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RESEARCH INTO THE PHENOMENON OF SELF-ORGANIZATION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION AND MANIPULATION

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Abstract

In the conditions of the modern information society, **expat communities** are becoming important centers for the formation of opinions and attitudes towards various socio-political events. The research object: the phenomenon of spontaneous self-organization of online community. The research purpose: to conduct a comparative analysis of homogeneous emigrant communities (primarily from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus) in various European Union countries, allowing to identify external factors influencing the formation and development of mechanisms for combating information threats. The results of this research will have a significant potential contribution to the development of social sciences, in particular sociology, communication studies and information security science. By investigating the mechanisms of self-organization, the project will provide the scientific community with new data on how systems of spontaneous social control of information arise and operate without direct state or commercial support. The knowledge gained will contribute to the development of new theoretical models of community self-organization and can be used to shape integration and information security policies at the national and pan-European levels. This, in turn, will help strengthen democratic institutions and increase the resilience of societies to external information threats, which is a priority for the European Union, Lithuania and Ukraine.

Keywords: online communities, self-organization, manipulation, resilience, democracy, natural language processing, artificial intelligence.

1 Introduction

Despite the large number of studies devoted to the problems of disinformation and information manipulation in general, the issue of self-organization of online communities in the context of countering disinformation remains insufficiently studied. Today, most research focuses on professional approaches to combating manipulative content: moderating social platforms, using artificial intelligence to automatically verify information, or involving professional fact-checkers. However, the phenomenon of spontaneous **self-organization of online community** participants themselves, which occurs without external intervention or funding, remains scientifically underestimated and practically undescribed.

2 Originality and novelty of the idea

The proposed study is innovative, since for the first time it aims to systematically study the phenomenon of self-organization in large expat online communities. The lack of previous studies that deeply study the mechanisms and factors that contribute to such self-organization determines the fundamental originality of the proposed approach. A feature of this project is the comparative analysis of homogeneous expat communities (primarily from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus) in different countries of the European Union, which allows us to identify external factors influencing the formation and development of mechanisms for countering information threats. It is this approach, which combines social sciences and information security issues, that is completely new in this area and creates opportunities for obtaining unique theoretical and practical conclusions.

The relevance of the proposed topic is due to a significant increase in the number of expats who arrived in the countries of the European Union, especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to official data, as of 2025, more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in European countries, and the number of migrants from Russia and Belarus also increased. Such a sharp increase in the number of newly arrived people has led to the formation of large online communities that are becoming active subjects of the information space and, accordingly, potential targets of information attacks on democratic values.

The article is of direct relevance for the EU, in particular for Lithuania and Ukraine, as it is aimed at solving a real and acute social problem – countering disinformation, which can weaken social cohesion and pose threats to democratic institutions. The research also meets the information security priorities of the EU and Ukraine, helping them to respond more effectively to information threats and support democratic values among migrant communities.

In recent years, the phenomenon of self-organization among online communities in the context of combating disinformation and manipulation has attracted increasing interest from international scholars. This grassroots approach, based on voluntary and decentralized actions, is seen as a promising complement to institutional efforts to enhance informational resilience. Researchers acknowledge that self-organized online communities can be highly effective in mitigating the spread of false information, especially in contexts where official countermeasures are insufficient or delayed. According to Rachel Kuo and Moira Weigel (2021), these communities develop "participatory infrastructures" that enable collective fact-checking, emotional support, and counter-narrative generation without formal oversight or external funding [1]. Similarly, Chen et al. (2023) emphasize the role of informal community norms and social reinforcement in promoting accurate information-sharing behaviors. Their work highlights how community dynamics can foster trust and a sense of responsibility among members, encouraging them to act against disinformation [2]. Despite the potential, scholars also identify several critical limitations and challenges:

– **Sustainability and Burnout**: Long-term volunteer engagement is difficult to maintain. Participants often face emotional exhaustion, especially when combating high volumes of toxic content (Starbird et al., 2020) [3]:

– **Lack of Coordination and Authority**: In the absence of formal structure, self-organized communities may struggle with coordination and decision-making, making it harder to react efficiently to disinformation threats (Bruns, 2019) [4].

