MEDIA LITERACY AS A MEANS OF PROTECTING UZBEKISTAN'S MEDIA ENVIRONMENT FROM DISINFORMATION

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the study of the concept of "disinformation" in the media environment of Uzbekistan, as well as technologies of their detection and effective counteraction. The author considers media literacy as the main means of counteracting disinformation. This paper considers modern types of disinformation in social networks disseminated with destructive use of automated systems based on AI (artificial intelligence). Measures of effective counteraction to the spread of disinformation, including through increasing media literacy of the population and increasing the number and quality of fact-checking platforms in Uzbekistan are studied. The paper uses the method of comparative analysis of scientific research in the field of creation and dissemination of disinformation, which allows identifying best practices to improve the basic skills of their detection. The set of research tools also includes a survey by questionnaire method realized by the author in 2023 among 1066 respondents - citizens of Uzbekistan. The hypothesis of the paper is that the success of the process of identifying fakes and disinformation is directly dependent on the level of media literacy of the population. Increasing the level of media literacy of the population, in turn, should be carried out through the development and widespread implementation of mechanisms for detecting disinformation on the basis of medialiteracy and various fact-checking platforms - which will be the recommended outcome of the work. In the course of the study, we will provide arguments in favor of these arguments.

Key words: disinformation, fact-checking, verification, media literacy, artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and the explosive spread of Internet technologies, the ability of Internet users to use technologies to verify the content they receive is of particular importance. Lack of verification skills in such conditions leads to the formation of erroneous, distorted perception of reality in the minds of consumers. The mass dissemination of illegal information in social networks, including through artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, not only distorts the perception of reality of Internet and social network users, but also creates new risks and challenges for ordinary Internet and social network users.

Uzbekistan has established a solid legal basis for ensuring freedom of speech and information, as well as for developing the media, improving the legal framework, protecting the professional rights of journalists and ensuring the online safety of the country's citizens. In view of the risks and threats posed by fakes and disinformation, the authorities of Uzbekistan are making efforts at

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the national level to counter the dissemination of disinformation. Thus, Presidential Decree No. UP-158 of 11 September 2023 on the «Uzbekistan 2030 Strategy» named as one of its priority objectives the formation of guarantees for the realization of citizens' rights to freely seek, receive and disseminate information, with a focus on improving the culture of information use, protecting the population from the impact of destructive messages, preventing radicalization and, in general, on the security of the national information space (Strategy, 2023).

At the same time, the fact that the global trend of spreading misinformation poses a threat to the media space of Uzbekistan is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the author of this paper in 2023 by questioning 1,066 respondents - citizens of Uzbekistan. The survey revealed that 70% of respondents daily or once a week encounter false information in social networks or messengers, with users most often encounter false information in the messenger Telegram (Abdikarimov, 2024). According to the results of the study «Media Consumption and Disinformation in Central Asia: Quantitative and Qualitative Assessment in the Context of Geopolitics» (Vesterbay, 2023) from 2023, it can be concluded that different categories of the population easily become victims of disinformation. The older generation has difficulty in cross-checking information due to lack of relevant technical skills. In turn, young people tend to rarely double-check what they consume online. Rural residents are also believed to have lower media literacy, making them easier targets for misinformation.

2. Methods and Materials

The paper uses the method of comparative analysis of scientific research in the field of production and dissemination of misinformation, which allows to identify best practices to improve the skills of their detection. The set of research tools also includes a questionnaire survey realized by the author in 2023 among 1066 respondents - citizens of Uzbekistan.

The research materials used are data containing information about the circulation of misinformation and disinformation in the world network (Malhotra P., Zhong, R., Kuan V., Panatula G., Weng M., Bras A., Sehat M. C., Roesner F., & Zhang, X. A. 2023); an extensive study of similar issues by scholar Claire Wardle - Fake news. It's complicated (2017), which presents an optimal explanation of the eco-system of misinformation, et al.

3. Result and discussion

Targeted misinformation (Disinformation) is an organized attempt to disseminate false information with the aim of destructively influencing public opinion or achieving specific political, economic

or social objectives. According to the UN, disinformation is disseminated with the intent to deceive and cause harm. We have already reported (Abdikarimov, 2024) that we rely on the Clair Wardle system of the following seven components: 1) Satire or parody: without intent to cause purposeful harm, but can be misleading; 2) Misleading content: dissemination of misleading information to form a certain situation or impression about an individual; 3) Fake content: falsification of original sources of information. For example, fake accounts or web browsers to mislead the user; 4) Fabricated content: disseminating completely fictitious information with the intent to mislead and cause harm; 5) False linking: when headlines, visual elements or captions do not match the content of the material; 6) False Context: dissemination of information with a distortion of the original context that could lead to misinterpretation; 7) Manipulated content: alteration of original content, (photo or video) with the intent to mislead. (Wardle, 2017).

