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## The Russian Strategy of Concept Substitution in Facebook and Telegram economic content. Example of the Russian–Ukrainian War in the Period 2014–2023\*

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** To analyze manipulative pro-Russian materials on social networks during the war that apply the “replacement of concepts” method.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS:** The main tasks are the timely detection and counteraction of Russian propaganda, which uses disinformation technologies in the information war against Ukraine; the use of visualization to disprove falsehoods, and determination of the use of the “replacement of concepts” method on social networks. The research methodology used on the Russian tactics of concept substitution on social platforms can be characterized as a synthesis of techniques that should be justified by the interchangeability of traditional objects of media research: author (initiator) – message – intermediary (mediator) – receiver. This research aims to synthesize and combine monitoring methods, content analysis, and comparative analysis.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** Several publications were selected. Some contained inaccurate information, while others contained accurate, factual information. As a result of comparing these materials, disinformation was

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refuted, and the importance of timely detection of the “concept substitution” technique used by pro-Russian channels in the Ukrainian information space was described.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The study showed that Russian propaganda often uses concept substitution on Facebook and Telegram. This made it possible to explain how the most common tactics, technologies, and tools of concept substitution work and to fight against their spread.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** In Russia’s war against Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda tries to alter linguistic reality by “suppressing” certain words. Words emphasizing the fact of war and its negative consequences have been banned in Russian media and social networks.

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**KEYWORDS:**

concept substitution, propaganda, interactivity, economic information, manipulation

## INTRODUCTION

Modern conditions in the information space require maintaining a positive international image of Ukraine as a country that has been fighting for European values and democracy in the war against the Russian Federation since 2014 (Khaldarova & Pantti, 228). At the same time, analysis of information in global mass media shows that interest in Ukraine and the events taking place there is not uniform, therefore neglecting to provide high-quality and truthful information can be considered short-sighted in terms of creating and maintaining a positive image of Ukraine in the international arena (Feldstein, 44).

Like any conflict or international crisis, Russia’s war in Ukraine has become fertile ground for the growth and spread of misinformation on the internet (Kost, 2017). Substitution of concepts is one of the most common tactics used by Russian propaganda during the war in Ukraine (Tkachuk, 2022). This is a psychological trick based on a logical fallacy. It consists in presenting any object or phenomenon to the audience as something that it is not (Molotkova, 2022). Over time, this substituted image takes root and functions in society as the only correct one. In this case, commonly used terms (concepts) that cause primarily negative emotions are artificially replaced by

new ones that are perceived neutrally or positively. Nowadays, and especially during the war, social networks have become the primary source of information (Marketer, 2022). Every day, social network users are immersed in a continuous flow of information, but there is a lot of fake news. After all, the information presented on social networks is easily accessible and understandable because its presentation is simple; however, this information is not always true, is presented with a significant distortion, or is taken out of context. With such methods of presenting information, it is easy to manipulate economic indicators because they are mostly offered through data (numbers, infographics, symbols, images, code, tables) that are perceived visually.

After the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2014, and especially after February 24, 2022, a lot of information was published on social networks which used certain economic information that does not correspond to reality (Rozenas & Stukal, 982; Tkachuk, 2022).

This publication examines the methods and functions of the manipulative use of data during and about war; it also analyzes the importance of honest reporting of information in avoiding falsehoods, misinformation, and disorientation; it examines the beginning of the mediatization of the economic sphere in wartime and substantiates the use of financial data to promote certain narratives that are intended to influence the world community's attitude to war. During the war, such means influence the audience's emotions, cause anxiety, and sow doubts (Rozenas & Stukal, 984). In such cases, mindless dissemination of such information begins, and social networks are "good ground" for such actions.

### RESEARCH TOOLS

Since social media is a new form of communication, it has facilitated the creation of new forms of manipulation. Taking into account the principles of privacy and security of personal data in social networks and the relevant law regarding methods of obtaining, processing, and storing data, as well as being guided by the legislation of the European Union on the protection of personal data (GDPR), as material for our research we used publicly available data that users are

allowed to collect and process. Therefore, only data from open and public groups serve as material.

