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# Features of political and manipulative influence in the information space

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## **Abstract**

The article examines the peculiarities of political manipulation and cognitive influence on the public consciousness, conducts a comparative analysis of the experience of using social networks in different countries, and summarizes the main techniques of the political manipulation process in the form of a model of political manipulation.

**Key words:** manipulation, weapons, network, information, influence, disinformation.

## **Introduction**

In the 21st century manipulation has become an integral part of any political process, including hybrid confrontation between states. Political advertising and campaigning act as effective organism that shapes the agenda and regulates the ideological and value orientations of the population. At the same time, social networks play a significant role in the content distribution of and act as a mechanism of political manipulation.

## **Problem statement**

The purpose of the article is to define the features of political manipulation in the information space, to analyze the use of social media in political processes in the international arena, and to develop a generalized model of political manipulation.

## **Material and methods**

The paper uses such scientific methods as observation, analysis, synthesis, and generalization.

## **Results and discussion**

1. In the modern world, any confrontation between states is characterized by information support, i.e. information acts as an unconventional weapon that can be used both independently and in combination with traditional warfare. Information weapons, and their use in social networks in particular, have become a significant and decisive factor during the conduct of hostilities. The large-scale aggression by the Russian Federation is also characterized by the active implementation of special information measures of influence using social media and other modern means of communication. Fake news spread in the cyberspace is aimed at manipulating audience emotions, undermining any potential for collective action. This kind of information threatens the democratic process in various ways, and is aimed at the result that contradicts the will of the people [1]. During information operations, the population is usually the target of manipulation, and a large amount of disinformation and fake news is directed at it. The main indicators distinguishing fake news are:

unknown source; manipulative headline; emotional coloring of the text; lack of reference to the original source. Russian information campaigns developed as a part of a specific military operation include informational threats and narratives. The dissemination of false information and fakes is characterized by the active involvement of public figures, the automatic creation of fake accounts in social media, and the creation of Telegram channels to spread disinformation.

Therefore, information weapons can be considered as highly accurate information technology used in the interests of a certain state to achieve its goals and can be presented as a type of manipulation in social media and propaganda [2]. Social Internet networks are one of the tools of modern warfare in the information age, which are used as a source of propaganda and narratives, using a network of automatically created accounts to popularize information [3]. One of the forms of information weapons is propaganda and disinformation, which can create a virtual image to change reality, distort the system of human values, and manipulate the moral and psychological life of the enemy's population. Currently, information weapons are used as an effective means of information political warfare to achieve the goals of a particular nation with or without direct military invasion.

The purpose of spreading disinformation in the information space is:

- misleading a particular person or group of people (even the whole nation);
- manipulation of consciousness;
- creating desired public opinion.

Disinformation is used in attempts to destroy trust, undermine morale, degrade the information space, undermine public discourse, and increase loyalty to the government by spreading fake news [4]. However, the ability of a person to respond to disinformation depends on a critical analysis of the credibility of the information. Understanding the important properties of fake news minimizes the destructive impact of propaganda and disinformation, so countering disinformation requires an approach that adapts to different groups of people and target audiences. In order to effectively counter disinformation, the following measures should be taken that will have an effect in the short and long term [5]:

1) systematic analysis of the impact of disinformation on citizens and their level of trust in the authorities, including tools for tracking content and news in different countries, comparing them with each other. Such an analysis will provide a holistic understanding of effective response to propaganda. A detailed analysis of the media environment will allow us to identify disinformation campaigns and understand the sources of public information. A systemic analysis should include monitoring social networks and identifying trends and personalities popular among polarized social groups that can be used to build trust;

2) ensuring the quality of mass media by regulating political advertising, correcting media errors and creating effective regulatory institutions;

3) new agencies and new cooperation. A practical example of countering propaganda is the creation of the Center for Countering Disinformation in Ukraine. Creating a strategic communications department is also an effective way to fight against disinformation;

4) detecting disinformation by investigating propaganda in cooperation with international organizations (Global Witness, Transparency International) and destroying myths for a critical-thinking audience receptive to arguments that are based on reliable facts. It is recommended to use technologies to automate fact-checking, search for automated chatbots, and train media specialists;

5) improving media literacy of the population, which involves training information consumers to identify fake news. For example, there are pilot projects in Ukraine, in particular IREX, which use new methods to expose disinformation outside the academic environment [6].

