

Received: March 2023

Accepted: June 2023

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2023.hss.14

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DISINFORMATION CONTENT IN POLISH CYBERSPACE

The war in Ukraine and the risk of it spreading to other countries strongly undermined Poles' sense of security. One recurring phenomenon is attacks in cyberspace. Such attacks are aimed at the critical infrastructure of the state; however, they also target citizens who seek knowledge on the Internet in areas related to defense, but also on ordinary matters that translate into everyday activities and knowledge about the world. The purpose of this article is to present the most important topics that function in cyberspace and are currently the most common targets for hackers. The research problem is, which topics functioning in cyberspace are most often modified so that they become disinformation? The research methods used were literature analysis and a diagnostic survey; the techniques were text analysis and a survey with a questionnaire.

Keywords: disinformation, fake news, cyberspace.

1. INTRODUCTION

A crisis is a phenomenon that can affect any organization, regardless of its mission, areas of activity, its size and recipients. An organization or state that prepares an action plan in advance and manages communication in the event of a crisis is more likely to overcome the crisis than those that are not prepared. This involves identifying a priori crisis scenarios, defining target groups, establishing procedures, assigning roles, conducting exercises, and drawing conclusions.

Crisis preparedness and the ability to anticipate the consequences are the characteristics of an organization that is ready to act and maintain control in the event of a crisis. Crisis communication cannot be self-sufficient. It must be included in the system of global links with risk management and the company's communication strategy. In addition, it requires the cooperation of many entities and must constantly adapt to changes in the environment in which the organization operates.

When a crisis occurs, you need to act effectively, decide quickly, provide information in real time, adapt it to each of its recipients, especially the media.

Thus, crisis management is based on fast communication, consistent and intended for each of the internal and external recipients. Proper analysis of the crisis environment allows you to identify the recipients directly affected by the extreme situation, their positions and

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interactions. With good communication, you can inform and restore trust while reassuring your target population. Proper communication in a crisis situation makes it possible to limit the impact of a crisis on the operations and reputation of a company or organization in a top-down manner.

Nowadays and with the development of information and communication sciences, it can be noticed that it takes place on faster paths, such as the Internet or social media. The audience is no longer just a spectator, but also a participant in a possible crisis. Crisis communication thus becomes unity by participating in the process of restoring order. A return to normal is therefore a matter for the information society. Therefore, it is necessary to appreciate the role of communication through its involvement in management. The act of communication is based on language, which refers to accuracy, correctness in relation to the social context and its norms.

2. DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is the creation and dissemination of misleading or false information in order to damage the image of the country chosen as the target (Bennett, 2003).

Disinformation activities were mainly associated with the military sphere, the activities of special services, interviews, when attempts were made to mislead the opponent by means of false data. Recently, disinformation has begun to occupy an increasing area of our reality. It appears in the media, marketing and politics. When conducting communication, especially in a crisis, you should be aware that sooner or later you will have to face it. It can appear in the context of any threat, from an epidemic to, for example, disruptions in the power or IT system.

Strategic, long-term disinformation has become the basis for the functioning of totalitarian systems, an element of manipulation, exerting influence on society. Information is a tool of disinformation - treated instrumentally – it is used to consciously distort reality, and thus to influence public opinion, also international (Księga Komunikacji Kryzysowej – RCB – Portal Gov.pl, b. d.).

An example may be a coordinated information campaign, which can be a real tool of the enemy's attack, as a result of which it can lead to mass disinformation, panic and actions that deepen the crisis situation. This is because the modern world is undergoing rapid changes, not only in the sphere of security. What changes are primarily the habits and processes related to the area of media, information and the need to use access to knowledge for individuals, social groups and society. Access to information/news has become easy and widespread. It has become an inseparable part of the social media culture, permanently inscribing itself into the habits of interpersonal communication. Sharing information about events, opinions, emotions more and more often fills the time spent in the virtual world of websites and social media. Especially social media to a large extent replace the need to maintain traditional contacts and begin to constitute a certain rule, a culture of communication.

Internet users move in the area of digital communication looking for and selecting content, guided by their interests. The impact of information on the cognitive area in which a person functions is very complex, and the effects it generates in the cognitive sphere are obvious. Information in cyberspace is subject to the process of continuous creation/processing by various media centers, social media, the blogosphere, and a network of websites. Based on them, a person shapes his worldview. Therefore, the human cognitive process can be relatively easily controlled by skillfully influencing the content of information and its availability. Using precise techniques of using a suggestive rhetorical

layer, propaganda, disinformation, social engineering, a cognitive pattern derived from reflective management techniques, one can influence the assimilation of manipulated information and obtain the result, which is an opinion, decision, action or inaction. Foreign centers initiating the impact (e.g. social groups, states, corporations, etc.) through various forms can achieve their goals - long-term and short-term. Contemporary habits of obtaining information, combined with the possibility of manipulating them through information and psychological interaction, create a distorted information environment in which the recipient, the user, functions. A foreign center initiating the process of manipulation of the infosphere can create long-term plans of impact with a diverse potential of effects and carry out precise information attacks using its own cybernetic potential and tools to take control of centers, information objects (Księga Komunikacji Kryzysowej – RCB – Portal Gov.pl, b. d.).

