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INTENTIONAL ABUSE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS WITH THE GOAL OF PROMOTING IDEAS OF ANTI-SEMITISM, RACISM, AND XENOPHOBIA

This scientific study points out a relatively common negative occurrence in the Slovak society as well as in Europe in general. Various parties, associations and movements, most notably on the extreme right side of the spectrum, use virtual social networks to promote their ideals and to reach their goals in the society. Social networks often contain hidden and manipulative forms of promoting ideas of anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia.

Keywords: Social networks, manipulation, communication, extreme right, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia.

1. Manipulative Methods and Their Effects on Social Networks

There are many techniques of manipulation which enable certain persons to gain influence on people and their thinking, while these people remain utterly unaware of it. There are many possible methods to do this, the following being the most frequent ones [1]:

- “The spiral of silence” – this theory was brought by E. Noelle-Neumann who discovered that many people are rather silent at their first encounter with information as they fear of being pushed to the margin of the society and that they would have to face the pressure of the society. They prefer to remain silent, accepting the opinions of others [2, pp. 22-23].
- “The third-person effect” – people generally tend to overestimate the effect of media and the Internet on others, but they underestimate the effect on themselves (they think that it cannot happen to them) [3]. As recipients, they think that they are absolutely resistant to the phenomenon of manipulation. The social networks use this as a moment of surprise – a moment when human individuals do not expect manipulation targeted on their personality [4]. The phenomenon is known as the third-person effect which is rooted in the natural thinking of humans who believe that “others are worse than themselves”. The term “others” refers to the third person who is constantly manipulated, while remaining unaware of it, but it is frequently myself who is

manipulated. In short, I do not believe that it could be me who is influenced by manipulation [1].

- “The hidden persuasion” – is the most dangerous method of manipulation in information technologies. The danger is rooted in the fact that it cannot be so simply recognized. The term refers to journalists as to “hidden persuaders”. The fundamental principle of the phenomenon rests in the fact that judging, opinion or propaganda are presented as the absolute truth. The authors of articles and information on the social networks work with several obscure and ambiguous terms in order to cover ambivalence of opinions while individuals share the information and foist their unilateral and manipulative commentaries. This system completely avoids all arguments that could raise any doubt in the minds of the audience. When people encounter information that seems to be completely clear to them, it is the hidden persuasion that raises doubts in their minds [5].

There are millions of people involved in the process of communication on social networks. They enter the communication via topics that they want to share. These topics provoke moods which can rapidly transform into opinions and when the opinions of a critical number of people converge, the public opinion is created. This public opinion then creates a certain stance in the mind of a person which prompts one to behave in certain ways when in critical situations [2, pp. 11-12]. Therefore, it is very important for people to educate themselves so as to be able to critically access the information gained from the social networks.

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Thus, they gradually uncover the potentially unfair practices and methods in the mass-media routine.

One may encounter also other manipulative practices on social networks today, which are used to influence or manipulate people, such as:

- “Deliberate concealment of certain as well as inconvenient information” – it is the easiest and at the same time simplest way to influence recipients. In intentional and deliberate concealments, media makers deliberately omit certain details of the message, such as circumstances, persons involved or even whole thoughts and messages considered unfit to the manipulators’ agenda. As a result, there appears only a brief commentary on the networks, as it is not the right time or situation for the whole message. The important information is modified to such an extent that it affects the whole approach to the information. The authors do not conceal the important information completely. On the contrary, they reveal the information, but they try to lessen the significance of its importance or to emphasize half-truths which are suitable for them [4, p. 84].
- “Intentional publishing of unverified information” – the publishing of an unverified information on the social networks makes the message uncertain or even false. It is a classic model of political manipulation. Information usually concerns likely events which could, but do not have to happen. The information becomes credible due to its probability and the information chaos within which it is presented [4, p. 86]. This model is often used in the political sphere, during political campaigns, often being the result of dishonesty in obtaining and verifying the information. Rather than verifying the veracity of the reported message, the authors tend to use universal phrases, such as “it is common knowledge” or “as we unofficially learned” as well as “we have information that” and so on [6].
- “Purpose-made and sophisticated accusations” – abusing and challenging competitors, opponents, rivals and institutions in discussions on networks because they are inconvenient. They are primarily unverified and distorted pieces of information – so called “News”. It is a very effective method for labeling of persons and institutions or for foisting opinions to create a prejudice against their rivals. It is a manipulation with truth, [2, p. 33] as there is no need to publish negative messages, but rather insinuation (Lat. *insinuare*), getting to the trust, [7, p. 312] targeting suspicion, peaching in order to humiliate or to destroy good reputation etc. All these practices are used mostly in the political sphere where one can find lies, defamation, slander and informing others by means of unverified messages. There are various forms of unverified messages commonly being used.
- “Verbal and written attacks” – it is closely connected with the already mentioned insinuation. It means labeling some person or institution with certain purpose-made easily

memorized attribute regardless whether it is the truth or just a statement [4, p. 90].

