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PSEUDO-EVENTS OF UKRAINIAN MAIDAN: POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

Key words: infotainment, social responsibility, provocations, pseudo-events

Abstract

The article addresses ways in which the Ukrainian protests of late 2013 and early 2014 have been covered in mass media. The author focuses, in particular, on the analysis of media-related provocations by identifying and interpreting them in terms of the current concepts and theories such as *infotainment*, *social responsibility*, and *pseudo-events*. The article examines ways in which orchestrated events – more often than not, visually catchy and captivating – are launched, i.e. introduced into information space. It also argues a proposition that, as a result of a media event thus staged, political attitudes and entire policies can be adjusted through a shift in public opinion both inside and outside a country.

“Provocation” has been one of the most frequently heard words during Euro-Maidan, Ukrainian protests in late 2013 and early 2014, which were recognized at one of the EU meetings in Strasbourg as the biggest pro-EU demonstration in the entire history of the European Union. This was stated at one of the meetings of the EU by Guy Verhofstadt, Belgium’s former prime minister.

However, it was not so much about an individual demonstration as about a social and political event, or rather a series of events and/or micro-events. These were the kind of peaceful rallies and demonstrations which, starting on September 21, 2013, broke out in various towns and cities and swept much of the country, with the epicenter in Kiev, chiefly on Independence Square. All of these events have now come to be known as EuroMaidan, since the first wave of anger was triggered by a sudden diplomatic U-turn by the Ukrainian government when it cancelled the signing of a deal that would lead to closer ties with the EU. The pro-EU Ukrainian public was outraged, seeing the move as a betrayal of the country’s foreign-policy vector – the course of the European integration is defined in the constitutional law

– in favor of closer ties with Russia instead. This was the trigger that made Ukrainians take to the streets.

The article sets out to examine events during EuroMaidan that we categorize as provocations, to identify media-related provocations and interpret them in terms of the currently popular theories and concepts such as infotainment, social responsibility, and pseudo-events. The author has studied ninety-five media stories with the key word “provocation” that appeared on news web resources Kyiv Post, Уніан, Корреспондент.net, Українська правда (Ukrainian Truth), LB.ua, and Maidan.in.ua in the time frame between November 30, 2013 and January 1, 2014.

It is worth pointing out that the word “provocation” vis-a-vis such events has become a key term in view of the exclusively peaceful, non-violent nature of the protests. Here is an extract from a statement made by the Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv, Ukraine) whose faculty and students had been actively involved in the protests since the very first day:

For us, the community of the Ukrainian Catholic University, who advocate Christian values, it is inexpressibly sad that in the hearts of a small group of people dwells a desire to pay law enforcement officers to shed blood. But revenge is also repugnant – no matter how strong the motivation is. We will have the moral right to demand the authorities to take responsibility for the violence only when we will demand the provocateurs or demonstrators who deliberately fueled the bloody confrontation to take responsibility. They placed themselves not only outside of the law, but also outside the will of society.

This goes to show that violence is seen as something to be avoided at all costs, an instrument that can only come from the outside – by forces that seek to discredit peaceful protests.

These forces, which repeatedly brought an unknown number of trained gangs to stage violent clashes with the police, would like nothing better than a scenario, whereby an immediate introduction of martial law would be inevitable, according to Oksana Zabuzhko, an author and public activist.¹

The study has shown that the word “provocations” is used with reference to a wide range of events. Not all of them, however, are meant to be in the news. The website Maidan.in.ua in the section “Provocations” discusses a crackdown in the early hours of the morning on November 30, 2013, when Maidan was crushed by the “Berkut” riot police and the military. “They hit everybody who was there including women (there was one pregnant woman among them)”. Despite the fact that people on Maidan had done nothing to provoke the violence, the militia brutally cracked down on the protesters. Qualifying as a provocation, according to the same site, is a situation whereby “every Ukrainian rural and city mayor was told to find in their locality three athletic men”, who were later sent to Kyiv. Another exam-

¹ *Statement of the Ukrainian Catholic University on the Violent Suppression of the EuroMaidan in Kyiv.* Available: <http://ucu.edu.ua/eng/news/1712/> [2013, December 2].

ple of illegal actions was observed in Kharkiv. A woman noticed that the local administration was ordering employees from all state-funded organizations and institutions (hospitals, schools etc.) to attend an anti-EU-meeting.²

“Provocateurs attack journalists” – under this title the site ran a news article about twenty journalists and two policemen who were attacked (and beaten up) by a number of young athletic men (called *titushky* in Ukrainian slang), who have been compared to the Tontons Macoutes, a paramilitary force that operated in Haiti in the 60s-80s. *Titushki* are known to have attacked people, harassed journalists and suppressed public activities in the recent and not so recent past.³

In all of the cases above, we deal with more or less secretive actions that are not meant to find their way into the media. The fact that news about them leaked is either accidental or due to the journalistic acumen of the people handling the story.

