

When we talk about emotions and its roots, it appears that the basics of hopes and fears, dreams and horrors are in stories that we hear and tell during our lives [see: Mayer 2014]. When we want to prove that something is good or bad, we tell a story that will serve as evidence of goodness or badness of the matter. That leads us to the one of the core instruments of irrational persuasion – storytelling.

When modern scientists conduct a research about the storytelling aspect of politics – what is said and how this is said – they usually work with the term “narrative”. That may refer to the field of so called “collective action” [see: Mayer 2014] or “international relationships”, when researchers employ the term “strategic narratives” [see: Miskimmon A. et al. 2013].

Here is the first point of potential dissonance between European and American (from Russian point of view noted as “Western”) academic notions and Russian research of these topics, as the second one has its roots in the Soviet tradition that indicated narratives primarily from the point of view of literary studies and literary criticism, and then applied the best insights to social sciences. Author believes that the comparative analysis of these two scientific traditions may fill some blank spots and give an opportunity to look at the tools of the post-truth politics from a different perspective.

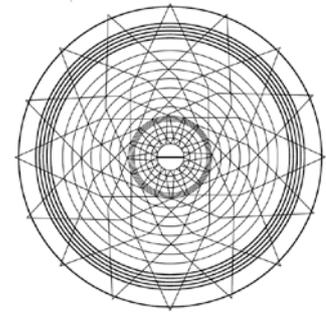
After that, there will be a comparison and adjustment between some key ideas of Russian theory and the insights of the Homo Narrans approach [Fisher 1985], presented by the theorists of political communication in the USA. The aim is to draw some core rules of modern political storytelling in order to deconstruct its schemas and analyse its basic tools, which are used in terms of post-truth politics.

The third part of the article will include the analysis of three cases that the author has chosen from the modern political communication. The first case presents Europe and covers the election campaign for the position of Prime Minister of Norway in 2013. The second case presents Russia and covers the reconstruction of the biography of current Russian leader

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Vladimir Putin in 2015. The last case presents the USA and covers the election campaign of Donald Trump in 2016.

The core aim of the research is to show the schemes and patterns of applying storytelling to the political communication of the leaders. This involves work with the images and archetypes, which are built on the basic plots and shared narratives. Here you can see the attempt of three de-constructions of the plots and archetypes, which may lead to an attempt to deconstruct post-truth politics by analysing and understanding its main tool.

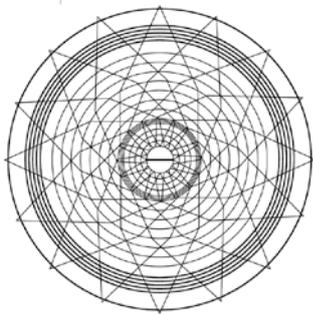
Russian and Soviet Approach to Narratives

If social sciences in Europe and the USA explored and investigated common public schemas, or the so called “shared narratives” [Mayer 2014], which were studied from the points of view stated by rational theory, social institutionalism and comparative mythology combined with the inventions of framing theory [see: Goffman 1974] or postmodern scepticism and distrust toward so-called “grand narratives” [see: Lyotard 1984], Russian tradition followed a different path. As part of this article, the author would share some notions of Russian theories about the narratives, plots and storytelling structures in order to give a brief description of the theory of “wandering plots” (or “migrating plots”), which was mainly a Russian idea (the term was first used by Veselovskiy A.N. in his works in the XIX century) [Veselovskiy 1989], as it was masterminded mainly by the literary historians of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union (most of all by Vladimir Propp [Propp 2003], Viktor Zhirmunskiy [Zhirmunskiy 1979], Olga Freydenberg [Freydenberg 1997], Eleazar Meletinskiy [Meletinskiy 1994]).

