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## Post mass media in the modern informational society "Journalistic text in a new technological environment: achievements and problems"

### SURVIVORSHIP BIASES: STUDIES OF THE SUGGESTIVE POTENTIAL OF MASS MEDIA CONTENT

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#### *Abstract*

The article is devoted to the suggestive power of mass media in the focus of cognitive psychology. The news content is considered in the contradictory environment of modern mass communication with democratic nature of the Network society from the one side and manipulative opportunity of digital media from another side. Interactivity of this lateral environment doesn't really exclude some intentions of unilateral pressure. This situation has already led to crucial discussions, decisions and legal acts on different levels. In this context the destructive potential of unreliable news (and fake news as their extreme point) could be regarded as those caused by the irrational reactions of the audience. The methods of the appropriate concepts of cognitive distortions by Aaron Beck, David Burn at al. could be applied as the theoretical framework to media researches. The case study of current online news in Russian and English presented in the article is aimed at approval of this possibility. As the result, the elements of unreliable information (partial fakes) were found in news posted in media of different types, scales, national segments and political sets. Such distortions were supposedly caused by tendentiousness of a media, infringements in the editorial cycle, an author's incompetence etc. The proposed approach opens perspectives for some further considerations of structure and effects of the mass media suggestive power.

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**Keywords:** Cognitive distortion, mass media, fake news, suggestiveness, Network society.



## 1. Introduction

The modern mass media environment puts earlier utopian suggestions under pressure and causes some new ethic challenges. The Network Society (Castells, 2005) hasn't become the paradise of digital cosmopolitanism as it was projected before (Zuckerman, 2015) while up-to-date participatory media practices are still opposite to institutional mechanisms (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). Today early optimism that relied on lateral public connections is confronted by mass manipulations that various political parties are seeking to by the means of the Web.

In this way what Deborg (1967) pointed out on the role of mass media in his *The Society of Spectacle* that has become the classical work for the postmodern paradigm is still significant:

*If the spectacle, taken in the limited sense of 'mass media' which are its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to invade society as mere equipment, this equipment is in no way neutral but is the very means suited to its total self-movement. If the social needs of the epoch in which such techniques are developed can only be satisfied through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this 'communication' is essentially unilateral.* (para. 24)

### 1.1. Fake news as the extreme point

The extreme point of this tendency is presented by fake news that is considered as publications in mass media based on deliberately and consciously fabricated facts (Ilchenko, 2016). It's fake messages which are regarded by corporations (Martineau, 2018), governments and international organizations as the key threat to public safety (Levi, 2018).

### 1.2. Russian context

Particularly, according to the new law "On corrections to the 15-3 clause of the Federal law 'On information, informational technologies and protection of information'" widely known as the "law about fake news", the administrative and judicial practice gets the following definition of fakes: "unreliable publicly meaningful information that circulates as allegedly reliable messages and threatens lives and (or) health of citizens, their property, public order and (or) public safety or threatens completely or partly functioning of life support, transport and social infrastructure, credit organizations, energetic, industrial and media infrastructure".

## 2. Problem Statement

In this regard, the elaboration of methods of unreliable news identification and evaluation of their suggestive potential seem timely and meaningful. We define the suggestive potential as the ability of a text to not only affect the audience cognition but cause deliberately irrational decision making (Sukhodolov & Bychkova, 2017). This phenomenon isn't totally new though it gets new destructive dimensions in the modern environment of digital communication which is of increasing quantity and

speed of messages' circulations along with decreasing opportunity to process them properly (Verstraete, Bambauer, & Bambauer, 2017).

### **3. Research Questions**

From this research perspective the key questions could be defined as follows:

- What makes news unreliable (false completely or partly)?
- By what means could these fake elements be categorized?
- How could these elements be reflected and neutralized?
- What research and practical meaning does this process bring?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is approval of an analytical approach which is supposed to be effective for the stated problem. Embracing the research questions we could describe a new methodological concept that is appropriate for the identification of fake news in the world mass media.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Theoretical Framework**

From our point of view, the text analysis of the modern mass media content could be provided by the theory of cognitive distortions particularly in the works by Aaron Beck. The renowned American psychiatrist defined these types of mental aberrations (Beck & Beck, 1991) (the list varies from one source to another but the main logical principle remains the same):

- Personalisation: solipsic cognition of events around;
- Dichotomous thinking: polarization of the outlook;
- Selective abstraction: forming a conclusion based on an isolated detail of an event;
- Arbitrary inferences: drawing out unmotivated cause-effect connections;
- Overgeneralization: elaboration of a general idea out of a single fact;
- Catastrophizing: extreme negativization of a fact.

