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# **COVERAGE OF THREE TRAGEDIES IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA: APPLICATION OF THE NETWORK AGENDA MODEL**

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## **COVERAGE OF THREE TRAGEDIES IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA: APPLICATION OF THE NETWORK AGENDA MODEL<sup>3</sup>**

December 19, 2016, saw three tragedies simultaneously, that could not go unnoticed by the Russian media: dozens of people died as a result of a surrogate alcohol poisoning in Irkutsk, a Russian ambassador was killed in Turkey, and a terrorist attack took place at the Christmas market in Berlin. In this article using the network agenda theory we analyze how these tragedies were covered by various types of mass media: on 11 federal TV channels, in 1,974 print newspapers, in 34,905 online newspapers and 2,574 blogs. We believe that direct and indirect control of the agenda by the state can be exercised by creating a network of events that will canalize correctly discussions about tragedies. We showed that ties between the tragedy and a network of other acute issues are more important than objective circumstances, such as the number of victims or a geography of the event. The context in which the events were looked at led to greater attention to the killing of the ambassador and less attention to surrogate alcohol poisoning. The Russian mass media paid significantly less attention to the Berlin terror attack, it yet was used as a supplement to the demonstration of importance of the fight against terrorism.

Keywords: alcohol, construction of problems, Internet, mass media, network agenda-setting, press, Putin, Russia, terrorism.

JEL Classification: Z

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## **Introduction**

One of the characters of "Nekrassov", an ironic piece by J.P. Sartre, a newspaper editor, laments the fact that he has nothing to publish on the front page: nothing important has happened in the world. The attempts to depict such lack of events as anxious and ambiguous produce weird results – headline ideas like "The Soothing Silence of America" or "The Anxious Silence of the Soviet Union." Finally, a phone rings and the editor is now faced with another problem: "Good headlines never come alone. Either no headlines or the necessity of choosing between headlines." A talented fraudster shook off pursuit, and a minister escaped from the Soviet Union. All in one day. What should an editor do in a situation like that? Which event deserves being published on the front page?

The lack of objective significance of any given events makes the editor's job especially hard. Social problems are constructed, including in the course of discussion in mass media (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1987), and the existence of a negative fact in reality does not necessarily make it a problem (Fuller and Myers 1941). Many disfunctions can be perceived as inherent elements of culture or an expected result of the affected party's actions. A situation becomes a problem as a result of its social discussion and public demands that it be changed. Consequently, the editor from Sartre's piece does not determine which event is more important today but, rather, decides which of the two will be viewed as important by people tomorrow.

This story covers several key peculiarities of media. First, the significance of any given events is constructed (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1987). Second, events compete with each other for public attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; McCombs and Zhu 1995). Third, bad news attract more attention than good news (Blondheim, Segev, and Cabrera 2015; Leung and Lee 2015; Nadeau, Niemi, and Amato 1999). Scientific literature has usually discussed these factors separately and in the context of one type of media (see, for instance, (Hughes and Mellado 2016; Kioussis 2004). This article for the first time attempts to analyze how different types of mass media construct the importance of simultaneous tragedies.

Monday, December 19, 2016, was marked by a series of tragedies, all of which deserve to be published on the front page in the Russian newspapers. These include deadly poisoning from surrogate alcohol in Irkutsk (the so called "Boyaryshnik," the Russian for hawthorn). The assassination of Andrey G. Karlov, Russia's ambassador to Turkey, was on the news in the evening of December 19. A bit later the Berlin terror attack was committed: a truck crashed into the Christmas market visitors. In other words, one day saw three tragic events, that could not go unnoticed by mass media.

This article aims to focus on how various types of mass media (television, press, Internet) covered these events. On the one hand, we analyze the attention paid to each of the tragedies.

What makes this issue especially critical is the fact these events, presumably, competed with each other for public attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; McCombs and Zhu 1995). On the other hand, we can compare the network agendas of different types of media. Using the network agenda theory we can analyze the context in which these tragedies were addressed in each type of mass media and how it was connected with the domination of any given tragedy on the agenda. An important peculiarity of the Russian mass media study is the dependence of television and a considerable part of press on authorities (Gehlbach 2010; Fredheim 2017) accompanied by a relative independence of discussions in online newspapers and blogs. Therefore, we can compare the agenda in the mass media types characterized by greater or smaller levels of independence from authorities.

### **What happened?**

It is important to discuss the key facts of the three tragedies. Irkutsk is a Russian city with a population of about 600 thousand people. The first mass alcohol poisonings were reported on December 19, 2016. 76 people died. People were poisoned after consuming a bath lotion containing alcohol called "Boyaryshnik," which was formally not intended for consumption as alcohol. However, it was very cheap – about 30 roubles per 250 ml (around \$0.5). For comparison, a minimum price for 500 ml bottle of vodka permitted by law was 165 roubles (i. e. approximately 2.5–3 times more expensive). In other words, Boyaryshnik was the cheapest alcohol. Its consumption was a fairly routine practice. As Boyaryshnik is produced illegally, its quality is not controlled at all. The reason behind the tragedy was that Boyaryshnik suppliers breached the technology by using methanol instead of ethanol.

This is not to say that death from alcohol poisoning is a rare phenomenon in today's Russia. According to statistics, the first three quarters of 2016 have seen more than 36 thousand domestic incidents of acute poisonings after drinking alcohol-containing products<sup>4</sup>, one in four was fatal. Accordingly, the reason why the tragedy in Irkutsk made headlines is a considerable number of victims in one place in a short period of time and not because poisonings by surrogate alcohol are unprecedented in Russia.

