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## Information wars as a conflict of interpretations: activating the ‘third party’

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This article deals with a specific type of information wars, understood as ‘the manipulation of the second level’. We discuss the ‘war of interpretations’, in which the real target is not the enemy but a kind of third instance, able to take action to resolve a particular conflict. An important factor in the success of this technology is a kind of Big Event, by which the attention of the ‘third party’ is attracted, leading to irreversible actions.

**Keywords:** big event; information wars; interpretation; third party

The ‘information wars’ (IWs) phenomenon is discussed in many publications, detailing the history and development of IW (Volkonsky, 2003), the methods and technologies of IW (Bukharin, 2007; Bukharin & Tsyganov, 2007; Panarin, 2003), their role in modern information society (*Information wars in the world today*, 2008; Pocheptsov, 2002; Vlasenko & Kir’janov, 2011) and in international relations (Panarin, 2004). There are studies of the Russian experience in IW (Mukhin, 2000), the use of modern information technologies in IW (Norris, 2001; Owen, 2011), and the mathematical models of IW (Rastorguev, 2006). One also finds many electronic network resources devoted to IW (e.g. <http://www.infowars.com>; <http://www.infwar.ru>).

The term ‘IW’ is often employed by political scientists. Whole scientific communities have formed which actively discuss the IW in foreign and domestic policies, as well as in business and corporate management. In the market, there are agencies specializing in rendering the corresponding services for conducting IWs, ensuring information security, information intelligence, etc.

One might have the impression that ‘IW’ refers to a well-known concept operationalized to specific technologies and procedures. This is both right and wrong. For instance, students often choose themes related to IW for preparing their term papers, graduation papers, and master’s theses, and each time they are faced with a lack of conceptual clarity of the term ‘IW.’

*The present paper focuses on a specific sort of IWs: the so-called second-level IW, when participants and their purposes are not clear, and specific analytical efforts for understanding a conflict content (with its desirable and actual results) are needed. It is hoped, that by this attempt, we can contribute to a clearer conceptualization of the IW phenomenon.*

### What are IWs?

What is usually meant by an IW?

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First, and most obviously, it is a conflict, in which at least one of the parties takes a very aggressive approach.

Second, unlike *physical, economic, and trade wars*, here one deals with a specific instrument, i.e. information. More precisely, the concept of 'IW' is a communications concept *par excellence*, dealing with the instruments, channels, and content of communications as information transfer.

Third, as a communication phenomenon, IW can either accompany military, political, or economical conflicts, or be deployed independently.

Fourth, depending on the emphasis of the technical components of communication, IW can be focused on the instruments of communication or its contents. In the first case, we deal with a *technical IW*, focused on destroying or damaging hostile information infrastructures, including information centers and decision-making centers. In the second case, we deal with IW directed to impacting enemy consciousness as a system of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and stereotypes.

IW of the first kind are *cyber wars* (including international ones), actively discussed in recent times (cf. hacking activities including data theft, website defacement, denial of service, redirects, spam attacks, and other technological attacks (Clarke & Knake, 2012; Krekel, 2009)). Such attacks are carried out through the electronic resources of government agencies, different companies and civil society organizations, as well as media outlets and individuals. *Technical IWs* have a predetermined structure that corresponds to countermeasures and security measures.

IWs of the second kind are less obvious: they can be attributed to manifestations of soft power or smart power (Nye, 2008, 2009, 2012). Instruments used in this case may be very different, including the entire set of manipulative and propaganda techniques that Lakoff connects with cognitive reframing (Lakoff, 2006, 2009), and Pocheptsov recently called *semantic wars* (Pocheptsov, 2013). The question that arises is, 'What new technologies are created as a result of IW?' It could be argued that, whereas the unidirectional information attacks focus on actions such as propaganda, manipulation, speculation, and distinct beliefs and opinions, the IW of the second kind demonstrate a *strong* practical aim by stimulating certain actions needed to solve a particular problem.