2. Specific Influences of Media in Interaction on the Social Networks

It is necessary to be acquainted with specific influences of media in the interaction on the social networks that belong to basic elements of contemporary media education. The social networks distribute a very large amount of information which sometimes makes it virtually impossible to resist their influence. In media education, therefore, it is necessary to know of the specific influences through which the social networks affect their users. What follows are specific types of influences:

- “The influence of the so-called overlap” – it is primarily about diverting someone’s attention from a problem to another issue. The real message is not to be revealed, it is either covered or masked. It is an intentional concealment of inconvenient information as a directed type of manipulation. However, it does not hide the information, but rather overlaps it. In the US, the phenomenon is known as “red herring” [4, p. 92].
- “The influence of false authorities” – the important role is played by a person whose opinion has great influence on the society and public opinion. There are persons on the social networks that present themselves as authorities, but they do not have stable ethical and moral values, belonging instead to various opinion platforms. For example, these persons belong to the extreme right and left and their opinion platform is at or beyond the boundary of the human rights and religious values [8].
- “The impact of the loss of knowledge” – numerous interpretations and the sharing of media contents that spread through social networks are based on or originate in the interpretation itself (not in the original source) which is simply taken or shared with the interpreter’s own commentary [9, pp. 69-81]. At the same time, the information does not have a concrete historical basis and a clear source. This phenomenon is widespread and happens with increasing frequency. There are some media that use lies about the past and focus only on the present and their argumentation is based on mediated interpretation without a clear scientific source or a necessary fact checking [4, pp. 96-98].
- “The influence of violence, attacks, fear and emotion” – the social networks are used to spread fear and a sense of threat from the potentially violent third parties [10], such as immigrants or minorities who are in some way threatening the majority society. This is sometimes based on real situations [11, pp. 17-25]. To present an example from Slovakia, we recently witnessed a political campaign which reacted to the immigration crisis and several political parties

made a profit from this campaign. However, in 2015 only 330 migrants applied for asylum in Slovakia and it was granted to only 8 persons. 124 migrants did not receive asylum and in other 148 cases the process was stopped for various reasons or the migrants used Slovakia only as a transit country. As of October 2016, only 62 people applied for asylum in Slovakia, 155 applications were granted, 42 applications were refused and in 20 cases the process was discontinued [12]. However, in 2016 during the electoral campaign to the National Council of the SR the social networks paid great attention to the issue of migrants, appealing to the national identity and patriotism of Slovaks. This appeal, though, affected primarily the people's emotions. Unfortunately, scientific observations indicate that negative emotions on the social networks considerably exceed the positive ones, which disturbs mental conditions or causes unstableness in one's emotional experience of every-day reality [13]. The voters were supposed to decide about their future under such conditions which naturally led them to make this important decision under the influence of their emotions [14].

- "The influence of the adopted position" – a subjective message which is subject to personal stances, feelings and interests that are based more or less on the personal experiences of their author. It is a complete opposite to an unbiased and objective message which is a basic condition for serving the truth. Those sharing the information shape the truth by their very choice of language. If the media and the social networks do not seek the truth, they will end up making it up and trading with it. The truth itself will thus become a product and its interpretation will be subject to trade. It is necessary to separate the information from its subjective commentaries, because these spread (or even force upon people) a subjective point of view. On the social networks, such approach is considered to be a dangerous manipulation which is based on the fact that information is served from a biased point of view. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly verify important information from several independent sources.
- "The influence of goodwill" – a rather often used practice that can be found in commentaries of shared contents on the social networks. As a form of manipulation, it uses simple human trust and affection [15, p. 24]. It is evident in: "Every reasonable person must recognize that..." It is a latent promotion of subjective requirements in the sense of goodwill or help or various assurances about the accuracy of shared information.

