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Aleksander Żołnierski / Dariusz Jaruga (eds.)

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Aleksander Żołnierski - Institute of Economics, Polish Academy of Sciences

Dariusz Jaruga - Faculty of Political Science and International Studies,
University of Warsaw

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Olesia Medynska

Disinformation Narratives of Social Media in the Context of Social Transformations

Introduction

Disinformation has become a part of the information environment, especially in periods of social transformation. For Ukraine, disinformation remains to be a serious threat as it is one of the main tools applied by the Russian Federation during the war. Disinformation encourages the destabilisation of society and provides ground for conflict-generating situations and potential combat actions. In conditions of a psychologically unstable society, people will accept as true any content which is generated by social media and which corresponds to their emotions rather than to rational thinking.

The analysis of processes taking place in the modern information environment demonstrates an increasing influence of social media on mass consciousness. In conditions of social transformations and states of emergency – revolutions, pandemics and wars – the problem becomes more exacerbated since it is the physical rather than informational security of the citizens that depends on whether the facts they have received are true or false. In this context, identification of disinformation narratives in the social media discourse in order to protect society from their destructive influences and to find the ways of countering them appears to be especially relevant.

Results of the Research

The purpose of this research is to identify the content-related priorities of disinformation narratives in social media in periods of social transformation.

The goal of the research is to outline the definitions for such terms as “narrative”, “disinformation”, “disinformation narrative”; to present various approaches to classification of disinformation in scientific and practical discourse; to perform monitoring of social media in order to identify disinformation constructs; to classify disinformation narratives; and to suggest ways of countering them.

To achieve the goals we have set, the systemic-functional analysis was used, which envisaged the application of a series of methods and approaches. General research methods: analysis of academic literature was used to outline the conceptual structure of the research; descriptive method – to observe and interpret disinformation narratives; classification method – to distinguish various kinds of disinformation narratives; content analysis method – to explore the disinformation content in social media; synthesis and generalisation – to systematise and separate results of analysis of disinformation narratives in social media.

Disinformation and its discursive characteristics have been a subject of research for both Ukrainian and international scientists, media experts, and information environment explorers. The problems of conceptualisation of the term “disinformation” are an integral part of studies undertaken by Floridi and Fallis. The role of disinformation in information-psychological operations was explored by Petryk, Shtokvysh, Pocheptsov and Prysiashniuk. Methods of countering disinformation were considered in the works by Stray, Giussani, Fursai, and Danylenko. The issue of studying the role of narratives in the consciousness of modern society was the focus of research works by Hutsol, Isakova, Karpyleko, Surina, Sushyi, and Shkil. The interconnection of mythological and ideologemic constructs in the hybrid warfare was studied by Zelenin, Kononenko, Magda, Mylchenko, Nagorna, Perekhnoskyi, Pocheptsov, Rozumnyi, Stiazhkina, and Yavorska. Influences on mass consciousness through the concept of information warfare were explored by Chernova, Grushyn, Lysenko, Diligenskyi, Olshanskyi, Fromm, Panaryn, Libicki, McLuhan, Kara-Murza, Moscovici, Linebarger, Senchenko, and Varyvoda. At the same time, in spite of the incontestable value of their contributions, the scientific discourse lacks research works focusing on disinformation narratives of social media, which suggests the choice of this topic.

The point of departure of this research is clarifying the essence of the notion of “disinformation” since without first doing so, one cannot identify disinformation narratives and understand the nature of their creation. Let us study the definitions of this notion, “disinformation”, as given by different researchers, and its theoretical construct. Fallis, an American scientist, remarks that disinformation is non-accidentally misleading information [6]. The Oxford English Dictionary interprets disinformation as “false information that is given deliberately” [9]. The European Commission defines disinformation as “false or misleading content that is created, presented and spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm” [5]. A Ukrainian researcher, Pocheptsov notes that disinformation features “a special emotional

breadth that facilitates spreading disinformation narratives across large masses of people”; it is difficult to disprove; it promotes an “imagined virtual object which engages actively in breaking the conventional worldview”; it encourages the object of disinformation to commit certain actions which put the subject of disinformation to advantage; a “deliberate deception” [10]. The educational platform EdEra in cooperation with IREX provides the following definition: disinformation is “manipulative audio / video content created deliberately. It combines two features: being false and having the intention to cause harm” [3]. Media experts from the Institute of Mass Information understand disinformation as “purposeful spreading of false information, use of manipulations for deception and misleading, and provoking loss of trust to any source of information” [8], while distinguishing such qualities of this phenomenon as deliberate dissemination of false information and teleological nature. Researchers from the online education platform Prometheus emphasise that it is “false, manipulative and/or deceptive information which is spread deliberately to achieve a certain political goal” [13]. Analysts from TEXTY.ORG.UA believe that the notion of “disinformation” suggests an emphasis on a certain pattern of worldview, an opinion – the so-called spin [14]. Experts from Detektor Media note that disinformation is dissemination of false information, distorting facts with the purpose of influencing opinions and behaviour of an individual or society, and making social groups believe in a worldview which is different from reality [4]. Urška Umek, Head of the Department of Information Society, Council of Europe, claims that it is “messages that deliberately manipulate facts and reality with the aim of inflicting damage or gaining financial profit; fabricated or deliberately modified audio/visual content, or specially created conspiracy theories or rumors” [1]. According to Koretska, disinformation is public dissemination of false information which was not checked or was proved to be false, and which has, or may have negative consequences for implementation of people’s constitutional rights and/or threaten national security [7].

