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- PANDEMIC RESPONSE
- INFODEMIC AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
- SECURITY STRATEGIES

New Threats

Editors

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DOUBLE CHALLENGE: THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND THE GLOBAL INFODEMIC

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The coronavirus not only is challenging national health care systems but also creates a favourable environment for numerous information attacks. The global infodemic is another challenge to address. In the article, the author shows who benefits from spreading fakes and what goals these actors have (the most obvious actor is the Russian Federation). The article considers some fundamental principles in which an “info vaccination” may be grounded, considering national patterns of information perception. Among these principles, the following should be named: case studies of typical disinformation, mobilisation of opinion-makers for the sake of public interest, cooperation with the institutions of civil society, and, the most importantly, stressing that the public interest is the multiplied personal interest.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began with an outbreak in the Chinese province of Wuhan in late 2019, will determine the life of the humanity for at least another year or two – until a vaccination becomes cheap and effective enough. The pandemic has posed a number of challenges to humanity in a wide range of areas, from urban planning to access to food, and has raised the issue of the balance between civil liberties and a decent level of public safety. This list can be extended. However, in today’s world, a critical resource is the access to information (reliable and up-to-date), which is the basis of decision-making – at both state and personal levels.

The use of information weapons has repeatedly proven its effectiveness. Therefore, it is quite natural that during the

period of instability caused by the pandemic, at the same time there were opportunities for (dis)information campaigns by various international actors in order to achieve their own goals in the international arena. Usually, the Russian Federation and China are mentioned among such actors.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on changes in the world’s information environment, the nature of threats to information security, and the role of Russia and China in this process. I will pay more attention to the Russian contribution to the rise of the infodemic. The article will conclude with propositions on possible ways to overcome the devastating effects of information attacks.

Undoubtedly, this topic is not brand-new in public discussion. Thus, there are open

debates about it¹; there are already dozens of thematic journalistic publications². Most of this content is descriptive. Now is a period of facts and experience accumulation, which is yet to be understood, analysed, and reflected.

Infodemic and Infodemiology

Famous words by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, on 15 February 2020 introduced *infodemic* into global public and scientific discourse: "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic". That was an acknowledgement of an obvious fact: Fake news about COVID-19 spread faster than the virus itself.

However, he was not the first to use this term. One of the latest editorials of *The Lancet* claims that the term *infodemiology* was first used in 2002³. The research area of this new discipline is at the intersection of public health and information security studies, where academics explore the "distribution and determinants of information in an electronic medium, specifically the Internet,

or in a population, with the ultimate aim to inform public health and public policy"⁴. The cited definition has been proposed by Gunther Eysenbach, an author of dozens of texts on infodemiology and problems of public health and e-health; he calls himself the first infodemiologist in his Google Scholar profile⁵. Moreover, the first conference on infodemiology (although, as we see, the research area has been existing since early 2000), hosted this summer by WHO,⁶ proves the importance of infodemic studies and shows the future research perspective.

Infodemic management is another new research area, formed at the intersection of management and infodemiology, and it is "applying evidence-based interventions that bring understandable, localized evidence-based information to citizens and drive positive health-seeking behaviour"⁷.

The professor of international relations and columnist for the *Washington Post* David Rothkopf coined the term *infodemics* in 2003 in his column: "What exactly do I mean by the 'infodemic'? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected

- 1 *Дезінформація проти України та ЄС у період пандемії COVID-19 (Disinformation against Ukraine and the EU in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic)*, "Ukraine-Office.eu", 19 May 2020 [https://ukraine-office.eu/disinformation-against-ukraine-and-the-eu-in-times-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-2/ access: 1 August 2020].
- 2 *Rosyjskie działania dezinformacyjne w dobie koronawirusa – jak Rosja próbuje wykorzystać koronakryzys do realizacji własnych interesów (Russia's Disinformation Efforts in the Era of Coronavirus – How Russia Tries to Use the Coronavirus to Pursue Its Own Interests)*, Instytut Nowej Europy, 15 May 2020 [http://ine.org.pl/rosyjskie-dzialania-dezinformacyjne-w-dobie-koronawirusa-jak-rosja-probuje-wykorzystac-koronakryzys-do-realizacji-wlasnych-interesow/ access: 1 August 2020].
- 3 *The Truth Is out There, Somewhere*, "The Lancet", 1 August 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31678-0 access: 12 August 2020].
- 4 G. Eysenbach, *Infodemiology and Infoveillance: Framework for an Emerging Set of Public Health Informatics Methods to Analyze Search, Communication and Publication Behavior on the Internet*, "Journal of Medical Internet Research", 11(1): e11, 27 March 2009 [doi:10.2196/jmir.1157].
- 5 G. Eysenbach, *Google Scholar Profile* [https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=UjKmMQcAAAA&hl=en access: 1 August 2020].
- 6 *1st WHO Infodemiology Conference*, WHO [https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management/1st-who-infodemiology-conference access: 1 August 2020].
- 7 *Infodemic Management – Infodemiology*, WHO [https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management access: 1 August 2020].

