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1. Introduction

Ten years of legal regress and the conspiratorial belligerence that culminated in Russia's brutally executed, full-scale invasion of Ukraine make it impossible to present Russian political and social life with academic neutrality.[1] A silver lining in this grave historical situation is that global audiences have unprecedented access to events both on the Ukrainian front and within Russia itself. While Russia's borders have all but closed to researchers and cultural critics from abroad, Russian-language mass media today, particularly digital journalism, offers access to political and social life in Russia that is informed, immediate, and uncensored. This situation is unique in that, during the Soviet period, and then since the early 2000s, Russian television and other forms of visual mass media have strongly correlated with state media (See Kuznetsov in Evans, 2016, pp. 128). Yet with the popularization of digital documentary journalism, especially over the last five years, and digital media's ability to operate across national boundaries both in how it is produced and consumed, Russian oppositional perspectives are more popular than state propaganda, remaining accessible to audiences within Russia and across the world.[2]

This article addresses the robust environment of innovative digital media constructed by an important group of oppositional figures during Russia's recent history of social oppression and unjust war. These digital dissidents, a phrase introduced in media studies that gestures to Soviet

[1] Borenstein outlines pervasive trends toward conspiracy across state media, politics, and culture in contemporary Russia that underlie Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and can be extended to its 2022 invasion (Borenstein, 2019, pp. 236).

[2] The highest watched news or political commentary programming on Russian television receives ratings of around 5%, approximately four million viewers (Media Scope, *Reitingi*, 2023). The most popular politically oriented videos uploaded by Pivovarov and Dud' have received 7-10 million (Pivovarov) and over 35 million (Dud') viewers. Dud' has over 10 million subscribers, and his videos regularly receive over five million viewers.

dissidence while distinguishing a new form of dissent in terms of media and reach, have publicly advanced oppositional positions that earned them the state's label of 'foreign agent.'[3] By analyzing how these figures address the state's repressive measures, social neglect, and disinformation campaigns, we can see how today's digital media environments open new spaces for disclosure and dissent as Russia's political and geographical borders have closed.[4] This article analyzes the work of some of these figures to map an arc of themes across Russia's oppositional media environment: control of television media by the state, social neglect of the provinces, repression of LGBTQ+ people, gender inequality, and disinformation as a state communicative strategy.[5] The article also aims to generate ideas for incorporating the work of these and related figures into language and culture courses in ways that help disclose propaganda by foregrounding evidence-based narratives. This type of media can provide pathways for the current generation of students to Russian political, social, and cultural life.[6] First limited by COVID-19 and now by the war in Ukraine, students

[3] Gritsenko et al. use the term "digital dissidents" to describe oppositional figures engaging in "civil resistance" in ways that parallel Soviet dissidence but, harnessing the digital medium, represent different "generations and values" (Gritsenko et al., 2021, pp. 8). Differences include remaining uncensored while operating in Russia (at least until many fled after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine) and being part of mass culture rather than a niche elite. While hundreds of Russian journalists and artists have been labeled 'foreign agents' by the state, the figures described in this article are particularly significant for their popularity, the integrity of their journalistic work, and the social themes they address.

[4] Asmolov & Kolozaridi (2021) mention the oppositional content that has been accumulating in digital space, referencing in particular the YouTube channels of Alexei Navalny and Yuri Dud'. They discuss the general landscape of what they call the "vectors" of new media, rather than the materials these figures create. This article seeks to provide a more robust analysis of these sources.

[5] In outlining this thesis I aim to avoid binaristic misnomers that suggest these oppositional figures are marginal in contrast to a dominant state media apparatus in Russia. Informed by arguments about the potentially mainstream, integrated nature of dissidence outlined by Yurchak (2005), it is difficult to call these forms of media "alternative" after Strukov (2021). Strukov himself suggests that digital media, once "alternative," is subsumed in "all journalism," which is now "digital journalism," admitting the powerful reach of new digital forms.

[6] Alexander Groce (2020) is one of few sources who reference Dud', Parfyonov and other YouTube video auteurs when arguing that Russian language digital media, in particular the genre of the "video blog," is "expanding the reach" of media to younger demographics who "increasingly form their viewing around digital content" in ways that can be relevant to the Russian language classroom.

may not be able to go to Russia to study, live, and develop language and cultural proficiency. By becoming familiar with these media figures, they will join tens of millions of Russian language speakers in critical debates unfolding through an evidence-grounded media environment opposed to the Russian state's post-truth ideological and real wars.