On the other hand, the story of EuroMaidan included events that give an impression of having been conceived specifically with a view to being extensively covered. It might be assumed that at least a part of them could have been designed with a visually catching TV image in mind. It may be pertinent at this point to turn to the Mediatisation theory, which, according to Darren Lilleker, argues that it is the media which shapes and frames political communication as well as the society in which that communication happens.⁴

Among the reports about Maidan, the world’s major news channels (CNN, EuroNews, and Al Jazeera) gave the most attention to the assault on the President’s administration on December 1, 2013. This story received more coverage than any other Ukrainian event – Maidan-related or otherwise – in 2013. It was reported that participants in protests clashed with police on Bankova Street not far from the presidential administration in Kyiv on December 1. Some people wearing masks arrived at Bankova Street on a road grader and attempted to break through a police cordon.⁵

All the global news channels reported that the activists were behaving aggressively and pelted the police cordon with smoke grenades, stones, metal rods and fireworks. Some time later, the law enforcement retaliated, throwing stun and gas grenades at the rioters. The clash continued for about three hours, after which the Berkut task force cleared Bankova Street of protesters.

Dozens of law enforcement troops, journalists, and demonstrators suffered injuries in the incident. The opposition claimed that the attack on the police cordon was staged by agent provocateurs bribed by the authorities in an attempt to provoke

² O. Zabuzhko, *Dear Western friends of Ukraine (also concerns journalists!)*. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/oksana.zabuzhko> [2013, December 1].

³ Available: <http://maidan.in.ua/tag/provocations> [2013, December 12].

⁴ *Provocateurs attack journalists*. Available: <http://maidan.in.ua/tag/provocations> [2013, November 29].

⁵ D. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication*, London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006, p. 117.

the use of force in dispersing the crowds. A great number of peaceful demonstrators who were not involved in the clashes with police sustained injuries in Berkut's counter-offensive.⁶ A member of the *Batkivschyna* parliamentary faction, Hennadiy Moskal, said that the government was plotting provocations against members of the main opposition faction in the parliament, journalists and public activists with the aim of discrediting protesters at the EuroMaidan rally:

A systemic provocation against well-known journalists, members of public organizations, and MPs is being prepared. This is done so that the government-controlled media can spread reports that it is only terrorists and extremists that operate on Maidan.⁷

As is apparent, the main objective behind provocations is discrediting EuroMaidan as a political phenomenon. Provocations as an instrument for undermining opponents, on the one hand, are beyond the law (provocation as a criminal offence) and, on the other, they are designed to conjure up a visually attractive picture of scuffles, flaming cars, clashes with the police, etc. We are thus talking about a phenomenon that can be best described as a "spectacular criminal provocation".

The intention behind the ploy was, by orchestrating a visually striking scene, to make the television people take the bait; a scene that big mainstream media would most probably be willing to broadcast. What we deal with here is a staged event which we put in the category of pseudo-events. The latter is known to range from peaceful protests to press conferences and from interviews to flash mobs, which suggests that pseudo-events do not necessarily have to be provocations. The simplest types of such staged events are a rally, picket or a demonstration. They can be instigated and held without an outside agent pulling the strings; they are the result of people freely exercising their will, which is fundamental to democracy. If such spontaneous acts do reveal an element of "set-up", it seems, if anything, to be rather amateurish than professional. It involves the participants of the action inventing slogans, producing posters etc., which, in their opinion, may attract the attention of journalists when the event is being covered by the media.

However, an increased sophistication of political communication has already made it standard practice that the design and orchestration of complex pseudo-events are now within the purview of specially trained advisers, also known as political strategists or spin-doctors. Darren Lilleker construes a pseudo-event as an event that takes place strictly to gain media and public attention. A pseudo-event is not an event per se, according to Lilleker. However, it is assigned the task of communicating "image-related symbolism to the audience".⁸ Although the concept of

⁶ Available: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/court-arrests-nine-suspects-in-riots-near-presidential-administration-for-two-months-332990.html> [2013, December 3].

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Batkivschyna warns that provocations might be planned on EuroMaidan*. Available: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/batkivschyna-warns-that-provocations-might-be-planned-on-euro-maidan-333249.html> [2013, December 8].

pseudo-events has taken on a whole new dimension, given the scope and complexity of today's political communication, it has to be noted that the notion itself is hardly new.

