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Strategic communications as a component of state information security

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Abstract

The formation of the information society at the current stage is defined by an active process of information exchange and communicative interaction at various levels - interpersonal, between social groups, strata, and countries. In addition to constructive characteristics, the specified process is characterized by a number of risks that face the information security of states and are aimed at violating human rights and freedoms, undermining established democratic traditions and authority on the geopolitical map of the world. This testifies to the relevance of the study of strategic communications as a guarantee of the reliability of the security sector. In view of the above, the purpose of the article is to study the features of communicative interaction at the strategic level in the context of information security of the state. The basis of the methodological toolkit was dialectical and sociocultural methods, as well as systemic, informational and functional approaches, thanks to which it was possible to present strategic communications as a living and open system, the elements of which interact with each other and depend on the cultural and historical conditions of society. The key threats facing information security in the context of communicative interaction at the strategic level are the use of aggressive rhetoric, the production of false information flows, the spread of fake content, myth-making and attempts to rewrite history. The essence of russian information campaigns, which are carried out by means of disinformation, and the experience of the EU and Baltic countries in countering them are considered. Ukrainian realities have proven the rationality of building strategic communications on the basis of public trust in the subjects of information production, given that, in addition to representatives of the diplomatic corps and representatives of the security sector, active participants in this process should be experts from among scientists and civil society in general. The practical value of the results is that they can be used to determine ways to build a national system of strategic communications and create an institution to coordinate this activity at the interagency level

Keywords:

communication; information; war; narrative; diplomacy; politics; disinformation; fake

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Introduction

In the conditions of economic destabilization and political turbulence, which marked the beginning of the 21st century, the battle for an information resource, the search for ways to counter information aggression, cyber threats, etc., are of priority importance. Thanks to virtual communication, the accessibility of social networks, and the constant adaptation of media to new conditions and requests from the world audience, contemporaries are witnessing an information confrontation between strategic communicators from different countries. The investigation of the subject under study is updated considering the intensification of the struggle in the information space, the so-called information war, one of the optimal tools for countering which can be the system of information and communication measures, the application of which at the strategic level can establish in the individual and mass consciousness certain ideas that will positively resonate with national interests.

Information security also faces new threats related, among other things, to total digitalization, which, apart from positive aspects, according to modern scientists, serves as a tool for violating the sovereignty of democratic states, interfering in election processes, and using cyberspace to spread “deep fakes” (Paterson & Hanley, 2020), efforts to maintain dominant influence in certain communities and regions by spreading disinformation, to establish a kind of “safety belt” from other subjects of international relations (Sheremet *et al.*, 2021).

This confirms the relevance of investigating the features of communicative interaction at the level of public diplomacy, military relations, information operations aimed at promoting the goals of the state, relations with the media, i.e., the so-called strategic communication.

The demand for this issue is indicated by a wide range of modern studies on this issue. For instance, M. Khan and K. Pratt investigated the composition of strategic communications through social media, their potential in countering terrorism, specifically through the use of frames (Khan & Pratt, 2022). R. Arcos and H. Smith highlight the threats of using information operations by hostile authoritarian actors aimed at spreading discord between partner countries and interfering in democratic processes (Arcos & Smith, 2021). According to these researchers, in the context of hybrid warfare, the enemy, encroaching on information security, uses the media to create certain cognitive and emotional reactions among people who, due to their nature, make decisions based on their ideas about the world and information available through interpersonal symbolic interactions.

In addition, worthy of attention are the results of the development of information security policy principles proposed by H. Paananen, M. Lapke and M. Siponen (2020). Having considered the modern developments of internet service providers, these authors concluded that when defining the means and tools of strategic communication interaction, it is necessary to focus primarily

on the needs of information security related to a particular organization. The importance of the role of information technologies in building communication strategies is also emphasized by M.V. Cavelli Mauer and S. Krishna-Gensel (2013).

Despite the wide range of such studies, certain aspects of the subject related to today's challenges are still understudied, given that the purpose of this study was to determine the essence of strategic communications, their role in ensuring the information security of the state. To fulfil the said purpose, the following tasks were to be completed: to highlight the main threats to information security of the state related to strategic communications, to cover the potential of the latter to overcome hybrid threats using evidence from Ukraine, to determine the optimal tools for their construction at the international level.

