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ATTENTION AS A COMMODITY IN THE WORLD OF DISINFORMATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA \*

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**Abstract.** The dynamic development of information and communication technologies, systems and devices, the emergence of new digital media and platforms, as well as the increasingly widespread use of social networks, on the one hand, increase the availability of information and expand the possibilities of searching, receiving, creating, modifying and sharing it, on the other hand, in a significant way increase the risk of spreading misleading, altered, distorted, deceptive and/or invented information, for example, in the form of disinformation. Given the fact that current business models and the ecosystem of advertising technology allow advertising to be tailored based on already known preferences and previous interactions of users, based on their profile, interests, activities, content they interact with, and even their interpersonal relationships, media, platform, social networks and advertisers try – to achieve the best possible economic results – to attract the sustainable attention of their users. Unfortunately, in many cases, it is also through the spread of disinformation. In this context, the authors, using relevant methods of scientific research, focused on attention as a commodity and the functioning of the attention economy in the context of the increasing extent of the spread of various disinformation (but also hoaxes and conspiracy theories) primarily through social networks, their susceptibility to the spread of unwanted content and efforts to regulate the spread of such content.

**Keywords:** attention; commodity; economy of attention; disinformation; social media; social networks

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## 1. Introduction

Current business models and the ecosystem of advertising technology are characterised by the fact that, in contrast to surface advertising, such as that provided by television broadcasts, radio or print media, they allow to adapt advertising based on the already known preferences and previous interactions of users, based on their profile,

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interests, activities and the content they interact with and even their interpersonal relationships. In addition to providing an opportunity for various forms of fraud, the advertising space also uses inauthentic information, such as pseudo-reviews of products and services, to increase their attractiveness or various automated methods of producing purposefully misleading information. An anonymous virtual environment further enhances their spread. The same happens with fake votes and signatures for multiple petitions on the Internet, public opinion polls or even illegal content. The rapid spread of such information in digital media, including social networks, elevates this space to extremely interesting and, from a business point of view, very lucrative.

At the same time, the use of emotional stories and situations is typical of this area, which is associated with the use of emotional language and the fact that the information provided is designed to attract attention and sound urgent. Nowadays, when attention has become an attractive commodity, it plays a relatively important role. It is evident that digital media in the advertising ecosystem benefit from the rapid spread of information (including false, misleading, distorted, altered or invented in the form of disinformation) in the online space, and consciously or unconsciously, they reward the spread of disinformation (Braun, 2019; Diaz Ruiz, 2023).

At the same time, it is confirmed that with the dynamic development of information and communication technologies, systems, devices, new media and the increasingly massive use of social networks and the constantly expanding possibilities of searching, receiving, creating, changing and sharing information, the risk of access to disinformation also increases. In this regard, Dholakia (2023, p. 5) says: *"In the age of information overload and profit-oriented media, the conditions for the growth of disinformation have been created for decades; social networks have only given these conditions a huge boost"*. In addition to the above, we would like to add that the publication and monetisation of information is never neutral, on the contrary, politics, the formation of opinions or prejudices, or even the spread of confusion can always be found behind it.

In view of the above, the authors of the article, using relevant methods of scientific research, focus on attention as a commodity and the economy of attention in the context of the increasing extent of the spread of various disinformation (but also hoaxes and conspiracy theories) through digital media, especially social networks, their susceptibility to spreading unwanted content, and also by trying to regulate the spread of such content. In close connection with this, they are also dealing with challenges that are constantly emerging in connection with the mentioned issue, and - given the dynamics of the development of new, modern digital technologies and the authorities' reactions so far - they will probably continue to emerge.

## **2. Attention economy in the era of disinformation**

The Internet and social media have greatly changed and enhanced the way individuals, communities, and organisations seek, receive, create, modify, and share information. The digitally connected world has become a great swirling sea of information, often devoid of context (Ryan, 2020). Thanks to the rapid progress in technology and the development of new devices, the prevalence of disinformation increases every year. In proportion to this, concerns about their impact on individuals and society are growing. This is also one of the many reasons why more and more attention is paid to the issue of disinformation at the national and international levels.

Several different methods are used to spread disinformation. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), the key ones are mainly:

- social engineering, which provides a framework for the manipulation of events, incidents, issues and public debates and is often aimed at influencing public opinion in favour of a certain agenda;
- an inauthentic accent, where trolls, spamming tools, fake accounts, paid accounts and offering "sensations" play an important role;

- micro-targeting, consisting of the use of tools to identify and focus attention on specific groups of social media users, who are expected to have a high probability of sharing and further expanding the offered content;
- harassment and manipulation of the mobilised audience in an attempt to cover or marginalise other topics and opinions.

Quantifying and identifying the risk of spreading disinformation takes a lot of work. Significantly, if their definition exceeds several definitional frameworks and in this spirit, such type of information cannot be subjected to a simple dichotomous test - true/false. And also if the defining criterion of truth is a subjective attitude. In general, it can be said that currently, there is no single, unified and generally accepted definition of disinformation, and therefore, in the literature, we can come across a relatively large number of definitions that differ primarily by the industry or area of society in which disinformation occurs, or they are investigating. Despite their greater or lesser difference, the common feature of all used definitions is that disinformation is a deliberate modification of the information provided to influence, deceive or mislead the addressees of this information.

