

NEGATIVE MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES IN PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND INDICATORS TO IDENTIFY THEM

Manual summary

BY NIKOL MARGARYAN

The objective of this research project is to examine negative manipulation techniques used by various individuals and organizations in their statements made on the Internet and the Facebook social media that gained wide public recognition, outline indicators to identify them and offer to the public an applied practical manual based on those indicators.

The research resulted in developing a guide entitled “**DETECT MANIPULATION: NEGATIVE MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES ON FACEBOOK SOCIAL MEDIA**”. It has an introduction, 4 parts, a section with texts for testing and useful references. A concise version of the Guide is presented below.

INTRODUCTION

‘Manipulation’ is one of those terms most often used nowadays in the Armenian language media and on Facebook social media. Despite this fact the term does not have a universal application. In some cases false information is understood as manipulation, in other cases, it is fabrication of facts, or one-sided interpretation, or threats of violence, etc. Cases of contradicting use of manipulation are also seen. For instance, some people believe that the advocacy against human rights is a manipulation, while the others insist that it is their advocacy. There is a lack of certainty. Nevertheless, the majority agrees that manipulation is a negative phenomenon and could negatively affect people’s perceptions and behavior.

Various analytical platforms (e.g., Detector, Fact investigation platform, Information checking center, etc.) and individual analysts are trying to clarify the boundaries of manipulation and regularly address in their publications the facts and techniques used by different politicians and organizations to manipulate the public. However, often these analyses are published after the manipulation has been used and had its negative impact on the audience. This important factor necessitates the availability of preventive videos, manuals and Guides on manipulation techniques and indicators, which will either help to avoid the next manipulation or mitigate its impact.

In the recent years media experts and representatives of political authorities quite often talk about the importance of media literacy. However, coordinated and regular media education programs are conducted within the scope of formal and informal courses mainly organized for specialized groups. In other words, the journalists and political analysts are main beneficiaries of those programs. However, it is a fact that most often the victims of manipulation are ordinary people, who are neither journalists nor political analysts, and their number is several hundred times more. It is true that from time to time some learning and advisory videos and publications on media education and various media literacy talk shows appear on the Internet and in public media. However, they do not have a coordinated and regular character. On the one hand, there is a need to increase the number and frequency of such programs and publications, on the other hand, additional measures, such as this Guide we offer to a wider readership, are needed to enhance the level of people’s awareness.

Thus, the beneficiaries of this Guide are, first and foremost, people without a sufficient level of media literacy, while the main goal of this Guide is to provide them with some level of support to avoid manipulations or mitigate their possible impact.

PART ONE: WHAT IS NEGATIVE MANIPULATION?

Many definitions related to manipulation are found in dictionaries and professional publications with different and sometimes contradicting emphases. Some forms of manipulation (such as threats, targeting gratitude and consciousness, proposing conspiracy theories) are often overlooked. More importantly, the definitions usually fail to describe the consequences of manipulation for public. By combining all rational ideas and filling in the blanks, the Guide offers the following practical definition of negative manipulation:

Negative manipulation is a way to exercise influence over human mind and emotions provoking actions and feelings that serve the manipulator's narrow personal or collective interests, do not reflect honest desires of the manipulated and contradict to public interests and fundamental human rights.

PART TWO: MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES

This section presents 18 groups of manipulation techniques. Complicated and abstract formulations found in professional literature were excluded and simple and easy to recognize indicators were used to ensure that the techniques are easy to digest. Presentation of each technique includes a description of its essence, relevant examples and the analysis thereof. The description of techniques ends with some advices with focus points requiring the reader's attention.

Manipulation techniques are the means or ways, which the manipulators use on the subjects of manipulation to provoke actions desirable for them or impose inaction. Professional literature describes around thirty means of manipulating people with the majority of them being linked to mass media, commercial advertising or narrow interpersonal relations. Some of those means are either not used on Facebook social media or used scarcely. For instance, 'obfuscation', 'creating impression of immediate participation', 'boomerang effect', etc.