Literature Review

Recently, the study on this subject has become more active in the Ukrainian scientific space, which is a response to the challenges that the security sector faced after the invasion of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine. For instance, a comprehensive approach to the investigation of strategic communications was proposed by representatives of the scientific school of the National Academy of the Security Service of Ukraine on strategic communications. The manual prepared by them (Kompantseva, 2022) contains quite practical recommendations for employees of state institutions of tactical and operational direction.

Presently, the security potential of strategic communications is quite thoroughly covered in the context of the problems of information warfare (Chen, 2022; Makenko, 2022), specifically cyber warfare and the “digitalization of the battlefield” (Siroli, 2018). The study by M. Libicki “What is an information war?” constitutes a significant theoretical basis for the development of the subject under study (Libicki, 1995), which describes in detail the types of information warfare (command and control, psychological, economic, hacking, cyber warfare, intelligence, etc.). At the same time, such conclusions were made by the theorist at the end of the 20th century. Today, we are dealing with a symbiosis of all these forms of information warfare, which involves the use of elements of all forms, with which the specified researcher actually agrees in his latest works, where, according to him, all elements of information warfare should be perceived as a whole, especially during military operations (Libicki, 2020).

Examining the outlined issues in more detail, some scientists pay attention to the impact of the communicative component of information warfare on the ontological component of human security in the modern era (Bolton, 2021); communicative interaction based on the strategic use of fear appeals within the limited confidence model (Scheller, 2019).

Worthy of attention are studies investigating the concepts of strategic communication of influential people in modern social media (Enke & Borchers, 2019). The authors fairly note that the activities of these entities are an effective tool for building an optimal model of strategic actions of the state at the international level.

In the context of the problems under study, the conclusions of modern scientists regarding the controllability of the process of building strategic communications are valuable, namely the use of information technologies to analyse the effectiveness of communication against the background of the requests of a certain audience (Müller & Braun, 2021). At the same time, investigating the tools for building discursive practices, R. Andersson defines the praxeological component of building strategic communications, their direct ability to form a certain way of vision, to have a constructive impact on the public (Andersson, 2020). O. Hoffjann interprets strategic communication as a game where participants, like actors in a play, define communicative interaction in the context of post-truth (Hoffjann, 2021). The scientist suggests a theoretical approach where strategic political communication is played out as a play in which entertainment is more important than mandatory.

The performed analysis indicates considerable developments on this issue. Despite this, the characteristics of strategic communications and their potential in ensuring the information security of the state in the face of modern threats facing democratic states are still understudied, which confirms the timeliness of the present study.

Materials and Methods

The fundamental component of the methodological tools was the dialectical method, which allowed investigating the contradictory manifestations of reality in their interrelation and interaction, especially when it came to communicative factors and cause-and-effect relationships between them, differentiation and integration processes. This is especially noticeable in the variability of building strategic communications, the criterion of which is the discrepancy between the needs of society and the existing model of communicative interaction, the relationship between the objective and subjective factors in its construction.

Given the fact that the study of any social phenomena involves their consideration in relation to the cultural environment, the specific features of the development of humankind at a certain historical stage, the present study required the use of a sociocultural method, which allowed considering communicative interaction in the broad context of civilizational processes, considering historically formed political traditions, beliefs, values, without losing cultural identity.

The system approach allowed analysing the object of the study through the components of the system and their relationships within a particular organizational structure. As is well known, strategic communications constitute, on the one hand, a system of ideas, opinions, and beliefs that form a background on which interaction unfolds at the international level in the sphere of politics, economy, culture, etc., and on the other hand, a system of institutions, subjects of interaction, which determine the rules and the subject of this interaction. Moreover, the role of the subjective factor in the conditions of the global information space is constantly growing because the rational use of the information resource can ensure the management of public opinion and even change the value system.

The study of the essence of strategic communications in the context of informatization also involves the use of an information approach that can present the comprehensiveness of the system of communicative interaction through the lens of the concepts of content production, disinformation, post-truth, manipulation, etc.

Since strategic communications are a process of synchronizing certain actions, ideas, and expressions to fulfil a set purpose, it was appropriate to use a functional approach that can reflect the dynamics of the object under study, which is implemented in a synchronous context. Furthermore, this study required the use of elements of the statistical method, namely in calculating the level of trust in the media, governments and public organizations based on the quality of information.