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies play a special role in the process of spreading fakes and misinformation. First, in the generation of fake content and dipfakes, where AI algorithms such as generative models can be used to create plausible fake images, videos, texts and sound recordings, making it more difficult to identify fake material. Second, in the spread of automated misinformation, where bots and automated systems are used to spread misinformation on social media, which promptly disseminate false information, creating the illusion of widespread support or agreement (Experts, 2023).

Another researcher sees the reason for the rapid circulation of disinformation in the media environment as social networks that do not adhere to the restrictions characteristic of the official media, which allows destructive information to reach the mass audience through these digital platforms. G. Pocheptsov believes that humans do not have the ability to distinguish between information and disinformation. He explains his statement by the fact that disinformation is hidden in the flow of real facts, i.e. such material becomes one with other objective information. For example, the process of disinformation constructs a necessary fact under itself, then the fact turns into information that circulates in both social media and conventional media. Under such conditions, an ordinary user needs special knowledge and skills to detect misinformation (Pocheptsov, 2019).

Today in the media environment of Uzbekistan, especially in social networks, it is difficult to distinguish the content according to the presented model, but it can be noted that the current disinformation has a more multidimensional character, where there are elements of all the seven categories identified

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above. Thus, the cases related to misinformation from the media space of Uzbekistan are as follows:

Analysis of the content of the official channel of the State Unitary Enterprise of the Cyber Security Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the messenger Telegram (https://t.me/cyber_102) for April-May 2024 showed that most often attackers use misinformation, including AI technology for financial fraud. In particular, it can be noted that the materials found and published practiced the distribution of viral links by attackers to steal users' personal data and funds from their bank cards. Such materials can be divided into the following categories.

3.1. Disinformation using influencers (government officials, businessmen, show business stars and influencers) popular among the people

Fraudsters used the photo of actress Shakhzoda Mukhamedova and the name «AT Khalk Bank», allegedly spreading messages with the content «our citizens are given up to 1,000,000,000,000 2% microcredits», which are false and do not correspond to reality. In addition, the use of the image of singer Sevara Nazarkhan, who is popular among Uzbek citizens, is practiced. Such infographic materials are created on the basis of special programs using images of popular Uzbek faces to gain the trust of ordinary users.
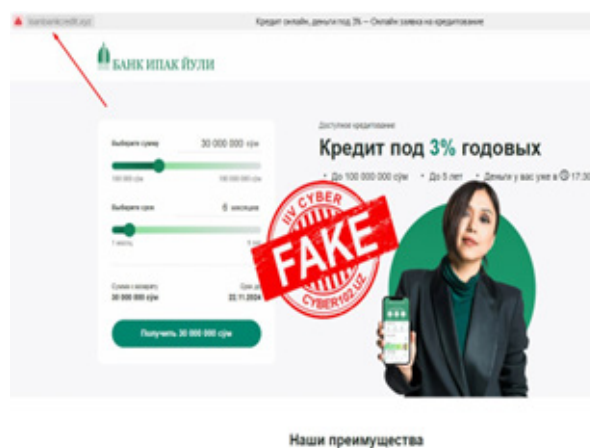

Figure 1.https://t.me/cyber_102/4421

Figure 2. https://t.me/cyber_102/4431

3.2. Viral links in social networks.

In the messenger Telegram, fake information with user data with viral links allegedly on behalf of the Bureau of Compulsory Enforcement under the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Uzbekistan is massively distributed by malicious persons.

Figure 3. https://t.me/cyber_102/4416

Figure 4. https://t.me/cyber_102/4384

3.3. Disinformation using Artificial Intelligence technologies to falsify voice and video

Through the use of Artificial Intelligence technologies in social networks and channels in Telegram messenger by falsifying the voice of the President of Uzbekistan Sh. M. Mirziyoyev, attackers are spreading messages that the channel called «Aliya» «helps citizens to earn income». Also, a fake video with a video image of popular businessman Alisher Usmanov, prepared with the help of artificial intelligence technologies, is gaining popularity in social networks. In order to create plausibility and to gain the trust of ordinary users, attackers use the image of businessman Alisher Usmonov together with a certain individual under the name «Aliya».

Another illegal case is related to the use of the image of video blogger Timur Alikhonov. In the video, fraudsters offer ordinary users an instant income of 7 million soums. Also through the social network Instagram and messenger Telegram under the headline «Earnings with Seka» messages are spreading that popular blogger Dilshod Nazarov (Dili,me) received income in a short period of time. Such methods are more often used by scammers to lure victims under viral links to commit further illegal actions.