Some authors consider disinformation to be information that is (a) inaccurate, (b) uncertain, (c) vague (unclear) or (d) ambiguous (open to multiple interpretations) (Karlova & Fisher, 2013). Fallis (2014, p. 623) defines disinformation as "inaccurate, incomplete, or fabricated information that misleads people, whether as a result of inadvertent error, negligence, unconscious bias, or deliberate deception." According to Dušek and Kavan, two independent characteristics are attributed to disinformation: (a) it misleads and (b) the source benefits from it. However, it must be emphasised that the condition is not only that the information is misleading but that it is also primarily assumed that it will be misleading. This excludes, for example, improbable lies or intentionally false information that scientists and/or educators sometimes use as a research or education tool. In this work, we will primarily understand disinformation as information that misleads.

Typical disinformation techniques are characteristic not only of controversial content. They also appear, for example, if a topic is politicised, if they are used as a weapon in political competition, if there is an interest in instilling fear in society, or if it is a suitable tool to fulfil certain political, ideological or economic goals. In this work, we will focus primarily on the economic background of the dissemination of information that misleads its recipients and not only its source but also its spreader benefits from them.

We focus on this type of disinformation because standard business strategies, which are not primarily based on disinformation, do not exclude the possibility of using disinformation for purely economic reasons, which is usually invisible to the lay public. At the same time, as already mentioned, their creation and spread can disrupt certain social aspects, polarise society in political, health, financial issues or technological trends, and even shift political and economic power (Hajdúková, 2023). We could observe how false, invented, distorted, altered and erroneous information misleads people and influences public opinion, and what are the political and socio-economic consequences during the COVID-19 pandemic in connection with armed conflicts in the world or political rivalry in the national and international space. Disinformation directs people to motivated thinking or provokes unconscious bias. After all, politicians also usually make unrealistic promises to the people during election campaigns. Yet the media likes to spread them and misleading stories in various contexts, mainly for their shock value that attracts people's attention.

Spreading falsehoods and distorting facts is not a modern phenomenon. The twisting of historical events is known from oral tradition and can also be found in various historical manuscripts. However, today's modern technologies enable the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories or hoaxes to such an extent and at such a speed that it is almost impossible to immediately identify and stop them (Hajdúková, 2023; Dušek & Kavan, 2024). This is also why they can cause intended and unintended damage, whether in political, economic or social relations, as well as to the health of people who believe in them. The scene is the media space formed on digital markets. They quite

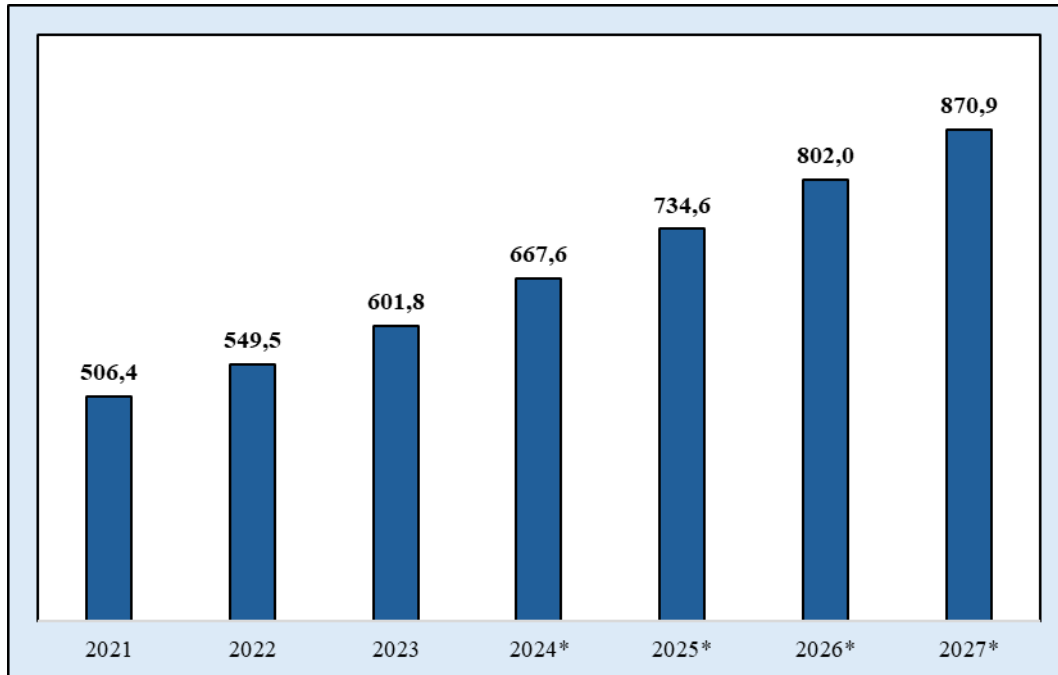
naturally have different preferences for content creation and distribution. Regarding these preferences, their association with disinformation practices may be greater or lesser, depending on the type of business model of a specific media market.