Having analysed the above-mentioned definitions for the term “disinformation”, we can distinguish its conceptual features: significance of information, falsity or deceptiveness, specifically formed data, purposeful spreading of data, the intention to deceive or harm, teleological nature, systematicity, and emotional breadth.

Having explored various scientific approaches to defining this term, one can conclude that disinformation should be viewed both in a narrow and enlarged sense of the word. In the narrow sense it is false information, deliberately prepared and spread in order to achieve a predetermined political, economic or ideological goal. In the enlarged sense, it is a purposeful process of creating,

modifying and disseminating information, both false and true, with the purpose of deceiving a person (a group of people) to achieve a political, economic or ideological goal; as a result, human rights / civil rights / rights of the public / rights of state are infringed or may be infringed.

A structural element of disinformation is narrative. Narrative is a “story, interpretation of events that strives to create a desired attitude of the target audience towards the object of such story” [2]; “a plot-and-narration form of organizing the text, a kind of discourse, the subject and meaning contents of which has the status of an event and is characterised by telling a certain story” [15]. The main characteristics of the emergence of narrative is formation of a mysterious plot that consists of selection and arrangement of events and actions which are being told about, and it turns the storyline into an accomplished and complete story that has the beginning, the main part, and the end. The plot is an aggregate of connections, with the help of which events are transformed into a story, or a story emerges from a chain of events, respectively. In other words, a plot appears as an intermediary between an event and a story. A narrative includes all features of a narration text (author, characters, events, storyline etc.) and forms a kind of frame into which real events are inserted in order to be understood and comprehended.

A narrative includes three basic dimensions: semantic (story), mental (representation of the story’s world) and discursive (form and style of communication). With the help of narratives, which are actually certain models of stories about true or imagined reality, mass consciousness is manipulated, notions are substituted, and society is integrated into the “pre-determined text” of the narration, while social tensions are created that can transform into certain actions.

With the purpose of accurate separation of disinformation narratives in social media, the following original definition of this term may be proposed. A “disinformation narrative” is a story, a distorted interpretation of reality / event which accumulates and transmits an author’s (subjective) systems of senses, and which is aimed at the mass audience with the purpose of influencing their opinions, behaviour and perception.

In the period of social transformations, in addition to strategic (state-generated) narratives highlighting changes in the social reality, the information environment becomes filled with disinformation narratives as well. Within the context of various social and political processes in Ukraine (the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea, the COVID pandemics, the

economic crisis, the Russian-Ukrainian war, migration processes), it is narratives combining means of ideological, mythological and symbolic nature that form a distorted imagined reality, within the framework of which tailored models of identity, communication, thoughts, judgements and choice of values are offered. Taking into account the transformations taking place in Ukraine, the paradigmatic changes in the principles of forming and implementing state policies, the increasing influence of communities and civil society on political decision-making, using crises and discrepancies in worldview and values of various parts of the society, disinformation narratives are deepening the current destruction and divisions.

A great amount of disinformation is spread through social media where technologies of parallel and cross-cultural communicative strategies are actively used along with other tactics.

Today, social media are quickly gaining popularity while covering immense audiences, which is demonstrated by the results of monitoring surveys performed by the results of monitoring surveys performed by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in 2020 and Kantar CMeter research group in 2022. The survey by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology indicates that respondents distinguish four platforms of social media as their sources of information (see Fig. 1). The dominant social media are YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Less popular with the respondents are TikTok, Twitter etc. [11].

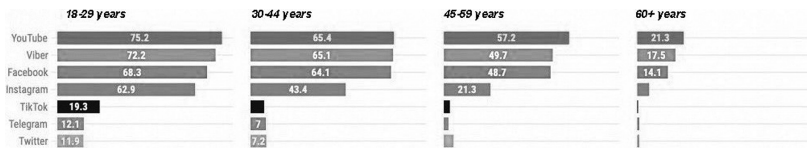


Fig. 1. The level of trust in social media

According to the survey by Kantar CMeter (January–March 2022), the respondents most often chose their sources of information to be such social media as YouTube and Facebook (See Fig. 2) [12].