Daniel J. Boorstin viewed the pseudo-event as a synthetic element of US news culture observable as early as the 1920s. Journalists, he noted, would seek out such events "to make up for the lack of spontaneous events".⁹

While forced to cover the activities of electoral candidates, journalists will often be subjected to a staged event that diverts coverage from other, less favourable events or news items. Equally, candidates from opposing organisations will compete for media coverage by staging events to clash with those of their opponents, though, at times this can result in the media's refusal to cover either. Hence the concern relates to the fact that the news of pseudo-events can drive out news covering real issues and real events. However, is this always the case? Journalists have the power to frame coverage of the event to fit existing news agendas. They also create their own events.¹⁰

In Baudrillard's view (1993), pseudo-events, while not being real, "represent a simulation of reality (...) stupefying range of images that present us with a false reality of life beyond our homes".¹¹ It appears that the concept of pseudo-events has both journalists and academics locked in heated debate. Yet the authors above talk about pseudo-events that operate within the legal framework. These can be interpreted in terms of the so-called "white PR". The events of Ukrainian Euro-Maidan, by contrast, are more like dark or "black PR" (negative public relations, also called dark public relations – DPR¹²), since what takes place is clearly outside the law. To extrapolate the term to pseudo-events, one can talk about "black pseudo-events", meaning events that were arranged and carried out by means of illegal methods. Resorting to such methods constitutes an offense that carries criminal liability. In the set-ups described above, in particular, one can detect a method of a punishable "spectacular provocation".

The first day of 2014 was marked by another spectacular provocation, which, luckily, was thwarted. Unknown men attempted to set fire to the electrical room of the Unions Building (the National Resistance Headquarters) on the ninth floor. Here is how Stepan Kubiv, an MP and one of the commandants of the Unions Building, describes what happened on the evening of January 1, 2014:

Unknown men had sneaked in unseen and climbed to the ninth floor of the building, which houses the electrical room. The provocateurs drilled a hole to the room, which was, without exaggeration, a lifeline for thousands who spend days

⁹ D. Lilleker, *Key Concepts...*, p. 165.

¹⁰ D. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York: Vintage 1961, p. 9.

¹¹ J. Clarke, *How journalists judge the reality of an international pseudo-event*, "Journalism", 2003, 4(1), p. 50–75.

¹² J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1993.

and weeks on Maidan and depend on electricity for food and heating. The men then inserted a rope – soaked in gasoline and ignited – through the hole into the electrical room.

The attempted arson attack was spotted by Maidan guards, volunteers who guard the Maidan grounds. Within a few minutes of discovering the fire, they extinguished it. The arsonists, however, were not apprehended.¹³

Would it be safe to say that the intended event would have qualified as a “spectacular” pseudo-performance, had it not been stymied? I am inclined to think that it would. Had everything gone according to plan, from the provocateurs’ perspective, the fire might have destroyed the entire building, not only the electrical room. I should add here that the protesters took hold of the Unions Building without permission, as was the case, incidentally, with the Orange Revolution. Only later did the leadership of the National Resistance manage to negotiate a lease with the administration of the building, i.e. to legalize the unlawful occupancy. However, on New Year’s eve, that same administration refused to renew the lease.

It is probably not far-fetched to assume that the attempted arson attack was carried out to accomplish several objectives:

1. To disable communications and cut protesters off from electricity supply.
2. To discredit the leadership of the National Resistance in the eyes of the rank-and-file by casting them in an unfavorable light (How could they not have taken proper care of the communications when their right to use the building was dubious, at the very least?). Besides, if they couldn’t protect the Unions Building, what might be expected if they were entrusted with a far greater responsibility?
3. In the event of a fire sweeping through the entire building, world’s television networks would be bound to broadcast spectacular footage of the National Resistance headquarters in flames. One can be justified in assuming that whoever was behind it (pro-government strategist) was planning to damage (if not destroy altogether) the reputation of Maidan and its supporters.

Another provocation – although on a somewhat smaller scale – that happened on that same day, occurred during a torch march that was conducted by the all-Ukrainian national association Svoboda and other forces of the radical right to mark the anniversary of the birth of Stepan Bandera, a figure that remains controversial to this day both in and outside of Ukraine.

What Svoboda’s press service referred to as a provocation took place in the evening, when someone participating in the march hurled burning flames at the central entrance of Premier Palace hotel. It turned out that two young men who were responsible for it were indeed Svoboda party members, although they were reportedly expelled from the association immediately after what happened. Fol-

¹³ M. Wattenberg, *Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer*, eScholarship Repository, UC Irvine, Department of Politics and Society. Retrieved on January 29, 2005.

lowing the incident, the Kyiv police opened a criminal case on hooliganism charges against the two men.