As regarding these distortions as causes of depression, Beck (1979) also defined the list of techniques of cognitive therapy:

- Recognizing maladaptive ideation;
- Filling in the blank;
- Distancing and decentering;
- Authenticating conclusions;
- Changing the rules.

This classification, similar ideas by Burns (1999) as well as the concepts of the Network Society and digital communication are the theoretical framework of our research.

## 5.2. Methods

- On the first stage of methodological development we correlated each type of distortions with a trigger in a media text presented by a verbal structure which is potentially suggestive.
- Following the same logic (from tenets of cognitive psychology to mass media practice), on the second stage we correlated techniques proposed by Beck (1979) to ways of self-protection that a modern reader might rely on.

The systematic suggestion that inevitably leads to destructive effects could be evidently contradicted by the systematic individual ‘prophylaxis’ based on the achievements of the cognitive psychology.

## 6. Findings

The results of the case study we’ve carried out for news in Russian and English are presented in the table 01.

**Table 01.** Case study on unreliable news

Type of cognitive distortions	Example	Comment	Appropriate techniques of cognitive therapy
Personalisation	In the interview to the RIA published on March, 14 Russian Ambassador in Belarus and Special Deputy of the President of Russia Mikhail Babich hit heavily some nationalistic and economic myths that Belarusian authorities are propagating publicly so he caused quite tense feedback from the government of the post-Soviet republic. (In Russ.)  (Belarusian TV: Belarusian lands were grabbed by the Russian Empire // Regnum. 12.03.2019. URL: <a href="https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2592575.html">https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2592575.html</a> )	While describing a communicative situation, the author states his own point of view using expressive means instead of neutral ones: ‘hit’ («прошелся по»), ‘propagate’ («насаждать»), ‘tense feedback’ («нервная реакция»). In the whole text and particularly in this fragment the journalist considers the issue subjectively.	Distancing and decentering:  – What prejudiced expressions does the text contain? – What neutral expressions they could be replaced by? – How could this situation be regarded from some other viewpoints?
Dichotomous thinking	No one expresses the joy of giving like Donald Trump. Well, maybe “joy” isn’t the word. <...> Trump’s charitable activities have come under fire to the point that the Trump Foundation was forced to shut down in December, so it’s no surprise	In this news about the charitable activity that Donald Trump has provided the journalist is initially looking for signs of the US President’s insincerity. At the same	Recognizing maladaptive ideation: – Who are ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ characters of

	<p>that many Twitter users were skeptical of his motives. Very skeptical.</p> <p>(Twitter Users Drag Trump After He Posts Donation Check To Homeland Security // HuffPost. 18.03.2019. URL: <a href="https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-donate-homeland-security_n_5c9024dee4b0d50544fee504">https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-donate-homeland-security_n_5c9024dee4b0d50544fee504</a>)</p>	<p>time, the author uses some prejudiced expressions ('no surprise') and overgeneralization ('no one expresses the joy'). In the context of the HuffPost agenda Trump is tendentiously considered in the negative way while the opposite left-liberal wing of the American political discourse is primarily supported.</p>	<p>the given narrative? – Could their behavior be more complicated combining positive, negative and neutral actions?</p>
Selective abstraction	<p>The rating of Pyotr Poroshenko is that he will hardly pass to the second round. Consequently, the staff of the Head of the State seeks to eliminate all barriers on the way to fabrications of the election's results. Marie Yovanovitch was appointed to the office in summer 2016 when the Democrats Barack Obama and John Kerry were in power so now she is evidently not for the Republican President Donald Trump. Probably, the authorities in Kiev has decided to gamble these contradictions in Washington and sicken the diplomat's position. (In Russ.)</p> <p>(Not this way: why did Kiev attack American diplomat? // Izvestia. 23.03.2019. URL: <a href="https://iz.ru/859613/igor-karmazin/ne-tuda-posol-pochemu-kiev-atakoval-amerikanskogo-diplomata">https://iz.ru/859613/igor-karmazin/ne-tuda-posol-pochemu-kiev-atakoval-amerikanskogo-diplomata</a>)</p>	<p>Having no direct evidences the author points out future fabrications by Pyotr Poroshenko's election staff and current conflict with Marie Yovanovitch, US Ambassador in Ukraine. In this fragment and further in the text the journalist voluntary combines different facts for his own version and makes the conclusion that is appropriate to this viewpoint but not supported by real cause-effect connections.</p>	<p>Authenticating conclusions: – Could this conclusion be approved or disapproved? – Could alternative versions be elaborated?</p>
Arbitrary inferences	<p>Fully one in four Europeans said they were "<i>somewhat or totally in favor of letting an artificial intelligence make important decisions about the running of their country,</i>" ...</p> <p>The figures remained constant across education levels, gender, and political affiliation, indicating either Europeans are abnormally welcoming of their new robot overlords – or they're sick of their human ones.</p>	<p>On the foundations of just a single survey the author builds up the message that is close to a sensation ("25% of Europeans would prefer AI government"). After that he voluntary proposes only two possible motifs that Europeans are allegedly</p>	<p>Filling in the blank: – Are the given evidences sufficient? – How and where might additional data be collected to</p>