Results

The doctrine of strategic communications. Even though the problems of strategic communications are acutely felt in most countries, at the current stage the authors of this study are primarily interested in the experience of Ukraine, which, according to the influential British weekly "The Economist" (Our country, 2022), considering the dynamics of socio-political changes and characteristics, became the country of the year – 2022, having demonstrated to the whole world an exemplary resistance to terror, including on the information front and, above all, by establishing strategic communications with the world community, determined to affirm democratic values.

This area in Ukraine is regulated by several doctrinal documents that directly or indirectly relate to the issue under study. These are, for example, the Concept of Strategic Communications of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine¹, the Information Security Strategy, approved by the Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 685/2021 dated December 28, 2021², the Road map of the Partnership in the field of strategic communications between the National

¹Order of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine No. 612 "On the Concept of Strategic Communications of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine". (2017, November). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/v0612322-17#Text>.

²Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 685/2021 "On Information Security Strategy". (2021, December). Retrieved from <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/6852021-41069>.

Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the International Secretariat of NATO³, etc. Despite the availability of certain documents, the normalization of this area is still ongoing, which relates to new challenges that have arisen before the information security of Ukraine.

The mentioned process is accompanied by institutionalization at the state level – awareness of the importance of strategic communications as one of the key tools for ensuring the political stability and security of the state in general led to the emergence of several relevant bodies, educational and research centres in Ukraine, whose activities are aimed specifically at finding effective ways of promoting state narratives and countering misinformation (Syvak, 2019).

The experience of Ukraine shows that the prerequisite for building an optimal model of strategic communications is their ideological basis, which can be traced both at the local and state levels, in the military and civilian spheres. Complete identity, admittedly, is impossible due to the specificity of structures, but even in the militarized sphere of strategic communications, ideological influence comes first. However, what they all have in common is the ideological component, which is primarily based on the trust of target audiences in both public figures and institutions.

The level of trust is currently affected by the lack of proper coordination of a communication strategy to overcome threats to global and national security of the state.

Total disinformation in the network space, speculating on the opinions of pseudo-experts, purposeful production of fake news and systematic information “stuffing”, aimed primarily at destabilizing public opinion, emotional injection is a sign that public opinion is largely formed based on the so-called post-truth, when the personal attitude, own beliefs of the consumer of the information product come to the fore, and not the assessment of objective facts and factors. Given the above, there is a crisis of trust in public institutions, which is primarily related to the quality of information. Supporting this author's opinion, the results of the “Trust Barometer – 2022” study, conducted by specialists of the “Edelman” company, who surveyed over 36,000 people from 28 countries of the world (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022), can be cited.

Trust in strategic communications entities. The analysis of communicative interaction in modern realities proves that the main subjects of the production of strategic communications, the level of trust in which we are interested in, are the government, the media, as well as representatives of non-state institutions and experts from various spheres of life, involved in information exchange. Specifically, among the main factors of the level of trust in the media, such as bringing others to justice, the ability to manage change, the effectiveness of the use of force, communication and transparency, the quality of information occupies a prominent place – the indicator is 6.6% (Fig. 1).

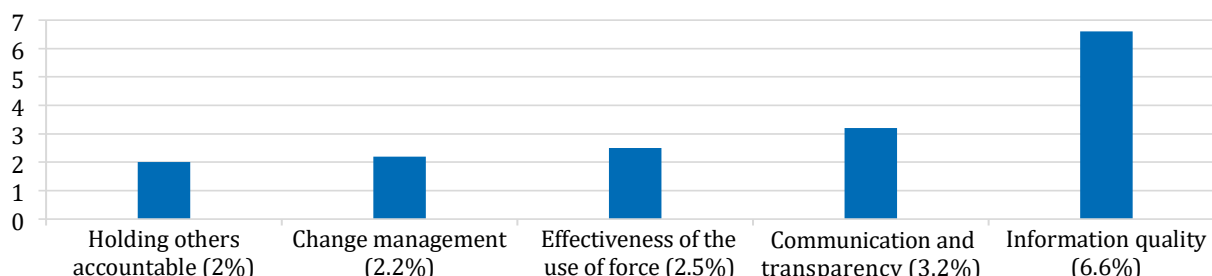


Figure 1. Factors of trust in the media

Source: developed by the author based on the results of a study by Edelman (Edelman, 2022)

No less important was the role of the quality of information flow in the activities of official government agencies (Fig. 2). After all, according to the author, this is a guarantee of the country's authority, a manifestation of trust in established partnership relations, the formation of an international information space that will be optimal for the implementation of the strategic vectors of the national foreign policy and public diplomacy.

