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Pseudo-Authorities As A Manipulation Tool In The News Coverage Of “Sputnik V”

ABSTRACT

The present article is devoted to the issues of public opinion manipulation in the post-Covid era. Within the framework of the study, the author introduces the concept of “pseudo-authority” which is defined as a rhetorical strategy used by journalists with the aim of the manipulation of the Internet news reports that contain either appeals to non-experts' opinions or no indication of the authoritative source of knowledge so that the information is perceived by the audience as the truth and does not require evidence. The study is also focused on the distinction between appeals to authority and pseudo-authority, which is vital for developing skills of media literacy. Through the discourse analysis of the news stories about the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V” extracted from highly circulated British and American online newspapers, it is revealed that there are three main types of appeals to pseudo-authorities in Internet news discourse: appeals to “nominal” and “implicit” pseudo-authorities as well as appeals to “pseudo-visibility”. The study found that these appeals are used with the aim of political decision-making, enhancing or discrediting the image of the country as well as polarizing social groups in digital information warfare. The results of the research can be applied in the fields of linguistics, political and media studies.

KEY WORDS

Media Literacy. Pseudo-authority. Coronavirus. Covid-19. Sputnik V. Manipulation. Rhetorical strategy. Internet news discourse.

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the outbreak of Covid-19 has become a new global threat which has fundamentally changed all spheres of human life and which has led to unprecedented challenges to lifestyles, behaviours and business practices.¹ In such uncertain times the role of mass media has become quintessential in terms of informing the public on the pandemic. A global epidemic of misinformation or “infodemic”, spreading rapidly through social media platforms and other news outlets, has posed a serious new problem to the whole world and, first and foremost, to the media and public spheres.²

Recent studies carried out suggest that during the Covid-19 crisis “journalists found themselves in a vulnerable position within the communication ecology and sought to mitigate the forces challenging their work as they sought to reverse the flow of misinformation”.³ It is evident that journalism has been largely affected by the pandemic. On the one hand, much has been written about the positive effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the media sector, including citizens turning to traditional media institutions to obtain reliable information. Media coverage of coronavirus news also seems to have had a significant positive impact on protective behaviours and pandemic transmission, helping to prevent the spread of the disease.⁴ However, on the other hand, a recent study shows that news stories about Covid-19 induced fear and caused psychological stress,⁵ which indicates the media’s vulnerable and arguable role during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the print media sector was largely affected by closing newspapers in various countries for fear of their contribution to the spread of infection.

Another factor which gained media attention and contributed to the increasing global concern in the media and public spheres is the fast development and global distribution of vaccines against Covid-19. The arrival of the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V” or “Gam-Covid-Vac”, which was developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute, part of Russia’s Ministry of Health, and is regarded as the first vaccine against Covid-19 registered on 11 August 2020, was initially met with controversy and caused heavy skepticism and serious concerns about its efficacy among many politicians, scientists, journalists as well as the international community since it was rolled out before its final trial. Though it was scientifically proved in the article of the oldest, most respected and widely read medical journal *The Lancet* that the “Sputnik V” vaccine was 91.6% effective⁶ and with more than 40 countries having approved it for their use so far, it has not yet been approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Meanwhile, the efficacy and validity of the “Sputnik V” vaccine concern not only the scientific world but also political and media organizations. Many politically biased media outlets started to criticize and politicize the promotion of the Russian vaccine, viewing it as a geopolitical “soft-power weapon” aimed

¹ GUPTA, S. D.: Coronavirus Pandemic: A Serious Threat to Humanity. In *Journal of Health Management*, 2020, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 115.

² ZAROCOSTAS, J.: How to Fight an Infodemic. In *The Lancet*, 2020, Vol. 395, No. 10225, p. 676. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30461-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30461-X/fulltext)>.

³ PERREAULT, M. F., PERREAULT, G. P.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 976.

⁴ CAO, Q. et al.: The Role of Media Coverage on Pandemic Containment: Empirical Analysis of the COVID-19 Case. In *PACIS 2020 Proceedings*. Dubai, UAE : Association for Information Systems, 2020, p. 162. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://aisel.aisnet.org/pacis2020/162/>>.

⁵ MHEIDLY, N., FARES, J.: Leveraging Media and Health Communication Strategies to Overcome the COVID-19 Infodemic. In *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 2020, Vol. 41, p. 412.

⁶ LOGUNOV, D. Y. et al.: Safety and Efficacy of an rAd26 and rAd5 Vector-based Heterologous Prime-boost COVID-19 Vaccine: An Interim Analysis of a Randomised Controlled Phase 3 Trial in Russia. In *The Lancet*, 2021, Vol. 397, No. 10275, p. 671.

at advancing the image of Russia on the global political arena⁷ as well as discrediting Western vaccines and seeking to divide the European bloc amidst the Covid-19 crisis.⁸

In the post-truth era, which is characterized by the ignorance of rational arguments and by appeals to emotions, the diffusion of online media and social media platforms as well as the proliferation of online user-generated news have led both to opportunities in fast distribution and sharing scientific data as well as the spread of personal opinions which often have no relation to real facts or scientific knowledge. In fact, objective facts no longer play the role of a key to attracting news audiences.⁹ It is also believed that arguments based on facts will not convince people if that information is contrary to a person's world view.¹⁰ The readers tend to trust opinion leaders or those people who appear to be experts or authorities more than real facts. Thus, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic the sharing of scientific data in the media has two aspects: the presence or absence of "filters" capable of fact-checking the reliability of the information and increasing individual responsibility for making information public and disseminating it.¹¹

Furthermore, due to the birth of the post-truth era and the proliferation of social media there have been a great deal of lies, hoaxes, disinformation and conspiracy theories with propaganda and manipulation being the key features here.¹² As a result, many people all over the world have lost confidence in most governmental institutions as well as media outlets. This process is accompanied by a decline in the authority of social and political subjects who were once widely recognized as "authorities" and role models and a decline of public trust in traditional (mainstream) media. Hence, massive online consumption of conspiracy-driven and unverified news which often contains sensational and viral content has made modern media vulnerable to manipulation, which has contributed to increased disinformation, the declining distrust in news sources and further radicalisation of society.¹³ As Helvoort and Hermans note, "the spread of fake news is considered a new threat for democracy and civic participation in a lot of European countries".¹⁴

In general, one of the main aims of mass media is to share information with the public and objectively assess socially significant events and phenomena, which is particularly important during a public health crisis. However, the vague origin and nature of Covid-19 and the controversy and inconsistency of the scientific data have created new challenges both for journalists and researchers in providing credible and accurate information about it, thus making news stories difficult to keep up with from a journalist's perspective, which, in its turn, makes the readers feel confused about the provided information and distrust the media source on the

⁷ VARGINA, V.: Sputnik V Vaccine as a Soft-Power Instrument of Russia. In *Journal of Governance and Politics*, 2020, Vol. 7, No. 2. No pagination. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://sgpjournals.mgimoru/2020/2020-7/sputnik-v-vaccine-soft-power-instrument-of-russia>>.

