

THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN COMBATING INFORMATIONAL MANIPULATION

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Résumé : *La manipulation de l'information constitue une menace importante pour les démocraties, la sécurité nationale et la cohésion sociale à l'ère numérique. La communication stratégique devient un outil essentiel pour lutter contre la désinformation et pour protéger la société des effets néfastes de la manipulation. Cet article explore le concept de communication stratégique, ses composantes essentielles et les moyens de l'appliquer efficacement pour contrer la manipulation de l'information. Il examine également les meilleures pratiques et stratégies mises en œuvre à l'échelle mondiale et en République de Moldavie.*

Mots-clés : *communication stratégique, manipulation de l'information, sécurité nationale, propagande, désinformation.*

Introduction

In today's world, where information is constantly flowing and changing, the manipulation of information has emerged as a potent tool for various groups aiming to shape public perception. Disinformation, digital propaganda, and fake news can lead to social unrest, sway election results, or impact personal choices. Effective communication is essential in countering these issues by making sure that accurate information is delivered to the public and that misconceptions are addressed.

Defining Strategic Communication

Strategic communication plays a crucial role in safeguarding democratic systems and countering disinformation by fostering credible, fact-based narratives in response to hybrid threats (EEAS, 2023). It involves the process through which state institutions craft and executes messages designed to meet specific objectives. This form of communication is grounded in research, planning, and ongoing assessment, and it spans various domains, including national security and public diplomacy, utilizing communication intentionally to advance an institution's mission (Hallahan et al., 2007: 29).

An Essential Component: Strategic Planning

A crucial aspect of this type of communication is strategic planning, which helps clearly define national security objectives and choose the right channels for sharing messages. When it comes to national security, strategic planning includes outlining key goals, such as safeguarding sensitive information, thwarting cyberattacks, or addressing geopolitical risks. Additionally, it's vital to pinpoint target audiences, which may include government agencies, the general public, international allies, or potential threats.

The planning process should consider the choice of communication channels, which may involve official channels, mass media, social networks, or direct communication via government agencies. It's essential for the media and state institutions to work together to deliver accurate, clear, and consistent information, helping to build citizens' trust in the management of events and situations (Albu, 2020: 25).

An important aspect of strategic communication is the creation of tailored messages that are clear, coherent, and specifically designed for each target audience, while also being relevant to critical situations. This approach helps maintain stability and public trust. During crises, it is essential that messages be concise to prevent any misinterpretation. For instance, in the case of a cyberattack, communications aimed at the general public will focus on data protection measures, whereas institutions will receive more detailed technical guidelines. A key factor is ensuring that the information shared by various authorities is well-coordinated to minimize confusion.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of strategic communication are crucial for grasping the impact of messages and swiftly modifying strategies as needed. This can be accomplished through opinion surveys, media tracking, and examination of public responses on social media. Performance indicators, like the degree of message understanding or trust in authorities during a crisis, are evaluated to determine effectiveness. As the situation develops, messages should be adapted to tackle emerging threats or shifts in public perception.

A significant instance of strategic communication by Moldovan authorities took place amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, right at the country's borders. The Moldovan authorities, including the Ministry of Defense, the Intelligence and Security Service, and the Government, consistently implemented a clear communication strategy to combat disinformation and avoid public panic. Their goals were to keep the population informed about the actual situation and the protective measures in place, while also enhancing relationships with international partners such as the EU, Romania, and Ukraine.

The target audience included the general public, local and international media, external partners, and international organizations. National television stations (Moldova 1, TV8), social networks (Facebook, Telegram), press releases, and public meetings served as the main communication channels.

Specific messages were developed for each audience to clarify the situation, combat fake news, and maintain trust in the authorities. For citizens, messages emphasized the current status: *“The situation is continuously monitored by the authorities, and safety measures are in place to protect citizens,”* along with practical advice: *“Avoid sharing unverified news and follow only official information sources.”*

In this context, several attempts have been made to create panic among the population regarding the possibility of the war in Ukraine spreading into the territory of the Republic of Moldova. For instance, a Telegram channel spread false information claiming that President Maia Sandu was preparing a military mobilization in the country. This disinformation was picked up and distributed by the Russian media, posing a risk of creating panic among the population (www.protv.md).