The rating of trust in public organizations is noteworthy, since this year their role in public opinion has substantially increased compared to business structures. Here the situation is comparable – the list of the main factors

of building trust in this institution is headed by such an indicator as the quality of information (3.2%) (Fig. 3).

Thus, the analysis of the level of trust in the media, governments, and public organizations as key subjects of strategic communications production shows that the basis of its optimal model is trust as a result of the quality of information. At the international level, for instance, specialists from King's College London (2023) and the NATO Center of Excellence in Strategic Communications are working in this direction. Ukrainian scientists also offer recommendations for building a strategic committee based on trust (Kompantseva, 2022).

³Road map of the Partnership in the field of strategic communications between the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine and the International Secretariat of NATO. (2019, April). Retrieved from https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/00/66/78/b59dbab0d5049ff2cd77cc58800eda5c_1554906510.pdf.

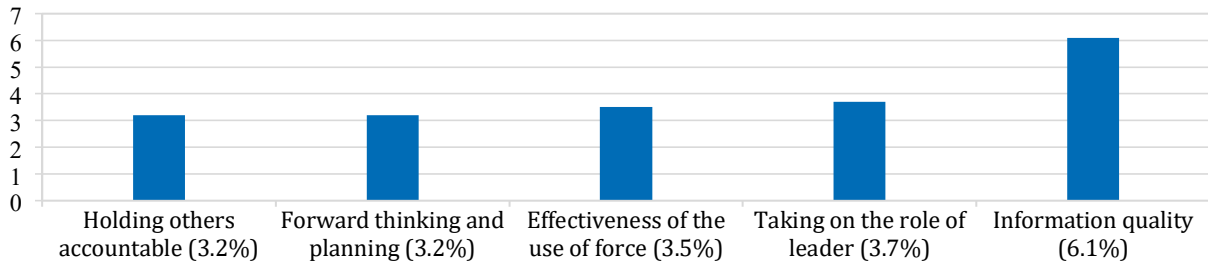


Figure 2. Factors of trust in governments

Source: developed by the author based on the results of a study by Edelman (Edelman, 2022)

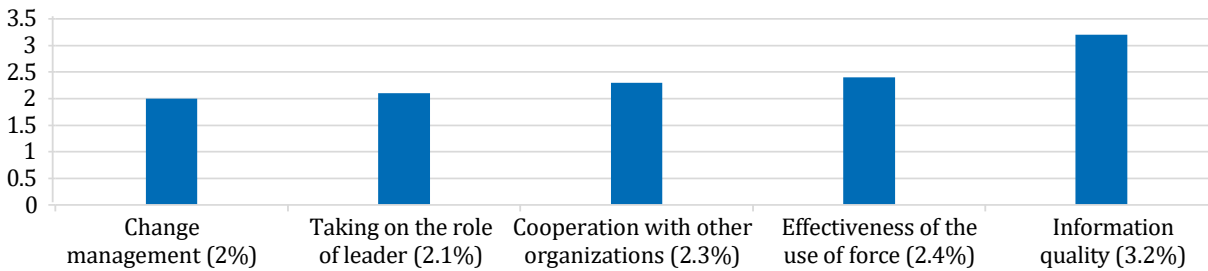


Figure 3. Factors of trust in public organizations

Source: developed by the author based on the results of a study by Edelman (Edelman, 2022)

A key role in this process belongs to particular individuals – leaders in various spheres of life, who influence strategic communications by producing or approving/denying certain content. This is emphasized by N. Enke and N. Borchers, arguing that through social media, such subjects contact an interested audience, disseminate certain information or communicate on social networks, considering the impact on communication interaction, which is of strategic importance for the goals of the organization (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

This refers not only to key figures in the security sector, but also to representatives of certain professional cells. Therefore, during the development of strategic communications, the subject of close attention at the international level should be the sphere of activity of representatives of professions whose level of trust is the lowest.

