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Media Manipulation in Modern American and British Press

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Abstract

In the course of the study, the author of this article analyzed 87 articles from American and British newspapers relating to the "Russian topic". As a result, only 3 of them contained objective information, not "packaged into" manipulative techniques. Thus, approximately 96 % of articles in the American and British press somehow contained signs of manipulation and propaganda clichés.

In the analysis of articles in the American and British press, the author uses the filtering of information (reasoned highlighting of true and false in media texts, clearing information from "glitter" and "labels" by comparing with actual facts, etc.; removing the halo from information's "typicality", deconstructing simplification, appeal to authority techniques; a critical analysis of the goals, interests of the information agency, i.e. the source of the information.

Keywords: media manipulation, press, USA, media, Russia, fake news, analysis, media studies, propaganda, ideology.

1. Introduction

As numerous researchers maintain (Albright, 2017; Aldwairi, Alwahedi, 2018; Azzimonti, Fernandes, 2018; Bakir, McStay, 2018; Bean, 2017; Berghel, 2017; Bertin et al, 2018; Bharali, Goswami, 2018; Bradshaw, Howard, 2018; Conroy et al., 2015; Dentith, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2018; Fletcher, Nielsen, 2017; Gahirwal et al., 2018; Goering, Thomas, 2018; Janze, Risius, 2017; Marwick, 2018; Ruchansky et al., 2017; Vargo et al., 2018; Waldrop, 2017 and others), in the modern media world there have been a drastic growth of media manipulations recently. Guided by political, economics, ideological or other aims, media agencies in different countries strive to win the information warfare against these or those opponents. In the article we attempt to distinguish and analyze the main manipulative techniques used in American and British press related to Russia.

2. Materials and methods

During our research, we analyzed 87 articles from American and British newspapers that relate to Russia. The findings show that only 3 of them contained objective information, not accompanied by manipulative techniques. Thus, approximately 96 % of articles in the American and British press contained some signs of manipulation and propaganda techniques to one degree or another.

Therefore the following methods were used: data collection, generalization and classification. In particular, we analyzed the following basic techniques of manipulative influence of media on the audience: "orchestration" – psychological pressure in the form of constant repetition of certain facts, regardless of the truth; "selection" ("framing") – selection of certain tendencies – for example, only positive or negative, distortion, exaggeration (or understatement) of these

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tendencies; "blush/glitter" (embellishment of facts); "labeling" (for example, accusatory, offensive, etc.); "transfer" ("projection") – the transfer of any qualities (positive, negative) to another phenomenon (or person); appeal to authority (not necessarily true) in order to justify a particular action, a particular slogan; "plain folks", and simplification. In our analysis of articles from American and British press, we used the monitoring, verification and filtering of information (reasoned selection of true and false in media texts, clearing information from "blush" and "labels" by comparing with coverage of the same event in other resources, historical facts, etc.; removing the halo, a critical analysis of the goals, interests of the media agency, that is, the source of information (Albright, 2017; Fedorov et al., 2016; Fedorov, 2014; Fedorov, 2015; Fedorov, 2019; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2015; 2020; Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020; 2021; Marwick, 2018; Vargo et al., 2018 and others).

3. Discussion

The problems of propaganda, misinformation, media manipulations and fake news have been extensively analyzed in scientific research (Albright, 2017; Aldwairi, Alwahedi, 2018; Azzimonti, Fernandes, 2018; Bakir, McStay, 2018; Balmas, 2012; Bean, 2017; Berghel, 2017; Bertin et al, 2018; Bharali, Goswami, 2018; Bradshaw, Howard, 2018; Conroy et al., 2015; Dentith, 2017; Derakhshan Wardle, 2017; Farkas, Schou, 2018; Figueira, Oliveira, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2018; Fletcher, Nielsen, 2017; Gahirwal et al., 2018; Goering, Thomas, 2018; Janze, Risius, 2017; Marwick, 2018; Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017; Quandt et al, 2019; Ruchansky et al., 2017; Vargo et al., 2018; Waldrop, 2017 and others).

