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ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SPREADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

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Abstract. The development of human civilization is currently – in the middle of the third decade of the third millennium – highly dynamic, inextricably linked to the development and introduction of new, modern technologies in all spheres or sectors of society. Information and communication technology is one of the most dynamically developing sectors. The wide use of various advanced systems, tools, and smart devices in connection with the mass use of the Internet and a wide range of interactive social media platforms brings a new way of communication among people and searching, receiving, and spreading information. Such developments bring many positives but also negatives in the form of abuse – especially of social media – to spread misleading, altered, distorted, deceptive and/or invented information, for example, in the form of different conspiracy theories to influence people's thinking and actions. Some conspiracy theories can be just harmless fun or an expression of a certain disbelief or scepticism. However, some can be very dangerous; they can be part of hybrid threats spread by state and/or non-state actors to disrupt the functioning of democratic societies, undermining trust in democratic institutions, principles, rules, etc. That is why today, conspiracy theories represent a threat and a challenge to society, especially democratic society, and that is also why the authors of this paper deal with them as part of the interdisciplinary scientific research carried out.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories; hybrid threats; democratic society; modern technologies; media; social networks

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Additional disciplines: information and communication; political sciences; sociology

1. Introduction

The modern human civilization is significantly influenced by deepening globalization processes, which are manifested to a greater or lesser extent in all spheres of society's life. With one of the manifestations of the current modern age, closely connected with the growing computerization, internetization and digitalization of society, the dynamic emergence of new media and the rapid development and increasingly massive use of sophisticated information and communication technologies, systems and means, a new range of possibilities has also appeared, such as all kinds of news, information, or theories to search. And a new range of options for creating or modifying them and then further sharing and spreading them. At the same time, however, a new range of possibilities for abusing modern technologies and devices (Hajdúková & Šišulák, 2022; Wang, et al., 2023) and spreading invented, altered, distorted, deceptive and misleading information through them, for

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example, in the form of various conspiracy theories to influence people's thinking and actions (Green & Douglas, 2018; Ivančík & Nováková, 2023; Hajdúková, 2023). The spread of some conspiracy theories, which react to various significant events, phenomena or processes taking place around us, thus represents a threat that can have very adverse consequences for individuals, social groups, organizations, and the entire human society. As the proliferation of conspiracy theories coincides with advances in information and communication technologies (Sambol et al., 2023), the online discourse on conspiracy theories is flourishing today. For this reason, several recent studies in this area have focused on the spread and exposure of conspiracy theories in social media (Gambini et al., 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Kaye & Johnson, 2024; Daunt et al., 2023; Sambol et al., 2023; Valenzuela et al., 2023).

It is widely recognized that the current capacity for mass online communication on social media carries various dangers: fake news, disinformation, or conspiracy theories that can be precisely targeted to a specific audience (Mitchell, 2024). Some conspiracy theories can be just harmless fun or a manifestation of a certain incredulity or scepticism about official explanations for some politically, economically, socially, militarily, or otherwise significant events, phenomena, or processes (for example, economic, financial, energy crises, wars, conflicts, epidemics, pandemics, climate changes, tragic events, deaths of prominent personalities, etc.). However, some can be very dangerous, as they can be part of hybrid threats spread by state and/or non-state actors with the primary goal of influencing the thinking, opinion, actions and behaviour of the population and, at the same time, creating chaos, polarizing and destabilizing society, disrupting its normal functioning, undermining authority and trust in democratic institutions, democratically elected representatives, democratic principles and also in the ability to solve current problems of society in the target countries. At the same time, they can lead to the support of violence, extremism, radicalism, ethnic, racial, or religious intolerance. This is also why some conspiracy theories currently represent a severe threat and challenge for democratic societies (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Ivančík, 2022).

For this reason, we have decided to contribute to the current research in the field of conspiracy theories and hybrid threats as part of our scientific research activity and, using relevant methods of interdisciplinary scientific research, to participate in the clarification of these terms, which are increasingly used in the modern information society. At the same time, as part of the presentation of our scientific findings, we offer interested parties from the ranks of both the scientific and academic community, as well as practitioners, an insight into where the students of our academies obtain information, which sources they prefer when searching for information, whether they trust them, whether they consider the media, the Internet and social networks as tools for the spread of hybrid threats and also whether they believe conspiracy theories to be part of the spread of hybrid threats.

