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## PECULIARITIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE AND MANIPULATION IN SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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**Abstract.** The article explores the peculiarities of psychological influence and manipulation in social media on the formation of political discourse. The authors analyse the main methods of manipulation, including targeting, personalisation of content, the use of fake news and information bubbles, and their impact on public opinion. The article uses dialectical and comparative legal methods, as well as case studies to achieve its results. The article discusses in detail examples of political manipulation, in particular during the Russian-Ukrainian war, and suggests ways to neutralise these influences through the development of media literacy, the use of technology to detect fake news and strengthening media accountability. The findings contribute to the development of strategies to counter manipulation in the digital environment.

**Key words:** disinformation, media literacy, case study, narrative, information bubble, fake news.

**Introduction.** The modern development of information technologies and social media has significantly transformed political discourse, making it accessible and at the same time vulnerable to manipulative influence. Social media, as an important communication tool, allows for the rapid dissemination of political messages, shaping public opinion and mobilising society to participate in socio-political processes. At the same time, the active use of these platforms creates risks of manipulation, spreading disinformation and artificially creating public sentiment. This is especially relevant in the context of democratic processes, where social media play the role of not only a communication platform but also a tool for psychological influence on citizens.

The issue of psychological influence and manipulation on social media becomes particularly acute in times of political instability, election campaigns or social crises. Targeted advertising, platform algorithms, the creation of information bubbles and the use of emotional triggers make it much easier to manipulate the opinions of certain groups of people. This can lead to polarisation of society, distortion of democratic processes and threats to national security. Therefore, studying the specifics of such influences is becoming an urgent task that allows not only to identify the mechanisms of manipulation, but also to develop effective tools to minimise them.

The topic is also important because social media is an environment where each user can be both a consumer and a disseminator of information, often without proper fact-checking or critical analysis. This creates favourable conditions for the spread of fake news, propaganda narratives and psychological influence on large audiences. In this context, research aimed at studying manipulation tech-

nologies, their impact on shaping political discourse, and developing methods to counteract such influences is of particular importance.

**Analysis of the latest research and publications on this topic.** The issue of psychological influence and manipulation in social media is the subject of numerous scientific studies that cover interdisciplinary approaches, including psychology, political science, sociology and information technology. Speaking about the latest significant studies on this issue, we should mention the works of E. Mamontova, who examines the peculiarities of public analytics as a phenomenon of media discourse (Mamontova, 2023).

Also worth mentioning are J. Zielinski, J. Theoharis, F. Pradel, M. Tulin, C. de Vrese, T. Alberg, A. Zeusner, and others. In their works, they emphasise the vulnerability of citizens of democratic countries to psychological influence through social media, especially when such platforms are used by authoritarian regimes (Zilinsky & Theocharis et al, 2024). At the same time, they note that the recipients of manipulative information tend to approve or reject conspiracy narratives, depending on their personal beliefs.

It is also worth noting that the study by M. Navalna and N. Kostusiak focuses on the cultural aspect of information warfare (Navalna & Kostusiak, 2023: 73). The authors emphasise that Russian propaganda is trying to discredit Ukrainian identity by promoting the thesis that it was created by the communist government.

An important study on the topic is the work of N. Mikava and I. Potapova (Mikava & Potapova, 2024: 122), which analyses in depth the political discourse, the role of modern technologies in it, and the importance of social media as a tool for shaping this discourse.

It should be noted that Y. Nikolaets focuses on the influence of the media on the formation of regional identity, especially for residents of Donbas, which, due to the active use of the media, has become a symbol of regional uniqueness (Nikolaets, 2018: 88). According to the researcher, the formation of political discourse was accompanied by the intensification of interethnic conflicts caused by the specifics of economic relations.

Despite a significant number of scientific studies on psychological influence and manipulation in social media, many aspects of this topic remain insufficiently studied. In particular, the issues of the complex impact of manipulative technologies on the formation of political discourse, the specifics of the impact on different social groups, as well as the effectiveness of modern methods of counteracting such phenomena require further analysis. In addition, the dynamic development of digital platforms and the emergence of new technologies create new challenges that require the adaptation of scientific approaches. All of this makes our work aimed at a deeper and more detailed analysis of this multifaceted problem relevant.

**The purpose of the article.** The purpose of the article is to study the peculiarities of psychological influence and manipulation in social media on the formation of political discourse, to identify the main mechanisms and to analyse real cases in order to substantiate effective approaches to minimising manipulation and increasing the level of information security in a modern democratic society.