**2.** Political manipulation aims to create support or vice versa – to cause antipathy of the electoral base to certain ideas, ideologies, politicians and political parties. Manipulation creates a

certain worldview and bypasses the processes of critical thinking of individuals. Technological development of the information environment created the prerequisites for using social networks as a tool to influence the minds of users.

Recalling the 2016 US presidential elections, it is worth paying attention to the study by American scientists P. Howard, B. Kollanyi, S. Bradshaw, L. Neudert "Social Media, News and Political Information during the US Election: Was Polarizing Content Concentrated in Swing States?" [7], which reveals the role of social media, fake news and disinformation during the US election process. The statistics provided in the article confirm the extremely important role of social media in modern life, as an integral part of the election process. The indisputable advantage of social media over other media is the speed of content dissemination in the process of preparation for elections: the information needed for the candidate's "advertisement" is delivered instantly [8]. Analyzing the processes that took place during the US presidential election and the referendum on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union in 2016, it is possible to trace certain analogies in the information field of both countries. First of all, this concerns the creation of a large number of fake accounts on social media representing concerned citizens. These accounts were used to spread discrediting messages on the Internet aimed at creating a negative discourse around the current authorities in both countries. In order to draw attention to the information spread by fake accounts, the created pages usually had a provocative profile image. The main messages spread by such accounts were calls to pursue an isolationist policy, disseminate racist information, condemn migration policy, incite hostility between different groups of the population, discredit the idea of the unity of Western countries, and undermine the foundations of democratic development of society. Other inherent features of fake accounts include a focus on domestic political issues of countries, and calls for isolation policy. No less noteworthy are the pages of social media that spread their narratives under the guise of news agencies imitating the dissemination of official news. In order to manipulate the voters' consciousness, such "agencies" spread misinformation, referring to unverified or non-existent sources, and carried out active discrediting measures against the current government. The ultimate goal of the subject of influence was to disorient society, destabilize the political life of countries by spreading fake news, inciting hostility between different groups of society, spreading extremist ideas, and, ultimately, the acceptance of the desired ideological position by the object of manipulation.

The applied model of influence (Fig. 1) led to quite unexpected political results in these countries, which allows us to conclude that effective influence on people's consciousness is increasingly possible through digital Internet technologies. Modern technologies of influence play an important role in political activities and can change the course of events that seemed to be determined.

With regard to political manipulation by the Russian Federation, it should be noted that the influence is focused on several objects simultaneously: its own population, the population of Ukraine, and the population of Western countries (Fig. 2). For each of the objects of influence, the usual social networks are used. Thus, to spread messages to its own population, the Russian Federation usually uses domestically produced platforms (Ok.ru, VK.com). They spread narratives aimed at creating a negative attitude towards both Western countries in general and Ukraine in particular. Creating the illusion of oppression, the Russian-speaking population on the territory of Ukraine, the Russian Federation justifies to the electorate the need for a large-scale armed aggression, disguising it as a "Special Military Operation" (SMO). In order to justify the significant loss of human and material resources, economic decline, and long-term duration of "SMO", messages are constantly circulating in the information environment that it is not Ukraine that opposes Russia, but the NATO. The aggravation of domestic political problems, especially economic

ones, is offset by the need to implement the concept of “Russian world”, which is to unite the entire Russian-speaking population.