2. Conspiracy theories as part of hybrid threats

Conspiracy theories have become a widespread phenomenon in recent years. With a particular insight, it can even be said that they have become one of the phenomena of contemporary modern society. Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned rapid development in communication and information technologies, systems and means, the massive expansion of the Internet and the massive use of social networks contributed significantly to this. Conspiracy theories provide alternative explanations of significant historical or contemporary political, social or other events (phenomena, things, stories) with claims of secret conspiracies by people or groups trying to achieve their own goals at the expense of the majority of the population (e.g., gain or increase their power, subvert and control society, limit the activity of public institutions, etc.) (Uscinski, 2018). Therefore, many different conspiracy beliefs regarding a wide range of topics have recently appeared in the online space. Notable examples include unconventional interpretations of climate change (Samantray & Pin, 2019), the 9/11 attacks (Mahl et al., 2021), political movements such as QAnon (De Zeeuw et al., 2020), and/or theories related to the COVID pandemic -19 (Puri et al., 2020). As a result, the dissemination of such information can have far-reaching consequences for both individuals and society as a whole.

Belief in conspiracy theories has occurred in every historical period (Groh, 1987; Ucsinski & Parent, 2014). Although in the past the importance of anticipating real conspiracies and creating conspiracy theories was often important for human survival due to their frequent occurrence, which could lead to his death (Van Prooijen &

Van Vugt, 2018), an enormous number of current conspiracy theories are in terms of their content irrelevant and illogical. American surveys show that up to 55% of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory - for example, the one that claims that a group of Wall Street bankers organizes the financial crises to get even richer from the crises and dominate the world economy (Oliver & Wood, 2014). The situation is no different even in the countries of the so-called Vyšehrad Group (V4) because in Slovakia, Poland, Czechia, and Hungary, more than one-third of the population still believes in the conspiracy theory that Jews are trying to dominate the world (Krekó, 2015).

Studies published based on research carried out in the field of belief in conspiracy theories confirm that a person who believes in one conspiracy theory is generally more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011). The effort to understand users' inclination towards conspiracy theories is thus of great interest because it can offer valuable insights into the spread of ideologies without limiting the analysis to a particular conspiracy theory. This understanding is crucial for assessing the roles played by the individuals involved and taking appropriate measures to mitigate the impact of this phenomenon (Gambini et al., 2024).

The importance of understanding and investigating this phenomenon stems not only from their irrational nature but mainly from research that has pointed to the negative connection between belief in conspiracy theories and the safety of individuals and society. Belief in some conspiracy theories is closely connected with organizing and advocating violent protest actions (Chayinska & Minescu, 2018), with extremism, radicalization and violence committed by some extremist groups (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Likewise, belief in some conspiracy theories is associated with the promotion of xenophobia, racial, ethnic and religious hatred, polarization of society, etc.

Some conspiracy theories can be considered one of the forms of hybrid threats precisely for the above reasons. Their dissemination is by no means just harmless fun or a manifestation of a certain scepticism on the part of some individuals about the official explanations of some significant events but represents a carefully thought-out move, the only real intention of which is to promote predetermined strategic political and ideological goals. These are not just "regular conspiracy theories", such as those about aliens living among us because their spaceship crashed on Earth and they can't get home, so they took human form and adapted to life on Earth, or about a staged moon landing, which did not happen but was filmed in a movie studio to show the Americans to the world that they are better than the Russians in conquering space, or about Elvis Presley, Princess Diana, Michael Jackson and other famous people who, according to these theories they staged their death to live their next life peacefully, in seclusion, without ubiquitous media and sensationalist journalists (Greig, 2019; Uscinski – Parent, 2014). In this case, as stated above, these are elaborate conspiracy theories spread for support in achieving predetermined strategic political and ideological goals based on individual methods and procedures used to spread hybrid threats within the conduct of hybrid warfare. It is a conscious and deliberate activity aimed at manipulating the general public through disseminating various fabrications, lies, half-truths, misleading, distorted videos, images and/or stories to achieve set goals.

Based on the information above, this type of conspiracy theory is a form of political propaganda that aims to promote political and/or ideological goals. They use a proven strategy for this - they offer attractive explanations of significant events, phenomena and processes, which, although untrue and objectively improbable, focus the public's attention in the desired direction. However, individual actors pursue their interests and goals by spreading conspiracy theories (Qassam, 2019).