In the Ukrainian segment of social networks such as Facebook and Telegram, we studied posts on profiles, pages, groups, and channels that are located in Ukraine or have indicated Ukraine as their location. We analyzed them according to the following criteria:

#### Facebook

- the text of public posts and comments on them;
- information about the time of publication of posts and comments;
- number and type of interactions with posts (likes, shares, clicks);
- names of groups and pages – authors of posts and comments;
- information about open groups (date of creation, whether the page name has been changed, where it is operated from);
- number and list of subscribers.

#### Telegram

- the text of telegram channel posts and comments on them;
- information about the time of publication of posts and comments;
- information about Telegram channels (date of creation, number of subscribers, country);
- information about the distribution of materials on other Telegram channels or mention of other Telegram channels.

In the research, we focused on two areas: Ukrainian and pro-Russian Facebook pages and Telegram channels. Based on the search program Tgsearch, 50 posts on pro-Russian Telegram channels and 50 comments on the Facebook platform were analyzed by sampling. We consider the Ukrainian channels to be media that distributes content to the Ukrainian audience, while pro-Russian channels are oriented to the spread of disinformation slogans and narratives that repeat Russian propaganda.

Based on the research of the Ukrainian public organization “Detector Media” (Detector Media), the data of the LetsData company, and our observations, we define Telegram channels as pro-Russian if they meet the following criteria:

- channels whose connection with Russia has already been proven;
- channels that spread disinformation messages and content consistent with the narratives and messages of Russian propaganda;
- channels that quote Russian and pro-Russian media, Telegram channels, bloggers, and resources related to Russian special

services, politicians, collaborators, and occupation administrations unilaterally, without critical thinking or analysis;

- channels that masquerade as Ukrainian but whose content contains lexical terms typical of Russian propaganda.

It is worth noting that in order to track similar rhetoric in Ukrainian dimensions of social networks, we define lexical terms that indicate pro-Russianness as a list of critical words formulated on the basis of content analysis of Russian propaganda telegram channels and information resources. In particular, Russian propaganda resorts to concept substitution, mirroring, manipulation, and other techniques. Substitution of concepts is a psychological technique based on a logical fallacy. It presents an object or phenomenon to the audience as something it is not. Over time, this replaced expression takes root and functions in society as the only correct one (Center for Combating Disinformation, 2022) in order to cleverly, unfairly, or unscrupulously control or influence (a person or situation). This is manipulation (Keenan, 2020). These tactics involve the use of specific keywords/phrases, including labeling and derogatory or offensive language.

Labeling is a way in which a propagandist gives negative meaning to the phenomenon he opposes by giving it a name that evokes negative associations, and vice versa. Euphemisms are used when a propagandist is trying to increase the perceived quality, persuasiveness, or credibility of specific ideas. Dysphemism is used when a propagandist intends to discredit, reduce the quality of perception, or undermine the perception of the truth of the object. When creating a “label” or “category” for users, it is easy to manipulate and give an example of a greater crime against which a specific event will not seem so large-scale, that is, to level the tragedy of the war in comparison with more global events (Shulska, N., Bukina N. & Adamchuk N., 269). Depreciation or the use of offensive words involves an unpleasant argument directed by the propagandist at the object of manipulation in order to create uncontrolled aggression and devalue them (Sluchay, 378). Also, the list of critical terms includes words indicating manipulations and substitutions in the economic field.

## THE BODY OF THE ARTICLE

The Kremlin regime is fighting with the help of not only artillery, missiles, or weapons of mass destruction: another powerful and no less cynical weapon of the Russian Federation (Shpet, 2022) is its propaganda. The Russian state information politics combines special media and relevant state bodies and institutions, which, under the guise of “public information”, are engaged in psychological manipulations of the population of the Russian Federation. However, other countries’ populations are increasingly becoming the target of such psychological manipulations (Burlakova, 2014). Regarding the impact of Russian propaganda, it is worth emphasizing its destructive effect on the Ukrainian-speaking information space because anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Russia has been carefully developed since the early 2000s (Riabchuk, 2014).

