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FAKE NEWS AND CONTENT MANIPULATION UNDER RUSSIAN INFORMATION AGGRESSION

The issues of spreading fake information and manipulations have become especially important due to the development of new information technologies. In the Ukrainian information environment, this problem became especially acute when Russia began its aggression in the east of Ukraine and occupied Crimea in 2014. Manipulation technologies mean a deliberate spread of fake news or disinformation (Fitzpatrick, 2018: 48) and are one of the tools used in an information war that, in turn, are part of a hybrid war. The study by Magda (2016: 4) defines a hybrid war as “...a country’s efforts to impose its political will on the other country (countries) through a combination of political, economic, and informational actions and without declaring a war according to the norms of international law.”

During the Russian aggression in the east of Ukraine and in Crimea, manipulation technologies have been used in all types of strategic communication: social, mass, visual, organizational, crisis, public relations, and others (Falkheimer, Heide, 2018: 19), targeting both the conscious and subconscious levels. Both primitive, downright fake news and elaborate methods of subconscious influence have been used in the information warfare. Propagandists distort historical facts in order to promote their own ideas and discredit governments and whole nations. The Russian propaganda targets not only the information environment of Ukraine, but also that of other countries. At the end of 2019, the Russian president spread utterly fake information about Poland and events that preceded World War II. That took place at Putin’s press conference where he condoned Stalin’s actions during the attack on Poland in 1939 and accused Poland of annexing the territory of Czechoslovakia (*Russia-Poland row over start of WW2 escalates*, 2019). These statements were refuted by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Germany’s Ambassador to Poland Rolf Nikel, and US Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher. Russian technologies of influencing the audience were widely used during the United States presidential election in 2016, which is studied in detail by Guess, Nyhan, Reifler (2021). Latvia, another post-Soviet country, also faced

a similar problem. “Paid pro-Russian trolls operating in Latvia can influence specific groups of users if they confirm their existing opinions about Russia, United States, and EU policy, and significant socio-political events” (Rožukalne, Sedlenieks, 2017: 94). The information aggression started by Russia has gone beyond the Ukrainian content environment, and aims at other countries. “As a component of hybrid war, information war is especially alarming because its influences are proliferating and it is having more of a global impact as an increasing number of countries find traces of Russian active measure occurring in their territory” (Fedchenko, 2016: 142). Georgia was another target of Russia’s attacks in 2008 (Lupion, 2018: 330).

Social media are especially vulnerable during an information war, as information spreads much faster in social media than in the traditional ones. Haidt, Rose-Stockwell (2019) believe that if the influence of hatemongers and trolls on web communities was reduced, “social media would immediately become far less toxic, and democracies less hackable.” M. Lupion came to a similar conclusion, stating that “During the Crimean annexation and later fighting in East Ukraine, the Kremlin augmented the digital tactics it pioneered in 2008. Recognizing the importance of digital and social media, Moscow experimented with encouraging pro-government trolls to attack Facebook and Twitter users, both in the near abroad and in the West, who expressed support for NATO or Kyiv” (Lupion, 2018: 334). At the end of the 20th century, Shewartau (1994: 16) warned that “information warfare is an electronic conflict in which information is a strategic asset worthy of conquest or destruction. Computers and other communications and information systems become attractive first-strike targets.” As twenty years passed, “Russia has already demonstrated through weaponization of mass media, it is not the pen but the keyboard that might very well be mightier than the sword” (Lupion, 2018: 353). In 2016, the NATO defense ministers recognized the cyberspace as the fifth dimension of warfare along with land, sea, air, and outer space (Moroz, Matychak, Babak, Sazonov, 2017).

Internet offers relatively cheap methods to communicate and collect and disseminate information. At the same time, it allows creating large communities of people to hold different discussions. Web resources have thus become an important tool of information warfare.

This study considers different approaches to the concept of hybrid war, which includes information aggression and media manipulations. It analyzes the spread of fake news and their structure. The authors propose ways to fight disinformation and provide recommendations for counteracting the aggressive Russian propaganda based on the Ukrainian experience.

UNDERSTANDING HYBRID WAR AND INFORMATION WARFARE (Literature review)

The war that broke out in Ukraine in 2014 was very different from the classic perception of warfare. Regular troops of the Russian army wore no badges, pretending to be local rebels. In March 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed there were no Russian soldiers in Crimea (*Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov o situ-*