Some websites, media or individuals on social networks attract more readers, listeners or viewers by knowingly (or not) promoting various false information. They benefit from their spread by attracting attention, and the growing interest in the medium, in turn, increases the price of advertising space (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). Spreading controversial content, such as various conspiracy theories or hoaxes, is also a means used to maximise profits by attracting readers' attention, listeners or viewers. Many narratives deliberately try to evoke an emotional response in the reader, listener or viewer (regardless of the factual side of the story) because this increases the likelihood that people will be interested.

In addition, advertisers and advertising companies place their ads on websites directly or use specialised automated tools for this, so trying to maximise the potential of advertising income does not exclude that they will eventually become part of the financing of malicious content (various conspiracy theories, hoaxes and disinformation). The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) – a non-profit organisation that attempts to identify disinformation through content and message context analysis – continuously updates the list of websites that publish disinformation. The list also serves entities using online advertising and platforms as an opportunity to avoid spreading potentially controversial content in the form of various disinformation, conspiracy theories and hoaxes. For example, the label "good brand" is a valuable asset, meaning that its association with such harmful or controversial content, even if unintentional, can damage the brand's reputation and ultimately reduce its market value. The GDI reports that at least \$235 million in revenue is generated annually from advertising on disinformation and conspiracy websites, partly powered by well-known companies in all sectors (GDI, 2019).

According to Wajeeha et al. (2023), advertisers using digital advertising platforms are about 10 times more likely to appear on websites with disinformation than those who do not use this mechanism, especially if it is a programmed advertisement based on automated mechanisms. The difference from non-automated forms, where the advertiser has control over where his ad is displayed, lies in the fact that the possibility of control is absent in this case. Thus, online advertising revenue still contributes significantly to the funding of disinformation and conspiracy websites, or when they are unwittingly placed alongside disinformation content.

In the case of social media platforms, whether we realise it or not, they "collect" the tastes and interests of their users and tailor advertising and adaptive content to them. They also allow disinformation sites to earn money through placed advertising. We view disinformation in this context as the product of a carefully planned and technically sophisticated process of deception (Fallis, 2009) by attracting attention and monetising it. In other words, new highly interactive media allow media platforms to rely on monetising attention or monetising user interactions and attention by using the collected information to target ads to each user. According to Statista.com (2024), global advertising spending has been growing steadily since 2010, with the Internet considered the most important medium for advertisers from 2022. The portal also reports that global digital advertising spending reached over 601 billion US dollars in 2023. Their continuous growth is also expected in the following years (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1.** Digital advertising spending worldwide from 2021 to 2027 (in bil. USD)

Source: Statista (2024)

Note: The stated expenditures on digital advertising in the years 2021 to 2023 are real, in the years 2024 to 2027 estimated

### 3. "Attention" in the centre of attention

It is undeniable that media habits have changed in a relatively short time. Continuously improved technologies and devices, increasingly accessible and faster Internet connections, the growth of the number of social networks and their platforms, as well as the dynamic growth of users, together with the steadily growing content intended for "consumption" and the fact that the income of many technology companies is primarily based on advertising and data collection means that these companies - to maximise profits - can ensure continuous engagement and growth of users by having websites, applications and platforms specially designed using certain psychological principles to support and reinforce this engagement continuously (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The economy of attention is openly discussed in this context.

Although this term is relatively young, it already appears in terminological dictionaries. For example, Collins Dictionary (2024) defines the attention economy as "an economic system in which sellers of goods and services must compete to attract the attention of potential consumers". The Political Dictionary (2024) states that "the attention economy is a term that refers to a range of economic activities based on the belief that people's attention is a scarce and highly desirable resource to be captured and held. In the attention economy, attention is primarily about user engagement with digital products, which equates to revenue and influence for those who capture and maintain it" (Politics Dictionary, 2024).

McCann (2024) says that the "attention economy" describes the business model of companies that generally offer their goods or services for free but profit from selling user data - obtained from attention - to third parties and advertisers. Traditionally, this business model was used for television, radio and newspapers. However, on the Internet, it has become the default for major social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter (X.com), TikTok, and more.

With the rise of content creation presented on the Internet and social networks, the concept of the attention economy is being taken more and more seriously. It is indisputable that attention given to one thing eliminates the mental capacity for the ability to pay attention to another thing. When it comes to receiving / consuming information, the individual's attention is a limiting factor and limited or, in economic terminology, a "scarce resource". This is because the total available attention is limited by the number of people who have access to the information, by time, which is defined by a fixed number of hours of the day, and by the individual's ability to maintain attention over time. From the point of view of economic theory, attention is thus a rare resource that is in demand on the market, and with its lack, its price increases (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

The demand for attention and the dynamics of the attention economy encourages content providers to seek ways in a competitive environment to attract the attention of the broadest possible range of users to their product, so that these users spend as much time as possible "consuming" this product. And also by sharing content on pages, in applications, etc. Marketing, in this case, is built on two steps: (1) it must interest or entertain a person to get their attention, and (2) it must then offer advertising content. The correct estimation of the suitability of the potential content and the potential of the chosen medium is, therefore, crucial (McCann, 2024).