**Methodology statement.** The methodological basis of the study was formed by general scientific methods of cognition, which provided a comprehensive approach to the study of the peculiarities of psychological influence and manipulation in social networks on the formation of political discourse. The application of the dialectical method allowed to analyse the dynamics of changes in the socio-political environment under the influence of digital technologies.

The comparative-historical method was used to study the transformation of manipulative technologies in political communications, taking into account changes in the information environment, in particular the transition from traditional media to social networks. The systemic-structural approach provided an opportunity to consider psychological influence as a multicomponent process that includes cognitive, emotional and social aspects.

The empirical analysis was used to study specific examples of manipulative social media campaigns and their impact on public opinion and political behaviour. Content analysis methods allowed us to study the nature and peculiarities of manipulative content distribution. The application of these methods contributed to the formulation of reasonable conclusions and recommendations for minimising manipulation on social media.

**Main part.** In today's world, and especially in Ukraine, which is in a state of full-scale war, tools of manipulation and psychological influence have become a powerful weapon in information and political confrontations. Rapidly developing social media have become a battlefield where public sentiment is shaped, citizens are mobilised, disinformation is spread and trust in state institutions is undermined. In such circumstances, studying the mechanisms of influence and manipulation becomes important not only to understand their essence, but also to develop effective methods of counteraction. However, for a qualitative analysis of these phenomena, it is necessary to first explain what exactly constitutes psychological influence and manipulation.

Manipulation is defined as 'a complex action performed with the hands, which requires skill and ability; it is also a procedure, an operation'. In addition, the term is also used to mean fraud or fraudulent activity.

Manipulating public opinion for political and commercial purposes has become an important tool in politics and market competition, although the ethical aspects of this phenomenon raise many questions. A well-known researcher E. Berneis noted that 'conscious and rational manipulation of the masses through their habits and beliefs is an important component of a democratic society'. Thus, he emphasised that manipulation is characteristic not only of totalitarian regimes, but also of democracies (Berneis, 2023).

Political manipulation is the use of covert communication strategies to realise political interests. As A. Konet correctly notes: 'Unlike other methods of influence, political manipulation is aimed at a mass audience and aims to shift public opinion or behaviour in the desired direction' (Konet, 2020: 187). Manipulations are usually carried out through the media, which allows them to reach the widest possible audience. Thus, the media become a tool that not only establishes contact with people, but also makes it possible to influence their emotions, beliefs and worldview.

At the same time, psychological influence is a complex process that includes a variety of methods and techniques aimed at changing the mind, emotions, beliefs or behaviour of a person or group of people. Such influence can be conscious or unconscious, positive or negative, depending on the purpose of the person who exercises it. In today's world, particularly in times of war, psychological influence often takes the form of information campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion, mobilising society or demoralising the enemy (Mamontova, 2023: 139).

It is worth emphasising that both manipulation and psychological influence are components of psychological communication, which determines how individuals identify with certain political groups and how this affiliation affects their political beliefs and actions (Shapovalova, 2024: 1333).

Having considered the basic definitions, let's move on to the direct analysis of manipulation and psychological influence on social media. Currently, there is no stable list of functions and methods of influence, as the interpretation of this phenomenon depends on the specifics of the socio-political context of each country and changes depending on the development of information technology.

At the same time, there are basic approaches and categories that allow us to characterise this phenomenon. In particular, in our study, we highlight the following important aspects of social media influence: targeting, personalisation of content, use of emotional triggers, fake news, use of AI and formation of information bubbles.

For a more detailed analysis and clearer visualisation of these phenomena, we plan to focus on specific cases, both in the international context and within Ukraine. The choice of this approach is

based on methodological principles, in particular, systemic analysis, which allows us to study social networks as complex communication systems with numerous interacting elements.

We would like to emphasise that the use of case studies allows for a detailed examination of practical examples of manipulation and psychological influence that reflect real-life situations in political, social and cultural contexts. Given the dynamic development of Internet technologies and media platforms, this approach allows us to cover a wide range of situations where manipulation through social media can be both negative and strategically used to influence public opinion.

In our further research, we will focus on analysing specific cases that illustrate the effectiveness of manipulative technologies on social media. In addition, we take into account the importance of studying not only the impact, but also the ways to neutralise these manipulations, which is important for the development of a strategy for media literacy and critical thinking among social media users.

And we should start with targeting and personalisation of content. One of the main features of manipulation on social media is the ability to fine-tune targeting, i.e., to direct content to a specific audience. Social media algorithms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, allow users to choose not only their age, place of residence or interests, but also their political position, behavioural patterns, habits and even emotional state. This allows certain politicians, parties, and even countries to target their messages more precisely and elicit the desired response.