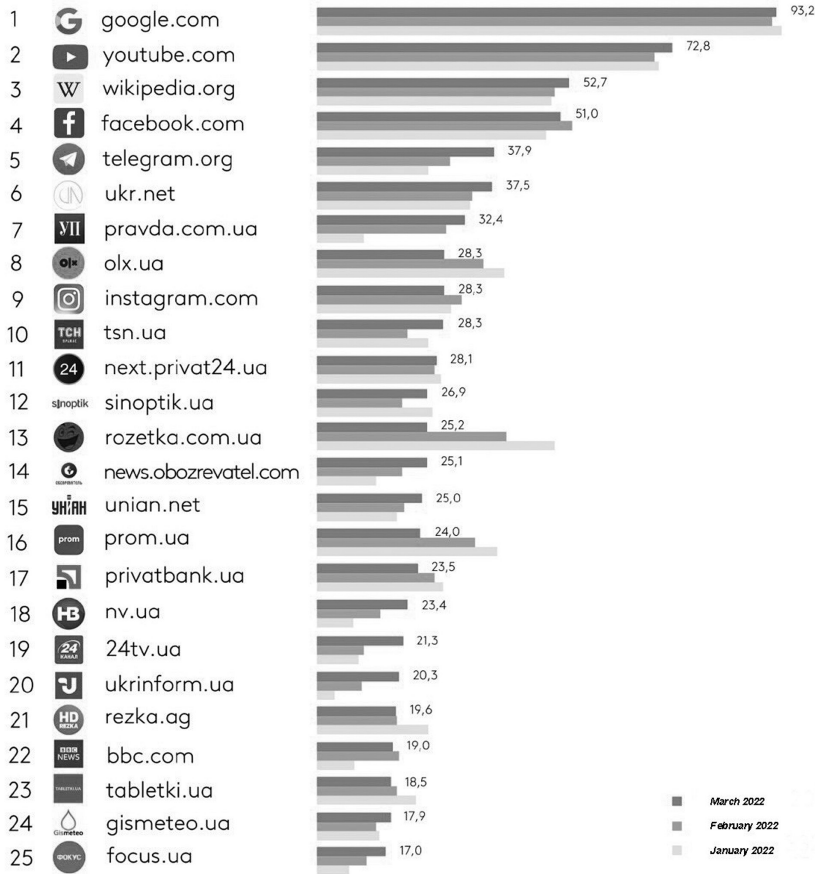


Fig. 2. The rating of popular websites

The key broadcasters of disinformation narratives appear to be the most popular social media – Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

In the course of our research, we have discovered domination of pro-Russian / Kremlin and anti-Western narratives, whose disinformation flows were intensively spread by the aforementioned social media, with a considerable effect on the people’s mass consciousness.

The objects of disinformation include the country’s government, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteer battalions, the country’s population, national

minorities, social groups, international organisations (NATO, UN, EU, WEU, IMF, CE, OSCE, IAEA), governments and population of the world's leading countries.

Let us distinguish the main features of disinformation narratives in social media:

1. Purposefulness.
2. Being based on some “falseness” which can be checked.
3. Being integrated into certain worldview patterns, and conformity to certain beliefs.
4. Construction of a specific hyperreality where people and physical objects are incorporated.
5. Being related to socially significant events, including socially important information which is sensitive or of symbolic value.
6. Irrationality, emotionality, evaluative nature, expressiveness and persuasiveness.
7. Negative (socially dangerous) consequences (anti-vaccination or imperialist motives).

The following types of disinformation can be distinguished in social media:

- (1) deceiving a specific person or a group of people by providing misleading information as the grounds for making a particular decision;
- (2) modification of the information flow which consists in selective presentation of information;
- (3) white noise – the technique of framing true information with false versions which are supported by certain evidence, facts and witnesses.

The disinformation narratives analysed here can be classified as follows:

1. *By the motivation to create them*: political, financial (subjects construct disinformation materials for financial gain) and socio-psychological motivations (purposeful creation of disinformation to achieve informational-psychological influence which forms a psycho-emotional response from the object of such influence, and it results in changes in perception of reality, correction of an individual's worldview in the direction which is advantageous for the subject of disinformation).
2. *By the goals of informational-psychological influence*: gaining an information advantage, changing people's worldview, disorganisation and disorientation, elimination of Ukraine's information structure, destruction of Ukrainian values, and protection of pro-Russian views.

3. *By territorial principle*: local (concerning a certain population centre, city, district or oblast), regional (concerning a certain region within one country), national, international (concerning several countries).
4. *By topic*: political, social, cultural, religious, historical.

Political Disinformation Narratives

Having monitored social media, one can state that in the circumstances of social changes, particularly in the periods of the Revolution of Dignity, annexation of Crimea, ATO/JFO, the COVID-19 pandemics, the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, migration processes the most frequently broadcasted disinformation narratives were of political topics.

