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FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC TIME (CASE OF GEORGIA)

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ABSTRACT

Spreading fake news and disinformation is one of the global challenges over the last years. It is a challenge for Georgia too. This acute problem was also current at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when a number of misinformation appear in the social media as well as in the traditional media, regarding the origin and spread of the coronavirus, especially in Facebook which is the most popular social network in Georgia. A lot of fake news was spread and is still being spread in the post-pandemic period too.

The Goal of this research paper is to explore the attitudes of Georgian Facebook users, specifically what kind of fake news and disinformation they met about Coronavirus in social media, how to identify them, how much they tried to verify them, how to explain their spread, how to fight them, etc. In order to explore this issue a social constructivism framework is used.

As for the main research method, this study is based on the qualitative approach. For this purpose, the method of in-depth interviews - with Georgian active internet users – has been conducted. The respondents are doctors, journalists as well as representatives of different academic fields, who possess media literacy skills.

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Introduction.

Covid-19 first appeared in December 2019 in the Wuhan province of China. Then, probably, no one would have thought if the virus had turned into a pandemic and spread all over the world, would have killed millions of people and make us lose the rhythm of normal life. Restrictions and lockdowns began immediately and the public was gripped by fear, a little later in Georgia, but at the beginning of 2020, in March, the first cases already occurred.

Of course, as soon as the virus appeared, there were myths and different opinions about its possible origin, one of the most common options was that someone in China ate a bat and that is why this virus appeared, some attributed it to the time of “The Second Coming”, and some still do not believe in the existence of a pandemic. And this is called imaginary. One way or another, the coronavirus has already changed everyone's life for more than 2 years.

Spreading fake news and disinformation is one of the global challenges over the last years. Of course, it is a challenge for Georgia too. This acute problem was also current at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when a number of misinformation appeared in the social media as well as in the traditional media, regarding the origin and spread of the coronavirus especially in Facebook which is

the most popular social network in Georgia. A lot of fake news was spread and is still being spread in the post-pandemic period too.

MDF (Media Development Foundation of Georgia) as a fact-checker organization, started with partnership with Facebook detecting disinformation, in order to ban fake and manipulative photos or video contents by Facebook administration.

The Goal of this research paper is to explore the attitudes of Georgian Facebook users, specifically what kind of fake news and disinformation they met about Coronavirus in social media, how to identify them, how much they tried to verify them, how to explain their spread, how to fight them, etc. To explore this issue a social constructivism framework has been used.

As it is widely recognized, there are three types of fake news: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. All three directions are united by fake news, although all three have different purposes. A misleading story (misinformation) may not be an outright lie and may simply be caused by the spread of unverified information by someone or a journalist. Disinformation is a targeted lie that aims to make people believe something that did not actually happen. And as for mal-information, this is information that harms people. According to a survey among Facebook users, all three types of fake news related to Covid-19 pandemics are found.

Methods.

As the main research method, this study is based on the qualitative approach. For this purpose, the method of in-depth interviews - with Georgian active internet users – is conducted. The respondents are doctors, journalists as well as representatives of different academic fields, who possess media literacy skills.

This qualitative Research was conducted from 20 January till 20 March 2022. On the whole 24 interviews were analyzed.

As for the main research questions, they are the following: 1. What kind of fake news and disinformation appear about Coronavirus in social media? 2. Is social media a source of information or disinformation while the pandemic and post-pandemics?

Literature Review.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, researchers have paid attention to the role of social media. Mostly, they emphasized the negative role of the social media platforms (Amin, 2020; Hadlington, 2022. Lelisho, 2022; etc.).

As Yas and his co-authors argue, the covid-19 pandemic increased the spread of misinformation about the virus, mostly it was spread via social media. Misleading news and information about various aspects of the pandemic could endanger public safety and complicate crisis management. (Yas, et al., 2021).

Amin, while emphasizing negative role of social media during the covid pandemic time, concludes that social media have caused various psychological symptoms in quarantined patients (due to coronavirus) in the form of anxiety, depression, negative well-being, lack of self-control, general health and vitality (Amin, 2020).

According to Brindha and his co-authors, in a pandemic situation like the Covid-19 outbreak, social media become the most-searched venue for information-gathering. However, there are thousands of people spreading information, sensationalism, rumors, misinformation and disinformation making it crucial for Governments and experts to fight the pandemic as well as the infodemic (Brindha et al., 2020). The researchers tried to find out whether social media is informing or misinforming the public regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and for this purpose, they used the qualitative method of phenomenological study.