national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities. It is a phenomenon we have seen with greater frequency in recent years—not only in our reaction to SARS, for example, but also in our response to terrorism and even to relatively minor occurrences such as shark sightings”.⁸ As we see, Rothkopf was inspired in some way by the epidemic of SARS – another coronavirus, which, however, was not so terminal. The informational flood made its influence much more significant than it could be and the public health crisis harder to control.⁹ In the next dozen of years the term *infodemic* seemed to be forgotten, only to come back with the new coronavirus outbreak.¹⁰



The infodemic and pandemic are interdependent, and an infodemic can make a pandemic worse

The definition of *infodemic* is clarified by WHO in 2020 as “an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people”.¹¹

Another term that should be clarified is *infodemic management*, which means “applying evidence-based interventions that bring understandable, localized evidence-based information to citizens and drive positive health-seeking behaviour”.¹²

The infodemic and pandemic are interdependent, and an infodemic can make a pandemic worse. That happens in several ways: The information flood influences the ability to find and analyse trustworthy sources, and this is especially dangerous for decision-makers. Reliable information seems to be buried under tonnes of fakes and horrors and conspiracy theories. The massive amount of negative information may cause anxiety, depression, et cetera.¹³

Why Is the Virus of Disinformation So Catching?

Let us consider the preconditions and reasons for the intensification of disinformation attacks in the first half of 2020 in the world, in general, and by Russia concerning Ukraine, in particular. Here are some general trends:

1. The destruction of the usual picture of the world creates despair and panic.
2. The unexpected nature of the challenges stimulates the spread of conspiracy theories and fear. In such conditions, the seeds of populism quickly sprout.

8 D. J. Rothkopf, *When the Buzz Bites Back*, 2004 [<http://www1.udel.edu/globalagenda/2004/student/readings/infodemic.html> access: 1 September 2020].

9 *Words We're Watching: 'Infodemic'*, “Merriam-Webster Dictionary” [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning> access: 1 August 2020].

10 Ibid.

11 *UN Tackles 'Infodemic' of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis*, UN [<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19> access: 1 August 2020].

12 WHO, n7.

13 *Understanding the Infodemic and Misinformation in the Fight against COVID-19*, PAHO, 2020 [https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52052/Factsheet-infodemic_eng.pdf?sequence=14 access: 1 August 2020].

3. A significant slowdown in the pace of global economic development becomes obvious. And the expectation factor of an economic catastrophe stimulates the desire to find the culprit quickly.

4. There is no universal protocol for the treatment of COVID-19; the search for a vaccine is still in progress; the question about the immunity of those who have already fallen ill remains open.



Some societies, e.g., the US or the Ukrainian one, are hyper-polarised and politicised.

People are not very likely to believe representatives of the opposite political party, no matter whether they tell the truth or not

5. Restriction of the rights and freedoms of citizens is perceived as an appropriate (though not always effective) method of combating the spread of the coronavirus. Therefore, many are willing to give up some civil liberties in exchange for imaginary security. The coronaviral reality is undermining the fundamental foundations of democracy, creating a temptation to severely restrict the rights and freedoms of citizens under the pretext of protecting their health.

6. Democratic procedures are also under attack: The dates of the parliamentary elections in Northern Macedonia have been postponed. The change of the date of the presidential campaign in Poland significantly altered its picture¹⁴. The coronavirus in the United States not only destroyed the economic achievements of

the Donald Trump administration but also became an unexpected third player in the presidential election.

7. False information about the coronavirus spreads much faster than accurate news does, and even faster than does the coronavirus itself.

8. Social media often replace traditional media, but the information is not always as reliable as it should be.

9. Some societies, e.g., the US or the Ukrainian one, are hyper-polarised and politicised. People are not very likely to believe representatives of the opposite political party, no matter whether they tell the truth or not.

In Ukraine, the situation is both in line with global trends and has its specifics. The fundamental precondition for the new round of the disinformation campaign is that the territory of the former USSR in general, and Ukraine in particular, is considered by the Kremlin to be a zone of its particular interests, so they decided to use the crisis to their advantage. Besides:

- The pandemic significantly increases feelings of anxiety; many recipients of information prefer to consume it in the language they know best. And we have to admit, there is much more relevant Russian-language content than Ukrainian-language one;
- There is a marked increase in the use of social networks and various messengers as sources of information. They compete with traditional media and are used, in particular, by the Russian Federation, which has recently spread the practice of using anonymous Telegram channels to Ukraine;
- Low prevalence of critical thinking makes the Ukrainian society more

14 S. Walker, *Duda Narrowly Re-elected in Poland in Boost for Ruling Nationalists*, "Guardian", 13 July 2020 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/13/incumbent-andrzej-duda-wins-polish-presidential-election-commission> access: 1 August 2020].

vulnerable to various manifestations of misinformation;

- The traditional weakness of Ukrainian state institutions and institutions of civil society plays a role;
- The Ukrainian society remains emotionally vulnerable.

