

Misinformation and Information Manipulation in Pre-Election Messages of Candidates from Latvian Political Parties

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Abstract. Separating truth from lies has become the defining issue of our time. It has become a problem that affects the quality of our democracy, life, way of thinking. Such circumstances raise the bar of responsibility for communicators, but as a result of mistakes or deliberate deception, the reputation of political actors, institutions or media organizations may be negatively affected. The aim of the report is to describe examples of manipulation of information by candidates of Latvian political parties. The research question of the study is: what types of information manipulation can be found in Latvian political communication practice and what has influenced the spread of examples of information manipulation? More and more studies show that democracy is threatened not only by disinformation, but also by systematic manipulation of information by political actors. Efforts to influence the attitudes of voters, journalists or political opponents in order to achieve political goals are recorded. Information manipulation utilizes various types of content to influence, disrupt or distort the information ecosystem. The work uses the multiple case study approach, with the help of which the manipulation of information by political actors in the practice of political communication in recent years is characterized. The results of the study show that in the reviewed time period, the cases are mostly related to the malicious activity of social media users and the insufficient media literacy of society, including media professionals and politicians. Considering the development of technology, it can be predicted that more complex information manipulations may also appear in Latvia, therefore it would be necessary to offer wider, comprehensive media literacy training to the public, as well as to raise the average level of political knowledge, which can be promoted with a broader media content about political processes and political actors, participants of political communication wider justification for their actions and decisions.

Keywords: information manipulation, misinformation, political communication, political candidates, social media

Introduction

There are different classifications of fake or false information. The scientific literature explains the role of fake news, false news, disinformation, rumour and other concepts in the field of inaccurate, false or partially true information. The main problem of misleading information is closely related to the development of digital media, where political actors, media and society are involved – as individuals or groups (European Commission 2018, 5).

The concepts of misleading information and disinformation lies in the intention of the distributor – whether the information is designed to cause harm on purpose. Mostly, disinformation describes the intentional spread of false information, while misinformation describes the unintentional spread. Wu, Morstatter, Carley and Liu (2019, 81–82) pointed out that the term ‘misinformation’ combines all the false and inaccurate information presented on social media platforms, as they all have a common characteristic – they can cause any kind of harm on social media, especially if there is no timely intervention to prevent it.

The National Democratic Institute explains information manipulation as a set of tactics that includes gathering and disseminating information to influence or disrupt democratic decision-making. The following are distinguished: digital vectors, different actors, tactics and content. Since the focus of the study is on representatives of political parties and election candidates, information manipulation related to this level is examined in greater detail. Political parties and their candidates can use information manipulation to discredit political opponents by using false reinforcements (exaggerations) to reach a wider audience; or manipulate the political discourse in such a way as to serve their campaign agenda. Political campaigns can be used to manipulate information both in and out of election cycles. Information manipulation can use different types of content to influence public attitudes and beliefs or persuade individuals to act in a particular way (National Democratic Institute 2021, 5–8).

The consequences of information manipulation are also the emotional changes of society and social media users. Emotions play a vital role in the social transmission of news and information. Interest, happiness, disgust, surprise, sadness, anger, fear, contempt influence how some stories ‘catch on’ and spread much more widely than others (Hermida 2014, 48). It means that information manipulation can affect not only public attitudes and beliefs, but also the emotional state.

Methodology

The case study approach was used in this research. The time period of research is January 2020–March 2022. During the considered time period, examples were selected that characterise the types of information manipulation. It helps to

describe and explain the context of examples of communication. The research question of the study is: what types of information manipulation can be found in Latvian political communication practice and what has influenced the spread of examples of information manipulation? It is stated that “the case study approach works well to identify best practices for risk communication because individual situations are defined or isolated, relevant data are collected about the situation, and the findings are presented in such a way that a more complete understanding is reached regarding how messages shape perceptions and serve to prompt particular responses from those hearing the messages” (Sellnow *et al.* 2009, 53).

Results

The results of the research show that in the field of political communication in Latvia, various small-scale information manipulations have been conducted from various social media accounts, mainly anonymous ones, as a result of which the victims of the manipulations mostly had an insignificant or small negative impact on their reputation. These social media accounts and their content can exist without attracting any attention until their content is noticed and shared by a real, perhaps even recognizable, social media user, as a result of which the digital vector takes a new direction, and the created manipulation gains wider resonance. In some situations, the media also do not contribute to the solution of the problems – sometimes they omit to ask for the comment of the victim of the information. In order to gain an insight, some examples are given in the text that describe a particular type of manipulation.

