



The Coverage and Reception of
the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict



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Alternative versus Mainstream Media Discourse? Shifting Boundaries: The Curious Case of Stephen Fry

Corina Selejan
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

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Context



- **Hot War Tourism:** travel to “locations, which are currently experiencing conflict and violence, or are still recovering from such events” (Piekarz 2007)
 - Scarcity of mainstream printed/AV texts versus a profusion of YouTube vlogs/travelogues, some of the latter evincing titles challenging mainstream representations of the conflict (e.g. “Everyone Told Me Kyiv was Dangerous, but...”; “Don’t TRUST The Media: I Went To Ukraine”; “Inside Ukraine During the War! Kyiv Dangerous Now?”)
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Stephen Fry into Ukraine

- Premiered on 31 July 2024 on *Planet Fry* channel (set up less than a month before)



Planet Fry ✓

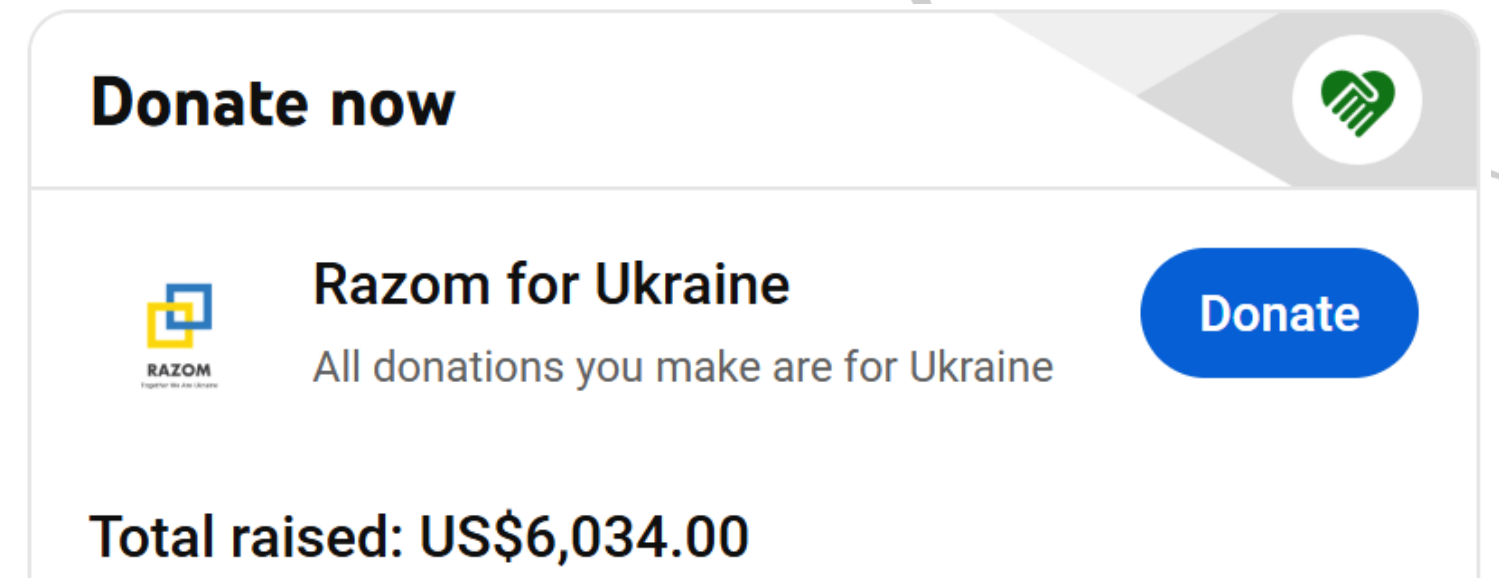
57.3K subscribers



325,450 views Premiered on 31 Jul 2024

Stephen Fry is invited to Kyiv by First Lady Olena Zelenska to co-host a conference on mental health in time of war. He discusses the war with President Zelensky, and tells him jokes. He meets amputees and the recently bereaved, Azov brigade survivors, and artist Nikita Titov. He experiences an air raid for the first time while a stint at standup makes him realise just how important humour has become to survive the war. At the Babyn Yar memorial to the holocaust he considers Ukraine's bloody history.

Genre(s)



- (allegedly independent) advocacy documentary (“Fundraiser”):
 - Professed aim: raising awareness with regard to mental health issues in a country at war
- Travelogue/ vernacular YouTube genre
- Yet: celebrity-driven (not just Fry, but also Olena Zelenska and Volodymyr Zelenski, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, artist Nikita Titov)
- But also personality-driven: Fry’s highly personal note – comedian, but also diagnosed with bipolar disorder; also: Jewish → visit to Babyn Yar memorial (33,000 Jewish people killed in 1941 by Ukrainians)

Sound



- **Dialogue/ sit-down interviews** with injured combatants, doctors, war widows and other relatives of deceased combatants, former prisoners, the President and First Lady, artists
→ sense of authenticity & authority, grassroots testimony;
- **Narration:**
 - diegetic: especially at the beginning, in the train compartment ('setting the stage');
 - non-diegetic: **11.1% voiceover** (Fry's acousmatic voice, close miking, non-declamatory style → sense of intimacy instead of detached "Voice-of-God"); occasionally meta-discursive: "after the somber reflections [...] I'm tempted to lighten the mood" (38:18)
- **Music:**
 - diegetic: trumpet player in park (20:25); group of teenage singers at summit (29:44)
 - non-diegetic: violin & piano music (0:01)