The concept of the attention economy, which works with human attention as a scarce commodity, is attributed to the American economist, political scientist and cognitive psychologist Herbert Alexander Simon, who explained in his 1971 article how the laws of supply and demand govern information and attention (Simon, 1971; Hyland, 2023).

Every change in doing business disrupts the competitive environment and often brings inequality of opportunities and unfair practices. The spread of digitised activities and processes into a wide range of business areas thus indicates new, potential problems in law enforcement, especially regarding cross-border business. Although the digital economy opens up new business opportunities, it also brings structural, financial and legal issues. The dynamics of the development of economic processes usually outstrips the dynamics of legal regulation. According to the World Bank, digital platforms are one of the six pillars of the digital economy, as they offer products and services available through digital channels such as mobile devices, computers and the Internet for all aspects of life (World Bank, 2024). Both public and private entities are intermediaries between one or more parties to a business relationship. The potential of the information obtained thanks to the digitalisation of the economy, as well as the tools that can not only concentrate it but also analyse it, represents a new type of asset with an unimaginable value.

The fact that different types of media and information and communication channels struggle to keep users' attention is probably something users are aware of, as well as the fact that they often spend more time with them than is necessary and healthy. They need to learn more about the real reason and the financial incentives behind attracting attention. They do not think about the standard economic premise that the market value of anything is determined by what someone is willing to pay. In this sense, users' attention must be understood as a valuable commodity (Davenport-Beck, 2001).

The fact that some digital products are presented as "free" to users does not ultimately represent any form of altruism on the part of the providers of these products. These are paid by consumers through their consumption because attention affects the price of advertising space. The price the user pays can be the service he receives, "laced" with advertisements paid for by advertisers. The possibility of avoiding such distractions naturally exists. For example, the user pays for the service without advertising. From this, it is clear that the product makes money under all circumstances, either through paying advertisers or users, regardless of whether they know it. The provider's challenge is just to attract more attention.

The attractiveness of headlines and design, as well as the deliberate division of the text into several pages and keeping users in suspense, is naturally linked to increased attention, which, according to psychologists, can be addictive but also increasingly urgent from the point of view of commercial companies or individuals who offer content, because it is a revenue-generating tool for them. This is one of the main reasons they are open to any practices to keep the attention of consumers/users.

Another aspect that motivates to maintain attention is the knowledge that the media, especially social networks, is a lucrative space for mining personal data, which is crucial for effective marketing strategies and advertising targeting. According to Nixon (2020, p. 75), *“Attention is a central object of control and a source of value, and the ability to control the conditions of news consumption makes it possible to gain power over attention and treat news attention as exploitable audience work. The ability to “manage” attention thus implies not only power over consumption but also power over part of the process by which audience members create meanings from the meanings they consume”*.

According to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/ The EC (General Data Protection Regulation), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, as well as the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union include the protection of natural persons in connection with the processing of personal data among basic human rights. Personal data of users, provided by the use of social networks, online purchases, or simply by saving them in the Internet browsing history (name, residence, phone number, e-mail address, education, occupation, interests, habits, photos, etc.), but also numbers bank accounts and means of payment should be subject to protection according to the approved rules. Therefore, we confirm the terms of use by default when providing them. The risk is if we do not study the conditions sufficiently and consent to data use. As has long been speculated, this data may be sold to third parties for marketing purposes and may also be misused by third parties due to insufficient protection. A typical example of this is the Cambridge Analytica case, where Facebook user data was used to formulate an algorithm to understand users' personality traits and then used in the pre-election presidential campaign to influence voters (Confessore, 2018).

To generate revenue from news "consumers" or advertisers, the competition to keep customers' attention is increasingly fierce in an information-saturated environment. Therefore, it is reasonable to question whether there is a risk that disinformation is included among the means of attracting and maintaining attention in such a competitive struggle. And vice versa, whether disinformation websites and/or offered disinformation content cannot be understood as a suitable carrier for advertising, which is one of the primary sources of income in the digitalised economy (Brynjolfsson & Oh, 2012).

Depending on the context, the effects of the attention economy are different. We perceive the management of our attention differently if we want to make more efficient use of our mental abilities in connection with our own productivity or to maintain the right balance between work and private life, which is different in the business world. In the following sub-chapter, we, therefore, address the different contexts of disinformation dissemination in connection with the activities of content producers and marketers in a digitalised environment, where the attention economy is a competitive environment in which economic entities compete for the largest possible share of consumers and do not hesitate to use disinformation as a means of attracting attention. The motive does not have to be financial profit but various other forms of benefit.