atsiyi na Ukraine, 2014), at the time when the “green men” were blocking Ukrainian military bases and state institutions. Eight months later, in an interview to German TV channel ARD, Putin admitted the Russian army had been engaged in occupying the Crimean peninsula (*Interview to German TV Channel ARD*, 2014). A similar scenario was seen in the east of Ukraine in April 2014. Such aggression was named “war without occupation” (Antczak-Barzan, 2014). A. Antczak-Barzan reckons that Ukraine faced a new type of war and a humanitarian intervention, which means that a war is fought without being officially declared. In the author’s opinion, Russia’s success in information warfare clearly shows how much modern war, occupation, and expansion differ from their classic definitions. A. Gladii (2017: 114) defines a hybrid war as a war in which regular troops participate disguised as civil population, while also recruiting civilians. Nikolaienko (2018: 97) suggests another point of view. He says that “a hybrid war consists of a set of technologies of informational and psychological influence which is aimed at transforming collective and individual consciousness and the psychological self-perception of citizens from opposing countries.” Such concept focuses only on the informational and psychological component. The study by Gruszczak (2011: 11) interprets a hybrid war more broadly, referring to hybridization as the coexistence of “old” and “new” elements of warfare, of classic military conflicts and “postmodern” wars. Manko, Mikhieiev (2018: 17) view a hybrid war as a process to create controlled chaos in order to influence policies of the country under aggression. Such aggression involves large information campaigns targeted at influencing the society in order to attain the objectives of the war by using other people. Pocheptsov (2015: 37) in his paper suggests the term “information intervention” to mean the use of own resources (economic, political, military, international, and informational) in order to transform or adjust the public information environment. An information intervention can be generated internally or externally. It aims to attract attention of either the general public or a specific segment. Afterwards, an information intervention should change our attitude to the object of attention. Military aggression is accompanied by information aggression. This viewpoint corresponds to conclusions drawn by Lupion (2018: 329), who emphasizes that a modern hybrid war always uses available information technologies, “including the weaponization of digital media.” In her paper, M. Lupion suggests another term to refer to a hybrid war – the Gray War. M.-V. Bînă and C. Dragomir take a different approach to the notion of hybrid war. In their study, they point out that no accurate definition currently exists for the term of hybrid war that would be widely acceptable. They believe that the only similarity between different existing concepts is that they recognize a combination of traditional and asymmetrical measures, procedures, and war tactics. “In post-Cold War conflicts, those who faced western states would, at times, have used conventional forces, irregular troops, terrorist acts and organized crime” (Bînă, Dragomir, 2020: 12). On the other hand, F. Hoffman and L. Freedman generalize the hybrid war concept, defining it as “a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the same time and battle space to obtain their political objectives” (Hoffman, 2014). L. Freedman widens this definition, suggesting it is an “approach that draws upon a number of types of force from across the full spectrum, including terrorism, insurgency and regular combat, along with the extensive use of information operations” (Freedman,

2014: 11). The present article is guided by this perspective, viewing an information war as part of a hybrid war.

The study of (Qureshi, 2020: 903) focuses on the term “information war,” which the researcher presents as “a combination of multifarious strategies aimed at harming the reputation or informational infrastructure of an adversary.” Y. Magda proposes a broader definition for an information war, which he sees as “a confrontation between two or more countries in the information environment in order to damage critically important systems, processes, resources, and other structures, aiming to undermine the political, economic, and social systems, exercise massive influence on people’s minds, destabilize the society, and force state authorities to take decisions in the adversary’s favor” (Magda, 2016). Miller (2019) puts forward similar arguments, stating that an information war is the use of printed and online media aimed at influencing actions of opposing parties and protecting own information environment. In addition, an information war is understood as a range of strategic operations to shape public opinion at the regional and global levels (Golovchenko, Hartmann, Adler-Nissen, 2018).

Spreading fake news is one of the methods used in an information war (Paterson, Hanley, 2020: 448). J. H. Fetzer says fake news “are assertions that are false, that are known to be false, and that are asserted with the intention to mislead, deceive, or confuse” (Fetzer, 2004: 231). In his paper, J. H. Fetzer talks about five types of disinformation:

- spreading information that was deliberately selected to be distorted in order to mislead;
- forming a biased impression about a specific event, ignoring its obvious advantages, in order to mislead others about the actual essence of the event;
- providing offensive information by attacking the author or editor of a publication, using arguments that are irrelevant or misleading and have nothing to do with the opinion of the author or editor;
- ignoring and rejecting important evidence, conclusions, or hypotheses that relate to a certain event;
- information being distorted due to the incompetence of its source, as wrong conclusions are made without knowing the facts.

Fake news is disguised as something legitimate, pretending to be reliable news. Authors of falsifications and manipulations aim to completely mislead the audience from the start (Tandoc, Lim, Ling, 2018: 12). Allcott, Gentzkow (2017: 213) define fake news as news deliberately made up to mislead readers. This concept corresponds to conclusions made by Fetzer (2004). R. Chesney and D. K. Citron propose a narrower approach to the term fake news. The authors coin the term “deep fake” to mean editing audio and video content in order to create extremely realistic and seemingly undeniable footage of real people who are “doing or saying things they never said or did” (Chesney, Citron, 2018). In fact, the authors refer to deliberate faking of audio and video materials. In order to solve this problem, R. Chesney and D. Citron suggest: using special software to detect fake images, including in social media; fighting those who spread fakes by imposing economic sanctions; organizations and politicians that are in the public spotlight should always record their actions and speeches on digital media; promoting media literacy.

N. Rochlin and C.-C. Wang criticize this approach to fake news. They believe that fake news should not be defined as libelous or lacking facts. In particular, Rochlin (2017: 386) thinks that fake news contradicts personal beliefs and tries to change them, concluding that “fake news is the truth of the post-truth era.” In his opinion, truthfulness of a story does not matter anymore in the post-truth era. The only thing that is important is whether the content corresponds to what a person wants to hear (Rochlin, 2017: 386). Due to the perception subjectivity, the problem cannot be solved by merely “flagging certain news outlets as ‘fake’ and others as ‘real’” (Rochlin, 2017: 388). C.-C. Wang understands fake news as news that contains incorrect or false information but does not indicate that the information is incorrect. “Not all incorrect facts are spread purposely; some are distributed unintentionally, though” (Wang, 2020: 148). S. Illing views the abovementioned term “post-truth” as a concept for “the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth” (Illing, 2018). The Oxford English Dictionary recognized this term as the word of the year (*Word of the Year 2016*, 2016) and gives the following definition: “Post-truth is relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Post-truth, 2021). Yerlikaya (2020: 181) says the post-truth world is a world in which perception is more important than truth, and any manipulations and fake content can be easily spread among the wide public.

