

## SOCIO-CULTURAL NATURE OF THE INFODEMIC AND ITS APPEARANCES UNDER GLOBAL TURBULENCE

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the socio-cultural nature of information and studies its role in increasing global turbulence. Based on the methodological grounds put forward by A. Toffler, S. Moscovici, N. Chomsky, R. Patzlaff, O. Aronson, dialectical and systemic methods, the authors argue that the infodemic roots in stereotypical thinking generated by mass culture, as well as informatization and computerization of social relations. Mass culture contributed to a decrease in the level of critical thinking and caused the so-called ‘clip consciousness’. The paper substantiates the idea that the infodemic became most evident during the coronavirus pandemic, and the spread of hybrid and information wars within the world scale. The infodemic organically correlates with the world of post-truth, where a person does not seek the truth but up-to-date information. The fact of whether the information is true or not in such a context becomes secondary to the cliché of the stereotypical consciousness of an individual, social group, or society as a whole.

**Keywords:** global turbulence; infodemic; mass culture; information war; post-truth

### General problem formulation

Information flows are penetrating human and social life constantly contributing to the development of communication. on the one hand, and creating threats of manipulative influence on public and individual consciousness, on the other. At the beginning of the 21st century, mankind faced not only the threat of pandemics but also of infodemic related primarily to the spread of false information that endangers various spheres of public life, the harmonious development of states, international relations, and so on.

Infodemic technologies are also components of information and hybrid wars since they purposefully and destructively affect the enemy's public and individual consciousness. Currently, the infodemic waves are inspired by the actors of war (both classical and non-classical) to provoke destructive moods in society, create an atmosphere of 'controlled chaos', destroy the value basis of the nation, and so on.

### **Analysis of the recent research and publications that have put forward the problem**

The coronavirus pandemic gave a start to the studies of the infodemic phenomenon in scientific literature. The WHO Director-General, T.A. Ghebreyesus, described the infodemic as a wave-like spread of fakes on the origin, basic characteristics, and consequences of the coronavirus disease.

In Ukraine, M. Ozhevan was among the first who started to study the nature of the infodemic, its causes, and its consequences. O. Aronson, N. Horbenko, A. Chanturia, A. Yakimov study the socio-cultural nature of the infodemic and analyse the phenomenon of post-truth. M. Butyrina, O. Hoiman, L. Horodenko, L. Drotynko, S. Moscovici, O. Rudakevich, A. Stadnik, P. Feldman deal with the issues of mass consciousness, mass culture, and spreading social stereotypes, which they consider as grounds for the infodemic.

N. Chomsky, M. Antipov, H. Hych, R. Patzlaff, and others analyse the essence of the infodemic under the impact of information and communication technologies on human beings and society.

Regarding the above, the goal of the article is to focus on essential characteristics of the infodemic in the socio-cultural dimension and analyse the features of its appearance under global turbulence.

### **Presentation of the main material with a full justification of the obtained scientific results**

Disinformation as a powerful means of affecting public opinion has been used throughout the existence of mankind. But only in recent decades, it has turned into a 'weapon of mass destruction' thanks to new information and communication technologies that can permanently, purposefully, and systematically form any picture of the world among consumers of information. A significant increase in fake information at the beginning of the 21st century initiated scientists to introduce the concept of infodemic into scientific literature. The term 'infodemic' appeared in 11 May 2003 article in 'The Washington Post', where D. J. Rothkopf used it to describe the information epidemic or infodemic as "a combination of a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation, and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies". Later, amid the coronavirus pandemic and hybrid wars, this phenomenon has become one of the global factors of social instability aggravation (Rothkopf 2003).

M. Ozhevan considers infodemic as a rapid growth in the number and scale of dissemination of fake information (Ozhevan 2021).

P. Duggal claims that fake information does not just poison the information ecosystem but prejudicially impacts the human thought process. Today, fake news and its dissemination has reached such significant proportions that it is already beginning to impact public order and even in some cases sovereign interests of sovereign nations (Duggal 2020).

Yu. Kalynovskyi and S. Zhdanenko define the infodemic as a hybrid war technology used to affect the public consciousness by spreading disinformation on any socially significant problem (Zhdanenko & Kalynovskyi 2022, p. 29).

Some facts of infodemic manifestation help us understand its socio-cultural nature and role in increasing global turbulence. Thus, in 2021 the multimedia platform 'Ukrinform' provided data on the false and unverified information on the coronavirus epidemic and vaccination in Ukraine. According to the presented analysis, the following fake messages spread in Ukraine and the world:

1. *Conspiracy theories*: the coronavirus is fiction, a worldwide conspiracy; governments' attempt to control and reduce the population; 5G technology spreads coronavirus; Bill Gates wants to chip people to control them.

