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**REAL POLICE AND FICTIONAL  
POLICE: A STUDY OF PUBLIC  
PERCEPTIONS THROUGH  
ONLINE COMMENTARIES**

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**REAL POLICE AND FICTIONAL POLICE:  
A STUDY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS THROUGH ONLINE  
COMMENTARIES<sup>2</sup>**

Contemporary police scholars have argued that it is important to study “how representations of the police and policing are produced and received” (Loader, 1997: 5) and what social meanings are created by them. Police scholars have claimed that police television series produce media images which frame social relations, and social relations, in turn, frame media images (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178). Given that there is no common name for these theoretical assumptions, this paper proposes to use ‘feedback loop theory’ to unite these assumptions into a common framework. In addition to analysing the content of police shows, scholars have recently begun to focus on the stage of production (Colbran, 2014; Lam, 2013) and the stage of reception (Cummins et al., 2014; De Bruin, 2011; Dowler et al., 2006; McClean, 2011). The purpose of this study is to add empirically to reception studies and to test the feedback loop theory by analysing how people discussing fictional police dramas refer to the actual police and police-related issues. I answer these questions by carrying out a content analysis of popular Russian-language internet discussion forums where internet users review Russia’s most famous police show *Glukhar*’ (2008-2011). The paper shows that this police procedural frames what ordinary citizens and the police chiefs expect from the police, and thus the results of the study illustrate the feedback loop theory.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: internet discussion forum, police, crime, television, drama, audience.

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## **Introduction**

Many police scholars have shown that policing and its media representations are interwoven (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Leishman and Mason, 2003; Reiner, 2008, 2010). As Robert Reiner has pointed out, “the media–society relationship is dialectical: each develops in interaction with the other, in a complex loop of interdependence” (Reiner, 2008: 317). The purpose of this paper is to explore one of the sides of this loop and to understand how people relate fictional images of policing with their opinions about real-world policing and real-life situations that are related to the police.

I meet this purpose by conducting a content analysis of reviews of a police television show that its viewers posted on Internet discussion forums.

The paper shows that the TV series frames what ordinary citizens and police chiefs expect from the police, and thus the results support previous theories that have claimed that media images frame social relations and social relations, in turn, frame media images.

## **Theoretical context of this study**

Police scholars have emphasised the importance of considering images, both factual and fictional, when discussing the state and the police. Alan Clarke pointed out that popular culture informs popular imagination and public discussions about the police along with personal experience and stories told through media (Clarke, 1983: 45). In his analysis, he referred to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘sedimentation’, by which Gramsci meant the process of bringing diverse meanings together, and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ notion of ‘bricolage’, which refers to an ad-hoc, everyday, non-professional explanation of the world (Clarke, 1983: 50). In his further studies of the issue, Alan Clarke pointed out that “for many people their only contact with a speaking policeman is on the television and this reinforces the aura of reality which police series strive so hard to construct” (Clarke, 1992: 232). He adds theoretically his earlier work by introducing yet another concept of ‘refraction’ borrowed from Voloshinov (Clarke, 1992: 239). By doing so, Clarke hoped that the concept and the theory that it labels would permit police scholars to go beyond a simplistic vision of the media as a mirror of reality, of symbolic constructions as free-floating

signs, and to ground them in social reality. He added that “it is not possible to understand the series without some understanding of the conditions of its production, but these conditions are not sufficient to explain the particular form of the series as it was broadcast” for

<...> the criteria of reality imposed to assess the fiction are based on only a partial knowledge of that reality. Hence, with the police series, the authenticity of the series may actually be judged against the fictional presentation of the police in other series, the well-publicized views of certain leading police officers and the new reports—themselves constructed—of police actions. (Clarke, 1992: 239).

It can be inferred from this theory that to understand fully how popular imagination and public discussions about the police are formed, how ideas of the police come to be *sedimented* and *bricolés*, it is not sufficient to conduct a semiotic reading of a singular police series or crime film, but it is necessary to add studies of intertextual references, production, reception and interpretation by audiences, and the effects the series or film has had.

It is worth noting that the research programme proposed by Alan Clarke in 1992 in relation to studies of police studies resonates with the programme of studies of popular culture at large that Richard Johnson proposed in 1986 (Johnson, 1986).

Ian Loader developed a theoretical stance proposed by Alan Clarke in the paper “Policing and the Social: Questions of Symbolic Power” (Loader, 1997). There he criticized police sociology of that time for the fact that it “devoted insufficient theoretical and substantive attention to comprehending the symbolic power of the police as a social institution” (Loader, 1997: 5) and proposed a research programme that would find answers to the following questions that deserve to be quoted in full:

How representations of the police and policing are produced and received; or of the competing social *meanings* ascribed to policing and their various sources, supports and effects” (Loader, 1997: 5);<sup>3</sup>

why people invest their hopes and fears in the police (Loader, 1997: 9);

*What forms do these investments in, and attachments to, policing take? How and by what means is policing positioned within prevailing vocabularies, sensibilities and ‘structures*

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<sup>3</sup> Italics in quotes from (Loader, 1997) in original.

*of feelings’? What does the cultural prominence of the police and policing communicate about the quality and character of social relation? (Loader, 1997: 9);*

and

*“What effects do these investments in, and attachments to, policing have? How is the emotional appeal of policing taken up, rearticulated, and used in official, political and media discourse? What are its implications for crime prevention and social ordering?” (Loader, 1997: 11).*

In addressing these questions, Ian Loader uses three concepts: the ‘condensation symbol’ by which an anthropologist Victor Turner had labelled a cultural category that brings “together under one roof an otherwise disparate set of meanings” (Loader, 1997: 7). Another concept that Loader utilises is the ‘structure of feeling’, which comes from culture theorist Raymond Williams and which is defined by the latter as “practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating community” (Williams, 1977: 132). The third concept is Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic power’.