Consequently, the objective characteristics of the Irkutsk tragedy include: regional scope (spatial locality), a high number of victims, high social significance (the real cause of surrogate alcohol consumption is the poverty of population, as was shown (Kotelnikova 2017)) and the prevalence of the problem.

Andrei Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, was gunned down at the opening of an exhibition at Ankara's Center for Contemporary Arts. The killer was named as Mevlüt Mert

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<sup>4</sup> Data of the Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rosпотребнадзор). 2016. [[http://rosпотребнадзор.ru/about/info/news/news\\_details.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=7405&sphrase\\_id=862995](http://rosпотребнадзор.ru/about/info/news/news_details.php?ELEMENT_ID=7405&sphrase_id=862995)].

Altıntaş, a former police officer. The killer was shot dead himself by the Turkish special forces. The United Nations Security Council recognized Russia's ambassador assassination as a terror attack. This tragic incident is different from Boyaryshnik poisoning in many respects – it had a global outreach, only one, but a high-ranking, person died. This is not a common event. Last time a Russian ambassador was murdered about 90 years ago. Previously, back in 1829, Russia's ambassador to Persia and famous Russian writer Alexander Griboyedov was killed; in 1923, plenipotentiary envoy of the RSFSR in Italy Vatslav Vorovsky; in 1927, plenipotentiary envoy of the USSR in Poland Pyotr Voikov.

Russia's participation in the civil war in Syria and the battle for Aleppo was reported as the main reason behind the ambassador's assassination. After shooting, the killer shouted: "Do not forget Aleppo, do not forget Syria." Numerous studies demonstrate that events like these may be used to construct an "alien" and consolidate the society in the face of an external enemy (Chowanietz 2011; Dinesen and Jæger 2013; Perrin and Smolek 2009). Meanwhile, it is hard to predict how strong this effect can be in this case. On the one hand, domestic events have a stronger effect on public opinion (Bennett 2014). On the other hand, prior experience of interaction with an "other" can affect the perception of significance of the problem (Edwards and Swenson 1997). In the past year, Russia has already attempted to build the image of Turkey as an antagonist. Attention to the fault of Turkey and certain prejudice by the Russian citizens about the country could still be the case despite favorable relations with the country as of the diplomat's assassination. Furthermore, the tragedy turned out to be related to the situation around Syria broadly covered in mass media. Presumably, the influence of the discussion about the diplomat's assassination on public opinion can be strengthened due to earlier beliefs.

The third tragic event of December 19 also had political roots. The truck smashed into crowded Breitscheidplatz in Berlin, hosting a Christmas market. 16 people were killed and 56 more were injured. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a terrorist group, claimed to have carried out the terror attack.

Unlike the previous events, the Berlin terror attack is not directly related to Russia. However, such events have traditionally attracted considerable attention, partly because they happen suddenly (Mueller 1973) and cause numerous victims, partly because an "other" is also involved and accused of the incident. Consequently, although the Berlin terror attack may seem to have affected Russia's interests to the smallest extent, it is assumed to have drawn considerable media attention.

Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of each tragedy.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Three Tragedies of December 19, 2016**

	<b>Boyaryshnik poisoning</b>	<b>Russia's ambassador assassination</b>	<b>Christmas Fair terror attack</b>
Spatial locality	Irkutsk, Russia	Ankara, Turkey	Berlin, Germany
Directly relates to Russia	Yes	Yes	Limited <sup>5</sup>
Number of victims	74 people (as of December 23)	1 person	16 people
Uniqueness of the event	Low	Very high	High
Deaths for the same reason (previous year)	9,557 people <sup>6</sup> (for 2015 in the Russian Federation)	0 (4 in the history of the Russian Federation)	151 people <sup>7</sup> (for 2015 in the EU)
Conformity to citizens' personal experience	Yes <sup>8</sup>	No	No

An exclusive focus on the objective characteristics of each tragedy does not allow predicting clearly which of the three will draw more media attention. For example, Boyaryshnik poisoning could draw much attention due to the greatest number of victims (Chowanietz 2011; Chermak and Gruenewald 2006; Weimann and Brosius 1991), high social significance and spatial locality (it is the only event that occurred in Russia). However, the fact that the event is not rare can weaken media attention (Galtung and Ruge 1965). The ambassador's assassination in Turkey can grab the most considerable media attention due to its uniqueness and high political significance. Finally, the Berlin terror attack could become the leading story due to its sudden occurrence, the uncertainty of its consequences and a symbolic nature of this tragic event (it happened at the Christmas market). The Berlin terror attack could cause public concern and nervousness about themselves or their friends and relatives who could have been visiting Berlin.

We employed the agenda-setting theory when analyzing how these events were covered by different Russian media.

## **Theory**

The agenda-setting theory, according to which the intensity of discussion in mass media can affect human perceptions about the importance of any given events, has been around for quite a while and gained considerable popularity among the mass communications researchers (Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs 2014). This concept was first formulated based on data from the U. S. presidential election campaign in 1968 when researchers discovered a link

<sup>5</sup> This conclusion derives from the lack of Russian citizens among the Berlin terror attack victims. Research shows that foreign terror attacks draw more media attention in those countries whose citizens suffered from such attacks (Kelly and Mitchell 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Accidental alcohol poisonings in 2015 according to data from the Federal State Statistics Service.

<sup>7</sup> According to data from the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), European Police Office, 2016. P.10.