Disinformation narratives are characterised here as follows: defining objects of disinformation, separating metanarratives, formulating their goals, identifying derived sub-narratives and channels of dissemination.

I. *Disinformation object*: the Ukrainian state and its institutions.

Metanarrative: Ukraine is a dysfunctional state / Ukraine is a failed state.

The goal of the metanarrative: damaging Ukraine's image and authority.

Examples of derived sub-narratives: "Ukraine is a failure of the state"; "Ukraine is the land of chaos, radicals and Nazis"; "Ukraine is a mess"; "Ukraine is dominated by unprecedented neo-Nazism and antisemitism"; "Ukraine has no freedom of speech"; "In Ukraine, Russophobia dominates, and Fascism flourishes"; "Ukraine causes a global food crisis."

Dissemination channels. Disinformation narratives about Ukraine were most frequently spread through Facebook communities and on YouTube channels.

II. *Disinformation object*: authorities (the President of Ukraine, government, local self-government bodies).

Metanarrative: External governance of Ukraine, The Ukrainian authorities are neo-Nazi, illegitimate and discredited.

Goal: discrediting Ukraine's political authorities; demonstrating the incapability of Ukrainian authorities and the divided society; pressure on the political authorities with the purpose of securing certain decisions in the field of politics.

Examples: "Ukraine is a Western puppet"; "The West in general, and the United States in particular, have taken Ukraine under control"; "Soros minions in the authorities are agents of external governance"; "There are certain misunderstandings or tensions between the political leadership of the West and Ukraine";

“Ukrainian government is corrupt and incompetent”; “There is a clear conflict among the Ukrainian authorities”; “The illegal junta in Kyiv”; “Neo-Nazis have seized power in Ukraine”; “Ukrainians need a new government”; “The Ukrainian government capitulates”; “Citizens of Ukraine are dissatisfied with their authorities, which will cause destabilization, mass protests and early elections”; “The President of Ukraine launches repressive measures against pro-Russian media”; “Zelensky’s power is weak, he has no control over the situation, and he will be removed when the right time comes”; “Due to decentralization, regions will no longer listen to the weak Kyiv”; “Zelensky won’t take the risk of fulfilling his promises as he is controlled by oligarchs and Soros”; “The Ukrainian authorities do not adhere to the Minsk agreements and breaches the arrangements”; “The President acts primarily in the interests of Western Ukraine and ignores Russian-speaking regions.”

Dissemination channels: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

III. *Disinformation object:* The Revolution of Dignity (protesters, public figures, representatives of political parties, volunteers, medics).

Metanarrative: The Revolution of Dignity is an unconstitutional seizure of power by force, an armed coup d’état.

Goal: encouraging a division of society, denying expression of Ukrainians’ will.

Examples: Events on Maidan are an armed coup d’état with the support of Western security services that resulted in the loss of Crimea, civil war and deterioration in Ukrainians’ quality of life; nationalists stand on Maidan; Struggle of nationalist forces supported by the West; The Revolution of Dignity was supported by the West; The Euromaidan led to Ukraine’s break-up in all areas; Ukrainians bit at the Western bait and can’t recover from the consequences; The Revolution of Dignity resulted in a financial and economic crisis; The Revolution of Dignity is political mistake, and a wrong vector for Ukraine; The Revolution of Dignity led the country to a dictatorship; The Euromaidan is the victory of Russophobia.

The disinformation narratives are full of myths and stereotypes that demonise Maidan, indulge in negative labelling and call for the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine to “defend themselves”. They create an image of the enemy personified in the new Kyiv authorities and the part of the Ukrainian people who strived to dismantle Yanukovich regime.

Dissemination channels: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

IV. *Disinformation object:* war (military authorities; the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteer battalions).

Metanarrative: Russia is an innocent victim; In Ukraine, there is a war / special military operation.

Goals: legitimisation of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; substantiation of the claim that Russia only acts in self-defence; focusing on Ukraine's defeats and concealing its achievements; discrediting the Ukrainian army; reducing people's trust in the AFU, volunteer battalions, local territorial defence units.

