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MEDIA EDUCATION AS A TOOL OF NATIONAL SECURITY: THE STRATEGIC FUNCTION OF STOPFAKE IN COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

The article analyzes the role of media education as a tool of national security using the example of the activities of the Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake. The theoretical foundations of media education and media literacy as factors in strengthening societal resilience and national security are examined. The evolution of concepts – from Len Masterman's «inoculation paradigm» to the modern understanding of media literacy as «social immunity» – is considered. It is shown that media education contributes to the development of critical thinking, the formation of ethical guidelines, and resistance to manipulations in the information environment. Particular attention is paid to contemporary research on the effectiveness of fact-checking, debunking, and prebunking as components of information security policy. The analysis of current research demonstrates that preventive educational practices – «mental vaccination» against disinformation – are more effective than reactive refutations. Thus, modern media education combines cognitive, technological, and social approaches, becoming a key tool in countering disinformation and supporting national security.

The purpose of the study is to clarify the strategic functions of media education initiatives in countering disinformation, developing critical thinking, and forming societal resilience to information threats. To achieve this goal, methods of content analysis, systematization, and case study were used, which allowed for the analysis of StopFake materials, including publications, educational programs, international projects, and communication practices with various audiences.

The results of the study confirm that StopFake's activities go beyond classical fact-checking, performing a strategic function in strengthening the information resilience of society, and the experience of StopFake demonstrates that media education combined with fact-checking becomes an important component of national security and an effective means of countering disinformation in the context of hybrid warfare.

Key words: media education, media literacy, teaching methods, disinformation, fact-checking, strategic communications, Russo-Ukrainian War.

Problem Statement. In recent years, among the serious threats to democracy in the EU, the activities of extremist groups influenced by external actors, particularly through Russian disinformation, which exacerbates societal divisions and crises, have been particularly highlighted. Information manipulations and external interference (FIMI) undermine democratic processes, reduce trust in media and government, and make the information environment more vulnerable [2]. These threats have been repeatedly stated by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission [3]. The Russo-Ukrainian War has intensified these challenges, underscoring the importance of media education as a tool for enhancing societal resilience to disinformation and developing critical thinking.

National initiatives aimed at overcoming information challenges and formed on an educational-practical basis, integrating academic potential in media and analytical work, are of particular interest. The experience of the Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake, which emerged in 2014 based on the Mohyla School of Journalism at NaUKMA and evolved from a university project into a full-fledged media organization [19], attracts special attention. According to the annual Internews survey, 18% of Ukrainians recognize StopFake as a reliable fact-checking project whose information they trust and share. StopFake combines fact-checking, educational programs, and analytics, providing practical tools for countering disinformation and developing media literacy [18].

The example of this organization demonstrates a special approach to overcoming disinformation threats, where the functions of media education are realized through a complex of tasks of a practical media organization and a center that also contributes to the protection of the national information space.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.

The theoretical foundation of the study covers media education and media literacy in the context of strengthening societal resilience, enhancing national security, and analyzing contemporary practices of fact-checking, debunking, and prebunking. Media education, which developed from the mid-20th century, reflects the evolution of media's influence on society. Len Masterman (The Media Education Revolution, 1993) notes that media were viewed as a cultural «disease» from which media education was meant to protect [13]. In this approach, media education was perceived as protection against the manipulative nature of media, comparing it to the eternal values of true culture represented by literature. The paradigm that Len Masterman calls the «inoculative paradigm» is extremely important in the context of our study, as it outlines key problems – media influences and their potential impact within certain cultural and social processes [13, pp. 6–7]. He also emphasizes ways to counter these influences, particularly through educational practices and the integration of educational components into learning, as well as formats of these tools, including «soft» forms of media inoculation. This approach received further development in studies of media literacy effects, particularly in the works of Renee Hobbs [7], John Potter [16], Sonia Livingstone [11], Paul Mihailidis, and others [15].