⁸ STOICESCU, K.: *Sputnik V is a Geopolitical Soft-power Weapon*. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://icds.ee/en/sputnik-v-is-a-geopolitical-soft-power-weapon/>>.

⁹ TENEVA, E.: The Rhetoric of Political Emotions in the Internet News Discourse. In *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies*, 2021, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 126. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://galacticamedia.com/index.php/gmd/article/view/146/119>>.

¹⁰ HERMANS, M., VAN HELVOORT, J.: Effectiveness of Educational Approaches to Elementary School Pupils (11 Or 12 Years Old) to Combat Fake News. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 40.

¹¹ ORSO, D. et al.: Infodemic and the Spread of Fake News in the COVID-19-era. In *European Journal of Emergency Medicine: Official Journal of the European Society for Emergency Medicine*, 2020, Vol. 27, No. 5, p. 327.

¹² MORAVČÍKOVÁ, E.: Media Manipulation and Propaganda in the Post-Truth Era. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 25.

¹³ MARWICK, A., LEWIS, R.: *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>>.

¹⁴ HERMANS, M., VAN HELVOORT, J.: Effectiveness of Educational Approaches to Elementary School Pupils (11 Or 12 Years Old) to Combat Fake News. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 39.

whole. In this sense, due to social media danger and the probable harm of fake news about Covid-19 the role of media literacy has become quintessential in developing newsreaders' evaluation skills necessary to understand how mass media direct their attention and to be able to critically analyze media messages and their profound impact, which is one of the key tasks of media literacy.¹⁵ Therefore, all these factors combined have led to the fact that it is necessary to carry out a thorough and comprehensive study of the manipulative tools, rhetorical strategies and their language markers used for manipulating a mass addressee in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. In our research we will focus on the appeals to "pseudo-authority" or "false" authority and consider them in the context of false news as one of the "threats" to democracy and the principle of objectivity in journalism. However, first and foremost, these appeals are worth investigating from an educational point of view. Familiarity with the manipulation tools used in news discourse and designing educational literacy programs aimed at developing critical skills and competence in distinguishing between fake and credible Covid-19 media messages and critically evaluating media content for all people is relevant and essential especially in the new media infodemic ecosystem.¹⁶

2. Research Objective and Methodology

Within the framework of this study, it is hypothesized that appeals to pseudo-authorities have become one of the most common tools for manipulating public opinion in modern Internet news discourse. The research aim is to provide new insights into the understanding of the notion of pseudo-authorities and their impact in the news coverage of the vaccine "Sputnik V" vaccine. There are several research objectives which facilitate the achievement of the research aim, which are as follows:

- a) to analyze appeals to authority and pseudo-authority within the framework of the author-audience relationship;
- b) to classify the types of authority and pseudo-authority in modern Internet news discourse;
- c) to identify the role of pseudo-authorities in the news coverage of the "Sputnik V" vaccine from a rhetorical viewpoint;
- d) to detect the language markers used for public opinion manipulation.

To do this, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) and content analysis. For the purpose of our study we analyzed more than 150 news stories about "Sputnik V" extracted from the online versions of the highly-circulated British and American newspapers ("The Times", "The Guardian", "The Independent", "The Telegraph", "BBC news", "The New York Times", "The Washington Post" and "The Wall Street Journal") which were published between 2020 and 2021 and are considered to be highly reputable papers, which contributes to the reliability of the research. The news stories containing information about "Sputnik V" were collected using the LexisNexis database as a data collection tool. Content analysis was used to make inferences about the rhetorical potential of the appeals to pseudo-authorities in Internet news discourse.

3. Literature Review

Undoubtedly, the processes of the rapid digitalisation of mass media as well as mediatization of politics have modified the pragmatic goals and attitudes of the participants in mass communication. The binary category "addresser/addressee" has undergone a significant

¹⁵ BIELIK, P., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: Explanatory Journalism – A New Way How to Communicate in Digital Era. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 25.

¹⁶ JORMAND, H. et al.: A Qualitative Study on People's Experiences of Covid-19 Media Literacy. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 39.

transformation and is of particular importance to the scientists studying argumentation in Internet news discourse. Though the author-audience relationship has been studied over the centuries, there is still much to learn about this relationship, especially in the context of online communication.

Recent studies show that modern media discourse is characterized by heightened interactivity and a blurring division between author and audience. Modern audiences tend to “engage with texts in digital forms and generate their own content, which makes it difficult for researchers to capture how the people interact within technologically mediated contexts”.¹⁷ It is also noteworthy that the study of the binary categories “addresser/addressee” and “producer/consumer” of media content is impossible without considering another important text-forming category - the category of authority which is associated with the communicative status of the participants in communication. It indicates the relationship between the participants of communication, regulates the process of communication between communicants and directs it in the right direction: either the reader accepts the author’s position and agrees with them, or the author takes the side of the reader and identifies their position with the position of the reader.¹⁸

In general, the author-audience relationship dates back to the founders of rhetoric such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, who laid a foundation of the “rhetorical triangle” which is made up of three basic components: topic (*logos*), author (*ethos*), and audience (*pathos*). These components are displayed in Figure 1.