On the other hand, some of the techniques that the researchers examined to find manipulations are using allegories and metaphors with an apparent objective to show their elegance. For example, 'black information', 'glaring uncertainty', 'trojan horse', 'sacrificial cow', 'poisonous sandwich', 'sweet sandwich', 'sitting carriage', etc. Some techniques have in their wording the manipulators' ultimate goal difficult to guess up front. For example, 'blockade of critical thinking', 'social approval', etc. These circumstances make it difficult for ordinary audience without professional education to identify manipulation.

Two important factors deserve attention:

- 1 . Most of the techniques presented in the Guide are used both in negative and positive manipulations. However, the frequency of their use varies. For instance, labeling and threats are most often used in negative manipulations.

- 2 . Manipulation techniques or indicators may be interchangeable but more often they complement each other and could be found in the same texts. Despite this fact, it is better to introduce them separately. Thus, they are presented one by one.

1. Fact-related manipulations




The fact is an event or reality that can be checked. The following can be deemed as facts: video, audio, printed and handwritten texts, documentary records, laboratory test results, survey and interview data, etc.

Most of techniques found in manipulations are related to facts. On Facebook social media, where the users are often free from legal and moral liability for their posts and shares, the facts are used arbitrarily.

There are about ten fact-related manipulation techniques and 7 of them are found more often:

1. 1 Unfounded statements and judgments are made;
1. 2 Judgments and assumptions are presented as facts;
1. 3 False or invented facts are used;
1. 4 Facts are partially or fully fabricated;
1. 5 A fact is taken out of context or turned into a unit of information by neglecting its link with other facts in the same text. In this case, the fact is turned into a unit of information or linked to other facts;
1. 6 An authority is invoked instead of the fact. It could be a book (the Bible), famous persons, eminent countries, etc.;
1. 7 Some reassuring words are used instead of the fact ('I am sure', 'everyone knows', etc.)

2. Manipulations related to sources




Facts and messages claiming to be reliable must refer to specific sources. Such sources include witnesses, documentary video, audio and printed materials, professional literature, legal acts, agreements, news and programs. In short, anything that can be used to prove that a fact exists.

Among manipulations related to sources 4 types of techniques stand out:

2. 1 Fact is presented without any reference to the source;
2. 2 False sources are cited;
2. 3 Reference is made to a "yellow" source;
2. 4 Pretend they have a source. In many texts often we can find statements insisting that the sources are available but without disclosing them. For instance, according to 'our sources' or 'our information', etc.

3. Manipulations related to concepts




Concept is a primitive form of thought about the object (objectified reality) with its essential characteristics. Manipulation techniques presented below essentially deal with the manipulations related to concepts. Key concepts are used to form the proper message and narrative of a text. They are used to interpret and evaluate specific events and systems. Determined by context, the concepts may be interpreted differently. Thus, the authors need to explain what is the meaning of concepts they intend to use in their messages.

In general, there are three main manipulation techniques related to concepts:

3. 1 Concept is used without defining it;
3. 2 Concept is distorted or substituted by an arbitrary definition;

3.3 The meaning of the concept is being restricted or narrowed.

4. Manipulations with comparisons




Comparison is a qualitative or quantitative juxtaposition of various characteristics of two or more objects with a goal to demonstrate the advantage of the one over the other or prove the similarities or equivalence of these objects.

In the texts using comparisons in manipulation techniques the following are found most often:

- 4.1 Incommensurable things are compared;
- 4.2 Differences are equated;
- 4.3 Different aspects of the same phenomenon are contrasted.

5. Changing thematic line



Departures from the thematic line or issues discussed are found in a number of texts and posts. Sometimes it is done intentionally with specific objectives, e.g., to distort the attention of audience from undesirable facts and move the topic in the desired direction, conceal something important, push the topic into a deadlock or discredit someone. In the Armenian texts we encounter the following forms of the “changing thematic line” technique:


- 5.1 Discussion matter is generalized via inclusion of other issues;
- 5.2 Fully changing the discussion matter;
- 5.3 References are made to the merits of a person related to the discussion matter such as titles, rewards, services to the Homeland. Referring to them is a positive manipulation technique, when used in certain contexts, e.g., birthday, anniversary, holiday, etc. However, it cannot have a decisive role for a court judgment because all are equal before the law. In the post-revolutionary times such references are seen quite often during court trials of several high-rank officials (R. Kocharyan, M. Grigoryan, A. Minasyan, Y. Khachaturov and others).