This article will address four figures in Russian digital media who are producing oppositional material significant for its high linguistic and production quality, evidence-based approaches, and wild popularity, an indicator of the historical relevance of these new media forms.[7] Aleksei Pivovarov serves as a guide to the recent history of Russian media who shows why committed journalists have been left with few options to operate in mainstream television. The internet provided a new and far less regulated source for independent media, offering journalists uncensored digital space to create new documentary forms and the means to make a living. Particularly over the past five years, platforms like Vimeo and YouTube have made uploading, sharing, viewing, and monetizing digital content in high-quality formats accessible to author-producers and viewers globally, creating an environment of Russian media with mass viewership. The remainder of the article will address three figures who are today leading an explosion of Russian documentary journalism in this digital space: Yuri Dud', Irina Shikhman, and Karen Shainyan.

Dud', Shikhman, and Shainyan move beyond Pivovarov's historical narratives to address the state's rewriting of Soviet history, its neglect of rural populations, its disinformation campaigns, and its inaction or outright repressive measures regarding gender equality and free expressions of sexuality. These figures reveal how the new media environment opens space for disclosure and dissent, creating the background for responsible conversations about these and other social issues. This article analyzes the digital content of these figures to argue that while the Russian state has enclosed large segments of its population in a chamber of disinformation and propaganda, Russia's digital dissidents offer access to social and cultural life in contemporary Russia and forms

[7] Their popularity attests to the sustained appetite among Russian-language media consumers for materials that are produced using evidence-based journalism and candid discussion in interviews. The viewership numbers also indicate a level of opposition to state action that approaches the mainstream, which is not well registered in other public forums like sociological surveys.

of documentary storytelling that are as innovative as they are accessible. They have not only created a forum for social debate that is engaging to their audiences; their work can be integrated into language and culture courses to expose students of Russian and Russia to new perspectives and new forms of activism.[8]

2. *Redaktsiia*: A pre-history of digital documentary forms

We can begin by considering Aleksei Pivovarov's YouTube channel *Редакция* [*Redaction*], which today has 3.76 million subscribers (Pivovarov, n.d.). His most popular materials are film-length documentaries that have reached up to 16 million viewers. In comparison, the average viewership of a Sunday night NFL football game, the most popular offering on television in a given week in the U.S., is around 18 million. The average daily viewership for Russia's most popular television channels *Россия 1* [Russia-1] and *Первый Канал* [Channel One] is just over five million each. Their most popular programming in a given year, state holiday parades and Putin's annual New Year's Eve address, receive a viewership of about 10 million (Lenta.ru, 2021). Pivovarov's popularity on YouTube affords him a full production team of over 20 professionals, including investigative reporters, writers, cinematographers, editors, and marketing staff. He receives front billing on most documentaries and on his weekly hard-news response to Russia's ban on free speech after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, *Редакция.News* [*Redaction. News*]. With full, uncensored control of content (beyond YouTube's normal restrictions), Pivovarov focuses on controversial cases in Russian political and social history: the crash of Tu-154 (16 million views), the explosion of the Kursk submarine (11 million views), and the Moscow and Ryazan apartment bombings that sparked Russia's second war against Chechnya (10 million views).

One important thread of Pivovarov's oeuvre on *Redaction*, which unfolds in over 660 videos since 2018, addresses the period of free journalism in Russia during the mid- to late 1990s. Over these years Pivovarov worked

[8] Lonkila et al. refer to the type of activism that transpires in producing and engaging with this type of media as *communicative activism*, "exchanging information and raising awareness of societal problems and issues among people," which often "takes place on widely available platforms, such as popular social networking or video sharing sites" (Lonkila et al., 2021, pp. 139).

at NTV, considered one of the era's beacons of free speech and journalistic integrity, and was peripheral to its coverage of the Moscow apartment bombings and "Ryazan Sugar" incident. He also experienced first-hand the dramatic shift of NTV's ownership from Vladimir Gusinsky's Media Most to state-controlled Gazprom Media. Pivovarov's documentaries provide a glimpse into the pre-history of Russian journalism behind his YouTube channel and the current movement in digital documentary journalism that dominates the Russian media sphere today.[9] Two documentaries in particular address the relationship between independent media and the Russian political landscape during the 1990s and early 2000s: *«Редакция» – о терактах, с которых началась эпоха Путина* [*Russia in the Late 1990s: Apartment Bombings that Accelerated Vladimir Putin's Rise to Power*] and *Как и почему закончилось «старое» НТВ* [*The Rise and Fall of the Most Popular Independent TV Channel in Russia*]. *Apartment Bombings*, one of Pivovarov's most popular documentaries, revisits the series of apartment bombings in Dagestan and in and around Moscow in 1999 that helped propel the shadowy KGB agent and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin into the presidency (Pivovarov, *Russia in the Late 1990s*, 2021).