The above concepts come to a common point that fake news is news based on unreliable facts, while the motivation is the secondary issue in discussing this notion. The motivation means the presence or absence of deliberate intent to make mistakes in the news.

This article considers facts that correspond to the concept presented in the studies by Fetzer (2004), Chesney, Citron (2018), Tandoc, Lim, Ling (2018), and Allcott, Gentzkow (2017).

FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

When we consider the diffusion of information on the Web, the first thing that comes to mind is social media – the set of online technologies which allow users to create and share their own content. Modern social media, blogs, and video hosting services have become a powerful tool to influence social change and processes. The events that took place in Ukraine in 2013–2014, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, are a vivid example.¹ Social media, particularly Facebook, were the platform for coordinating actions and sharing information about the latest events. However, social media were also a convenient environment for fast dissemination of fake news and manipulations. R. Ralf and P. Dunay draw attention to three specific features of social media:

¹ The Revolution of Dignity (Maidan, Euromaidan) is the name for a social transformation taking place in Ukraine from 21 November 2013 to 22 February 2014, triggered by the country’s political leaders refusing to follow the European integration course that was established by law and adopting dictatorial laws which limited citizens’ right to protest, and by Russia attempting to undermine the independence of Ukraine.

1. “Social media has made access more cost effective and influence hence can be ‘bought’ at a lower price” (Ralf, Dunay, 2018: 24);
2. “it is easier to send tailor-made messages” (Ralf, Dunay, 2018: 24);
3. “some social media networks, including very wide-spread ones like Facebook, facilitate the reinforcement of perceptions by pre-selecting those messages that one allegedly sympathizes with in light of the record of messages read earlier” (Ralf, Dunay, 2018: 24).

Social media being used as the environment for an information war, combined with cyberattacks and the propaganda of political distrust, is the main challenge faced by modern democracies (Paterson, Hanley, 2020: 449). The internet provides ample opportunity for spreading unfaithful content.

The Russian media have been the main source of the disinformation at the time of the Maidan and the subsequent military conflict in the east of Ukraine. They were everywhere: starting with free newspapers handed out in public transport and ending with web resources. Russian propagandists were ones of the first to create fake social media accounts which were fully or partially automatized. “Russian trolls and bots serve as force multipliers for Russian disinformation operations” (Helmus et al., 2018: 22). The paper (Rožukalne and Sedlenieks, 2017) studies in detail the new type of trolling, the main goal of which is to divert attention and create an impression that certain ideas and beliefs prevail over the public opinion. This is achieved by promoting some topics while discrediting the opponents – public figures, officials, or other communication participants.

The study by (Babak, 2017: 14–24) describes a whole range of narratives spread by Russian propagandists which Russian propagandists spread in social media. They include the following: Ukraine – a failed state; Ukrainians need a new Government; Ukraine is a country of beggars, chaos, and radicals; Ukrainian servicemen are criminals; NATO fights in Ukraine; russophobic Ukraine; anti-Semitic Ukraine; crackdown on dissent and lack of freedom of speech in Ukraine; Ukraine violates the Minsk Agreements; Russia is not involved in the events in Ukraine; Crimea is better off in Russia than in Ukraine; the West is an enemy who wants to destroy Russia; the West does not need Ukraine.

These are vivid examples of a deliberate spread of fake news and distortion of facts. However, as pointed out by (C.-C. Wang, 2020), manipulations are everywhere: people manipulate consciously and unconsciously, at home and at work, in order to blackmail and intimidate, when feeling insulted or guilty. Due to their huge audience, social media very often become the means to spread fake news, both on purpose and because of incompetence.

EXAMPLES OF MANIPULATIVE CONTENT

Let us look at some examples of how the Russian mass media distort information and spread fake news and provocative content in the information warfare with Ukraine. The versions voiced by the Russian mass media after Ukrainian Boeing 737 crashed in Iran in January 2020 were a clear example of manipulation and disinform-

mation. As their main view, they suggested that Boeing 737 was hit by an American military drone so as to start a war in the Middle East (Figure 1, 2). In another attempt

Весь мир • 17:24 8 Января 2020 / Обновлено: 20:52 08 Января 2020

Непопулярная версия: американский БПЛА сбил украинский «Боинг-737» в небе над Ираном

• 41 219 1 Оставить комментарий

Непопулярная версия: американский БПЛА сбил украинский «Боинг-737» в небе над Ираном

TACC / Foad Ashtari/dpa

Самолет «Международных Авиалиний Украины» Boeing 737 мог быть сбит американским беспилотником ВВС США в ответ на ночные ракетные обстрелы американских баз в Ираке. Почему это скорее всего правда — в материале **Федерального агентства новостей**.

Figure 1. Unpopular Version: American Drone Hits Ukrainian Boeing 737 in the Sky of Iran. Boeing 737 of Ukraine International Airlines might have been hit by a military drone belonging to the United States Air Force in response to the artillery attack on U.S. military bases in Iraq that took place at night. Learn why that is true in the material by the Federal News Agency

Source: <https://bit.ly/33DQgXa>.

