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How Disinformation and its
Mongers Strive in Ukraine 2020

Andriy Yurichko

ANALYSIS

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Germany



/freiheit.org



/FriedrichNaumannStiftungFreiheit



/FNFreiheit

Author

Andriy Yurichko

Translator and editor

Vadym Kastelli

Contact

Phone: +49 30 22 01 26 34

Fax: +49 30 69 08 81 02

email: service@freiheit.org

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1. Subject Matter and Content

Disinformation in Ukraine is not much different from what you can find elsewhere in the world. However, there are certain peculiarities, particularly regarding its content.

I would identify five basic categories of disinformation. These are very often intertwined but not necessarily, more as an exception.

1.1 Conspiracy-related disinformation

I would argue that in Ukraine, conspiracy theories are the kind of disinformation that are the least readily accepted. There are many of them circulating around. Some of them never change for decades while others may morph substantially, depending on the situation. For example, fans of the vaccine conspiracy theory were among the first to embrace the Covid-19 situation. Meanwhile, cellular network conspiracy theorists continue to blame everything on cell towers, no matter whether they are 3G or 5G (well, okay, 5G seems to be more trendy worldwide now). Disinformation about the Jewish or billionaires' world rule (Club 300 or similar) also remains the same, except that it is sometimes injected with mundane themes of pro-Russian or pro-American control.

What makes these forms of disinformation so popular is that they offer answers to the simple question of 'who is to blame' for an economic collapse, war, unemployment, epidemics, and so on.

1.2 Household disinformation

Another type of disinformation is household disinformation. Very often, this is a mixture of pseudo-practical advice, panic-mongering, and emotional engagement. Some of the most prevalent types of this kind of disinformation includes missing persons announcements (lost child announcements are some of the most common reposts, even if the incident takes place in another country); charity fundraiser announcements; reports of corrupt practices of judges, public officials, and the law enforcement; reports of contest wins and unusual accomplishments; tips on the benefits of consuming garlic, lemon, ginseng, or tea; hate speech against particular population groups (i.e. a report of a child kidnapped in a car with Lithuanian number plates at the time of the foreign licensed car customs clearance controversy of 2019, or a reports of a child kidnapped by gypsies (a derogative reference to Roma people) in 2017 used by right-wing movements to justify their acts of aggression), and so on.

What makes this type of disinformation popular is the emotional response it elicits, ranging from a faint smile to practical sympathy. The stronger the emotional response, the broader the audience.

1.3 Political disinformation

One of the most prevalent types of disinformation in Ukraine is political disinformation. It's worth noting that historically, the Ukrainian society has been highly politicized. The events of 2014 only added to the public polarization. It is important to take into account Russia's attempts to create an information divide, as well as the struggle of Ukrainian political elites for power by employing the dirtiest information methods possible.

As a matter of fact, I would say that political disinformation is currently the most powerful and dangerous in view of the current status of Ukraine's informational landscape.

Besides, these are fake stories that are created and disseminated for real money. Thus, all other disinformation (such as conspiracy theories or household disinformation) merely serve as a cover-up. In other words, they are just used to shape an active audience, test social media algorithms for content promotion, and gauge the audience's mindset before releasing fake political stories.

Very often, political disinformation exploits the audience's sentiments and fears but is always secondary to the idea that is promoted. What makes this type of disinformation more popular is the illusion of influencing decision-making and the future, which encourages involvement, discussions, and proliferation.

1.4 Subversive disinformation

It is worth looking at a special category of mixed, dual-nature disinformation. Simply put, which country's audience they target. And this is easy to figure out from...the context. There are disinformation stories tailored to the Ukrainian audience, and then there are adaptations. The language of the news story is not the main giveaway as these can be in Ukrainian, Russian, or English (e.g. supposedly released by WHO or the United Nations). What is most important are semantic and contextual inconsistencies. This type of disinformation should be classed as subversive. They go round different countries with a view to generating public outcry and discontent with government actions. That is what sets them apart from the rest of the abovementioned types of disinformation.