2. *False narratives to discredit Ukraine and its healthcare system*: Ukraine cannot protect its people from the pandemic and provide a vaccine to its citizens; Ukrainians will 'test' the vaccine; Ukrainian authorities manipulate coronavirus statistics.

3. *False anti-vaccination narratives*: the government wants to use a low-quality vaccine; politicians/officials do not tell the whole truth about the vaccine; the vaccine is dangerous for health and life, so doctors actively refuse vaccination; vaccination is the means to control the population.

4. *False coronavirus treatment narratives*: masks/antiseptics/non-contact thermometers do not help/harm; PCR tests are not reliable; people who have been ill with the coronavirus-caused disease have immunity; fake methods of treating and preventing coronavirus (sodium bicarbonate inhaling or gargling with salt water, various tinctures, breathing exercises, etc.).

5. *False discriminatory narratives*: the coronavirus has been artificially produced by the Chinese.

These messages can classify as fake, unverified, and hybrid (combining truth with lies) since there is no objective data that denies or confirms some of the above concepts.

J. Simon and R. Mahoney, chronicles the ways in which governments cracked down on dissent and usurped power during the COVID-19 pandemic, under the guise of protecting public health. The authors chart that the infodemic lays bare the mechanisms that move beyond the information restriction, they open the floodgates of misinformation, overwhelming the public with lies and half-truths (Simon & Mahoney 2022).

In the socio-cultural dimension, the infodemic is based on the manipulations of the socio-historical experience of certain nations and their cultural and mental

characteristics. Modern infodemic technologies range from straightforward deception to creative combinations of true and false information. Mass culture has created an appropriate background for the post-truth world where mass consciousness most often interprets real events superficially, which is a favourable factor for spreading the infodemic. A mass man cannot critically comprehend reality and culture, which makes them absorb not only ready-made information but often ready-made interpretations and assessments. Mass culture conveys accessible samples, understandable ideals, and effective models of behaviour to a mass man using stereotypes, patterns, and clichés. This is fertile ground for interested social groups and political forces who want to manipulate mass consciousness (Chanturia 2018, p. 5). Therefore, a man of the post-truth world is an ideal object for the infodemic.

Post-truth is due to many reasons: socio-psychological phenomena that cause the incomplete or distorted perception of information; mass culture, which forms an alternative ethics with its intermediate stages between truth and lies, the justification of lies and its transformation from the sphere of morality to the comic field; the philosophy and aesthetics of postmodernism, which has planted to the mass audience the idea of the relativity and amorphousness of moral categories; political institutions using manipulative technologies; impact on the emotional sphere; populist ideas; falsifications and disinformation (Horbenko 2021, p. 25).

C. O'Connor and J.O. Weatherall argue that social factors, rather than individual psychology, are what's essential to understanding the spread and persistence of false beliefs. They state that "we live in an age of misinformation – an age of spin, marketing, and downright lies. Of course, lying is hardly new, but the deliberate propagation of false or misleading information has exploded in the past century, driven both by new technologies for disseminating information – radio, television, the internet, – and by the increased sophistication of those who would mislead us" (O'Connor & Weatherall 2019, p. 37).

These specifics of modern society contribute to the spread of post-truth and, as a result, directly or indirectly form the socio-cultural prerequisites for the infodemic. An average person in the information society can consume large amounts of information but often has no proper skills for critical comprehension. In this regard, scientists state that it is not the distrust but the lack of any doubt, being a natural aspect of consciousness, that is a paradoxical condition for post-truth. Thus, we can assume that the roots of post-truth are contained in everyday life, perception, background practices, communication methods, and so on (Aronson 2017, pp. 12 – 13).

Modern society, generating certain symbolic images, simulacra, clichés, and post-truth reality creates a socio-cultural background for the infodemic that is reproduced and distributed through the mass media content where the reliability of information is not important – it should be embedded in the cliché of the stereotypical consciousness of an individual, social group or society as a whole, whether it is true or not.

M. Butyrina considers that the mass media implement technologies to produce social (trans-individual) meanings. The effectiveness of such technologies determines if the content-morphological features of mass consciousness are relevant to the nature and forms of communication messages. Human consciousness tends to maintain homeostasis, that is, a relatively stable state that does not involve assimilating new information permanently or perceiving conflicting data. That is why the nature of human consciousness needs to preserve and apply relatively cognitive and conative elements – stereotypes (Butyrina 2007, p. 20).