The first example of such successful targeting was the US presidential campaign in 2016. As it became known, Cambridge Analytica used huge amounts of Facebook user data to create micro-targeted political campaigns. According to research, these campaigns actively used psychological profiling to influence voters' emotions and convince them to vote for a particular candidate. Targeting technologies allowed voters to see ads that exactly matched their political preferences, which significantly increased the chances of manipulators achieving the desired result.

Moreover, this case continued in 2024, as according to Goodway media (Monse, 2023), political campaigns invested heavily in data analytics and machine learning to improve their targeting strategies. The importance and comprehensiveness of this approach is clearly evident in Vivvix's analysis, which notes that political advertising spending is likely to reach \$11 billion in 2024, making it one of the fastest growing sectors of advertising (Passwaiter, 2023).

In our opinion, personalisation is being actively used to manipulate voters' emotions through content that resonates with their personal experiences or views. For example, political campaigns can tailor messages to increase feelings of fear, anger, or indignation among voters who, according to algorithms, already have certain emotional reactions to previous content. This creates a vicious circle effect, where people see information over and over again that reinforces their views and emotions.

An example of this is the presidential race in Ukraine in 2019, when candidates P. Poroshenko and V. Zelensky actively used personalised ads to achieve results in the parliamentary elections. Advertising campaigns on Facebook and Instagram were tailored to appeal to specific groups of people – voters who already had a strong preference for certain political leaders.

And considering the case of the Ukrainian elections, let's move on to the next feature of the manipulative influence of social media, namely emotional triggers. Manipulation on social media is often implemented through the use of emotional triggers, which are intended to evoke strong emotional reactions. These can be fear, anger, anxiety, compassion, or joy. In political campaigns, emotional manipulation is used to mobilise the electorate, mobilise protest moods or create conditions for social instability.

The presidential campaign of Volodymyr Zelenskyy is perhaps the most successful example of how social media can be used to gain extraordinary voter affection. The digital strategy of the campaign was carefully designed and aimed at engaging voters, particularly the younger generation, through social media. V. Zelenskyy's team actively used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube to create viral content that combined humour, accessibility and a sense of unity among

the audience. The candidate's team constantly produced videos, posts, or collections of 'interesting facts' that highlighted V. Zelenskyy's personality and political messages, making them relatable and understandable to a wide audience (Zakharchenko, 2019).

It is worth noting that V. Zelenskyy's campaign successfully used the rhetoric of 'anti-establishment', which resonated with Ukrainian voters who were disillusioned with the old political elites. He has been vocal in his criticism of the ruling politicians, particularly the Poroshenko administration, focusing on corruption, inefficiency and the inability to implement necessary reforms. V. Zelenskyy has often highlighted the gap between politicians and the needs of ordinary citizens, which has further deepened public discontent.

Thus, his campaign slogan 'I'm coming, are you with me? Ze! team' became a symbol of his position against the existing political regime. It was not only a call to unite supporters of change, but also expressed his desire to become the leader who could change the established political order and lead the country to a new future (Solonyna, 2019).

However, it is important to understand that the language used by V. Zelenskyy in his speeches and campaign materials was full of symbols that reflected closeness to ordinary people, which contrasted with the perceived aloofness of the political elite. Such symbolism strengthened his sense of unity with voters, enhancing his image as a representative of the people. V. Zelenskyy often used images of ordinary citizens in his speeches, emphasising that he was a 'servant' of the people, not a 'ruler', which was in harmony with his role in the popular TV series.

It is now time to move on to the next feature of psychological influence and manipulation on social media, namely fake news and propaganda. Fake news has become one of the most powerful tools of manipulation on social media. It spreads rapidly and its consequences can be catastrophic because it has a large impact on public opinion. Social platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, have become the main channels for spreading fake news. As these news often meet the emotional demands of the audience (e.g. refuting official statements, accusations of corruption, incitement to violence, insights from the frontline), they easily resonate with people.

In this context, we note that an integral part of this is information and psychological operations (IPO). These are specialised actions aimed at manipulating information in order to influence people's consciousness and behaviour, and to promote changes in the political, social and psychological environment. In the context of modern technologies, IPSO has been significantly enhanced by the development of tools for processing and manipulating information, in particular through the creation of fake materials – photos and videos that can convincingly imitate real events.