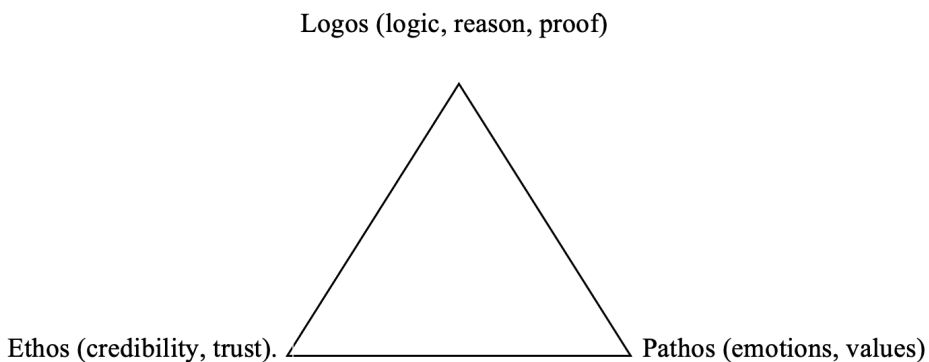


FIGURE 1: The “rhetorical triangle”

Source: EnglishWithLatini.com. [online]. [2021-06-14]. Available at: <<https://sites.google.com/site/englishwithlatinicom/writing/persuasive-writing/ethos-pathos-logos>>.

According to Aristotle, “the orator has to instill an attitude oriented toward following the rule of law”.¹⁹ In other words, the main aim of the speaker (author) is to influence the audience in such a way that would make it accept the view that is advantageous for him/her. The speaker (author) would appeal to the logic inherent in the subject matter (*logos*), to the emotions of the audience (*pathos*), or to their own character (*ethos*) in order to affect a particular audience in particular ways. In Aristotelian rhetoric, the appeal to *ethos* (Greek for “character”) refers to the credibility and authority of the writer or speaker, or the credibility and authority of those brought in to testify on behalf of the argument. This appeal is intended to show the audience that they can trust the speaker.

¹⁷ RINGROW, H., PIHLAJA, S.: *Contemporary Media Stylistics*. London, UK; New York, USA : Bloomsbury Publishing Company, 2020, p. 3.

¹⁸ TENEVA, E.: Implicit Authorities in the Political and Publicistic Discourse (by the material of the English language). In *Philology. Theory & Practice*, 2016, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 155.

¹⁹ COELHO, N. M. M. S., HUPPES-CLUYSENAER, L.: *Aristotle on Emotions in Law and Politics*. Switzerland : Springer, 2018, p. 9.

Our study found that there is abundance of research addressing the concept of authority. The notion of authority, derived from the Latin *auctoritas* which means social authority, reputation, and status, is inexplicit and has various meanings: from reputation, dignity, value, conscience, assurance, affirmation, veracity, notability, significance to role model and opinion.²⁰ Since the phenomenon of authority is present in many spheres and dimensions of human life: from socio-political and legal relations to scientific knowledge, research approaches in determining the concept of authority are numerous and there is a lack of common taxonomy and definitions on this topic.

For instance, in political sciences the concept of authority is mainly related to the concept of power and is seen as the exercise of legitimate influence (power) by one social actor over another. Within social psychology, there is no common definition of authority. However, sociologists distinguish between the concepts of power and authority and view the latter as the result of the relationship between two or more social actors, in which one exerts an influence over the other as a consequence of social status.²¹ In philosophy, authority is regarded as “a way of justifying belief by appealing to a positive past experience” or as “a way of arguing by referring to famous people”.²² In this sense, authority is most often related to a person whose judgement or behaviour is highly valued and accepted as undoubtedly correct,²³ whereas in cultural studies, a broader definition of authority is given: it is a “subsystem of culture which is responsible for the goal-setting process, socialization and the choice of life attitudes of a person”.²⁴ In psychological terms, our tendency to listen to experts is a principle known as ‘authority’. The famous social psychologist in the fields of influence and persuasion, Robert Cialdini, claims that authority is one of the six key principles behind the science of persuasion. As he notes, “we can be confident that there will be compliance professionals trying to take advantage. We can stay within the field of medicine and see that advertisers have frequently harnessed the respect accorded to doctors in our culture by hiring actors to play the roles of doctors speaking on behalf of the product”.²⁵

As regards the concept’s ambiguity and vagueness, it should be noted that research approaches in distinguishing the types of authority are numerous. According to Goodwin, there are authorities based on command, expertise and dignity. Each type is distinguished with respect to the reaction that a failure to follow it ordinarily evokes.²⁶ Goodwin notes that the dignity authority cannot be distinguished by knowledge or power, but rather by eminence. The appropriate response to such authorities is not obedience (as to command authority) or prudence (as to expertise authority), but deference - or showing respect.²⁷ Another prominent scientist, sociologist M. Weber, distinguishes three forms of authority, including the traditional form which is based on the relations of strong personal respect and

²⁰ NJEGOVAN, B. R., VUKADINOVIĆ, M., NEŠIĆ, L. G.: Characteristics and Types of Authority: The Attitudes of Young People. A Case Study. In *Sociología*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 6, p. 658.

²¹ MORSELLI, D., PASSINI, S.: New Perspectives on the Study of the Authority Relationship: Integrating Individual and Societal Level Research. In *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 2011, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 291.

²² STEPANOV, A.: *Ontognoseologičeskaya Konceptciya Avtoriteta*. [Synopsis of Dissertation Thesis]. Tomsk : National Research Tomsk State University, 2002, p. 5.

²³ NJEGOVAN, B. R., VUKADINOVIĆ, M., NEŠIĆ, L. G.: Characteristics and Types of Authority: The Attitudes of Young People. A Case Study. In *Sociología*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 6, p. 660.

²⁴ STEPANOV, A.: *Ontognoseologičeskaya Konceptciya Avtoriteta*. [Synopsis of Dissertation Thesis]. Tomsk : National Research Tomsk State University, 2002, p. 21.

²⁵ CIALDINI, R.: *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. New York : Collins, 2007, p. 165.

²⁶ GOODWIN, J.: Forms of Authority and the Real Ad Verecundiam. In *Argumentation*, 1998, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 267.