<sup>8</sup> (Kotelnikova 2017) shows that poverty is a key reason for alcohol poisoning in Russia.

between human perceptions about the most significant problems in the programs of candidates and the frequency of mentions of these problems in media (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In the future, the idea was confirmed by numerous and diverse empirical examples: the Persian Gulf War (Iyengar and Simon 1993), the Watergate scandal (Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman 1975), environmental pollution (Ader 1995) and even organ donation (Feeley, O'Mally, and Covert 2016).

Nevertheless, agenda-setting hypotheses have not only been tested by diverse empirical objects, but also have changed in substance (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014). For instance, as a supplement to the idea of media discussion influence on social perceptions about the importance of the problem, it was suggested that attention be paid to the fact that a focus on certain characteristics of a situation or a public figure shapes public opinion (Wanta, Golan, and Lee 2004). Such theory development is called "second level agenda-setting." Later, a number of modifications of this theory were proposed (McCombs et al. 2014). These include network agenda (third-level agenda) according to which objects (events, public figures) or their characteristics are interconnected in public mind. The first academic article which analyzes network agenda was published as late as 2012 and described the traits attributed to the Texas governor election candidates (Guo 2012). Upon the completion of research it was proposed that online media agenda must be connected with social agenda, i. e. links between the problems built by mass media will be at least partly reproduced in public opinion.

The first studies of network agenda were local in nature and based on a relatively small number of analysis unit, whereas subsequently the method was applied to the countrywide situation. In the United States, researchers analyzed media and social attention to ten key problems faced by the society, including economics, politics, national security, environmental protection, and interconnections among these problems (Vu, Guo, and McCombs 2014). Moreover, attempts were made to study network agenda in other countries. For instance, the studies conducted in China demonstrated a strong effect of network agenda (Cheng and Chan 2015) (Cheng 2016).

However, the potential of the theory is not limited to the possibility of comparing social networks based on media reports and findings from public opinion polls. For example, third-level agenda allows implementing diverse comparative studies. More specifically, research shows that political leaders can be associated with their networks and not individual issues. Accordingly, network agenda can be employed in comparing the images of presidential candidates, this solution was implemented in the B. Obama and M. Romney presidential campaign (Guo and Vargo 2015; Kioussis et al. 2015). Another possible option is to study the agenda on one issue in different countries (Guo et al. 2015).

Media landscape changes can contribute to changes in the existing mass communication theories and a shift in research focus. The growing role of the Internet as mass medium requires partial revision of agenda-setting concept (Golan 2014; Williams and Delli Carpini 2004). On the one hand, traditional media have lost their monopolistic role in news agenda shaping. Now this process can develop "from bottom to top" when public attention to any issues on the Internet encourages their discussion in traditional mass media (Kim and Lee 2006). Multiple studies shows that journalists use information from social media and blogs when preparing their materials (Parmelee 2014; Verweij 2012). In fact, one person's web statement can serve as the basis for agenda shaping. Nevertheless, it does not mean that conventional agenda-setting theory is already non-applicable to the analysis of public opinion shaping. For instance, the Internet penetration in Russia is still relatively low. According to data from Public Opinion Foundation, the Internet daily audience in spring 2016 made up 59%<sup>9</sup>. Public opinion polls also show that television remains the main source of information for 86% of Russians<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, a considerable portion of messages in social media is about their author's personal interests and business and not any kinds of social processes and events (McCombs et al. 2014), thus limiting the impact of social media and blogs on the agenda. Consequently, it is too early to announce the death of traditional media.

An increased role of the Internet and the hypothesis of multiple agendas opens up the opportunities of comparative study of the influence of media agenda and web on public opinion (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000). A number of studies demonstrate considerable similarities among the agendas of traditional media (television, press, radio), online news and blogosphere in the United States (Belt, Just, and Crigler 2012; Lee 2007; Shapiro and Hemphill 2017; Wallsten 2007). Among other things, it is emphasized that the agenda of a specific mass medium rather depends on its information focus (news or entertainment) than whether this mass medium is traditional or new (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Nevertheless, the intensity of discussions on issues in blogs and forums not always coincides with the intensity of their coverage in traditional media. For instance, social media pay more attention than television and press to discussions on social issues (birth control, abortions and same-sex marriages) and the problems related to social order maintenance (drugs and weapon) (Russell Neuman et al. 2014). Meanwhile, traditional media provide a considerably more intense coverage of the economic situation and economic policy. Moreover, agenda in different media types can vary considerably in respect of certain issues (Billings et al. 2015; Kim and Hur 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> Internet in Russia: penetration evolution. Spring 2016. URL:<http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/13012>

<sup>10</sup> Mass media's trust and willingness to voice one's opinion. URL:<http://www.levada.ru/2016/08/12/14111/>



Consequently, personal agenda can be shaped differently, depending on what is the key source of information for people (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002). Moreover, the effectiveness of traditional and news media in agenda shaping depends, in many respects, on the audience peculiarities. For instance, newspapers to a greater extent contribute to an increase in the quantity of perceived topics if readers are interested in the news (Waal and Schoenbach 2008). Meanwhile, online media can succeed in public opinion shaping even when targeting indifferent audience.

It should be noted that discussions in mass media can evolve differently depending on the discussion subject. For example, terror attacks usually attract considerable media attention (Seib and Janbek 2010; Wilkinson 1997). On the one hand, a possible reason is the existence of a negative focus in media materials, when negative events grab more attention (Blondheim et al. 2015; Leung and Lee 2015; Nadeau et al. 1999). On the other hand, such tragedies jeopardize social stability (Gans 1979), causing the growth of demand for information about these events among the population, which seeks to minimize risks (Shoemaker 1996). Consequently, mass media functions include public order maintenance in a crisis through the provision of information about current developments and, possible, certain guidance (Lasswell 1948).

