

«Kyrgyzstan’s vulnerability to the issue of disinformation points out several factors, such as weak domestic journalism, undeveloped home television content, demand for the “tabloid” press, and lack of educational media literacy programs for the younger and older generations,» Ermek Baisalov, editor of CABAR.asia analytical materials, writes in his article.

The material was prepared as part of the [internship program](#) for participants of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics in Tbilisi (Georgia).

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Brief overview of the article:

- Kyrgyzstan remains within the framework of the post-Soviet information field and often falls under the influence of propaganda, which is addressed, for example, to the Russian audience;
 - The current unspoken anti-disinformation strategy in Kyrgyzstan is directed towards the disclosure of false information and training journalists, but there is no comprehensive, compulsory course on media literacy in schools and universities;
 - Today, some individuals are increasingly talking about the legal regulation of the fight against fake news. However, good intentions against false information may have a flip side;
 - Kyrgyzstan might be interested in Georgia’s experience in countering disinformation and developing media literacy.
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Western countries drew attention to the problem of disinformation and began to take serious measures only after the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Various analysts and commentators believe that “fake” content was widely distributed during the election campaign. According to estimates by the administration of the Facebook social network, 126 million users of this platform have seen articles and messages published, allegedly, by Russian sources. Twitter found 2752 accounts created allegedly by Russian groups that posted 1.4 million posts (or “tweets”) in 2016.[\[1\]](#)

Modern Kyrgyzstan, like other countries, being part of the global information space, is increasingly faced with the problem of disinformation, the growing influence of social networks and new forms of communication. However, the fake news problem is not entirely new in the country's media space. Society periodically rages after the dissemination of false information, such as - fruits with the blood of HIV-infected people or Chinese plastic chicken eggs.

In this article, we will take a look at the media habits of Kyrgyzstanis, try to find an answer to the question of how to deal with disinformation, what pitfalls can be expected, and a brief experience review of Georgia on a similar problem will be made.

Disinformation in Kyrgyzstan

Despite the growing popularity of the Internet, television is still the main source of information for the most population of Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas. State and private television channels, depending on interests and agendas, can provide false information or news from the angle they need.

If we talk about news and processes from around the world, residents of the country due to poor funding, low level of domestic journalism and language limitations receive second-hand translation information. This restricts access to the primary source, restricts access to information and gives rise to various manipulations.

Due to historical, linguistic and cultural community, as well as integration processes, Kyrgyzstan remains within the framework of the post-Soviet information field and often falls under the influence of propaganda, which is addressed, for example, to the Russian audience.

The fake news phenomenon is not new to the Kyrgyz press. There are many private newspapers and online resources in the republic that specialize in disseminating disinformation under the guise of popular news and rumors. Unverified news in the guise of sensation, informational "attack" or planned article without an author - all this finds its reader. There are websites and groups on social networks that collect this kind of material.

Nevertheless, there is still some self-censorship on television and in the press. Editorial offices and journalists can be held responsible for publications and reporting. There are cases of multimillion-dollar lawsuits against publications and authors.[\[2\]](#) Therefore, today most of the disinformation and false information is distributed on the Internet.

Over the past decade, the landscape of the world's media has changed dramatically. Thanks to digital sources, coverage of journalism, social networks and public relations have expanded significantly. However, instead of using digital tools to inform people and foster civil discussion, some people use social and digital platforms to trick, mislead, or otherwise harm others by creating or distributing fake news and disinformation.

False news or "fake news" are generated by agencies that are disguised as serious news agencies or online publications. "Troll factories" are also actively operating - these are groups of Internet users who are involved in the formation and manipulation of public opinion in a certain way.

When these actions pass from random to - organized and systematic efforts, they turn into disinformation campaigns that can affect a certain protest potential, election results and decisions of the authorities.

Although on a smaller scale, these processes are inherent in Kyrgyzstan.

What to do?

The current unspoken anti-disinformation strategy in Kyrgyzstan is directed towards the disclosure of false information. So far, most attention has been paid to professional and citizen journalists. Pieces of training are held for them, where they are taught the tools of "fact-checking", media literacy, and websites are launched where refutation of false publications are posted.

Perhaps this is the right step at this initial stage of the fight against disinformation. However, journalists should not take on an excessively large role in this struggle, monopolizing the movement solely in their profession. Professional media no longer plays a dominant role in determining the information agenda, and, accordingly, the general public, including educators, political scientists, sociologists, historians, data analysts, security specialists, representatives of civil society, should be involved in the discussion and spurred into action.

Exposing disinformation is of great importance.