For effective strategic communication, targeted messages for external partners are crucial, such as: *“The Republic of Moldova is in direct contact with its European and international partners for technical assistance and diplomatic support.”* Similarly, messages aimed at the media provide clear official information to prevent panic: *“We will hold daily press conferences to communicate developments.”*

National authorities have implemented a continuous monitoring system to assess the impact of messages and combat potential disinformation. The Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) plays a key role in identifying and countering disinformation campaigns by hostile groups. Reactions are analyzed through quick surveys and social media monitoring. If confusion or social tension arises, messages are adapted to clarify misunderstood aspects and reduce panic risks.

Informational Manipulation: Forms and Impact

Informational manipulation is a deliberate process in which information is distorted, partially presented, or fabricated to influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors. It can take various forms, each with distinct characteristics and objectives:

Disinformation involves the intentional dissemination of false or misleading information with the goal of deceiving the public and influencing decision-making. Its content is either fabricated or contains distorted information and is driven by clear objectives, such as causing social, political, or economic destabilization. Disinformation can spread rapidly through social networks, fake news, or unreliable media channels.

Professor Claude Polin identifies two categories of disinformation: internal disinformation, where a falsehood is portrayed as truth, and superior disinformation, where the manipulated individual is guided to form their own incorrect understanding of the opposing party (Volkoff, 2000: 5). Disinformation is not just about convincing people of something that isn't real; it is about changing their responses even when they hold strong beliefs. One type of disinformation is logomachy, which involves creating catchy phrases that, after appealing to communication experts, make their way to the public and are taken as fact. Examples include terms like the Red Terror, right-wing Stalinist, and witch hunt.

A recent case of disinformation in Moldovan media with significant implications for national security was observed during the period leading up to the presidential elections and the referendum on joining the European Union, held in October 2024. Disinformation campaigns, attributed to pro-Kremlin entities, aimed to destabilize the electoral process and sway public opinion against European integration.

These campaigns leveraged social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and YouTube to spread anti-government messages and discourage voter participation. One notable example was a viral TikTok video featuring American actor Brian Baumgartner calling for the removal of President Maia Sandu, demonstrating how disinformation can be propagated through seemingly credible sources.

Moldovan authorities linked these activities to Russian organizations, thus emphasizing the significant impact on national security and the urgent need for robust measures to counter such interference (www.wired.com). Strategic communication is essential in combating disinformation, especially against hybrid threats like those orchestrated by Russia (EEAS, 2018).

Propaganda is the strategic use of information to advance a particular ideological or political agenda, shaping public perceptions and garnering support for specific causes. In this framework, messages are designed to appeal to emotions and build loyalty towards a cause or organization. They often present a biased view of facts, omit opposing information, or include exaggerations, and may incorporate patriotic, religious, or ideological themes.

Propaganda involves sharing information with an audience in a way that they are likely to accept, and the informant does not see it as false but rather as the sole truth. It serves as a means of persuasion through influence, seeking to substitute rational thought with suggestibility, thereby obscuring the distinction between truth and falsehood (Thaverson, 1996: 8).

Black propaganda misleads its sources, crafting intentional falsehoods to seem credible. This is due to the inherent disinformation potential of information. When news is carefully curated and skillfully delivered, it becomes one of the most insidious forms of propaganda. Black propaganda seeks to disseminate and create false narratives, manipulate perceptions, and obscure the truth.

Moreover, symbolism serves as a powerful form of suggestive-emotional propaganda aimed at the masses. It enables individuals to convey their thoughts and feelings to others by facilitating the manipulation of concepts in a way that would be challenging without this tool. The reliance on symbols is particularly significant in politics and mass movements. For a political movement to succeed quickly, it must have a distinct way of expressing its ideas – a unique symbolism that can be easily embraced by a wide audience.

A key concern for anyone looking to execute large-scale propaganda is the understanding of how to rally the masses by tapping into the psychological mechanisms that shape individual behavior within those groups. These mechanisms are driven by survival instincts and play a crucial role in safeguarding the economic, political, and social interests of the collective. The psychological condition of the masses is influenced by their social context and the nature of their interactions.

