

**ISCKMC 2020****International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»****MEANS OF ENEMY IMAGE CREATION IMPLEMENTED BY  
REGIONAL INTERNET MEDIA**

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**Abstract**

The following paper explores how an enemy image is constructed by modern mass media in a critical and tense environment, taking the Russian regional media coverage of the current Covid-19 pandemic as an example of such unfortunate circumstances. The main enemy in the current Russian mass media narrative is the virus itself. Its rapid spreading and high mortality rate make people anxious and scared for their relatives and close ones. However, considering the uncontrollable – to a certain extent – nature of the virus and its consequences, people turn their frustration to living objects – those who might spread the virus. Analyzing social media posts from local sources, the authors suggest that there emerges a new increasingly marginalized group of people within the smaller regions of the country – those who supposedly carry the virus and may be contagious; namely, people who have recently left the country, worked outside the region in question or come home from Moscow to stay in self-isolation. The enemy image creation, in this case, was not deliberate per se, but turned out to be extremely effective. The discourse of such media texts is explored through the frame of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in order to determine the peculiarities of how people supposedly carrying the Covid-19 are portrayed in different Russian regional media resources, find out the linguistic means by which the image of the social group mentioned above as an enemy is created.

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## 1. Introduction

Mass media have been a topic of heated discussion since the very day they emerged. There is still seemingly no consensus on how they actually affect their audience, although one must acknowledge the fact that they do have their impact on one's mindset and are widely used as a means to achieve political or ideological goals (Faircough, 1995). When it comes to traditional media, it should be highlighted that their primary task is to inform their audience about whatever topic they choose to cover. Although admittedly oriented at sensationalism of a piece of news in question, they struggle to create an image of wise, omnipresent and truthful messengers (Nystrom, 1973).

However, it can be seen that mass media are by no means unbiased – be it their intention to please the higher authority, attention-seeking, one-sided perception of the facts or incomplete and unexhaustive amount of data, they constantly distort the reality accordingly (Fackler & Fortner, 2014). It must be highlighted that the reasons for that are not always purely reprehensible, just as they can not be always justified (Cunningham, 2002).

One of the most prominent types of media manipulating mass consciousness is propaganda – a set of tools aimed at directing people's thoughts and decisions by the change of narrative and nurturing certain actions and behaviours (Foulkes, 1983). As suggested by the French philosopher Ellul (1973), there exist several types of propaganda and it might be either conscious or unconscious, so one can not undoubtedly present propaganda as an exclusively negative phenomenon, although it seems that current mindset implies exactly that – especially because deception is perceived as one of the underlying principles of propaganda (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Marlin, 2002; Ross, 2002).

Hate is admittedly the easiest way to mobilize masses and trigger an emotional response from the audience (Ellul, 1973). This feeling is often cultivated by the media by creating an enemy in front of them, external or internal, who would represent whatever values, actions or ways of life a group involved in propaganda despises. It is curated by suggesting a simple yet powerful idea of opposition – “we” vs “they”, “good” vs “bad”, etc. Implementing hate into the media narrative, one can easily make it more scandalous -thus, getting more attention while transmitting message carefully picked by the propagandists. If started slowly and constantly repeated, it can become a part of the audience's behavioural patterns and preconceptions, spreading its seeds across the board and becoming the so-called “pre-propaganda” (Ellul, 1973), which can be utilized whenever the need emerges.

This narrative of “hate speech” is created using language. Linguistic means of manipulation include a very vast number of different techniques implemented depending on the context. There are, for example, such phenomena as labelling, negative personification, evaluative vocabulary, etc. In order to detect them, the whole field of semiotics, first explored by a Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, developed a comprehensive set of methods, of which the one suggested by a Lithuanian linguist Algirdas Greimas (1983) seems to be the most pervasive. It provides a very interesting framework allowing the researchers to take both linguistic and contextual aspects of any given text into account when analysing it.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Nowadays, during the unprecedented times of COVID-19 pandemic, mass media – especially on the Internet – transformed themselves into every day update reporters providing information on how many people are infected, what is the death rate and whether there are any recovering patients. Trying to keep up with the updates as soon as possible, they face the lack of time to critically evaluate the publications and are prone to making errors and creating unnecessary panic – which, arguably, is what currently happens in Russia. Here, where the pandemic unexpectedly interrupted the daily life of the country, in smaller Russian regions emerges a completely new type of an enemy – a person carrying the virus. It seems noticeable even in simple social interactions that in Russia people become increasingly aggressive towards those who come from Moscow, other regions or other countries as they are seen as a hazard. This newly acquired perception is expressed through Internet posts and interviews – such utterances as “We need to put a wall around Moscow in order to fence off this hotbed of human troubles” or comparisons between current situation in Russia and the way the outbreak happened in Italy are increasingly popular among local. In its turn, the media create and nurture this image, and these publications became the subject of this study.