The second kind of IW may contain forward-attack, but there are two important circumstances. First of all, their goal is boosting action, and (as will be shown later) action of not only the attack object. Second, of course, mutual attacks represent the special interest. However, in this article, we are primarily interested in the first circumstance, which determines the semantics and the IW configuration itself.

This fact is well illustrated by several examples.

- (a) The politically ambiguous circumstances leading to the resignation of Yuri M. Luzhkov, one of the major figures in the Russian political elite of the past decades, is a strong example. Luzhkov was the head of the city administration of the capital of the Russian Federation in 1992. Those 18 years were very intense years full of political struggles and crises; however, Luzhkov not only successfully performed his functions in those circumstances, he also initiated the creation of the political movement 'Fatherland – All Russia', which later became the basis of the 'United Russia' – the still ruling political party. His position had a certain deliberateness about it; from the very beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Luzhkov was able to build a relationship with the country's leadership. The media regularly featured stories aimed at revealing the ambiguous circumstances of Elena Baturina's business success, (Luzhkov's wife), but this did not prevent Luzhkov from winning the elections; Luzhkov appeared invincible. However, in the middle of Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term, enough incriminating ideas were perpetuated by the media that the President of the Russian Federation decided it was time for Luzhkov to resign as a result of a 'loss of confidence'. The initiators of

this IW and their goals still remain unclear. The alignment of political forces in Russia enables us to assume that, even taking into account the personal conflict of Luzhkov and Mr Medvedev, such an attack could not be made solely by the presidential administration without the knowledge of the head of the government, whose functions are performed by Putin. It could be argued that the result of this IW led not only to the resignation of the mayor of Moscow, but also the weakening of Mr Medvedev's position. In many ways, the recent resignation of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov is a similar case.

- (b) Another storm in the Russian information sector, in the context of a conflict between the opposition (systemic and extra-systemic) and the ruling political regime, emerged in Russia after the Duma elections in 2011. The possibility of fraud is often discussed in the media, the blogosphere, and even in the Russian courts after every election. However, in the winter of 2011–2012, Russian society was put on the brink of a political crisis, triggering violent demonstrations, which the authorities tried to qualify as outside influence.
- (c) The actions of the Georgian government of Mikhail Saakashvili in the conflict over South Ossetia are also worthy of scrutiny. In essence, according to the cabinet members and especially Saakashvili himself, this was an incident of Russian aggression. As a result, Georgia called on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene in the conflict, or at least speed up the integration of Georgia into NATO. There is much ambiguity as to the true nature of these events.
- (d) The chain of revolutionary events in the Arab world and the Islamic world as a whole, known as the 'Arab Spring', is a prime example of information prioritizing and its effect on the public. Information about the corrupt and despotic regimes in the Arab countries of the Mediterranean have long been well known, including facts about the international terrorism support, especially Gaddafi's regime. However, for some reason, at some point the information came to the forefront in the agenda, leading to serious political changes.

Do these events have anything in common? If there is a conflict, is it possible to say with any certainty who is opposed to whom in all of them? What are the goals of the conflict participants? What are the results of such IW? Is it always possible to determine the winners and losers? For every one of these questions, several answers and interpretations can be given. Moreover, interpretations themselves are actively involved in the IWs, largely determining their content.

Thus, this article focuses on the selection and consideration of a special type of IW, second-level IW, in which the actors and the goals are not clear, emerging in the process of interpretation and generating a new socio-political context.

### **IWs as a conflict of interpretations**

A specific feature of these second-level IW is the implicitness of their actors. Who are the organizers of these actions? Against whom are these actions directed? Ambiguity of the problem of actors generates the mythologization of the IW and their demonization. If required, a motivational chain can be traced behind any news, any event, and an 'evil purpose' can be attributed to certain 'enemies'. This, of course, does not deny the obviousness of the developed and implemented plans and projects of different political and social forces, both foreign and domestic.