6. Improper address



Manipulations often vocalize accusations and demands addressed, however, to wrong recipients. Sometimes it is done intentionally to discredit certain state institutions and public officials as well as to move the discussion matter into another context.

7. Improper positioning or imitation




Manipulators often position themselves as humanists, they call for tolerance or talk about unfailing love for Homeland, fight against crimes and protection of human rights. In such cases, it is difficult to identify manipulations by examining the content of message or facts, concepts, comparisons and comments as well as expressions and words used therein. Thus, a last indicator or tool to identify manipulation could be details from the author’s biography or finding coherence between his/her behavior, actions and words.

8. Absolute expressions and words



Absolute expressions or words exclude the existence of another or different such as all, the whole world, the entire nation, everybody, nobody, none, always, never, etc. The use of such expressions in manipulations is found quite often.


9. Labeling or discrediting expressions



Labeling or discrediting expressions include the use of nicknames, mangled first and last names, compromising words, mocking someone's activities or behavior, giving them negative agnomens. The above are mainly used to discredit the addressees and undermine them and their activities in the eyes of public. G. Grachev and I. Melnik argue that "high efficiency of ridiculing technique, in particular, is determined by indirectly influencing low conscious, unconscious and subconscious psychological realms, where the person has a low level of psychological protection. Where the direct critique and negative influence are suppressed by psychological barriers, a human being's protective reactions are sharply reduced against influence exercised via humor."

Labeling (except for positive labels) has negative nature because discreditation is a negative phenomenon itself. Besides, they provoke aggression or [loosen](#) motivation for ex-officio actions.

10. Repetitions



One of the techniques used by manipulators is manifold repetition of specific words, phrases or periodic repetition of specific texts. The repetitions are used by manipulators to strengthen certain ideas or perceptions in the memory of audience. I. Makishvili believes that "the goal of repetition technique is to artificially create a "truth", which many people will accept as reliable..."


As time goes by, people start to believe in the thing that initially looked nonsense to them. One of the reasons is that human beings memorize or forget information unevenly. We lose major part of what we hear or see already in the first hour, unless it is repeated. Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, after multiple experiments found in 1885 so-called "the forgetting curve", which shows how long the human brain can retain information digested only once.

11. Threats of violence



Direct or indirect threats of violence are found in a number of texts. The essence of this technique is to present an apparent threat of using violence against an individual or a group of people with or without a full description of how it will be done. Whether these threats are followed by violent acts or not; nevertheless such threats are negative manipulation techniques designed to spread fear and discredit certain individuals and organizations. Another immediate outcome of threat is an aggressive response by the addressees of that threat.


12. Fortune-telling and sorcery



The fortune-telling is predicting future events with use of some irrational methods. Political predictions are usually about bad and seldom about good or neutral things. Our examples are predictions of adverse prospects or, in other words, woeful prophecies.


The sorcery, on the one hand, is an action or several actions to influence the future using irrational methods, and, on the other hand, is a way of finding and halting the spells and malevolent influences using irrational methods. In this section we consider examples related to the latter form of sorcery. Both fortune telling and sorcery are manipulation techniques since they can provoke people to approve actions, which in sound mind they would not endorse as these actions are immoral and inhumane. Woeful prophecies, in particular, are negative manipulation techniques playing with the human fear and creating panic. Threats are widely used in political and militaristic propaganda. It is easy to manage and control frightened people. The manipulators actually bet on this aspect.

13. Manipulations with numbers and statistics



In social and natural sciences the term 'statistics' means analysis of mass phenomena based on application of probabilistic theory methods. Round figures and statistics are used to create an impression of progress, achievements, sustainable development trends or expected disaster and hardships either to inspire society with optimism or provoke disobedience and aggression. Statistics and numbers are also used for discrediting purposes.

14. Use of metaphors and allegories




In some texts, specifically political, metaphors and allegories are found.

Metaphor is a linguistic device used to make the speech figurative or poetic. Metaphors, for instance, include uses of a name, word or expression differently from its usual meaning and in place of another name, word or expression. Metaphors are based on the similarity of internal or external characteristics of objects or phenomena and their functional unity. For instance, in the phrase "heart of gold" the latter is replacing the word "precious", while in "hard luck" the word "hard" is a synonym of failure.