Traditional news media have often been used for the purpose of spreading fakes and misinformation, for example:

- newspapers
- TV
- news sites
- radio.

However, significant development of electronic media dramatically increases the number of ways to distribute misinformation. One of the key tools of disinformation campaigns is social networks due to their popularity all over the world and the ease of dissemination of information through closed groups and private networks (Marwick & Lewis 2017, p. 26).

Being used legally, social networks can also be used for spreading misinformation. The following social networks can be used for this purpose:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube
- blogs
- forums.

Besides the above platforms, mobile communication applications are increasingly used, although they were originally developed as a means for private communication but not a public platform (Dias 2017).

The relationship of traditional media and social networks in the overall picture of misinformation spread has complex dynamics. Social media can serve to distort and inflate stories, disseminated through traditional media, and traditional media often report and reflect trends observed in social networks, which results in the multiplication of inaccurate information.

M. Dice studies the fake news phenomenon and the implications of mega-corporations like Facebook, Google, and Twitter becoming the ultimate gatekeepers and distributors of news and information. He thinks that the powerful and deceptive methods of manipulation affect us all, as numerous organizations and political activists cunningly plot to have their stories seen, heard, and believed by as many people as possible. The depths of lies, distortions, and omissions from traditional mainstream

media shocks since now they're colluding with the top tech companies trying to maintain their information monopolies (Dice 2017).

An essential prerequisite for the spread of the infodemic, in addition to the above, is gadget addiction. The spread of gadgets in all spheres of public life providing a person with a number of new opportunities for a comfortable existence has created a danger to their spiritual and psychological health. In the context of our study, we can argue that the infodemic in its modern form would be practically impossible without gadgets. Thus, R. Patzlaff states that while viewing the television, the human body consumes less energy than during idleness, metabolism decreases, the pulse rate decreases by 10%, a person falls into an intermediate state between sleep and wakefulness, which is very suitable for affecting a person making them weak-willed, dependent, and unable to make their own decisions. These changes are not superficial, but rooted in human physiology. Gradually, a person gets used to uncritically perceiving what they see. A person turns into a thoughtless bio-robot, acting according to an unknown program installed by someone else (Patzlaff 2003).

All these factors create the basis for the infodemic, contribute to weakening critical thinking, and ultimately lead to a distorted perception of reality not only by individuals but also by public groups, and society as a whole.

We claim that the mass media tend to simplify the essence of information, making a person perceive reality superficially since the form or emotional component prevails over the content. The infodemic appears when people do not analyse information critically, unconditionally trust in certain media or 'experts', do not have sufficient skills to compare various sources of information, have a low level of information culture and prone to stereotypical, uncritical thinking.

Proceed from these methodological positions, we can assume that the infodemic is grounded on fake stereotypes that are being formed in public opinion as a result of social development or deliberately planted in the public consciousness by stakeholders, for example, the initiators of hybrid and information wars. The infodemic attack such socially significant values as justice, freedom, security, and so on. The semantic content of such concepts as 'rightness', 'truth', 'actual fact', and 'reality' are losing their original objective meaning and acquiring an opportunistic character. Mass culture contributes to the formation of a certain human type – a conformist who is prone to an uncritical perception of reality, who has a fairly high level of trust in the media and is easily affected, and does not want and is not ready to defend their own views systematically and reasonably. A man of mass culture has almost lost the ability to rationally and critically think, analyse, and discern the truth. Such a person is affected by numerous energetic and unsubstantiated statements that are attractively and brightly wrapped and limit achieving the desired (Hoiman 2014, p. 63).

Although mass culture is not always negative in meaning, it can enhance the effectiveness of manipulative technologies, and 'switch off' the critical function of social and individual consciousness. In this context, S. Moscovici focuses on the fact

that “individual properties disappear in the same way as personalities ‘dissolve’ in a group regardless of the level of its members’ wealth or culture. It would be a mistake to think that the educated or upper strata of society are better at resisting collective influence than the uneducated or lower strata and that forty academics behave otherwise than forty housewives” (Moscovici 2011, p. 76).

The infodemic stakeholders reproduce in the public consciousness the stereotypes, assessments, and vision of the situation that are beneficial to them from a certain perspective. E.S. Herman and N. Chomsky critique mass media and argue that it is controlled by a powerful hegemonic elite who are motivated by their own interests that determine and manipulate what information is present in the mainstream. The mass media is therefore a system of propaganda. “In sum, a propaganda approach to media coverage suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests. This should be observable in dichotomized choices of story and in the volume and quality of coverage... such dichotomization in the mass media is massive and systematic: not only are choices for publicity and suppression comprehensible in terms of system advantage, but the modes of handling favored and inconvenient materials (placement, tone, context, fullness of treatment) differ in ways that serve political ends (Herman & Chomsky 2002, p. 96).