One should realize that political reality is a result of interaction, collision, and competition of such projects and campaigns. This is what is meant when history is interpreted as a *resultant will*.

Nevertheless, the actors in such IW, in many respects, appear to be the products of interpretations and discursive practices, which, in turn, can also be considered IW.

Thus, the phenomenon proper of an IW is not something that translates to the discursive practice of myth-making, but rather to a mind game of analysts and political strategists, i.e. who will *out-interpret* whom. This is a paradoxical feature of second-level IW and characterizes their main quality. It is not only the implemented information, propaganda, and manipulative attacks, but also a conflict of interpretations of these actions. By analysing the interpretations of the opposing parties, the initiators of attacks and their motivations can be defined.

### Why does it work? Or the ‘third party’ problem

There is a certain mystery to IW.

Consider the events in Libya. Was there nothing previously known about the *eccentricities* of Muammar Gaddafi, e.g. his authoritarian methods of governing the country, attitude to opposition and dissenting views? It seemed that suddenly people ‘opened their eyes’ and politicians everywhere pronounced their disapproval of Gaddafi’s regime, and these pronouncements were inevitably followed by sanctions.

This ‘unexpected efficiency of the commonly known’ is another paradoxical aspect of second-level IW, which conceals the main mechanism of this technology. Why, despite all the obviousness, does this technology ‘work’? Is it because it becomes inappropriate or unfair to maintain the status of a *half-truth*? Perhaps disclosure of the facts imparts publicity to them, when ‘everyone is speaking’, when ‘you cannot be silent’, or when it is already ‘necessary to act’.

It seems the solution to the paradox of the ‘unexpected efficiency of the commonly known’ lies in determining the actual recipient of information influence in such IW. Actually, any conflict can eventually involve a third party, the one who understands everything and becomes an arbiter. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, human existence is existence beneath a gaze (Sartre, 2000). It may be God, Absolute, Fair Trial, the Testament of the Ancestors, the Scientific Truth, the Historical Law of Development, the State or, in the absence of, or powerlessness of these listed, someone who is ‘in law’. It is to this *third party* that both sides of the conflict appeal to justify their actions.

Thus, such a type of IW is a conflict represented in the information sector, which aims at activating a certain influence group, an authority, or decision-makers.

It is important to understand that this is not a simple rhetorical instrument such as those used by the parties in judicial practice, when the prosecution and defence present arguments before a jury in a court of law. In judicial practice and judicial rhetoric, an argument is subsumed under the laws and court rules. However, the type of IW discussed in the present article is not about evidence; it is about *attracting attention to*, and creating motivation for, irreversible actions.

To clarify, we can use an analogy of strategic promotion in marketing, the implementation of which is composed of three components designed to impact the consumer: public relations (general information about the organization, its activities, products and services), advertisements (stimulating interest in specific products), and sales promotion (when the situation and the action of direct consumption organized). In this regard, IWs of this type are similar to sales promotions.

As a result of the intensity and concentration of the information supply, it would be improper and unfair to keep the facts in a status of *half-truths* and rumours or simply ignore them. The disclosure of facts gives them a sufficient degree of publicity, when we ‘cannot remain silent’ and ‘must act’.

Where is the threshold of transition from the rumours, isolated publications, or discussions in the blogosphere, to a certain new quality? And, what is the institution that justifies the actions resulting from this *new quality* of the situation?

### IWs and mass information society

A basic concept for characterizing modern society, the system of relations in it, business, science, and politics, is the *network*. The network connection type has always existed, from family relationships and affinity groups to the mafia and other various subcultures. However, several features of modern civilization, such as new information and communication technologies, are brought to the forefront as *network* relationships.

Practically all forms of social activity are seen as *project* activity, where the project is a trigger for activation of a certain fragment of the network, resulting in the maintenance and further development of this piece of social network. Not without reason, modern society is often characterized as information society, the post-informational society, or even the net-project civilization (Boltanski & Kyapello, 2011).