The most typical example of subversive disinformation are reports about secret American or Russian biological warfare labs. The media literacy online conference on "How to Counter Disinformation," held by the Academy of Ukrainian Press on 27 May, 2020, identified at least three countries claiming that the story had targeted them, namely Ukraine, Georgia, and Lithuania. In Ukraine, that fake story resulted in an official letter from the parliament to the Ministry of Defense (for where else would biological weaponry be developed). However, it is widespread

across different nations, only the bio lab contracting states vary, mainly between the U.S., the Russian Federation, and China.

So far, no investigations into the origins of such subversive disinformation stories have been able to confirm whether they were created in Russia and targeted Ukraine or were merely adapted to fit a particular geopolitical situation. I am more inclined to believe that the content was hastily adapted in an effort to trigger the audience's emotions considering that such stories immediately alert fact-checking organizations and even official institutions and thus have a very short lifespan.

I should also mention another typical example of subversive disinformation disguised as household disinformation, i.e., a series of disinformation about politicians, public officials, MPs, and law-enforcement officers, all of whom always represent the authorities, without any reference to specific localities, although words such as 'federal,' 'state,' or 'county' occasionally pop up in such texts. There are no federal districts in Ukraine and the term is never used, however, it is widely used in the Russian Federation. The division into states and counties is typical of the United States of America. This suggests that initially, the text was created for the Russian-speaking audiences in the U.S. or the Russian Federation but later was hastily adapted for Ukraine.

Very often, subversive disinformation campaigns refer to public institutions that do not exist in Ukraine, such as warnings from the 'Public Health Department of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine.' No such department has ever existed in Ukraine, however, there is a similarly named institution in the Russian Federation. Another example would be the 'Center for Disease Control' which, in fact, only exists in the U.S.

Often, such news stories refer to private cell phone numbers whereas public agencies always provide special 0-800 numbers or numbers with area codes.

Here is an example of another hot household disinformation story about Covid-19 reposted in a chat room:

"Beware! Some people go door to door and introduce themselves as decontamination personnel disinfecting homes against Covid-19. Once they get inside homes, they use sleeping gas and rob them. The police reported that at the morning briefing!!!"

Essentially the same disinformation story can be found, in different languages but with the same meaning, in Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, or Belarus.

The incident would have been unremarkable had the Ukrainian police not actually discussed it at a morning briefing (and posted it on its official website) because it was so widely discussed online! The circle is now complete. So far, the Ukrainian police is yet to register a single burglary incident similar to the one described above. Nevertheless, there is much talk about this online in different countries...

What makes such fake stories popular is a combination of offering answers to simple questions, akin to conspiracy theories, and triggering emotions of joy or fear, similarly to household disinformation.

1.5 Official disinformation

To wrap up this overview, I should mention another category of disinformation which may not, in fact, essentially be fake and is later officially refuted. These include speeches, announcements, and statements by public officials, pro-government political figures or local self-government officials. More often than not, these are remarks taken out of context not by "fake news proliferators" but the officials themselves. This adds weight to the information and feeds different types of disinformation, from household ones to conspiracy theories.

A classic example would be a statement made by Yevhen Brahar, member of parliament representing the Servant of the People party, in response to a retired lady's question about how she was supposed to afford to pay her gas bills: "Sell your dog to pay your bills!" This spawned a bunch of memes featuring a dog asking the master whether he/she has paid the gas bills and where they were going.



The speech bubble reads, "I'm selling you to pay the gas bills."

Or the statement made by Halyna Tretyakova, member of parliament representing the Servant of the People party and chairperson of the parliamentary Committee for Social Policy and War Veterans Rights, claiming that the families in need produce 'extremely low-quality' children [1].

Or the statement made by Halyna Yanchenko, member of parliament representing the Servant of the People party, calling children living in Donbass 'grungy and messy' [2].

The Internet is full of statements by oblast governors, city mayors, and chief medical officers about the numbers of Covid-19 patients, none of which are confirmed by the Ministry of Health of Ukraine. Nevertheless, they do cause a stir, debate, and discontent with the Ministry of Health, the Cabinet, and the President.