## **3. Research Questions**

While analysing media narrative in regional Internet media, the following research questions were addressed:

- Is there any valid reason to consider regional media narrative regarding the Coronavirus outbreak forming a negative image of people of certain groups?
- If yes. What are the groups targeted by the enemy image creation?
- How is the enemy image created by the media? What strategies linguistic means and manipulative techniques do they use to reshape audience’ perception of the groups in question?
- Is this enemy image created intentionally? What are the ultimate intentions of authorities and official regional media in current situation?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

This paper states as its main purpose to explore the mechanisms of indirect enemy image creation in the regional Russian Internet media through local official Telegram channels.

## **5. Research Methods**

For this study, the authors mainly use the hypothetic-deductive model, which, in its essence, provides a researcher with a falsifiable hypothesis explored via observation, analysis and data collection. While exploring the media texts, both quantitative (word frequency) and qualitative (discourse analysis) methods are used when necessary. The analysis is based on the Greimassian method including Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Narrative Analysis and deep level analysis. Additionally, the authors searched for linguistic manipulation techniques. These methods were chosen for several reasons: firstly, they seem

to be the most exhaustive types of analysing texts, combining both linguistic means and social consequences. Secondly, they might be relatively easily implemented into both traditional and Internet media.

The samples used in the current research consist of a list of official regional Telegram channels (Table 01). They were chosen as the most popular and representative channels for information used by the local residents – according to OMI and Content Research, 55 % of Russian population trust official media Internet accounts and 20% trust bloggers (WCIOM, 2015).

**Table 1.** Regional mainstream Telegram channels

Region	Telegram channel (name)	Telegram channel (link)
Belgorod region	Belgorod №1	<a href="https://t.me/belgorod01">https://t.me/belgorod01</a>
Voronezh region	#betterathome Voronezh region	<a href="https://t.me/govvrn36">https://t.me/govvrn36</a>
Bryansk region	koronavirus32	<a href="https://t.me/koronavirus32">https://t.me/koronavirus32</a>
Ivanovo region	Ivanovo region	<a href="https://t.me/ivanovoobl">https://t.me/ivanovoobl</a>
Kaluga region	Coronavirus. OHQ. Kaluga region	<a href="https://t.me/stop_coronavirus40">https://t.me/stop_coronavirus40</a>
Kostroma region	Stopcoronavirus   Kostroma	<a href="https://t.me/stopcoronaKSTR">https://t.me/stopcoronaKSTR</a>
Kursk region	Stopcoronavirus_Kursk region	<a href="https://t.me/stopviruskursk">https://t.me/stopviruskursk</a>
Lipetsk region	Lipetsk region	<a href="https://t.me/lipobl">https://t.me/lipobl</a>
Oryol region	Coronavirus. OHQ information	<a href="https://t.me/orel_official">https://t.me/orel_official</a>
Ryazan region	Coronavirus. OHQ of Ryazan region	<a href="https://t.me/ryazanoblast_official">https://t.me/ryazanoblast_official</a>
Smolensk region	Smolensk region against Covid-19	<a href="https://t.me/smolobl_vs_covid19">https://t.me/smolobl_vs_covid19</a>
Tambov region	Tambov region	<a href="https://t.me/tmbcan">https://t.me/tmbcan</a>
Tver region	Coronavirus information. Tver region	<a href="https://t.me/coronavirus_tverreg">https://t.me/coronavirus_tverreg</a>
Tula region	Tula region	<a href="https://t.me/tularegion71">https://t.me/tularegion71</a>
Yaroslavl region	STOP! Coronavirus. Yaroslavl region	<a href="https://t.me/koronavirus76">https://t.me/koronavirus76</a>

In terms of the narrative, the news about the COVID-19 outbreak reported by regional mainstream Telegram channels were analysed. Those are considered conservative and official among the residents of the regions and provide the population with every day reports on the situation. In addition, some of the texts – consequences were analysed in order to prove the existence of the enemy image. They show how people become increasingly hostile towards certain groups of people.

## 6. Findings

While analysing media texts, Greimas' approach was implemented. It consists of critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis and deep analysis. During the CDA, the authors were searching for the linguistic means of enemy image creation. Both quantitative (word frequency) and qualitative (discourse analysis) methods are used.