In Ukraine, social networks have become an essential tool for receiving news and information about life in the country and beyond during the war. In addition, they have become a platform for discussing events and expressing public opinion, but there are problems with the spread of fake information and propaganda, and the method of concept substitution has become common (Center for Combating Disinformation, 2022). Social networks are an essential source of information about the situation in eastern Ukraine and the state of the war. According to Aksenia Krykun (the press secretary of the Ukrainian Media Development Institute),

Since life has been ‘transferred to the internet’, many events are broadcasted here immediately. Therefore, searching for information on the internet and social media is an important way of gathering information (Krykun, 2012).

The economy is one of the most important topics for a country’s population during war. The Russian–Ukrainian war has drastically affected Ukraine’s economy. For example, levels of production have decreased, unemployment has increased, financial stability has worsened, and living standards have fallen. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine’s GDP (gross domestic product) has fallen by 29.2% (Bohdan, 2023).

The accessibility of up-to-date information regarding a nation’s economic state is crucial, particularly in the context of war as it allows

individuals to comprehend the impact of warfare on the economy. Moreover, the government must ensure the dissemination of adequate information to the public regarding the economy and the measures taken to ensure economic stability in wartime. As the media serves as a prominent information source during conflict, it provides extensive access to news and updates about events occurring across various regions, particularly within the war zone. The media employs diverse formats such as news articles, video reports, expert and witness interviews, and analytical materials to convey information.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the information presented by the media may not always be objective or reliable because the conditions of war can lead to distortion. Additionally, information disseminated by the media can be tailored to cater to specific audiences or reflect particular perspectives and interests. Through the media, individuals are informed about the latest economic developments, the influence of war on the national economy, the government's efforts to enhance the economic situation, and the available opportunities for citizens under the conditions of war. Furthermore, the media utilizes social media platforms to swiftly and effectively share economic information with a wide audience.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to address the contemporary issue of disinformation and the prevalence of fake news, particularly on social media, where individuals can freely post information without verifying its credibility. Such a scenario can lead to the dissemination of false, distorted, and undesirable information regarding the war, economy, and other activities, subsequently affecting individuals' perspectives and decision-making processes.

According to a study conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on behalf of the Opora Civil Network (Lorian, 2022), Telegram is the most popular source of information among social networks (Datawrapper, 2023). Similar results are provided by the Marketer internet resource (Marketer, 2022).

## [ The popularity of social networks as a source of information ]

the survey was conducted in June 2022

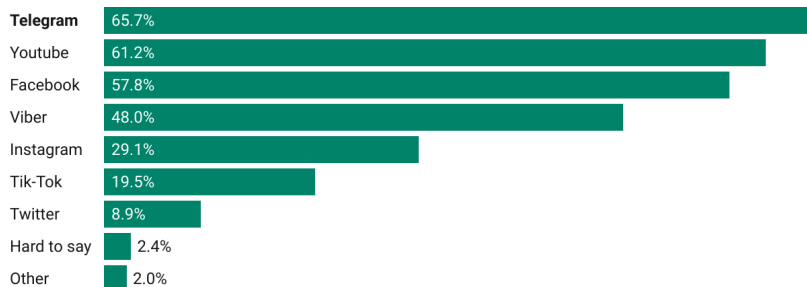


Chart: Tetyana Viytovych &nbsp; • Source: Opora • Created with Datawrapper

In addition, many pro-Russian resources on social networks are used for information warfare. These channels spread false information, which in turn creates a threat to national security and affects the public's attitude toward authorities. On platforms such as Telegram, many disinformation channels have been created since February 24, 2022 (Mikhalkov, 2022). For example, the Telegram channel Media-Killer2021 provides a lot of concept substitutions and false information. MediaKiller2021 is a pro-Russian Telegram channel that spreads propaganda and Disinformation in favor of the Russian Federation. This channel actively uses manipulative technologies and methods of "replacing concepts" to distort facts and create a favorable image of the Russian government and its political actions. This is often aimed at influencing public opinion, particularly among the Ukrainian audience, and spreading an anti-Ukrainian narrative. There are many pro-Russian media resources on the Telegram platform that are similar to the Mediakiller channel and also spread propaganda and Disinformation. For example, Ukraina.ru (Ukraine.ru, 2023), Legitymny (Legitymny, 2023), Ura.ru (Ura.ru, 2023), and others. Some of them use similar manipulation methods and "substitution of concepts" to achieve their goals. When researching these resources, it is important to use critical thinking and verify information from reliable sources to avoid spreading false or manipulative information.