Another classic example of 'official disinformation' is the statement by Chief Sanitary Physician of Ukraine, Mr. Liashko, made on a Friday at 10 AM, that Kyiv, Ukraine's capital city, was not ready to lift the lockdown, followed at 12 AM by the diametrically opposite statement that Kyiv was, in fact, "ready to lift the lockdown." For several days after that, both news stories circulated on social media and newsfeeds concurrently, causing confusion among Ukrainians over the reasons for such a drastic change in his standpoint.

Here we should point out the low media literacy level

among Ukrainians who are not able to distinguish between facts and commentary, or, in other words, individual opinions. On the other hand, this can be blamed on poor ethics of public officers and members of parliament who pass off their assumptions in their official capacity, making them appear as the government's

official position on the matter.

What makes this form of disinformation popular is that it originates from public officials, often spread via traditional media, not only in text form but also along with videos to confirm the claims, and any official refutation covers less audience than the original story did.

2. Proliferators and their Motives

Having identified the types of disinformation based on their subject matter and content, we should now figure out who the proliferators are in Ukraine. Here, the situation is close to critical. According to the latest nationwide survey on information hygiene, 54 percent of Ukrainians have reposted fake stories and hoaxes on Facebook [3]. For the sake of convenience, the proliferators of disinformation can be put in the following categories, based on their intentions.

2.1 Jokers

These create or spread disinformation stories for fun. They may find fun in testing social media algorithms, chasing likes and reposts, or merely competing for the wildest news story or strongest audience response.

This group of people does not actually realize the potential effects of publishing false information. Most often, they are perfectly aware that the information is false and untrue but do not consider it to be harmful. Often, they spread conspiracy theories or disinformation stories about events in other countries which they find interesting to discuss.

Take Kostia, for instance. He often spreads unverified information among different newsgroups. His motivation behind spreading unverified information, which is socializing, illustrates this group of people the best.

"Sometimes, you really want to have a conversation with your friends but the topics have all been exhausted. Of all the hot subjects, the ones circulating in the media environment are the first to pop up. Such as Covid-19. Hundreds and thousands of sources offer information and

only a few of those are credible, so you pick the craziest stories that cause a WOW effect: dead bodies are burnt down, all doctors have fallen ill, mortality rate is 20 percent and so on. Such information goes down particularly well if the person you are trying to talk to doesn't pay attention and you really want to grab that attention. That's it."

2.2 The responsible

These people often spread disinformation that they never created themselves. Most often, they do that via emails to their friends or via chats with their coworkers, neighbors, or their children's schools. They do not do so in bad faith, they actually want to share information that they think is important. Sometimes, they follow all the instructions provided in such reports to a T. There have been instances where such people retold and embellished disinformation if it matched their picture of reality, thus legitimizing those stories for the next iteration of news consumers.

Between 12 March and 18 May, 2020, Ukrainian courts heard and ruled on 89 complaints about dissemination of Covid-19-related disinformation. According to the Investigative Journalism Agency Fourth Estate, the largest numbers of relevant court rulings were registered in Zhytomyr and Khmelnytsky Oblasts.

"The majority of defendants argued that they thought the information they were spreading was true and they only wanted to share those headline news with their friends. Some admitted that they could not distinguish between the disinformation. Nevertheless, the courts found almost 30 percent of the defendants guilty and fined them." [4]

The infographic below was shown on two national TV channels, namely 24 and 112, and a person was brought to court for reposting it.

Иногда в компании друзей очень хочется поговорить но все темы давно исчерпаны. Из того что "на слуху" легко приходят темы о том что циркулирует в информационном пространстве. Например о вирусе Ковид 19, информацию подают сотни, тысячи источников из которых единицы достоверны и можно вырвать самые безумные истории которые вызовут эффект "Вау", трупы сжигают, заболели все врачи, смертность 20 % ит.д. Особенно легко дать такую информацию если предполагаемый собеседник не обращает на Вас внимания а Вам хочется это внимание получить.