Considering this levelling of social structure, let us say a certain event occurred which triggers public interest. The reaction can be compared to throwing a rock in a pond – the ripple effect. In public relations, it is well known which information becomes news. This is (a) something important, usually threatening the well-being of many people, (b) something to which famous people are connected, and (c) something that causes a scandal.

Today, journalists gather no more than 12–15% of the information circulating in the media. More than 40% of events reported in the media are not reported because they happened, but because people cause them to happen in order to get news coverage (Gerasimov, Lokhina, & Tulchinsky, 2010).

The President is featured on television scratching a calf behind an ear, not because he did it, but because he did this just so the media would show it. Excellent examples of these kinds of ‘events’ were given in the ‘news’ series related to Putin’s activities as Head of the Government: shooting whales with a harpoon gun, fire fighting, retrieving ancient amphorae from the sea bottom, etc.

A special role is played by threats such as natural disasters, technogenic catastrophes, economic or political crises, and military threats. Modern society is particularly sensitive to these events because people are extremely vulnerable to such disasters, and, due to the globalization of the economic, information, and political sectors, such events are reported on the global scale. One can even state that contemporary mass society is an alarmist society, maybe even horror society. That can and has been used for political manipulation: the horror society is conveniently and malleably manipulated.

This is essentially what we now have in modern Russia. There are a series of obvious examples: explosions in residential homes before the beginning of the second Chechen military campaign, the Beslan tragedy during which ‘terrorists’ took children and teachers of the school hostage in order to have the gubernatorial elections cancelled, or the statement made by the Chief Sanitary Doctor about the allegedly poor quality of imported foods to instigate campaigns against Ukraine, Georgia, Latvia, or Norway.

Noisy publicity is, however, only half the work.

### Role of a ‘big event’

Now we approach the crux of the matter. Second-level IWs are not solely comprised rumours, isolated publications, or information in blogs. This information has broad resonance in society. This is the new media reality. Not just in the spirit of McLuhan’s ‘medium is the message’ (McLuhan, 2003), or Luhmann’s reflective reality (Luhmann, 2012), but the reality proper, a ‘big event’ in the media which affected the interests of that ‘third party’, an appeal to which is, in fact, an IW, and without taking into account whether the settlement of a real conflict is possible.

The real target of such an IW is this ‘third party’: government agencies, power groups, and decision-makers. Sometimes the IW sheds new light on an ongoing situation, which changes or informs the opinion of these third parties.

This was the case with Luzhkov; the ‘exposing’ information attack against him and his wife became the basis of a decision taken by the President. The President forced the resignation of the mayor of Moscow, who had served for many years, because the mayor had ‘lost credibility’.

Cases in which the third party is not in a decision-making position deserve special consideration (as in the above-mentioned case with Saakashvili). Here, the situation is suspended, or a decision is made by certain emerging other third parties, and the conflict is resolved by the intervention of this new force; for example, a revolution or external occupation. Consider the bloodshed in the ethnic cleansings in Serbian Krajina of Bosnia that excited the global community, the self-immolation attempt by a young man in Tunisia, or the ‘thousands’ of persons murdered during the Gaddafi regime. These events took center stage in the media and created a new reality, which appealed to the leading world powers that then announced their disapproval, followed by a series of ambiguously effective actions.

A chain of events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, and Syria reveals the main actors of these events to be the two main centers of the Islamic East with claims to leadership: Sunni-Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. But the series of Arab Spring revolutions was an appeal for action from the NATO states, primarily, the USA and France, both of which played the key role in ensuring a change of political regimes. One could assume this should be followed by a wave of anti-American sentiment. This came to fruition when the American military in Afghanistan burned several copies of the Koran used by prisoners for correspondence. This event gave an impetus to a new IW, with an appeal to the Islamic world to distance itself from the West.