As we can see, the ground for spreading misinformation in Ukraine is more than favourable.

Cui Prodest?

Two of the most obvious actors are Russia and China. Both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping do not depend on election. This statement seems to be proven already by European think tanks. For example: “Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally, seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context”.¹⁵ The two non-democratic states have different strategic goals, but they turned into temporary allies¹⁶.

What is the gain for the Russian Federation and China in spreading misinformation on COVID-19? The first thing to say is that both states have the infrastructure, methodology,

and experience in information operations. The second is that spreading fakes on COVID-19 would help both states to reach their strategic goals. The key one for Russia is to undermine the EU and its ability to cope with new, growing challenges. The key goals for China are to project a positive image of itself and show the advantages of its communist system.

Obviously, the executives of the tactical tasks differ. For example, in Ukraine, pro-Russian politicians are always ready to challenge the pro-European narrative. These executives may seek to achieve their own goals – financial gain, political gain, and experimental manipulation. Let us list some cases of misinformation of obviously Russian origin. This list may not be exhaustive, but it will help us illustrate some general trends.

- Vadym Rabinovych, the co-chairman of the pro-Russian political party Opposition Platform – For Life, stated in March 2020 that “Ukraine has been supplying our specialists to the EU for six years, and today it cannot get anything from them.”¹⁷ This and similar statements promote the message: “Europe will not help”.
- Renat Kuzmin, a representative of the Opposition Platform – For Life, paid much attention to the functioning of “secret American bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine”¹⁸; his efforts were supported by Viktor Medvedchuk, the head of

15 *Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 10 July 2020
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf access: 1 August 2020].

16 *Россия и Китай продвигают конспирологические нарративы о коронавирусе - агентство ЕС (Russia and China Promote Conspiracy Narratives about the Coronavirus – EU Agency)*, “Eurointegration”, 21 April 2020
[<https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/04/21/7108976/> access: 1 August 2020].

17 *Рабинович: После пандемии коронавируса мир уже не будет таким, как прежде (Rabinovych: After the Coronavirus Pandemic, the World Will Not Be the Same)*, “Interfax”, 26 March 2020
[<https://interfax.com.ua/news/press-release/650144.html> access: 1 September 2020].

18 *ОПЗЖ ініціює розслідування фактів незаконного функціонування в Україні американських воєнних бактеріологічних лабораторій (The Opposition Platform – For Life Is Launching a Criminal Investigation Into Facts of Illegal Functioning of American Military Bacteriological Labs in Ukraine)*, “112.ua”
[<https://112.ua/mnenie/opzzh-iniciiruet-ugolovnoe-rassledovanie-faktov-nezakonnogo-funkcionirovaniya-v-ukraine-amerikanskih-voennyh-bakteriologicheskikh-laboratory-533959.html> access: 1 August 2020].

the party's political council¹⁹. Such statements aim to undermine the image of another strategic partner of Ukraine – the United States.

- Also, there are many texts about the influence of George Soros and Bill Gates. The financial support these entrepreneurs and philanthropists provide to civil society institutions is a crucial reason for such information attacks. George Soros's concept of an "open society" globally contradicts the matrix of "sovereign democracy" on which Vladimir Putin relies. It is no coincidence that the pro-Russian media are incredibly active in demonising Soros in the post-Soviet space. The Russian propaganda machine also used Bill Gates's TED Talk speech²⁰ in 2015 against him. The philanthropist stated that a viral infection was a more significant threat to humanity than a nuclear war. Five years later, in just a few months, more than a million posts appeared on the internet linking Bill Gates and the coronavirus.

What Can Be Done?

The first "infodemiologist" Gunther Eysenbach writes about the four pillars of infodemic management:

- 1) information monitoring (infoveillance);
- 2) building e-health literacy and science literacy capacity;
- 3) encouraging knowledge refinement and quality improvement processes such as fact-checking and peer-review; and

4) accurate and timely knowledge translation, minimising distorting factors such as political or commercial influences²¹.

Let us add some ingredients to this recipe.

One must take into account national specifics of information perception. Russian television channels are banned in Ukraine; Russian social networks and even movies are banned as well. However, the flow of disinformation has not stopped and will not stop soon – it is impossible to build an information "iron curtain", and the understanding of the need to protect oneself from Russian information aggression is not always strong enough.