The idea that all stories may have the same origins – and that all stories can be narrowed down to the closed list of basic plots – was widely shared among European writers and poets, playwrights and folklorists of the 18th century. One of the brightest sages of the 18th century, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, said that national literature had very little value and that the era of the world literature would come. He also noticed some general commonalities among the beginnings of folk songs of different nations. During this period several authors, such as Friedrich von Schiller from Germany or Georges Polti from France, made attempts to draw up a closed list of basic plots for drama and novels. These attempts were followed in the 20th century, when Jorge Luis Borges said that there are only four basic stories and then Christopher Booker wrote his *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2005).

While Western science has made attempts to practically apply and make such lists or debate about the origins of all stories (with the version about the Germanic roots of the tales by the Brothers Grimm or the idea of Theodor Benfey that all the plots are from the Panchatantra), Russian literary studies have chosen the way of theoretical analysis. One of the major literary historians, Alexander Veselovskiy, was the first to use the idea of so called “wandering plots” - the type of stories that are similar in different countries, which can move from one culture or literature to another [Veselovskiy 1989]. If we look at Cinderella, Snow White or the Sleeping Beauty – these will appear as wandering stories among many countries.

The ideas of Veselovskiy were widely criticised by the Soviet philologists but that gave them a chance to deepen the idea of wandering plots and draw up the notion about some stories, plots and motives that are established by the evolution of society itself. Vladimir Propp was one of the scientists whose works are more famous for an international academic community, than the works of his colleagues and contemporaries. He analysed basic plot components and



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irreducible narratives from the points of their historical and social roots [see: Propp 2009, Propp 2003]. Victor Zhirmunsky followed the same direction and wrote about the theory of the cross-currents of world literature: that the plots can be adapted to the country if the country has the necessary images and moods in its social mind [Zhirmunskiy 1979]. Olga Freydenberg also considered the questions of plots in her work and described wandering plots as the stories repeated by a culture so often that they have become the “spiritual fund of mankind” (*in my translation of this definition – J.C.*) [Freydenberg 1997]. In her works, she also explained how plots helped to understand the reality for the people of ancient times, when they could not operate with scientific methods [Freydenberg 1997]. The same pattern of explanation was used later by the Church that saw its mission in giving to people an account for the categories of Good and Evil.

Eleazar Meletinskiy followed the same logic and even went further, as he was one of the latest Soviet philologists. He perceived the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung and added to the Russian literary theory the definition of the so called “literal archetype” [Meletinskiy 1994]. In his turn, Jung used the definition “typical situations” in order to describe the schemas that launch the action of various archetypes [Yung 1991, Yung 2013]. These situations were defined by Jung as often repeated and commonly experienced by the person. This definition makes “typical situations” sufficiently similar to the functions and essence of wandering plots.

If we combine these key ideas of Russian researchers of literary studies with the notions of American theorists of the narrative paradigm, we will have a better understanding of the structure of storytelling and its core tools, which are widely used in modern political communication.

Storytelling Animal: from Homo Narrans to Narrative Politics

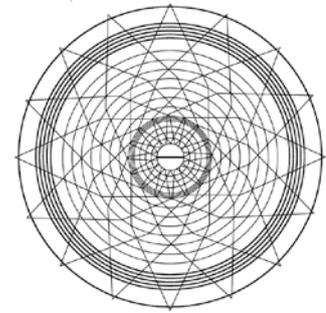
As Frederick Mayer and his predecessors say: “Human is a Storytelling Animal” [Mayer 2014]. That approach was stated by a group of academic researchers from the USA. The starting point was the Round Table: “Homo Narrans: Story-Telling in Mass Culture and Everyday Life”, that was held in 1985 and initiated a range of articles at the Journal of Communication. Among the researchers, for the purpose of this article, should be mentioned academics that worked exactly with political communications. In this case Walter R. Fisher can be considered as the “Founding Father” of the narrative paradigm [Fisher 1985] for a new theory that got a denomination “Homo Narrans”. The reconstruction of the narrative theory and its functional perspectives were the key questions for Lucaites and Condit [Lucaites and Condit 1985]. But the most essential contribution, from the point of view of the author of this article, was made by Lance W. Bennet and Murray Edelman, who were the authors of the article “Toward a New Political Narrative” [Bennett and Edelman 1985]. Some of the crucial points and notions, which were stated in that article, were the following:

1. **“Each narrative creates its own social world** while it holds a group’s attention: a world, to cite some examples, that is defined by crime in the streets, by growing prosperity, by the security threat from a hostile foreign power, or by pervasive poverty and unemployment”;
2. “The creation of a social world through narrative is all the more compelling because **there are always conflicting stories** - sometimes two, sometimes more - **competing for**

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acceptance in politics. The awareness that every acceptance of a narrative involves a rejection of others makes the issue politically and personally vital”;

3. “To a striking degree **stories are insulated from one another.** <...> in everyday life, people notice or ignore news stories according to whether they fit their current concerns and aspirations, typically focusing upon those that have meaning for them regardless of their compatibility with other narratives. <...> Because narratives evoke social realities, anyone may experience contradictory worlds as they accept contradictory stories”.

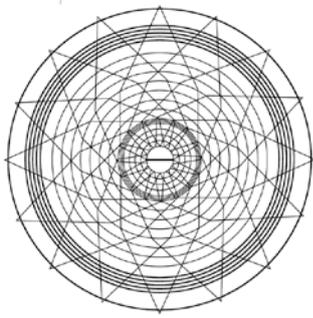
The line was followed by McGee and Nelson in their article “Narrative Reason in Public Argument” [McGee and Nelson 1985]. They stated that there appeared to be a need in the epistemology of narrativity, as the stories are an essential tool for the humans to evaluate events, subjects and people from the moral and ethical points of view. The offered epistemology included some notions about the role and phenomenon of stories. Particularly, these researchers said that myths and stories can be considered as the coins of our mind, mostly earned than given without any reason. In this way, stories recount myths, heroes, events, paradigms and symbols for every person and society, as the elements of stories are the tools for the human mind.

These statements are in lockstep with the ideas of Russian literary criticism on the one hand and with the post-Jungian researchers of psychology of folk tales on the other hand. When psychologist and folklore researcher Marie-Louise von Franz defined the power of the narratives, she described it with the words of the “habit to telling tales”, as tales were a crucial part of everyday life and experience of ordinary people, rooted in their history, their social patterns and their education [Frants 2003].

The academic research in this field developed to a further extent during the last years, as politicians faced the challenges of digital culture, network society and new media ecology. Modern researchers conclude that narratives have become the essential tool of political communications in terms of the so called “mediatisation of policy” [Shomova 2016]. Nevertheless, some specific features of storytelling – and of wandering plots as one of its tools – remained and even deepened in terms of the phenomena of the 21st century. These features are the following:

- The story makes the character (so exactly the story establishes, strengthens and legitimises the image of the political actor);
- The story has its own narrative logic, which is deeply rooted in the mind of the listener/reader (so exactly this logic allows the political actor to “predict” the perception of a potential listener and to encode it);
- Contested stories narratives and contested truths will launch the schema of defence of the mind of a listener from cognitive dissonance, which allows to counter-attack with narratives;
- Combined stories will agree in a human`s mind even if it is impossible from the perspective of pure logic (e.g. during the Russian-Ukrainian information war one “advocate of the regime” can interpret the same actions of Russia and Ukraine from the points of view of “love for the country” (“patritiosm”) and “fascism”);
- If the story is repeated very often or if some wandering constructions are used, the listener of the story irrationally gives the “credit of trust” to it.

Now I would like to see, how these specific features and effects are used in the modern political communication of different leaders.



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Narrative Analysis of Modern Politics: Norway, Russia and the USA

As we can see from the previous parts of the article, the most important thing in political storytelling is to follow several core rules of “narrative logic”. The key idea is that a plot used in the act of political storytelling should be suitable to a Character (in case of political communication – a political agent). The second key notion was in the cultural roots of the narrative element used. Keeping this notion in mind, we can analyse the narrative messages of political communication.