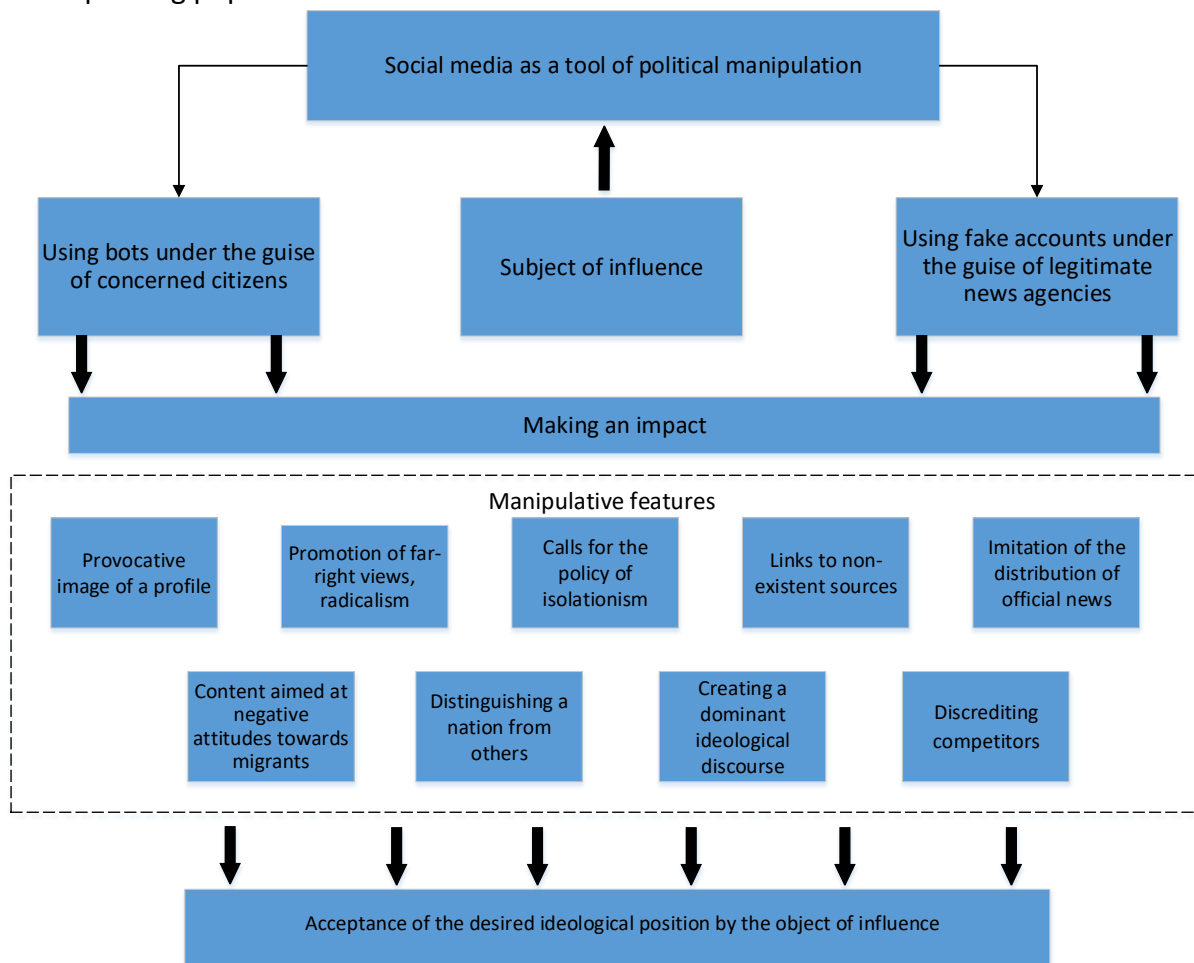


Figure 1 – Model of political manipulation using social media on the example of the US presidential election and Brexit in the UK

The manipulative influence on the population of Ukraine is carried out mainly through the Telegram application, where a large number of political channels of regional and national scale are created. The main motive of the disseminated content consists in to discredit the top state leadership, spread fake information about the rise of far-right forces and their negative impact on the Russian-speaking population, the need to conduct “SMO” in order to denazify the “brotherly people”, spread misinformation about the Armed Forces of Ukraine in order to suppress the moral and psychological state of the population and to discourage resistance to the actions of the armed forces of the Russian Federation.

As for carrying out special measures to influence the population of Western countries, social Internet networks such as Facebook and Twitter have been chosen as the main medium for manipulation. A huge number of fake accounts created under the guise of citizens who care about politics and information news agencies spread manipulative content in which Ukrainian authorities are accused of genocide of their own people and, as a result, the need for a Russian invasion to protect the population from so-called neo-Nazis. The posts distributed by artificially created accounts by the Russian special services contain information that discredits the policies of the current US and EU authorities, and focuses attention on the internal problems of American and European society (rising energy prices, mass migration). The actions of the Russian Federation in the

information environment of Western countries are aimed at disrupting the unity of democratic states in making politically important decisions.