Apartment Bombings tells, with remarkable clarity and journalistic integrity, one of the most controversial stories of contemporary Russian history and geopolitics. When a series of apartment bombings terrorized ordinary citizens across Russia in autumn 1999, the Russian state and the FSB declared Chechen leaders responsible. But well-grounded speculation emerged that the FSB may have themselves orchestrated the bombings. A bomb-like package that was large enough to create an explosion similar to those in Moscow was found in the cellar of an apartment building in Ryazan. While initial police statements indicated that the package contained explosives and a detonator, the FSB established a parallel narrative that the materials in the package were sugar, part of a training exercise set up by FSB operatives. No evidence was established to definitively confirm any of the three competing narratives, allowing speculation and conspiracy theories to run rampant. The events came to be known famously as the "Ryazan Sugar" incident. Independent media played an important role in constructing storylines that countered the

[9] Wijermars suggests that the "proliferation of digital technologies unfolded in parallel with the 'authoritarian turn' under President Vladimir Putin," of which NTV's fall to state control and Pivovarov's rise in digital media is a case in point (Wijermars, 2021, pp. 16).

Russian state and FSB's official line, most dramatically a live broadcast on NTV's «*Независимое расследование*» [*Independent Investigation*] just before the 2000 presidential elections. Invited guests from the police and FSB candidly delivered contradictory statements, with the FSB leaving the final word to a sealed bag of state secrets. The unscripted public discussion revived heated debate in a charged political context. While NTV's main competitor, Channel One, was financed by oligarch Boris Berezovsky and supported Putin, NTV was backed by Berezovsky's opponent Vladimir Gusinsky, making the network a frequent source of attacks against the future president (Pivovarov, *Russia in the Late 1990s*, 2021). Indeed, Putin appeared more than culpable in NTV's evidence- and interview-grounded journalistic narratives.

Unfortunately, the story that Chechen terrorists had committed the string of bombings, supported by the state and reinforced by Channel One, held out. Putin was able to construct a strong-man persona, win the presidency, and justify war in Chechnya. For many journalists and international political leaders, the "Ryazan Sugar" incident characterized Putin's approach to domestic and international affairs, suggesting the deceptive, coercive, and violent measures he was willing to take, even against Russian citizens, to establish and expand his power (Deniau, 2003; Insider Business, 2018). Putin quickly turned to antagonizing the sphere of independent media after winning the election, edging to increase state control: NTV immediately became a target. Pivovarov's *Redaction* also tells the story of NTV's fall to state control, not long after Putin was elected in 2000.

Rise and Fall of the Most Popular Independent TV Channel in Russia, with over 4 million views, creates the image of NTV as an independent news channel of paramount journalistic integrity, founded on the idea that freedom of speech and the press are cornerstones of a free democracy. While federal channels skewed toward bias or feigned ignorance, depicting the first Chechen war like a "walk in the park," NTV's on-location coverage revealed the stories of its brutal injustices (Pivovarov, *Rise and Fall*, 2021). NTV journalists became so integrated in the urban fighting that several were taken hostage by Chechen terrorists, released only when ransom was paid. On the international front, NTV offered a "window to the world" for long isolated former Soviets (Pivovarov, *Rise and Fall*, 2021). Its investigative journalists, hosting programs like «*Итоги*»

[*In Summary*], *Independent Investigation*, and «*Намедни*» [*Nowadays*], built on rigorous evidence- and interview-based reporting, became "leaders of social opinion" (Pivovarov, *Rise and Fall*, 2021). As the 2000 elections approached and competing news networks engaged in information wars, attacking rival candidates and parties, NTV maintained its independence with integrity, even as Gusinsky financially backed it (Pivovarov, *Rise and Fall*, 2021).

Putin won the presidency in 2000. Shortly after the election, Gusinsky was arrested, jailed temporarily, and forced to sell control of Media Most to Gazprom Media, a state-controlled media company and subsidiary of Gazprom Bank and Gazprom. While the structure and reporting ethos of the network were not immediately transformed, with time the once independent channel became another state-controlled media outlet (Pivovarov, *Rise and Fall*, 2021). Eventually all of the major figures who had created NTV's renowned journalistic culture were forced out, quit, or pivoted away from the network. Pivovarov himself received his breakout role at NTV, working with Leonid Parfyonov on «*Намедни*» [*Nowadays*] and other NTV programming. Pivovarov remained with NTV for several years after its takeover by Gazprom Bank, but departed in 2011, eventually launching his independent channel on YouTube in 2018.