Thus, the results of the “Trust Barometer – 2022” study show that today the least trusted professions include government leaders (42%, which is +9% compared to last year). According to the author, such a low level of treatment for government representatives is conditioned upon general political turbulence, among other things, disregard for democratic values on the part of individual states, as evidenced, e.g., by the deployment of the Russian Federation of a full-scale war against Ukraine in the centre of Europe. Next in anti-rating are journalists (46%, +8%) and company heads (49%, +7%). The highest level of trust is in scientists (75%), work colleagues (74%), and the direct supervisor (66%). It is these indicators that should be used when developing an optimal model of strategic communications (e.g., actively use scientific analytics as a tool in countering disinformation).

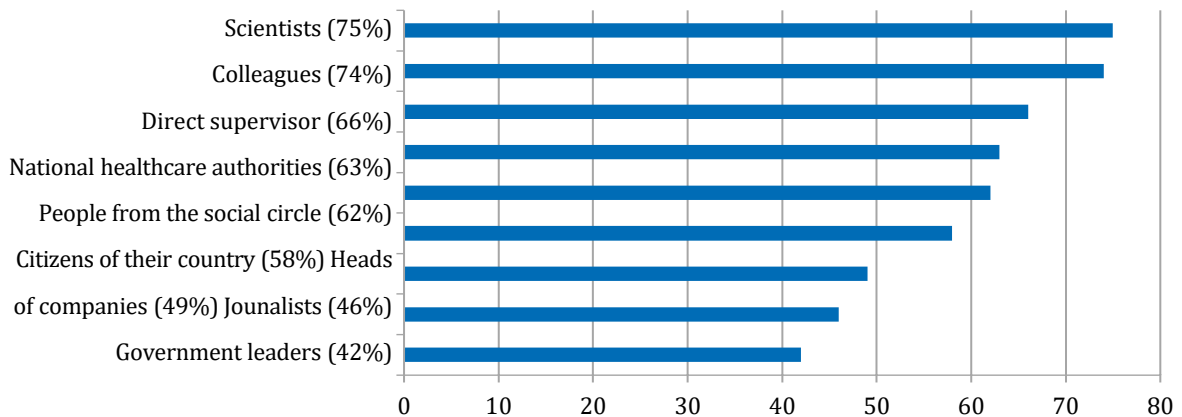


Figure 4. The level of trust in representatives of certain professions/communities

Source: developed by the author based on the results of a study by Edelman (Edelman, 2022)

Discussion

This problem is a popular subject of research by modern scientists. Researchers mostly agree that strategic communications are ambivalent in nature, since, on the one hand, they can serve as a tool of resistance in hybrid wars by undermining the authority of the enemy in the information space. On the other hand, they show a powerful consolidating potential in the geopolitical context, since they allow promoting their interests, establishing a dialogue between countries in a single ideological direction, develop a common vision for further development, and find optimal steps in the affirmation of socio-cultural values. This is also emphasized by Ukrainian scientists in the field of informatization, who believe that strategic communications should be perceived both as a tool in the battle for an information resource and as a means of “harmonizing topics, ideas, images, and actions” (Shtonda, 2018). This is actively facilitated by humanitarian technologies, which, according to the statement of modern researchers (Poltorak *et al.*, 2021), contribute to the formatting of the mass consciousness of the population, the formation of a certain public opinion to win the favour of both its people and representatives of other states of the world.

An essential function of communicative interaction at the strategic level is that it allows reaching consensus both at the interpersonal and international levels. After all, the information exchange is accompanied by disinformation, manipulative technologies, and an attempt to distinguish between “friend and foe”. As noted in the author's previous studies (Abysova & Antipova, 2019), the modern communication space is reduced to a binary opposition of “I and the other” or “we and the others”. Therewith, “other” is traditionally identified with the category “alien”, which is determined by cultural-historical, ethnic, and social factors. In this context, “alien” approaches the image of the enemy.