The following scholars further developed the theory of media-society interdependence in relation to images of the police was: Christo Lassiter introduced the term ‘feedback loop’ to point out at the influence television audience makes on the trial participants when the trial is broadcast on television (Lassiter, 1996). Frank Leishman and Paul Mason and Robert Reiner actualised the term ‘refraction’ (Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126; Reiner, 2010: 178) and used the notion ‘feedback loop’ (Leishman and Mason, 2003: 134–138). Robert Reiner proposed his own two loop metaphors in 2008, the ‘semiotic loop’ (Reiner, 2008: 315) and ‘a complex loop of interdependence’ between the media and society to label a situation in which policing and its media representations are mutually dependent (Reiner, 2008: 317). In 2010 he also borrowed the notion of ‘media loop’ from police scholar Peter K. Manning. However, Reiner changed the meaning of the term. While Manning, when using the term ‘media loop’, meant images that are “shown in another context, reframed by the media” (Manning, 1997: 26) and thus limited his definition by media-media relations, Reiner give the term a broader meaning of the media representation of policing that “feeds back into policing practice via its effect on public perceptions” (Reiner, 2010: 178). In 2011, Markus-Michael Müller built on Ian Loader’s ideas and emphasised the important role of imagination in police studies, stating that the police are “an ideal object for the empirical analysis of the state, state-society relations and the resulting ‘state

imaginations” (Müller, 2011: 20–21). Alongside these important theoretical claims, numerous analyses of the content of police shows<sup>4</sup> and several works focusing on the stage of production (Colbran, 2014; Lam, 2013) and the stage of reception (Cummins et al., 2014; De Bruin, 2011; Dowler et al., 2006; McClean, 2011) have been published recently.

This reconstruction of debates about sedimentation, bricolage, refraction, condensation symbols, feedback, media, and semiotic loops is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates the importance that many police scholars have ascribed to an approach to studies of the police and the state in which images of the police and public imagination would be grounded into social contexts and would be explained in their connection with a broader societal system. This understanding of images and imagination in police theories, though without frequent references to it in police media studies, goes along with the basic premise of the strong programme in cultural sociology which consists in the idea that culture is an independent factor of social life along with social, economic, political and other factors (Alexander, 2003: 11–26). In this study I will refer to the aforementioned set of theoretical ideas as to the ‘feedback loop’ theory.

The purpose of this study is to add empirically to reception studies by analysing one of the sides of this loop where viewers of police shows interpret what they have seen. My leading question is how people discussing fictional police dramas evoke the actual police and police-related issues. More specifically, the questions I seek to answer are: What kind of reviews do viewers compose? What are the relations between people’s accounts of the fictional police television series and the actual police? What do they pay most attention to in their reviews? What narratives do they compose about the police, policing, crime, security and related issues? What additional themes do they bring up? Do they draw a line between “reality” and “fiction”, and if so, how do they do it and how do they conceptualise these themes? Is there any typology of references to the real police; are there any rhetorical and discursive patterns in these discussions? Is there any specificity in discourses depending on the type of the forum? What topics provoke users’ emotional reactions? How do users develop and change their interpretations during discussions? Which interpretations compete?

I will draw my conclusions from the content analysis of Internet users’ reviews on Russian police TV show *Glukhar*. The answers to these questions will help better understand how public

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<sup>4</sup> Lists of references can be found in (Reiner, 2008: 331) and in (Morgan et al., 2012: 271).

imagination about the police and the state are formed and will therefore contribute to contemporary police studies.

## Method

My sampling procedure was completed in three stages: case sampling, material sampling, and sampling within the material. I chose all my cases purposively (Flick, 2009: 115). I used content analysis as the method of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). This consisted of coding forum entries and writing analytic memos in order to find rhetorical and discursive patterns (Saldaña, 2009).

### Case sampling

I have chosen contemporary Russia as a geographical area and temporal period because of the heated debate and discussion police reform and police corruption have received in the media and in state institutions over the past several years. I hypothesise that in these circumstance discussions about fictional images of the police might serve as a rich with references to real-life situations and factual media stories.

The reason I chose *Glukhar'* as a case is the fact that its broadcast coincided with moral panic in society over the topic of the police and also emerged at the same time as the 2009-2011 police reform in Russia began. The show has also enjoyed extremely high popularity amongst television viewers. *Glukhar'* was broadcast from 2008 until 2011 on the private *NTV* channel. According to *TNS Russia Media & Custom Research* company, during the last week of its broadcast, *Glukhar'* became the most popular TV programme on Russian television in general, the most popular TV show, and the most popular programme on the channel.<sup>5</sup> The series was broadcast in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Rashid Nurgaliev, Russia's interior minister of that time, confessed to a Russian news agency in 2011, two months before the end of the series, that he liked *Glukhar'* and believed that the show is the first series that showed "our life and our psychology" (Nurgaliev smotrit serial '*Glukhar'*', schitaia ego samym ob"ektivnym, 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> These data were collected from the website of *TNS Russia Media & Custom Research* company in April 2013, but they were no longer available upon examination of the website in March 2014. However, some TNS data can be seen in the article by television critic Arina Borodina and other news reports (Borodina, 2011a, 2011b; Telereitingi: '*Glukhar'*' pribavil i v reitinge, i v dole, 2010).