The essence of conspiracy theories is that nothing is as it seems at first glance, and everything is connected to everything. In other words, conspiracy theories try to convince people that there is a particular group of people - the so-called conspirators - usually representatives of elites (for example, the Rockefellers, Rothschilds, Windsors, Murdochs), the government (American, British, German, Israeli) or secret services (CIA, FBI, NSA, Mossad), some organizations (G7, NATO, EU) or secret societies (Bilderberg Society, Freemasons, Illuminati, etc.) or famous personalities (e.g. Bill Gates or George Soros) who secretly plan and organize everything that happens. Fictional conspirators are usually presented as enemies of the people.

Conspiracy theories thus divide the world into good and evil, We versus They. At the same time, conspiracy theorists argue that people must look beneath the surface to uncover the actions and intentions of conspirators who go to great lengths to hide their true intentions. The assumption is that if the one or those who want to know how it is or was, that is, to know the "real truth", they must "drill, dig deep enough" to discover the hidden connections between people, institutions, and events (phenomena, processes), which explain what happens or happened (Byford, 2011).

Some conspiracy theories can be considered part of hybrid threats because they are part of non-military, unconventional and asymmetric combat methods and part of conducted information, psychological and intelligence operations aimed at influencing the opinion, thinking and behaviour of the population in the target countries and reducing the resistance of the attacked society. In terms of definition, hybrid threats can be characterized as a set of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional, military and non-military methods and tools, used systematically to achieve specific goals without a formal declaration of war and under the pretext of a standard response (Ivančík, 2016). They are applied by activities characterized by centrally controlled intelligence and information activity, by the activity of non-state actors, including paramilitary groups, or by the deployment of the armed forces of a state actor without designation. Such activities can begin before openly declared military operations (EU, 2016; Jurčák & Turac, 2018; NATO, 2023).

From the perspective of relevant international organizations, NATO defines hybrid threats as a combination of military and non-military and covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, the deployment of irregular armed groups and conventional forces. Hybrid methods blur the lines between war and peace and try to sow doubt in the minds of the target population. Their goal is to destabilize and undermine societies (NATO, 2022).

According to the European Union, state or non-state actors can use and coordinate hybrid threats to achieve specific political goals. Hybrid campaigns are multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures using both conventional and unconventional tools and tactics. They are designed to be challenging to detect or attribute. These threats target critical vulnerabilities and seek to create confusion that would prevent quick and effective decision-making. Hybrid threats can range from cyber-attacks on critical information systems by disrupting essential services such as energy supplies or financial services to undermining public trust in government institutions or deepening social differences (EU, 2018).

According to the National Security Analytical Center, hybrid threats are characterized by the simultaneous use of several tools in a coordinated manner to exploit the vulnerabilities (weak spots) of the adversary and subsequently weaken his decision-making processes while maintaining a certain degree of plausible deniability. The strategic goal of these threats is to weaken public trust in democratic institutions, deepen unhealthy polarization at the national and international levels, question the fundamental values of democratic societies, as well as gain geopolitical influence and power through damaging and influencing democratic decision-making processes (NBAC, 2021).

For a better understanding of the investigated issue and to create a comprehensive picture of why some conspiracy theories can be considered part of hybrid threats, it is necessary - within the framework of the theoretical-methodological starting point of the investigation of the issue - to mention other closely related terms, such as hybrid influence, hybrid activity (action) and above all hybrid warfare.

Hybrid influencing is an act that the instigator achieves through several mutually complementary methods and the use of the vulnerabilities of the target society. Hybrid influencing is realized through economic, political, or military use and other tools. It can also be carried out using information and communication technologies and social networks, while the methods can be used simultaneously or sequentially (YT, 2017: 95).

A hybrid activity (action) is an activity characterized by ambiguity, which arises from the combination of using conventional and unconventional means - disinformation, fake news, interference in political debate or elections, disruption of functionality or attacks on critical infrastructure, implementation of information and cyber

operations, various forms of criminal activities and asymmetric use of military assets and warfare (Zandee et al., 2021: 8).