## RESULTS

According to Khrystyna Yuskiv, the aim of modern Russian narratives is to discredit Ukraine's government, politics, and economy in order to destabilize it and, finally, promote the concept that Ukraine is a "state that did not happen" (Yuskiv, 2020). To split Ukrainian society and demonstrate to the West the inability of Ukrainian state-building, the Russian leadership began implementing the disintegration projects "Crimea" and "Novorossiya", whose ideological justification was the concept of a "divided society" and restoration of "historical justice".

1. Furthermore, the ideology of post-Soviet revenge, which includes the image of Russia as the protector of the "Russian world" divided by artificial borders, has become official. The Kremlin has resorted to historical manipulations which are supposed to justify Russia's right to certain territories. In the spring of 2014, demagoguery the concept of the "Russian world" (Poiarkova, 2023) became prominent. It reverberated with symbolic terms such as "historic Russian land" and "the city of Russian military glory". Such historically untrue and logically and legally false arguments are intended to convince Ukrainians and the world community that Crimea has always been Russian, and that Crimea joined Ukraine in 1954 as a result of Nikita Khrushchev's voluntarism.
2. Therefore, it is logical that in order to justify its actions the Russian Federation uses messages that it did not attack the eastern Ukrainian territories in 2014 but that Ukraine itself allegedly attacked the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. From March 2022, this narrative began to be actively promoted on pro-Russian Telegram channels: "Why are you lying? Turchynov ordered an air strike on Donbas, and Poroshenko continues to kill people" (February 22, 2022). Many similar messages are posted on pro-Russian Telegram channels. "And what about Donbas in the last eight years? Where is your protection for them?" (Legitymny, 04/17/2022). In these two examples, the so-called "whataboutism" tactic is used – a response to criticism or an answer to a set question in the form of "What about X?" (Bobb, 2015). It is worth noting

that after the beginning of Russia's armed aggression and the occupation of Crimea in 2014, this term returned to active use (Keating, 2014). In addition, another similar narrative of Russian propaganda became frequently recurrent: "Where have you been these eight years?"

3. Due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine's territory, another concept substitution arose, namely manipulation of the geographical name of the state of Ukraine. In social networks and instant messengers, covert Russian agents translate 'Ukraine' as 'outskirts', 'border', or even the adjective 'stolen': "Since you are so interested in names and historical relevance, Ukraine means borderland (relative to the Russian Empire). This is not a nation" (MediaKillers, 03/01/2022), "...my Russian grandfather said that Ukraine translates to Russian as "stolen" (Facebook, 02/26/2022). To spread this type of message, Kremlin propaganda creates fake Facebook accounts, whose "users", pretending to be citizens of countries in Africa, the Middle East, and North America, spread anti-Ukrainian narratives designed to discredit the government of Ukraine and its citizens (Molotkova, 161).

Other Ukrainian authors, such as Diana Ducyk, Anastasiia Plys, Anastasiia Sychova, Oksana Pochapska, and Olga Yurkova, have also conducted research in the field of manipulation on Telegram channels (Ducyk, Plys, Sychova, Pochapska & Yurkova, 2023). These previous studies laid a foundation for understanding manipulations in media. However, analysis of methods such as mirroring, visualization, marker words, and numerical manipulation offers a new contribution to this field, allowing for better understanding and counteraction of manipulations in the media space.

The results of previous research indicate that a significant use of Telegram channels and similar media is the dissemination of unreliable information. Researchers confirm that these platforms can be used to spread manipulative messages, disinformation, and fake news to influence public opinion.

4. For example, a pro-Russian Telegram channel, "Novosty Khersonshchyny", published an article, "The Ministry of Economy of Ukraine announced a historically record decline in the country's economy" (Novosty Khersonshchyny, 2023),

which claims that the economy has shrunk by 30.4%. However, if you monitor the media from the “white list” in the same period when this article was posted in Telegram, you would see that these media claim that this is a predicted recession of the economy and, according to the state statistics, it amounts to 29.1% (Tarasovskyi, 2023). As we can see, the mirroring method can be an effective method of disinformation, especially in the case of economic indicators, where incorrect information can have serious consequences for a country and its citizens.