Allegory is a form of fiction in which aspects of reality, events or objects are described indirectly through imageries using uniquely constructed narrative. For instance, the red rose is an allegory for love, the lion is an image of strength, rabbit – for cowardice, bee – for diligence.

15. One-sided interpretation



Facts and phenomena in manipulative texts are usually presented with one-sided interpretations, i.e., only good or bad traits are emphasized. In reality, there are only very few phenomena or facts, which are either absolutely good or absolutely bad. Everything has its positive and negative sides. Critical texts are dominated by negative comments. If no single positive comment is found then we talk about a one-sided negative interpretation. The opposite trend is often found in eulogies (praising texts).

16. Provocative titles and names



Manipulators often use provocative tricks to catch the attention of audience. There are two main types of such techniques: provocative titles and provocative names. Very often the content found under those titles or pages contains either discrediting propaganda or threats.

16.1 PROVOCATIVE TITLES

Provocative publications often have in their titles “urgent”, “breaking”, “bad news”, “shocking news”, “you have not seen anything like this” and other similar catchy words or phrases. Those are otherwise called “click-baits”. When finding such calls, it is difficult, indeed, to overcome the temptation and refrain from reading the content.


16.2 PROVOCATIVE NAMES

Not only the titles of posts, articles, video and audio materials provoke the readers but also names of various pages, which often belong to fake news agencies or individual users. At the first glance, the accounts have a financial goal, i.e., to attract funds and motivate advertisers through likes and views. However, in quite a few cases these accounts use disinformation and anti-propaganda to achieve their goal. For instance, the following accounts are engaged in such activities on the Armenian Facebook social media:

Lustration <https://www.facebook.com/lyustracia/>, Discover <https://www.facebook.com/bacahaytum/>;

Uncovering the scumbags <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100021817898312> etc.


17. Likes and shares



Posts, videos, internet publications get views, shares and likes. In quite a number of cases this has an artificial character and achieved through support of fake users or own followers. So, the number of views does not necessarily show the number of those, who watched it until the end or, if a written text is considered, the number of those, who read it all. Some users simply open and close the page. Others read few lines or hear few words. Regardless of that it is counted as viewing.

Similarly, the likes do not necessarily speak about the number of those, who liked the content. Some like because of close relations, others out of respect for the author, or others like because the author liked their posts, or others bookmark them to read or view later and ... forget. Yet, another group clicks likes to guarantee sufficient numbers. The number of shares again does not necessarily witness about the importance of the post. A careful look will help to note that the posts are usually and predominantly shared by the same group of people or the same bloggers and news sites.

18. Manipulations with group stereotypes



Group stereotypes are relatively stable perceptions and beliefs related to the identity, historical past and symbols of a group blended with some emotionality. Stereotypes are built of signs and symbols giving rise to positive or negative emotions. This fact, per se, often makes stereotypes a target for manipulations.

18.1 WORDS AND PHENOMENA REFUSED BY GROUP STEREOTYPES

Words creating negative associations are linked to stereotypes formed by historical experiences coming from certain events and phenomena with use of propagandistic techniques. Among Armenians, for instance, such stereotypes are Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turks, etc.

18.2 WORDS AND PHENOMENA APPRECIATED BY GROUP STEREOTYPES

Words and expressions connotated with the identity and security (Armenian, family, tradition, language, army, Armenian history, state borders, flag, coat of arms, Armenian Church, etc.) are used.

The goal is to achieve specific results and distract the attention of audience from certain processes to other domains by influencing group stereotypes. One of the success keys for this technique is targeted manipulation with the human feelings of duty, shame and pride.

PART THREE: WHY WE ARE BEING MANIPULATED?

Knowing manipulation techniques and indicators is necessary but not sufficient to avoid negative manipulations. Our protection depends on the knowledge of other factors as well. They are related to specific features of information environment, or our cultural clichés, or our psychological predispositions.

El Ries and Jack Trout, marketing specialists, call the modern society “over-communicated”. E. Aronson and A. Praktanis note that a modern recipient of information is so overloaded with messages that he/she finds difficult to spend sufficient mental energy required to understand many current important issues.