A hybrid war can be understood as an armed conflict led by a combination of non-military and military means to force the adversary to take actions it would not have taken on its own through their synergistic effect. At least one side of the conflict is the state. The primary role in achieving the goals of the war is played by non-military means in the form of information and psychological operations, propaganda, economic sanctions, embargoes, criminal activities, terrorist activities and other subversive activities of a similar nature, which are conducted against the entire society, especially against its political structures, state authorities administration and self-government, the economy of the state, the morale of the population and the armed forces (Kříž et al., 2015: 8).

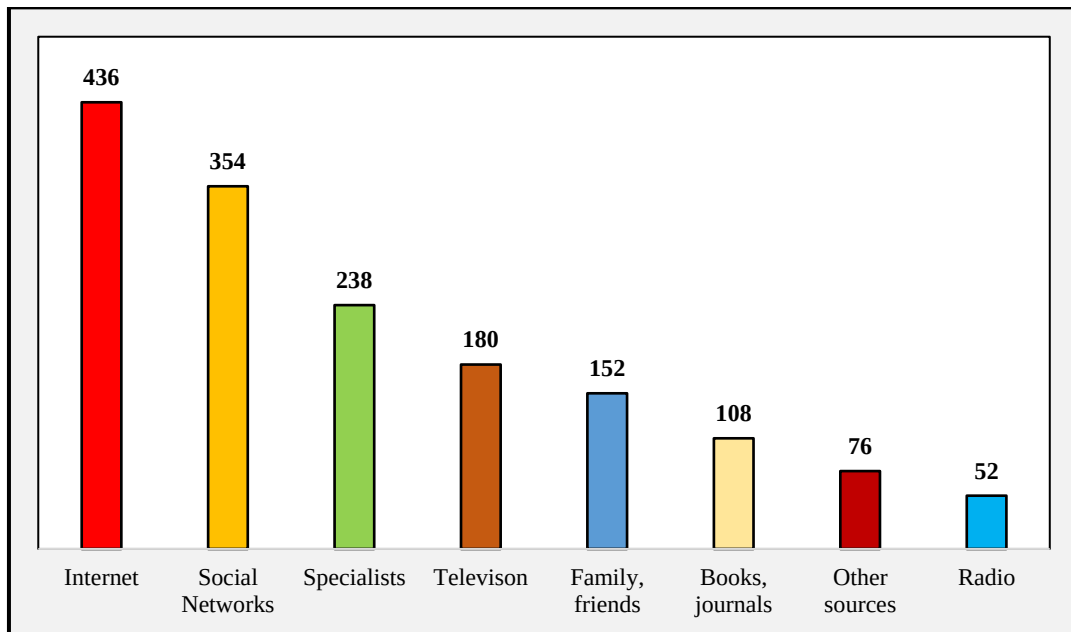
Overall, in the case of hybrid war, it is a way of conducting a modern armed conflict. A conflict that does not start with a shot and certainly not with a declaration of war. A conflict that the attacked society does not even know about at first does not even suspect or admit that it has been attacked and is at war. It is a dynamic combination of military and non-military (political, diplomatic, economic, technical/technological, humanitarian, diversionary, terrorist, criminal, etc.) activities carried out by state and non-state actors, regular and irregular formations, using disinformation, propaganda, sanctions, and other tools. and methods and implementation of information, cyber and psychological operations (Ivančík, 2016: 148).

3. The spread and perception of conspiracy theories as part of hybrid threats

The use of various fabrications, lies, half-truths or twisting of facts to influence individuals or even the entire public within the framework of hybrid activities, as we have already mentioned above in the text, is nothing new, but if it is combined with sophisticated means, such as today's modern smart devices, means and technologies, with the environment of social networks and the Internet, or the activity of hackers, there is a new and extreme threat of the spread of various types of conspiracy theories, disinformation, hoaxes or so-called fake news, which represent a danger not only for individuals, social groups and organizations but in some cases a security threat for the entire contemporary democratic society (Ivančík & Nečas, 2022).

The emergence and rapid development of the Internet and social networks have radically changed how people communicate and obtain information today. This new way of communication is characterized by the very high speed with which information is transmitted. Social networks offer the highest level of interaction that current communication can provide users. Access to all kinds of information on the Internet and social networks is almost unlimited and, compared to other options, very cheap and mostly wholly free. Also, the lack of effective and efficient measures aimed at regulating online content, in contrast to that provided through traditional media, makes the online environment of the Internet and social networks extremely interesting and tolerant.