A possible information attack flow could have the following stages of operation:

1. Recognition of the information environment, vulnerabilities of objects/recipients,
2. Planning,
3. Cyberattack, implementation,
4. Distribution and information impact,
5. Cyberattack (BTS) – SMS distribution,
6. Impact study, correction, information impact.

Cyberspace increasingly affects the everyday life of its users, not only through the availability of many tools facilitating communication, data resources, but also through the information environment shaped in it, which can become an object of intoxication and a tool for achieving kinetic effects, without the use of kinetic methods of interaction (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

3. GFK POLONIA RESEARCH

At the beginning of October 2021, a GFK Polonia study was conducted on behalf of the Digital Poland Foundation on a representative sample of 1,000 people, using the CAWI method (*Największa dezinformacja w Polsce dotyczy klimatu i energii. OKO.press liderem fact-checkingu*, 2022), which examined the level of disinformation among Poles and what false statements they believe in (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

a. Dieta i fale radiowe

Information that a proper diet replaces oncological treatment was encountered by 15%. Every fourth respondent believed that the radio waves used by 5G networks are dangerous to humans, and slightly less (22%) that 5G networks are launched to spy on their users. As many as 40% of respondents admitted that they use the so-called alternative sources of information.

In Poland, conspiracy theories and false theses are usually believed by about 20-25% of society. This level is similar in other countries and is confirmed by other studies, presented by, for example, the international analytics platform YouGov. Scandinavian countries are among the countries where the percentage of believers in false theories is lower. Poland is at the forefront when it comes to believing in untrue information. Research for the Digital Poland Foundation has additionally shown that in some areas the beliefs of Poles are going in a disturbing direction (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

b. Climate and energy

In the area of „climate and energy”, more than half of the respondents agreed with the misconceptions. In the area of health – over 40%. What is dangerous is that these beliefs

translate into the decisions and behavior of Poles. More than half of the respondents believe that the nuclear power plant is a threat to the inhabitants, which is crucial in the current energy situation. Climate change as a „conspiracy” targeting certain countries was heard and believed by 27% of Polish society, and 25% do not believe that the increase in the average annual temperature in the world has an impact on the occurrence of extreme weather phenomena, which may be important obstacle in the process of energy transformation. It is not known to what extent the belief in the information encountered is the result of misinformation, and to what extent - simple educational deficiencies. Climate change is a new phenomenon and many people only know what they hear about it in the media (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

c. Lack of general knowledge

The probable lack of knowledge, which translates into belief in false information encountered on the Internet, is indicated by detailed statements prepared by GFK Polonia, which show that the largest number of people agreeing with false theses had primary education and lived in the countryside or in the smallest towns. This is confirmed by another study conducted by the EU Eurostat in September 2021, which examined the level of knowledge and attitude to science and technology of citizens of European countries. The result of the Poles was shockingly low – only 10% of the respondents answered 8 and more questions correctly (there were eleven in total), which put us in 5th place from the end. 28% of Poles said that humans lived at the same time as dinosaurs (this is not true), 43% that lasers work by focusing sound waves (actually they are light waves). And 36% disagreed with the statement that humans developed from earlier animal species (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

d. Politics and social affairs

Educational deficiencies are one of the reasons, the other is the influence of the media. Their influence was evident in GFK Polonia's questions on politics and social issues. 31% of respondents agreed with the statement that feminism and LGBT are ideologies aimed at imposing a different lifestyle on the majority of Poles. And 25% that the plane crash in Smolensk is an attack, not a catastrophe. Interestingly, this result is almost identical to those obtained in the Ipsos polls, commissioned by OKO.press, carried out in 2016, 2017 and 2020. The question about the crash of the presidential plane was regularly indicated by about a quarter of respondents to the assassination attempt, most of whom belonged to the electorate of the PiS party (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

e. Trap of the Internet search engine

The majority of those surveyed by GFK Polonia confirmed that they had come across disinformation (81%) and 67% with false information. This is a higher level than in the research of the NASK Institute from 2019, when 56% of Poles said they had encountered fake news in the last 6 months. The source of fake news was most often friends or family members, only in second place was social media. 69% of respondents declared that they check the credibility of news, and only 12% of them use fact-checking portals for this purpose. On the other hand, as many as 44% of Poles use Internet search engines in such a situation. And that turns out to be a trap. Internet search engines display answers to the questions asked, based on their own algorithms. This makes them more likely to show users results that are similar to websites that a given user has previously used. If someone regularly visits alternative Internet portals (and according to other answers, as many as 40% of Poles do so), the probability that they will see such alternative sources in the first