ИСТОЧНИКИ ПРЕДПОЛАГАЮТ, ЧТО УКРАИНСКИЙ САМОЛЁТ В ИРАНЕ МОГЛИ СБИТЬ ДРОНЫ США ПО ОШИБКЕ

У военных Ирана есть своя версия трагедии в небе над Тегераном

8 января 2020 19:00

Печать Отправить по email



Крушение пассажирского Boeing-737 «Международных авиалиний Украины» (МАУ) 8 января близ Тегерана могло произойти из-за атаки беспилотного летательного аппарата (БПЛА), считают иранские военные.

Утром 8 января, всего через несколько минут после взлета из аэропорта иранской столицы, разбился пассажирский самолет МАУ со 176 человеками на борту. Шансов выжить у людей не было. Власти Ирана заявили, что авиакатастрофа могла произойти по причине технического сбоя. Однако источник из числа Вооруженных сил страны сообщил сотрудникам портала Live Report, что причиной трагедии могла стать ракета, выпущенная беспилотником ВС США.



Figure 2. Sources Say U.S. Drones Might Have Hit the Ukrainian Plane in Iran According to the Iranian military, the catastrophe of passenger Boeing-737 belonging to Ukraine International Airlines, which happened on 8 January near Tehran, might have been caused by a drone attack

Source: <http://www.iarex.ru/news/73326.html>.

to spread propaganda, the Russian media drew parallels with the crash of flight MH17 in 2014 and blamed the United States for both air crashes (Figure 3). Tsargrad, one of the Russian outlet, produced a downright fake version that the plane was old and the greedy Ukrainian air company used it despite the end of its operating time (*Baranets nazval izoshchryonnyi stsenariy krusheniia ukrainskoho boinha v Irane*, 2020). In reality, the plane was new. According to planespotters.net, the plane was a little older than three years. It made its first flight on 21 June 2016. The airline bought it directly from the Boeing plant in Seattle.² Notwithstanding the extensive evidence that the Ukrainian Boeing had been hit by an Iranian missile, the Russian propagandistic mass media denied it until the last, citing numerous experts and blaming the United States (Figure 4). Other Russian military experts also rejected the version that it was a missile that hit the passenger airplane (*Voennyi ekspert iskliuchil versiyu o popadanii*

08 Января 2020 09:58 / Политика

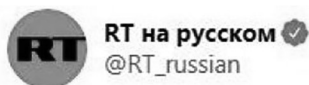
Боинг МН17 "дубль два"? США после крушения украинского самолета обвинили в развязывании войны



Figure 3. United States Blamed for Starting a War after the Crash of Ukrainian Plane

Source: <http://tiny.cc/2n93kz>.

² <https://www.planespotters.net/airframe/boeing-737-800-ur-psr-ukraine-international-airlines/385qjz>.



Обвинения в причастности Ирана к крушению Boeing 737 со стороны западных политиков и СМИ — часть информационной кампании, развёрнутой Вашингтоном, считают эксперты. По их мнению, её цель — оправдать убийство США иранского генерала Сулеймани ru.rt.com/f50h



4:48 AM · 11 янв. 2020 г. · Twitter Web App

Figure 4. Experts believe accusations that Iran is responsible for the Boeing 737 catastrophe voiced by western politicians and mass media to be a part of Washington's information campaign. The campaign aims to justify the United States killing Iranian general Soleimani

Source: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/706337-zapad-tegeran-prichastnost>.

rakety v ukrainskiy samolet, 2020). The propagandists manipulated on the abbreviation for the Armed Forces of Ukraine which coincides in Russian with the abbreviation for auxiliary power unit (“*Vinovata VSU*”: *rossyiskiy ekspert vydvynul svoyu versiyu krusheniya Boinha v Teherane*, 2020). Such content becomes especially dangerous when attempts are made to destroy evidence on the scene. A British investigative journalist, the founder of Bellingcat website, warned Iranian authorities against impeding the investigation of the Ukrainian Boeing crash near Tehran (Higgins, 2020).

Russia is spreading similar fake news about historical events in Ukraine. In particular, they forced the statement that “Crimea has always been Russian” (*Putin: ‘Crimea*

has always been an integral part of Russia', 2014) during the annexation of the peninsula. In reality, Crimea was part of Russia (in the form of the Russian Empire and the USSR) for a little more than 200 years. Distorting information about Holodomor (the Great Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933) and not recognizing the guilt of the communist government headed by Stalin (Meyer, 2019) was another manipulation.

Fake news about Petro Poroshenko, the fifth president of Ukraine spread by the Russian mass media was also a notable example of foreign information aggression. The Russian media reported that Ukrainian radicals had forced him to flee his own rally held in the city of Zhytomyr during his election campaign, illustrating the event with a fragment cut from a larger image. In reality, Petro Poroshenko headed towards people to listen to their demands (Figures 5, 6). In 2018, many Russian mass media – such as RIA Novosti,³ Moskovskiy Komsomolets,⁴ Izvestia,⁵ Federalnoye Agentstvo Novostei (Federal News Agency),⁶ and IRNET.RU⁷ – accused the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces of ordering to fire in Donbas “to save people’s lives” (*Poroshenko prikazal streliat v Donbasse dlia «sokhraneniia zhizni liudei»*, 2018). Figure 7 and Figure 8 show examples of this disinformation. President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko did make a speech in Khmelnytska oblast and he did urge the Ukrainian military to save people’s lives. However, the Russian media misrepresented the president’s words, saying that he had ordered to start shooting. In reality, the president spoke only about the possibility to



Figure 5. Nationalists sabotage Poroshenko’s speech in Zhytomyr and make him flee (fake news)

Source: <https://bit.ly/3p2otHm>.