One of the most well-known examples of fake news is Russia's activities during the war in Ukraine. Propaganda disseminated through social media often aims to convince the public of the 'necessity' of Russian intervention, discredit the Ukrainian authorities and create an image of the enemy as 'Nazis', 'fascists' and 'Benderites'. Russian propagandists use disinformation to manipulate both Ukrainian citizens and those abroad in an attempt to influence the international political situation, as seen in the recent French elections, when Russian bot farms actively promoted candidate Marine Le Pen, who is known for her anti-Ukrainian narratives (Tereshchuk, 2024).

As we know, Russia started the war back in 2014, when it annexed the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and started military operations in eastern Ukraine. However, Russia started its propaganda campaign in 2013, when it became clear that our country was seeking to move towards Europe. One of the most significant cases of fake news spreading at that time was the incident with the 'shooting of civilians on the Maidan'. Russian media manipulated the facts, claiming that it was not Viktor Yanukovich's security forces who were shooting, but representatives of the opposition, which in turn allowed them to create a narrative about the legitimacy of the 'anti-Maidan' and support for the actions of the then president. This was a typical tactic used not only to manipulate the domestic electorate, but also to discredit the Ukrainian protests in the international arena.

After starting the war in eastern Ukraine, Russia continued to spread fake news. An example is the fake news campaign about the Ukrainian army allegedly using chemical weapons in Donbas. Russian media and bots actively spread news about the use of prohibited weapons by the Ukrainian side. These reports were refuted by numerous international organisations, but the information about the ‘atrocities’ committed by the Ukrainian military left an imprint on the minds of some people both in Ukraine and abroad.

We would like to add that propagandists also used fake news about numerous cases of ‘attacks’ on civilians that allegedly took place in the areas captured by Russia. In order to discredit the Ukrainian authorities, these news were actively shared on social media with calls to ‘restore order’ and ‘protect civilians’. This was part of a broader strategy of psychological warfare aimed at creating chaos and increasing support for aggression among the Russian population.

Analysing the fake news of that time, we cannot but recall the TV story about the ‘crucified boy’, one of the most high-profile examples of fake news and propaganda manipulations that became widespread as part of Russian propaganda during the war in Ukraine. This story was disseminated by Russian state media in 2014 and became a symbol of manipulation and deliberate distortion of facts to discredit the Ukrainian military and government.

On 12 July 2014, Channel One TV broadcast a story entitled ‘A refugee from Sloviansk recalls how the Ukrainian military executed her young son and the wife of a militia member’. In it, a woman who introduced herself as Halyna Pyshniak from Zakarpattia described the events that allegedly took place after the Ukrainian military pushed Russian terrorists led by Igor Girkin (Strelkov) out of Sloviansk. According to her, the Ukrainian military allegedly ‘crucified’ a young boy on a board. The TV report was intended to portray the Ukrainian army as brutal aggressors capable of the most serious crimes, as well as to create emotional tension among the Russian population and the international community. Even after it became clear that the story had been fabricated, the story continued to be used by the Russians as a propaganda tool, as it was repeated through various channels and social media, shifting the focus to the emotional aspect of the tragedy (Nesterenko, 2024).

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fake news has become one of the main tools of manipulation both domestically and internationally. The Russian propaganda machine is actively spreading disinformation to achieve several goals: justifying military aggression, destabilising the political situation in Ukraine, and creating a favourable image of Russia in the eyes of the international community.

In our opinion, another feature of social media is the widespread use of artificial intelligence and image generation. Not only leading technologists, but anyone can now generate a photo or video that can be used to spread disinformation, propaganda and psychological influence.

It should be noted that Russian propaganda has various forms and ways of penetrating the Ukrainian information environment, including through ‘pro-Ukrainian’ posts, artificially generated ‘images of grandmothers with baked goods’ or even posts about brothers who ‘no one congratulated’. It is important to realise that such accounts can be run not just by random people, but often by Russian special services or those with far from good intentions.

It should be noted that one of the most popular forms of propaganda on social media is fake photos of children, grandmothers, farmers or soldiers, often accompanied by emotionally charged texts that manipulate feelings of sympathy. For example, ‘I am a lonely warrior, today is my birthday and no one congratulated me’. Such posts are usually published from accounts with no real activity or from groups created solely to collect likes and followers. Over time, these channels can be used to spread pro-Russian posts and aggressive propaganda. A particular danger is posed by posts that manipulate tragic topics, such as the wounding or disappearance of soldiers, to spread panic, collect personal data or destabilise the situation in Ukraine (Zdorovenko, 2024).

The generation of such materials with the help of AI allows us to create fake news on a completely new level. For example, deepfake technology can be used to create videos of political leaders making false statements that allegedly call for violence or even human rights abuses. These videos can be created to look completely realistic, with accurate imitation of intonation and facial expressions, making them particularly convincing.