However, not all the people need to understand modern complex issues. Many of us just look for the confirmation of our biased approaches in available information. We refuse to see, hear or read whatever is not matching our biased approaches or predispositions. We refuse to contemplate about them.

This predisposition of finding confirmation for our approaches in information contributes to such attitudes, which make us vulnerable to manipulators. Statements like “see, I was right” presuppose that someone takes a stance of knowing everything in advance that he/she is never wrong and it is impossible to deceive him/her. However, often we are being deceived exactly when we are confident that we shouldn't be.

The antinomy of being over anxious not to make mistakes or being wrong has collective rather than individual reasons. For the majority of people it is more important not to be wrong in the eyes of others rather than in own eyes. Similarly, being right assumes that others believe you are right. For this very reason we are inclined to communicate and interact with people, who share our positions. Most of our friends on social media are people, who endorse our positions regardless of the facts our positions rely on or the line of reasoning they follow. Thus, we are not safe from manipulations through fabrication of certain facts by our very friends who share our position.

Another vulnerable target emerges when facts are not given due importance. We make assumptions and guesses when the situation is unclear or uncertain; despite the existence of certain facts, which, if combined, could have led to an opposite opinion and help to clarify the situation. This predisposition, of course, is a wonderful target for street fortune tellers and coffee readers as well as political manipulators to ensure a maximum number of followers.

P. Lazarsfeld, a media sociologist, discovered that many people are not direct consumers of information and to navigate in uncertain situations they look for a help from “opinion leaders” or mediators, i.e., authorities. Informal leaders, politicians, representatives of religious organizations, culture, academia, arts, servicepersons, athletes and others may act as mediators in various situations and social groups. By looking at dissemination of different comments on social media it could be noted that in some groups there are more active users often reacting to various events and their positions find large support among the users of that group. It is no coincidence that the majority of these active and authoritative users are engaged in various manipulations.

An individual, who is looking for confirmation of his/her predisposition in information, is in search of two indicators: similar and different. No matter how diverse the information and the comments are,

he/she classifies them in two groups, i.e., similar and dissimilar. Similar are comments that confirm the predispositions, dissimilar are the opposite. They are not simply different but opposite. A person, who is looking for the confirmation of predispositions, is inclined to contrast different things. His/her thinking is dichotomic and hierarchic, i.e., this is good – that is bad, this is important – that is unimportant. Manipulators, naturally, cannot leave this distinctive thinking unnoticed and they use it in their manipulations the technique of comparing and contrasting different things or subordinating them to each other.

A person, who comes across comments or facts disapproving the predispositions, denies them altogether in the same way he/she refuses people, who dislike his/her behavior. The person, who believes in his/her infallibility, will never look for the reasons of failures in himself/herself. It is everybody else's fault; however, they are the reason for success. Psychologists call this phenomenon the external locus of control. Such people are trying to control and change the external factors instead of changing themselves. This, on the one hand, leads to a desire to manipulate others and, on the other hand, being a form of vanity, increases the risk of being manipulated. As a consequence of this, the group stereotypes are often being manipulated by emphasizing their uniqueness and splendor, on the one hand, and by belittling the opponent.

Other factors weakening the defense against manipulations are comprehensive and psychological. In the 30s of the last century the US Institute of Propaganda developed a “propaganda alphabet”, where creating a delusion of common platform was one of the key techniques. This trick is used in an attempt to convince the consumer of information that all his/her friends, neighbors have already selected the proposed idea or team and he/she could be late or remain alone or miss the best of lack.

Another reason for being defenseless against manipulations is the human search for inspiration. There is an opinion that people who get inspired the most are those who are unsure of themselves, easy to panic and highly sensitive. According to this view the children are more inclined to being inspired than the adults, women are more sensitive than men, etc. However, depending on the state of mind, all the people could be susceptible to inspiration. For instance, we all are sensitive to inspiration in situations of nostalgia, extreme agitation, severe stress or loss of cognition. Our critical thinking is evidently blocked in such situations and we rely on our emotions and subconsciousness, which could be abused by experienced manipulators.