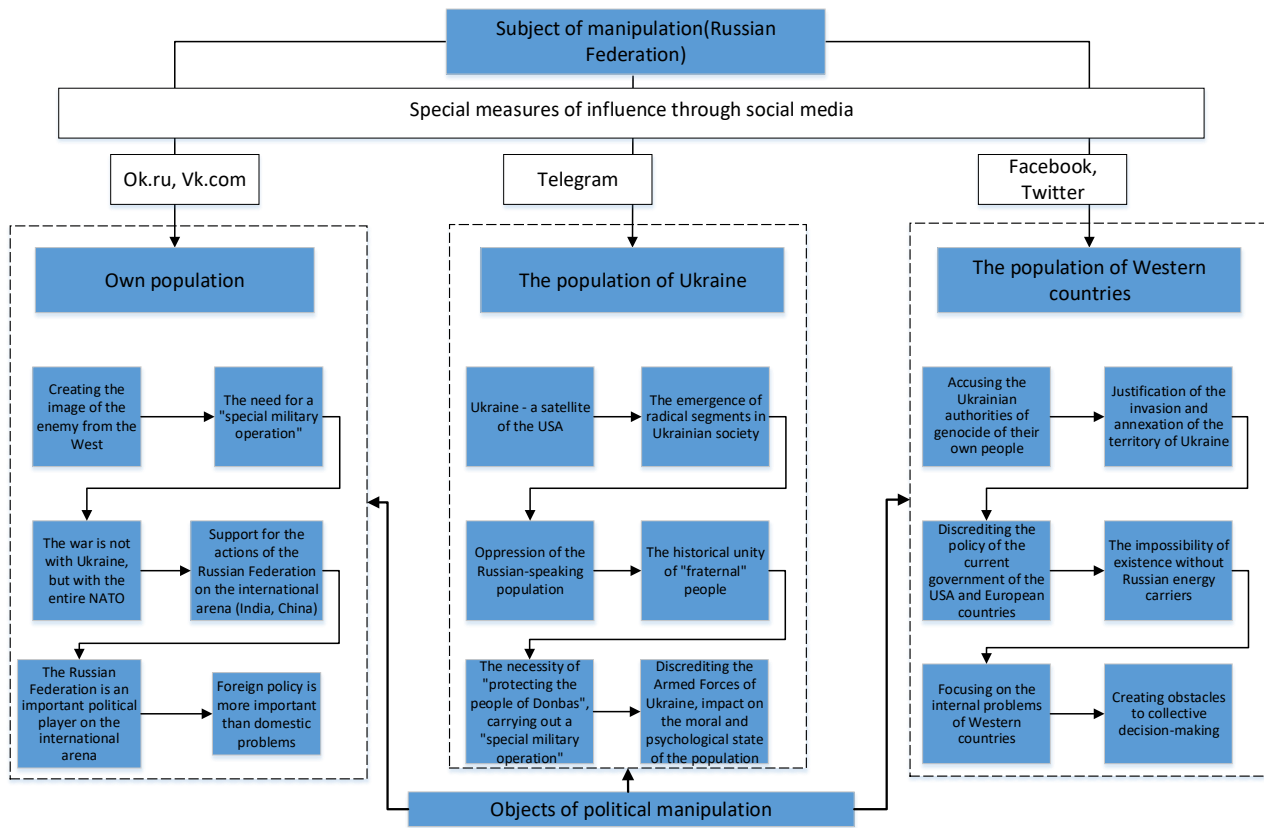


Figure 2 – Model of political manipulation (Russian Federation)

Analyzing the actions of Russian propagandists in the information environment, we can conclude that the basis of political manipulation by the Russian Federation is the permanent process of information circulation. Propagandists cover the same news, using different platforms to disseminate information, so that consumers do not have a chance for an alternative view of the situation. The manipulation process in this case consists of the following main stages:

1. Choosing the news, giving it a manipulative headline to increase the audience's interest.
2. Changing the plot to one's favor, suppressing reliable facts, distorting real events.
3. Clogging of the information space in order to block alternative coverage of the event.
4. Silencing the link to the original source.

5. Integrating a certain narrative into the news to have a cognitive impact on the subconscious of information consumers.

3. Therefore, when building an effective model of political manipulation, the following factors should be taken into account:

1. The environment of influence. With the development of technological progress, the socio-cultural basis is being transformed, and as a result, the ways of communication between the subject of manipulation and the object are changing. The process of manipulation changes its form of information delivery by the subject of influence to the consumer (Fig. 3). Taking into account the main goal of political manipulation (for example, winning elections), the issue of the number of involved audiences is fundamentally important, i.e., the use of modern tools of information dissemination, which is social media, is an important criterion for the success of the actions of the subject of influence.