However, media attention to terror attacks can vary depending on different factors. Discussion intensity is the highest in case of victims and certain types of terror actions (for example, plane terror attack) (Chermak and Gruenewald 2006; Weimann and Brosius 1991). The country in which the tragedy happened also matters. In the event of international terror attacks, the number of victims can be less important (Wanta and Kalyango 2007), whereas relationships between countries, their cultural and geographic proximity move to the forefront (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Moreover, there are quality differences in the coverage of domestic and international terror attacks. For instance, when covering a domestic terror attack mass media are less focused on the topic of fear and terror in general, paying attention to other news items, such as the actions of special forces and rescuers (Iqbal 2017; Kitch and Hume 2008). On the contrary, discussions on international terror attacks can be dominated by the topic of terror and the resulting chaos (Iqbal 2015).

## **Methodology**

In this research we use data from Medialogia<sup>11</sup>, a company which aggregates news from more than 40 thousand Russian-language mass media, including 1,974 newspapers, 11 federal

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<sup>11</sup> More detailed information is available from the official website at [<http://www.mlg.ru/>].

TV channels, 34,905 online newspapers and 2,574 blogs. Medialogia entered the market in 2003 and, to date, is the leader in mass media monitoring and analysis.

In order to answer these questions, we built networks which correspond to discussions in different types of mass media in the period of December 19–23, 2016. We knowingly limit the analysis period to 5 weekdays as mass media are usually less active on weekends. Moreover, December 25, 2016, saw the catastrophic fall of the plane in the Black Sea, which killed 92 people. As this event stole a considerable portion of attention, in the next period we would be unable to compare three tragedies without adding the fourth tragedy, thus further complicating our analysis.

We built 5 networks based on the joint mentions of different topics in three media types: television, newspapers (federal and regional), Internet (online newspapers and blogs). The networks show in the context of which issues the tragedies concerned were discussed. The comparison of these networks will allow understanding whether media type affects the coverage of tragedies.

The topics (attributes) to which tragedies were related were automatically selected by Medialogia's algorithm based on joint mentions. We did not include in the network any issues inherent in the tragedies, for example, geographic locations (Berlin, Ankara, Irkutsk, Turkey, Russia, Germany, etc.). However, the network includes, for example, Syria, Ukraine and the United States, which are independent topics in the Russian media, yet not directly related to tragedies (these links were constructed by mass media). The network included attributes which could have caused the tragedies (terrorism, poverty). A total of 17 attributes were selected.

Networks were built using matrixes (Appendix 1 shows the matrix for a discussion on television). Each cell of the matrix reflects the number of times when two network attributes were mentioned simultaneously. Since the direction of attribute connections is irrelevant to our analysis, the network is symmetrical. In other words, the connection between attribute A and attribute B is as strong as the connection between attribute B and attribute A.

The distance between different network points is calculated using the Force Atlas 2 algorithm, considering the strength of connections among different network nodes (detailed analysis of this tool is described in (Jacomy et al. 2014)). The more often topics are mentioned together, the closer to each other they are located. The more connections an attribute has, the closer it is to the network center. Topics in the network periphery have weak connections with other issues. The thickness of lines, as well as distance, shows the strength of connections among different topics, calculated as the number of joint mentions in mass media.

“Degree centrality” indicator was calculated for each network attribute, reflecting the number of connections with other attributes. “Degree centrality” indicator shows the extent to which any given event is integrated in the context of discussions of other acute problems.

## Analysis findings

### The attention of different media types to tragedies

Data analysis shows that media paid more attention to Russia's ambassador assassination in Turkey (see Table 2). A similar number of news items were shown on TV with respect to surrogate alcohol poisoning and the Berlin terror attack. Blogs, newspapers and online newspapers paid more attention to the problem of Boyaryshnik poisoning than to the Berlin terror attack.

**Table 2. Attention of different media to tragedies**

	Poisoning in Irkutsk		Ambassador's assassination in Turkey		Berling terror attack	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
<b>News items on TV</b>	735	26.6%	1,307	47.3%	724	26.2%
<b>Newspapers (federal and regional)</b>	388	32.4%	611	51.0%	199	16.6%
<b>Online newspapers</b>	16,933	23.4%	40,694	56.2%	14,803	20.4%
<b>Blogs</b>	727	22.6%	2,030	63.1%	462	14.4%
<b>All</b>	18,783	24%	44,642	56%	16,188	20%

It is noteworthy that all types of mass media prioritized the tragedies in the same manner. The strongest emphasis is on news items about the assassination of Karlov; the weakest, on the Berlin terror attack.

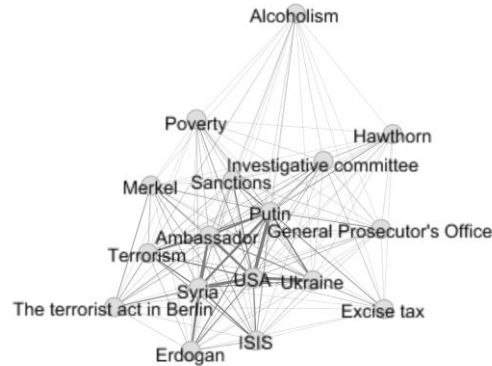
The differences in media attention levels to different issues can be explained by their peculiarities. Apparently, an ambassador's assassination, as a unique event of political nature, provoked a more active discussion than a social problem related to mass poisonings by surrogate alcohol. Presumably, the authorities would not have benefited from discussing the problem of poisoning as it unveils their failures in its economic policy, which, in turn, caused poverty. In this event, less attention to Boyaryshnik poisoning, possibly, has to do with the government pressure on mass media. However, this does not explain why this news item is ranked second by relatively independent media (blogs and online newspapers). The reason for such distribution of attention to news items can be identified through the analysis of all topics together with which these tragedies were mentioned.