³ <https://ria.ru/world/20181011/1530457978.html>.

⁴ <http://tiny.cc/lr93kz>.

⁵ <https://iz.ru/799346/2018-10-11/poroshenko-prikazal-streliat-v-donbasse-dlia-sokhraneniia-zhizni->

⁶ <https://riafan.ru/1109069-poroshenko-prikazal-otkryvat-ogon-v-donbasse>.

⁷ <http://tiny.cc/2m93kz>.



Figure 6. Original image to Figure 5

Source: <https://prm.ua/yak-rosiyski-zmi-poshiryuvali-feyki-pro-petra-poroshenka-u-2019-rotsi-proekt-stopfake/>.

MKRU

МК в регионах ▾
11 октября 2018
время 20:06

Свежий номер
Подписка на МК
Вход

Новости
Политика
Экономика
Происшествия
Общество
Спорт
Культура
Наука
ЧМ 2018

Армия
В мире
Кавказ
Письма президенту
Россия
СНГ
Вертикаль власти

СРОЧНАЯ НОВОСТЬ

Филарет подтвердил, что Константинопольский патриархат снял с него анафему Московскому патриархату

Новости

18:28 Автозак с Кокориным и Мамаевым въехал на территорию Тверского суда

18:27 Константинопольский патриархат снял анафему с украинского митрополита-раскольника Филарета

18:16 Синод Константинопольского патриархата не принимал решения об автокефалии Украины

Порошенко приказал стрелять в Донбассе на поражение "ради жизни людей"

"Мы не должны сдавать ни один кусочек украинской земли, и моя просьба и приказ: мы должны сберечь каждого украинского воина", - заявил украинский лидер

сегодня в 17:10, просмотров: 4435

2
 5
 5
 4

Глава Незалежной Пётр Порошенко приказал открывать огонь на поражение в зоне вооружённого конфликта в Донбассе «для сохранения жизней людей». Украинский лидер также подчеркнул, что Вооружённые силы Украины должны сберечь «каждого воина». С таким заявлением глава украинского государства выступил во время посещения военных манёвров украинских войск «Чистое небо» в Хмельницкой области, сообщает ИА "Новороссия".


Figure 7. Poroshenko Orders to Shoot to Kill in Donbas to “Save People’s Lives”

Source: <http://tiny.cc/lr93kz>.

IRNET.RU

ЭКОНОМИКА ЗДОРОВЬЕ НЕДВИЖИМОСТЬ ОБЩЕСТВО АВТОМОБИЛИ

:трвах базу военно-морского флота

Сегодня, 18:00  6 411

Порошенко приказал стрелять в Донбассе на поражение "ради жизни людей"



Figure 8. Poroshenko Orders to Shoot to Kill in Donbas to “Save People’s Lives”

Source: <http://tiny.cc/2m93kz>.

return fire in order to save the lives of civilians. “One should be ready for any scenario: for both defense and an effective counterattack. We should not fall for provocations in the area of the Joint Forces Operation. However, I authorize and order you to use all the forces and means that you have to return fire in order to save lives of our people,” said Poroshenko. In early 2020, the Russian media evidently manipulated the content again, spreading information that the National Anti-corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) had started an investigation against the former U.S. President Barack Obama. This content was found on webpages of the Russian media Lenta.ru (Figure 9) and Ukraina.ru (Figure 10). At the same time, the Ukrainian law stipulates

Figure 9. Ukraine Initiates Proceedings against Obama

Source: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/01/30/ukrobama/>.

Figure 10. The National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine has initiated criminal proceedings against Poroshenko and Obama. NABU suspects Poroshenko of embezzling money from the state budget together with representatives of the former U.S. President Barack Obama

Source: <https://ukraina.ru/news/20200129/1026508582.html>.

that NABU has powers over citizens of Ukraine – Ukrainian top officials – but it has no powers over presidents of other countries. In 2019, the Russian mass media posted information that residents of Ukraine had been allowed to access a number of Russian media and social networks following restrictions imposed by the decree of the fifth president of Ukraine in order to stop Kremlin’s propaganda. The information was provided by Zvezda (Figure 11), Vesti (Figure 12), and others. However, in July 2019, the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Danyliuk stated that the restrictions had not been lifted (*V Ukraini nazriv skandal cherez zaboroneni rosiiski saity: RNBO vpershe vidreahuvala*, 2019).