As emerges from the statement issued by the Svoboda public relations department, the party leadership does not believe its activists had instigated the arson attempt, noting instead that they “had swallowed the bait”. Incidentally, the footage of the incident distinctly shows a man with a microphone addressing the participants of the torch procession, who called the hotel a contemporary brothel and clearly encouraged “sending them [the hotel – B.P.] our warmest regards with fireworks, smoke bombs and the like”. According to the opposition, therefore, this unidentified man was a specially trained provocateur and that the Svoboda association condemns the provocation. Upon a closer examination of the incident, a decision was taken to expel from the association the two members who allowed themselves to be involved in the incident.¹⁴

In the above-described incident, the spectacular staged event – the attempted arson of the entrance to a hotel – was meant to undermine the reputation of the right within the Euro-Maidan political spectrum, an intention which, incidentally, was attested in a blog post on Українська правда (Ukrainian Truth) by Andriy Okara, a political strategist and political scientist:

While Svoboda intellectuals go around Kyiv setting fire to the entrances of luxury hotels making for excellent video footage for Russian and Western news channels and contributing to stories along the lines of ‘Ukrainian Maidan-esque fascism posing ultimate threat to mankind’, EuroMaidan has found itself in grave danger, but this time the danger is to do with information working against it.¹⁵

On the other hand, the authorities have launched counterattacks by imitating the tactics that the opposition has employed: accusing the other side of provocations.

With exactly this purpose in mind, the authorities have resorted to a special category of people:

At one time, in Kyiv near subway Voksalna (Ukr. Railway station), unknown persons gathered homeless people and gave 80 hryvnya to each of them. They wanted these people to go to EuroMaidan to ‘chant and kill’.¹⁶

In December 2013, Tetiana Chornovol, a journalist known for her investigations of massive abuse of power by the ruling party (Party of Regions) and exposés of corrupt practices by government officials, was brutally beaten after she spent a day taking pictures of the residencies of Interior Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko

¹⁴ Available: http://zaxid.net/home/showSingleNews.do?u_kiyivskomu_budinku_profspilok_poperedili_sprobu_pidpalu&objectId=1300269 [2014, January 2].

¹⁵ *Statement issued by Svoboda press service*. Available: <http://www.svoboda.org.ua/diyalnist/novyny/046138> [2014, January 2].

¹⁶ A. Okara, *Russian loans and cheap gas – only in exchange for elimination of Maidan?* Available: <http://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/okara/52c58c51666a2/> [2014, January 3].

and Prosecutor General Viktor Pshonka. The opposition and human rights activists accused the authorities of being behind the assault. However, even well before the investigation, the pro-government Party of Regions alleged that what happened was in the interests of the opposition. Mykola Dzyha, a Party of Regions member, claimed:

It seems that provocations against activists are convenient for the opposition as an attack on a pro-European activist would give a much-needed boost to Maidan at a time when it is quickly losing momentum. With this, they would be getting a new opportunity to shout about 'reprisals' and 'political repressions' and by so doing rally their supporters, who are by now growing weary of a lack of activity on Maidan.¹⁷

We are, therefore, close to a conclusion that of all pseudo-events, there is a distinctly identifiable category, which – on account of its very spectacularity – is specifically designed for widespread media coverage. This coverage usually aims at modifying political decisions by bringing about a shift in public opinion both inside the country and abroad. The considerable media potential that such events have makes people in charge of them resort to any methods and techniques available to them, including ones that are outside the law.

In other words, the model of the impact of spectacular criminal provocations that we have described is based on the assumption that modern commercial mass media, especially television, cannot resist putting on the air sensational, visually striking material, like the 9/11 events of 2001 or other terror attacks. So here is how it happens. To begin with, let us try to get inside the mind of a person that intends to mislead the public by manipulation. The first thing to do would be to try and visualize an event that could "do the job", preferably one of brutal and violent character, which is capable of having a desirable political impact, for example, by causing outrage or fear in a part of their audience. Then the plan is put into action. In the Ukrainian scenario, it involved hiring people specifically for the purpose of provocations. This meant brutally attacking police (riot police) and even using a bulldozer (brought here in advance specifically for this purpose) in front of the president's administration. Their calculation was that these acts would also "inspire" peaceful protesters to join in. Once some of the protesters did "swallow the bait" and got involved, the provocateurs vanished into thin air and even hid behind the riot police, who, importantly, played along. They acted (the police) as if the provocateurs were not there. Instead, the police started beating up the activists and even passers-by, who had had nothing to do with it. As a result, over 100 people got injured, some of them seriously. Interestingly enough, not only the protesters swallowed the bait, but even the media people (cameramen, TV reporters etc.). As a consequence, this footage showing uncontrollably wild mobs, which almost immediately appeared on all news channels, prepared the world public opinion that if the government were

¹⁷ Available: <http://maidan.in.ua/page/10> [2013, December 13].

to declare a state of emergency, it would be completely justified. This perception by the world would be exactly what the “script-writers” had in mind.