The sense of dignity is one of the most important human attributes. It is one of the most important human needs. We all want to be respected, don't want to be fooled, want our rights to be recognized regardless of what our dignity is made of and how our rights are formulated. It could also be a collective feeling such as the pride of nation, national rights. Nazis, for example, believed that Germans have the right to dominate over other nations. If some individuals or media regularly repeat that we are being fooled, our rights are being infringed or we are being insulted, this will likely make us anxious, we will feel offended and, consequently, open for calls to stand up and fight for our rights and restore respect for us.

Nevertheless, the primary human needs are security and food. Manipulators, who know this, often threaten us that war is inevitable and famine is coming. In this case as well as when the dignity is manipulated the critical thinking often shuts down. We quit analyzing the facts, while fear and panic make us focus on emotional commentaries and sceneries presented to us by manipulators.

One of the key targets for manipulation is the feeling of gratitude. In many cultures the ladder of gratitude is taken by those who endangered their lives or sacrificed them for the sake of others. So, the heroes, usually, play a key role in manipulation themes. Manipulators often encourage to subdue the facts of injustice and unlawfulness of their defendants or proteges to their historical deeds. Those

who refuse are often threatened to be labeled as ungrateful and traitor. The sense of duty is also one of the most often used manipulation techniques in the international relation.

Another universal human feeling is compassion or remorse, which could be a target of manipulation in various relations. We all are hear from childhood that we must not bully the little ones, the hungry must be fed, the elderly must be provided assistance and many other advices. When politicians or military leaders are involved in scandals or litigations, they often use this technique and speak about their diseases, sudden or hidden from the relatives, while the army of their followers provide for mass manipulations with the feeling of compassion.

PART FOUR: PECULIARITIES OF MANIPULATION ON FACEBOOK SOCIAL MEDIA

Based on interviews with media experts dealing with manipulations and our own observations, this part of the Guide presents specific features of manipulations on Facebook social media and different ways to mitigate their impact. In terms of manipulations, the social media, specifically Facebook social networking service, and the traditional media, in particular their electronic news sites, printed and audio and video materials, are not very different. As noted by the experts in this field, the topics most often manipulated in these two media are the same: national security issues, rights of sexual minorities, importance of the Church. Raising the living standards and reducing the emigration trends can also be added to this list. Many traditional media outlets have their Facebook accounts, where they post the same products they create and disseminate via own media outlets outside the social media. Of course, many manipulation techniques used in the content created outside the Facebook are automatically moved to social media environment.

Social media provides opportunities for expanding the scope of manipulations, using more manipulation techniques as well as more rapidly disseminating the manipulations. New manipulation techniques emerge on the Facebook not found or almost unnoticed in the traditional media. Expanded scope of manipulations on the Facebook is determined by the absence of several restrictions applied to traditional media regulated by the Republic of Armenia Law on Mass Media (2003) and by internal censorship rules. The experts argue that such restrictions are the liability for disinformation, unfounded information, discreditation, calls for violence, discrimination propaganda identified in the content of information or, in case of complaints against them, the publication of retraction. These principles are not observed on the Facebook social media because their enforcement is hampered by certain difficulties. For instance, significant efforts are required to complain against posts that preach discrimination and ban them, especially if the posts are in Armenian language where the Facebook algorithm for detecting discrimination has problems with identifying them.

Facebook is also is need for professionalism of content developers. Everyone can write posts using whatever vocabulary and grammar they want. The lines between a journalist and a non-journalist disappear. Everyone becomes a media content developer. Today many users, who regularly publish posts on the Facebook are better known than experienced authors writing well-grounded and comprehensive analytical articles for traditional media.

Another problem, in specific cases, is the impossibility of checking and verifying the content of information and its source as well as lack of referencing option, which is not an option for traditional media. A user can edit Facebook posts many times or discretionary delete them from the Facebook page. In such cases, the only option to fix and then bring a complaint against that is taking a screenshot of the post, which is not always done.

The above mentioned lack of restrictions on the Facebook, in turn, adversely affects the content of traditional media. It happens both directly and indirectly. Firstly, the Facebook is gradually gaining more authority and influence in the common media domain and the audience learn about the lion share of events and comments thereof from social media. Taking into account this trend, the traditional media outlets create own Facebook accounts. Some media outlets (experts call them “mushroom”, “fake” or “provisional” media) are founded right on Facebook.