#### **4. Different contexts for spreading disinformation**

Today's knowledge indicates that the distribution of false, misleading, distorted or altered news in disinformation is strongly linked to many aspects, including the already mentioned social, cultural and historical ones. These can

affect the perception and use of information in society in general. And precisely because inaccurate, misleading, distorted or altered information may have some characteristics in common with correct information, it is not easy to detect the nature and intent of such misuse. In general, however, it can be a social or personal benefit. The authenticity of the received content, the ability to perceive it in a broader context, the way the language is used, the emphasis or omission of certain facts, the reliability of the information spreader and the possibility of his interest in a specific agenda, these are a whole range of factors that need to be aware of in this issue.

Attention management is becoming more and more important on a social level. It helps people deal with the massive number of events and the amount of content they encounter daily as efficiently as possible. On the other hand, the media, even the mainstream ones, largely depend on viewership, which is – as mentioned above – a determining element of the price of advertising space. These media compete for viewers, listeners or readers (Frislich et al., 2023). Viewership as a parameter of media success, therefore, often stands and falls on the content offered. In this case, users of news/information rely on the fact that the content provided is correct. It is assumed that all the information offered by these media has gone through internal verification processes, that they are under the scrutiny of the authorities, and that these media vouch for the truth and accuracy of the information they publish.

Nevertheless, in political programs and talk shows, we often witness that the media cannot guarantee the objectivity of what they present in many cases. Unfortunately, it is not an exception that their representatives, who are expected to be impartial, are directly involved in political arguments or do not hide personal bias for a reason that can only be deduced. Also, how they grasp and present the topic plays a significant role in the attention economy (Yuting et al., 2020). Show trailers are a clear example of this.

Conducted surveys indicate that the most watched programs are those that broadcast sensational content and, at the same time, tend to rely on journalistic commentary. This means that they often prefer personal opinions to the actual disclosure of facts, naturally creating space for spreading attractive but inaccurate, incomplete or misleading information. Since these were mostly programs broadcast in prime time, one of the motivations was likely an effort to gain users' attention. This action may have intent, not ignorance (GDI, 2022).

The topics that have been dividing society for the last decades, thus giving space to the spread of various disinformation (as well as conspiracy theories and hoaxes), were and are mainly uncontrolled migration, health crises, armed conflicts and undoubtedly political rivalry. In this context, internet platforms and social networks play a key role in how people's opinions on these topics are formed and how they are commonly expressed and discussed.

The last two decades have been significantly marked by waves of irregular migration, which is why many misleading, distorted and hostile narratives have appeared on the Internet and social networks regarding it, presenting it as a threat to partially overlapping areas, which are: (a) health (migrants as disease carriers), (b) wealth (migrants as welfare cheats abusing the social system, or unfair competition in the labour market), and (c) identity (migrants as a hostile invading force, threatening to replace white Christian Europeans and their traditions) ( Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020, p. 5).

Whether it's xenophobic discourses or the authors' reasonable concerns and frustrations, it's content that often doesn't delineate or even blurs the lines between fear and perceived threat, undoubtedly attracting much attention. Naturally, the mixing of cultures can also bring with it the mentioned risks, and they must be included, just as it is not correct to generalise them. Two groups stand against each other - opinion-forming media and alternative media, which compete for attention and, often without real arguments, create pressure on public opinion (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Another of the topics that are recorded in the media in the fight for attention are various health crises, such as, for example, epidemics of cholera, bird flu, swine flu, Ebola, dengue fever or the coronavirus pandemic. The situation that arose in connection with the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic causing the disease COVID-19 strengthened and even accelerated the development of modern technologies and the use of various online services. On the one hand, it brought new possibilities for economic models; on the other hand, it created new and strengthened existing threats, often of a hybrid nature (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). During the period of the pandemic, not only was various disinformation spread on the Internet and social networks denying the disease itself, its origin, the way it spreads and the need for vaccination to protect public health, but also emotionally exposed speeches and images of vaccination advocates. The influence of coercion and hysteria supported by the media, as well as the countless amount of disinformation that accompanied this period, was manifested in the lower vaccination rate of the population and in the a priori resistance to the measures taken to protect public health. We have even witnessed aggression, verbal and physical attacks directed at representatives of state power, health workers, police officers, members of testing and vaccination teams, etc., regardless of their personal involvement. In a pluralistic society, one would expect space for plurality on both sides of the media spectrum. Still, their sharpness and the replacement of pragmatic debates with emotional outputs evoke media competition for Attention (Liu et al., 2024).

Armed conflicts are undoubtedly a breeding ground for the creation and spread of disinformation. The lack of transparency, inaccessibility, and especially the frequent impossibility of verifying some information are great opportunities for all parties involved in the conflict. According to the current development of the conflict, it is possible to evoke sympathy or sway the public to one's side, appeal to foreign countries to obtain financial and material support, etc. Often, even after years, it takes work to prove one of the parties to the conflict to be correct and to prove the plausibility of the content presented and accepted by the warring parties. Our goal in the article is not to evaluate past or current conflicts but to point out the fact that the media, in the competitive struggle to gain the attention of the consumer, often expose the offered content with inadequate, bombastic narratives in an attempt to attract attention, regardless of the effort to find out the truth or at least warn, that the information is not verified (Harper et al., 2021).