Chukwuere tries to systemize literature review, “this study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of social media's role in the novel covid-19 pandemic” (Chukwuere, 2022). The group of researchers conducted covid-19 misinformation multilingual analysis of Twitter (Pranesh et al, 2021).

According to the findings of Nottingham Trent University researchers, “the coronavirus pandemic has acted as a perfect storm for fake news, with individuals using social media to stay social, engaging in some fact-checking and distancing themselves from people they see as “fake-newsers”, or those who share fake news with their networks” (Hadlington et al. 2022).

Finish researchers tried to show the rhizomatic nature of covid-19-related dis- and misinformation, which has aspects of conspiracy theories and is used on social media platforms to

counter official narratives about the origin of the virus. “The results indicate that the rhizomatic structure of COVID-19 conspiracy theories makes it possible to vary the narratives based on the platform where it is published and the target audience” (Sederholm et al., 2021).

Polish researcher Pałka-Suchojad underlines that the functioning of the information ecosystem is fundamentally challenged by the detection of bogus news under pandemic conditions. As the author wrote: “Disinformation in the era of the coronavirus pandemic is nothing new, the mechanism of disinformation campaigns remains the same, although instruments are modified, profiling towards, e.g., medical fake news. It is important to identify the factors influencing the dissemination of false information” (Pałka-Suchojad, 2020).

According to the paper “Conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation and the coronavirus: A burgeoning of post-truth in the social media”, post-truth bubbles emerge in the online media, conned objectivity and rationality are conjured to elicit strong emotions capable of causing people to hold incorrect beliefs about coronavirus (Oji, 2022).

Some authors conducted content-analysis about detection misinformation and disinformation related to covid-19 pandemic (Chakravorty, 2020 Divvi, 2021; Alsmadi, 2022; Mitra, 2022; Deepthi, 2022; etc).

As for Georgian context, some monitoring was conducted about disinformation and misinformation in social media. Democracy Research Center had two monitoring on this topic (DRI, Social media monitoring results, September, 2020; DRI, Social media monitoring results, October-November, 2020). The results of this media monitoring showed “that the disinformation media campaign around the Covid-19 pandemic is of network nature and deliberately manipulates public opinion. The disinformation campaign in turn creates fabricated, manipulative content and causes significant harm, as it in stills uncertainty and fear in society.” (DRI, Social media monitoring results, October-November, 2020).

There is research about covid-19 and education, whose results emphasized the need for digital media literacy and the need to implement it in university curricula (Osepashvili, D. 2022).

MDF of Georgia (Media Development Foundation) conducted research where covid-19 related disinformation is analyzed together other topics of perceptions of media literacy and disinformation (MDF, 2022).

This is the first research in Georgia, which analyzed covid-19 related fake news - misinformation, disinformation and mal information in social media. This is novelty of this study.

Main Findings and Discussions.

Myths about the origin of Covid-19.

As the questioned respondents noted, a number of myths and disinformation regarding Covid-19 were spread in social media, especially in Facebook, which were aimed to mislead the public.

If verified and fact-based information helps the citizen to be informed and make the right decisions, the main goal of disinformation is the manipulation of public opinion.

At the very beginning of February 2020, the information was spread about the Lugar laboratory in Georgia, according to which the laboratory was one of the bases of the United States of America, where biological weapons were made, and the coronavirus was also created here, which was misinformation.

“After certain time, Facebook announced that it will delete the disinformation spread about the coronavirus, which, of course, was a very good way to fight against harmful information, and indeed, they began to delete it. However today, when there are many social networks and means of expressing of different opinions on this or that event, it was just a drop in the ocean. That is why the influence of traditional media should be increased, and the essence of media and journalism in general is to protect society from false information and show reality based on facts” (One of the questioned respondents).

As the research revealed, one of the most important misinformation for all respondents is that the virus does not exist and is a myth.

„For me personally, the most dangerous and relevant myth remains the misinformation that the virus does not exist and is invented. People seem to be zombed and pose a danger not only to themselves, but also to others, because they do not follow the rules, this is an example of the hidden weddings, gatherings that exist in Georgia to this day, and then the increase in the number of infected people and deaths. We see that so far the pandemic is not disappearing anywhere, and on the contrary, new strains

are emerging, therefore the only way to protect yourself from the pandemic is healthy information and thinking critically." (One of the questioned respondents).

One of the most common disinformation is about 5G Internet, does it cause the spread of the coronavirus? The pandemic scared some people so much that they believed in all the conspiracy theories and absurd ideas. This conspiracy theory was actively spread, after which a social network campaign was launched, various pages were created, and all comments suggested that the 5G Internet causes a decrease in immunity first, and then the coronavirus.