Examples: "Ukraine won't be able to hold out in the war against the Russian Federation and will quickly lose it"; "Ukraine is going to lose the war"; "With the help of the West, Ukraine was going to destroy the Russian Federation"; "Ukraine actually dreams of conquering Europe"; "Foreign mercenaries fight in Ukraine"; "The West made Russia attack Ukraine"; "Ukraine is all Nazi, so they should be denazified"; "We are losing but they don't tell us about it"; "The Ukrainian military poisons water supplies"; "AFU soldiers sold HIMARS to Russians for \$800,000"; "Mobilization in Ukraine is conducted with violations of laws"; "Ukrainian nationalists messed up evacuation from Mariupol"; "Ukrainians can't handle weapons / Ukrainian army is not combat-effective"; "Ukrainian military command doesn't take care of their soldiers and puts them at risk"; "The Ukrainian military breach the ceasefire"; "The Ukrainian military use disinformation to conceal their defeats / losses"; "Ukrainian soldiers do not receive the logistical support / compensation they are promised"; "The Ukrainian military are going to blow up a children's hospital in Kharkiv"; "Nationalists have struck at Kakhovka Hydroelectric Plant with Tochka-U missiles"; "Legalization of DPR/LPR"; "The killers of Donbas"; "Ukrainian troops are demoralized and don't want to fight"; "The Ukrainian military shell the people and civil infrastructure in the so-called DPR and LPR and commit genocide in Donbas"; "The Ukrainian army commits war crimes"; "The AFU consists of people with alcohol and drug addictions"; "Territorial defense units are cannon fodder, nobody is actually ready to fight"; "AFU fighters take away food from civilians, while the Russian army feeds the people of the occupied territories"; "The AFU has surrendered"; "The AFU are executing Mariupol residents"; "For the war to finish, Ukraine has to cede its territories"; "Azov are Nazis (they are shooting at population centers)."

Dissemination channels: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

V. *The object of disinformation:* international organisations (NATO, UN, EU, WEU, IMF, CE, OSCE, IAEA).

Metanarrative: European integration is a crime against the Ukrainian people; the EU is weak and divided.

Goal: creating distrust of the Ukrainian society for the European Union and NATO, the Alliance member states, international partners, their diabolisation and discreditation.

Examples: “The West exploits Ukraine and is destructive to the world order”; “A NATO general is arrested”; “NATO tries to surround Russia with the help of Ukrainians, and attempts to take over the world leadership using the military approach”; “The USA are rewriting the history of Ukraine and World War Two”; “The USA lobbied the ban of Russian social media”; “The USA is an aggressor which tries to unleash war in Donbas, using Ukraine as a tool”; “Poland wants to annex part of Ukraine”; “NATO countries have actually occupied Ukraine”; “The International Monetary Fund is controlling Ukraine”; “There are thousands of U.S. and Allied states military servicemen in the territory of Ukraine”; “The downfall of Western civilization is inevitable”; “The NATO response to the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the corresponding reinforcement of the Allied states in Central and Eastern Europe are a violation of the Alliance’s international obligations”; “The West is tired of Ukraine”; “NATO thinks in Cold War era categories”; “The Alliance planned to deploy ships and missiles in Crimea”; “All decisions in NATO are made by the United States”; “NATO is surrounding Russia”.

Dissemination channels: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

By way of generalisation, we can conclude that political disinformation narratives are tailored for: (1) citizens of Ukraine (except for the population of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and aimed at provoking feelings of disappointment and hopelessness regarding the “Western direction” among the patriotic-spirited members of the public; at reinforcing the desire of the pro-Russian part of the population to reestablish the dialogue with the Russian Federation on the conditions dictated by the Kremlin; at returning the territories occupied by the Russian Federation (except for Crimea and Donbas) to Ukraine but on the Kremlin’s conditions; at Ukraine’s abandonment of Crimea at the change of the current government and political elite in favour of pro-Russian authorities; (2) residents of the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and aimed at provoking the feeling that they won’t be able to return to Ukraine as long as it sticks to the pro-Western course; at provoking the feeling of hatred for the current government of Ukraine, NATO, the European Union, and the West in general; at blaming Ukraine for all social and economic problems; at creating a positive image of the Russian Federation and its leadership; at facilitating integration of the occupied territories into the linguistic, information and cultural space of the Russian Federation; at creating preconditions for returning the said regions to Ukraine after the government becomes a pro-Russian

one; (3) citizens of the European Union, the USA and international partners of Ukraine, and aimed at forming the image of Ukraine as a “failed state”; at creating an anti-Ukrainian discourse in Western media; at forming an information trend proving Ukraine’s historical appurtenance to the so-called “Russian world”; at impelling Western governments to weaken or revoke anti-Russian sanctions; at propagating the pro-Russian worldview; at removing the issue of occupation of Ukrainian territories from the socio-political agenda.

Social disinformation narratives. Having monitored social media, one can conclude that social disinformation narratives aimed at discreditation of internally displaced persons with consideration of their social and political status, age, peculiarities of national mentality, and religious views are actively generated online; such narratives also strive to discredit the Ukrainian health care system, as well as initiators of the medical reform etc. There is a series of disinformation narratives visible about internally displaced persons. In particular, the metanarrative “Due to nationalistic views dominating Western Ukraine, internally displaced persons have to leave their new homes” is actively spread in social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter), with the goal of discrimination based on territorial and worldview differences. Other examples may include such sub-narratives: “Refugees hate Western Ukraine because there are no combat actions”; “People in Western Ukraine are opposed to refugees who may take away their jobs”; “The West is unfriendly to refugees”; “All residents of Donbas are looking forward for Russians to come.”