One of the most striking features of this television show is that nearly all police officers that appear on the screen act illegally—according both to the current legislation in Russia and the legislation mentioned in the show. They take bribes, transgress laws by performing illegal and violent actions against innocent people or people whose guilt has not been proven yet. Citizens are generally represented in the show as distrusting the police.

I chose to examine the audience which is active online for the following reasons: I consider internet discussion forums as an arena of debate, where media images are discussed, accepted, negotiated and contested and new meanings are produced. The analysis of forums give an insight into how all that is done. Forum users are anonymous and are able to speak freely and openly. Forum users are diverse in their social status and geographical location. They are preselected by a number of factors such as Internet access, media literacy, and willingness to express themselves, knowledge of the place where other users can hear their opinions. I choose forums because I see them as sites where television viewers with different social characteristics and from different geographical areas, even though neither systematically countable nor totally reliable, form communities of interests, engage in debates, and produce interpretations of television shows and, possibly, social meanings of social phenomena these shows portray. These communities are formed without intervention from the side of the researcher, unlike focus groups, for example. Forums are usually platforms that allow people to express their opinions openly, in the conversational and very often emotional mode, with no limitation from the medium itself of time needed to write an entry, of the desire to save one's face and to speak according to one's status due to the immateriality and the anonymity of internet communication. People on forums engage in horizontal forms of communication with people they regard as peers, and can feel anonymous, and therefore are more likely to disclose their honest (and negative) views of the police and of authorities than they are if they are asked by an authority in the form of a researcher. The researcher, on the one hand, does not disturb forum users, and forum users, on the other hand, do not try and manipulate the researcher. Forums provide researchers with the possibility to see how people free from spatial and social limitations of personal communication develop and express their opinions and form communities of interest very quickly and easily. Additionally, participants of such forums are not limited by shared contexts, except for the context that is the show itself.

Thus, the study is based on the assumption that people post online what they really think. Even though I being an Internet user could also be a way to allow one to create digital personae and to



engage in performances, one of which could be a performance of ‘speaking openly and freely’, online performances are not a bigger obstacle on the way to get to social meanings than offline performances, and therefore it is possible to generalise opinions of forum users to individuals offline and in society.

All these qualities allow us to gain insights from texts that users post on forums into social meanings, public imaginations, to sensibilities or structures of feeling, and to everyday, non-professional theories of the social world. As platforms for dialog, forums can provide the researcher with the possibility to see how users develop their interpretations, change them and how different interpretations compete.

### **Material sampling**

Material sampling was done in two stages. During the first stage my sampling units were websites, during the second stage of sampling my sampling units were Internet discussion threads. The reasons behind splitting material sampling into two stages were the following. Technically, the Internet is divided into units that are websites. During the first stage of material sampling I was looking for the most relevant and most popular websites. However, users do not always deal with entire websites, preferring to deal with particular segments of websites such as web discussion forums, forum threads or even parts of forum threads in which they are involved. For this reason I looked for relevant threads within selected websites. During this stage I relied on the method of relevance sampling as described by Klaus Krippendorff (Krippendorff, 2004: 118–120).

I wanted my sample to satisfy the following criteria: Firstly, I wanted it to include discussions from different websites, because I supposed that there might be a more or less stable audience within a given website while I aimed at analysing accounts from different audiences. Secondly, I gave priority to long entries and long discussions in comparison to short entries and short discussions because I assumed the former might be more meaningful. By ‘entry’ I mean a short text that can be attributed to an individual Internet user and that can be said to be published at a particular moment. By ‘thread’ I mean a sequence of entries that are either connected into an exchange of thoughts that I will call ‘discussion’ or are just individual accounts.

The search of relevant texts was driven by two principles: the audience size of websites at the time of the data collection, with priority given to the most visited websites; the entries and the discussions length in terms of the number or the length of sentences in entries and the number of entries under the same topic, with priority given to forums with the longest entries and the longest discussions. In other words, data collection was conducted in the following way.

### Finding relevant texts

Firstly, I searched for discussions about *Glukhar*' using *Google.com*, *Google.ru*, and the most popular Russian search engine *Yandex.ru*. I utilized 16 key Russian language phrases that were various forms of the phrase "discussions *glukhar*" which are the most relevant key words for the search of forums where users would discuss *Glukhar*'. My attempts to find English language reviews, forums or opinions were unsuccessful. Within the top ten websites that *Google* and *Yandex* gave me as a response for these key words I choose the forums with the longest threads and the longest entries.

After collecting data that *Google* and *Yandex* showed, I scrutinised the selected websites, looking for some additional materials, using their own search engines and *Google* using the latter to search within selected websites.

I also used Internet rankings such as *Liveinternet.ru*<sup>6</sup> and *Top100.rambler.ru*<sup>7</sup> and collected the longest discussions with the longest entries from websites rated in the top ten in terms of popularity by these rankings.

Limitations on this stage consisted in following: First is the limitation in the method of sampling itself, which rests on the fact that I consulted the rankings on the day of material collection and not throughout the whole period of the discussion. Secondly, another limitation is that both search engines *Google* and *Yandex* kept my cookies and could use my geographical location at the moment of the search (which was Berlin, Germany), and search results from other locations or from web browsers in an incognito regime might have yielded different results.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.liveinternet.ru/rating/cinema/> where I chose the top ten the most visited websites for the last 31 days in the 'cinema' category. I addressed the ranking on September 4, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> <http://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=245%2F276&statord=0&range=01.08.2014++31.08.2014> where I chose top ten websites in the 'cinema' category for the period August 1, 2014 – August 31, 2014 sorted by the popularity index. I addressed the ranking on September 4, 2014.