It should be noted that IPSOs using such technologies are not limited to videos and photos, but also actively include textual information accompanying these materials. Bots and other automated systems can distribute these manipulative images on social media platforms, forums, and chat rooms, allowing fake news and disinformation to reach wide audiences. This creates the effect of ‘mass support’ for fictitious events, making it possible to influence the minds of millions of people through disinformation.

Particular attention should be paid to information bubbles, which allow social media users to receive information that confirms their own beliefs and views, while limiting access to other, alternative information.

The algorithms of social networks (such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) actively personalise the content that is constantly offered to users, creating a separate information reality for each one. As a result, people get caught in information ‘loops’ where they are hardly exposed to other points of view, which can lead to the reinforcement of their existing beliefs, even if these beliefs do not correspond to reality.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, in particular, intensifies this process through politically charged information that is actively circulating in the networks. Each of the parties to the conflict is trying to form a certain vision of events in the media space, using social media to mobilise support, attract new like-minded people and create strong emotional ties. At the same time, each of these parties is in its own information bubble, where only those points of view that support their national and political beliefs dominate.

Interestingly, young people who actively use social media are more likely to fall into such a bubble due to their higher tendency to social conformity, which is typical for this age. Young users, eager to confirm their beliefs, may not even notice how their activity is limited to a one-way flow of information. This phenomenon can lead to an even greater polarisation of views, as users are unable to make an objective assessment of the situation without receiving information from different sources.

However, there are factors that can reduce the likelihood of falling into an information bubble. One of them is to actively seek out diverse information and participate in open debates where different views are discussed. Users who are able to question the prevailing narratives and engage in constructive discussions are more likely to receive new, diverse information and break out of the bubble. At the same time, an insufficiently large network of interactions can limit access to alternative points of view, increasing isolation within one ideological group (Tamilina, 2024).

Finally, the bubble process is of particular importance in the context of war, as information warfare is one of the main forms of struggle. The dissemination of information from one side of the war can have a major impact on the psychological situation both inside and outside the country. Therefore, it is important to understand how social media shapes the views of users and how their information can be manipulated to increase conflict sentiment among the population.

Having examined the main types of manipulation and psychological influence in social media, we have come to the conclusion that effective neutralisation of these influences is an important component of the struggle for the formation of an objective political discourse. Given the urgency of this problem, there are several main ways to neutralise manipulations that will help increase the level of media literacy and develop critical thinking among social media users:

1) Development of media literacy and critical thinking. One of the ways to neutralise manipulation is to develop media literacy, which includes the skills of recognising fakes, understanding social

media algorithms and critical analysis of information. Users should learn to question dubious sources and study information before it is disseminated.

2) Improving content regulation and filtering. Strengthening the filtering of fake news and disinformation on platforms will reduce its spread. Platforms can add features to verify facts and provide additional information about news sources.

3) Engage independent fact-checking. Collaborating with fact-checking organisations will help reduce the level of trust in manipulation and fake news, allowing users to more easily navigate the flow of information.

4) Education through civic initiatives. Public campaigns should raise awareness of manipulation and promote analytical thinking among a wide audience.

5) Legislative initiatives to protect users. Laws should be created to provide protection against manipulation and fake news, including through transparency of political advertising and platform liability.

6) Developing technologies to detect fakes. Artificial intelligence-based technologies will help detect manipulations and reduce their impact on the audience.

7) Development of ethics and social responsibility in the media. Raising ethical standards in the media will help create a healthy information climate that will reduce manipulation in political discourse.

8) The role of social media as agents of change. Social media should become platforms for educational initiatives that promote critical thinking among users and protect them from disinformation.

**Conclusions.** The study proved that manipulation and psychological influence on social media is an important tool for shaping political discourse. Through mechanisms such as personalisation of content, targeting, use of emotional triggers, fake news and information bubbles, manipulators can significantly influence public opinion and political beliefs of users. Specific examples, such as disinformation campaigns used during political crises, including the Russian-Ukrainian war, confirm how effective these tools are in changing political narratives and shaping new political realities.

Given these problems, it is important to implement effective neutralisation strategies, including the development of media literacy, content filtering, support for fact-checking initiatives and social responsibility of the media, to minimise the negative impact of manipulations. This will help reduce the impact of fake news and manipulative technologies, contributing to the formation of an objective and constructive political discourse in the digital environment. Thus, achieving these goals is an important step in the fight for information security and democratic processes in society.

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