In the course of monitoring, disinformation narratives are apparent concerning the country’s health care system / medical reform. The metanarrative “The health care system reform is ineffective”, which is intended to disqualify initiators of the medical reform and block its implementation, was spread throughout various communication platforms. It was accompanied with the following derived sub-narratives: “Suprun has liquidated standardization of medical aid”; “In the country of chronic epidemics, they have liquidated internship training for infectious diseases”; “Soros minions are interfering in health care”; “The health care reform has failed”; “Introduction of electronic medical records is dangerous for Ukrainians.” Social media were spreading destructive criticism against the former Minister of Health Uliana Suprun, who was blamed for the alleged failure of the medical reform and for her desire to “eliminate the Ukrainian nation”.

Results of the research indicate that disinformation narratives concerning COVID-19 account for a large volume of social media content. The metanarratives “Coronavirus is a fiction” and “Vaccinations are dangerous to health” have given rise to a number of sub-narratives, in particular: “Coronavirus is faked by politicians”; “Vaccination kills”; “Vaccines are of poor quality”; “Vaccination

against COVID-19 will be used to control the population”; “Ukraine is unable to protect its people against the pandemic”; “The government wants to give everyone a poor quality vaccine”; “Politicians / officials don’t tell us all the truth about the vaccine”; “Ukraine is supposed to use the Russian Sputnik vaccine but the external governance won’t allow it”; “Russia will supply vaccines to the DPR / LPR, Moldova and Transnistria”; “The Kremlin protects its people, but Ukraine will be left without any vaccines”; “Ukrainians will be used to test the vaccine”; “New strains of coronavirus are a part of the process to modernize biological weapons which are being tested on Ukrainians in secret laboratories in Ukraine under U.S. control”; “Bill Gates wants to implants chips to people’s bodies to control them”; “The USA planned to use Ukrainian birds and mosquitoes to transmit diseases and destroy the Slavic ethnos”; “Coronavirus is spread with 5G technology”; “Coronavirus is the attempt of world governments to control the population and reduce its numbers” etc.

The goals of disinformation narratives concerning COVID-19: denying the existence of coronavirus or belittling its danger; initiating protests and mass riots supporting refusal of vaccination; negative effects of vaccination; making havoc in the society; manipulating people’s opinion; stirring up hatred or provoking confrontations.

By the topics involved, disinformation narratives concerning coronavirus may be usefully divided into the following groups: 1) narratives about people ill with coronavirus: their number, personalities, correlations with race, gender and other characteristics (“Everything depends on the skin color: scientists surprised everyone with their new discoveries about coronavirus”, “People with a certain blood group are at greater risk to catch COVID-19”); 2) narratives concerning the virus: its origins (“China is where COVID-19 originated”, “Coronavirus is a development of American / Chinese scientists and it was created in a laboratory”, “COVID-19 is a weapon created by NATO”), causes for its emergence (“The development of coronavirus was sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation”), ways and means of its transmission (“Snakes are intermediate hosts of SARS-CoV-2”, “The virus is transmitted by mail”), structure, forms and size; 3) narratives containing pseudo medical advice: ways of treating and combating the illness, medicines and folk remedies, self-treatment (“The prevention method is to keep your throat moist”, “Advice from a young doctor Yuriy Klimov from Wuhan”), ways of self-diagnosing the virus; 4) anti-vaccination narratives (“Vaccines can’t save you from death”, “Vaccines cause mutations”, “CoviShield is of poor quality, so even African countries refused to take it”); 5) disinformation about social and economic consequences for the world order or certain region (“A few thousands of death from coronavirus triggered the global chaos”).

Their authors used various forms of presenting the disinformation content, including faked screenshots, videos, edited photos, documents, and stories of new coronavirus cases. The platforms most frequently engaged in spreading disinformation include Facebook (such groups as STOP Fake Pandemic, “Vaccination: Free Choice”), YouTube, and Instagram. Active agents who spread disinformation narratives concerning coronavirus on YouTube channels were bloggers Ostap Stakhiv, Anton Gura and Petro Sologub, who portrayed themselves as human rights activists.

Historical Disinformation Narratives

The object of disinformation includes Ukrainians, national minorities, and post-Soviet countries. The metanarrative “Ukraine is an artificial state that only emerged in the twentieth century thanks to the USSR” / “Ukraine is an artificially created state construct” / “Ukraine doesn’t have its own history” is broadcast through various communication channels.

The goals of historical disinformation narratives include the following: falsification of Ukrainian history; denial of Ukraine’s national identity; propagation of the myth of common history; glorification of the Soviet Union and its role; provocation of national and ethnic strife; support for separatist tendencies.