### 6.1. Quantitative research

In order to determine how often different regional media use certain phrases naming the reasons of the spread of infection, it seemed reasonable to start with counting the number of posts on the matter. The following phrases were searched for:

- guests from Moscow (e.g. “In the Belgorod region, the *epidemiological situation is unfavorable only because of contacts with Moscow and the Moscow region, a lot of people came to see their relatives*”);
- came from another region (e.g. “The first case of infection was detected in the Ponazyrevsky district (Kostroma region) – with a citizen who returned from another region. *Most of the new cases are related to contacts with people who arrived from other regions of the country (Moscow, Moscow region, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod) and violation of self-isolation*”);
- came from [a foreign country] (e.g. “Governor Igor Rudenya (Tver region) at a meeting with the heads called for strict adherence to the recommendations of federal departments for the prevention of coronavirus and *to be vigilant towards those who came from countries where outbreaks of COVID-19 were registered*”);
- were visiting [someone] in a different region/city (e.g. “Tambov region: over the past day, 11 people have recovered. *All of them either arrived from Moscow or had contact with the arrivals*”).

These people seemed to be the mostly used reasons of the local residents becoming infected with COVID-19. The number of posts found using the search engine in Telegram is presented in Table 02. Having all the representative posts combined, it is easier to proceed with describing some of the tendencies emerging from them.

**Table 2.** Number of posts about people responsible for the infection

Region	Number of posts about people responsible for the infection (28.03.20–30.04.20)	Region	Number of posts about people responsible for the infection (28.03.20–30.04.20)
Belgorod region	14	Oryol region	5
Voronezh region	15	Ryazan region	15
Bryansk region	1	Smolensk region	0
Ivanovo region	0	Tambov region	5
Kaluga region	2	Tver region	1
Kostroma region	3	Tula region	1
Kursk region	1	Yaroslavl region	0
Lipetsk region	0		
Total: 62			

## 6.2. Qualitative analysis

1. The discourse level. There are several tendencies one can notice on the level of linguistic analysis. They can be categorized as follows. There are three main categories of people constantly mentioned as the main reasons for the COVID-19 outbreak in the regions: people coming home from Moscow in search for self-isolation, people coming home from other regions and those who returned from a trip to a foreign country (regardless of the reasons for such trips). One can argue that this “classification of actants” creates an opposition between “us” – the residents of the region – and “them” – people from either of these categories. Moreover, it is also can be considered labelling because of the fact that these people are now perceived within this negative framework – whether you are from Moscow, other region or a foreign country, you are now perceived as a threat. The language used in these posts is

mostly formal and lets “the facts speak”, as one might say. There is little to no expressive vocabulary in the posts and they are presented as simple reports on the development of the situation with the virus. The extensive usage of number only supports this stance.

However, some cases are worth mentioning separately – namely, those of Belgorod and Voronezh regions. The words chosen by these regional media seem to be the most hostile of the sample – Belgorod №1 perceives Muscovites as the only reason why “epidemiological situation is unfavourable” in the region and despises the authorities for neglecting their duties due to the lack of measures taken in regards to the two people from Dominican republic coming to Belgorod (“But for now, nobody cares”). Voronezh, in its turn, provides an overwhelmingly factual yet unsympathetic post with detailed information about people coming from either of the places mentioned above and infecting the local residents.

There are no negative personifications or precedent phenomena – it might be partially explained by the fact that the language itself is formal and unexpressive.

Some regions are more prone to citing the groups of people in question as to the sole reason for the COVID-19 outbreak. It might be explained by several reasons: from mere lack of necessity to do so to the number of people coming to a region from different places. It seems that a deeper investigation of these reasons might become a topic for future research.

Thus, one can conclude that the main linguistic techniques used to create the enemy image in these posts are labelling and dehumanization (formalization), rarely – expressive language (although muted). One can also suggest that there exists a certain degree of simplification – instead of detailed explanation of the causes and effects of coronavirus, Telegram channels choose to shorten the distance between them and the audience by mentioning certain groups of people as the primary reason for the outbreak. Moreover, it creates an interesting perspective in regards to the whole narrative of “coronavirus vs the regions”.

2. The narrative level. On the narrative level, the situation becomes increasingly intriguing. Starting with the end of March 2020, regional Telegram channels start posting their regular reports on how the situation with the COVID-19 outbreak develops. At first, they are reluctant to admit there are any people infected by the virus – although it is quite hard to prove, there are suggestions stating that the first infected people appeared back in February 2020. Then, throughout the entire period the authors explore, some of them, although admitting the outbreak happening in the regions, present anything and anyone as the reason for the outbreak – apart from the local authorities, who, in their own words, praise them for the measures taken to prevent the virus from further spreading. Nowadays (in May 2020), one can see that the narrative changed again – due to the overwhelming number of infected people, the media start to embrace the problem as it is no longer possible to switch the burden of being the root of the problem to other people.