During the election rally for the position of the Prime Minister of Norway, lens Stoltenberg became a hero of a video that depicted one day with him. At that time, the current Prime Minister of Norway, Stoltenberg, introduced this video with the words: “Today is Friday, and as every Friday, I have participated in the government meeting with the King. The rest of the day will be quite different than most Fridays. As Prime Minister it is important to listen to people’s opinions. And in taxis, people really say what they mean” (*I have saved the original word order and punctuation of YouTube video subtitles – J.C.*). The video shows us how lens Stoltenberg changes his costume with the Norway Taxi uniform and then becomes a taxi-driver for ordinary citizens to hear what they really think about the country and its problems. After that there are several reactions from his clients: some of them recognising him, someone not. After that people share their views on relevant problems in their country.

This case shows one of the most complex addresses to the wandering plot, which can be characterised as “Ruler Incognito” (or “Unrecognised King”), that occurred in a wide range of stories in different cultures (e.g. Unrecognised Ulyssus, King of Ithaca, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, King Richard in Ivanhoe of Walter Scott, The Empress in The Captain’s Daughter of Pushkin etc). It is worth noting that the most famous “shapeshifter” in Scandinavian and North culture is Odin, who travelled incognito among people as Grimnir and tested the hospitality and fairness of people. The plot was taken as a complex construction and it makes it easily recognisable, but the effect was quite remarkable: over one million of views via YouTube and a sharp leap of popularity of the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the campaign can’t be recognised as successful. After several weeks, the secretary of the Labour Party declared that the clients of Stoltenberg were cast by a PR agency to show different types of citizens and some of them were paid for their taxi trip. An unfair technique led to setting the effect of the plot to zero – and maybe even to adding negative intentions about Stoltenberg. He did not win that race.

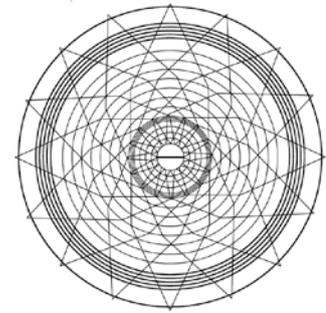
Political leaders can address not only the archetype of the Ruler, but also of the so-called Cultural Hero. The basic aspects of this type of characters are the belonging to a community, the fact that they are “chosen” for their mission by God or Higher Forces and their readiness to get through the initiation stage and trials in order to complete their heroic mission. The plot about initiation can be seen in the biography of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, which has been reconstructed on the occasion of the 63rd birthday of the Russian president.

The “63 facts about Vladimir Putin” includes the following story: shortly before moving to Moscow and starting his career as a nominee to the president position, the summer residence of Vladimir Putin and his family burned to the ground. All belongings of the future president were lost, yet the family was still to experience another wonder. Right after the fire, Putin returned to the ruins, where he found his cross worn next to the skin, as it said in the text (*in my translation – J.C.*) “the only thing that wasn’t destroyed by fire and shone quite brightly”.

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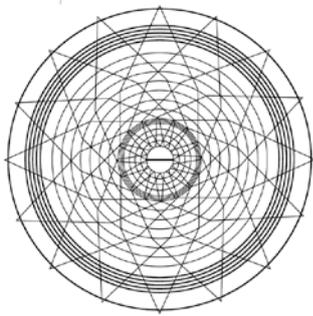
Shortly after that Putin's family moved to Moscow, where he began his career. Following the text of the article, Putin considered this to be a sign and even told George Bush about the accident during one of their meetings [Bersenev 2015].