"How can a sane person believe that the 5G Internet causes the spread of corona, however, I would like to point out here that similar information was spread about bananas and was attributed to a thousand diseases, including the spread of coronavirus, which was not based on facts, obviously." (One of the questioned respondents from academic field).

As the respondents pointed out, "chipping" (inserting this chip in the body) is the most relevant disinformation, which prevented the successful conduct of the vaccination process. A lot of people really believe that a vaccine puts a chip in their body and then they control their life.

This conspiracy theory is also supported by the representatives of the high hierarchy of the Orthodox Church in Georgia. Even today, the videos of the clergymen's sermons are circulating, where they talk about the massive manipulation of the society so that people are enslaved and lose their sense of self.

"Also, I would like to point out here that it was from the side of the clergy that information was spread that immunization protects against the coronavirus. It was picked up by various media outlets and provided to the public without any verification or adding alternative healthy information. You will probably not be surprised if I tell you that a large part believed all this".

Myths and misinformation were also false reports about wearing a face mask, as if it does not protect a person from the virus and, on the contrary, is a carrier of various infections. For a certain period of time, Georgia also experienced a shortage of masks, because frightened people wanted to create a supply. Then new business ideas appeared and sewn masks of various designs were produced, until epidemiologists began to talk that the most optimal option for protection against the virus was a medical mask.

Misinformation about wrong treatment.

As the interviewed respondents noted, a lot of false information about the treatment of Covid-19 was spread on Facebook. The doctor respondents emphasized that it was often harmful that this information was not addressed to health care workers and that non-traditional, supposedly folk remedies were used. The most serious consequence that followed was burns. People were led to believe by false information that they should drink boiled water because it seemed to help them defeat the corona virus.

"It is very sad for me as a doctor that a certain part of people did not doubt and believed this lie in such a way that they hurt themselves, many people ended up in the center of burns" (One of the questioned doctors).

As some of the respondents pointed out, it is often the traditional media that misleads the public and, in order to gain ratings, distributes such a photo or video material that does not have a good impact on citizens, or in the other case, this or that program is prepared without properly checking the information beforehand.

"Unfortunately, my fellow journalists make many mistakes unknowingly, such was the case on one of the Georgian TV channels regarding the preventive measures of the coronavirus, where the journalist said that pouring warm water down the throat every 20 minutes will protect us from the virus, which, of course, was a myth. It's a fact that people believed this, because in the burn center of Tbilisi there were several people who drank boiled water to prevent the coronavirus, as a result of which they needed treatment for oral burns" (One of the questioned journalists).

"Information was often spread on social media in Georgia that drinking alcohol, eating garlic and other means are important to protect against coronavirus, however, not a single scientific source confirms that alcohol protects people. The World Health Organization has long since published information on effective means of defence, vaccination which is very important for the world to defeat this virus." (One of the questioned respondents from academic field).

Anti-vaxxers and disinformation related to vaccination process.

As the research shows, one of the main challenges that hindered the vaccination process was an active campaign against vaccines on social networks.

Several opinions were expressed and spread. The vaccine is said to cause infertility, which is misinformation, and the results of monitoring and studies show that it has no effect on fertility. They also discuss the theory that vaccination, on the contrary, spreads the coronavirus more, or in the second case it does not protect us from it, and we come back to the topic of getting infected. Opinions that vaccination caused incurable, serious diseases spread widely through social networks.

"The worst thing is that this information is constantly circulating on social networks or social media and it is almost impossible to defend yourself. The media should do more work to inform the public about the results of studies (which is partially happening), of course, instead of spreading comments out of context" (One of the questioned social media active users).

"The most common video that comes to mind regarding this topic is a video shared on one of the social networks "Tik-Tok", where a vaccinated person claimed that after getting the vaccine, he could get coins on his hand or arm. Judging by the number of likes and views of this video, it can be said that similar types of videos and fake news can easily influence people, and this can be concluded from people's attitudes after the spread of this video" (One of the questioned journalists).

"The opinions of anti-vaxxers are actively spreading on social media, which are not based on any scientific evidence and they deliberately mislead people. Videos are being spread through specific media, groups, Facebook pages, as if people die after being vaccinated against Covid, what can happen to vaccinated people in 2-3 years and so on. Misinformation is so powerful that many people believe it, which significantly hinders the vaccination process. Similar anti-vaxxer statements are spreading virally." (One of the questioned journalists).

A source of information or disinformation?