In Moldovan media propaganda, with significant effects on national security, was evident during the presidential elections and the referendum on EU membership held in October 2024. According to Moldovan authorities, Moscow spent approximately \$100 million on various disinformation operations, vote-buying schemes, and corruption, all aimed at undermining Moldova's European integration. These actions were primarily orchestrated by Moldovan businessman Ilan Shor, who fled to Moscow after being convicted of bank fraud.

The influence campaign spread anti-European and pro-Russian messages through media outlets and social networks, intending to polarize society and influence electoral outcomes (www.lemonde.fr).

This type of propaganda negatively impacts national security by polarizing Moldovan society, undermining the democratic process, and hindering the implementation of security policies. It also influences the national agenda and decision-making processes, diminishing trust in state institutions and affecting internal stability (Mârzac et al., 2024: 2).

The first principle of propaganda revolves around transforming the individual, a tactic that politicians are quite adept at utilizing. During their interactions with the public, they often start by depicting a grim outlook on the current state of affairs, blaming it on the policies of those in power (referring to all administrations over the last decade). Following this, they offer a solution to this dire predicament – one that can only be realized through their suggested actions and policies. The excitement of the crowds follows a predictable rhythm, alternating between moments of tension and sudden tranquility. This rhythm is meticulously planned when organizing a rally, with both organizers and speakers ensuring their speeches are filled with clever remarks and ironic comments to captivate the audience, fostering a sense of shared purpose. Several key guidelines are typically followed: - If music is involved, the audience should be entertained beforehand, ideally with stirring popular anthems; - The audience's energy and agitation should be sustained and gradually heightened until the rally concludes; - A dialogue should be established between the speaker and the crowd by asking questions that elicit collective “yes” or “no” responses. These unified reactions serve as an electric jolt to the masses, igniting their enthusiasm; - Songs should be alternated before and after speeches; - Speeches should be kept to a maximum of 30 minutes; - The rally should conclude with the singing of a well-known battle hymn; - If feasible, a brief play or relevant poetry recitation should be included; - An allegorical painting or a vibrant, dynamic banner can help alleviate tension; - The crowd should be periodically encouraged to chant slogans while raising their fists or making the “Victory” sign; - The venue (square) should be adorned with slogans and symbols, and banners should feature a well-organized team of militants in uniform, showcasing the spirit of the event (Volkoff, 2000: 5).

Coordinated trolling involves the use of fake accounts or organized users to disseminate manipulative messages on social networks and in public spaces. Through this form of informational manipulation, large groups of trolls act simultaneously to amplify certain messages. They often initiate personal attacks, create confusion, or polarize public debates. Their messages can provoke strong emotional reactions, contributing to the radicalization of parts of society.

A recent example of coordinated trolling in Moldovan media, with an impact on national security, was observed during the lead-up to the presidential elections and the EU membership referendum held in October 2024. Pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns used social networks such as Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and YouTube to spread anti-government messages and discourage voter participation. The consequences included societal polarization, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the amplification of social conflicts.

Each of these forms of informational manipulation can affect a state's social, political, or economic stability, making their identification essential. Combating them requires public education campaigns, the creation of information verification mechanisms, and the promotion of trustworthy sources.

Strategic Communication in Combating Informational Manipulation

To combat manipulation, it is essential that transmitted messages be based on verifiable facts and presented in a clear and engaging manner. The public must perceive these messages as credible. For example, the organization *Stop Fals!* dismantled various disinformation campaigns during the 2024 elections, particularly those related to Moldova's relations with the EU and NATO. They countered articles claiming that European integration would lead to the country losing its sovereignty (<https://stopfals.md>).

Social networks are the primary platforms through which disinformation spreads. An effective strategy involves monitoring these channels and intervening quickly to counter false content. For instance, collaborating with influencers or experts can amplify accurate messages. During the 2024 elections, several local journalists and influencers, such as Dumitru Ciorici, worked with authorities and NGOs to debunk myths about European integration. Their messages were promoted on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, capturing the attention of young audiences and limiting the impact of pro-Kremlin campaigns (<https://agora.md>).

A fundamental pillar in fighting informational manipulation is media literacy, which helps the public identify fake news and become critical consumers of information. Education campaigns can include training sessions in schools, universities, or even at workplaces. *IREX Europe*, in partnership with the Moldovan government, implemented the *Media Literacy for All* program in schools across Moldova. This program included courses and workshops that taught students and teachers how to identify fake news and distinguish facts from opinions (*Moldova.org – Media Literacy Project*).