The analysis of these events in the Islamic countries shows a key role was played not so much by the new information technologies within specific countries, but rather by the formation of an external information context in the global information sector. It is this context that created a kind of irreversibility and set the development vector. By comparison, the bloodbath of the Rwandan genocide did not become a concern to the global community in the 1990s. This massacre did not get into the media, which means it did not become an important event (until years later). There was no *third party* to which this event could appeal.

### **Ergo: some consequences**

*Thus, we can identify some key features of second-level IW discussed in the present article, conceptualized as a specific technology of formation and settlement of the information conflicts:*

- 1 It is a conflict of interpretations, in which the opposing parties and their motivations and interests are defined.
- 2 The real target of these IW is not an adversary, or an opponent, but a certain ‘third party’, to which the opposing parties appeal and base their actions through intensifying their efforts.
- 3 The ability of ‘the third party’ to act has a large role in creating the information sector.

This explains the incentives in the IW and the effectiveness of this information technology in the political process. It also demonstrates the importance of the communication media as a political institution. Those who control it also hold the keys to the net-project political reality.

The main conflict around this control of ‘the third party’ is a conflict of the state and civil society, determining the qualitative palette of the specificity of modern society. But the question

does not strictly pertain to direct control. Those who managed to create ‘an event’ have already achieved a significant result on the way to victory. There are many examples in modern political activity, from public policy to political terrorism.

Or consider the confrontation by participants in the civil protest against fraud at the State Duma elections (and the opposition which joined it – extra-systemic and partly systemic), on the one hand, and the political regime on the other hand, largely reduced to the creation of the news pretexts: such events included rallies, processions, and motor races. However, the opposition rallies were the off-line extensions of the activity of the very visible on-line communities, versus the actions of their opponents, which were organized on initiatives ‘from above’.

As a result, a definite limit of conflict resolution technology is revealed. An aggressive attack by the authorities, accusations of attempts to seize power, intimidation of society with ‘orange revolutions’, playing workers against intellectuals, and residents of the province against residents of the capital cities, led to the following: the movement for fair elections started publicizing their politics. According to the approach developed in this article, an evolution of a third party occurred. The protest was originally addressed to the state power, but was gradually drawn into the framework of the presidential electoral campaign. Under these conditions, the struggle for creating the news pretexts resulted in disputes about the number of participants of these actions (‘who has a larger rally’) and degenerated into mutual accusations and invectives typical of electoral campaigns. In this situation, the presidential elections could become the key event; the manipulations revealed in their course are capable of giving new impetus to the formation of the Russian civil society, raising it to a qualitatively new level.

However, the progression of events acquired a slightly different character. Thus, the results of the Duma elections on 5 December 2011 became the impetus for the development of a large-scale information conflict, which went beyond the framework of the electoral campaign. All those who participated in the party elections, in general, agreed with their results. The Liberal Democratic Party and A Just Russia, the day after the elections, congratulated the candidates and the electorate with the election of the State Duma. Still, 5 December 2011 became a big political event.

Protests which arose after the Duma elections were of a civil nature. In the terminology of the IW (with people rigging the ballot), it was an appeal to the third party, i.e. the institutions of state power to ensure the legitimacy of the new State Duma and punishment of the persons guilty of fraud. The moment of truth was a refusal of the political regime to take these requirements into account. It turned out ‘the Third Party’ to whom the voters appealed, was their enemy.

It was a moment of truth when the people realized how much power the government held and the authorities understood the real attitude toward them. As a result, the presidential elections afterward appeared to be a weak legitimate procedure, and the civil conflict started acquiring an even more politicized character, which became extremely aggravated by the inauguration procedure at the beginning of May 2012.

In conclusion, the approach developed in the present article offers new possibilities of analysing not only second-level IW, but also the political processes generating them. Since one of the parties of a conflict, which usurps the position of ‘the *third party*’, is unlikely to win in the conflict with this type of IW discussed above (i.e. an interpretations war), the conflict takes on an entirely different configuration: the ‘Third party’ becomes the object of the struggle for interpretation, opening up new prospects for analysis.

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