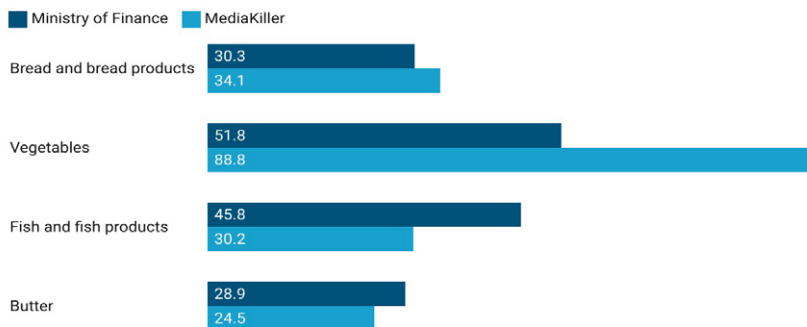
Analyzing an economic term such as ‘inflation’ is very important because it is often used in journalistic articles. This is an influential thing for society, especially in wartime, because it is an economic indicator that characterizes the financial stability of citizens and the economic development of the country, and it also affects social stability.

High inflation can lead to social problems, such as increased poverty and unemployment. It can cause social dissatisfaction and conflicts in society. In general, people manipulate economic data to affect society, so they use false data, in particular a type of manipulation known as “the substitution of concepts”.

As shown by analysis and comparison of information on the consumer price index published by one of the MediaKiller Telegram channels (MediaKiller2021, 2022) and information from official sources of the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine (Ministry of Finance, 2023), these data are very different. For example, according to official information from the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, the price of vegetables has increased by 51.8%, while information in some Telegram channels shows that this price has increased by 88.8%. As for the consumer price index, the difference between official data and Telegram information is 15.2% (Ministry of Finance of Ukraine – 7%, MediaKiller – 22.2%).

## Comparison of official data of the Ministry of Finance and the Telegram channel

consumer price index for 2022



comparing the corresponding points of the graph, you can see how distorted the information is

Chart: Tetyana Viytovych • Source: MediaKiller, Ministry of Finance • Created with Datawrapper

The graphic visually confirms that pro-Russian propaganda manipulates this important economic concept (Flourish, 2023).

5. We will demonstrate the functions of numbers using the example of the analytical article “Why Ukrainian business should pay attention to the Western region” from “Dzerkalo Tyzhnia.”

One of the main functions of numbers is to indicate facts. The suggested analytical article relies on a central premise, as is customary for analytical publications underpinned by statistical data:

nowadays, the regions of Western Ukraine have already received more than a thousand applications for relocation. Little more than 200 companies have actually moved out of them (Bno-Airiian, 2022).

With the help of numbers, we create visual elements such as diagrams and charts; we highlight various statistical data, and we show the results of sociological surveys. In the article “Why Ukrainian businesses should pay attention to the Western Region”, the author used three infographic elements. The first diagram, “Top 5 regions in terms of gross regional product”, allows the audience to immediately understand the essence of the publication. In the second visualization, “How alcohol can be used in the national economy”, the author justifies the expansion of grain processing in Ukraine (Bno-Airiian, 2022).

After analyzing the article “Why Ukrainian Businesses Should Pay Attention to the Western Region”, we can see that the numbers show development trends. However, the numbers can also show declining trends. So, in this analytical text, the numbers together create a convincing argumentative panorama. Therefore, to improve the aforementioned article, it is very important to use data journalism: graphics, digital visualization, and arrays of texts.

### CONCLUSIONS

It should be noted that the information in the analyzed pro-Russian media is presented very cleverly. Data that is important to and has a significant impact on society is easy to falsify and differs significantly from real data. Also, indicators that are not so important in influencing citizens are presented more reliably. These methods of providing information lead to wrong decisions and consequences for the country, so it is important that data that has a significant impact on citizens is as accurate and reliable as possible.

Visualization is a good method of detecting misinformation and changing concepts. Visualization shows data and information using graphs, charts, maps, and other visual methods. This method can help to show the reliability of data and its connection with real phenomena and processes; it can also help detect unreliable data, help in decision-making, and demonstrate the difference between true and inaccurate information. One of the most impactful visualization methods is numbers, which journalists often use in their articles because they make them unambiguous, visualized, and authoritative.