What will, no doubt, strike the reader as odd about this model is the media constituent, which appears to be one that is the most rigid, inflexible, and unchanging. If we were to use the metaphor of Internet phishing here, mass media – in a kind of pun – comes across as a big ‘fish’, which is prepared to swallow just about anything, as long as it is sensational, shocking and visually striking enough. Here it might be a good idea to make a reference to Neil Postman’s seminal book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which discusses television and makes a point that TV, as a medium, by virtue of its very nature, cannot be altered, improved upon just because it constitutes pure infotainment. “Indeed, we may have reached the point where cosmetics has replaced ideology”.¹⁸ If we were to expand Postman’s observation, it might be safe to argue that television is not only about amusing ourselves, but also about scaring ourselves to death.

To sum up, this model is made up of four basic elements: (1) the idea that is conceived by a spin doctor; (2) the execution of the idea through staging a “scene” in a maximally attention-grabbing and visually irresistible manner (importantly, it should unfold in front of the rolling cameras, as was the case with Maidan. It was there that most news agencies and TV channels were located and what happened was right in front of their lenses). If the “performance” goes according to the spin-doctor’s plan, the media will swallow the bait and the picture will be all over the news and it will become a “player” in successive politics by informing attitudes toward the Ukrainian issue. As a result, the U.S. State Secretary John Kerry, for example, to the delight of the spin doctor(s) and the polical mastermind(s) behind it, will issue a statement urging utmost restraint on BOTH sides, which is exactly what the ruling political elites need as it, in equal measure, discredits the opponents of the regime as well.¹⁹

This situation, however, begs the question of why respectable news networks are unable to resist the temptation of broadcasting provocateur-orchestrated visually attractive footage? We will confine ourselves to an interpretation of this situation in terms of the theory of infotainment. The visual appeal seems to be given precedence over everything else, which can be explained by:

- a) distorted tastes and preferences of the viewing public, which wishes to approach news as a kind of entertainment, including where it is not only amusing but also scary;
- b) the fact that there always exists a risk of the popularity of the television channel going down, which necessarily entails reduced advertising. This is-

¹⁸ N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Statement on Events in Ukraine*. Available: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/12/218585.htm> [2013, December 3].

possible in the event of a more analytical coverage of the news and a more rigorous filtering of the visually attractive, if factually dubious, information.

This by no means suggests that the public should not demand that journalists pay closer attention to the footage and pictures they receive, no matter how entertaining and appealing they may seem. It is exactly what the Ukrainian public is doing, in particular through the words of Oksana Zabuzhko, a Ukrainian writer and public figure who we quoted earlier:

Please stop being sensationalist, and don't be so fast at spreading rumours on "the rally in Kiev getting violent". By your sensation-hunting, you play, without your own awareness, along the scenario of the coup spin-doctors: namely, you prepare in advance the public opinion of your countries "for the worst". Please be very cautious about ANY bit of "pro-violence" information that you might get. Ukrainian civil society is now seriously tested on its maturity, and its capacity for self-organization, and the last thing we need is being manipulated over through the world media – even if in all the good will.²⁰

The subject of the social responsibility of the media in covering Ukrainian EuroMaidan will become the topic of further study. I will add here, however, that even the most respectable news channels, such as CNN or Euronews, in reporting the events of December 1, 2013, did not act, from what I observed, in accordance with the principles of socially responsible media. As one may know, the theory postulates that "it is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact".²¹ This is exactly the approach that supposedly underlies reporting and editorial policy of the afore-mentioned channels. However, with respect to the above-described events of December 1, these channels, at best, reported the facts truthfully, meaning that they showed a visually spectacular picture, which, in fact, was nothing other than a spectacular pseudo-event. The information policies pursued by these channels lead us to place CNN and Euronews – on an abstract scale between the theory of social responsibility of the media on one end and the infotainment theory on the other – closer to infotainment. At the same time, we are fully aware that such a conclusion may be somewhat premature as it is based on the limited analysis of several news reports. Further investigation of the issues discussed here will follow shortly.

²⁰ O. Zabuzhko, *Dear Western friends...*

²¹ F.S. Siebert, T. Peterson, W. Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973, p. 88.

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