Russian Topic on *Radio France Internationale* and Media Manipulations

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Abstract

Media manipulation in recent years has increasingly become the subject of scientific research around the world. This is primarily due to the fact that today the media spectrum has expanded dramatically compared to the situation of the 20th century, when only paper, radio and television media, where professionals worked, could have a mass audience. Today, many online bloggers have millions of readers, outnumbering most traditional newspapers in terms of circulation. This forces professional TV/radio channels and newspapers to actively develop their Internet versions. Among them is *Radio France Internationale*, founded in 1975, but with its origins dating back to 1931.

Based on the developed theoretical model of anti-manipulative media education activities, the authors of the article, using key questions, analyzed 180 materials of 2021 on the Russian-language website of *Radio France Internationale* relating to Russia for the period of 2021. The news agency as a whole gives the audience quite realistic information and this differs significantly from many modern tabloids that do not hesitate to post fake news. However, this does not mean that the journalists of *Radio France Internationale* are totally free from such traditional media manipulative techniques as omission, selectivity and appeal to authority, especially when it comes to "Russian topic".

Keywords: media manipulation, media, press, Radio France International, Russia, fake news, analysis, media studies, media literacy, propaganda, ideology.

1. Introduction

Media manipulation in recent years has increasingly become the subject of scientific research around the world. This is primarily due to the fact that today the media spectrum has expanded dramatically compared to the situation of the 20th century, when only paper, radio and television media, where professionals worked, could have a mass audience. Today, many online bloggers have millions of readers, outnumbering most traditional newspapers in terms of circulation. This forces professional TV/radio channels and newspapers to actively develop their Internet counterparts. Among them is *Radio France Internationale*, founded in 1975, but with its origins dating back to 1931. When it comes to coverage of Russian news in foreign media and vice-versa, the role of media manipulation is very important.

2. Materials and methods

In the course of the study, we analyzed a number of scientific studies related to media manipulation and 180 materials from 2021 on the Russian-language website of *Radio France Internationale*, which dealt with the Russian topic. First, the material was quantitatively analyzed

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and 4 categories were distinguished: "culture/science", "Covid pandemic", "international policy", "domestic policy". Next, a sample of news reports from each category was chosen for closer qualitative reading and analysis. In analysis, we relied on the model of anti-manipulation media education activity (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2021: 323-332).

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3. Discussion

The problems of propaganda, misinformation, media manipulations and fake news are widely analyzed in scientific research (Aguaded, Romero-Rodriguez, 2015; Azzimonti, Fernandes, 2021; Balmas, 2012; Bean, 2017; Berghel, 2017; Bertin et al., 2018; Bharali, Goswami, 2018; Bradshaw, Howard, 2018; Bradshow et al., 2021; Carson, 2021; Colomina et al., 2021; Conroy et al., 2015; Dentith, 2017; Derakhshan Wardle, 2017; Farkas, Schou, 2018; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2020; Figueira, Oliveira, 2017; Goering, Thomas, 2018; Hofstein Grady et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021; Janze, Risius, 2017; Kim, de Zúñiga, 2020; Marwick, 2018; Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017; Quandt et al, 2019; Ruchansky et al., 2017; van der Linden et al., 2021; Vamany, 2019; Vargo et al., 2018 and others).

We can agree that "the current communicational and digital ecosystem is endogenous and systemically misinformative, as it has gradually become an information overload and infoxicative scenario, traversed by a dynamic of mediamorphosis, in which traditional media are looking to compete for the preference of the audience facing the multiplicity of digital platforms in the way of their economic subsistence, usually spreading pseudo-contents with limbic great value, but lacking useful in the process of decision making" (Aguaded, Romero-Rodriguez, 2015).

Prior research suggests that "fake news has been discussed as a disturbing factor... As such, it has recently become a major object of inquiry for scholars and practitioners in various fields of study and practice" (Vamanu, 2019: 207).

Many modern scholars hold the view that "the explosive usage in recent years of the terms "fake news" and "posttruth" reflects worldwide frustration and concern about rampant social problems created by pseudo-information. Our digital networked society and newly emerging media platforms foster public misunderstanding of social affairs, which affects almost all aspects of individual life. The cost of lay citizens' misunderstandings or crippled lay informatics can be high. Pseudo-information is responsible for deficient social systems and institutional malfunction" (Kim, de Zúñiga, 2020).