The majority of respondents negatively assessed the role of social media in the course of the Covid pandemic, especially after the spread of anti-vaxxer sentiments.

"Sometimes I don't even want to look here anymore, because I see so much misinformation" (One of the questioned respondents).

"It is very sad that some people on Facebook did not try to ask critical questions and believe the misinformation that was being spread about vaccines, especially the American Pfizer. In the end, it let us to anti-Western myths here." (One of the questioned respondents).

Although the majority of surveyed respondents pointed to the negative role of social media during the Covid pandemic, some emphasized that the information received from social networks was also useful. Accordingly, not only misinformation was spread, but it was also one of the main sources of information regarding Covid-19.

"Social media is one of the fastest ways to get daily, continuously updated information on the statistics of Covid-19. With the help of the media and multimedia journalism, we got information about how to wash our hands properly, how to behave in transport to protect ourselves from the virus, how to cover our face with our hands, when coughing or sneezing to minimize the risk of spreading the virus." (One of the questioned respondents).

"During the pandemic, social media plays a big role in providing people with correct information. For me personally, this media space is very important, because I received such information from the attached video tutorial, the details of which I did not know. With my personal example, I can judge that the information given through social media, may be used very effectively by a person, if he follows all the instructions and can survive from the virus like me." (One of the questioned respondents).

However, as the respondents participating in this qualitative research emphasize, if not for social media, the majority of the population would be in information vacuum related to the Covid pandemic.

„I believe that social media has contributed more to informing the public about Covid-19 than spreading misinformation, and the fact that certain individuals have used this medium to spread lies should not overshadow its positive activity during the current pandemic.“ (One of the questioned respondents).

„Social media helped not only to inform the public about Covid-19, but also to fully prepare the public for the fight against the pandemic. The well-known campaign called "Stay home" was spread through social media and helped to increase people's public responsibility. Everyone analyzed that in this battle we all fight together and we will achieve victory only by standing together.' (One of the questioned respondents).

The way out.

As the participants in this qualitative study pointed out, the only solution for us all is to learn how to ask critical questions and filter information.

„We all need to be able to check reliable sources and get accurate information especially today when it comes to our health. I think that this is more due to the lack of media literacy and media education, because often people do not ask critical questions about the received information, do not look for a document confirming its reliability. We easily trust the published information, or even the thoughts and opinions of people who are authoritative for us, and often these are the people who benefit from their authority. They know how to influence public opinion and use it for their own purposes, which was most clearly seen during the Covid-19 pandemics.“ (One of the questioned respondents).

The question arises, how to differ information from disinformation? First of all, we should not believe this or that widespread opinion without verifying it and finding for the primary source. We should get information only on the website of the WHO, the Center for Disease Control or various official agencies, listen and trust the advice of doctors and epidemiologists, should not address to folk methods of treating coronavirus.

„One more thing, it is very good that in Georgia there are such platforms as: "Media Checker" and "Myth Detector", both platforms actively disseminated information about fake news throughout the pandemic and protected the public from being misled“. (One of the questioned respondents).

„Ultimately, no one believes that fake information will disappear but everyone should be involved in the campaign to spread healthy information, and the media should play a major role. This is how we can get rid of this absurd misinformation.“ (One of the questioned respondents).

Conclusions.

According to the results of this qualitative research, social media mainly had negative influence regarding covid-19 pandemics, but it also helped people to receive information. Otherwise, the majority of the population would be in information vacuum related to the Covid pandemic.

The study also answered the question that all three types of fake news related to the virus were presented on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic: disinformation, misinformation and mal information.

As it was revealed by this research, misinformation on the topic of Covid-19, especially about vaccines, can be found even in the post-pandemic era. As questioned respondents emphasized, it is difficult to prevent the spread of misinformation, that is why society should take this matter more responsibly.

Audience must be able to think critically, ask as many critical questions as possible, seek alternative sources of information and filter the received information and trust only the information disseminated by reliable sources and media outlets. This will contribute to raising people's awareness, developing their worldview and thinking skills, which ultimately will have a positive impact on public life and the current situation in the country.

Recommendations.

According to this study some recommendations appeared:

- It would be desirable if fact-checking organizations will periodically continue to hold workshops for both students and schoolchildren in order to teach them how to filter and verify information, how to acquire digital media literacy skills and tools for detecting fake news and deep fakes in social media.
- It would be great to introduce basic media literacy skills in schools so that they can verify information from an early age.
- It would be preferable to add digital media literacy to university curricula and teach it not only to journalism students, as is the case today, but to students of any specialty in order to improve their critical thinking skills, improve detecting tools of disinformation.

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