places in their results increases. A lot depends on how the search engine works. For example, Google does not display links to some websites that are considered the least reliable or typically propaganda. The high trust of Poles in search engines also shows how important Google's decision on coronavirus vaccination information was, for example, when access to websites containing scientifically confirmed data on this subject was facilitated. Thanks to this, materials from alternative media, with false conspiracy theories and manipulated messages reached fewer people (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

f. Reaction to blocking fake news spreaders

In the GFK Polonia study, as many as 84% of respondents said that an important problem for Poland is the impact of false information on the Internet on social divisions and democratic elections. Independent journalists (50% of responses) and experts (49%) are most involved in activities aimed at limiting this impact. The actions of the government in this regard were indicated by 33% of the respondents, slightly less the European Union – 31% of Poles were also asked what ways of counteracting disinformation they would agree to. It turned out that there is a huge social acceptance for blocking and deleting the accounts of people or organizations that most often publish fake news in social media. The answers: „I definitely agree” and „I rather agree” with regard to such a solution were indicated by as many as 71% of respondents. The same number accepts the introduction of media education into schools, teaching how to recognize false information on the web and in the media. Only the idea that the media should be obliged to correct fake news gained more indications (75% of respondents were in favor). It turns out that blocking accounts can be accepted by the majority of society (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

g. Other actions to reduce disinformation

Over 60% of Poles also support other ideas listed in the GFK Polonia survey that can help reduce disinformation:

- 69% are in favor of fake news being automatically deleted by social media platforms,
- 67% agree to flagging false information in web browsers,
- 63% support the imposition of financial penalties on the owners of social platforms and search engines in the event of failure to take action to limit the reach of fake news,
- 43% support the idea that a government body should be established in Poland to determine what is untrue information and to publish a rectification. The so-called Freedom of Speech Council was directly pointed out here. This is a solution enshrined in the draft act on „protection of freedom of speech on the Internet” prepared by the Ministry of Justice. The project was submitted in 2021. However, it was returned to it and the Freedom of Speech Council, whose members are to be elected by the Sejm, is to function within the structures of the National Broadcasting Council. It will consider appeals against decisions by social networking sites to block content and accounts. The fines imposed by it are to range from 50,000 to PLN to even PLN 50 million. This idea is the least liked of all ten proposals presented in the study. This is not the only case where the response shows a low level of trust in the current authorities, official institutions and public media (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

h. Sources of current information

They were also asked from which sources Poles get current information. OKO.press was ranked first among the listed fact-checking portals, with indications at the level of 37%, ahead of, among others, the TVN24 Konkret 24 portal (35%), fakenews.pl (33%) or

the website of the Demagog Association (23%). Generally, however, the majority of respondents (over 60%) decided that television was the main source of current information. At the same time, as many as 61% get their information from TVN and TVN24, 58% from Polsat, and only 32% from TVP1, even less, because 28%, from TVP Info. The low rating of public and pro-government media is also visible in other categories. Among radio stations, the first of the public radio stations – Jedyńka Polskiego Radia – was ranked only fifth. Among the pro-government weeklies, „Do Rzeczy” ranked highest – also in fifth place (6% of responses) and its online edition landed one spot higher. However, in the list of the most popular Internet portals, there was only one pro-government medium – niezalezna.pl, with indications at the level of only 1%, while onet.pl, the leader in the ranking, scored 74%, and the second portal wp.pl – 66% (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

4. CONCLUSION

Poles know that disinformation is a significant threat affecting the reality in which we live. They expect real actions to limit the spread of false information, but they do not see that such actions are taken by state authorities. In this respect, they can count on independent journalists and experts more often than on the systemic activity of state authorities.

The research presented in the article proves that over 80% of Poles have encountered disinformation and false information about Poland and the world. According to 84% of Poles, too much false information on the Internet divides society and influences democratic elections. The most susceptible to fake news are young people who trust social media, who are unable to independently distinguish what is true and what is false (*DigitalPoland*, b. d.).

Actions taken by social media to counter disinformation give hope for increasing the credibility of information distributed on the web. The activities of information portals are also needed. Those who introduce appropriate systems verifying the reliability of information as soon as possible will have the best chance of winning in the fight to rebuild the credibility of online media.

Market experts agree that the key in the fight against „fake news” is to support high-quality journalism and pluralistic information media, as well as education, developing critical thinking skills and digital competences, in particular by young people.

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