In this light, we believe that the analysis of media texts of major information agencies, such as, for example, *Radio France Internationale*, is indispensable to investigate the problem. One of the aims of the study is to provide politicians, experts, institutions, teachers, and other actors with an enhanced basis for discussing and acting in relation to the media coverage of Russia by foreign media and foreign countries by Russian media.

4. Results

Implementing our model of media education activities aimed at identifying and critically evaluating manipulative techniques of media (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2021: 323-332) we have used the set of key questions that aid to understand the aims and techniques of the media texts' agencies and/or authors (Wilson, 2019). Using this framework we have analyzed 180 media texts of 2021 from the Russian-language version of *Radio France Internationale*, related to Russia.

In particular, the following sample of texts were examined: *Radio France Internationale:* "Coronaskeptics or "Coronanegativists"? How Russia views the COVID-19 epidemic" (Makarova, 2021); "Russia broke a new anti-record of deaths from the coronavirus. Putin announced the weekend" (RFI, 2021); "It "does not contradict the Constitution": Russia advocated compulsory vaccination" (RFI, 2021); "In Russia, additional restrictions were introduced for the lockdown period" (RFI, 2021); "United Russia" wins, the CPRF has a record: the first results of the State Duma elections" (RFI, 2021); "Lukashenko and Putin signed an integration decree" (RFI, 2021); "Russia announced the suspension of its mission to NATO" (RFI, 2021); "Go to Warsaw for a visa: the American State Department has added Russians to the list of "homeless nationalities" (RFI, 2021); "Russia became the absolute leader in the number of government demands to *Google* to

remove content" (RFI, 2021); "Russia launched the first movie crew to the ISS to shoot a movie" (RFI, 2021); "Konstantin Khabensky appointed head of Chekhov Moscow Art Theater" (RFI, 2021).

Let's start with *Radio France Internationale* media texts on science and culture.

The genre of the media text: news coverage.

Analysis of the media text for accuracy (identification of the political, ideological position of the authors of the media text, identification of its possible commissioners, political and other groups, who are served by or benefit from the message):

What is the source of information? What facts are presented to support it?

A group of materials with a positive image of Russia is the smallest. One of these kinds of examples is the report "Russia Launched the first movie crew to the ISS to shoot a movie" where it says that the Soyuz Spaceship with the actress Yulia Peresild and the director Klim Shipenko started on October 5 to the international space station. Within 12 days on the ISS, (where the French astronaut Thomas Pesquet was also at the time), they will make the first feature film in the history of cinema in a near-earth orbit (RFI, 2021). However, the mood of the message is not universally positive about Russia, as further it says (with reference to the France-Presse agency) that using this flight as PR, Roscosmos is trying to restore the reputation of the space industry of the Russian Federation, stained with corruption scandals, recurring accidents and loss of the profitable monopoly on flights to the ISS (RFI, 2021). The opinion of the political scientist K. Kalachev is given, that the "Russian Space Agency hopes to win NASA and SPACE X" and "distract attention from their problems" (quoted in RFI, 2021).

In this regard, the material by *Radio France Internationale* on theatre life sounds more neutral: "Konstantin Khabenskiy appointed head of Chekhov Moscow Art Theater". Without embedded political agenda, it says (with reference to RIA news, Interfax, and Ministry of Culture of Russia) that "the actor Konstantin Khabenskiy is appointed the new art director of Moscow Art Theatre named after A. Chekhov... Khabenskiy will replace the 64-year-old Sergey Zhenovach" (RFI, 2021).

Can the source be verified?

The cited sources of the above texts are accessible, the information can be checked, the message is rather objective and based on true facts.

Does the message appeal to emotions or logic?

In the first place, the messages appeal to logic.

What is the main objective of the text?

The message is being sent to inform the audience of *Radio France Internationale.*

Is there any information (ideas, alternative perspectives) left out?

In the media text on shooting a film in space the perspective of the film crew and Roscosmos representatives are missing, which prevents it from being totally objective.

Whose point of view does the text reflect?

The texts present the point of view of *Radio France Internationale,* as an agency, positioning itself as an objective source of information for the mass audience.

Who will profit if the text's message is accepted? Who won't?

Those who are looking for factual information will benefit.

The evaluation of the text's credibility: the media texts contain mostly objective information.