We agree that “the most important circumstance and characteristic of manipulative information is that by inviting listeners or readers to make their own judgment, the media create only the illusion of independence, objectivity, the possibility of choosing from different points of view and relying on the opinion of the audience. The opinion of the audience, which has a negative response to certain information, does not apply to the entire targeted audience. The mass audience is territorially fragmented and people, consuming information, are, if not alone, then at least in small groups and have the opportunity to argue only in front of each other. Public expression of your protest against current information is impossible, but it is precisely this information that becomes a permanent instrument of manipulative influence on people who, under the modern information system, are doomed to passivity and existence only as an object of influence” (Grachev, Melnik, 1999).

Moreover, one has to consider that “now, if we take the allegation of something being fake news, or fake media seriously, then – if we assume one side of the debate is correct – then someone is misleading the public. So, is the allegation of “That’s just fake news!” just the exposure of a lie? Not quite; the allegation something is fake news is a *rhetorical device*, one designed to cast doubt on what would otherwise be some received story. That is, currently allegations of fake news, or fake media, focus on challenging mainstream media discourses” (Dentith, 2017: 67).

4. Results

The article in *The New York Times*, under the eloquent heading “Apathy and wariness of Kremlin leave Russians unvaccinated” – is one of the vivid examples of media manipulation.

The following manipulative techniques are used:

“*Weak inference*”, *integrating the over simplification of the information*. The article's author tries to draw wide political conclusions (see the headline) based on the statement of only one person – “a person of the people” (who might be a fictional character as well): “After Sofia Kravetskaya got vaccinated with Russia’s *Sputnik V* vaccine last December, she became a pariah on the Moscow playground where she takes her young daughter. “When I mentioned I volunteered in the trials and I got my first shot, people started running away from me,” she said. “They believed that if you were vaccinated, the virus is inside you and you’re contagious.” For Ms. Kravetskaya, 36, the reaction reflected the prevalent mistrust in the Russian authorities that has metastasized since the pandemic began last year. That skepticism, pollsters and sociologists say, is the main reason only one third of the country’s population is fully vaccinated, despite the availability of free inoculations. But even with a record-breaking death toll, the government has imposed few restrictions, and its vaccination campaign has floundered, sociologists say, because of a combination of apathy and mistrust” (Hopkins, 2021).

Thus, some gullible readers of *The New York Times* may get the opinion that in Russia vaccinated people really become outcasts, and the “wrong” political system is to blame for the relatively low percentage of vaccinated population. As if in “democratically correct” countries like the USA or the UK, there are neither adversaries of vaccination, nor a large number of Covid-diagnosed people.

“Labeling” and “appeal to authorities”: further in the article it is made clear that the Russian government is hesitant to vigorously fight coronavirus precisely for political reasons: “The government is reluctant to impose restrictions because they do not want to “mess with this majority of people,” who oppose them, said Aleksandra Arkhipova, a social anthropologist who researches Covid-related misinformation... She said her research showed that many Russians believed that political, rather than epidemiological, concerns drove policy” (Hopkins, 2021). The author of the article however does not link the scope of the infected population to the political issues in any other countries, the USA or the UK, for example.

The topic of pandemic in the Russian context is touched upon in the article in *The Guardian* newspaper. It emphasizes that in Russia “cafes and restaurants look likely to take a hit from the city’s long-delayed response to the coronavirus epidemic. After the government’s lacklustre campaign to get Russians to get jabs of *Sputnik* and other domestically produced vaccines, cafe owners have said they feel like they’re being “sacrificed” as the government scrambles to contain an “explosion” in new cases” (Roth, 2021).

At a time when restrictions on working hours of cafes and restaurants were imposed in dozens of European countries, the author of an article in *The Guardian*, using manipulative techniques of “selection” and “labeling”, is trying to convince the readers that “anti-restaurant measures” are being taken in Russia for political reasons at the same time making an assumption that in the Western countries similar actions of the authorities, apparently, were exclusively democratic.