²⁷ SORM, E.: *The Good, the Bad and the Persuasive: Normative Quality and Actual Persuasiveness of Arguments from Authority, Arguments from Cause to Effect and Arguments from Example*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Nijmegen : Radboud University Nijmegen, 2010, p. 34.

the acceptance of norms based on holy traditions, the charismatic form which is based on the emotional belief in the importance and value of personal power and the rational-legal form which is featured by abstract legality, patrimonial qualities and persistence in the sense of every day deeds. In addition to the mentioned theoretical research on different types of authority, a recent study suggests that authority may be differentiated into charismatic type (with characteristics such as reliability, progressiveness, determination, dignity and charisma), traditional type (with characteristics such as: familiarity, esteem, categoricalness, tradition and habitualness) and bureaucratic type of authority (described with characteristics such as: credibility, exclusiveness, uniqueness, omnipresence and validity).²⁸

In the modern online media appeals to authorities have become very common. Nevertheless, the reliability and validity of such argumentation which uses appeals to authorities has always caused debates in the scientific world. On the one hand, we cannot understand much without others' help, particularly in a technological and culture-laden world. Thus, it is prudent to take expert statements into account.²⁹ In news reporting authority plays a very important role. The use of the author's knowledge of this concept stimulates the thinking activity of the audience, convinces it to include the proposed information into the fund of its knowledge, helps the author to guide the logic of perception of information by news audience and to justify his/her opinion. In this context, for the reader of newspapers and magazines as well as for the reader of any other literature, it is very important to deal with reputable experts. Sorm, analyzing several types of authority (the argument from authority, the argument from cause to effect and the argument from example), concludes that for the argument from authority "*there is relatively high agreement on the relevant expertise criterion, the expert criterion, the trustworthiness criterion, the ability to provide evidence criterion, the recency criterion and the hedged statement criterion*".³⁰ However, it is often very difficult to determine what these "relevant" expertise criteria are. Hence, in some cases appeals to authority are often regarded suspicious and fallacious.³¹ This refers to *appeals to so called "false" authority* which is an argument that relies on the opinion of a false authority figure, who is framed as a credible authority on the topic being discussed. These appeals are widely spread in our daily lives, both in politics and the press.

In general, the use of false or illogical reasoning has been studied since Aristotle, who introduced a theory of logical fallacies. According to his theory, fallacies are instances of *specious* reasoning and not merely logical errors but *hidden* errors which give the illusion of an argument being sound. Aristotle divided fallacies into two broad categories: those which depend on language and those that are independent of language. The famous English philosopher, Francis Bacon, also contributed to the knowledge of fallacies by paying attention to prejudice and bias in scientific investigation and the effect they could have on our beliefs. Bacon distinguished four types of false notions which he called the idols of mind (Tribe, Cave, Marketplace and Theatre), which mislead and prevent men from attaining true understanding.

In fact, the term "fallacy" (or faulty reasoning) was coined in the 17th century by the English philosopher and physician John Locke who studied the *argumentum ad verecundiam*, also known as appeal to ignorance. It is used when a person appeals to a false authority as evidence for his claim. Irving Copi identified eighteen core fallacies, including the following:

²⁸ NJEGOVAN, B. R., VUKADINOVIĆ, M.: Relationship between the Types of Authority and Authoritarianism. In *Škola biznisa*, 2011, Vol. 4, p. 14-15. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<http://www.vps.ns.ac.rs/SB/2011/8.2.pdf>>.

²⁹ GOODWIN, J.: Forms of Authority and the Real Ad Verecundiam. In *Argumentation*, 1998, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 274.

³⁰ SORM, E.: *The Good, the Bad and the Persuasive: Normative Quality and Actual Persuasiveness of Arguments from Authority, Arguments from Cause to Effect and Arguments from Example*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Nijmegen : Radboud University Nijmegen, 2010, p. 228.

³¹ GOODWIN, J.: Accounting for the Appeal to the Authority of Experts. In *Argumentation*, 2011, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 285.

1. *Argumentum ad numerum* (an argument or appeal to numbers) which include appeals based on the number of people who hold a particular belief.
2. *Argumentum ad populum* (an argument or appeal to the public) which include appeals to popular opinion, or common knowledge, rather than a specified authority.
3. *Argumentum ad verecundiam* (an argument or appeal to authority) which includes citing some person, even though that person may have no expertise in the given area.³²
4. In this research we followed Copi's typology and considered the above-mentioned types of appeals to pseudo-authorities and their rhetorical potential in the context of the news stories about "Sputnik V".

4. Results

As we have already emphasized, authority is considered to be one of the most complex phenomena in a modern society which is hard to describe in empirical studies since it embraces both sociological and psychological content and deals with the most important relationships between individuals or groups that are based on some type of authority. It has pivotal importance within social sciences, being a fundamental element in organization of social life.³³

Modern journalists tend to appeal to "false" authorities or non-experts - the opinions of famous people who are taken to be an authority in the fields where they virtually lack special competence and expertise to enhance the persuasiveness of the provided arguments. Their opinions often serve as an argument taken by the audience for granted without any evidence or proof. Let us consider their types in Internet news discourse in more detail.

For the purpose of this research, we have analyzed over 150 news stories about "Sputnik V" extracted from British and American online papers using the LexisNexis database and have concluded that there are several types of pseudo-authorities in Internet news discourse:

1. Appeals to "nominal" pseudo-authorities or "false" experts

In modern Internet news discourse pseudo-authorities can be represented in the form of quotations, and testimonials for greater persuasiveness. Celebrity endorsements often have an enormous impact on the entire online community since they are trusted role models for many people. To illustrate it, let us study the following examples:

1. *"I got a vaccine a few days ago. I don't know if it'll work but I heard good things about the Russian vaccine," Oliver Stone told Russia's Channel One state "I'm hopeful. It's a very good vaccine; I don't understand why it's being ignored in the West."*³⁴
2. [Michael Kretschmer]: *"Russia is a great land of science and I don't have the faintest doubt that scientists there are capable of producing an effective vaccine."*³⁵
3. *"The French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, has described Sputnik V as more 'a means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy' than a medical asset."*³⁶

³² COPI, I. M., COHEN, C., RODYCH, V.: *Introduction to Logic*. New York and London : Routledge, 2018, p. 120.

³³ MORSELLI, D., PASSINI, S.: New Perspectives on the Study of the Authority Relationship: Integrating Individual and Societal Level Research. In *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 2011, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 291.

³⁴ LEWIS, I.: *Oliver Stone Receives Russian Coronavirus Vaccine as Experts Warn It May Be Harmful to Over-60s*. Released on 15th December 2020. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/oliver-stone-vaccine-coronavirus-sputnik-v-b1774166.html>>.