The Covid-19 topic is one of the most popular in international media. *Radio France Internationale* pays a lot of attention to it, too, every time mentioning that in Russia the infection is boosting and the share of the vaccinated population still leaves much to be desired.

The genre of the media text: news coverage.

Analysis of the media text for accuracy (identification of the political, ideological position of the authors of the media text, identification of its possible commissioners, political and other groups, who are served by or benefit from the message):

What is the source of information? What facts are presented to support it?

The media texts "Coronasceptics or Coronanegativists"?, "How Russia views the COVID-19 epidemic" (Makarova, 2021) state that there is a very large proportion of "coronasceptics" in Russia – those who doubt the seriousness of this disease or the need for government measures to combat it. During the first wave of the pandemic, the proportion of such people in Russia was 38 % – this exceeds the indicators of large European and Asian countries by two or more times.

The source of such conclusions is the opinion of the head of the Laboratory of Comparative Social Research (Higher School of Economics) B. Sokolov, based on research conducted in 2021.

This expert believes that a typical Russian coronasceptic is "a person who is primarily characterized by increased distrust of the existing socio-political order: the government, epidemiological policy, to a lesser extent, other people. ... Coronasceptics trust social networks much more than some traditional media, like newspapers or TV. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, there were more men, more people of working age, more people with a low level of education, but this is quite predictable. ... those who are not ready to get vaccinated – this indicator remains more or less stable, just above 50 %" (quoted in Makarova, 2021).

The text "Russia broke a new anti-record of deaths from the corona virus. Putin announced the weekend" claims that ""in Russia, 1028 people have officially been declared dead from the effects of coronavirus over the past 24 hours. This is the worst indicator for the entire time of the pandemic. ... Later it became known that the president declared "non-working days" in the country from October 30 to November 7, 2021. ... shopping malls, cafes, and restaurants will be closed, as well as mass events will be banned. ... The restrictions will not affect pharmacies, grocery stores, online trading and delivery, catering establishments will be able to work takeaway" (RFI, 2021).

Sources: decisions of the Russian authorities, taken in the fight against the pandemic in the fall of 2021, reports by TASS, RIA-Novosti and Forbs.

The article "It does not contradict the Constitution: Russia advocated compulsory vaccination" says that "Alexander Ginzburg, director of the Gamalei Center, which developed the Sputnik V vaccine, advocated mandatory vaccination of Russians against Covid-19. Almost simultaneously, the chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation, Andrei Klishas, adds that the introduction of such a measure "does not contradict" the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Later that day, Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova says at a meeting with Putin: "all Russians who do not have medical contraindications should be vaccinated against COVID-19" (RFI, 2021). This text also contains another quote from the statement of Deputy Prime Minister T. Golikova: "In order for us to reach the level I mentioned – 80 %, for this all citizens of the Russian Federation who currently do not have a medical withdrawal from vaccination should simply be vaccinated" (quoted in RFI, 2021).

Further, *Radio France Internationale*, using links to news agencies, provides comparative data on the number of vaccinated in Russia and France and on the daily mortality: "in Russia, according to official data, 49.8 million people or slightly more than 34 % of the population have been vaccinated... For comparison, 50.3 million people have been fully vaccinated in France. At the same time, the population of France is 67 million, the population of Russia is 146 million. According to the latest data (as of November 9), 49 people died from coronavirus in France during the day. In Russia – 1211 people (November 10 - 1239) (RFI, 2021).

In the article "In Russia, additional restrictions were introduced for the lockdown period" (RFI, 2021), it is reported that at the end of October 2021, "Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the regional authorities to ban the operation of catering and entertainment establishments in the evening and at night, and also announced quarantine for non-vaccinated Russians over 60 years old. ... At the same time, the peak of the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia has not yet been reached" (RFI, 2021). This material of *Radio France Internationale* contains references to official Russian information sources, the Interfax agency and the infectious diseases specialist V. Chulanov.

Can the source be verified?

The cited sources of the above texts are accessible, the information can be checked, the message is rather objective and based on true facts.

Does the message appeal to emotions or logic?

In the first place, the messages appeal to logic.

What is the main objective of the text?

The message is aimed to inform the audience of *Radio France Internationale* on the situation with the pandemic in Russia. However some texts have the embedded message that the situation in Russia is worse than in France and other European countries.

Is there any information (ideas, alternative perspectives) left out?

In media texts, in many cases, the points of view of different parties are presented, which creates the effect of a balanced presentation of materials. There are also references to similar phenomena in France itself.