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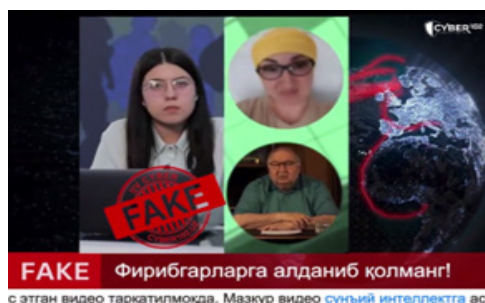Figure 5. https://t.me/cyber_102/4401   Figure 6. https://t.me/cyber_102/4326

Figure 7. https://t.me/cyber_102/4203   Figure 8. https://t.me/cyber_102/4425

In this way, attackers lure victims for further illegal actions or withdrawal of funds from citizens' plastic cards. These messages are false and do not correspond to reality.

3.4. Measures to counter fakes and disinformation

Researcher A.A. Kazakov suggests categorizing measures to counter disinformation into two areas:

General principles (rules relating to the perception of media texts in general): not to make instant conclusions about what one has seen, heard or read; the ability to turn off emotions when perceiving news reports, to sift out the so-called «information noise».

Instrumental techniques: to compare information from different media sources; to take into account alternative points of view, the tone of media communication, the specificity of the vocabulary used by the author and the difference between different genres of information messages; to assess the reliability of the source; to check the reliability of the facts presented; to make periodic pauses in the usual mode of receiving information.

In parallel with the spread of media literacy, experts believe it is necessary to develop additional fact-checking tools designed to improve the mechanisms for detecting misinformation (Malhotra et al., 2023), using interactive sites and platforms specialized in

fact-checking and based on innovative technologies, including AI mechanisms.

In order to effectively counter such misinformation among the Uzbek population, a special channel, Antifake.uz, using the social networking platforms Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, has been set up as an official source for refuting fake news and promptly countering disinformation and fakes. The website of the Cyber Security Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan (Cyber 102) has been created and is in operation, which is focused on identifying and countering the dissemination of unlawful information. In addition, an online platform Factchecknet.uz is operating in Uzbekistan under the auspices of the Center for the Development of Modern Journalism to verify reports, information from public speeches and media publications.

Nevertheless, these measures require further measures to increase the media literacy of the population in order to ensure the online safety of citizens. We believe that media literacy is a key factor in the formation of critical thinking and analytical skills necessary to effectively counter disinformation.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The author proposes to introduce the following formats of cooperation between state institutions, educational institutions, mass media and the public:

4.1. National Center for Media Literacy of Uzbekistan

In light of the conducted mapping of media literacy in Uzbekistan, it seems possible to create a National Center for Media Literacy in Uzbekistan. The Centre will become a place of multidimensional partnership, bringing together government organizations, experts, educational institutions, media representatives and the public to develop and implement coordinated measures to improve media literacy in Uzbekistan. The Center will facilitate the exchange of experience, the creation of a unified methodology and the coordination of efforts by all parties. We believe that this new format of cooperation will become a key element for the sustainable development of media literacy, ensuring a coordinated impact of all participants on public opinion and effective counteraction to misinformation in Uzbekistan.

4.2. Continuous generation of digital content on the Internet of educational and entertainment nature.

Continuous preparation and production of short educational videos on the YouTube platform. In collaboration with stakeholders, the production of practical, age-appropriate videos in a problem-solution format with a maximum length of 3 minutes. The

message of the videos should be aimed at improving the critical thinking skills of the population, namely critical evaluation of news in messengers and checking information for accuracy. It is also necessary to draw the population's attention to the existing algorithms of social networks functioning on the basis of artificial intelligence. At the same time, videos should educate people on how to recognize false information and how to fact-check news stories before sharing them with others. All of these measures will directly lead to increased immunity to fakes and misinformation on the Internet and social networks.

Thus, in this paper, the current state of Uzbekistan's information environment has been reviewed, and it has become evident that the country's media space is facing challenges related to the spread of disinformation. Various types and models of disinformation have been considered, including through the use of artificial intelligence technologies. In particular, the study of the phenomenon of disinformation has shown that it progresses in a destructive way, taking different forms depending on the purposes and methods of its dissemination. For example, in generating disinformation, AI can be used to create plausible images, videos, texts and sound recordings, making it more difficult to identify fake materials. Bots and automated systems are also used in the dissemination of automated disinformation, creating the illusion of widespread support or agreement. Under such conditions, we believe that the growing urgency of problems related to disinformation emphasizes the need to further improve mechanisms for countering disinformation through the application of media literacy as an effective means of countering disinformation in Uzbekistan.

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