³⁵ CONNOLLY, K.: *German Minister Defies EU by Saying He Wants Russia to Supply Sputnik Vaccine*. Released on 8th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/08/germany-seeks-russia-talks-over-possible-supply-of-sputnik-v-covid-vaccine>>.

³⁶ Ibidem.

4. *“The prime minister of Lithuania, Ingrida Šimonyté, tweeted in February that Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, saw the shot not so much as a ‘cure for the Russian people’ but as “another hybrid weapon to divide and rule”.*³⁷

In these examples the opinions of celebrities and politicians who are non-experts in the field of medicine serve as arguments either in favour of (№1, 2) or against (№3, 4) the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V”, thus enhancing or discrediting the image of both the product and the country on the whole. Example № 1 shows that the American film director, producer, and screenwriter, Oliver Stone expresses his positive opinion about “Sputnik V” after receiving the jab. The use of emotive language with positive meaning (“good things”, “hopeful”, “a very good vaccine”) is intended to identify the thoughts and feelings of the celebrity about the efficacy of the vaccine with that of the audience and contributes to the emotional impact on the audience. The feeling of emotional “involvement” and unity with the audience increases the emotionality and persuasiveness of the information, brings the audience closer to the opinion of the famous director and is used for its “emotional infection”. In example № 2 the journalist appeals to the opinion of the famous politician, Michael Kretschmer, who speaks about the efficacy of the vaccine and enhances the image of Russia by referring to the stereotype of it as “a great land of science”. Stereotypes often have rhetorical function: they evoke a number of associations in the minds of representatives of national and cultural communities, have an axiological meaning and are used by the journalist in the text in order to make the audience believe the politician’s opinion.

As is evident from examples № 3 and № 4, where the journalists refer to politicians who consider the vaccine as “a means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy”, quotations of non-experts (e.g. politicians, celebrities) are intended to “hide” the journalist’s opinion, removing responsibility from him/her and shift it to celebrities as well as making the argument sound more valid in the eyes of the audience. In this example quotations that contain words with negative meaning (“aggressive diplomacy”, “another hybrid weapon”) are used to emotionally manipulate the audience and justify the negative opinion of the journalist about “Sputnik V” as a political tool for Russia’s propaganda.

In order to make the arguments about the efficacy of “Sputnik V” more compelling and sound, journalists may refer to the testimonials of vaccinated people. In these cases the evidence from those who have been inoculated serves as an argument in favour of the journalist’s opinion so that the audience cannot but believe and accept it. For instance:

5. *“Sitting nearby was Galina Chupyl, a 65-year-old municipal worker. What did she think of getting vaccinated? ‘I am happy, of course’, she said. ‘Nobody wants to get sick.’ I agreed.”*³⁸
6. *“People are afraid; there’s all sorts of rumours about complications,” Lidia Nikolaevna reasoned, shovelling thick snow away from her garage door.”*³⁹

In these examples (№ 5 and 6) the journalists, who are either in favour of (№5) or against (№6) “Sputnik V”, appeal to the testimonials of vaccinated people that prove journalists’ positive or negative opinion about it, making the readers accept their viewpoint about the efficacy of the vaccine. The use of emotive language (“happy”, “agreed”, “afraid”, “complications”) contributes to the persuasiveness of the appeals to pseudo-authorities and creates either positive or negative image of the Russian vaccine.

³⁷ HENLEY, J.: *Is Russia’s Covid Vaccine Anything More Than a Political Weapon?* Released on 30th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/30/is-russias-covid-vaccine-anything-more-than-a-political-weapon-sputnik-v>>.

³⁸ KRAMER, A. E.: *Why I Got the Russian Vaccine*. Released on 27th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/world/europe/russian-vaccine.html>>.

³⁹ RAINSFORD, S.: *Why Many in Russia Are Reluctant to Have Sputnik Vaccine*. Released on 3rd May 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56250456>>.

Thus, it is evident that references to people, who are non-experts in a certain domain and do not have enough competence on the subject to be objective, have a profound effect on the mass audience, forcing it to trust the words of pseudo-authorities. This is one of the widespread manipulative tools in modern Internet news discourse.

2. Appeals to “implicit” pseudo-authorities

Based on the findings of our research it is obvious that when it comes to the discussion of the efficacy of the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V”, journalists often use so-called “implicit” pseudo-authorities. We have assumed that “implicit” pseudo-authorities are rhetorical strategies which are used by journalists when there is deliberately no indication of an authoritative source of knowledge, and the information transmitted with the help of them is perceived by the audience as obvious, generally accepted and does not require special evidence. Let us study them by considering the following examples:

7. *“An Italian politician described as an ‘iron Putinist’ has called for the country to adopt Russia’s ‘Sputnik V’ coronavirus vaccine.”*⁴⁰
8. *“‘Russia’s low vaccination rate just doesn’t tally with it having a supposedly cheap, easy-to-make and effective vaccine’, one EU diplomat said.”*⁴¹
9. *“Experts say that approving a vaccine even for limited use before large-scale testing carries risks.”*⁴²
10. *“Observers say the Sputnik V jab is aimed more at sowing political division than fighting coronavirus.”*⁴³
11. *“Russia expected a surge for its Sputnik V vaccine. But many skeptics still stayed away.”*⁴⁴

In examples № 7-11 common nouns (“observers”, “experts”, “Italian politician”, “EU diplomat”) are used as implicit authorities. The journalists identify their opinion with an authoritative source of information, but the name of this source is not mentioned. In fact, it is hidden from the reader. Replacing specific nouns by general nouns which contain the notion of authority in their meaning and have no determiners has a rhetorical function. It allows the journalist not to prove his/her point of view and is intended to create an illusion of objectivity and reliability of the information presented by the journalist, which contributes to the implicit impact on the reader.

Another way to refer to “implicit” pseudo-authorities is to use impersonal sentences (“there is / are ...”) or passive constructions (“it has been thought / criticised...”) in order to identify the journalist’s point of view with popular opinion and manipulate the reader’s opinion. In these cases, the journalists may mislead the reader, presenting their opinion as popular opinion and, hence, forcing the reader to accept it as obvious. The addressee of such statements is the entire society, whereas the author presents him/herself as a member of this society, one of the majority with the ultimate aim of manipulation. For instance:

⁴⁰ PENNA, D., MCTAGGART I., DAVIES, G.: *UK ‘Getting Safer Every Day’ as Almost 1 in 5 Adults Have Had First Vaccine, Says Nadhim Zahawi*. Released on 4th February 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/coronavirus-news-covid-vaccine-uk-south-africa-variant-lockdown/>>.