As part of the work, several video and photo manipulations were recorded. For example, manipulation happened with the then Minister of Justice (2018–2022) Jānis Bordāns, slowing down one of the video recordings of his speeches. It did not gain much popularity in the social media *TikTok* – the video was viewed only a little more than 800 times, but it had a different effect on the social networking site *Facebook*, where it was republished by a member of the board of the party Union of Greens and Farmers (*Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība*). In two days, 2,700 users shared it, 37000 saw it in total (Dimants 2021). Some *Facebook* users have pointed out that the video has been obviously altered. However, most of the comments showed that people believed what they saw, that the minister was drunk or had used something – this was also pointed out by well-known people in the society.

Another example of visual manipulation concerned the member of the 13th *Saeima*, Artuss Kaimiņš. In the photo of the television screen, containing a screenshot from the LTV1 news program “*Panorāma*”, the outline of the MP’s body had been changed and the inscriptions on the screen had been altered (Kas notiks Latvijā? 2020). The way the image spread was similar to the pathway

described above – it was published on a *Facebook* page without gaining as much attention as on other social media platforms, where users reacted to the image as if it were real. The direct impact of this image on the official can be seen in the reactions of *Twitter* users to his subsequent posts. It should be noted that some people pointed to their media literacy skills, explaining that users were misled.

Simpler information manipulations should be discussed in the context of political party members. Before the municipal elections of 2021, the media offered various polls of citizens concerning the support of political forces. Election candidates tried to interpret the survey data in their favour. For example, comparing not party ratings, but the possible outcome of the election with a 5% barrier, where those voters who do not plan to vote in the election or who have not yet decided are not counted – in May 2021 they comprised 20.9% and 22.8%, respectively (Stirāne 2021). Usually, the second case has a higher percentage of support, so it is mentioned, but it is not correct when making a comparison.

Another approach is the manipulation of information by appealing to emotions based on culture, traditions, and the structure of society. This type of manipulation was clearly used not only by the political forces, which defended the rights of Russian-speakers, the poor, the unvaccinated, etc., but also, for example, by the coalition parties of the parliament at that time, which appealed to unfair social protection for women with children: “Why does the state punish mothers with smaller pensions?” (Latvijas attīstībai 2020).

In the autumn of 2021, a video from Riga Castle gained wider attention on several social media platforms, where the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš sang, the Minister of Health Daniels Pavļuts played the piano, while several recognizable politicians, officials and other guests stood around the room. The two-year-old video regained relevance after the news that the Office of the President planned to buy a new concert grand piano. Notably, the video did not indicate the date of the video, resulting in a context shift, and most of the audience, perceiving it as a recent video, blamed politicians for not following strict measures to contain the coronavirus and ridiculed the actions captured in the video. The video was shared by several members of the parliament and local governments, contrasting the persons seen in the video with unvaccinated individuals, low-income residents and other socially vulnerable groups.

In recent years, the activity of fake social media accounts imitating or caricaturing a specific politician has become less relevant. The situation has improved over the last 5–10 years, especially in the context of the last few years, when national governments demand specific actions from social media platforms to combat disinformation and misleading information. For example, it is possible to verify accounts, but the content of the platforms is constantly monitored in response to deception, misinformation, hate speech, etc. for message expressions.

Discussion and conclusions

It must be concluded that direct deception is a rare phenomenon in the examined time period, it mainly refers to self-promotion or interpreting the support ratings of political parties or candidates for one's own benefit. In the analysed examples, the content is often presented without the context, omitting the time of its occurrence, which opens up free interpretation by the audience – the users who believe it spread the content further, while after that, the trust of the communicators in the information distributor becomes an important factor.

Fixed information manipulations have a low technological capacity, which does not pose a significant threat to the environment of political communication. However, the informational attacks on Latvian politicians and media experienced in March 2021 to discredit the opposition of Russia and undermine the support given to it by the politicians of the Baltic states, showed the vulnerability of information environment in Latvia.

It can be predicted that in Latvia more complex manipulations of information may appear, therefore it would be necessary to offer broader, comprehensive media literacy training to the public, as well as to raise the average level of political knowledge, which can be promoted with wider media content about political processes and a more extensive range of political actors' justification of their actions and decisions.

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