Most often, numbers occur in articles on economic and social trends. Numbers make publications more understandable for the audience.

Or, thanks to them, you can explain how a journalistic story is related to a specific person, as the BBC and the Financial Times regularly do in interactive presentations of the budget (Bounegru, 2021).

In the era of numbers and technology, we can talk about the digital society, the digital consumer, the dynamic environment, and the need for information. In such a changing environment, the promptness

and availability of information are very important; to be among the best, a journalist must make maximum use of these conditions.

Nowadays, in the time of war, the use of numbers in publications can be traced more and more. This helps to better perceive and analyze information.

Correctly organized data becomes understandable even to a person who does not know a certain language because numbers, regularities, images, and symbols are a universal sign system. Data is more easily translated into other languages and adapted than text; it stores connections between objects (Bno-Airiian, 2022).

Such information is especially important for temporarily displaced people, both internally and externally. Many media, as well as public organizations and volunteers, offer communication services for such persons. Almost every story that covers information for displaced people uses data journalism.

The events of the war have caused financial difficulties for the mass media. The media market, like the labor market, is currently in crisis because many newsrooms have merged and other media outlets have suspended their activities; as a result, some Ukrainian journalists are unemployed. According to observations, journalists who know how to work with data and use the potential and advantages of numbers have much better prospects of getting a job because not everyone can skillfully use and expertly process digital data for effective, reliable, exclusive, and well-illustrated articles.

Now more than ever, journalists and consumers of information must be media literate because this allows them to navigate the socio-economic situation and filter the saturated information environment. Through numbers, journalists bring the audience to analysis of the true conditions, facilitated by graphs, digital data, visualizations, infographics, etc.

It is also important to visually expose false narratives, which helps journalists lead the audience to analyze actual conditions.

Also, the fulfillment of tasks related to the timely detection and counteracting of Russian propaganda on social networks, which uses disinformation technologies in the information war against Ukraine, is essential in ensuring the country's information security and defense capability. Achieving such goals involves several vital aspects.

First, it is necessary to ensure an effective monitoring and analysis system of social networks to detect disinformation materials and propaganda campaigns. This may include using specialized tools and algorithms to detect false information and manipulative technologies automatically.

Second, it is essential to develop effective strategies to counter disinformation. Visualization can be a powerful tool for disproving misinformation and explaining complex concepts. Visual data and graphs can help show an objective picture of events and resist manipulation.

Thirdly, it is necessary to study the use of the “substitution of concepts” method on social networks. Understanding this method will make it possible to identify and analyze how Russian propaganda distorts and manipulates concepts in order to form unwanted thoughts and attitudes.

This study aimed to analyze manipulative materials originating from pro-Russian sources and distributed in social networks during the Russian–Ukrainian war. Using the method of “replacing concepts”, these materials aim to influence the public’s attitude towards and perception of events in Ukraine. Analyzing these manipulative materials and revealing their nature, distribution, and influence on public opinion and perception of war events is possible. The search results will help better understand the methods of manipulation and their consequences, thus allowing strategies to be developed that counter manipulative technologies in the media space, particularly on social networks.

This study of manipulation in the context of social networks and media provides an understanding of the mechanisms and methods used. It allows us to better reveal the processes that influence public opinion, the perception of events, and the formation of attitudes toward them. This helps to create a more objective picture of reality and develop more effective strategies for countering manipulative technologies. Also, such studies provide a basis for developing new methodologies and tools to identify, analyze, and monitor manipulative influences. This may include the development of algorithms for automatic disinformation detection, tools for assessing the credibility of information sources, and analytical models for detecting changes in public sentiment, all of which create a foundation for developing

effective strategies of countering disinformation and manipulation technologies.

So, now more than ever, journalists and consumers of information must be media literate because this allows them to navigate the socio-economic situation as well as filter the oversaturated information environment and expose manipulative narratives; this, in turn, helps journalists lead the audience to analysis of the true conditions.

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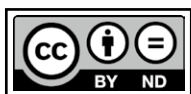
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