The resulting population included 47 threads.<sup>8</sup> This selection included 1,223,802 words which included all textual elements what were on web pages, including technical information such as dates and times of publications, user data, menus, advertisements, links. However, relevant texts always prevailed technical texts. The size of the population was equal to 5.7 *Moby-Dicks* (for Herman Melville's text has 214,309 words). In order to build a manageable sample out of this population I conducted a two-stage sampling within the material. Sampling within the material was based on the technique of stratified sampling (Flick, 2009: 117–125), for which I considered a thread as a sample unit.

### Sampling within the material

Sampling within the material was conducted in stages. On the first stage I divided websites from the population thematically and got 29 threads (from 8 websites) from forums of cinema and TV shows' fans, 9 threads from websites for women (from 3 websites), 4 threads from police websites of the police, the Russian and the Ukrainian (from 2 websites), 4 threads from websites with miscellaneous thematic (from 3 websites), and 1 thread from a website dedicated to popular psychology.

I took the longest thread from each category, assuming that the longer a discussion is, the more meaningful it is and/or the more participants it includes. The only exception from this rule consisted in two forums for employees of the police. I split this category into two, according to the country of the police, and chose the longest thread from the website by the Russian police and the longest thread from the website for the Ukrainian police.

The result of the first stage of the sampling within the material produced a sample that included 837,621 words.

On the second stage of sampling within the material I limited the resulting sample since it was still too extensive for a qualitative analysis by one person. The technique that I used is a

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<sup>8</sup> I copied these threads as pdf files on my computer. The data were collected on September 5 and 7, 2014. I did not check if the postings were altered or new postings were added after the dates of the data collection. I saved web pages in the pdf format so that formatting, inserted pictures and emojis would be visible. It was important because some users expressed themselves with a lot of formatting techniques such as bold texts, crossed out texts, cursive texts. Some emojis were animated, however, I saved them still. Saving these texts as forums would mean not only to sometimes make texts unreadable, when, for example, originally crossed out texts would appear as normal text, but also to lose a part of meaning. In my analysis I paid attention to both purely textual meanings and to visual messages that were sent through formatting and the use of emojis. I did not analyse users' profile pictures and signatures.

combination of random and systematic sampling techniques. I chose the first 30 entries, 30 entries from the middle of the thread, and the last 30 entries from each of the 6 threads. The midpoint was determined approximately.

The decision to limit the conversation to 30 entries is of course arbitrary, but it is based on the assumption that conversations of that length are long enough to be meaningful and to show how users produce rhetorical and discursive patterns and develop them. The decision to take into consideration conversations from the very beginning of the thread, from its middle, and from the end—two latter parameters being dependent on the date of the data collection—is motivated by the intention to analyse a sample that would resemble the population in its dynamics and permit to detect changes of rhetorical and discursive patterns over time in case any exist.

Additionally, I took into consideration one whole thread from *Klukharino-teatr.ru* that contains 280 entries. I did this in order to be able to carry out an in-depth analysis of conversations longer than those in 30-message-long extracts and therefore to be able to identify meanings that might be overlooked otherwise, if any were to exist. This thread was dedicated to the first season of the show, but it contained viewers' reactions on all the three seasons.

The fact that additional materials were taken from a website dedicated to cinema and not, for instance, a police website or psychology website, might have influenced the final results of the study. However, in building this sample I did not try to make it represent the population, for my analysis focuses on rhetorical and discursive patterns and not on constant or quantitative characteristics of messages that can be calculated and measured.

Thus, the final sample included 90 entries from each of the 6 threads, which makes 540 entries, and the full 7<sup>th</sup> thread which includes 280 entries. This amounts to 820 entries in total.

My coding unit was the entry, which can be defined as a separable message by one user. The context unit was the conversation that is a meaningful textual exchange between users on the same subject. The whole forum thread can coincide with the conversation or be a collection of several conversations. Coding of entries was not exhaustive, which means that not all entries that were part of my final sample were coded, and not mutually exclusive which means that one entry could have more than one code.

## Number of users and their demographics

Some forums allowed their users to indicate some of their demographics such as the country and the city where they were posting from, others did not provide with such possibility. On the forums that allowed their users to put their demographics not all of them used this possibility. Sometimes indications of the place of posting and even the place of living were mentioned in entries. However, even when indicators are available they remain unreliable. Thus, for the reason that these indicators are incomplete and unreliable, I do not take them into account. Yet, it is worth noting that amongst authors analysed there were users who claimed they were living in various cities of the Russian Federation, in Ukraine, in the U. S.

## Time frame

The earliest entry in my sample was published on 5 December, 2008, and the last entry was published on 14 April, 2014.

Even though a diachronic analysis with the aim to investigate how Internet users' accounts changed over time and in relation to some historical events would be an interesting possibility, in my study I decided to rely on a synchronic approach, regarding the data as a reservoir of meanings rather than a timeline of meanings evolution. The latter approach can be employed with the aim of discovering how meanings occurred and evolved throughout the life of discussions.

## Methods of analysis

Within this qualitative study I have chosen to employ a content analysis framework (Krippendorff, 2004; Saldaña, 2009) which is informed by elements of discourse analysis methods.

Scholars in the social sciences hotly debate the very term 'discourse' and the 'discourse analysis' method (markers of the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences). There is a wide range of understandings of what discourse is (Barker, 2008: 152). Most scholars agree that 'discourse' refers to the nature and role of language and other meaning-systems in the functioning of social

relations. In such a paradigm, these meaning-systems are understood to shape identities, social practices, norms, relations between individuals and groups, authority, power, legitimacy.