3. The Social Networks, Threats and Risk Content

The contemporary social networks contain numerous Facebook profiles which, besides their classic agenda, purposefully use and present ideas of anti-Semitism, racism

and xenophobia. Unfortunately, this negative phenomenon appears quite often on the social networks, as there is an increase of nationalism (migration issue), patriotism and the extreme right movement. They aim to establish themselves in the society and achieve the best possible election result. With this goal in mind, they use various forms of manipulation in order to gradually establish the ideas of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia. They justify it by claiming to protect Slovakia, race or Christian tradition. It is important to re-emphasize that in Slovakia, the promotion of the ideas of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia is accompanied with highlighting the importance of Christian religion. The material which is gradually published and promoted on the social networks is not, at the first glance, dangerous for the user. On the contrary, this material shows a strong national, Christian, and cultural awareness, but inserted among these positive values are also the ideas of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia. For the users, it seems to be right and in accordance with the protection of national interests. However, what they do not see is that it contradicts the very Christian religion they wish to promote. Such organizations use a great variety of different symbols, signs, terms and verbal expressions that can be used for their self-identification, but, they can also be useful as rallying tools to boost the adherents' (or sympathizers') zeal for national interests.

The following features are characteristic for all such profiles [16]:

- General profile of the group – most often, it is one user with a general name who shares and publishes contents. Moreover, this user reacts to all comments in terms of manipulative and foisting techniques. When identifying concrete names of some profiles the user does not want to reveal one's own identity, even if requested, while this person can see the public profile of other people, their personal as well as basic information, which is not in accordance with fair-play communication.
- Religious name of profile – in particular, there are profile names taken from the Christian religion or based on the motives from the Bible, such as: living faith, Magnificat Slovakia etc. Such religious names appeal to users' confidence that it is a serious group. For example, the above-mentioned name Magnificat is based on the traditional Marian pilgrimage and cultural tradition in Slovakia.
- Religious content published with the highest priority – profiles like this publish religious content that inspire confidence with the high priority label linked with their messages. Besides the religious content, however, especially during the time of elections, there appear persons and groups with national interests that are presented to be religiously grounded, stable in values and faith. Quite paradoxical then is their aversion to the Jews (whom they label as "Zionists"), foreigners and non-white citizens. In this context, the Z.O.G. platform - Zionist Occupation Government or Zionist Occupied Government

are promoted as a fight against the established system, using propaganda that includes the denial of the Holocaust [17]. The suggested attitude often appears in comments of the shared contents that appeal to emotions focusing on anti-multicultural society based on intolerance towards other ethnic groups. The manipulators use religious rhetoric for spreading these ideas.

4. Conclusion

All people using often diverse social networks either as private persons or as members of some groups are prone to fall a prey to manipulation by either certain persons or media. Thus, they become victims of unhealthy, or even dangerous and aggressive ideas leading to intolerance or even hatred towards certain ethnic or religious groups of people.

Many of Facebook posts are based on factors of emotions, euphoria, feeling of danger and the need to protect one's culture. By means of this devious rhetoric they create an atmosphere of fear instead of the promised sense of security. They try hard to target or recruit people who are easy to influence and manipulate. There is a great need for individual awakening and for educating all age categories who find themselves in the in the circle of influence and power of mass media. This need stems from the fact that most people are not aware that they are influenced by manipulation and to what extent their communication on the social networks

may influence them. Yet, these people continue to think that they are the ones who decide about which values, morals and principles should be accepted and which rejected [18, pp. 139-142].

A paradox emerges in this situation as we, once again, witness a dangerous phenomenon in Slovakia, wherein the promotion of the ideas of anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia is coupled with an emphasis on Christian religiosity, or more precisely, pseudo-religiosity [19, pp. 75-96]. Ideas and content that gradually emerge on social networks are initially harmless to the common user. They rather appear as a positive promotion of a strong Christian and cultural awareness present in and among true Slovaks, which is commonly perceived as beneficial to the Slovak society. Only later, ideas of anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia infiltrate the network, being intentionally inserted there by extremists. The user's critical discernment is caught off guard because these extreme ideas appear to be in harmony with the noble task of protecting one's national and cultural interests [20, pp. 75-96]. One thus fails to notice that the content of these ideas contradicts the very Christian religiosity that it claims to promote, neglecting "the logic of God's plan and its divine historicity" [21, p. 162]. These movements use a series of symbols, signs, terminology, and slogans that, on the one hand, serve their self-identification and, on the other hand, have the function of self-agitation for national interests and for the Slovak citizen identity.

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