Grand loss and life from square one without any belongings is one of the most common plot elements in the stories told about Cultural Heroes. They can lose family, home and belongings (like a hero of *The Booted Cat* or *Ivan the Fool* from *Russian Tales*), beloved ones (the plots about the kidnapping of the Princess by the Dragon and so on) and even their state and that is how their hero journey starts. The second aspect I would notice here is a strong cultural foundation, as the cross for every Russian and Orthodox means not only the faith of the hero, but the symbol of the cross is also the symbol of the destiny of the hero. The last thing I should notice here is that leaders may combine images of different characters in order to increase the total effect of their communication, and thus I will intentionally avoid the analysis of the plots that address the ruler archetype in the political communication of Vladimir Putin.

One of the most provocative cases and images was used during the election rally of 2016 in the U.S.A. If we analyse and deconstruct the political campaign of Donald Trump, one of the most famous masters of "post-truth politics", we can see that this campaign is made on micro-plots and motives that built the image of a political trickster – one of the most provocative characters in political communication [see: Shomova 2015]. Nevertheless, Trump addresses this archetype with the mastery and artfulness that gives him an advantage not only in recognisability between the male candidates, but also helps him to occupy the news agenda of all major media. The question of this article is: how could Trump win the race – despite that trickster image or due to it?

The most famous trickster in folklore is Loki, the Scandinavian God. The main aspects of tricksters are their blindness to the division between "good" and "evil", antagonism to the category of morals and ethics, their provocative escapades and their main desire to change the existing order of things. If we look at the political PR communication of Donald Trump, we will see all these elements. His slogan "Make America Great Again" refers to the notion that the USA is not as great as it used to be – Trump wants to break the existing order and "renew" the country. The list of things, people, places and ideas that Trump has offended in his Tweets includes 325 positions (information dated 4th of April, 2017) [Lee and Quealy 2017] and is still growing. He is famous for his racist, sexist and violent ideas that he translates through his Twitter account – and by such ideas claiming that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are the direct "Founding Fathers" of ISIS, for example. The trickster's image was also carried by Hillary Clinton, who addressed the motive of the game in her tweets about Trump: "Tell him our economy is not a game", "For him it is just a game", "Do not let him roll the dice of the future of our children", as the motive of the game is one of the predominant ones for the trickster. But the fact that tricksters are not suitable for presidency did not play a significant role and persuaded the voters during the Election Day.

Two possible reasons may be outlined in this context – of course, just as a part of a big and complicated combination of facts. The first notion is that the Trickster image became very popular in mass culture, where we can see such heroes as Loki (Marvel universe) or the Joker (DC Universe). The image of the trickster was romanticised by the modern cinema, comics and media. The second reason is deeper and has its roots in one of the oldest wandering plots about the trickster in Europe – the legend about the Pied Piper or the Ratcatcher. The legend tells about the Piper that came into town and promised to kill all the rats, but when he did it the government did not pay him for his work. The man played at his pipe for the second time



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and the children went out of their houses and followed him. The city lost them and never saw them again. This story introduces a different image of a trickster – not a fool or a jester, but a kind of magician or shaman who has the power to make people follow him. In some sense, this can be assigned to Jesus Christ. In political history, the metaphor of Pied Piper was used for Napoleon, Hitler and communist leaders, so it has a strong tradition that refers to the important politicians of their time.

We cannot say that the trickster image became the determinative factor of that political campaign in the USA, but we can conclude that the trickster is one of the most suitable characters to deal with phenomena such as post-truth politics, as the trickster takes no responsibility for his words and that may be the factor that allows Trump use this tactic so effectively.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful for the guidance and attentive recommendations of her academic supervisor Dr. S. Shomova, Professor of the Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

The author agrees with the opinion of the reviewers, that the following research is the introduction of the bigger project concentrated on the roles of migrating plots and narratives in political reality and their effects on public opinion. In this article, several examples of migrating plots and their elements in political PR-communication are mentioned.

Right now there are more questions stated by the author than definite answers given. But the author believes these questions make sense in the current political situation and in understanding the post-truths politics.