My approach to discourse analysis is based predominantly on Norman Fairclough's understanding of this method's use in the social sciences. Fairclough's approach stems from the assumptions that language is an irreducible part of social life and that social life can be analysed through language (Fairclough, 2003: 3). These assumptions do not imply that language and social life are synonymous, but rather they set the stage for a methodological agenda that focuses on language as a source of knowledge about social reality.

My work focuses on rhetorical and discursive patterns related to social issues which come up in my textual sources more than on the language of the texts. In this way, I concentrate not on *text* analysis (which is a part of discourse analysis), but on the analysis of *discourses*, which is the *social* structuring of language, and, subsequently, of social practices.

## Findings

In 518 entries (63.1%) of 820 of my total sample users either discussed the show only, conversing about its cinematic qualities, or issues that were related neither to the show nor to the real police. In 302 entries (58.3% out of 518 entries) viewers talked about the fictional police in relation to the real police. Generalisations that I propose below are the result of the analysis of these 302 entries only, for it is only this type of comments that contained materials needed to address my question of how viewers of the show relate fictional police to the real-world police. I divided comments of this type into three groups:

- 1) Opinions about how the show affects people;
- 2) Moral judgements about the show;
- 3) Opinions about the show's plausibility.

These groups are neither mutually exclusive, that is, I included some entries into two or all the three groups; nor are they exhaustive, that is, there are some entries that deal with the issue in question but could not be attributed to any of these three groups. This fact makes it impossible to draw any quantitative conclusions, and thus the analysis below, even though I mention some numbers, remains qualitative. My aim is to discover rhetorical and discursive patterns in online

discussions and to find out what online users conceptualize as “reality” and “fiction” of police work and how they see relations between them. In the analysis below I split these three groups of messages into subgroups and comment on the latter ones. As in the case with groups, subgroups are not mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive that is some entries belong to two or more subgroups and some entries are included in one or more groups but not included in any subgroup.

My analysis shows that the series frames what its viewers think about and expect from the real police.

I find evidence showing that the series frames what ordinary citizens and the police’s heads expect from the police. Some users hardly draw any distinction between actions that they have seen represented in the show and actions of the real-world police that users think or know the police do. Thus it can be concluded that my analysis supports the feedback loop theory (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178).

## **The show affects people**

### **The show affects ordinary viewers**

There are eleven entries in this category. In nine of them users state that *Glukhar*’ either makes smart and civilised viewers stupid and brutal, or it augments negative behaviour of those who have already been inclined to act aggressively by gratifying evil sides of their personalities. Some users stressed that the show might transform people into zombies.

Other suggested that *Glukhar*’ might persuade people that what is shown in the series is normal. People expressing this type of concern were particularly worried about the effect the show might have on the youth. These viewers regard the youth as an especially vulnerable part of the audience.

Two entries in this category confronted this claim by arguing that the truth cannot do the youth any harm, but can do the opposite, and that one should not blame television shows for their children’s moral degradation and rather one should invest more energy in their children’s moral upbringing.

There is one message in this category that contains a broader claim going far beyond the case of *Glukhar*' and attacks television in general. It says that television plunges people into the world of illusion, manipulates them by appealing to their primitive desires and even creates artificial ones. This criticism resembles the type of cultural criticism developed by the Frankfurt school that claimed that high culture became a cultural industry that manipulate people's minds and leads to the degradation of the taste (Laughey, 2007: 123–127).

### **The show makes police officers worse**

In seven entries users expressed their concern with possible negative effects that *Glukhar*' might have on police officers. In some entries in this category people worried that *Glukhar*' could make the police organisation an attractive work place for psychologically unstable people. They also worried that some viewers can see fictional, and, in their view, bad policing as an example of how the police service should be carried out normally.

A user from the web discussion forum of the Russian police reported that it followed from the remark by Rashid Nurgaliev, 2003–2012 Russian Minister of the Interior, that *Glukhar*' is the most realistic police television series on Russian television, that some local police chiefs started to recommend to their subordinates to watch the show and to regard it as an instruction for their service. This fact supports the feedback loop theory (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178).

Another user from the same discussion forum supposed that the show's image of the disobedient and transgressing officer who ignores orders, duties, and organisational hierarchies is popular amongst viewers from the police because this image embodies what police officers wish they could do in real life, but cannot.

There were no messages saying that the show makes police officers better professionals or moral agents.

Similarly to accounts from the previous category, messages from this one showed a vivid concern with how the show can affect young police officers. Users said they are afraid *Glukhar*' can be particularly harmful for young police officers, for it can transform them into *evsiukovs*,



clones of Denis Evsiukov, an infamous police officer who killed people in a Moscow supermarket in 2010<sup>9</sup>.

### *Glukhar'* affects people's attitudes towards the police

Twenty-three entries contained claims that *Glukhar'* affects what people think about the police. Their authors said the show is harmful for the reputation of the police. On the discussion forum of the employees of the Ukrainian police one user stated that the show harmed not only the Russian police, but also the Ukrainian ones by analogy.

While in reviews gathered in the two previous categories there were concerns that people might *start behaving* in a bad way if they take actions of the show's characters for a normative example, authors of the entries from the category in question said they are afraid that people might *start to see* actions shown in the series as normal. The difference between these stances is that while in the former case viewers were afraid that fictional actions would *cause* real actions, in the latter case viewers were anxious that people would *regard* bad actions from the show and similar actions in real life as normal.

Users from the forum of Russian police employees expressed their dissatisfaction with citizens who have unrealistic expectations from the police based on what is shown in series as possible. This fact also supports the feedback loop theory (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178).