Whose point of view does the text reflect?

The messages succeed in presenting *Radio France Internationale* as a news agency providing objective information for masses.

Who will profit if the text's message is accepted? Who won't?

Advocates of objective, unbiased information will benefit.

The evaluation of the text's credibility: the media texts contain mostly objective information.

The next group of *Radio France Internationale* media texts concerns international policy topics. The examples are "Lukashenko and Putin signed an integration decree" (RFI, 2021); "Russia announced the suspension of its mission to NATO" (RFI, 2021); "Go to Warsaw for a visa: the American State Department has added Russians to the list of "homeless nationalities" (RFI, 2021); "Russia became the absolute leader in the number of government demands to *Google* to remove content" (RFI, 2021).

The genre of the media text: news coverage.

Analysis of the media text for accuracy (identification of the political, ideological position of the authors of the media text, identification of its possible commissioners, political and other groups, who are served by or benefit from the message):

What is the source of information? What facts are presented to support it?

The media text "Lukashenko and Putin signed an integration decree" reports that during the (video)meeting of the Presidents of Russia and Belarus 28 union programs were approved… The programs declare the integration of currency systems, the principles of collecting indirect taxes, the formation of monetary policy, the common payment space, the fight against terrorism" (RFI, 2021) with references to the statements of the President of Belarus A. Lukashenko, the BelTA news Agency, the Secretary of State of the Union State D. Mezentsev.

In "Russia announced the suspension of its mission to NATO", *Radio France Internationale* informs the audience that Russia is suspending the work of its permanent mission to NATO and the activities of the NATO military liaison mission in Moscow, as well as the NATO information office in Moscow at the Embassy of Belgium: "This was announced in Moscow after NATO's decision to halve the size of the Russian mission to the alliance" (RFI, 2021). Sources of this information: Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov, NATO Secretary General J. Stoltenberg, Kommersant newspaper

The report "Go to Warsaw for a visa: the American State Department has added Russians to the list of "Homeless Nationalities" conveys that in the fall of 2021, the United States Department of State classified Russian citizens wishing to obtain an American immigration visa to the category of "Homeless Nationalities". … Russians are invited to obtain visas in Warsaw (RFI, 2021). References to the US State Department and Kommersant newspaper are provided.

"Russia became the absolute leader in the number of government demands to Google to remove content" reports that "for 10 years, Russia has asked Google to block content more often than all other countries combined" (RFI, 2021). The sources of this information are the BBC, BBC IT expert G. Bakunov, and Google Transparency Report.

Can the source be verified?

The cited sources of the above texts are accessible, the information can be checked, the message is rather objective and based on true facts. Nevertheless some texts contain negative connotation related to Russia.

Does the message appeal to emotions or logic?

In the first place, the messages appeal to logic.

What is the main objective of the text?

The texts are aimed at providing information linked to the Russia's international policy to *RFI* audience.

Is there any information (ideas, alternative perspectives) left out?

The examined media texts sometimes miss the alternative points of view, which hinders the creation of the balanced message.

Whose point of view does the text reflect?

The reports reflect the viewpoint of *Radio France Internationale* as a news agency, some of them contain linguistic persuasive devices and manipulative techniques such as *labeling* and *omission*.

Who will profit if the text's message is accepted? Who won't?

Those actors who are aimed at undermining healthy, non discriminatory working relations between Russia and European countries, will benefit.

The evaluation of the text's credibility: the texts contain real-life facts intermingled with anti-Russian clichés and bias.

The next group of media texts by *Radio France Internationale* are the reports connected to the internal political life in Russia. In it, the manipulative techniques have been detected. One of the vivid examples is "United Russia" wins, the CPRF has a record: the first results of the State Duma elections" (RFI, 2021).

The genre of the media text: news coverage.

Analysis of the media text for accuracy (identification of the political, ideological position of the authors of the media text, identification of its possible commissioners, political and other groups, who are served by or benefit from the message):

What is the source of information? What facts are presented to support it?