Mass media plays a central role in delivering high-quality information. Strategic partnerships with journalists, newsrooms, and fact-checkers can help prevent the spread of false news. A notable example is the collaboration between *Moldova.org*, *Agora.md*, and fact-checking organizations such as *Factual.md*, which verify public statements made by politicians and flag press articles containing disinformation. This collaboration proved crucial in quickly debunking fake news related to the country's energy and security situation (factual.md).

Artificial intelligence (AI) and monitoring algorithms can quickly detect sources of disinformation and prevent their spread. For instance, AI can analyze dissemination patterns and identify fake accounts. In 2024, the Republic of Moldova collaborated with cybersecurity experts to implement an AI-based automated monitoring system. This system rapidly detected fake accounts involved in trolling campaigns and helped identify disinformation sources related to the energy crisis and security policy (wired.com).

Challenges in Implementing Strategic Communication

While strategic communication is one of the most effective ways to combat misinformation, there are several obstacles that limit its effectiveness. These challenges need to be tackled in a coordinated way to ensure the informational safety of society. Some of the most pressing issues include: The rapid spread of disinformation: False information can quickly circulate on social media, especially because algorithms tend to promote sensational content. For instance, misleading news about supposed economic threats or political crises often goes viral before authorities can verify the facts and provide official responses. This situation, referred to as an infodemic, arises when the sheer volume of information – both accurate and inaccurate – overwhelms people's ability to distinguish the truth. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the swift dissemination of disinformation

regarding the country's relationships with the EU or NATO on platforms like Facebook or Telegram can lead to confusion, panic, and a lack of trust in government policies. A notable example was the 2024 campaign about military mobilization, which sparked unfounded fears among the public.

A significant challenge in fighting disinformation is the public's distrust of official sources. Many people view governments and traditional media as biased, prompting them to look for information from alternative sources, which often include unreliable or manipulated channels. In Moldova, this problem is intensified by propaganda efforts aimed at undermining the pro-European government while promoting pro-Russian narratives. When the public loses faith in state institutions, their ability to effectively respond to crises is greatly diminished. For example, disinformation campaigns that question the effectiveness of government actions during the energy crisis have resulted in social tensions and protests.

Creating an effective communication strategy demands substantial investments in skilled teams, monitoring technologies, and resources to produce high-quality content. Countries with limited financial means, like the Republic of Moldova, often struggle to allocate the necessary budgets for monitoring and combating disinformation. A lack of resources can lead to slow or incomplete responses, allowing disinformation narratives to proliferate unchecked. For instance, the absence of a well-funded fact-checking team can lead to the continuation of false rumors on critical issues such as energy security or military partnerships with external allies.

To address these challenges, the Republic of Moldova must embrace a comprehensive strategy that incorporates media literacy, collaboration among institutions, and the application of advanced technologies. A well-coordinated effort, backed by adequate resources, is essential to effectively mitigate the effects of information manipulation on national security.

Conclusions

Strategic communication is essential in the battle against misinformation. In our highly interconnected world, where the swift exchange of information can sway political, social, and economic choices, strategic communication is vital for safeguarding national security and maintaining social stability. It involves more than just sharing official information; it is a sophisticated, carefully crafted approach designed to counter manipulation and build trust in credible sources.

Every effective communication strategy requires thorough planning, which includes identifying target audiences, evaluating informational risks, and choosing the right communication channels. Planning goes beyond just reacting swiftly to false news; it also entails anticipating possible disinformation campaigns.

In the Republic of Moldova, proactive information campaigns that emphasize the advantages of European integration, carried out before the 2024 elections, effectively countered a large amount of anti-EU propaganda. By delivering clear and informative messages, the authorities were able to diminish the effects of misinformation.

Strategic communication goes beyond merely reacting to misinformation; it is a vital part of national security. By engaging in thoughtful planning, delivering clear messages, fostering collaboration across various sectors, and adopting a comprehensive approach that includes technology and education, communities can develop lasting resilience against information threats. In today's digital age, where information is abundant

and flows rapidly, achieving success requires not just quick reactions but also ongoing readiness and the active participation of society as a whole.

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