The destructive potential of strategic communications tools is shown primarily in the context of information warfare. This refers to “distorting the information landscape” (Bolton, 2021), distorting national narratives to influence politics, trying to disrupt social ties, using cyberbullying (Hussain & Bandeli, 2018) to sow doubt, uncertainty, and even fear. Thus, according to Scheller (2019), the use of fear in populist rhetoric is the main tool used by political actors to win the favour of ideologically distant groups of voters.

In this context, D. Bolton naturally emphasizes such a feature of the communicative space as ontological insecurity (Bolton, 2021). The cognitive component suffers no fewer losses, as Western experts emphasize (Clack & Johnson, 2021), claiming that the main threats of information warfare, in addition to fake news and disinformation, the use of manipulative technologies, are the undermining of trust and the distortion of the general picture of world perception.

A vivid example of efforts to build a model of strategic communication using disinformation is the conduct of Russian information campaigns during the last decade, which researchers have repeatedly stated in relation to the countries of Europe (Wagsson & Hellman, 2018), the Baltic States (Hanley, 2022), the United States (Artamonova, 2022), according to which such attempts to influence world opinion and win the favour of foreign citizens pose a threat to the liberal world order.

The main purpose of using fake information technologies is to spread misinformation among the public, promote certain ideas, encourage aggressive actions, and sow doubts (Svintsytskyi *et al.*, 2022). Thus, the full-scale armed invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine is accompanied by disinformation attacks on the information security of the state by media. Researchers of information content fairly argue that the events in the war zone and the general situation in Ukraine affect the main characteristics of Russian media reports – they become more eventful, sensational, aggressive, and purposeful. Such active media influence of the subjects of the production of information material is a conscious and pre-planned action, which can be observed starting from the first words of the publications, their titles and leads (Yuskiv *et al.*, 2021), which, in the author's opinion, also testifies to a considerable manipulative potential.

The influence of disinformation, as noted by Ukrainian researchers (Konstankevych *et al.*, 2022), is currently aimed at creating panic among the Ukrainian population, discrediting the authorities, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, for which the Russian media resort to such methods as creating myths, rewriting history, and psychological shock and shifting accents, etc. A striking example is the aggressor state's production of narratives like “Russian-speaking citizens suffer from harassment by the Ukrainian authorities”.

In the current conditions, countering the destructive manifestations of the subject's communicative activity, which is strategically oriented towards other people, state and non-state institutions or society in general, with the purpose of disrupting the normal functioning of the individual, society, and the state in the long term, is of particular importance.

The opinion of the representatives of the Oxford University School of Anthropology (Clack & Johnson, 2021) is valid regarding the fact that information has now become the “centre of gravity” of the adversary's data exploitation operations. In the context of communication strategies, false information can be used as a source of emotional resonance and even identity reformatting.

In the context of Russian-Ukrainian aggression, fakes are also a battle of narratives and cultures. Apart from trying to “polarize the internal narrative debate” (Bolton, 2021), the opponent is trying to promote their narratives. Specifically, the Russian Federation uses such narratives as: “Ukraine is a fascist state”, “illegal seizure of power in Ukraine in 2014”, “the government of Ukraine

is a junta”, “Ukrainians are Banderovites”, “liberation of Ukrainians from nationalists”, “the government of Ukraine is subdued to Western politicians”, “Western values are anti-humane”, etc. To disseminate them, the enemy actively uses accounts managed by bots, which is a low-cost and fairly convenient tool that can quickly spread pro-kremlin narratives.

In modern conditions, the study of algorithms for detecting fake information has been updated, namely, countering targeted propaganda in social networks, building effective systems for detecting fake news (Shtefaniuk & Opirskyy, 2021) or, in general, building a so-called counter-strategy based on the concept of counter-chains for the destruction of disinformation (Dowse & Bachmann, 2022). Thus, one of the priority areas of strategic communications of the European Union is currently countering disinformation produced by the Russian media (Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018). For this purpose, for instance, the working group “East Stratcom” was created, the members of which publish weekly reports and analytical articles on this field of activity on the EU vs Disinfo platform. At the same time, active research is underway in the Baltic States to track the coordination of disinformation campaigns by investigating the content of blogs and related social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, VK, etc. (Hussain & Bandeli, 2018). Australian researchers are trying to implement a managed information activity strategy, funded by the state and based on specific tactics of dissemination of publicly available information, capable of countering disinformation as a global threat (Hammond-Errey, 2018).