The direct influence of Facebook on the principles and content of traditional media is evident through the following trend: the number of traditional media outlets, which include in their content Facebook posts or events unfolding therein is growing. Using the advantages of this trend, some news sites, to make their propaganda policy more effective, create their media content on Facebook social media by asking various users to write articles and then moving this content to their news sites.

It is an undisputed fact that social media, on the one hand, made information more accessible and, on the other hand, it is almost impossible to hide from information. Any time signing in to our Facebook page, we find our news feed full of diverse information and it happens independently from our will. In addition, some are shown more often than the others. About two decades ago only formal sources (TV channels, printed and electronic newspapers) were providing information about the events happening in the country and you were supposed to wait until they are published, then you had to search for their domains on the Internet and pay for information. Moreover, political, economic, sports and other information were often divided either between different pages or different broadcasting hours. In Facebook newsfeed all information appears in a chaotic way and one page turns into a lengthy hypertext.

Information supplied on Facebook by traditional media is topped by voluminous comments of individual users, which are often simply reprinted or reproduced (including Facebook lives) on various translator news sites and again return to the Facebook newsfeed with slight modifications. Facebook has now turned into a gigantic newsfeed environment. It is even more difficult to discern manipulations in this context. Often, people have no time to get into the depths of information they consume. Whether we like it or not, it seems their main task is to know about many things rather than receive answers to the questions like “why these things happened?” or “did they happen at all?”

Despite the fact that nearly all formal and informal news sites have Facebook accounts and disseminate publications with advertisement links, nevertheless, the individual users circulate them even more intensively. Many people learn about media news from posts on their friends’ pages, especially those, who make lengthy comments on the posts they share. It seems that these people act like censors of these publications. By following them some users are able to decide what publications of which source are valuable and what is or is not worth reading. Some of the followers simply do not read the shared content and limit themselves to the comments of their more active user friend. Using famous definition of American sociologist P. Lazarsfeld, these users are “opinion leaders” who simply moved to the virtual social media and became readily accessible to people who are not interested in or have no time for getting firsthand information or have difficulties with that.

Such “opinion leaders” exercise more influence on virtual social media not only because they are more informed and able to post convincing comments, but also due to technical opportunities offered by Facebook, i.e., the option to like and share posts and posted materials. Number of likes and shares shown under the posts are important indicators for many Armenian-language Facebook users to trust the content and have some reverence for its author. This, in turn, builds the trust towards the content of the comment. Obviously, the “opinion leaders” often use this fact to artificially add the number of likes and shares. Tricks such as creating “fake” users, asking friends for support and other crafty tools are deployed. In addition to what was said, these techniques help to increase the number of followers,

who are unaware and have no critical thinking but want to be part of majority or to be on the “sitting carriage”.

Experts offer different options to mitigate manipulation opportunities: from general education courses and video materials enhancing the media literacy of citizens to improving the quality of teaching certain subjects in the schools (Reasoning, Armenian language, Biology, Physics, History) and developing critical thinking and, finally, expanding the regulatory role of the state institutions in media sector.

Strengthening the supervision at various institutional levels (state authorities, Facebook management, partner organizations) and improving the role of traditional media may, indeed, have some positive effect on limiting the spread of different manipulation techniques on Facebook and mitigating their influence. Similarly, arrangement of media literacy and supplementary (language, reasoning, biology, physics, psychology) courses at various levels (general education, informal courses, TV and radio programs) may also be of key importance. However, an increasing role played by virtual social media in life of modern societies, on the one hand, and their enhanced technical capacities, on the other hand, support the use of new manipulation techniques and invention of crafty ways for disseminating them. These trends, noticed long ago, require rapid response measures, which sluggish organizations are often unable to implement. Regular bulletins and analyses presenting newly discovered indicators for identification of manipulations, new targets and expected effects are required to update social media users about the emergence of new manipulation techniques and new manipulators.

TEXTS FOR TESTS

The readers are offered 15 test texts to use analyzed examples of manipulation techniques, focus points and other factors contributing to manipulations presented in this Guide to identify, if desired, what kind of manipulation techniques are used in these texts.

USEFUL BOOKS

The readers are offered a list of popular science publications related to this topic