⁴¹ HENLEY, J.: *Is Russia’s Covid Vaccine Anything More Than a Political Weapon?* Released on 30th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/30/is-russias-covid-vaccine-anything-more-than-a-political-weapon-sputnik-v>>.

⁴² KANTCHEV, G.: *Russia Fast-tracks Second Coronavirus Vaccine*. Released on 5th October 2020. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-fast-tracks-second-coronavirus-vaccine-11601909843>>.

⁴³ HENLEY, J.: *Is Russia’s Covid Vaccine Anything More Than a Political Weapon?* Released on 30th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/30/is-russias-covid-vaccine-anything-more-than-a-political-weapon-sputnik-v>>.

⁴⁴ DIXON, R.: *Russia Expected a Surge for Its Sputnik V Vaccine. But Many Skeptics Still Stayed Away*. Released on 11th December 2020. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-vaccine-sputnik-interest/2020/12/10/005917fa-3702-11eb-9699-00d311f13d2d_story.html>.

12. 12) *"For now, with so many Russians deeply skeptical of their medical system and the vaccine, there is no great clamor for the shot."*⁴⁵
13. 13) *"The development of the Sputnik V vaccine has been criticized for unseemly haste, corner cutting, and an absence of transparency."*⁴⁶

In examples № 12 and 13 the journalists use the strategy of generalization, in which case, according to T.A. van Deuk, "a concrete specific example that has made an impact on people's mental models, is generalized to more general knowledge or attitudes, or even fundamental ideologies".⁴⁷ The negative opinion of the journalists about "Sputnik V" and its promotion is represented in a hidden way as a popular opinion and conveyed by using words with a negative meaning ("deeply skeptical", "no great clamor", "criticised", "unseemingly haste corner cutting", "absence of transparency"), impersonal structures and passive voice.

3. Appeals to "pseudo-visibility"

In some cases mentioning the name of the authoritative source is unnecessary. In these cases the journalist employs statistical data to enhance the "pseudo-visibility" and persuasiveness of the material in the paper. By "pseudo-visibility" we mean the use of such language means that contain large numbers and serve to enhance the emotional effect of information with the ultimate aim of manipulating the audience. Here are some examples to illustrate it:

14. *"Distrust of vaccines is so high in Russia that 53 per cent of people who say they are worried about catching the virus also say they will not get vaccinated, according to a recent opinion poll by the Levada Centre. About 60 per cent of all respondents said they had no plans to get the jab."*⁴⁸
15. *"A recent survey found that 52 per cent of Russians do not want to receive the vaccine due to safety concerns."*⁴⁹

With the help of statistics, the journalists seek not to deceive the audience but to disguise their true goal under data with large numbers - emotional influence on the addressee. They refer to very detailed statistics in order to support their negative viewpoint - the skepticism and distrust of the Russian vaccine. In these cases the appeals to statistics are used not as factual information but as a means of emotional manipulation since many laymen tend to trust statistics and large numbers.

5. Discussion

Within the framework of this paper, appeals to authority and pseudo-authority are regarded from a rhetorical viewpoint. Considering an appeal to authority, we have assumed that it is a rhetorical strategy which implies appeals to either popular opinion that exists among the members of a macro- or microsocial group or the opinion and statements of a highly authoritative member of a

⁴⁵ KRAMER, A. E.: *Why I Got the Russian Vaccine*. Released on 27th April 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/world/europe/russian-vaccine.html>>.

⁴⁶ KRAMER, A. E.: *Russia's Vaccine Is Safe and Effective, Published Study Shows*. Released on 2nd February 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/world/europe/russia-vaccine-safe-effective.html>>.

⁴⁷ VAN DEUK, T. A.: Discourse and Manipulation. In *Discourse & Society*, 2006, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 370.

⁴⁸ BENNETTS, M.: *Get Covid Vaccine and Chance to Win a Car as Moscow's Death Toll Grows*. Released on 14th June 2021. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/get-covid-vaccine-chance-win-car-moscow-ss0v2ft80>>.

⁴⁹ VASILYEVA, N.: *Why I Received Russia's 'Sputnik' Coronavirus Vaccine before Vladimir Putin*. Released on 27th December 2020. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/27/received-russias-sputnik-coronavirus-vaccine-vladimir-putin/>>.

group that is a role model with the ultimate aim of justifying the author’s viewpoint and influencing the audience. This is consistent with the views of Hartelius who examined rhetorical strategies that experts of various specialities employ to compete for authority and legitimacy with respect to how experts gain audience approval. From his viewpoint, “*expertise is rhetorical: a social and symbolic process, a relational logic at once real and imagined, theoretical and pragmatic.*”⁵⁰

It is also assumed that authority is a necessary premise of the category of “addresser/ addressee” since the success of communication depends not only on the degree of the reader’s awareness and trust in the author but, first and foremost, on the degree of credibility of the author. The higher the author’s authority, the greater his/her influence on the audience. Similarly, the greater the degree of the trust in the author, the greater the success of communication. Thus, authority is a category which links both participants of communication, emphasizing the role that the audience and the author play in the process of communication.

In this research we follow largely the views of Stepanov, who considered authority as “*a mechanism of goal-setting, socialization and choice of the strategies of personal behavior.*”⁵¹ From his viewpoint, the concept of authority consists of the following elements: the bearer of authority, authoritative knowledge, imitators of authority and the product created on the basis of imitation. The main structural relations between these elements are: creativity, storage, interpretation and propaganda of authoritative knowledge and imitation of it. It is worth mentioning that authoritative knowledge and its credibility play a central role in this system.

As regards Internet news discourse, we have assumed that authority is largely based on the general agreement or consensus of readers’ opinions and depends on the popularity, public image and fame of this or that person (source) rather than on facts and knowledge. As we have previously underlined, modern readers of online news tend to trust opinion leaders, influencers, bloggers and those people who seem to be experts and authorities more than real facts. Hence, in our research the elements of the system “authority” within the framework of Internet news discourse include: “the bearer or source of authority” (a person or thing that is perceived as an expert in a certain field and influences the audience), his/her/its “public image” (popularity), “authoritative knowledge” (information that is transmitted) and “percipients of authority” (the audience that complies with those in positions of authority). In this case the popularity and public image of the bearer of authority plays a key role in the process of persuasion. These structural elements are presented in Figure 2.