Some users speculated about possible reasons that made filmmakers create negative images of the Russian police. Some supposed that the image was made negative in order to invite people to work at the police because the negative image would seem plausible, for it would coincide with public imagination while a positive one would look improbable and thus would daunt people and provoke their irony. Others said that filmmakers depicted the police as common people envision them in order to make it easier for such people to accept criminal police actions in reality. This interpretation is close to Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory and Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, which share the assumption that repressive social institutions and norms have power

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<sup>9</sup> In April 2009, one year after the first season on the television series *Glukhar'* came out, a police major Denis Evsiukov walked in one of the Moscow supermarkets with his gun and killed two people, injured seven, and took hostages. This event, known as *Evsiukov's affair*, resonated in Russian media and society and brought to the fore the role of the police in public discourses. *Glukhar'*'s finale contains a scene in which one of the protagonists, a police officer, kills six people. This scene can be described as a media loop, i. e. reshowing and the reconstruction of the initial event (Manning, 1997: 26–28).

because people accept them voluntarily through everyday practice (Freedon, 2003: 19–30). Some users hypothesised that the show contained references to the Evsiukov affair in order to make Evsiukov a less popular figure in the society. This opinion summarises in a popular form the major premise of the agenda-setting theory in media studies which basic premise is that “any given media agenda will give rise to a public agenda over the course of time” (Laughey, 2007: 22). It is worth noting that while in some discussions viewers said that they would see the show as plausible if it was about Denis Evsiukov and another infamous police officer Alexei Dymovskii<sup>10</sup>, some other users recognised references to these two police officers in two last episodes of the show and hypothesised about reasons behind filmmakers’ decision of depict them in the show.

Some users emphasised that they paradoxically like characters of the show but did not like real-life police officers that resembling fictional images. Some users added that it is morally wrong that attractive actors play negative characters.

Only in two entries of twenty-three users contested this critical interpretation of the show. In the first entry the user said that the show cannot degenerate the youth because what is shown there are merely mild transgressions, and that it would be harmful if it was shown that characters take drugs. Otherwise the show propagates a police station as a workplace and encourages people to work for the police. The second entry contained irony about the idea that it is the show that must be blamed for the bad reputation of the police. The author of the entry said that it is the police that must be blamed for their bad reputation, not the show depicting the police in a negative light.

In this way, we can see that viewers showed their preoccupation with the concept of norms. Some users expressed their fear that what is shown will become a norm, that people, including police officers, might start taking the series for a normative example, and that the show might normalise crime and corruption in society. Others evoked the concept of the norm while evaluating the show and the fictional police positively, saying that the show is normal because it shows what “everybody knows” and not “fairy tales”, that it should become a normative example, and that corruption is normal. Regardless of how viewers evaluated the show, the fictional police or the real-world police, they used the concept of “the norm”.

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<sup>10</sup> A police major who in 2009 recorded and uploaded on *YouTube.com* two short videos addressed to Russia's prime minister of that time Vladimir Putin, in which he condemned the police as a corrupt organisation. In *Glukhar'*, Sergei Glukharev also records and uploads on Internet a video with claims that resemble Dymovskii's claims. This scene can be seen as yet another illustration of the category of the media loop.

Users demonstrated their preoccupation with the youth. Viewers described the youth as a vulnerable group that the show can influence in a bad way. Users were concerned with the youth in general and young police officers. This concern is linked with the idea of the norm in the way that the youth is seen as a group that does not have an established sense of a norm and might be influenced by the show.

The analysis also shows that viewers are critical towards the show and their interpretations vary significantly. Ad-hoc theories that viewers invented to make sense of the show resemble some critical social and media theories: the Frankfurt school criticism of cultural industries (Laughey, 2007: 123–127); the hegemony theory (Freedon, 2003: 19–30); the media-effect theories and the agenda-setting theory in particular (Laughey, 2007: 21–23). Users emphasised that fictional images normalise what might be unacceptable at the beginning and explain what might not seem understandable. It is worth noting that the results of my analysis support the feedback loop theory (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178). Two messages illustrate this theory: by the message by a police officer saying that citizens have unrealistic expectations from the police because of the show; and by the fact that the interior minister called the show the only realistic police series and by the message that reported that subsequently some chiefs of the local police stations demanded their employees to watch the show and to take it as an example of professional work.

## **Moral judgements about the show**

### **Corruption is normal**

I collected twenty-nine entries with judgements which contain judgments relating to bribery and corruption. The entries all contained the following kinds of narrative: A police officer cannot be ‘clean’ and one who criticizes corruption in the show does not understand life. We all steal and it is impossible to deny it. It is normal for police officers to take bribes—they have to feed their families somehow. One needs to discern a bribe from a sign of gratitude. The bribe takes place when someone asks to influence legal decisions; gratitude takes place when the case is over.

On a higher level of abstraction, these arguments can be systematically summarised as follows: Cinematic police officers do not transgress law for the sake of transgression; there are limits and principles of the transgression. The first principle is justice, understood as a moral and therefore

flexible concept, not as a legal, formal and thus rigid one. This flexibility is what makes the police's actions look illegal, but in reality they are not illegal, they just do not correspond to the formal legality while they do correspond to the spirit of legality. The second principle is responsibility: the police defend members of their circle out of duty. The third principle is a pragmatic one: it is one of the specificities of police work that if an officer does not defend his/her team, nobody will work for that person, nobody will fear and respect him/her, and s/he will lose authority and power in the organisation. The fourth principle is also pragmatic: it is only the police's brutality that allows the police to deal with criminals, for example, to get witness testimonies from people who would not give them otherwise.