Let us adduce examples of derived sub-narratives: “Ukrainians are an eternal and inseparable part of the triune Russian nation”; “Common Soviet history”; “Little Russians lacking their own language and history”; “Historically, Ukraine was on the periphery of the former Russian Empire”; “Ukraine emerged as a result of Russian Bolsheviks’ and Lenin’s efforts”; “The USSR is a cradleland of nations”; “Ukrainians and Russians are a single brotherly nation”; “The Soviet Union was a superpower”; “Donbas is Russian”; “Crimea is Russian”; “Oppression of the Russian language in Ukraine”; “The Russian minority is subject to oppression in Ukraine”; “Discrimination and humiliation of the Russian national minority due to the Law on Indigenous Peoples”; “Russia has the right to combat fascism in other countries”; “In the USSR, people had a guaranteed pension”; “There was no Ukraine in the south, but there was the so-called Novorossiia”; “The Baltic states should be thankful for being allowed to secede from the Soviet Union”; “Russia has given the Baltic states the freedom which they dreamed of.”

Cultural Disinformation Narratives

The object of disinformation is Ukrainian culture (artists, cultural products, traditions). In the course of the analysis, we have distinguished disinformation narratives related to the authenticity of the Ukrainian culture: “Ukrainian

culture is poor”; “Russia is a civilization-building cultural center around which other countries should unite”; “Ukrainian culture is provincial”; Ukraine steals Cossack traditions from Russia”; “Shevchenko is a Russian-Ukrainian poet” etc. Goals of disinformation: marginalisation of Ukraine’s culture, bringing down Ukrainian cultural values.

Religious Disinformation Narratives

The object of disinformation is the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The metanarrative of “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) being the only canonical church in Ukraine, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine being just a schismatic organization” is actively spread in social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter). Its goal is to discredit the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and provoke religious conflict. It is accompanied with such derived sub-narratives: “The OCU is created by politicians to struggle against Russia”; “The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is not a canonical one”; “The OCU is under external governance – it is dependent on the Greek church, so there is no autocephaly”; “Zelensky failed to restore justice in regard to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and to stop religious conflicts because he (and the West) benefits from splitting the Ukrainian Orthodox community”; “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) is beyond politics and independent from Moscow”.

By request of the civil organisation Detektor Media, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) has carried out a survey to identify disinformation narratives in the Ukrainian segment of social media and explore Ukrainians’ reactions to social challenges. They have analysed over 23 million posts from eight target areas in such social media as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter.

The survey studied disinformation narratives concerning “external governance” and the coronavirus pandemic. According to the survey data, residents in southern and eastern regions of Ukraine tend to believe in “external governance”: 69% of the respondents think that cooperation with the International Monetary Fund causes Ukraine to be controlled from abroad; 20% believe that this cooperation gives Ukraine the aid it needs; 58% adhere to the opinion that since 2014 the most important decisions in Ukraine have been approved under the influence of Western countries; 42% see the anti-corruption infrastructure as a tool for external governance of Ukraine, while 18% consider it an element of combating corruption; 24% trust that important decisions are made by Ukrainian politicians [11]. Over the period of this monitoring, the highest number of posts supporting the narrative of “external governance” was recorded in social media located in Donetsk and Odesa regions (see Fig. 3).

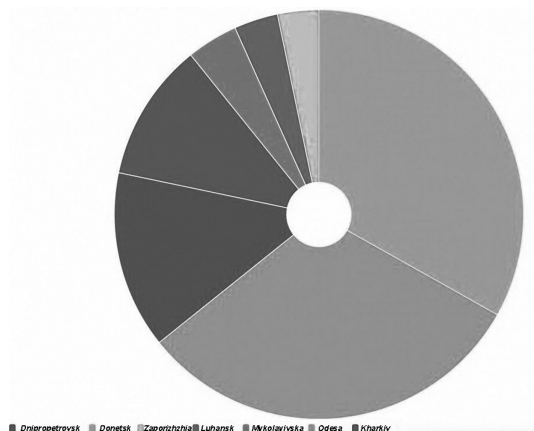


Fig. 3. The audience reception of disinformation narrative of “external governance”

As to the disinformation narratives about COVID-19, the results of this sociological research indicate that 54 % of the population in southern and eastern regions adhere to the opinion of the artificial origin of the coronavirus, while 25 % believe it is of natural origin. Additionally, 47.5 % of the respondents claim that there is no cure for coronavirus, and 18 % chose the option “the cure for coronavirus does exist, but this information is concealed”. Similarly, disinformation narratives concerning the measures applied to contain the pandemic are quite widespread. For instance, 49 % of the respondents find quarantine and other pandemic-related restrictions to be essential, while 26 % think that the danger of coronavirus is exaggerated, so the quarantine and restrictive measures are not necessary [14].