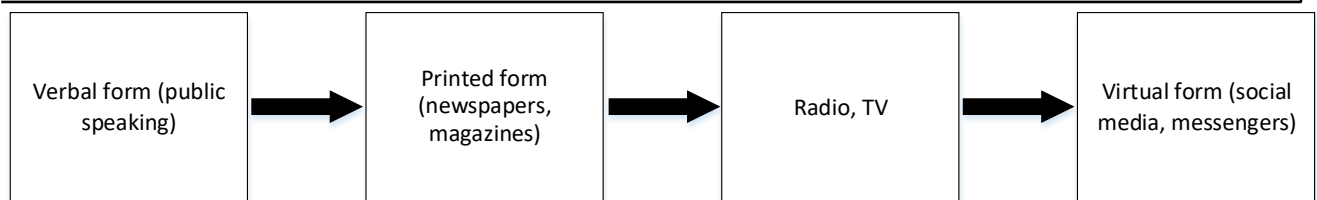


Figure 3 – Ways of communication in the process of political manipulation

2. In addition to choosing a platform for disseminating information, the correct form of presentation is an important factor. Information can be presented in the form of a text message, photo, video, while the color of the form is no less important: the color and style of the text, location, etc. These are important factors that form the idea of the way of information content is disseminated and the scope of its use.

3. Means and functions of political manipulation. When conducting manipulation, the subject of influence can use such techniques as appealing to the emotions of the object of influence, using associations, templates, generalizations, stereotypes, etc. Functionally, these techniques can be used for informing, campaigning, drawing attention to a particular problem, psychological programming, etc.

4. Concealment of influence. In the process of exercising political influence, direct and indirect methods are distinguished, but the inappropriateness of such a formulation is that manipulation cannot be a priori obvious, because the object of influence should not feel pressure to effectively impose the “correct” idea determined by the subject.

In addition to these factors, the success of political manipulation is also influenced by the country's political system. For example, if the political system of a certain country is liberal, then the form of coercion of the population to certain actions is a priori unacceptable, and therefore the use of manipulative technologies is a logical step during the exercise of influence.

The purpose of political manipulation is to program the psychological perception of the object with the help of special measures of influence. This is achieved by the use of certain verbal constructions in a covert manner. The subject of manipulation does not use text messages in the form of direct references, but does it in such a way that a behavioral and value transformation occurs at the subconscious level of the object, which will have a direct impact on the behavior and actions of the person. Using popular sources of information dissemination (media, television, public speeches, social networks), the subject of influence can use various techniques, including suggestions, information blocking, use of stereotypes, labeling, substitution of concepts, informational intimidation, etc. In the case of successful manipulations, the victim will have illusory ideas beneficial to the subject. In order to block critical thinking and evaluative judgments (to carry out the so-called “zombification”), in addition to the hidden nature of the manipulation, the object of influence must have confidence in the source of the manipulation, because in case of suspicion about the sincerity of the subject's goals, critical thinking and personal analysis of the content of the received information will be immediately involved. This, in turn, will complicate the process of integrating the desired narrative through the psychological barrier of mistrust. The ultimate goal of the manipulator is to get the object of influence to react correctly to the special influence measures carried out by the manipulator. In such a case, the object's critical perception of information is blocked, a false opinion is formed about the subject of influence, and the narratives disseminated by the subject are actively perceived. A generalized model of political manipulation is shown in Fig. 4.