A certain opinion is rooted in the society that if unreliable news is "revealed", then we can talk about victory. A journalist turns into a kind of policeman who fights with a criminal-disinformation on the net. However, the whistle-blower is usually in the role of a catch-up, and often disinformation runs ahead by leaps and bounds, increasing in quantity. Therefore,

more drastic measures are needed, where the broad masses should be involved in solving the problem. It is necessary to teach the consumers of information to “catch the fish” themselves.

Today, the younger generation and middle-aged people receive news mainly from the Internet. An avalanche of information on the network creates a “digital noise” due to which there is oversaturation, a habit of fluent viewing, concentration and analysis ability are lost. Despite the fact that the younger generation is “quite successful” with gadgets and the Internet, they can become a victim of extremist ideological recruitment and various manipulations through communication on the network. Therefore, today the need is growing for teaching young people critical thinking skills, the skills of recognizing disinformation and checking information for authenticity.

In Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in the world, there are more and more discussions about the need to introduce a compulsory lesson, a course on media and information literacy for schoolchildren and students. Pilot projects have already been carried out in Bishkek’s schools on the initiative of donors, and media classes and camps for schoolchildren, students and teachers are also periodically held [3]. For a larger introduction of this subject in schools and universities, funds are required to train teachers and provide them with the necessary ICT equipment, which is a problem for a country with a budget deficit. With such scarce resources, it can be limited to introducing a short course in the basics of media literacy into existing standard disciplines, for example, computer science or Human and Society.



Older people are more likely than others to fall into the “clutches” of scammers and become a victim of misinformation. Photo: sputnik.kg

Nevertheless, most young people feel comfortable on the Internet, and often speak one or two foreign languages, which increase their potential against the “fake news”, that cannot be said about the older generation. Today, more and more elderly people are becoming Internet users, actively using social networks, mail and instant messengers. Moreover, they are more likely than others to fall into the “clutches” of scammers and become a victim of misinformation. Due to trustfulness, people of the older generation take false information at “face value”, rush to share the link further, while unwittingly becoming distributors of false messages. At the moment, there are no significant initiatives taken to increase knowledge about cybersecurity, media literacy for the older generation of the country, which, of course, is a big omission.

Prohibit impossible to publish

No one disputes that disinformation as the deliberate dissemination of false information poses a threat to society. Today, some individuals are increasingly talking about the legal regulation of the fight against fake news. However, good intentions against false

information may have a flip side.

In Kyrgyzstan, where the situation with freedom of speech is slightly better than in other countries of the region, fines or blocking websites on the Internet can limit access to information and have sad consequences for independent media. To close, block, impose a penalty is always easier than to oppose, refute or train. The state should not have a monopoly on the determination of truth. Laws of this kind in non-democratic countries are a tool to suppress freedom of speech, dissidence and critical media.

Therefore, there is a fine line between the fight against false information and censorship against independent opinion, which should be taken into account.

Fake news in Georgia

Although Kyrgyzstan and Georgia are located in different regions, these countries have much in common, for example, a common history within the Soviet Union, a change of power as a result of mass protests, a non-resource based economy, relative freedom of speech, etc. However, unlike Kyrgyzstan, the previous Georgian authorities managed to carry out large-scale reforms, and the country occupies leading positions among the CIS in various ratings. Thus, it is interesting to consider and study the Georgian experience in countering disinformation and the development of media literacy (although this topic deserves a separate large article).

Georgia faced an aggressive disinformation campaign after the revolution in 2003 and especially after the armed conflict with Russia in 2008. In parallel with traditional military power, Russia is increasingly using soft power tools to support its foreign policy interests. These tools are effectively used to spread the ideology and values of the Kremlin.

The Kremlin information machine has an impact on the media, political organizations, and civil society. The main source of soft power policy in Russia is a propaganda, aggressive, anti-Western information campaign. Unlike pro-Kremlin propaganda, unbiased news agencies operating in a pluralistic media environment in Georgia with relatively few resources cannot adequately resist the massive flow of disinformation.

Kremlin propaganda has several pillars in Georgia. One of them includes ultranationalist movements that, under the influence of the Kremlin, manipulate issues of national and religious identity. Russian disinformation has a significant impact on the population of middle-aged and older people, who lived in the Soviet era, can speak Russian well and have economic and other ties with people living in Russia. There are also serious problems

regarding ethnic minorities. The language barrier is a serious factor in regions populated by ethnic minorities, as it exposes them to the vulnerability of disinformation and their integration with the rest of Georgia.