An article in *The Washington Post*, also devoted to the Covid situation in Russia, is constructed in a similar manipulative vein. Here again, the actual facts are presented first: “it took just a few hours for fraudsters to act after Moscow’s mayor announced this month that coronavirus vaccinations were compulsory for most of the city’s service sector employees. Accounts advertising the availability of fake coronavirus vaccination certificates suddenly appeared as social media followers of Russians who identified as working in restaurants or bars” (Khurshudyan, 2021).

Further on, however, the manipulative techniques “card stacking”/“cherry picking” are used when concluding that in Russia “people say they are more fearful of being vaccinated than they are of contracting the coronavirus. That makes buying a fake vaccination certificate an attractive option to try to beat the system” (Khurshudyan, 2021). Thus, the readers of *The Washington Post*, are being made to believe that the Russians are so afraid of being vaccinated with the “wrong” Sputnik V that they are ready to risk to commit a fraud, to deceive the “wrong” government.

Another hot topic is the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. An article in *The Times* titled “Nord Stream 2: Vladimir Putin accused of ‘choking’ gas supply to push up price” (Swinford, 2021) is one of the typical examples of media manipulation over the gas theme.

The Times journalist, without reference to actual facts, states that “Britain has accused President Putin of “choking off” the supply of gas to Europe to increase energy prices and win approval for a new gas pipeline. Ministers believe that Russia is deliberately restricting gas exports as part of a strategy to force European Union nations into approving Nord Stream 2, a pipeline under the Baltic Sea” (Swinford, 2021). The article contains the following techniques of the readers’ manipulation: a *scapegoat*: a technique which is aimed to transfer blame to one person or group of people without investigating the genesis and/or complexity of the issue (“Britain has accused President Putin...”), *cherry picking*: the technique is meant to convince the audience by using selected information and not presenting the complete story, *labeling* (“Russia is *deliberately*...”), *appeal to authorities* (“Ministers believe that...”).

The short but, in our opinion, rather tabloid article “Putin brought ‘attractive’ translator to distract Trump during G20 meeting” in *Daily Mail* was written by 4 (!?) authors. It argues that “Russian President Vladimir Putin brought an ‘attractive’ translator with him to distract former President Donald Trump at their 2019 meeting – and Trump told Putin he would act tough in front of the cameras and then play nice privately, former White House official Stephanie Grisham reveals in her forthcoming tell-all. ‘OK, I’m going to act a little tougher with you for a few minutes. But it’s for the cameras, and after they leave, we’ll talk. You understand,’ Trump had told Putin when they met in June 2019 in Japan at the G20, Grisham recounted” (Schwab et al., 2021).

This article was published during the presidency of J. Biden – at the end of September 2021, when the anti-Trump theme seems to be no longer relevant. But, as we can see, with the help of manipulative techniques of *selection, labeling, testimonial*, the journalists from the *Daily Mail* tried to convince their readers that the Russian president had tremendous influence on his American counterpart, and Trump did not have the strength to resist either Putin or his charming interpreter.

The article in *The Washington Post* under the headline “Putin’s Russia isn’t a model for anyone” demonstrates the open support of Russian lawful government's opponents: “Russians in huge numbers took to the streets again on Wednesday to protest their government’s treatment of Alexei Navalny, a man they fear may soon die because he dared to criticize President Vladimir Putin. While the mass demonstrations across Russia’s 11 time zones inspire respect, the country itself, under its entrenched regime, has achieved precisely the opposite. Putin has made no secret of his goal of restoring Russia’s former glory. Instead, he’s turning it into a global pariah. ... Today, Putin’s Russia stands for rampant corruption, stark income inequality, aggression toward its neighbors and state-sponsored assassinations of those who dare to criticize the system. Its economy is weak, its infrastructure atrophied. (One-fifth of Russians still don’t have indoor plumbing). Xi Jinping’s China is also a harsh autocracy, but it has visibly boosted the wealth of most of its citizens and dazzled onlookers with its rapid development. By contrast, Russia makes headlines for its kleptocracy, repression and mafia-style tactics. ... But most people certainly don’t see his regime as an example of what they want for their own countries or themselves. Modern-day Russia may still inspire fear, but it generates very little in the way of respect” (Ghitis, 2021).