In the article «Media and Information Literacy as a Model of Societal Balance: A Grounded Meta-Synthesis» [12], media literacy is considered as a form of «social immunity» that allows society to produce collective resilience to so-called «information disorders». The author emphasizes that modern media education should not only teach critical analysis of content but also form value orientations and ethical principles of interaction with media. Orientation toward components of media literacy and values that unite people rather than divide them contributes to countering various forms of extremism.

Among the topics of scientific research, increasing attention is paid to the impact of artificial intelligence and disinformation problems. A new focus alongside media literacy is AI literacy in the educational environment [6].

For example, Hackl, Mueller & Sailer in their work «AI Literacy Heptagon» propose a model where developing a critical attitude toward information flows is an integral part of the broader «digital literacy of the new generation», emphasizing that modern media education must consider not only classical mass media but also algorithmic structures that shape perceptions of reality [6].

In the context of the interrelation between media education and national security, theories of information resilience, critical thinking, and information risk management are considered. Lili Levy notes that media literacy goes beyond traditional education and becomes a key tool of national security, helping citizens understand the role of media in democratic society and counter disinformation [9]. In the article «State of Play of Media Literacy at National Level», media education is also considered as a strategic tool for developing critical thinking, evaluating media content, and countering disinformation, with integration into educational, social, and political strategies to strengthen information resilience and national security [1].

In the Western academic discourse of recent years, there is a growing attention to researching the effectiveness and methodological foundations of disinformation countering tools through fact-checking, debunking (refuting false messages), and prebunking (preventive inoculation approach) practices. These strategies are viewed not only as reactive measures but as components of a broader information security policy, media education, and media literacy.

One of the key directions of contemporary research is the analysis of the comparative effectiveness of prebunking and debunking. In the work of Roozenbeek, van der Linden, and Nygren, the effect of «mental vaccination» is examined using the example of the Bad News game, aimed at forming cognitive «immunity» to disinformation by simulating the process of creating fakes [17]. At the same time, in the scientific discourse, increasing attention is paid to developing effective debunking communication strategies that determine ways to overcome the influence of false information on various audiences.

In the work «How to debunk misinformation? An experimental online study investigating text structures and headline formats», text structures and headline formats that most effectively reduce belief in disinformation are experimentally tested [8]. In particular, the so-called «sandwich format» – where the refutation is presented between two reminders of true information – demonstrates the highest level of persuasiveness.

The aim of the study is to investigate the role of media education as a tool of national security using the example of the activities of the Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake, particularly its strategic functions in countering disinformation, developing critical thinking, and strengthening societal resilience to information threats.

The research tasks include:

- Examining the experience of the Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake as a practical model of integrating fact-checking, analytics, and educational programs.
- Identifying StopFake's strategies in countering Russian disinformation and forming audience critical thinking.
- Generalizing conclusions regarding the possibility of using national initiatives in media education to enhance national security.

Research Methodology. To clarify the state of scientific development of the problem of media education and its role in national security, the analytical-synthetic method was used. Content analysis of StopFake materials, media resources, and disinformation public campaigns was applied to identify key themes, narratives, and methods of influence. A case study was used to evaluate practical mechanisms of integrating media education, analytics, and fact-checking.

Outline of the main material of the study. The Ukrainian experience in combating disinformation, starting from 2014, is represented by various practices and projects that require careful study. The fact-checking organization StopFake, which has been operating since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War – from the moment of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbas – arouses particular interest for research. Its activities cover scientific and educational components, practical fact-checking and information verification, work with information and cyber threats, as well as educational media projects aimed at increasing citizens' media literacy.

The MADmethod («Monitor–Analyze–Debunk»), developed by the StopFake team, is a systematic approach to countering disinformation. It includes three stages: monitoring suspicious information, analyzing sources and context to identify manipulations, and refutation through the publication of verified facts. This approach allows for reducing the impact of fake narratives and strengthening audience information resilience. Currently, the StopFake website operates in 14 languages, disseminating reliable information to the international community [19].