Pivovarov holds *Redaction* to the high journalistic standards of NTV's golden period of independent journalism from the 1990s. He recused himself of his usual author and host role on *Rise and Fall of NTV*: the role went to new talent Sasha Sulim, who had no formal professional connections with NTV. *Redaction* has built its reputation on evidence-grounded news reporting and deep investigations into critical social controversies. These topics address Russian politics but also go beyond them to consider issues across Russian social and cultural life. Pivovarov insists in each of his films that he "believes in his viewer's critical thinking," presenting facts as objectively as possible, and highlighting moments of interpretation or potential bias in his interviewees (Pivovarov, *Apartment Bombings*, 2021). For example, he ends *Apartment Bombings* by arguing that *Redaction* revisited the case to pare narratives down and represent unvarnished facts, fleshing out the conflicting perspectives of various interviewees from the press, government agencies, and those who experienced the blasts first-hand. Pivovarov closes the film with the mantra that viewers "draw all conclusions" themselves. Only then

does he offer his own reading of the events: he is not convinced that the FSB solely organized the bombings, nor that the "Ryazan Sugar" incident was a training exercise, as the FSB narrative would have citizens believe. He goes on to argue that the incident was so problematic because it cripplingly undercut "trust between ordinary people and our main special services and state authority as a whole." Yet "trust," Pivovarov points out, is exactly what the state agencies demanded and needed as they hid behind misleading narratives and sealed bags of state secrets (Pivovarov, *Apartment Bombings*, 2021). This trust has never been restored in Russian media, where a fundamentally damaged relationship between Russian citizens and their governing agencies became too eroded to be reconciled, ushering in today's post-truth era of Russian social and geopolitics.[10]

3. *vDud'*: Digital, popular, dissident

During the early 2000s few independent media outlets remained to conduct investigative journalism that exposed state abuses of power, monopolies, corruption, illegal activities, or gross social negligence. The radio network «Эхо Москвы» [Echo of Moscow], while also, with NTV, falling into the hands of Gazprom Bank, remained relatively free and oppositional until its closure in 2022, but its reach was limited to a primarily urban, already progressive audience. Similarly, the Russian language television network *Телеканал «Дождь»* [TV Rain], now broadcast from the Netherlands and remaining popular in Russia, never achieved ratings comparable to those of mainstream television. At the same time, the internet was beginning to provide a far less regulated space for disseminating information and building digital personas, with little oversight. Free or low-cost platforms including YouTube and Vimeo began to reach wider audiences with almost no geographic or legal restrictions on uploading or streaming content.

Initially a platform for sharing short videos of limited size, YouTube benefited from advances in digital cameras, increasingly robust digital memory, and high-capacity servers to offer virtually free uploading of high-quality, feature-length digital content for streaming. In 2010 it introduced 4K video format capability; in 2015, 8K; and by 2016 it was HDR capable,

[10] I follow Brahms's definition of the post-truth era as a time (in Russia and globally) when the manipulation of information has eroded "factual evidence" as a tool with the power to establish social or political justice (Brahms, 2020, pp. 4).

making YouTube a better viewing experience than most television or other streaming platforms. It introduced algorithm-based advertising, making popular videos monetizable from any location in the world to any audience in the world. These circumstances compelled Russian journalists, content producers, influencers, and video bloggers to turn to YouTube for sharing their material, given the high degree of autonomy and influence that it offered them and their production companies. *Redaction* began operating on YouTube in 2018 and with over one billion views as a channel, is one of Russian-language media's most highly trafficked locations. However, no Russian-language content producer or production company has established itself so strongly in digital space or reached the same level of popularity and influence as Yuri Dud'.

Dud' emerged on the Russian media scene as a sports journalist, working as editor-in-chief of sports.ru from 2011-18. Under his leadership, the site went far beyond "scores and stats," offering a "cross-section of culture, politics and economics" that placed athletes and sporting events in broader social and political contexts (Gershkovich, 2019). Dud' combined this ethos with a punk-grounded, Vice-news style of interviewing, editing, and producing, positioning himself as a political outsider, as ready to depart from the turgid formalities of Russian journalistic and political style as he was well-informed on social issues. The formula worked: he successfully pivoted into YouTube's digital format, creating substantive one-on-one interviews with celebrities who were not afraid to candidly—slang and cursing included—discuss personal, social, and political issues meaningful to growing audiences. Dud''s earliest interviews on the channel were with musicians and popular celebrities, but his first to enjoy explosive viewing numbers were with the oppositional figures Aleksei Navalny in 2017 (21 million views) and Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2018 (25 million views).