конец мысли)



"I had the impression that the judge found the whole situation just as absurd. The hearing lasted some ten minutes. I explained that I had not written the post but reposted the infographics shown by TV Channel 24 and later published on the "Dnipro on Lockdown" webpage, and that the same information was spread online, including by mass media. They blamed me for not verifying the information. That's totally absurd. I do not think that the information published by official media can be classified as 'rumors.' That's their job to verify it. There is no way regular people can do that. And the Security Service should focus on more serious matters than this... The fine I was facing was small, 170 hryvnias. But this is not about the money as I could have suffered reputational damage. Being labeled a 'rumor monger' is damaging to the reputation of any person, especially a researcher, a historian. I think that was exactly the goal," said Yana Tymoshenko to Radio Free Europe [5].

The most popular story of household disinformation in Ukraine is the story about helicopter aerial spraying. The fake report has a long history. During the flu epidemic of 2008, airplanes were spraying unidentified agents over cities. I predict that by 2030 these will be replaced by drones.

Other hot topics include all kinds of discounts, free masks for retirees or other population groups, plant-based natural disinfectants, payments from the President for taking part in a survey, etc.

2.3 Fraudsters

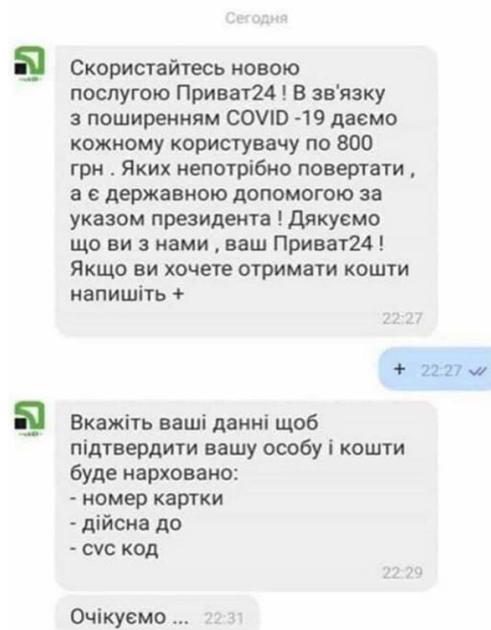
This is another distinct group of those creating and proliferating disinformation. They mainly exploit household disinformation, even those stories that have been refuted, hoping that regular people may not have paid attention. They fall into several groups.

Type A fraudsters collect personal information such as phone number, email address, residential address, or ID information. On the face of it, this type of fraud does no direct harm, but it's hard to imagine how and where such data may be used. There have been instances of

fraudulent loans received through the use of stolen personal data.

Type B fraudsters request small payments for bonuses, discounts, additional information, childhood charity and military support donations, etc.

Below is a typical example of an ad for an 800 hryvnia government grant aid. The ad, featuring a logo of a well-known government-owned bank, is an attempt to obtain credit card data for cash withdrawal.



Type C fraudsters offer fee-based training courses, diplomas of real and non-existent European universities, prospective employment, assistance in resolving all kinds of problems, access to classified private information, etc.

This group focuses on financial gains, uses direct messaging or ads, and is actively pursued by law-enforcement agencies and banking institutions.

2.4 Paid disinformation creators

This group deliberately creates and disseminates disinformation. More often than not, they do this for money, pursuing some political agenda. They make extensive use of dissemination channels known as bot farms. Disinformation creators may pretend to be real people (who have never spoken publicly or may not even have a social media account) or people that never existed. What they do is make up new disinformation or twist the ones fake stories that have already become popular as they see fit.

I suggest that you check out the investigative report by Vasyl Bidun, Slidstvo.Info journalist and co-author of the investigative documentary called I, Bot. For a month and a half, the reporter worked undercover at a Ukrainian bot farm where he was paid UAH 9,000 (US\$ 300-350) a month to post hundreds of comments on Facebook using fake accounts every day. One comment cost 15 hryvnias on average [6].