It can be seen from the narrative analysis that, although the local media do not set enemy image creation as their main goal, they, directed by the local authorities, use certain manipulative methods to maintain power and authority, thus almost unintentionally creating the negative narrative.

It should also be mentioned that the narrative analysis suggests the implementation of propaganda in these posts. With accordance to Ellul’s theory, it can be named the Social Horizontal Rational

Propaganda of Integration – a self-organized, fact-based propaganda aimed at excluding certain groups of people from the landscape and spread among people with similar social status. A pre-propaganda seems to be evident from the narrative considering the fact that people from smaller regions tend to despise – to a certain degree- people who can afford to travel abroad or move to Moscow, which can be partially explained by their lower living standards. For at least 20 years, polls show that Muscovites, according to residents of the regions, live at their expense, since all financial resources flow from the regions and territories to the capital. According to WCIOM, in 1999, 81 % of Russians were sure that Moscow lives spending the money of the regions, in 2002 – 82 %, in 2004 – 85 %.

3. The deep level analysis. In this part, Greimas suggests that a researcher needs to take a step back from the text and address the bigger picture – in this case, it is the issue of COVID-19 pandemic becoming the point of no return for the whole world, reshaping our perception of certain things and sometimes causing people to blame each other for whatever consequences they might face because of it. Ultimately, it can be said that the main underlying opposition one can currently see is not between people themselves, but between people and the virus. It can be named the main “villain” or the “enemy” of the current narrative structures, but, when facing the inability to hold a harmful accountable for the frustration we face, we turn them to people who might be scolded, ostracized and punished for the mere fact we experience our fears and frustrations. We cannot talk to the virus about the reasons why it spreads so rapidly, but we can close Muscovits in an isolator to prevent them from infecting the locals. At the end of the day, it turns out that the opposition described in this paper – one group of people blaming another – creates itself without anyone deliberately nurturing it, because we need to blame someone for all the bad things happening with us – and we find those victims no matter what.

## 7. Conclusion

When analysing media texts – especially those found on the Internet – one should always remember that they are to remain the subject of scrutiny and detailed study. Not only because the Internet is by no means a completely reliable source of information and is too free and easy to access to control anything within it, but also because sometimes these texts do not set informativeness and truthfulness as their primary goal – consciously or unconsciously. This study suggests that currently, during the COVID-19 pandemic which has changed people’s perception of some of the aspects of their lives, there can be observed a very interesting phenomenon – while switching the blame from themselves to whatever group of people they might find, local Russian authorities created an enemy in the eyes of their residents – a person carrying and spreading the virus.

Implementing Greimass’ method of analysing media texts, the following observations were made:

- on the discourse level, the following techniques were found to be implemented: simplification, labelling, repetition, formalization, creating of opposition. These techniques combined create a non-assertive yet powerful image, leading the local residents of Russian regions to believe that people who, for whatever reason, left the region to come back during the outbreak, can be a threat for them, their relatives and their loved ones;
- narrative level. A positive narrative about local authorities vs no evaluation of the opposite side’s actions. People returned from abroad, other regions or Moscow are mentioned as the

cause of infection without blaming them with emotional or evaluative vocabulary. It seems that the focal point of the narrative here is to show that local authorities are not to blame for the spread of the virus and they do everything they can to tame it – rather than to blame foreigners for the problem;

- deep level. Ultimately, the main enemy in the current Russian mass media narrative is the virus itself. Its rapid spreading and high mortality rate make people anxious and scared for their relatives and close ones. Thus, the underlying opposition here is “virus vs people”. However, considering the uncontrollable – to a certain extent – nature of the virus and its consequences, people turn their frustration to living objects – those who might spread the virus.

In conclusion, one might see that the enemy image creation, in this case, can not be confidently considered deliberate per se. Moreover, it is shown that as of today, the narrative has changed and the extent to which certain groups of people are blamed for the spread of Coronavirus in the regions is significantly lower – which happened arguably because of the overwhelming number of those infected every day, which can no longer be explained by the fact that these people left the region.

This study is seen as having perspectives for future research. The number of sociological polls conducted to explore the attitude of the residents of smaller Russian regions towards Muscovites is by no means exhaustive. Moreover, the methods implemented in this study can be extrapolated to other countries – e.g., Italy, where similar situation occurred.

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