To learn the respondents’ opinion as to Russian disinformation and determine the rate of its effectiveness, the 2020 data was compared with the results received by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2015 [14]. The assessment scale was marked from 0 to 100 points, where 0 indicates minimum disposition to believe Russian disinformation, and 100 indicates maximum disposition. The monitoring showed that the average figure for eight eastern and southern regions over the five years remained at the level of 37 points. In 2015, about 19 % of the respondents had from 60 to 100 points, that is, were disposed to believe Russian propaganda; whereas now this figure has decreased to 13 %. The share of respondents who scored from 0 to 40 points (immune or non-disposed) has only grown slightly to 62 %, whereas in 2015 this figure was 60 % (see Fig. 4).

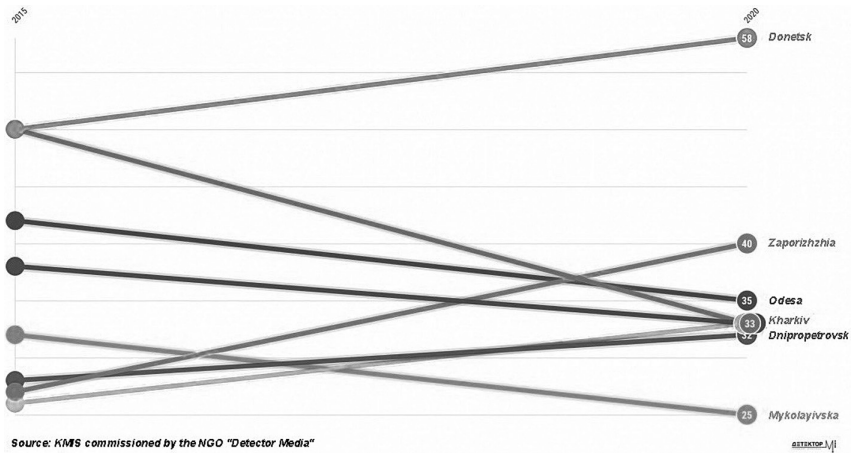


Fig. 4. Disinformation effectiveness ratio

Conclusions

Summing up, the main threats resulting from dissemination of disinformation narratives in social media can be distinguished as follows: the large number and variety of their forms; interference in social-political processes and transformations; latency and insidiousness of disinformation strategies. In the period of social transformations, disinformation texts create a discourse which envisages spreading information chaos, demoralisation and demotivation of public opinion, promotion of total scepticism, cynical mind, and apocalyptic moods.

In the course of content analysis, it was discovered that pro-Russian (63 %) and anti-Western (37 %) disinformation narratives are intensively generated in social media. Classified as pro-Russian are the narratives related to discreditation of the Ukrainian state, the current government, the army, the people etc.; and classified as anti-Western are the narratives aimed at discreditation of the USA and the European countries, as well as international organisations. In order to distort and transform social reality, authors of disinformation narratives use various techniques, including contrast (Ukraine/Novorossiya/Russia, Eastern Ukraine/Western Ukraine, Russia/the USA/NATO/the EU, friend/foe, Catholic/Orthodox Ukrainian "fascists"/"liberators"); stereotyping (creation of stereotypes for "Banderite", "enemy of the people", "Kyiv junta"); mythmaking (cultivating myths of "brotherly nations", "the great Victory", Cold-War fear of the West, fear of Western values etc.); emotional-semantic technologies with

negative connotations (intimidation, propagation of fear and hatred, threats); likening (to Soviet or Russian things); discreditation (destroying an opponent's image or distorting the image of a certain event, phenomenon or process); idealistic speculations (nostalgia for the USSR, "ideals of Communism") etc.

The following lines of activity may be suggested to counter disinformation narratives: (1) monitoring of social media by specialised groups of disinformation countering experts: documenting disinformation texts, identifying communities that generate such narratives, and drawing analytical case files on these; (2) awareness: using social media to inform people on their actions in case they face disinformation narratives; (3) media literacy and critical thinking: checking sources of information; comparing materials from various / alternative sources; carefully considering facts and taking independent decisions; (4) involvement of opinion leaders: referring to well-known authorities from various fields of life; (5) active citizenship: responding to disinformation materials posted in social media; thought-out and balanced discussion with their authors; using feedback options.

The leading mechanism in countering disinformation is represented by various fact-checking projects and civic organisations whose activities are aimed at identification, examination and refutation of false content. With grant support from government agencies and international foundations, Ukraine has created a series of projects and organisations engaged in monitoring of information influences and analysis of disinformation texts. For example, the Detektor Media civic organisation, the Center for Analytics and Investigation civic organisation, the Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, the Institute for Mass Information, and such projects as BezBrekhni, IREX Learn to Discern: Media Literacy, VoxCheck, StopFake, Nadiyno etc.

Therefore, to counter disinformation effectively in the national information environment, it is necessary to implement a cross-institutional approach, as well as use such methods as fact-checking, monitoring, cooperation with Internet platforms, media and leading fact-checking organisations, and promote positive narratives through certain communication policies.

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