**Figure 1. Discussion networks in five types of mass media (the period from December 19, 2016, to December 23,2016)**

**A. TV**



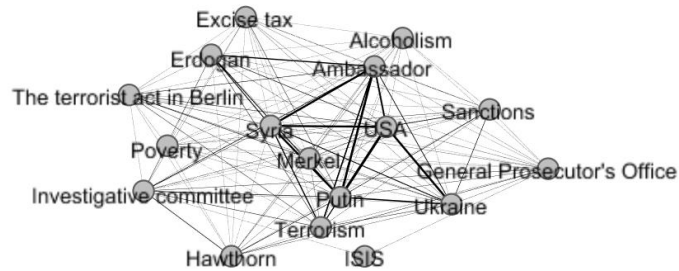
**B. Newspapers (federal)**



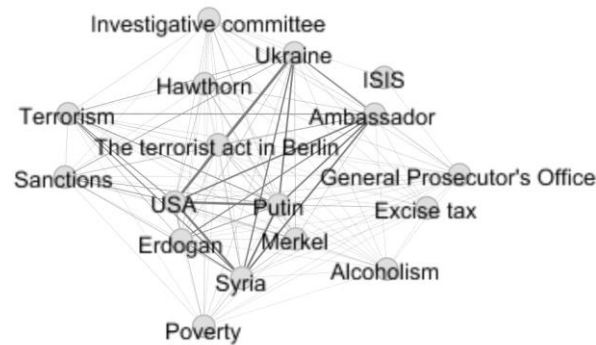
**C. Newspapers (regional)**



**D. Online newspapers**



**E. Blogs**



## **Event networks**

The figures below show network agenda in five different media types. Russia's ambassador assassination is the center of all networks, followed by the other two tragedies in question, irrespective of media type. The tragedy is closely connected with many key issues – the discussion of positions and responses of different countries (the United States, Syria, Ukraine) and leaders (Putin, Erdogan, Merkel), as well as the list of acute political problems (terrorism, ISIS, sanctions). As we see it, nothing but integration in the context discussed by the Russian media before the tragedies predetermined the absolute leadership of this problem on the agenda (in terms of the number of publications). The tragedy in Turkey organically fit in with discussions on those issues which caused concerned in the Russian media of different levels (Simons 2006; Brown 2014, 2015; Kazun 2016).

Boyaryshnik surrogate alcohol poisoning is on the periphery of most networks and does not create any strong connections with other topics being discussed. Interestingly, Boyaryshnik often lacks strong connections with both the poverty problem and the excise tax issue.

The Berlin terror attack topic attracted less attention in the Russian media than it could have grabbed if Russia's ambassador assassination had not been committed on the same day. The above networks show that this tragedy has to do with the same key problems as, the ambassador's assassination in Turkey. However, it was less acute for the Russian audience and, hence, could attract less attention. The comparison of discussions on the Berlin terror attack and the ambassador's assassination in Turkey allows assuming that the two topics compete with each other, indeed. Naturally, the event which directly affects the interests of Russia (Kelly and Mitchell 1981) sparks the strongest interest and the number of victims is less significant (Wanta and Kalyango 2007).

## Constructing problem perception through connection with other topics

As shown by (Kotelnikova 2017), the real cause of surrogate alcohol poisoning in Russia is poverty: people cannot afford quality alcohol and purchase surrogates instead. These topics are closely intertwined only in regional press. The tie between these problems in other networks is less distinct. It is noteworthy that the alcohol poisoning and poverty topics are in the opposite parts of the television discussion network. In other words, television did not establish any ties between surrogate alcohol poisoning and the problem of poverty. Boyaryshnik problem discussions in mass media most often refer to the actions of special forces (prosecutor's office and investigation committee), as well as the response of Putin, who is the central figure in all networks. Consequently, attempts are made to deproblematize the situation (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003). The government is presented as a strong actor which takes an active part in solving the surrogate alcohol poisoning problem.

This is confirmed by the analysis of the main news show, “Vremya”, which is broadcast daily on Channel One – Russia's leading TV channel, that made up 13.3% of the nation's television audience<sup>12</sup>. On the second day of the tragedy, only half a minute was devoted to the problem of surrogate alcohol poisoning, whereas the ambassador's assassination was discussed for almost half an hour (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Analysis of attention to tragedies in the news show “Vremya” on Channel One**

		<b>Poisoning in Irkutsk</b>	<b>Ambassador's assassination in Turkey</b>	<b>Berling terror attack</b>
<b>Channel One (news show “Vremya”)</b>				
News item duration (“Vremya” on Channel One at 9:00 p. m.)	19.12.	4:25	6:58	0
	20.12.	0:47	27:24	5:45
	21.12.	5:29	13:08	4:43
	22.12	0:58	6:54	0:49
	23.12	0	0	3:39
<i>Aggregate air time</i>		<i>11:39</i>	<i>54:24</i>	<i>14:56</i>
News item duration (final Sunday newscast)	25.12.	8:57	19:51	8:53

<sup>12</sup> MediaScope data for the period from December 19, 2016 to December 25, 2016.