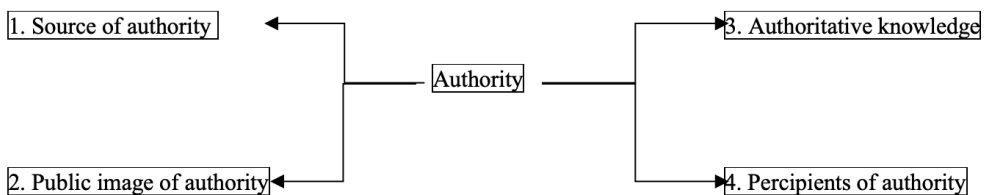


FIGURE 2: The elements of the system “authority” in Internet news discourse”

Source: own processing, 2021.

Regarding appeals to pseudo-authority, it is noteworthy that journalists seek to convey some part of information anonymously, deliberately selecting those facts that are beneficial to achieve their goal of influencing the audience. In these cases, they often appeal to “pseudo-authorities” or appeals to fallacies. The prefix “pseudo” comes from Greek *ψευδής*, “pseudes” and means “lying, false”. In this context, “pseudo-authorities” are “false” authorities or fallacies.

⁵⁰ HARTELIUS, J.: *The Rhetoric of Expertise*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Austin, Texas : The University of Texas at Austin, 2008, p. 164.

⁵¹ STEPANOV, A.: *Ontgnoseologicheskaya Konceptciya Avtoriteta*. [Synopsis of Dissertation Thesis]. Tomsk : National Research Tomsk State University, 2002, p. 22.

From a rhetorical viewpoint, fallacies are rhetorical strategies that are logically unreasonable and serve to enhance the emotional effect of information and manipulate public opinion. Based on the findings of this research and following Irvin Copi’s classification of core fallacies, we tend to assume that “pseudo-authorities” are used in Internet news discourse when:

1. there is an appeal to non-experts that show themselves as experts in the fields in which they have no special competence. In these cases we deal with “nominal” pseudo-authorities.
2. there is no indication of an authoritative source of knowledge. In these cases we deal with “implicit” pseudo-authorities.

Hence, two main types of authorities in Internet news discourse may be distinguished (“nominal” and “implicit”) based on the assumption that the bearer of authority and his/her/its public image plays the most significant role in the process of persuasion. The classification of authorities is presented in Figure 3.

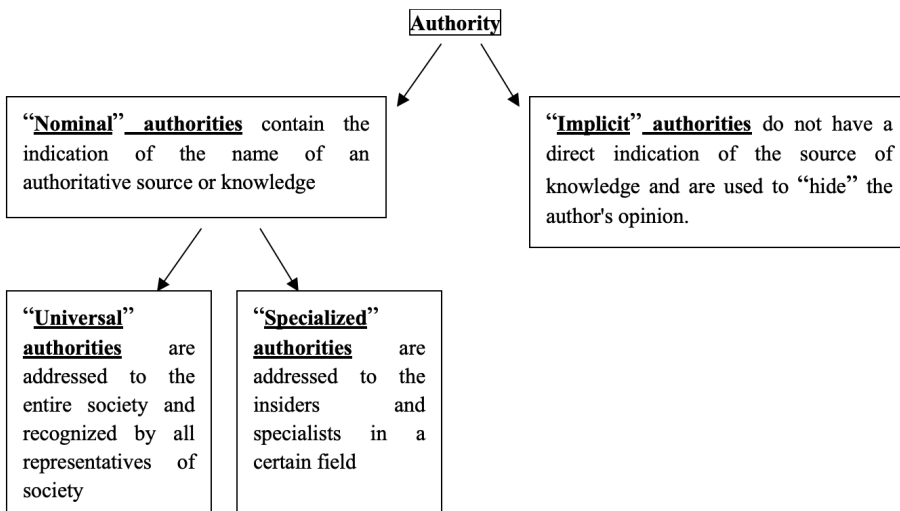


FIGURE 3 Types of authorities in Internet news discourse

Source: own processing, 2021

Appeals to authorities are related to the so-called “halo effect” which appears to happen in online media. It is a psychological effect when the authority of this or that person is automatically projected onto all the people around him/her, making them believe his/her words.⁵² This is in reference to one of the unspoken rules of public communication – “worship” and idolization of authority. It is needless to say that a person idolizes people of higher social standing. Thus, reference to authority in online media is virtually a substitute for the evidence of the author’s viewpoint. Nevertheless, the audience must have awareness of the subject of discussion and background knowledge in order to evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of the information and arguments presented by the journalist. Since the readers of Internet news discourse are mainly laymen, they do not have “preliminary preparation” for this kind of information. Moreover, massive online consumption has contributed to the fact that the “users” of modern media do not have sufficient time or expertise to reflect on the information in online papers. The audience needs to receive information quickly, which, as a result, often leads to the fact that they are often manipulated though they do not recognize it themselves. Thus, appeals to pseudo-authorities have become one of the ways to manipulate public opinion.

⁵² TENEVA, E.: The Rhetoric of Political Emotions in the Internet News Discourse. In *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies*, 2021, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 134. [online]. [2021-06-30]. Available at: <<https://galacticamedia.com/index.php/gmd/article/view/146/119>>.

To accurately discern the difference between appeals to authority and pseudo-authority it is essential to understand their communicative intention which can be either persuasive or manipulative. In this research we tend to think that appeals to authorities are used to persuade the audience, whereas appeals to pseudo-authorities are used to manipulate it.

Following the views of Aristotle who considered persuasion as inherently good because it is one of the primary means through which truth becomes known, we have assumed that the communicative purpose of appeals to authorities is mainly persuasion since they are usually used by people who have expertise and competence in the certain field and supported by sufficient evidence which can prove the reliability of the authority’s opinion. In this case, the audience is allowed to freely choose to either accept or reject these persuasive appeals.