Even though this group mainly focuses on creating fake stories for money, it also puts a lot of effort into figuring out information dissemination algorithms. It also does not shy

away from hiring real opinion leaders to spread information which is then taken out of context or paraphrased.

Proliferators

Proliferators may be divided into three groups: individuals, bots, and PR people.

Individuals

Members of this group mainly post politically charged content, although some of them may also be members of groups where they tell jokes and funny stories. Almost invariably, they are members of Facebook groups supporting certain politicians, and they gladly repost any information they are offered. They may receive small payments (during election campaigns) or do this voluntarily. They hardly ever create their own content but as that is not their core activity, they are not detected by social media algorithms as bots. Politically charged information and disinformation is interspersed with reposts of news reports, statements by politicians, investigative reports, cat images, and memes. Studies suggest that such individuals always manifestly support particular candidates and disseminate only positive information about them. Very often, such people carry the campaigning momentum even after the campaigns are over. However, the dissemination of politically charged disinformation almost comes to a halt.

Bots

Another group mainly consists of bot network owners. Bot farm bots fall into three groups - dummies, semi-dummies, and professionals. The first two types never have a filled-out FB profile or an avatar, however, while semi-dummies do leave comments on posts, dummies only like and repost.

Bot farms are very popular due to the low cost of equipment and the ease of registration on social networks, as well as moderate pricing for such services. There is a multitude of configurations to help with information influencing by generating views and comments, or simulating live discussions or public interest. Professional bots are people who manage up to ten carefully designed accounts, regularly update their profiles and newsfeeds, participate in discussions, leave comments and reposts that would then be spread around by dummies.

Once I even filed a complaint against one such bot for spreading disinformation when I had collected sufficient evidence. I was interested in how the anti-bot algorithm and Facebook's review procedure worked. However, automated profile and activity verification detected no breach of the 'terms of the license agreement,' and existing evidence was found to be insufficient to warrant manual moderation of the suspect profile.

I was able to find out that the person in the profile did not actually exist (I simply called HR departments of those organizations where he had supposedly worked) and disseminated information on request. However, the account did meet all the technical requirements: all the photos were unique, all newsfeed posts were original, and account activities were not synchronous with automated bot farms. As I said earlier, there are real people behind such accounts who either create commissioned content

or provide quality dissemination of it.

According to my own sources, a single bot operator may manage between 10 and 50 of such linked professional accounts. Their charges to the customers are higher, they care about their reputation and employ the accounts selectively so as to not be automatically banned for not being able to provide real IDs to verify the profiles.

However, semi-dummies pose the greatest danger. Their accounts mainly appear to be based in small localities. There is not a single resident of their localities on their friend lists but many other bots. That way a bot network is set up that exploits social media algorithms to make reposts or boost their ratings, or report other accounts for violation of the terms of the license agreement to have them blocked.

For example, a similar thing happened on 27 May, 2020, during the online conference on media literacy held by the Academy of Ukrainian Press. 39 minutes into the conference, more than two thousand accounts complained about the broadcast content which was then blocked by Facebook. The next broadcast on the same topic was manually moderated by a Facebook representative and further complaints were not accepted.

I would like to stress that this is a common tactic to control information online using registered bot accounts. A large number of complaints within a short period of time activates the automated blocking system, and unblocking a post or a profile is only possible after a detailed exchange with the customer service.

Our partner NGO BezBrehni had a similar incident. They launched a fact-checking project in one of Ukraine's eastern regions, and their FB page was blocked after they had posted several high-profile publications about the local power elites.

For weeks, Facebook bluntly refused to give any explanation why the page was banned and kept referring all inquiries to its office in... Moscow. Which, once it found out that the organization's focus was on fighting disinformation and political populism, chose to ignore them.

We found out later that the BezBrehni Facebook page was blocked due to multiple complaints against its content, even though all publications were original and compiled with the requirements of the Ukrainian law and the terms of the license agreement.

However, multiple complaints from bots prevented us from recovering nearly fifty investigative reports that had previously been automatically moderated by FB using keywords 'coronavirus' and 'disinformation.'