The image shows a screenshot of a news article from the Russian channel Zvezda. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a star logo, social media icons (Facebook, Twitter, VK, YouTube, Instagram, etc.), and a search bar labeled 'Поиск'. Below this is a main menu with categories: НОВОСТИ, ТЕЛЕКАНАЛ, ПРОГРАММЫ, ОРУЖИЕ, and ЛИЦА. A secondary menu includes: Армия, В стране и мире, Экономика и бизнес, ОПК, Вопросы истории, Общество, and Спорт. The article is under the 'В СТРАНЕ И МИРЕ' section. The title is 'Жителям Украины разрешили пользоваться российскими соцсетями'. The author is 'Василиса Морозова' and the date is '06:29 17.09.2019'. The text reads: 'Украинские операторы перестали блокировать российские соцсети и СМИ, находившиеся под запретом.' Below the text is a video player showing a man in a suit speaking at a podium. The video player has a play button, volume icon, and a progress bar showing '0:00 / 0:30'. At the bottom of the video player, it says '© Видео: ТПК "Звезда" © Фото: Sergii Kharchenko, ZUMAPRESS.com, Globallookpress'.

Figure 11. Ukrainians are allowed access to Russian social networks. Ukrainian operators have stopped blocking the banned Russian social networks

Source: <http://tiny.cc/a973kz>.

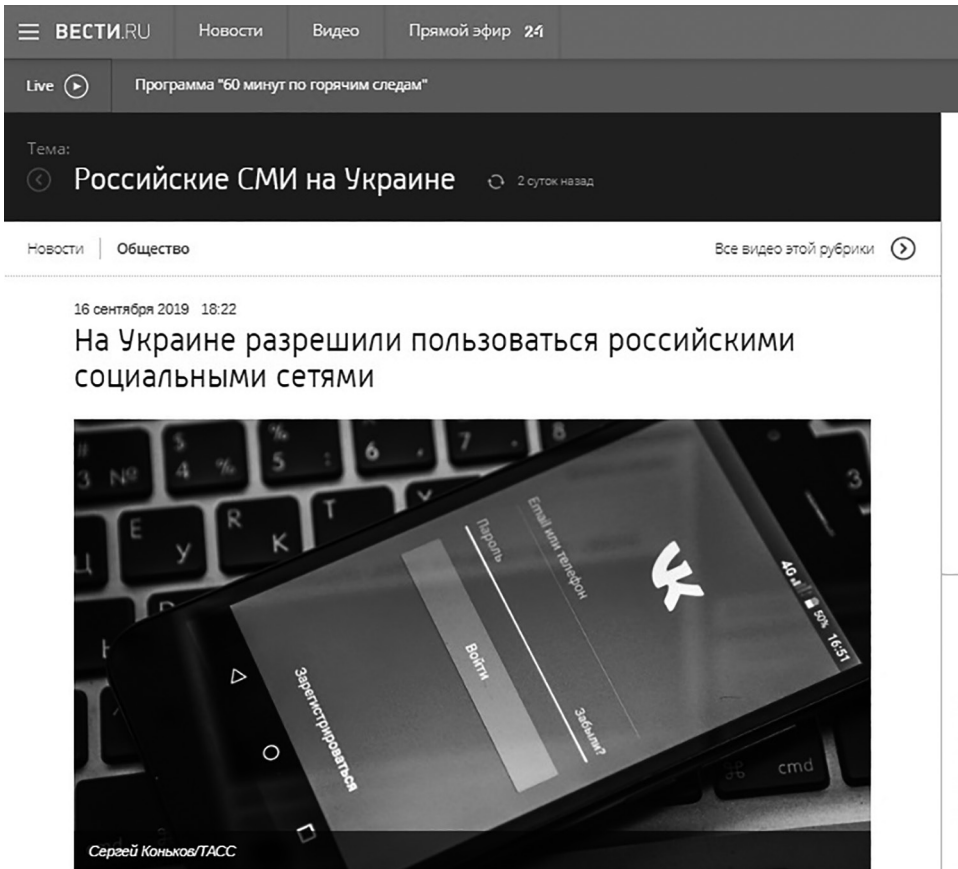


Figure 12. Access to Russian Social Networks Allowed in Ukraine

Source: <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3189685>.

One more well-known fake is related to the tragedy of Malaysian flight MH17 hit by a Russian missile in July 2014 in the sky of Donbas. Russia Today held an interview with a Spanish dispatcher Carlos, who claimed to work at the Ukrainian airport Boryspil and allegedly saw Ukrainian fighter planes bringing down the Malaysian aircraft. Journalists from RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty and Romanian organization RISE Project found the “Spanish dispatcher” who was widely cited in the Russian media that were looking for the Ukrainian trace in the tragedy of flight MH17 (Schreck, Poenariu, 2014) . “Dispatcher Carlos,” who was said to work at the Kyiv Boryspil Airport and who created Twitter account @spainbuca (Twitter administration later deleted the account), posted that Ukrainian SU-25 had chased the Malaysian Boeing. “Carlos” turned out to be Jose Carlos Barrios Sanchez, previously accused in Spain and later arrested in Romania for fraud. Authors of the journalistic investigation found Sanchez and communicated with him in popular messenger WhatsApp. The “dispatcher” claimed to have received USD 48,000 from Russia as a payment for impersonating “Carlos, the Spanish dispatcher.” Sanchez

also argued that he had irrefutable proof confirming that Twitter account @spain-buca belonged to Russians and could provide bank details and recordings of conversations with employees of Russia Today. However, he has not provided any documents after the authors of the investigation asked him to. Unfortunately, the “Spanish dispatcher” fake was also used by the Russian president Vladimir Putin in his conversation with film director Oliver Stone: the head of Kremlin said that a Spanish-born dispatcher from Kyiv Boryspil Airport, who allegedly saw Ukrainian battleplanes following MH17 flight, might have seen the crash of the Malaysian Boeing over Donbas (Schreck, 2018).