[[http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/tv/national-and-regional/audience/?arrFilter\\_pf%5BCITY%5D=5096&arrFilter\\_pf%5BPERIOD%5D=19%2F12%2F2016+-+25%2F12%2F2016&arrFilter\\_pf%5BTYPE%5D=45&captcha\\_code=00c5fa7c0df4d2000b714f3581639c41&captcha\\_word=G89AS&set\\_filter=Y](http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/tv/national-and-regional/audience/?arrFilter_pf%5BCITY%5D=5096&arrFilter_pf%5BPERIOD%5D=19%2F12%2F2016+-+25%2F12%2F2016&arrFilter_pf%5BTYPE%5D=45&captcha_code=00c5fa7c0df4d2000b714f3581639c41&captcha_word=G89AS&set_filter=Y)]

The newscast did not devote more than 5 minutes to this tragedy until the third day when Vladimir Putin personally asked to address this problem of poisoning in Irkutsk. However, newscasts on Russia's main TV channel aimed to ensure that this problem is perceived as something routine and insignificant.

The examples of phrases aimed at deproblematizing alcohol poisoning include a statement of "Vremya" newscaster: *"14 thousand <deaths caused by alcohol poisonings per year> is a lot, dozens of times higher than in the European countries, although they drink much, too. For example, cirrhosis of the liver is one of the most common death causes in France. They drink wine every day. Many people become alcoholics in old age"*. Such phrases attempt to persuade listeners that the situation in Russia is not unique and the problem of alcohol abuse also exists in other developed countries. Consequently, neither the domestic situation nor the acts (or inaction) of civil servants at different levels are the reason. The true reason is human nature. It is fairly hard to argue that this statement pursues any goal other than building a desired image of the problem as it contradicts statistics<sup>13</sup>. In all other respects, television focused mainly on the progress of investigation into Boyaryshnik poisoning and the statements of public officials about the action to be taken in order to prevent similar situations.

Media discussion on Russia's ambassador assassination could follow different paths. Media could criticize Turkey which was unable to prevent the terror attack or the terrorists that committed the attack. The Russian authorities should not benefit from the first scenario since Russia was in good relationships with Turkey at the time. Therefore, the official position of the Russian government was that Karlov's assassination was a provocation aimed at worsening recently restored relationships between Russia and Turkey. Presumably, this theory is further supported by the fact that the murder was committed right before the trilateral negotiations among Russia, Turkey and Iran. Accusations of the Turkish security service was voiced in the Russian media (primarily in online newspapers) only on the first day of the tragedy. Later newspapers, news sites and television clearly expressed the same idea – the tragic event should not be allowed to affect Russia-Turkey relations.

Why did the discussions on the ambassador's assassination follow the path that benefited the authorities even in the independent media (towards discussing the Syrian war and not Turkey's fault)? Again, a possible reason is that links with other news items being discussed forced it there. Right before the tragedy, the Russian media actively discussed the actions of ISIS, supported in war in Syria, demonstrated the unanimity of Russia and Turkey on these

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<sup>13</sup> According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), cirrhosis of the liver is not ranked among the 10 most common death causes in France (see the official website at: <http://www.who.int/gho/countries/fra.pdf>), and about 3% of citizens suffer from alcohol addiction ([http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/publications/global\\_alcohol\\_report/profiles/fra.pdf](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/profiles/fra.pdf)). Meanwhile, in Russia, according to WHO, cirrhosis of the liver is among the 10 most common death causes, and about 9% of individuals suffer from alcohol addiction.

issues. The news item about the terrorists who murdered the Russian ambassador in response to what was happening in Syria fitted in with the agenda much better than discontent with the actions of Turkey, friendship with which was a frequent topic in many Russian media.

Both press and TV news draw parallels between Russia's ambassador assassination in Turkey and the Berlin terror attack. Even if the attacks were committed by the representatives of different terrorist groups, they, in any event, resulted from the same problem. In some cases, however, the authors of articles referred to different reasons behind the attacks targeting Russia and Germany. For instance, journalists saw the cause of Russia's ambassador assassination in the attempt to destroy the effective policy which allows opposing terrorists; that of the Berlin terror attack, in the lack of clear policy. Consequently, similar events were interpreted by the Russian media differently, depending on whether actions were directed against "us" or the citizens of another country. However, mass media voiced other opinions. For instance, the *Novaya Gazeta*, a Russian opposition newspaper, writes that *"people in Berlin were killed by the German migration policy; the Russian ambassador, by the Kremlin's decision to be at war in"*<sup>14</sup>.

The Berlin terror attack issue was more neutral in the Russian authorities' eyes than the other two tragedies. The terror attack was committed in another country and did not affect any Russian citizens. However, this event could be successfully linked with the discussion on the ambassador assassination in Turkey. Deliberate shaping of this link is evidenced by the fact that the tie between the ambassador assassination in Turkey and the Berlin terror attack turned out to be twice as strong in the discussions on TV, control of which is maintained by the Russian authorities, as compared with print and online newspapers and blogs (see Table 4).

**Table 4. The number of ties between Russia's ambassador assassination in Turkey and the Berlin terror attack in different media types.**

	<b>Number of ties between two tragedies</b>	<b>Total number of ties in network</b>	<b>% to all ties in the network</b>
<b>TV</b>	119	6,241	1.91%
<b>Newspapers (federal)</b>	13	1,391	0.94%
<b>Newspapers (regional)</b>	15	2,229	0.67%
<b>Online newspapers</b>	784	87,886	0.89%
<b>Blogs</b>	97	13,226	0.73%

The connection between Russia's ambassador assassination and the Berlin terror attack underlines the importance of Europe/Russia consolidation in their fight against common enemy.