Dud' balanced interviews with celebrities from popular culture and interviews with journalists, political figures, and activists to create the most viewed Russian-language YouTube channel in the contemporary digital media landscape. His channel «*вДудь*» [*vDud*] has over 10 million subscribers and over two billion views of 170+ videos in its brief five-year history. It is the most visited Russian-language media site and the second most visited of all Russian-language sites in the world. Dud''s most popular videos *Как устроена IT-столица мира* [*Russian Silicon*

Valley] from 2020 (49 million) and his interview with social influencer Nastya Ivleeva from 2019 (36 million) may betray a predilection for big tech and media celebrity, but Dud' does not fall into the trap of the "media is the message" that one might expect of the platform (McLuhan, 1994, pp. 7; Strukov, 2021).[11] Instead of becoming a flattened reference to the YouTube platform, Dud' carefully crafts a political message across his interviews and documentaries: he has outspokenly opposed Putin and the activities of the Russian state as they have become more socially and politically repressive. He does this through interviews remarkable for their uncensored candor, in which he frequently fact-checks or contextualizes and revisits past statements of his guests to build trust with his audiences. By clarifying facts and sources and letting his interviewees demonstrate their reliability in their own words, Dud' establishes himself as a "truth teller" who subverts the Russian state's trends of post-truth media (Brahms, 2020, pp. 9). Dud' candidly discusses bisexuality, LGBTQ+ rights, protest, and political imprisonment with *Pussy Riot* member Nadya Tolokonnikova in their 2019 interview, leaving facts and statements on these topics uncensored, despite Russia's "gay propaganda'' law (Dud', *Tolokonnikova*, 2019). Dud' revisited the injustice of Khodorkovsky's political imprisonment, citing the Hague's evidence-grounded case against the Russian state on Khodorkovsky's behalf (Deutsch, 2020; Dud', *Khodorkovsky*, 2018). Dud' has interviewed Putin's primary political opponent Alexei Navalny twice: once before the 2018 elections and again with Navalny's wife Yulia in 2020 (Dud', *Navalnyi*, 2017; Dud', *The Navalniys*, 2021). The second interview with the Navalnys, which details the facts around Navalny's poisoning earlier that year in the Navalnys' own telling, reached over 35 million viewers. The interview also candidly discusses Navalny's fact-finding, anti-corruption media platform, and Navalny accuses Putin of knowing about and perhaps even orchestrating the poisoning himself (Dud', *The Navalniys*, 2021).

[11] Echoing McLuhan's famous dictum, Strukov argues that in "the merger between tech and media giants such as YouTube and individual content producers such as Dud'" we see a blurring of "the boundaries between individual and corporate agency, between news reporting and lifestyle media, between customized and universally available content" (Strukov, 2021, 164). But this description misses the explicitly political themes that Dud' often pursues in his interviews. Dud''s work resists reduction to a YouTube advertisement and to post-truth Russian politics through the specificity and power of these positions.

Beyond his success with the interview genre, Dud' mobilizes his channel to experiment with documentary forms that take viewers deeply into Russian life to interrogate the social complacency and distorted historical narratives that are often encountered in popular discourse. One of his most significant documentary films, *Колыма – родина нашего страха* [*Kolyma – Birthplace of our Fear*], with over 28 million views, addresses the changing perception of Joseph Stalin in contemporary Russia. From 1922 to 1953 Stalin was responsible for an estimated 9 million deaths from famine, GULAG labor camps, and mass executions within the Soviet Union (Dud', *Kolyma*, 2019). He sent nearly one million Soviet citizens to labor camps in Kolyma alone, although many "of them never committed a crime" (Dud', *Kolyma*, 2019). Dud' argues that these mass repressions imprinted on Soviet citizens the fear that "the slightest boldness" or protest will "result in punishment," justified or not (Dud', *Kolyma*, 2019). He asserts that the fear born from Kolyma and the Great Terror can still be felt in today's Russia, where many who grew up under the shadow of Stalin will not publicly oppose Putin or the state for fear of arbitrary retribution. Such complacence has had a disruptive effect on social and historical memory, he continues: based on a 2015 poll, almost half of those in Russia between 18 and 24 have never heard about Stalin's repressions (Dud', *Kolyma*, 2019). Some parts of this demographic even signaled a "rise of support" for the dictator, due to his role in defeating Nazi Germany in World War II. Dud' is particularly intent on dispelling the myth that Stalin did not know about the arbitrariness or cruelty of the GULAG system; he notes that this history should be taught in schools and discussed in social discourse freely, including the disclosure of previously repressed historical facts (Dud', *Kolyma*, 2019).