The main source of information on political processes and current news in Georgia is television and the Internet. According to some studies, the percentage of information received from traditional media is significantly higher compared to the amount of information received from online sources. However, according to data for 2017, the share of information received from the Internet has increased, possibly due to a reduction in television viewing. According to 2016 data, 77 percent of the population considered television as the main source of information, in 2017 this figure dropped to 72 percent, and Internet use increased from 14 to 21 percent.[\[3\]](#)

In 2008, Georgian cable TV companies stopped broadcasting Russian channels on the basis of verbal instructions from the government. All Russian channels have also been removed from cable television packages. However, after the change of government, in 2012, broadcasting of Russian channels resumed.

In general, Georgia has a wide and varied media landscape and the most liberal media laws in the entire South Caucasus region. There is practically no direct state censorship, although in some cases private media reflect the political orientation of the owners of media companies, on which they depend both financially and politically.

There are non-governmental organizations in Georgia that fight misinformation, propaganda and the spread of myths through media monitoring. One of the organizations that constantly monitor the media is the Media Development Fund (MDF), created in 2008 by a group of professional journalists.[\[4\]](#) MDF's mission is to support freedom of expression, ethical journalism, accountability, media literacy and diversity. The Myth Detector[\[5\]](#) website is one of the MDF projects that is dedicated to identifying media myths and verifying fake information.

A short video by MDF and Mythdetector.ge about the "troll factory" who are trying to manipulate public opinion with the help of various false accounts on social networks.

Today in Georgia there is no state program to support the development of media literacy, but there are media organizations working on this issue. The same MDF has developed a media literacy program that aims to assist media consumers in verifying fake information and fighting disinformation. The organization, supported by Akademie Deutsche Welle (Deutsche Welle Academy), offers media literacy courses, which include theoretical and

practical lessons on counteracting propaganda.^[6] Such events sponsored by international donors are regularly held by various organizations.

In general, despite the active cooperation between civil society organizations and existing legal acts, false and inaccurate information in the Georgian media space is purposefully distributed in large numbers. So far, in the educational institutions of Georgia, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, there is no subject or course on media literacy. Much of the disinformation disclosure and capacity building is done by non-governmental organizations at the expense of international donors.

Conclusions

In general, Kyrgyzstan's vulnerability to the misinformation problem points out several factors, such as weak domestic journalism, undeveloped home television content, demand for the "tabloid" press, and lack of educational media literacy programs for the younger and older generations.

A certain part of people require legislative regulation and introduction of control in the local segment of the Internet, where today most of the false information is disseminated. However, one should not forget that the Internet is just a tool, a common platform and censorship can primarily affect the freedom of speech and freedom of expression on the Internet, to which users of the Kyrgyz Internet are accustomed.

So far, most of the disinformation disclosure efforts are fact-check publications by local journalists. Nevertheless, the baton of the fight against disinformation must be adopted by representatives of other professions, where in addition to journalists a wider group of experts should be involved. Also, young people in educational institutions should increase the potential for critical thinking and information handling skills.

There are several alternatives in dealing with lies and disinformation that can be undertaken by various organizations. Many of these ideas are solutions that fight fake news and disinformation without jeopardizing freedom of expression and investigative journalism.

1) One of the most important things that Kyrgyzstan's authorities can do is to encourage independent professional journalism. The general public needs reporters to help them sort out complex events and deal with the ever-changing nature of social, economic, and political events.

2) Government agencies should avoid censoring content and holding media and online

platforms responsible for disinformation. This can limit freedom of speech, causing people to hesitate sharing their political views, fearing that it might be censored as fake news. Such overly restrictive regulation can set a dangerous precedent and inadvertently induce authoritarian regimes to weaken freedom of expression.

3) Financing media literacy efforts should be a priority. This is especially true for people who go online for the first time. It's difficult for these people to distinguish false from real news, and they need to learn how to evaluate news sources, and not take at face value everything that they see on social networks or on digital news sites. Helping people to become better consumers of online information is crucial as people go deeper into the "digital world".

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[1] Russian content on Facebook, Google and Twitter reached far more users than companies first disclosed, congressional testimony says, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/2017/10/30/4509587e-bd84-11e7-97d9-bdab5a0ab381_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5a2a578de1e0

[2] The most high-profile lawsuits and courts against the media - examples from Kyrgyzstan and international practice. Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20190508/1044262173/smi-zhurnalisty-isk-razbiratelstva.html>

[3] Results of December 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_December_2017_POLITICAL_ENG_final.pdf

[4] <http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/home>

[5] <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en>

[6] Myth Detector Lab for Media Literacy, http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_actives/61



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