The main aim of various content manipulations is to arouse a psychological reaction in the information recipient. Russian news presenters often use audio and video effects in order to enhance the emotional impact. Russian state-owned channels – Channel One Russia, Russia-1, and Russia-24 – broadcast such shows hosted by notorious presenters Dmitry Kiselyov and Olga Skabeyeva. A Russia-24 newscast of 30 October 2016 with Dmitry Kiselyov was a good illustration of using visual effects. In his material titled “Once More about the Nuclear Ash,” the Russian journalist threatens to destroy the United States with nuclear weapons with a respective visualization in the studio (Figure 13).



Figure 13. The nuclear ash

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pcNyzQ6SOA>.

INFORMATION WARFARE AND ITS SPECIFICS

Disinformation, fake news, deliberate distortion of facts, and any other provocations in the information environment envisage presenting content in a special way. Deliberate distortion of information can take many forms:

- A. distorting information that ranges from obvious lies to a semantic play with concepts: this allows adjusting the degree of psychological influence and creating the perception of reality where the actual event is not as important as the perspective from which it is shown (fig. 7, fig. 8);
- B. hiding a part of information, concealing content, and presenting some materials while leaving out the other (fig. 5, fig. 6);
- C. manipulating the presentation of materials so as to make the recipient perceive information with the intended emotional response: this also includes a purposeful arrangement of topics and materials aimed at pushing the audience towards intended and expected conclusions (fig. 9, fig. 10);
- D. manipulating with the time of presenting the information: the order of presenting pieces of information as well as the time of presenting and discussing them directly influence the assessment and digestion of information (fig. 13);
- E. providing information to a recipient while influencing the unconscious perception (fig. 11, fig. 12);
- F. overloading a recipient with information filtered by a certain criterion: the aim is to prevent recipients from analyzing the content and make them rely on prepared and suggested conclusions (fig. 1, fig. 2, fig. 3, fig. 4).

It should be noted that the above manipulation techniques closely correspond to the types of false information described by Zannettou (2018: 104). In particular, paragraph A corresponds to “Biased or One-Sided,” B to “Hoaxes,” C to “Conspiracy Theories,” D and F to “Clickbait,” and E to “Rumors.” The study by Zannettou (2018: 105) also lists false information actors: bots, criminal/terrorist organizations, activist or political organizations, governments, hidden paid posters and state-sponsored trolls, journalists, useful idiots, conspiracy theorists, individuals that benefit from false information, and trolls.

Any manipulation has a complex structure and comprises the following elements:

- planning the influence;
- determining the disinformation channels;
- collecting means and information about the target audience;
- adapting to the influence addressee;
- arranging the influence situation.

Such analysis, named “communication audit” (Pocheptsov, 2015: 201), allows to determine the type of audience and its vulnerabilities and prepare the addressee for perceiving the required content. Manipulative technologies are of social nature, which should be taken into account when developing the counteraction strategy.

An information war aims to influence the mind, consciousness, and psychology of the adversary (Nikolaienko, 2018; Manko, Mikhieiev, 2018). One of the main information warfare methods used by the Russian media in Ukraine’s information environment was provoking panic about military events happening during the anti-terroristic

operation in the east of Ukraine. The waves of panic were created over the likelihood of Ukrainian armed forces to be surrounded, the front line to be broken, Kyiv to be attacked, the Ukrainian army to have a large number of casualties and Ukraine's senior commanders to commit treason. All of these information provocations turned out to be fake news, but they served to spread distrust in the state authorities. Most manipulations took place on the eve of elections, important events, or remarkable dates of Ukraine's history. Such approach is usual for the Russian media. "The Kremlin's web campaign that relies on anonymous web comments and non-attributed social media content disseminated by bots and trolls offers Russia the opportunity to target unsuspecting audiences with malign and often fake-news content" (Helmus et al., 2018: 26). Roloff, Dunay (2018: 19) believe that "It is not Russia's primary intention to convince but to raise doubt in the messages of other actors and gain influence in societies and over governments." New influence instruments use not only texts as described in the study (Rizun, Nepyivoda, Kornieiev, 2005), but also other types of communication – namely: mass, social, visual, corporate, organizational, public relations, etc. Modern information manipulations are communication technologies aimed at altering an individual's behavior by means of adjusting their mindset. The World Wide Web is generating new communication channels, with information flowing both ways – to information consumers and from them as they create and share their own content and decide which information sources they should trust. This model seriously complicates the functions of public administration under conditions of a foreign information aggression. All manipulations take into account the psychology of the audience and primarily take the form of a communication process. Today, new information technologies change the mechanism of propaganda and the characteristics of fake messages. In the above examples, the target audience for the information attack resides beyond the aggressor country. This makes it harder for the aggressor to attain its goal and forces it to increase the number of information flows compared with similar practices inside its own country so as to ensure the success of the attack. In order to reinforce the information intervention beyond Russian borders, the notorious "troll factory" was created to produce and spread manipulative information in the social media (Lapowsky, 2017; Helmus et al., 2018: 22).