Kolyma also sheds light on the highly asymmetrical economic and intellectual relationships between European Russia's urban centers and its neglected peripheries. Although residents have adapted with great difficulty to Kolyma's environment, they suffer from social isolation and the state's neglect to provide basic infrastructure. Lacking social and economic opportunities for their youth and experiencing infrastructural collapse, villages in Kolyma are rapidly shrinking, becoming impossible to sustain. Dud' again addresses the theme of social inequality in an ethnography of the Russian provinces with one of Russia's leading photographers, Pskov resident Dmitri Markov. Markov combines street

photography in rural Russia with insider connections to the communities that he shoots. Getting beyond «парадная Россия» ["festive Russia"], the façades of Russia's metropolitan power centers, "we see the state's institutionalized negligence that has led to extreme inequality between Russia's megapolises and its rural villages" (Dud', *Markov*, 2021). The poverty concentrated in rural areas is dire: 45% of Russian citizens have no central plumbing and 30 million—nearly one in five Russian citizens—do not have access to heated toilets. High unemployment, pervasive alcoholism, drug addiction, and corruption are common in these areas. We also encounter the social effects of Russia's undeclared war in Donbas during the journey through Markov's Pskov. Soldiers who "served" in Donbas unofficially are offered no social safety net as they suffer the residual effects of war, including physical disability and mental illness. Without easy access to the internet, the population's main sources of information are state-controlled television and radio, leaving the significant majority in a bubble of propaganda and disinformation that, against their own interests, divides them from urban audiences with easier access to more diverse media sources (Dud', *Markov*, 2021).

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Dud' left the country, along with many of his fellow journalists working in digital media. Along with Pivovarov and many of his dissenting colleagues, he has been designated a "foreign agent," since financing for his production company comes through advertising revenues from YouTube, a U.S. company. Dud''s operations were always mobile, however, and he has been able to produce new oppositional content from abroad. His interviews from 2022 and 2023, shot on location in the United States and Europe, where Russian exiles now concentrate, are with other figures of the new diaspora. He has created two documentaries about the social aspects of the war since 2022: *Человек во время войны* [*Man During War*] and *Пропаганда – топливо войны* [*Propaganda: Fuelling War*]. In *Man During War*, he follows volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees settle and integrate into social and economic networks in Eastern Europe. Released in April 2022, *Man During War* was one of the first Russian-language films to show the devastating effects of the war on social life in Ukraine and eastern Europe. In *Propaganda: Fueling War* (2023), Dud' takes his audience into the mechanics and effects of the Russian state propaganda machine, exposing by name and photo the figures who create it—Vladimir Solov'ev,

Nikita Mikhalkov, Dmitrii Kiselev, Ekaterina Andreeva, Tigran Keosaian, Artem Sheynin, Olga Skabeeva, Margarita Simon'ian, Kirill Kleimenov, Irada Zeinalova, among others—and the channels and programs where propaganda pervades. Russia-1 and Channel One are primary culprits, especially Channel One's news staple «*Время*» [*Time*] and regular opinion talk show programming like «*Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым*» [*Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev*] and «*Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым*» [*Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev*] on Russia-1. To suggest how counter-narratives that undermine these propagandists can be constructed, Dud' interviews three journalists: Masha Borzunova from TV Rain and author and host of the show *Fake News*, Il'ya Shepelin, host of «*Зомбоящик*» [*Zombiebox* or *Brainwashing Box*, referring to the television] and Anton Pikuli, the author and host of the YouTube channel Разговорный жанр [*Conversational Genre*]. These experts analyze the most egregiously false and misleading statements disseminated in Russian state media, demonstrating their absurdity through criticism, irony, and humor, supported by deft research and skillful multimedia presentation (Dud', *Propaganda*, 2023). For those interested in pursuing methods for detecting propaganda and disinformation and their social effects, Dud''s video and the work of the people he interviews complement Aleksey Loshak's renowned film «*Разрыв связи*» [*Broken Ties*] (2022) and Ellick and Westbrook's *Operation Infektion* (2018) to create a dynamic coursebook. While Dud''s audience and opportunities have undoubtedly been reduced by Russia's war against Ukraine, he continues to be a leader in independent media's anti-war effort that happens in silence on the streets of Russia but loudly and before large audiences in Russian-language digital space worldwide.