Language

- Title: why “into Ukraine” and not “in Ukraine”?
- Expletives
- Moral(istic) vocabulary:
 - “do you think you will forgive the Russians?” (9:24)
 - “I hope that, uh, all Russia will disappear” (9:54)
 - “do you blame Putin and Russia?” (19:36)
 - “I blame Russia, I blame Russians, every single Russian, because this is not just the responsibility of Putin [...]
 - “will you ever forgive the Russians for what they’ve done?” (24:19)

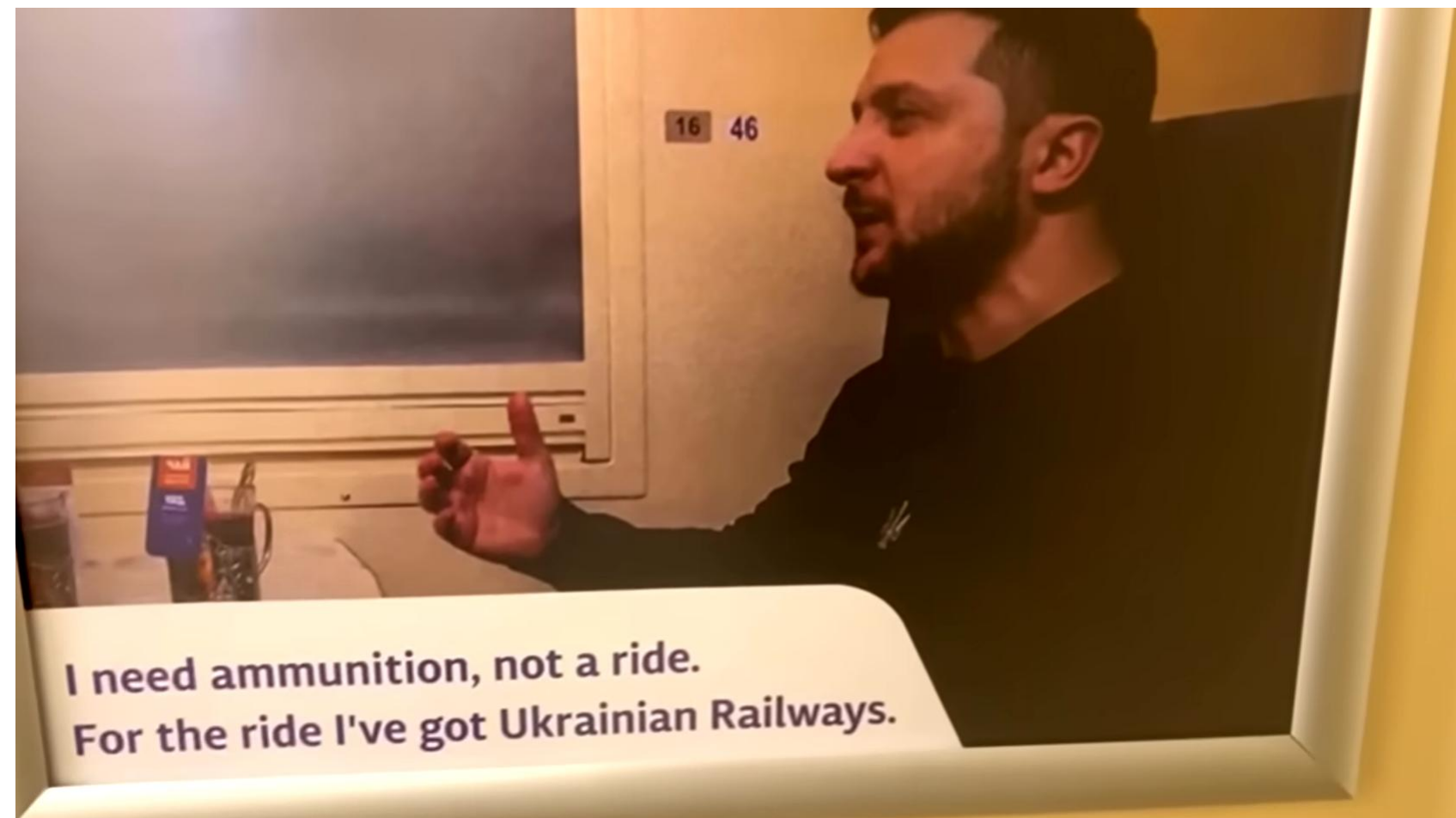
Image



- (increasingly) quick-cutting editing style (pre-empting audience impatience?);
- Mise-en-scène: diverse (including ER, air raid shelter, presidential office, but also relaxed, casual: bars, cafés, parks, memorial sites)
- Incorporation of emotionally impactful footage (bombardment, 1932-1933 famine, a video from one of the victims saying “There is a war, brothers.”)
- (vlog-like) inclusion of embodied filmmaker in the film (intrusive)
 - e.g. intro: medium shots and close-ups of Fry (2 cameramen with steadicams) speaking directly into camera 1)
 - Interviews (shot-reverse-shot pattern & compliance with 180° axis system → continuity style)

Image

- Fry's argumentation = supplemented by Ukrainian advocacy posters (against the background of Fry's voiceover)



2:10 – 2:14



1:03 – 1:06

Whither the “mainstream vs. alternative media” distinction?

- Are the boundaries still useful, however porous and volatile they may be?
- Has YouTube delivered on its democratization promise?
- “YouTube is now mainstream media”, but also “a site of vernacular creativity and cultural chaos” (Burgess & Green 2018)
- Is the new media truly grassroots, collaborative, independent, customizable, empowering and democratic (Turner 2010)?

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Contact

 grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon

 grant.corecon@ulbsibiu.ro

 corina.selejan@ulbsibiu.ro

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