<sup>14</sup> Yu. Latynina Berlin, Ankara and Aleppo. *Novaya Gazeta*. # 143 dated December 21, 2016.



The Russian media meant that, although Russia and Europe had different opinions on the Syrian war, they needed to overcome these controversies in order to prevent future tragedies. Consequently, the linking of the two tragedies allows strengthening a certain political position.

### Media type and the context of tragedies coverage

As seen earlier from Table 2, 56% of total publications on the three tragedies focused on the ambassador assassination; 24%, Boyaryshnik poisoning; 20%, the Berlin terror attack. However, the network analysis shows that the total number of publications in mass media does not always correlate with the central position in the network. A topic can be actively discussed in mass media and create ties with other news items or a discussion can progress autonomously.

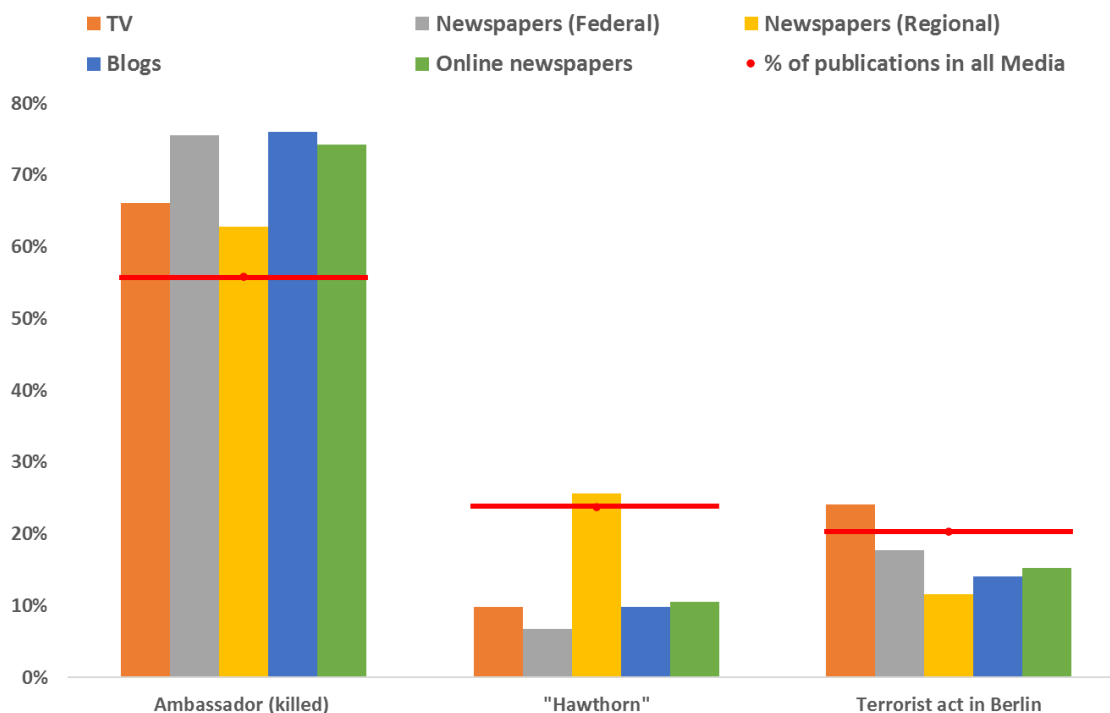
We assess linkage with other topics as the number of mutual mentions in publications or degree centrality. A comparison of degree centrality of three tragedies would allow us to understand which of the three is more context dependent.

**Table 5. Degree centrality of the three tragedies and the relationship among degree centrality indicators.**

	Poisoning in Irkutsk		Ambassador's assassination in Turkey		Berlin terror attack	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
<b>TV</b>	293	10%	1,973	66%	721	24%
<b>Newspapers (federal)</b>	29	7%	324	76%	76	18%
<b>Newspapers (regional)</b>	162	26%	396	63%	73	12%
<b>Online newspapers</b>	3,440	11%	24,234	74%	4,961	15%
<b>Blogs</b>	434	10%	3,353	76%	623	14%

Table 5 illustrates that the ambassador's assassination is much more connected with the other topics than the Berlin terror attack and surrogate alcohol poisoning in Irkutsk. Boyaryshnik poisoning was second in the number of mentions but was exceeded by the Berlin terror attack in degree centrality in all media types other than regional newspapers. A comparison of degree centrality and the total number of publications in mass media about each tragedy (see Figure 2) shows similar trends.

**Figure 2. Relationship between degree centrality and the percentage of publications about three tragedies in different media types.**



Red line on Figure 2 shows the share of attention paid to each tragedy (as a percentage of the total number of publications on the three topics). Columns show the share of degree centrality of the selected problem from the sum of degree centrality of three tragedies in each media type in question. Unless the news items in question were peculiar, then the number of network ties (degree centrality) should have approximately correlated to the total number of publications on a given topic. On the contrary, if degree centrality goes above the red line, then the event's involvement in the network derives not only from the number of publications in mass media, but also from its specifics. In contrast, if degree centrality goes below the red line, then the event is in the network periphery regardless of the number of publications.