The main thematic direction of the StopFake project from the beginning of its implementation has been the analysis of disinformation and propaganda originating from Russian sources, as well as the identification of Kremlin narratives. Since 2014, fact-checkers have focused on investigating disinformation campaigns related to key military events – the annexation of Crimea, the occupation of Donbas, the MH17 flight tragedy, the spread of narratives about a «fascist Ukraine», as well as various provocations and information operations aimed against the Ukrainian government, political processes, and national reforms.

As of 2025, the StopFake website has published over 38,200 materials in various sections and genres – from short refutations to detailed analytical studies. Such a large database of publications indicates the systematic and long-term work of the team in countering disinformation. In 2022, the resource was included in the US Library of Congress collection as an authoritative source documenting the evolution of Russian disinformation and reflecting the development of Ukrainian fact-checking and information resilience practices in response to it. In fact, StopFake began activities related to monitoring threats and forming resilience to them during a period of active military aggression against Ukraine. This work from the outset had not only an informational but also a security dimension, as it was aimed at protecting society from disinformation attacks that were part of hybrid warfare.

Considering that in the modern understanding (1990s–2020s), national security is viewed as an integrated, multidimensional system encompassing military, political, economic, social, informational, and ecological components [14], StopFake's activities have effectively become a tool for strengthening the state's information security. From the first publications on the site, the fact-checkers' priorities are clearly visible.

For example, one of the first StopFake publications in 2014, during the annexation of Crimea, which refuted a fake from Russian TV channels about «six thousand Ukrainian military personnel who swore allegiance to the Crimean government», already outlined the organization's main direction. Verification by the Ukrainian Navy and SBU confirmed that no unit had defected to the occupiers. This case demonstrated how unverified information can quickly form false perceptions in society and intensify destabilizing sentiments [5].

That same year, StopFake refuted a fake news story from Russia Today TV channel about an alleged «Spanish dispatcher Carlos» from Kyiv airport who

reported Ukrainian planes' involvement in the MH17 crash. This example became a telling testimony to the use of Russian disinformation to create a false impression of events related to the tragedy. Verification with «UkrAeroRuh», Ukrainian state air control agency, confirmed that no such dispatcher existed, and the message was completely falsified [10].

In April 2021, on the eve of the full-scale invasion, Russian and pro-Kremlin media spread a fake about the death of a child in Donbas as a result of a Ukrainian drone strike. StopFake's investigation proved that the child died from an ammunition explosion, and the village where the incident occurred was 30 km from the front line, making the drone attack at that time technically impossible [4].

The fact-checking organization StopFake systematically publishes refutations and analytical investigations through its own media platforms, combining analytical, educational, and communicative activities. Its strategy is based on an integrated approach to countering disinformation, which covers monitoring and verification of data, development of media literacy and critical thinking among various target audiences. An important component is prebunking initiatives – preventive educational practices aimed at increasing citizens' resilience to manipulative influences. StopFake also builds an international network of cooperation between fact-checking organizations, universities, and media institutions, which contributes to the exchange of experience and strengthening global information security.

Media Education and Media Literacy.

Close integration of StopFake with the academic environment of the Mohyla School of Journalism at NaUKMA contributed to the development of innovative educational programs and courses. Thus, in 2017, jointly with NaUKMA and representatives of the investigative group Bellingcat, the first training course on fact-checking and information verification was created for students majoring in «journalism» and «media communications». Representatives of 13 journalism departments from various Ukrainian universities joined the project to develop the course. The main goal of the initiative was not only to define the key thematic modules of the discipline but also to propose modern teaching methods. In particular, the project aimed to develop approaches for fostering debunking and prebunking skills, where training in the use of digital tools was combined with the development of critical thinking, ethical standards of journalistic verification, and an analytical approach to information. Among the

methodological approaches integrated into the course were inoculation-based learning, an educational model designed to familiarize students with types of manipulations and disinformation techniques before they encounter them; the media-analytical approach, focused on analyzing sources, narratives, and contexts of information dissemination; and project-based practical methods, which involved producing original fact-checking materials and working with real cases of disinformation.