Some viewers remark that characters look plausible precisely because they are shown as flawed. We can conclude that the weaknesses and imperfections of the characters make them look familiar to the viewers, look similar to what the viewers know from their life and to what viewers expect to see. One of the users declared "finally, we've got heroes of our time, with their merits and flaws, so much similar to many of us". The issue of the show's plausibility is important and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **The series "explains" life**

Eleven entries contained claims that the series explained the phenomena of Dymovskii and Evsiukov, and, more broadly, why the police and other state organisations in Russia are based on illegal principles.

The most emblematic example of this type of speculation is the following:

*Glukhar'* shows clearly the principle that what thieves have not stolen cops will take. Things that will survive the fire will be taken by the fire brigade. It is because we have such mentality. I used to be silly enough to complain about it [before I understood it]... Unless you pay, and pay a lot, neither the cop, neither the doctor, nor the plumber will carry out his duty. The concept of 'shame' lost its meaning. Money replaced everything.

Users claim that the show portrays the police as a gang that is estranged both from the state and from society and functions in their own commercial interests. "His police shoulder loops are the licence to kill", as one user put it. Another user stated, "The show demonstrates the major cause

of vices in our society, which is the absence of moral education and the presence of moral degradation”.

Only in one entry these judgements are contested: its author says that filmmakers have an advanced sense of justice, and their aim was to show that justice exists.

### **“I wish there were cops like this!”**

In six entries users said they wished there were police officers in real life similar to fictional ones. Fictional cops are good because they are humane, and “we all lack humanness”. One user said that it would be great to be able to ask the show’s protagonist Alexei Glukharev for help in real life. It can be concluded from this that fictional images become what incarnations of what people expect from the real world police.

### **The series sets a bad moral standard**

Twenty-four entries contained straight condemnations of the series for it shows crime and corruption as morally acceptable and normal. According to reviewers, it shows that police officers committing crimes “are human beings, too” without moral disapproval and therefore this attitude legitimises and justifies their wrongdoings.

Messages that I collected in the category ‘moral judgements about the show’ demonstrate that users propose various justifications of the police’s actions that they see as wrong. It is worth noting two nuances. Firstly, users say openly that they find these actions wrong morally or legally in theory, but at the same time they qualify them as acceptable in practice as far as users place them in certain explanatory frameworks. Secondly, when discussing this issue, users hardly draw any difference between actions that they have seen represented in the show and actions of the real-world police that users think or know the police commit. This fact supports a set of ‘loop theories’ that point out at the interdependence between the media and the society.

I have also found that the public views the role of the police through the police’s transgression of the law and corruption of police officers; normative judgments of these illegal police vary within online communities which I observed.

## Opinions about the show's plausibility

### The show is plausible

In eighty-one entries viewers said that the show is plausible or realistic.

Three types of opinions can be distinguished within this subgroup:

Firstly, claims that the show is a copy of reality, that it shows the truth, depicting life as it is. In messages of this type, users distinguished reality and fiction.

Secondly, statements that the show is not a copy of reality, but that it can be compared to reality and qualified as plausible, as close to reality, as coherent, or as corresponding to viewers' expectations, to how it should be. Authors of the messages of this type made it clear that they keep in mind the distinction between cinematic characters and real-world police officers and that they are fully aware of the fact that believing the acting is not the same thing as believing that the acting is a copy of reality. However, these users compared reality and fiction. They said they liked the acting in the show but they would not like situations or characters that have been played if they were real. They also pointed out similarities between real-world people they know and the show's characters, not necessarily police officers in both cases. They described the show as "lifelike", for it depicted recognizable types of personalities or familiar daily routine. It is possible to assume that these viewers extrapolated the plausibility from depictions of elements of life that are not linked with the police and were familiar to them to images of police work that they may not be familiar with. In fourteen messages from this subgroup users claimed the series is plausible and "normal" because it is not similar to "fairy tales" and does not portray "supermen", "machos", "Western *ramboes*", "angels", and "extremists". Instead, the show depicts common people, with their modest merits and flaws. Some entries had distinct anti-Western sentiments for they contrasted the show's protagonists with police officers and superheroes from "Western" cinematic production. Other entries juxtaposed *Glukhar*' with Soviet images, implying that the latter are as far from reality as Western portrayals. When users called the show's characters "normal" they referred to what "everybody knows" and what they "happened to hear" and never to their personal experience.

Thirdly, judgements of the police and the police-related situations without a clear distinction of whether they authors talk about fiction or reality. These judgements evaluated police officers and situations that involved the police negatively or positively.

It is not possible to distribute all entries to any of these three types; however, in some cases this distinction was evident.

### **The show is not plausible and not realistic**

In sixty-three entries users stated that the show is neither plausible nor realistic.

Some users who insisted the show is unrealistic also said they had no idea of both how the police work and what levels and kinds of corruption and brutality are there in real life. Those of them who gave arguments to support their judgements, judged by analogy, extrapolating their assessments from familiar experience to the unknown domain of police work. For instance, one of the users said he did not currently live in Russia and was not therefore familiar with realities of the Russian police, but being familiar with the Russian army where he served some time ago, and with its cinematic images, he could perceive the difference and therefore suppose that a similar gap exists between images of the Russian police and its portrayals in *Glukhar*'.

Some of the users who said the show was unrealistic stated that they actually were familiar with realities of police work but found the show was not coherent in details and for this reason could be judged as unrealistic. They would say, for example, that the Ukrainian accent is imitated wrongly, that a particular officer's actions would not correspond to his or her status, that some positions within the organisation were called incorrectly. Some viewers explained incongruities in details, assuming that filmmakers did not have advisers from the police.