The lack of a "single voice" has led to growing distrust toward government messages on both countering the coronavirus pandemic and domestic politics in general

Submission of information "in one voice" is key. Unfortunately, after the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the president of Ukraine, the "one voice" programme for executive authorities was curtailed. It seems problematic to deploy it in the conditions of the coronavirus. The lack of a "single voice" has led to growing distrust toward government messages on both countering the coronavirus pandemic and domestic politics in general.

19 A. Робінсон, *Як Кремль відродив фейк про "американські біолабораторії" в Україні під час коронавірусу (How the Kremlin Revived the Fake About "American biolabs" in Ukraine During the Coronavirus)*, "BBC", 11 May 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-52615461 access: 1 August 2020].

20 B. Gates, *The Next Outbreak? We Are Not Ready.*, "TED" [https://www.ted.com/talks/bill_gates_the_next_outbreak_we_re_not_ready access: 1 September 2020].

21 G. Eysenbach, *How to Fight an Infodemic: The Four Pillars of Infodemic Management*, "Journal of Medical Internet Research" 22(6): e21820, 2020 [https://www.jmir.org/2020/6/e21820 access: 1 August 2020].

VIP speakers should use the Revolver principle in communications. The decline in the authority of the Ukrainian state governance makes it impossible to use this step effectively, but it should be taken into account given the indefinite duration of the coronavirus pandemic. It will be recalled that this is a probable second wave of coronavirus and there will be a long period of uncertainty before the invention of a vaccine against COVID-19. Thus, the task for the reformed Ministry of Culture and Information Policy is to form a message box of government officials on the topic of the coronavirus.

Case studies for typical misinformation should be systematised. Ukraine's presence on the front line of a hybrid war with Russia presupposes the Kremlin's information activities in various spheres, among which the coronavirus is one of the main areas. It seems logical for Ukraine to try to systematise the experience of counteraction and broadcast it in the interest of other states – first of all, GUAM partners and representatives of the European Union. It will not be superfluous to establish a dialogue on this topic with Belarus, despite the use of contrasting models of combating the coronavirus at the state level.

To show the "light at the end of the tunnel" would make the perception of hard news easier. The instability of the coronavirus pandemic situation requires decisive and resonant steps from the Ukrainian authorities. Lack of financial capacity should push the government to asymmetric actions and consolidation of the society.

The interaction with civil society and relevant international initiatives is needed. Indeed, the initiative "On the Other Side of the Pandemic" is already operating in Ukraine (<https://coronafakes.com/>). It is a platform initiated and maintained on a volunteer

basis, on which information is quickly checked and fakes about the coronavirus are refuted. International initiatives include <https://shareverified.com/en>, a UN initiative, and <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/coronavirus/>.

To sum up, the goal of all these possible ways of countering an infodemic is to work on changing the environmental, political, and social factors that make spreading misinformation easy.²²

Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has had a systemic impact on many areas of human existence and the information sphere – one of the key areas in this case. The situation of uncertainty and fear is typical for the whole world, but a number of factors make the Ukrainian information space more vulnerable to information attacks. Among these factors are the ongoing war with Russia, the Kremlin's particular interest in shaking up the situation in Ukraine and undermining information sovereignty, and the readiness of the Ukrainian audience to accept Russian-language content and messages favourable to the Russian side. These messages are diverse but all aimed at achieving several key goals: destabilising the situation inside Ukraine and undermining the confidence of Ukrainian citizens in Western partners and their state institutions. Therefore, it is time for an academic discussion on the essence of the infodemic, its specific manifestations in Ukraine, and the search for ways to counteract it.

This is the moment when the connection between misinformation and death is visible and prominent. We may see different variations in different parts of the world, but the result is more or less the same: Infodemic is a significant threat to public health.

²² *The Truth*, n3.

I would like to finish the article by citing “From Pandemic to Infodemic,” a speech by the vice president of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová on countering disinformation amid COVID-19: “The COVID-19 pandemic is just a reminder about the vast problem of misinformation, disinformation and digital hoaxes”.²³ Of course, Madam Jourová is right. Information security is already one of the critical elements of state and global security, and its importance is not going to shrink unless humanity should find itself in the stone age.

Yevhen Mahda, PhD, is an associate professor at Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, the National Technical University, and the executive director at the Institute of World Policy, Ukraine. Author of reports “Hybrid War: Survive and Win” (Kharkiv, 2015), “Russia’s Hybrid Aggression: Lessons for the Europe” (Kyiv, 2017), and “Games of Images: How Europe Perceives Ukraine” (Kharkiv, 2016, with co-author Tetyana Vodotyka). His book “The Sixth: Memories of the Future” – a study of Ukrainian presidents – was published in 2017. Since April 2017, he is a member of the Public Council at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

23 *Speech of Vice President Věra Jourová on Countering Disinformation Amid COVID-19: “From Pandemic to Infodemic”*, EU, 4 June 2020
[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_1000 access: 1 August 2020].



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