In 2018, StopFake joined the IREX international organization's project – «Learn and Discern: Info-Media Literacy». The program's goal was to integrate elements of media literacy into school subjects, as well as to form critical thinking and media literacy skills in Ukrainian secondary school students necessary to counter disinformation and propaganda. Within this program, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, educational programs and course materials were developed, which were integrated into the Ukrainian school curriculum. Throughout its activities, the StopFake organization has implemented a significant number of training events for various target audiences both in Ukraine and abroad. These events were aimed at developing information verification skills, familiarizing with practical verification tools, and disseminating principles of effective communication in information crisis conditions. Special attention was paid to training journalists, teachers, and representatives of public organizations, forming professional competencies for countering disinformation and strengthening societal information resilience.

An example of disseminating international experience was the project «Fighting Disinformation in Central Europe: Showing StopFake's Best Practices», implemented with the support of Google Initiatives. The initiative aimed to spread Ukrainian experience in countering disinformation in Central and Eastern European countries. Within the project, the StopFake team presented its own fact-checking methodologies, propaganda analysis, and information resilience formation, organizing a series of practical trainings, lectures, and discussion sessions for journalists, teachers, public sector representatives, and diplomatic institutions.

The program covered 20 countries in the region and united over 500 participants, contributing to the creation of an international cooperation network in the fields of media education, fact-checking, and information security. The implementation of the project not only strengthened cross-border communication between expert communities but also

allowed for identifying specific local information challenges, developing adapted strategies to counter manipulations. In summary, the initiative made a significant contribution to strengthening the European information resilience system and popularizing Ukrainian media education practices at the international level.

General Media Literacy. One of the key directions of StopFake's activities is the development of media literacy as an important component of societal resilience to disinformation. From the beginning of the project's existence, the «Tools» section was introduced on the website, where materials reviewing modern fact-checking tools, verification algorithms, and analytics of innovations in digital journalism, open data, and OSINT research are regularly published. Later, the section expanded, integrating into a broader educational direction focused on increasing audience media literacy.

In addition to textual materials, StopFake actively developed multimedia formats and strategies to expand its audience, including international. From the first years of activity, the team launched video projects aimed at explaining propaganda mechanisms and disseminating media literacy knowledge. On the official YouTube channel, programs in English and Russian were released, targeted at foreign viewers, journalists, researchers, and media experts. Such formats contributed to popularizing Ukrainian experience in countering propaganda at the international level and strengthening global cooperation in media education and information security.

In 2018, StopFake began collaboration with UA:Suspilne Public Broadcaster, releasing weekly video programs in which the team talked about their own refutations, analyzed Russian propaganda work, and explained disinformation mechanisms. This program was the first television project in Ukraine at that time dedicated to media literacy, reaching a wide audience of viewers across the country.

A separate track of StopFake's activities became the implementation of projects aimed at countering disinformation and developing AI literacy among Ukrainian citizens. These initiatives aim to form critical thinking and practical skills in recognizing manipulations, particularly those related to the use of AI-generated content. Within this direction, the StopFake team develops multimedia educational materials that combine analytical articles, short videos for social networks, and practical tools for verifying information reliability, including AI-generated. Experts in digital security, media

analytics, and fact-checkers are involved in content preparation, providing professional recommendations on safe technology use and countering modern digital manipulations.