Free and fair elections are one of the basic building blocks of democracy, which presupposes the independence and transparency of the electoral process. However, digital tools have now significantly blurred the line between real information and political campaigning and opened imaginary doors for new intrusive and opaque targeting and amplification techniques that influence voters in a hidden way. Some manipulate them (Hajdúková, 2023). According to the European Commission, such techniques limit the plurality of opinions, fragment the democratic debate and naturally increase the risk of manipulation. And this is also thanks to the spectrum of new actors who play an essential role in political campaigns. From online platforms and social media to data processing companies (European Commission, 2021).

A typical example is the case surrounding the company Cambridge Analytica, revealed in 2015, which used data on 50 million users, which it obtained from Facebook users for a purpose other than the declared one, to create personality profiles of individual users, and then, without the users' consent, sold it. Subsequently, they could be targeted to influence voters in the American election campaign. On the other hand, to gain the attention of their users, the media sometimes bring fictions of electoral fraud or feature documentaries, as was the case, for example, in connection with the lost American presidential elections in 2020. In doing so, they support, to a certain extent, the trend towards "controlling" the electoral behaviour of other people (Bond, 2023).

Social divisiveness and inciting mistrust towards institutions are breeding grounds for similar manipulations of information and the spread of disinformation, as well as direct influencing of election campaigns or lobbying, which naturally undermines citizens' trust in the integrity of elections and their results. This is also indicated by a recent Eurobarometer survey, which showed that 81% of respondents in the EU believe that foreign interference

in our democratic systems is a severe problem that needs to be tackled. Regarding general attitudes to electoral issues, 78% of respondents fear that disinformation will influence voters' decisions, 72% fear manipulation of elections through cyber-attacks, and approximately the same number of respondents (70%) also fear covert influence on elections by other countries (European Commission, 2024).

The fact that micromarketing and disinformation have become a common political strategy and cases of direct or indirect foreign interference in elections are part of the political struggle is also documented by the so-called Mueller's report on the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019), or the public version of the report on foreign threats to the 2020 US federal election (National Intelligence Council, 2021) and many others. The results achieved by targeted political micromarketing could also be observed in the referendum on withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European Union, even with the generous help of incorrect and misleading information.

Opportunities to achieve political, economic or other advantages through the manipulation of the information space by foreign state and non-state entities are thus already part of geopolitical competition. News of information manipulation and foreign interference in elections often dominate political debates before and after elections. Unfortunately, they are often presented by the media even without real evidence. In the same way, published political preferences during election campaigns do not always correspond to reality and can also be influenced to a certain extent by the narrative accompanying the political party, its program, or persons associated with it. The more media space a competitor must influence voters, the higher the probability of winning them over. And this, even though it is often meaningless or false information, is used to manipulate public opinion. Therefore, "powerful stories", "guaranteed information about a political opponent", and emotional performances play an essential role in the attention economy (Schleffer & Miller, 2021). In this case, not primarily financial profit but political profit are at stake. However, it is also a tool for attracting attention and making the medium more attractive.

Incomplete, altered or distorted information, exaggeration, emotional manipulation, arguing with statistics that do not exist or are already old but "convenient" data, denial of certain facts, fabrications, selective reporting or even conspiracy theories, all of this is part of election campaigns, but also of contemporary political life. Suppose someone presents data, fancy diagrams or graphs, or uses numbers to illustrate the topic. In that case, he usually gets attention and is convincing, even when the information presented is not true or is only partially true. Likewise, simplified data visualisation helps people automatically – without understanding the problem – assume the truth of the presented information and pay attention to it without subjecting the received information to critical analysis or verifying its truth (Soprano et al., 2024).

According to Lewandowsky et al. (2020), disinformation is often accompanied by the "illusory truth effect". This means that the more people are exposed to certain disinformation that no one disputes, the more it appears to be true, despite doubts about the source of the information. Repeated exposure to such misinformation eventually leads them to believe the claims. In this context, the question arises as to why the media usually does not distance itself from content that already raises doubts or outrage at first glance but instead shares controversial content. Is there an economic profit behind such an attention-getting approach?

The presence of intent to disseminate incomplete, misleading, distorted, altered or outright false information in real-time communications is usually difficult to identify. This is one of the reasons why any information, including disinformation, can subsequently spread further. And often even without the spreader himself believing them. Usually, content sharing is associated with expressing belonging to a certain community, nationality, political belief, sympathising with entities, or as a result of a certain social pressure, or there is a simple conformity behind it (Molina et al., 2021).

## 5. Initiatives against the spread of disinformation

The need to learn more about the possibilities of disinformation detection and interventions on social networks is increasingly emphasised, especially in relation to companies such as Alphabet (Google), Meta (Facebook) and others. They are expected to actively assist researchers in understanding how these social networks filter information. Scientific cooperation has challenges from the point of view of industry and from the point of view of the academic community. However, there is an ethical and social responsibility that goes beyond market forces for social networks to contribute this unique data to the investigation of processes that support clearing misinformation (GDI, 2020).