– **Exposure to Harassment**: Individuals actively correcting misinformation may become targets of coordinated attacks or harassment, increasing the personal cost of participation (Jhaver et al., 2021) [5].

– **Risk of Echo Chambers**: While these communities aim to promote truth, there's also the risk that self-organization can lead to the creation of echo chambers, especially when participants lack diverse perspectives or critical media literacy (Guess & Lyons, 2020) [6].

International scholars (Guess, 2020; Kuo, 2021; Chen, 2023; Starbird, 2020; Bruns, 2019) emphasize that while institutional responses (e.g., platform moderation, governmental regulation) remain essential, grassroots and community-based models of misinformation response offer complementary and often more agile solutions. These approaches are particularly effective in contexts where top-down interventions are slow, culturally insensitive, or distrusted by the public.

Many researchers advocate for enhancing digital literacy within online communities as a foundational strategy. According to Guess et al. (2020)

equipping individuals with critical thinking skills and the ability to assess information credibility reduces the spread of falsehoods at the source [6]. Community self-organization becomes more efficient when members share a baseline of media literacy. Kuo and Weigel (2021) highlight the need for participatory infrastructures – tools and norms that enable everyday users to identify, challenge, and correct misinformation collectively [1]. These include shared databases of credible sources, automated tools for flagging questionable content, and coordinated counterspeech campaigns. Chen et al. (2023) propose integrating AI-based tools into community practices [2]. This includes leveraging natural language processing to identify patterns of misinformation and detect coordinated campaigns in real time. However, they emphasize that these tools should be transparent and augment rather than replace human judgment. Starbird et al. (2020) point out that volunteers in misinformation-fighting communities often act based on moral, political, or social motivations [3]. Designing systems that recognize contributions, foster trust, and offer emotional support is crucial for sustainability. These communities benefit from horizontal leadership and a sense of collective identity.

Bruns (2019) and other scholars suggest forming hybrid models, where self-organized communities collaborate with journalists, NGOs, and researchers [4]. Such partnerships ensure access to verified information while preserving community autonomy.

3. Research Methods for Studying the Self-Organization of Online Communities in Countering Disinformation

Given the complexity a nd interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon, scholars advocate for a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and computational research methods. The goal is to capture both the structural and behavioral dynamics within online communities. Among the qualitative research methods, it is recommended to use digital ethnography, in-depth interviews and focus groups. Researchers such as Christine Hine (2015) suggest that digital ethnography is essential for understanding the lived experiences and informal practices of online communities [7]. This includes long-term observation of group interactions, analysis of community rituals, and insider perspectives. In-Dept Interviews and Focus Groups methods help uncover the motivations, attitudes, and strategies of community members who engage in self-organized misinformation response (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) [8].

Among quantitative methods, it is appropriate to use surveys and questionnaires, social network analysis. Surveys and questionnaires used to collect data on user behavior, attitudes toward misinformation, and

perceptions of community efficacy. These tools can measure engagement patterns and psychological drivers. Social Network Analysis (SNA) helps map relationships between members, identify key influencers or bridge nodes, and detect the spread or containment of misinformation within networks (Himelboim et al., 2017) [9].

Other methods are also used. Acording Thorne (2018) computational and Mixed Methods such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) enables automated analysis of community discourse, sentiment trends, and the detection of disinformation markers (e.g., use of conspiratorial language or fake news markers) [10]. Machine learning and AI used to classify misinformation, identify bot activity, and analyze patterns of community responses. AI tools can also support community moderation by flagging harmful content [11]. Mixed-Methods Approaches combining qualitative insights with large-scale data analytics provides a richer understanding of how communities operate, evolve, and respond to threats. Cross-National and Cultural Comparisons helps to understand how different political and media contexts affect the development of self-organized responses. This method is particularly relevant to your project comparing Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian communities in different EU countries.

4. Instead of conclusions

Currently, insufficient attention is paid to the problem under analysis, therefore, the research methods that should be used are widely discussed. To address the problem, a scientific study will be conducted in Lithuania on how self-organized online communities can effectively reduce the spread of misinformation. What measures should be taken to stop the spread of such information.

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