There were also contradictory accounts in this subgroup of messages. For instance, one user wrote that s/he would believe the series if the filmmakers showed extremely transgressing officers. At the same time this viewer referred to his/her personal knowledge of some police officers whom s/he described "decent people". It is possible to assume that for this user imaginary police had more significance than the police that s/he knew from experience or heard of. Another contradictory account is worth quoting for it shows how expectations from the police and stereotypes can contribute to the perception of some real-life events:

I tend to think that what is shown is true, moreover it is brightened up, and the reality is worse. When there was a burglary at my acquaintances' house, they were really surprised that the police managed to find some of our things.

Others confessed they had no personal knowledge about the police but still they would not believe the show. It shows that some of the people who said they had no knowledge of police work evaluated the show as plausible, and some as unrealistic. Whatever their answer, both groups indicated that their evaluations were based on what they think and on what “everybody knows”.

There were some messages that presented the idea that the show is not realistic because it is a movie, and as a movie it is not supposed to be realistic.

### **The show should not be evaluated as plausible or unrealistic**

In twenty entries users made more radical claims than arguments from the last type and stated that the show should not be evaluated as plausible or unrealistic because it is just a movie. One user says that discussing *Glukhar*’s plausibility is similar to discussing the *Police Acadimy*’s plausibility with American cops.

I did not find any relationship between statements about the presence or absence of personal acquaintance with police work on one hand, and the show’s evaluation as realistic or unrealistic on the other hand. In other words, users assessed the show as realistic or unrealistic regardless of what they said about their knowledge of police work. References to common knowledge, to what “everybody knows”, to their expectations, or to the show’s dissimilarity with Soviet or Western cinema framed people’s accounts more profoundly than references to their knowledge or experience. This was especially evident in two cases—when users who said to have experience or knowledge of the police work made contradictory judgements about the show’s plausibility and when users judged the police without stating clearly about whether they are talking about the fictional police or the real police. I can conclude that when people tried to assess *Glukhar*’s plausibility, they relied on their imagination.

It is worth adding, however, that the only meaningful correlation I discovered was between the type of the message and the type of the forum: amongst sixty-three entries in which users said the show is not plausible thirty-seven messages were from police forums while there were only twelve messages from police forums that in which users approved the show’s plausibility. It can be concluded that amongst reviews from police forums messages that said the show was implausible outnumbered messages that said the show was plausible.



My analysis shows also that opinions about the show's plausibility do not correlate with positive or negative evaluations of the show. Some users said the show is not realistic and therefore it is bad, some say that it is not realistic and therefore it is good because the reality is more terrifying than its depiction.

## Conclusions

The study shows that threads from web discussion forums dedicated to fictional police are not limited to cinematic debates, but also include accounts of real-world issues related to the police. 302 out of 820 entries and each of seven threads from my sample contain references to real-world issues. It means that viewers of the police television show relate what they see on the screen with the real world, and this relation is by no means a marginal phenomenon.

When viewers referred to real-world police-related issues they talked about their personal experience, stories heard from others, stories from news media, their expectations from and their normative positions towards the police, and, finally, what they saw as common knowledge, what "everybody knows". They also might refer to the fictional show as to a source of factual information.

Forum-writers do not always draw a distinct line between these sources of knowledge. Moreover, some of them do not discern fictional police from the real-world police at all: they would condemn the police without clearly saying whether they talk about the show's characters or the real-life police. Additionally, when participants of discussions made it clear that they talked about the real-life police they nevertheless made references to the show. Some participants made contradictory statements that showed that their expectations from the police, including those based on the show, contradict their real-life experience, and people do not resolve contradictions. Expectations from the police, normative positions, common knowledge, from the one hand, are interwoven with references to personal experience, stories told by others and stories from the factual media, from the other hand. Sometimes viewers showed their readiness to prefer the former to the latter or to add to all of that their impressions from the show. In some cases, people did not discern fictional issues from real ones or if they did so, they assessed the degree of plausibility on the basis of their expectations and common knowledge. They state that the show

explains life, gives them criteria by which to measure real life events and people, and proposes a justification of corruption and crime.

Thus, the study shows how viewers blur reality and fiction in a system where one informs perceptions of the other, thus supporting the feedback loop theory (Clarke, 1983, 1992; Lassiter, 1996; Leishman and Mason, 2003: 126, 134–138; Reiner, 2008: 315, 317, 2010: 178).

## **Discussion**

This study proposes an interpretation of how people relate fictional stories about the police to real-world issues linked with the police, and how personal experience, stories heard from others, factual and fictional media images, expectations, normative positions, common knowledge, frame stories they tell about real-life and fictional police.

My findings can be generalised from forum-writers to other social groups and from the case of Russia to other countries. My results can be triangulated in future studies with other methods that deal with real-world encounters, for example, interviews and focus-groups with the TV show's viewers (Krippendorff, 2004: 39–40). Also, a study of whether people discussing the actual police evoke their fictional images may significantly enhance our understanding of media-society interdependence.

Audience responses to police shows give us an indirect way to evaluate societal perceptions of the police through a comparison lens of “fiction” versus “fact”. People's responses on forums give access to social meanings, to public imaginations, to sensibilities or structures of feeling, to everyday, non-professional theories of the social world by people who are not limited spatially or socially, in an environment in which they are not disturbed by the researcher's presence and cannot manipulate the researcher. Moreover, in horizontal and anonymous types of communication on forums users are more likely to disclose their negative views of the police and of authorities than they are if an authority in the form of a researcher asks them. Thus, online studies of opinions about the police can be seen as a promising method for police studies and criminology.

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