Although no specific public authority in the European Union would decide what is considered disinformation and what is not, even demonstrable disinformation is usually not directly sanctionable (financially, criminally), some initiatives to eliminate it are gradually emerging. The action plan of the European Union in the fight against disinformation (European Commission, 2018) brought guidelines for the duties and responsibilities of online platforms in the fight against disinformation. It continued with other formal and informal initiatives in this area.

The European Union also expressed its position in the Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022). It was the first ever instrument of its kind, which is already part of a wider regulatory framework. The Code contains 44 commitments and more than a hundred specific measures in areas such as the transparency of political advertising, the integrity of digital platforms in eliminating manipulative behaviour and misleading practices, as well as empowering users of digital services and protecting them from disinformation, as well as empowering fact-checkers and facilitating researchers' access to data in order to carry out meaningful analyses about what is happening on digital platforms. At the same time, the Code declares an effort to demonetise the spread of disinformation, i.e. an effort to eliminate financial incentives for providers of disinformation, or to ensure that advertising is prevented from being placed next to disinformation, or that advertising containing disinformation is prevented. More specifically, the appeal for adherence to the code is an effort to:

- guarantee the transparency of political advertising, that is, the proposed rules are intended to ensure the transparency of political advertising services that are provided for a fee. In principle, it is about not concealing and distorting key information, for example about financial sources and the way politicians and political entities are financed, such as the name of the advertiser, real amounts spent on political advertising, etc.;
- empower users with the aim of eliminating the use of certain targeting, amplification and optimisation techniques that are currently abused to target advertising based on the collected personal data and profile behaviour of users, which subsequently allow advertising to be tailored specifically to specific individuals or groups, mostly without their knowledge;
- improve cooperation with fact-checkers, whose task is to regularly publish impartial reports on the accuracy or inaccuracy of statements by public officials, essential institutions and other generally disseminated statements that are relevant to the company;
- facilitate the access of researchers to the data of online platforms for the purpose of analysing facts and evidence about the spread of disinformation, for the purpose of monitoring techniques and tools that are constantly changing, and for the purpose of sharing such knowledge with public authorities and the public;
- ensure the integrity of the services provided by the platforms by implementing and supporting guarantees against a list of manipulative behaviours and practices that are not allowed within their services.

The Code is supplemented by legislation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising and Regulation (EU ) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC, informally called "Digital Services Act" (DSA), hand in hand with the so-called by the "Digital Market Act" (DMA) amended by Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital

sector and amending Directives (EU) 2019/1937 and (EU) 2020/1828. They thus form a uniform set of rules for the so-called gatekeepers - large digital platforms - that apply throughout the European Union. The rules specified in the DSA concern primarily online intermediaries and platforms (online marketplaces, social networks, content sharing platforms, application stores and online platforms for travel and accommodation), respectively providers of certain services defined in the European Parliament and Council Directive (EU) 2015/1535 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 September 2015 laying down a procedure for the provision of information in the field of technical regulations and of rules on Information Society services, which establishes the procedure when providing information in the field of technical regulations and rules relating to information society services, which are normally provided for a fee, remotely, electronically and based on the recipient's request. The goal was to harmonise the rules, deal more effectively with the spread of illegal content on the Internet, and eliminate social risks that can result from the spread of disinformation. Thanks to the DMA, in the future, gatekeeper platforms will only be allowed, among other things, to track end users for targeted advertising with effective consent outside of the platform's core service.

The complete elimination of undesirable information types is naturally impossible in a liberal democratic society. In this context, however, it is very important to realise that the information's origin and the disseminators' identity are not so decisive as the message they spread. Therefore, the future of disinformation depends on the social responsibility of all media actors and their self-regulatory systems, including respect for the principles of best practices, and naturally also on individuals. A big challenge in the coming years will be effective and efficient education in media and information literacy, immanent critical thinking, and responsibility for verifying facts.

In addition, it should be noted that what is considered disinformation in the European Union is not decided by public authorities, and disinformation is also not directly sanctionable according to the above-mentioned regulations, nor is it sanctionable through other secondary legislation. It is related, among other things, to the terminological and content inconsistency, which was already mentioned at the beginning of the article. So far, the fight against disinformation has also relied heavily on the voluntary cooperation of platforms in terms of immediate action, for example against "illegal content". However, the legislation does not impose a general obligation on them to monitor the information that these providers transmit or store, or even an obligation to detect facts or circumstances indicating illegal activity proactively. On the contrary, there is room for platforms to refuse to comply with the orders of European or national authorities if they believe that they conflict with the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and information based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EUFRA, 2007, Article 11).

The task of creating a unified taxonomy has been undertaken by several private organisations, such as the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM), which brings together marketers, media agencies, media platforms, industry associations and ad technology solution providers, as well as other organisations whose the concern is to protect digital media from harmful online content and its monetisation. This means protecting against content that is not suitable for any advertising support. This includes insensitive, irresponsible and detrimental handling of debated social issues that incite conflict and verifiably false or deliberately misleading content. The goal is to create a shared understanding of what constitutes harmful and sensitive content through individual categories, determine minimum safety limits for the placement of a promoted brand ad, and identify the different levels of brand risk associated with certain content. Monitoring consists of answers to

- how safe the platform is for consumers (the number of views of malicious content as a percentage of all views);
- how safe is the platform for advertisers (number of ad impressions on harmful content as a percentage of all ad impressions);
- how effective the platform is in enforcing its security policy (total number of malicious content pieces removed and number of views);

- how prompt is the platform in correcting errors (number of user appeals and number of restorations performed by platforms (VFA, 2022).