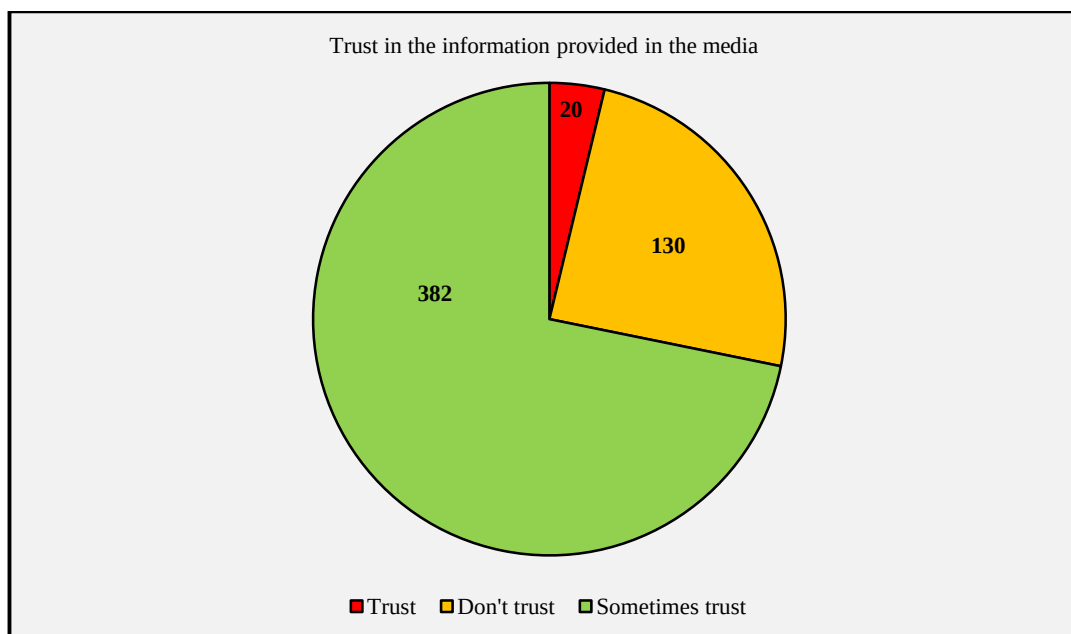
Research carried out at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava and the Academy of the Armed Forces in Liptovský Mikuláš in 2023, in which 532 students of internal and external bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies took part, confirmed that the Internet and social networks represent the two most used options for obtaining information. They are followed by experts, television, family, friends, acquaintances, the press, books, magazines, newspapers, radio, or other sources of information (graph 1).



Graph 1. Overview of the possibilities used by students in obtaining information (number of students)
Note: For this question, students could mark the three most used options for obtaining information

Source: Own research, 2023

The following graph explains why students use the Internet and social networks more often to obtain information than traditional media (television, radio, books, magazines, newspapers). It follows that only 20 (3.76%) students fully trust information from the media, compared to 130 (24.44%) who clearly do not trust the information provided in the media. Most students, up to 382 (71.80%), trust information obtained from the media only sometimes (graph 2).