It is useful for Ukraine to adopt examples of the best international practices not only to confront the enemy in the face of Information pressure against the background of armed aggression, but also to develop a unified coordinated approach to building reliable communication strategies as a component of information security. Therewith, an important subject in the Ukrainian reality turned out to be civil society, which demonstrated a total rejection of the narratives of the aggressor state, which affected public diplomacy – it provided the opportunity to develop a strategy of unity to protect democracy and universal values.

Conclusions

Proceeding from the above, the author concludes that one of the most vulnerable areas of the security sector at the present stage is its information and communication

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component. The results of the implementation of the assigned tasks proved that the main threats to the national information security, related to strategic communications, are information and psychological operations for the distribution of content capable of sowing fear, panic, insecurity in society, depriving the ability to critically interpret content under the powerful pressure of the information flow, undermine trust in authorities and encourage disregard for the rights of others. Furthermore, important negative manifestations are disinformation, spreading fakes and myths aimed at humiliating other peoples and ethnic groups, falsifying history, and producing narratives that justify violating the sovereignty and integrity of other states. Thanks to the technological tools of social networks and total digitalization, these adverse factors lead to manipulation of public consciousness, interference in domestic politics and violation of the foundations of national security.

Ukrainian realities testify that the basis of the optimal model of strategic communications is the ideological component, which determines the public discourse development trajectory in certain socio-cultural conditions, the promotion of a constructive concept at the level of diplomacy of political, security, economic, scientific, and other structures. An equally important prerequisite is the level of trust in strategic communications entities, which now directly depends on the quality of information produced. Considering the study results, experts from among scientists who have the highest level of trust in modern society should become active participants in building communicative interaction at the strategic level. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that today an essential role in these processes belongs not only to the diplomatic corps and representatives of the security sector, but also to civil society.

It is promising to investigate ways to build a national system of strategic communications, identify their comprehensive tools that can factor in all the risks in this area and the existing potential. It is also worth studying the issue of creating an institution in Ukraine that will coordinate the activities of all strategic communications entities and avoid randomness in the search for its optimal model.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Acknowledgements

None.

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Стратегічні комунікації як складова інформаційної безпеки держави

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Анотація

Становлення інформаційного суспільства на сучасному етапі означене активним процесом інфообміну та комунікативної взаємодії на різних рівнях – на міжособистісному, між соціальними групами, верствами, країнами. Крім конструктивних характеристик, цей процес означений низкою ризиків, які постають перед інформаційною безпекою держав та спрямовані на порушення прав і свобод людини, підривання усталених демократичних традицій та авторитету на геополітичній мапі світу. Це засвідчує актуальність дослідження стратегічних комунікацій як запоруки надійності безпекового сектору. З огляду на зазначене, метою статті є вивчення особливостей комунікативної взаємодії на стратегічному рівні в контексті інформаційної безпеки держави. Основу методологічного інструментарію становили діалектичний і соціокультурний методи, а також системний, інформаційний та функціональний підходи, завдяки яким стратегічні комунікації вдалося представити як живу та відкриту систему, елементи якої взаємодіють між собою та залежать від культурно-історичних умов соціуму. Ключовими загрозами, які постають перед інформаційною безпекою в контексті комунікативної взаємодії на стратегічному рівні, є використання агресивної риторики, продукування потоків неправдивої інформації, поширення фейкового контенту, міфотворчість і намагання переписати історію. Розглянуто сутність російських інформаційних кампаній, які проводяться засобами дезінформації, та досвід країн ЄС та Балтії щодо протидії їм. Українські реалії засвідчили раціональність побудови стратегічних комунікацій на основі довіри суспільства до суб'єктів продукування інформації, з огляду на що, крім представників дипломатичного корпусу та представників сектору безпеки, активними учасниками цього процесу мають бути експерти з числа науковців та громадянське суспільство загалом. Практична цінність результатів полягає в тому, що їх може бути використано для визначення шляхів побудови національної системи стратегічних комунікацій та створення інституції з координації цієї діяльності на міжвідомчому рівні

Ключові слова:

комунікація; інформація; війна; наратив; дипломатія; політика; дезінформація; фейк