PR people

The third group comprises creative/advertising agencies that mainly work for brands, private companies, and political parties and movements, sometimes working for competing teams concurrently. They live solely off creating and promoting image-building (or image-damaging) information. However, whereas they create content for advertising brands under their own name, they spread disinformation stories via posts on various Facebook and Instagram groups and channels under other people's names.

This group has no political affiliations. Sometimes, they actively disseminate political messages of competing political actors.

They make extensive use of bot farms and also accept

private orders. For example, all of a sudden, a political bot network that I've been keeping an eye on for a while began advertising a sports equipment webstore. That was... unusual.

According to the findings of an investigation by Schemes, a joint project by Radio Free Europe and UA: Pershyi TV channel, of 373 comments on a post by then Prime Minister of Ukraine Arseniy Yatseniuk, 271 were by controlled bots, and who knows whether the other 102 were not generated by rival political bots...[7].

Д. Яценюк	Адрес	наши	всього
А. Яценюк 28.05 00:24 "Ми все одно з тобою, «Дніпро»! Позаду надважкий та потужний сезон. Попереду – великі перемоги."	https://www.facebook.com/yatsenyuk.arseni/posts/516678508486289	53	86
А. Яценюк 28.05 12.07 "Сердечно вітаю українських прикордонників!"	https://www.facebook.com/yatsenyuk.arseni/photos/a.240776402743169.1073741829.238601382960671/516859625134844/?type=1&theater	98	163
А. Яценюк 28.05 15.48 "Рано чи пізно Україна стане членом НАТО і Європейського Союзу."	https://www.facebook.com/yatsenyuk.arseni/photos/a.240776402743169.1073741829.238601382960671/516919321795541/?type=1	271	373
А. Яценюк 28.05 19.05 "Санкції мають бути продовжені, адже Росія відмовилася виконувати"	https://www.facebook.com/yatsenyuk.arseni/posts/516969798457160	61	94
Д. Бигус			
Д. Бигус 28.05 10.11 "В этом эфире не было красивых домиков."	https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10203950296269032&set=a.1698427551794.2077502.1571041508&type=1&com	3	16

One can also see 'good' comments on the politician's other posts.

When it comes to the lowest level bots, or dummies, one such makeshift account is capable of generating up to 9,000 (!) comments, likes, and replies a day before it is detected and blocked.

Recently, there was a controversy in Ukraine when the Postman agency was blocked by FB for spreading politically charged disinformation stories. According to FB, the network consisted of 72 accounts and 35 Facebook groups and pages, as well as 143 Instagram accounts, with an audience of 766,000 FB accounts and 3,800 Instagram accounts. Officially, Postman spent US\$ 1.93 million on FB advertising [8].

3. Conclusions

It would be impossible to estimate how much money is involved and invested in disinformation dissemination. As we can see, disinformation can be spread by ordinary responsible individuals with good intentions as well as by, dare I say, entire bot nations consisting of millions of active bot accounts that reach all possible audiences of any age, gender, and interests. And for any audiences that haven't been reached yet, Google and Facebook services provide updates on the nation's browsing patterns that inspire more disinformation stories to trigger emotional response from Ukrainians or subvert the society as a whole.

The situation gets worse when, instead of creating a clear and transparent information policy and fighting disinformation, government officials, public officers, civil servants, and decision-makers inadvertently become disinformation generators, and politicians spread false and speculative information.

Political engagement of the Ukrainian society and continuous efforts to engage audiences in politics and divert their attention by fear mongering are embraced by bot armies that, either for money or interest, feed disinformation even to the people with basic critical thinking skills. The line between true and fake information becomes diluted as verification requires additional time and special skills.

There is no way this situation will get better over time just by itself. The fight for truthful reporting is gaining geopolitical significance and requires a coordinated approach from government agencies and non-governmental and international organizations and foundations, as well as continuous effort to raise awareness of Ukrainians to distinguish disinformation.

However, in 2020, Ukrainians found themselves in a world

of misinformation disseminated by fake social media accounts, advertising agencies, and politicians eager to exploit addiction to disinformation.

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