The Ukrainian experience of counteracting the Russian propaganda has allowed defining the following methods used by the media to spread fake news:

- taking a phrase out of context, which changes the meaning;
- neglecting the balance of opinions;
- providing incomplete information and concealing important details or the background to the story;
- publishing information after it lost its relevance;
- ignoring information of social importance;
- interpreting certain facts to their advantage;
- spreading downright disinformation, presenting shocking and scandalous information;
- creating information noise and scandals to divert attention from important information;
- using incorrect terminology;

- generalizing or simplifying through associations with well-known historical events.

It is important to refute fake news in a prompt and timely manner by providing reliable information. “The most prominent journalistic response to fake news and other forms of misleading or false information is fact-checking, which has attracted a growing audience in recent years” (Guess, Nyhan, Reifler, 2021).

It is easy to hide manipulative materials among the various content that is being spread by journalists every minute. That was an additional reason why the media have become the main professional tool to spread disinformation and exert influence during a hybrid war.

The World Wide Web provides new communication channels in which information flows both ways – to consumers of information and from them as they create and share their own content and decide which information sources they should trust. This model significantly complicates the functions of public administration under conditions of foreign information aggression.

Ukraine’s experience of resistance to Russian aggression shows that a hot military stage starts from an information war that does not subside even when military actions are over. Waves of fake news and manipulations often accompany elections, referendums, plebiscites, and parliamentary voting on important laws. They cannot be avoided, but state institutions, journalists, political experts, and social media moderators must provide timely response to information attacks as well as refute disinformation and stop panic among consumers of mass media content. The important method is timely foresight and public exposure of hostile propagandists’ intentions. This often helps to prevent implementation of aggressive plans.

Ruled by President Vladimir Putin, Russia has created a powerful propaganda machine in order to disseminate its ideology and imperial narratives. From the very beginning of the war in Donbas, the Kremlin has been spreading a number of fake messages in mass media so as to create a wrong idea of the events in Ukraine. The objective of these actions is to shape the public opinion in Russia, the EU and NATO states. Russia is convinced that Ukraine belongs to its sphere of influence; Russia’s presence is constantly felt in Ukraine’s political, economic, and cultural life. Thus, counteracting Russian information aggression is a vital component of Ukrainian resistance.

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the information aggression of Russian mass media in the hybrid war against Ukraine by analyzing cases when Russian media spread distorted or fake information in their coverage of the annexation of Crimea, the military conflict in Donbas, and political events inside and outside Ukraine. The research employs content and comparative analyses to study the structure of fake news as well as methods to use and disseminate the news among readers. In particular, attention is paid to manipulation technologies in social media. The article examines the concept of *hybrid war* that Russia managed to actualize during its occupation of Crimea and a part of Eastern Ukraine, its methods to expand into external information space during the Ukrainian presidential election and its increasing tension in relations with the United States and Iran. The results of the research consist of the analysis of techniques used in Russian mass media texts to spread fake news and influence audiences; the article also puts forward a classification of fake news as well as offers recommendations on ways to counteract disinformation in crisis communication. It is also argued that Russia is waging the war not only in the content environment of Ukraine but also that of many other

countries.

It is urgent that various forms and methods of Russian influence on the public opinion, its attempts to shape pro-Russian views in the democratic Western world, imposition of one-sided interpretation of international treaties should be resisted by teaching media literacy to audiences as well as by granting them with transparency and unimpeded access to original information sources.

Keywords: hybrid war, information warfare, fake news, manipulation technologies, Russian aggression in Ukraine

FAKE NEWS I MANIPULACJA TREŚCI W WARUNKACH ROSYJSKIEJ AGRESJI INFORMACYJNEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł analizuje problem agresji informacyjnej mediów rosyjskich w wojnie hybrydowej z Ukrainą, podaje przykłady rozpowszechniania zafalszowanych i nieprawdziwych informacji oraz faktów podczas aneksji Krymu, konfliktu zbrojnego w Donbasie, wydarzeń politycznych na Ukrainie i za granicą. Za pomocą analizy treści i metody porównania badana jest struktura fake newsów, a także sposoby ich wykorzystania i dystrybucji wśród czytelników. Szczególną uwagę zwraca się na technologię manipulacji w mediach społecznościowych. W artykule omówiono koncepcję wojny hybrydowej, którą Rosja realizowała podczas okupacji Krymu i części Ukrainy Wschodniej, metody ekspansji w zewnętrznym środowisku informacyjnym podczas wyborów prezydenckich na Ukrainie oraz zaostrzenie stosunków międzynarodowych między Stanami Zjednoczonymi a Iranem. Analizowane są metody zastosowane przez media rosyjskie do rozpowszechniania fałszywych informacji i ich wpływ na odbiorców na konkretnych przykładach. Przedstawiana jest klasyfikacja fałszywych informacji oraz rekomendacje mające na celu przeciwdziałanie rozpowszechnianiu dezinformacji w warunkach komunikacji kryzysowej. Artykuł zwraca uwagę na fakt, że Rosja prowadzi wojnę informacyjną nie tylko w środowisku treściowym na Ukrainie, ale także w wielu innych krajach.

Próbowanie kształtowania prorosyjskich poglądów w demokratycznym świecie zachodnim, narzucania rosyjskiej interpretacji wydarzeń międzynarodowych należy przeciwstawić umiejętność korzystania z mediów, przejrzystość i swobodny dostęp do pierwotnych źródeł informacji.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna hybrydowa, wojna informacyjna, fake news, technologie manipulacji, rosyjska agresja na Ukrainie