Figure 2 allows concluding that the ambassador's assassination topic not only attracted most media attention, but also was put in the context of the most acute topics. Boyaryshnik surrogate alcohol poisoning was linked to other topics pro rata to the intensity of discussion only in the regional press, still out of context in other media. Finally, the Berlin terror attack was put in context on TV only. As mentioned earlier, a possible reason is that television established a close link between the Berlin terror attack and Russia's ambassador assassination.

### **Similarities and differences between network agendas in different media types**

Despite the above differences, the network analysis allows concluding that discussions in different media are very similar. First, all networks give priority to the same topics. For instance,

although regional media pay relatively more attention to the problem of surrogate alcohol poisoning than other media, a discussion of the ambassador's assassination in Turkey is still ranked first. Second, the ties between the problems are very similar. All networks put the ambassador's assassination in the context of discussions on political issues, leaving Boyaryshnik poisoning in the periphery.

The Russian traditional media are highly dependent on the authorities (Fredheim 2017; World Press Freedom Index 2017; Gehlbach 2010), whereas the Internet and blogs currently remain independent. We could expect the tragedy discussion to vary greatly in the freedom level of any given media type, yet this is not the case. Television is more involved in deproblematizing alcohol poisoning as the authorities would not benefit from the development of this topic. Regional media write more about poisoning as this topic is more important to their audience than political issues. However, the analysis allows concluding that the level of media attention to problems depends, to a significant extent, on the nature of a problem and its ties with other pending issues on the agenda and not on media type.

Bloggers could write freely that Boyaryshnik poisoning results from high poverty rate. However, we can see that the discussion in blogs is very similar to the discussion in other media types in terms of its structure: Russia's ambassador assassination is in the spotlight. A possible reason is that bloggers had no personal experience with the problems in question (which are "unobtrusive" in MacCombs terms (Demers et al. 1989; Ju 2014; McCombs, Graber, and Weaver 1981; Palmgreen and Clarke 1977)) and, hence, relied on media information. In doing so, they reproduced similar arguments despite the lack of direct pressure on them on this issue.

Moreover, any news is always put in the context of other issues being addressed in mass media. Before the tragedies, the Russian media actively discussed the issues of terrorism, the fight against ISIS, sanctions, the U. S. policy, etc., almost ignoring the issues of poverty and alcoholism. The ambassador's assassination was put in the existing context, whereas Boyaryshnik poisoning did not have its own context.

## **Discussion**

The occurrence of the three tragedies on the same day allowed comparing the responses of different media types to tragedies of different nature. Contrary to literature (Chermak and Gruenewald 2006; Weimann and Brosius 1991), we showed that the number of victims is not a key factor affecting the visibility of an event in mass media. In fact, the links between the tragedy and other topics discussed in mass media earlier is a more important factor.

Like literature (Belt et al. 2012; Lee 2007; Shapiro and Hemphill 2017; Wallsten 2007), we showed that discussions in different types of media are very similar. It is noteworthy that this similarity persists even when mass media are not free from censorship (Fredheim 2017; Gehlbach

2010). However, generally similar network agendas differ in certain important aspects. For example, the difference in the ranking of the surrogate alcohol poisoning topic in the network agenda of television and regional media is evident. Such differences can be indicative of the attempts to deproblematize any given event in a certain type of media (in this case, government-controlled television). Moreover, in this case the peculiarities of the audience targeted by such media could matter.

This research allows supplementing the understanding of a possible functioning of state censorship. The topic of Boyaryshnik poisoning was very inconvenient for the Russian government as it raised the issues of ineffective management of the economy, poverty and social inequality. A direct ban on the discussion of this tragedy was possible on television (for example, Vesti, the main newscast, almost ignored this news item on the second day of the tragedy, see Table 3) but could hardly affect blogs and online newspapers, which remain relatively independent. In this regard, the fact that more independent media placed an equally weak focus on Boyaryshnik poisoning may seem surprising. As we see it, the reason is that the agenda traditionally discussed by the Russian media did not offer any topics that could have been organically linked to the alcohol poisoning. Moreover, traditional media discussed the problem of poisoning in the context of investigation and finger pointing, thus making the population feel that everything's under control. Interestingly, the coverage of the surrogate alcohol poisoning problem in keeping with "special operation" for capture of those responsible was organically aligned with special operations aimed at searching for the perpetrators of the Berlin terror attack and investigation into Russia's ambassador assassination. In other words, these tragedies, different in nature, were covered within the same frame (Scheufele 1999; Entman 2007), in which the government acted as a stronger party punishing those responsible (and not a weaker party that allowed the tragedies to happen).

Consequently, this research shows that it is possible to control the discussion of unpalatable and dangerous topics related to sudden tragedies by creating a certain agenda. Russia's media overlooked the problem of poverty and alcoholism as Boyaryshnik poisoning turned out to be out of context in which this topic could develop. The ambassador's assassination, on the contrary, was linked to the daily agenda of the Russian media – the Syrian war, the actions of President Putin, confrontation with the United States and Ukraine, etc.

## **Conclusion**

This research shows the potential of network agenda-setting for the analysis of competition among important events in different media types and a comparison of media type impact on the coverage of the same issue. For the first time in literature, we addressed these issues simultaneously, which allowed us to reveal the impact of event peculiarities and media

type of the nature of discussion. We demonstrate that attention to a tragic event is caused by the absence or presence of a ready context in mass media. The linkage between an event and any given issues can deproblematize all matters that are inconvenient for the authorities. The perception of any given event is shaped by linking it to other acute topics on the news agenda. It is noteworthy that the role of a network of events can outweigh the objective characteristics of events, such as the number of victims.

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