Within the infodemic, the collective ‘we’ dominate over the individual ‘I’, a person affected by ‘popular’ opinion and value judgments of ‘experts’ may doubt their own beliefs. This certainly contributes to spreading a form of mass consciousness called ‘clip consciousness’ or ‘clip thinking’, especially among the youth.

Back in 1980, A. Toffler envisioned a fundamentally new phenomenon he called ‘blip culture’ and considered as a component of the general information culture of the future, based on the endless flashing of information. In his book ‘The Third Wave’, A. Toffler wrote that “instead of receiving long, related ‘strings’ of ideas, organized or synthesized for us, we are increasingly exposed to short, modular blips of information – adverts, commands, theories, shreds of news...” (Toffler 1980, p. 182).

Researchers claim that ‘clip thinking’ leads to the syndrome of mass attention disorder, loss of desire for new knowledge, destruction of the need and ability to be creative, inconsistency in the way of thinking of the way of life; incoherence in decision making to solve problems, reduced ability to analyse and synthesize, ‘virtual addiction’, anti-intellectualism and plagiarism, mass ignorance of young people and the phenomenon of arrogant enthusiasm for their ignorance, and so on (Hych 2016, p.40).

The above processes have formed “the paradoxical situation in modern society: on the one hand, the number of information sources is increasing, and on the other hand, the opportunities for information attacks using these sources are proportionally increasing” (Kalynovskyi 2019, p. 21).

The subjects of global confrontation can use infodemic technologies as a controlled process only if a person does not want to think of a particular problem comprehensively, and is in an atmosphere of emotional tension, which further affects his worldview,

thinking, and behaviour. M. Antypov believes that book thinking in our time is being replaced by clip thinking – auditory-visual, figurative, and somewhat fragmentary. Clip thinking, in his opinion, firstly, focuses, in most cases, not on a graphic text, but on an image, which, in turn, has a complex effect on a person's consciousness through picture and sound. Secondly, clip thinking by its nature does not imply a long-term focus on a particular text: a person switches over attention and perception in a certain chain of clips (from site to site, channel to channel, fragment to fragment, clip to clip). This process can lead to a mosaic, eclectic picture of the world where there is no certain variant of consistency and integrity (Antypov 2015).

Thus, clip consciousness is caused by globalization, informatization, and computerization of social processes, and the increase in information in all social spheres, a decrease in the quality of education of citizens, and so on.

Infodemic technologies are primarily aimed at mass consciousness patterns. It is known that the warmongers of modern wars actively inspire the infodemic. Thus, A. Stadnyk, considering the concept of mass consciousness in the context of the information war, makes the following conclusions:

- “mass consciousness based on human emotions greatly simplifies the informational influence on people within information warfare since it is much easier to influence people's feelings than the mind;

- mass consciousness is unstructured unlike, for example, group (class, ethnic, etc.) consciousness where individuals are united based on some characteristics;

- the content of mass consciousness can be defined as infinite, being formed in the process of communication among people, and their perception of information;

- mass consciousness can change fast, which makes it flexible, capable of social change” (Stadnyk 2016, p. 222).

Therefore, the infodemic can be an integral part of the information or hybrid confrontation aimed at a significant deformation of the cognitive and emotional structures of the mass consciousness so that to control it in a hidden way.

## **Conclusions**

The infodemic as a socio-cultural phenomenon has occurred as a result of the informatization of society, global integration processes, and new technologies in various areas of public life. Its socio-cultural nature is based on the permanent wish and need of a person, society, and humanity to acquire new knowledge and information. At the same time, the perception of significant amounts of information, and stereotypical assessment of events and phenomena have contributed to a decrease in the level of critical analysis of information, the spread of manipulative technologies, deformations of public consciousness, and so on. The objects of the infodemic are masses of people both at the regional and global levels. The paradox is that the victims of the infodemic are people from different social strata (including the wealthy ones), with different levels of education (including higher education), and from different ethnic and cultural

groups. It should be emphasized that at present the infodemic is artificially inspired by the initiators of hybrid and information wars. The problem of the appearances, spread, and temporal characteristics of the infodemic needs further studies since we believe that under global instability this phenomenon will only intensify.

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