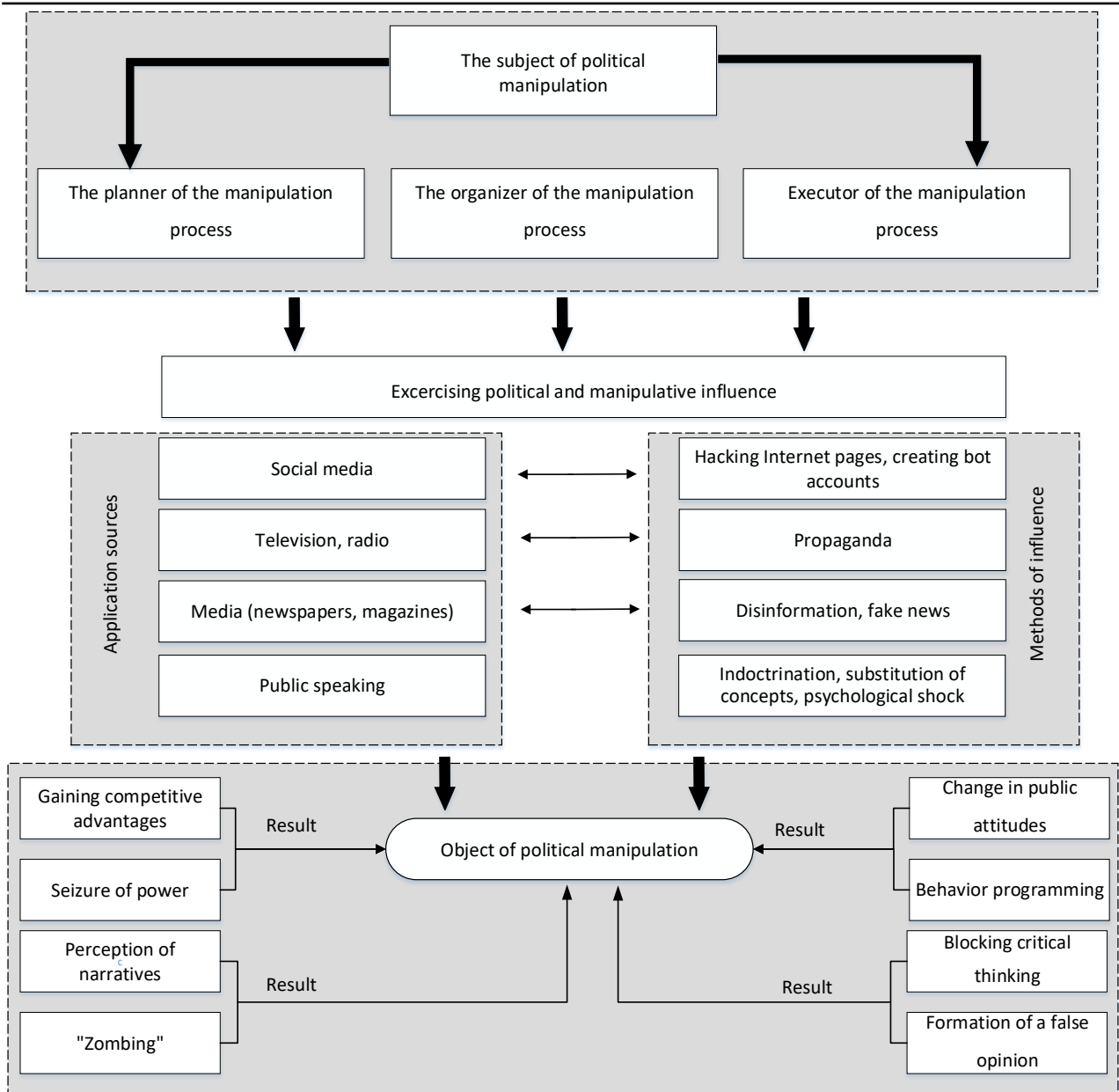


Figure 4 – Generalized model of political manipulation

**Conclusions**

Political manipulation is an integral part of the processes taking place in the modern world. Its main goal is the positive perception by the electorate of the narratives spread by the subject of influence.

In order to carry out effective manipulations, interested parties act according to a certain algorithm in the information environment. Depending on the country of application (such countries as the USA, the UK, and the Russian Federation were taken as an example), models of influence on the audience were developed based on the analysis of the political processes that took place there. The differences between these models lie primarily in the goals set by manipulators in a particular situation. For example, during the US presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum, the main focus was on discrediting the unity of Western countries, focusing on the painful issues of migration and calls for an isolationist policy. All of this was provided with the help of artificially created fake accounts under the guise of concerned citizens or news agencies. The idea of the model of influence used by the Russian Federation is manipulative techniques in relation to different

objects, which are its own population, the population of Ukraine, and the population of Western countries. Depending on the object of influence, different types of social networks are used and relevant narratives are promoted in order to adopt the desired ideological position. In the model of political manipulation, using the example of the presidential elections in Ukraine in 2019, the emphasis is placed on implementing a comprehensive approach to image-making of the subject of influence, which forms a positive cognitive perception.

A common feature for all models is the use of social media as an effective tool for information dissemination, because with the development of technological progress, communication methods have changed, so newspapers, radio, television and other forms of media are becoming outdated and are gradually being replaced. The phenomenon of social networks is monitored, which consists in the fact that the social media can be used both as a source of information dissemination (acting as a subject of influence) and as a consumer of information (an object of manipulation). It is noted that when building an effective model of influence, the following factors should be taken into account: the environment of influence; the correct form of information presentation; the use of psychological techniques (appeal to the emotions of the object, use of stereotypes, suggestion, substitution of concepts); and the concealment of influence.

Based on the analysis of the use of manipulative techniques in political processes, a generalized model of political manipulation was developed, which describes the algorithm of actions of the subject of political manipulation, which results in blocking the critical perception of information by the object of influence, forming of a false opinion and the active perception of imposed narratives.

**Prospects for further research.** Based on the built model of the process of political manipulation, it is advisable to develop an algorithm for influencing the target audience using Internet platforms as part of an information campaign, as well as to provide methodological recommendations for conducting information operations.

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