As we can see from this extract, real facts (corruption, a significant lag of the Russian economy from the economies of some Western European countries) are intertwined in the text in order to exaggerate demonstrations of Navalny’s relatively few supporters in Russia and to contrast “undemocratic” capitalist Russia for a number of reasons (in the first place - an economic nature) to a more acceptable to the West, communist China. Thus, the article exhibits the following basic techniques of manipulative media influence: *selection, labeling, plain folks*.

Paradoxically, the Western ideologists, that had actively fought against communism and communist ideology in the past, are now seriously concerned about the fate of the Russian communists. A striking example is the article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, which sounds quite sympathetically towards the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF): “while some rank-and-file members want them to push harder if they ever want to make political headway, their nascent protesting has resulted in a decisive wave of official repression. The backlash is unprecedented in post-Soviet experience and threatens to upend two decades of Putin-era political stability. ... The KPRF, with 150,000 members including 40,000 youths, is Russia’s second-largest party and the only major one with independent historical roots in Russia, while most others have been artificially created by the Kremlin. The KPRF won 19 % of the votes in the September election, up about 5 % from its previous tally in 2016. By contrast UR, which had been running at around 30 % in national preelection polling, won around 49 %, about 5 % below its previous total” (Weir, 2021).

Thus, by using the propaganda technique “*least of evils*”, the readers of *The Christian Science Monitor* are being indoctrinated that it would be better for the Communists to win the elections again than the party United Russia, which “democratic West” is intolerant to.

The article in *Foreign Policy* under the heading “Scientists Want Out of Russia” starts by the statement about corruption in Russia: “Many projects conducted seemingly for the good of the people in Russia are giant corruption schemes. ... Corruption in public services in Russia takes many forms, but what all experts can agree on is that it’s extremely high” (Antonova, 2021). However, further in the article, using the manipulative technique of *selection, stereotyping/labeling* (“draconian legislation”), weak inference (“...anyone...is in real danger...”), it is concluded that the main reason for the emigration of Russian scientists to the West is not that they want to earn more, but due to the fear of reprisals: “The pervasive paranoia of the Russian state means that anyone in sensitive sectors is in real danger of being accused of espionage – even if it’s just by an ambitious underling who wants their job. ... Repressions, previously more random, have taken on distinct and troubling patterns – including the adoption of more and more draconian legislation” (Antonova, 2021).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, in the analysis of the latest articles in the American and British press, the filtering of the text was used (reasoned selection of facts versus opinions in media texts, clearing information from "glittering" and "labeling" by comparing with actual facts, etc.; clearing out the halo of "typical", "common people", "authority", a critical analysis of the goals, interests of the media agency, that is, the source of information.

In particular, abundant use of the following basic techniques of manipulative influence of media on the audience was detected: stereotyping, labeling, plain folks, least of evils, scapegoat, distortion of data, framing, selection, weak inference, etc.

Although much has been written about the harmful effects of media manipulation, sadly, there are still a lot of media consumers who are not fully aware of its deceptive and unfair means or techniques. As a journalist, author, and fake news expert Craig Silverman reminds us, "If you trust that every news article in your news feed represent an unbiased collection of what you most need to see, you will end up misinformed. This reality is important for every person to recognize, but it's essential for journalists. We are being targeted by coordinated and well-funded campaigns to capture our attention, trick us into amplifying messages, and bend us to the will of states and other powerful forces" (Silverman, 2020).

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