4. *Let's Talk?* and *Queerography*

Two additional figures in the Russian-language digital media landscape warrant special attention for establishing themselves as "truth tellers" who elegantly combine the interview format with documentary forms that address Russia's most pressing social issues. *Let's Talk?* host Irina Shikhman has created a series of documentary films investigating social problems, with special attention to the impact of limited free speech, corruption, and unchecked state power on public health and women's rights. Her 2020 investigative documentary «*Вирус молчания: о чем*

категорически запрещено говорить врачам?» [*Virus of Silence: What Are Doctors Categorically Forbidden To Say?*], exposes government lies about providing medical professionals with proper protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. It demonstrates how the corruption of politically appointed medical administrators, the mandated refusal of help from volunteer organizations, and branding professional unions as hostile to the state led to medical workers themselves becoming primary spreaders of COVID-19. Shikhman follows medical staff who attempted to speak out about these controversies, but each investigative effort reveals "management at the hospitals" who "fear losing their positions. They have to bend the truth and back themselves into a corner." In sustaining the state's control over the medical sphere, they perpetuated the negligence that resulted in Russia's disproportionately high COVID-19 death rates (Shikhman, *Virus of Silence*, 2020).

A second investigative documentary reveals women's continued struggles for basic human rights in Russia, *«Бьёт – значит бьёт. (часть 1)»* [*If he beats you, he beats you. (Part 1)*]. The title is an ironic corrective to the archaic aphorism "if he beats you, he loves you." In the film Shikhman focuses on domestic violence against women by conducting on-site interviews with victims of violence and with experts in the field, including political scientist, activist and fellow YouTube star Ekaterina Schulmann. Shikhman uses protesters and advocacy groups to inform her audience that Russia has no laws protecting women in cases of domestic abuse, unlike many European countries and the United States. The result is that every year 12-14,000 women die in cases of domestic violence (Shikhman, *If he beats you, he beats you*, 2020).

Increases in state control over social life combined with its negligence and repression of free speech reduce the social agency of marginalized groups and their ability to secure basic human rights. This erosion has disproportionately affected women and those living in the provinces, but it is essential to highlight that the first social group to be formally targeted by the state for repression in the Putin era was the LGBTQ+ population. This was initiated after Putin won his third term as president and the Duma passed a 2013 federal law prohibiting speech about "non-traditional sexual relations" to minors. Regional laws also target LGBTQ+ groups and while "not uniform, like the new federal law, they all tend to advance vague definitions of propaganda that lend

themselves to the targeting and ongoing persecution of the country's LGBT community" (Council for Global Equality, 2014). Furthermore, the vaguely articulated federal ban can be applied arbitrarily and at the discretion of the government and law enforcement (Council for Global Equality, 2014). The law sows distrust, creates stigma, and fragments already antagonized groups. According to the organizer of a LGBTQ+ support group in Kazan featured in LGBTQ+ activist Karen Shaiyan's *Queerography. Kazan* (2022), "At first people would come, they were scared that it was some sort of trap. That it was some policemen luring them in." The digital media sphere has offered defenders of human rights, including Shainyan, one of the only safe spaces to communicate everyday problems encountered by LGBTQ+ persons to broad audiences. Although not as explosively popular as Dud', Pivovarov, or Shikhman, Shainyan created a profoundly moving series *Queerography* in response to the 2013 law. In videos like *Queerography. Irkutsk* he travels on site to understand the everyday lives and stories of Irkutsk's LGBTQ+ residents. He interviews LGBTQ+ people in their homes, connects them to each other, and highlights their struggles for normal lives and identity formation under repressive laws – all aspects of a journalism that bucks post-truth trends. He does this in the face of everyday social conditions that make one interviewee state with his partner, "I am 100% sure that we will face homophobia if we would go out hand-in-hand now, and spend a week just behaving how we want to" (Shainian, *Queerography. Kazan*, 2022). Shainyan tours many cities outside the capitals, including Irkutsk, Kazan, Perm, and Ekaterinburg, and his series addresses underground gay life in each city through individualized documentary stories. This illegal advocacy by another "foreign agent" may create the only beacon of hope to members of the LGBTQ+ community who face laws and everyday conditions that perpetuate repressive, hostile, and violent social environments across Russia.