In the report "United Russia" wins, the CPRF has a record: the first results of the State Duma elections" *Radio France Internationale* informs the audience that the Russian Central Election Commission has published the first results of the elections to the State Duma: United Russia wins, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party, Fair Russia – For Truth and the New People Party (RFI, 2021) are also going to the Duma. It is further emphasized that "the elections to the State Duma were held against the background of numerous violations reported by the *Golos* movement. Earlier, the Russian authorities recognized it as a foreign agent. *The Map of Violations* project has recorded more than 4,500 possible violations. According to representatives of the opposition and human rights activists, the elections to the State Duma cannot be called competitive. Supporters of Alexei Navalny, who is imprisoned, were not allowed to nominate their candidacies. This was due to the adoption of a law prohibiting the election of persons "involved in the activities of extremist organizations". This status was given to the Anti-Corruption Fund (FBK). The authorities also actively interfered with the work of the "smart voting" system, which offered to support opposition candidates in single-mandate districts with the greatest chances of winning" (RFI, 2021).

Whose point of view does the text reflect?

The media texts from this group generally represent the point of view of the opponents of Russian foreign and domestic policy. The authors of the messages, using the techniques of "selection" (not presenting contesting arguments or alternative data), "victimization" (A. Navalny is labeled as a victim without providing the context), "labeling" (using specific linguistic means to create the needed context (e.g. labeling some vague/anonymous candidates as having "the greatest chances to win"), etc., tried to convince readers that, on the one hand, numerous violations in the State Duma elections contributed to the victory of *United Russia* party, and, on the other hand, the suspension of A. Navalny's party from participating in the elections deprived the ruling party of real competition with the influential opposition. Meanwhile, the final voting figures in the elections in Russia over the past twenty years indicate that the potential votes of supporters of A. Navalny's party, with the most successful combination of circumstances, are in the niche of 3 % to 7 % of the total number of voters, and, therefore, could not and cannot influence the final victory of *United Russia*. As for the sources of information, here, using manipulative techniques of "references to authorities" and "selection", *Radio France Internationale* only cites the opinion of the opposition organization *Golos*, leaving out the wide range of different experts' opinions.

Who will profit if the text's message is accepted? Who won't?

If the audience accepts the point of view of such messages, anti-Russian political forces will win, and supporters of the dialogue and understanding between Russia and the West will lose.

The evaluation of the text's credibility: numerous cases of manipulative techniques are identified in this group of messages which seed doubts about its credibility. The messages are not neutral, they are judgmental, only one perspective is given, and the other parties' opinions are missing.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical model of anti-manipulation media educational activity developed earlier (Fedorov, 2015; Fedorov, 2019; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2015; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2016; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2020; Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2021: 323-332), we have analyzed 180 materials on the *Radio France Internationale* website related to Russia for the period 2021 using a set of key

questions. It was found out that two-thirds of media texts contained objective information, not accompanied by manipulative techniques. Nevertheless, in about a third of *Radio France Internationale*'s materials signs of manipulation and propaganda clichés were detected to one degree or another. In particular, the most common manipulative techniques used by *Radio France Internationale* authors reporting on Russia were "silence", "selection", "labeling", "framing" facts and "references to authorities". Clearly, a greater variety of sources and voices of experts is missing.

The news coverage of Russia and the Russian society presented by the foreign media (in our case, the French news agency) crucially determine the Europeans' perception of Russia: relatively few people from the European countries have personal relations with Russians or spend holidays in Russia, still fewer learn the Russian language, know its history and culture. Thus, the perception of Russia and the Russians is shaped primarily by the ongoing media (Kabel et al., 2019: 7).

Isolated events that are covered by media agencies create the combined effect and contribute to shaping the general image of Russia for the international community. Unfortunately, it is a negative image – the image of the country whose not only *foreign policy* on the international arena is criticized, but also *domestic affairs* are questioned and judged.

Our findings are consistent with the results of the recent research published by the Danish School of Media and Journalism: "Reporting on political, economic and cultural issues in Russia journalists quite often choose to stress features that seem alien and different…Such reporting only strengthens the stereotypical image of a dangerous, unpredictable, and incomprehensible neighbouring country. In general, the Finnish Russia reporting could use more vivid curiosity and less one-track thinking… The general coverage of Russia is focusing on hostile and negative aspects of Russian policies and the media portrayal of Russia sometimes gives the impression of a caricature" (Kabel, 2019: 69-81).

The consequence of this is a danger of "rejection of Russia as an integral part of the "civilized world", as a state which is ready to share "universal values" *as they are seen by the Western society*" (Repina et al, 2018). The question is, who takes advantage of intensifying this confrontation.

6. Acknowledgements

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