	<p>Spoiler alert: it's likely the latter.</p> <p>(Sick of human politicians? 25% of Europeans would prefer AI government // RT. 20.03.2019. URL: <a href="https://www.rt.com/news/454259-europeans-embrace-ai-government-survey/">https://www.rt.com/news/454259-europeans-embrace-ai-government-survey/</a>)</p>	<p>guided by and then puts an accent only on one motif: increasing nonconfidence to the governments.</p> <p>In this big and quite complicated problem the journalist relies on insufficient data and his own speculations.</p>	<p>make up objective conclusions?</p>
Overgeneralisation	<p>Social media users mocked this expression. Some of them pointed out that after the aggressive insults towards Russia the enemies of our country deserve no so much polytes. (In Russ.)</p> <p>(“By a cudgel and no polytes”: The Web saw add-ons to the Putin’s questions about Kiev’s madness // Tsargrad TV. 19.03.2019. URL: <a href="https://tsargrad.tv/news/dubinoj-i-bez-politesa-v-seti-dopolnili-vopros-putina-o-sumasshestvii-kieva_189739">https://tsargrad.tv/news/dubinoj-i-bez-politesa-v-seti-dopolnili-vopros-putina-o-sumasshestvii-kieva_189739</a>)</p>	<p>The extremely wide audience defined as ‘social media users’ is said to give definite emotional feedback to a definite communicative event that is the quote of the President of Russia. Then the comments of voluntary selected users are presented. In this case the using of expressive words («позабавило») as well as incorrect punctuation in indirect quoting blurs the boundaries between the editorial’s position and that the users stood by even more.</p>	<p>Changing the rules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What do the selected comments actually lead to?</li> <li>– By what language means might the object of the message be limited?</li> </ul>
Catastrophizing	<p>A Tory MP used House of Commons notepaper and taxpayer funded pre-paid envelopes to send out invitations to his birthday party.</p> <p>(Tory MP used taxpayer-funded stationery to invite people to his birthday party // Daily Mirror. 22.03.2019 URL: <a href="https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/tory-mp-used-taxpayer-funded-14173798">https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/tory-mp-used-taxpayer-funded-14173798</a>)</p>	<p>News is completely devoted to a small odd case. Why such a trivial infringement turns to the real media story could be reasoned by the political context. The discussion on Brexit got the critical point while the occasional newsmaker appeared to be the Tory MP. The focus on the extremely hot political agenda is strengthened by an insignificant but potentially irritating case.</p>	<p>Distancing and decentering :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What if the event has no such significant consequences that the author stated?</li> </ul>

## 7. Conclusion

The key point is that the elements of unreliable information were found in news posted in media of different types, scales, national segments and political sets. In this way the cognitive distortions are considered to be the trivial part of the world journalism rather than exceptional cases of deviation out of professional tenets. At the same time, no one of the regarded examples could be called a piece of fake news as such. The analyzed cases are texts with distortions caused by tendentiousness of a media, infringements in the editorial cycle, an author's incompetence etc.

The messages that contain these distortions appeal to emotional reactions rather than to conscious approaches. So, they act like atoms of information that used to 'survive' in the overwhelmed streams of digital media and provide tendentious sets of mind (Pennycook & Rand, 2017). In this regard the research problem of evaluation of destructive influences of unreliable information gets practical and even topical meaning (Aymanns, Foerster, & Gerog, 2017).

The study was aimed at approval of the opportunity of using the theory of cognitive distortions for the evaluation of the mass media content suggestiveness. In this way the effects and structure of this suggestiveness on the base of wider data could be the subject for further researches.

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