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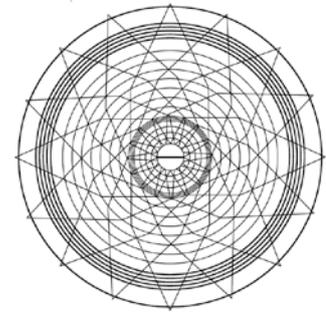
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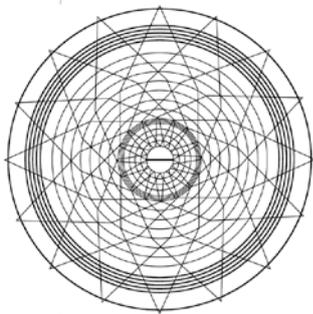
The post-truth world: Yes, I'd lie to you. *The Economist*, Sept 10, 2016 URL: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21706498-dishonesty-politics-nothing-new-manner-which-some-politicians-now-lie-and> [Retrieved at: 04.04.2017]

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ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ СТОРИТЕЛЛИНГ В ЭПОХУ ЦИФРОВОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ: ИНСТРУМЕНТ ПОЛИТИКИ ПОСТ-ПРАВДЫ?

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Аннотация:

Данная статья представляет некоторые предварительные результаты индивидуального академического исследования, направленного на анализ структуры, функций и эффектов политического сторителлинга в так называемую эпоху «цифровой культуры» и «политики пост-правды».

В рамках статьи автор хотел бы представить мировому академическому сообществу некоторые идеи и подходы к сторителлингу (рассказыванию историй) с точки зрения исследований литературы и сравнительного литературоведения, что включает в себя идеи и теории ключевых литературоведов Российской Империи и Советского Союза, таких как Александр Веселовский, Владимир Пропп, Виктор Жирмунский, Ольга Фрейденберг и Елеазар Мелетинский. Автор предполагает, что эти идеи могут быть актуальными, полезными, интересными и применимыми мировым академическим сообществом, изучающим сторителлинг и коммуникацию. Предположение основано на том постулате, что литература в Советском изучении рассматривалась в том числе как "идеологическая надстройка над обществом" и не исключалась из социальных и политических процессов.

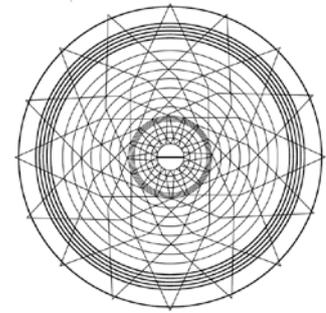
Представленный анализ приводит к описанию схем и механизмов деконструкции актов современной политической коммуникации с точки зрения «разделенных нарративов» ("shared narratives" - термин, принятый в западной традиции наук о коммуникации) и «бродячих (блуждающих) сюжетов» (термин, использовавшийся литературоведами Российской империи и Советского союза в рамках сравнительного литературоведения).

Заключительная часть статьи представляет собой нарративный анализ трех кейсов современной политической PR-коммуникации, отражающий ситуацию в Норвегии, России и США. В качестве норвежского кейса взят сюжет, использованный премьер-министром Норвегии Йенсом Столтенбергом в рамках предвыборной гонки 2013. Кейс из российской политической коммуникации показывает реконструкцию биографии российского президента Владимира Путина. Наконец, в качестве кейса из политической коммуникации США была

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выбрана предвыборная кампания президента США Дональда Трампа, который считается одним из активных последователей политики пост-правды.

Ключевые слова: политическая коммуникация, политический PR, цифровая культура, сторителлинг, пост-правда, Россия, Норвегия, США, Владимир Путин, Дональд Трамп

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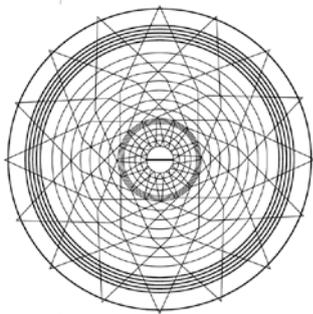
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