Instructions on how to prevent companies from losing their reputation by publishing their advertising on sites with undesirable content have also been taken up by various civic initiatives. For example, in Slovakia, one of the most famous is the Konspiratori.sk website, which publishes a database of websites containing at least one of the specified criteria for the content offered, such as:

- the materials have a fraudulent and charlatan character (miracle treatment, magic preparations, etc.), where "the criterion is a contradiction with objective, scientific knowledge";
- misleading, disinformation messages and false propaganda (statements that contradict the facts, audio and video content used in a different, misleading context, possibly invented or seriously distorted events) except presented opinion articles;
- conspiracy theories and "delusions", if it is assumed that they could have more serious political, economic, and health consequences, with the exception of interesting things, mysteries, and clearly marked speculations;
- profanity, calls to violence, extremist content, spreading alarmist messages, aggressive personal attacks, defamation of minorities, races, nationalities, religious groups, etc.;
- non-respect of the basic principles of journalistic ethics (not publishing corrective reports, not removing, or not including in reports that objectively proved to be false,
- the website does not have a clear owner and authors (except for the protection of sources and pseudonyms), does not publish possible reactions of the affected party, rudely mixes news and comments, repeatedly publishes shocking false claims in order to increase traffic, which it later corrects, etc. (Konšpirátori, 2024).

## **Conclusions**

The dissemination of false, misleading, distorted, altered or fabricated information is supported by three key mechanisms, among others. These are advertising, virality and automation. It can have a range of harmful consequences, starting from disrupting the functioning of a democratic society and threatening democratic principles through increasing the polarisation of society, endangering health, damaging the environment, damaging the brand's reputation and decreasing its value, to supporting radicalism, extremism, populism, xenophobia and total breach of company security. Therefore, efforts to eliminate such consequences appear naturally at the national and transnational levels.

Initiatives to strengthen the fight against disinformation spread today, mainly via the Internet and social networks, are aimed both at inducing a multidisciplinary public discourse about the reasons that led to the decline of public trust in information from official sources and on the one hand at finding ways to disinformation (but also conspiracy theories or hoaxes) to face. At the international level, for example, the OECD (2022) formulated best practice principles for this area: transparency, inclusiveness, society-wide cooperation guided by public interest, institutionalisation, provability, timeliness, prevention, and future and professionalisation.

While at the national level, countries are taking some useful steps, starting from legislative changes through digital and media literacy programs, to research into the phenomenon of disinformation with the participation of journalists and civil society, some of the efforts, even if they represent a legitimate public interest purpose, raise legitimate concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression and violations of human rights. In addition, there are also concerns that some governments could use the issue of disinformation as a pretext to impose unreasonable restrictions on press freedom (INCL, 2022).

In this context, one of the key elements of the anti-disinformation policy will probably be not only understanding the dynamics and demonetisation of disinformation but also ensuring that the policy of combating disinformation does not become a pretext for intimidating critical voices, defaming opponents, justifying censorship and a threat

to civil discourse and electoral processes. A complicating factor is the application of the rights to information and freedom of expression on the one hand, and the application of objective but adequate metrics for reliable identification and subsequent adoption of measures to eliminate the creation and dissemination of misleading, distorting, altered and/or manipulated information on the other.

Finally, one of the great challenges of the 21st century will also be redefining the nature and functioning of welfare states in the context of the problems brought about by digitisation and artificial intelligence and focusing exclusively on limiting the spread of demonstrably wrong content. However, suppose the free exchange of views and ideas, which is one of the basic building blocks of a democratic society, is weakened or restricted. In that case, it will undoubtedly mean the inhibition of innovative procedures and the limitation of progress. In this context, it is necessary to realise that if there had not been similar confrontations in the past, we probably would not have witnessed new scientific discoveries.

If we were to use the words of the classic that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then in this context, the adoption of harsh laws with a general ban on disseminating certain information raises questions: Who should be the arbiter of the truth? What would be the criteria of falsehood? Answers to these questions do not exist in a situation where terms or definitions in disinformation are unambiguous. Therefore, public authorities try to shift regulatory solutions and moral responsibility to media operators, although they are usually only hosts, not content creators. Obviously, when attention is a rare commodity, in the context of the attention economy as a modern business model, it is unlikely to be easy at all as long as the advertising market relies on gaining attention without moral inhibitions. This is also why social network operators and representatives of the online advertising ecosystem are expected to work together to eliminate disinformation and stop their monetisation through advertising revenue. However, the current measures to solve the problem of the spread of disinformation associated with the distribution of advertising online are, for now, only an appeal rather than a real solution.

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