5. Conclusion

If properly selected, introduced, framed, and glossed, videos like these can be used in Russian language classes at all levels and in culture courses in translation that attract students from across the university. Almost every video mentioned here has well-crafted Russian and English subtitles, making them accessible to all audiences interested in learning

more about everyday life in contemporary Russia. In introductory-level Russian courses, these figures can be introduced by having students read their Wikipedia pages; they can be introduced to students as famous media figures opposed to the Putin regime and the war in Ukraine. Authentic materials by these media figures can be presented in the form of screen shots of slides or short clips that students can analyze for pronunciation, content, and context. The names and brief biographies of these figures can be studied in contrast to the more typical presentation of the names and biographies of Russian and Soviet leaders or tsars of the imperial period that appear in some introductory textbooks. These digital dissidents can also be introduced together with Soviet-era writers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Joseph Brodsky to establish the fact that Russia and the Soviet Union have robust traditions of dissent about which students may not know. Students can be assigned to research one or more of the figures in English before discussing their basic identifying information in class in Russian through games like "Twenty Questions." Students can be assigned to introduce themselves as one of these journalists or one of their interviewees and explain in a phrase or two why the journalist or interviewee is an important figure in today's Russia. Dud' and Shainian also have videos in which they navigate addressing non-binary interlocutors according to their preferred pronouns, clips that can be the basis for classes that help LGBTQ+-identifying students choose how they will be addressed at the outset of their Russian studies (Dud', *Masha Gessen*, 2022; Shainian, *Queerography. Novosibirsk*, 2022).

In intermediate courses, the figures and their approaches to activism can be included in themed discussions on social problems in Russia. For example, Shikhman's *If he beats you, he beats you* fits seamlessly into Chapter Four's theme of the family and familial relationships from *Russian: From Intermediate to Advanced* (Kagan et. al., 2015). Shikhman's full video can be assigned alongside the unit, and one or more classes can be devoted to discussing how the authentic material in the film addresses problems brought up in the textbook. Instructors can ask students about how listening to the stories of the women Shikhman interviews differs from reading about domestic problems in textbook form. Students can research the limited rights women have when reporting domestic violence and consider how that might affect gender relations more broadly across social milieus. Another frequent intermediate-level theme, literature's

role in Russian culture, is addressed in Dud''s 2022 interview with Boris Akunin, released only days after Russia invaded Ukraine. The question of literature and society in Russia, which appears in every intermediate Russian textbook on the market, takes on new significance in light of the interview and Akunin's direct statements about the injustices of Russia's invasion (Dud', *Akunin*, 2022).

In advanced courses, full videos can be assigned as original content for detailed discussions in Russian on any of the themes these figures introduce. Channels or multi-video series can be assigned as research projects that require quoting the material and building evidence-based arguments around it: instructors can train students to become "truth tellers" themselves, insisting that they check the facts they report, quote sources verbatim, and cite the material correctly. The videos can serve as the basis for presentations on topics from the history of Russian media to digital media vs. television media to disinformation and propaganda, or human rights in Russia and Eastern Europe. One particularly useful exercise to address the mechanics of propaganda would be to choose one of the interviewees from Dud's *Propaganda: Fuel of War* (2023). Students can create presentations that analyze, line by line, the "fake news" or propaganda that the interviewee critiques. The presentation would need to isolate the specific material from the state-supporting press and then analyze the interviewee's critique of it, noting the historical context of the "fake news" and why exposing it as a fabrication or distortion may be historically important. Such an exercise would be excellent training for advanced students interested in careers in intelligence or at news agencies, or interested in contributing to media projects like Bellingcat or the Stanford Cyber Policy Center's Full-Spectrum Pro-Kremlin Online Propaganda about Ukraine database. At the advanced level, these videos can also be used in lessons that analyze speech-genre types as they demonstrate every speech type from journalistic style to persuasive argumentation to slang and humor. The material on YouTube, already organized by date, or by popularity, can also be formed into databases for independent research on topics that students find most interesting or relevant.

While the Russian state has designated each of the figures analyzed here a "foreign agent" because of their association with YouTube and their open opposition to Russia's war with Ukraine, YouTube remains accessible in Russia; their materials can still be accessed in both Russia

and the United States. These digital dissidents continue their work of truth telling in a post-truth world, reaching large audiences that care deeply about their work in Russia and globally. They can also reach American students who are eager to know more about the most relevant figures in Russian media today. If properly introduced and integrated into course plans, these figures can offer Russian language students unique access to global Russian culture and to aspects of everyday life in Russia in ways that are responsible and meaningful in and beyond the classroom. Russia's digital dissidents stand in stark but hopeful contrast to the Russian state's criminal war in Ukraine, a small but powerful group that can help sustain students' study of Russian through this dark period of post-truth Russian history.

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