In contrast, when it comes down to appeals to pseudo-authorities which rely on insufficient evidence of people who lack competence, the ultimate goal of them is mainly manipulation since they are aimed at misleading the audience and hence have a negative impact on it. In this case, the addressee has to accept the author’s viewpoint without any evidence or proofs. Therefore, detecting appeals to pseudo-authorities is essential especially in mass communication when these appeals are used for public opinion manipulation. The difference between these two appeals is demonstrated in Figure 4.

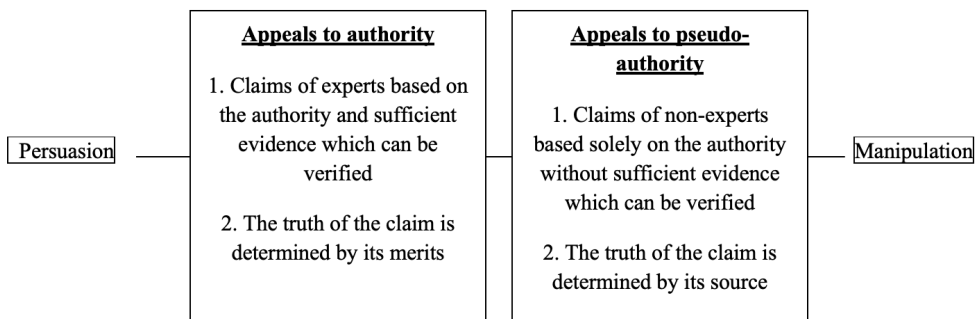


FIGURE 4: *The difference between appeals to authority and pseudo-authority*

Source: own processing, 2021

Based on the analyzed material, it may be inferred that one of the characteristic features of pseudo-authorities is their anonymity and “pseudo-visibility”: the information transmitted with their help contains either insufficient evidence by non-experts which cannot be verified or no indication of the source of the authoritative knowledge. This information is perceived by the reader as true and generally accepted. Rather than turning to empirical evidence, the argumentation relies solely on the authority’s credibility and, hence, the reader is assigned the passive role of the “victim” of manipulation that has no choice but to accept the journalist’s opinion.

From the obtained results it is also evident that the main function of appeals to pseudo-authorities is to stimulate either positive or negative perception of the information presented by the journalist, “hide” the opinion of the journalist, influence the addressee and manipulate public opinion. In order to “hide” the opinion of the journalist, the whole spectrum of various linguistic means can be used: from syntactic (impersonal sentences and passive constructions) to lexical and grammatical (words with positive or negative meanings, abstract nouns with the meaning of authority, numerals that present statistics). Undoubtedly, the degree of persuasiveness of pseudo-authorities largely depends on the degree of competence and expertise of the addressee in a certain domain. The lower the reader’s awareness, the higher the impact of pseudo-authorities and vice versa.

We have also concluded that appeals to pseudo-authorities have a profound influence on people's mental models - the way they perceive not only the "Sputnik V" vaccine itself, but also the country (Russia) as well. The attitude towards the vaccine that is imposed on the readers by journalists is transferred to the image of the whole country. Thus, appeals to pseudo-authorities may be seen as a tool for political propaganda.

6. Conclusion

Our findings that result from the analysis of more than 150 extracts taken from news stories in online versions of the highly circulated British and American papers underpin the research hypothesis that appeals to pseudo-authorities have become one of the most common tools for manipulating public opinion in modern Internet news discourse. This state of affair can be explained by the fact that due to the fast pace of modern life, proliferation of online user-generated news and large Internet consumption the readers of online media do not have sufficient time, knowledge or expertise to reflect comprehensively on the information presented in the online papers and fact-check it. Modern readers, often being laymen rather than experts in a certain field of knowledge, need to receive information quickly, which, as a result, leads to the fact that they are likely to become vulnerable to manipulation though they do not recognize it themselves. In this regard, appeals to pseudo-authorities question media credibility and may lead to misconception of facts, distortion, subjectivity and unreliability of media information. Nevertheless, it does not mean that all experts' claims are false and should be dismissed. When relying on the credibility of any authority, it is valid to accept the opinion which is qualified and unbiased and has sufficient evidence that can prove a point. In this regard, the role of media literacy is quintessential.

Overall, the process of the digitalization of journalism has brought both new communication instruments and a lot of challenges, thus increasing demands on the informational literacy and media education of a recipient. It is evident that what the percipient in the media space understood twelve years ago has changed,⁵³ which requires of them not only a certain level of competence in the use of media devices but, first and foremost, the ability to critically evaluate media content as well as understand the nature, functioning and influence of mass media. In order to conduct verification of news stories, distinguish appeals to experts from non-experts' claims, truth from lies and to stop the spread of disinformation, it is essential not only to study pseudo-authorities in Internet news discourse, which is increasingly flooded with a huge flow of unverified information, from a purely scientific viewpoint but, more importantly, to educate readers to orientate in the Internet mass media and develop their critical evaluation skills, which is one of the key tasks of media education. By designing educational literacy programs aimed at raising the awareness of individuals of modern tools for public opinion manipulation such as appeals to pseudo-authorities, we can teach them to detect false opinions that have no relation to real facts or scientific knowledge, develop their expertise in the understanding of the nature of media manipulation and the complexity of the transformations in the field of journalism that have been caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 and the arrival of "Sputnik V" as well as the significance of their influence on individuals, society and politics in the post-Covid era.

It is also important to emphasize that the narratives about the "Sputnik V" vaccine in the British and American papers play a crucial role in political decision-making and implementing the macro-level discursive strategy of expressing journalists' views towards political issues: either enhancing or discrediting the country's image on the global political arena. The discussion of the Russian vaccine in the media is undoubtedly politicized to a large extent and based on

⁵³ BIELIK, P., VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: Explanatory Journalism – A New Way How to Communicate in Digital Era. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 25.

the attitude towards Russia, reflecting either pro-Russian or anti-Russian moods, which contributes to the further polarization of social groups and intensifies existing internal and external political tensions in many countries. From the empirical material, we have assumed that appeals to pseudo-authorities can be used with the aim of political propaganda. In this sense, it is important to continue studying pseudo-authorities as they pose a serious threat to democracy and the principle of journalistic objectivity. Thus, the paper opens up perspectives for further research in media practice. Its results can be applied in the fields of linguistics, journalism, psychology, media studies and political science.

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