Conclusions. Media education today acts as one of the key tools of national security, as it forms society's ability to resist manipulations, propaganda, and fakes in the context of hybrid wars and large-scale wars. The Ukrainian experience confirms that developing media literacy is not only an educational task but also a strategic factor in state resilience. The fact-checking activities of StopFake demonstrate how combining educational, analytical, and communicative approaches can become an effective mechanism for countering disinformation. From the moment of its founding in 2014, the project evolved from a university initiative into a powerful media organization that combines fact-checking, educational programs, and international cooperation, contributing to the formation of critical thinking and information resilience among citizens in Ukraine and abroad.

Operating in the global information environment, StopFake does not limit itself to working with the Ukrainian audience. Through publications in 14 languages, the organization participates in shaping the international information discourse, exposing mechanisms of Russian disinformation campaigns and popularizing Ukrainian experience in countering hybrid threats. Thus, StopFake acts not only as a source of fact-checking but also as a platform for media education that combines academic expertise with practical journalistic work.

Among the key strategies of StopFake's activities, the integrated approach to countering disinformation stands out, which combines systematic monitoring, data verification, and the development of media literacy and critical thinking among various target audiences. An important element of this strategy is prebunking initiatives – preventive educational practices aimed at forming citizens' resilience to manipulations and disinformation influences. In addition, StopFake actively develops international cooperation between fact-checking organizations, universities, and media institutions, creating a network for exchanging experience that contributes to strengthening both national and global information security.

In the modern understanding, national security is an integrated system encompassing military, political, economic, social, informational, and ecological components. In this context, StopFake's activities can be considered a tool of information security

that contributes to increasing the population's media literacy and reduces society's vulnerability to information literacy, prevents the spread of manipulations, influences.

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Романюк В. С., Федченко Є. М. МЕДІАОСВІТА ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЇ БЕЗПЕКИ: СТРАТЕГІЧНА ФУНКЦІЯ STOPFAKE У ПРОТИДІЇ ДЕЗІНФОРМАЦІЇ

У статті проаналізовано роль медіаосвіти як інструменту національної безпеки на прикладі діяльності української фактчекінгової організації StopFake. Досліджено теоретичне підґрунтя медіаосвіти та медіаграмотності як чинників зміцнення суспільної стійкості й національної безпеки. Розглянуто еволюцію концепцій – від «інокуляційної парадигми» Лена Мастермана до сучасного розуміння медіаграмотності як «соціального імунітету». Також проаналізовано, як що медіаосвіта сприяє розвитку критичного мислення, формуванню етичних орієнтирів і протидії маніпуляціям в інформаційному середовищі. Особливу увагу приділено сучасним дослідженням ефективності фактчекінгу, дебанкінгу й пребанкінгу як складових політики інформаційної безпеки. Аналіз сучасних досліджень демонструє, що превентивні освітні практики – «ментальна вакцинація» проти дезінформації – виявляються ефективнішими за реактивні спростування. Таким чином, сучасна медіаосвіта поєднує когнітивні, технологічні та соціальні підходи, стаючи ключовим інструментом протидії дезінформації та підтримки національної безпеки.

Метою дослідження є з'ясування стратегічних функцій медіаосвітніх ініціатив у протидії дезінформації, розвитку критичного мислення та формуванні суспільної стійкості до інформаційних загроз. Для досягнення мети використано методи контент-аналізу, систематизації та кейс-стаді, що дозволили проаналізувати матеріали StopFake, зокрема публікації, освітні програми, міжнародні проєкти та практики комунікації з різними аудиторіями.

Результати дослідження засвідчили, що діяльність StopFake виходить за межі класичного фактчекінгу, виконуючи стратегічну функцію зміцнення інформаційної стійкості суспільства, а досвід StopFake демонструє, що медіаосвіта у поєднанні з фактчекінгом стає важливим компонентом національної безпеки та ефективним засобом протидії дезінформації в умовах гібридної війни.

Ключові слова: медіаосвіта, медіаграмотність, методи викладання, дезінформація, фактчекінг, стратегічні комунікації, російсько-українська війна.

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