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# On the Existence of Mikhailov

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In a seminal piece of anthropological research that has quickly become a classic, William Arens examined the credibility of the evidence for the existence of cannibalism as a social phenomenon, and concluded that the evidence was exceedingly weak (Arens, 1979). In fact, he concluded that while cannibalism had undoubtedly occurred in isolated “in extremis” situations, there was no good evidence for the existence of cannibalism as a routine social mechanism.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, the author was prompted to examine the evidence for the existence of A.I. Mikhailov, the legendary and apparently near-ubiquitous Soviet information scientist. At first glance this might seem unwarranted and gratuitous. After all, the appearance of Mikhailov, or at least his name, in the program was a fixture of international library and information science conferences for years, even decades. However, the actual appearance of Mikhailov at those conferences has been exceedingly, indeed it would appear vanishingly, small, and it was the realization of the consistency of this phenomenon, deriving from numerous informal conference conversations, that catalyzed the etiology of this project.

## Procedure

The author interviewed 67 information colleagues at several recent international meetings. The selection criteria was admittedly nonrigorous – it was simply those information scientists known to the author to be active internationally and likely to have encountered Mikhailov (43 cases), or further informants, recommended by two or more of the first set of informants as someone who was particularly likely to have met Mikhailov at a personal level (24 cases).

Number of Scheduled Appearances by Mikhailov	Number of Respondents Reporting
More than a dozen times	22
6-12 times	31
2-6 times	11
Once	3

Table 1. Number of meetings attended by individual respondents at which Mikhailov was scheduled to speak.

## Results

All 67 respondents reported having been at professional meetings at which Mikhailov was scheduled to be on the program, in most cases many such meetings (delineated above in Table 1).

Strikingly different, however, was the response to the question as to how often the respondent had actually seen Mikhailov or someone alleged to be Mikhailov. (Note: the question actually administered was “How often did you see or meet Mikhailov?,” so that the administration of the question would convey no negative bias as to the existence or reality of Mikhailov.) Comparatively few respondents, 21 or 31%, reported ever having seen or met Mikhailov; that is, 69% of the respondents reported never having seen or met Mikhailov. Indeed, 12 of the 22 respondents (55%) who reported having seen Mikhailov’s name more than a dozen times in a program of a conference they attended had never seen or met Mikhailov.

What the respondents did report with some frequency was the phenomenon of some substitute reading Mikhailov’s paper. Sixty-two of the 67 respondents (93%) reported this occurrence.

The 21 respondents who reported having met Mikhailov were interviewed in more detail. Seventeen of the respondents reported having seen Mikhailov deliver a paper, and nine reported having actually met Mikhailov. Eight persons reported having seen or met Mikhailov more than once. When the respondents were asked to describe Mikhailov, however, there was a striking degree of dissimilarity in their reports. All respondents agreed that Mikhailov was male, of advanced years, white-haired, and of intermediate to tall height, when they had seen him. However, ten of the respondents described Mikhailov as balding (quite conspicuously so, was the consensus of this group), while six respondents describe him as having a full shock of white hair, and five respondents were not sure. In similar fashion, nine respondents reported that Mikhailov had a moustache, seven reported that Mikhailov was clean-shaven, and five were unsure. Furthermore, there was a high degree of correspondence between these two sets of observations, as Table 2 below demonstrates.

Scalp Hirsuteness	Facial Hirsutiness	Number of Respondents Reporting
Balding	Moustache	9
Balding	Not sure	1
Full shock	Clean shaven	6
Not sure	Clean shaven	1
Not sure	Not sure	4

Table 2. Observations on Mikhailov appearance.

Two obvious clusters emerge – balding with moustache, and clean-shaven with a full shock of hair. In all these instances, this observation was volunteered by, not prompted from, the respondents.

Of particular interest is the four candidates in the “not sure – not sure” category. Three of these four respondents were not simply unobservant; quite the contrary, they were “not sure” because (it was revealed after further probing) they had the uneasy conviction that the person they had met and who was represented to be Mikhailov on one occasion was not the same person they had met on another occasion and who was similarly represented to be Mikhailov.

Further questions were asked of the nine respondents who reported actually meeting Mikhailov. Interestingly, none of the nine respondents reported having met Mikhailov in circumstances when he was not accompanied by at least three other people. The respondents were queried as to whether the conversational interaction with Mikhailov was relatively superficial (three respondents) or whether there were technical matters discussed (six respondents). In the latter category, all six respondents reported that when a technical question was addressed to Mikhailov, some person other than Mikhailov responded. Or, transposing that response, there was no report of a person who was represented to be Mikhailov responding to a technical question. This was not simply a question of translation. The observation was that in no case did the person who was represented to be Mikhailov participate to any noticeable degree in either the delivery or the origination of the response.

At the very least, it appears that there were at least two persons who were represented to be Mikhailov, and if so, at least one of them must have been an imposter. This situation would be similar to the well-known substitution of an actor for Field Marshall Montgomery in World War II in order to confuse German intelligence.

The other plausible hypothesis is simply that there was no Mikhailov, or at least that all of the persons represented to be Mikhailov were imposters. A closer examination of the six respondents who had the opportunity to address relatively technical questions to Mikhailov supports this hypothesis. Two of those six remembered Mikhailov as balding with a moustache, two as clean-shaven with a full shock of hair and the remaining two were in the “not sure – not sure” category because they remembered being introduced, as it were, to different versions of Mikhailov. If there had been a real Mikhailov with occasional or even routine substitutions, one would expect that there would be at least some reports of Mikhailov participating in the response to a technical question.

The somewhat unsettling results of the study above were brought to the attention of seven Russian information scientists permanently or temporarily resident in the U.S. Of the seven, five reported that indeed they knew of no concrete evidence for the existence of Mikhailov. Two Russians, however, confidently maintained that Mikhailov had existed and that they personally had known him well. Those two respondents, however, were the two that were visiting the U.S. and planning to return to Russia. Furthermore, they disagreed as to Mikhailov’s appearance, one opting for balding with a moustache, and the other for clean[-]shaven with ample hair.

It is difficult to prove a negative, but the available evidence seems to indicate strongly that there may never have been an A. I. Mikhailov, or that if there were, virtually all public appearances were by someone else posing as him. The motivation for such a state of affairs remains obscure, and deserves further analysis. Possibly, informetric analysis of the publications attributed to Mikhailov will shed further light on the subject. We also have some confidence that Llewellyn C. Puppybreath, the noted authority on illusive conference attendees, will be able to help illuminate the subject, but to date we have not been able to establish communications with him.

## References

- The Man-Eating Myth, Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, W. Ahrens, 1979, New York, Oxford University Press.
- “The Beginnings of Brazilian Anthropology; Jesuits and Tupinamba Cannibalism,” D.W. Forsyth, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 39, 1983, pp. 147-8.

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## Note

1. This conclusion is not universally accepted. Forsyth, for example, argues that the writings of numerous Jesuit missionaries in Brazil in the sixteenth century makes a very strong case for cannibalism among the indigenous Tupi-speaking Indians (Forsyth, 1983). Most anthropologists would agree, however, that Arens has demonstrated, at the very least, that the extent of cannibalism had been greatly exaggerated.

*[EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was originally published in 1993, in the Journal of the American Society for Information Science (vol. 44, no. 10, pp. 588-9.) We are reprinting it here with the kind permission of the author and of the publisher. The author is now Dean of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University, Brookville, New York.]*

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