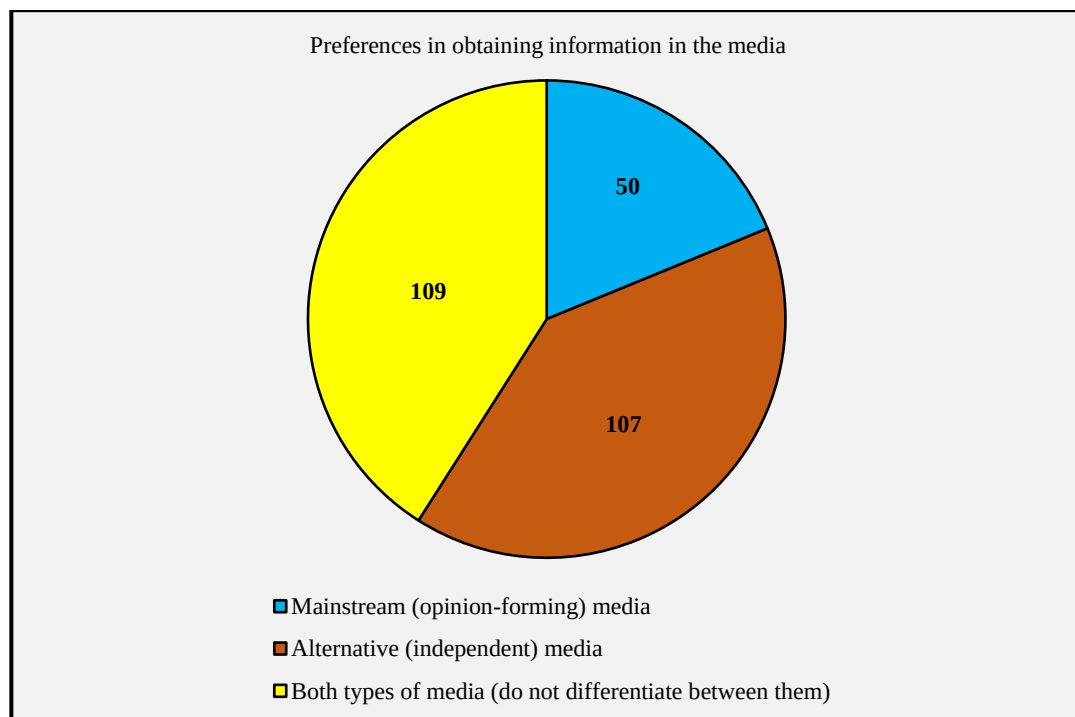
Graph 2. Overview of students' trust in the information provided in the media (number of students)

Source: Own research, 2023

Considering the low trust of students in the information provided by the media, in this context, we were interested in whether students - if they do use information from the media - prefer mainstream (opinion-forming)

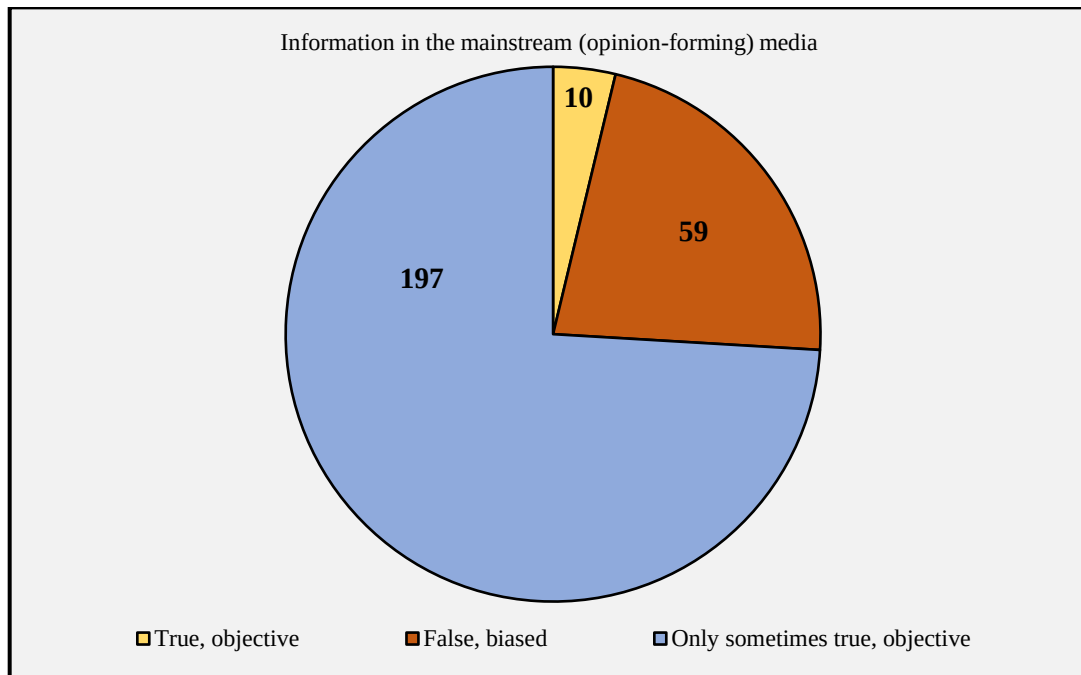
media when obtaining information or whether they prefer to obtain information from alternative (independent) media (portals, resources). The respondents' answers show that more than four-tenths of students (40.98%) need to differentiate between media when obtaining information. A slightly smaller part of students (40.22%) prefers to use alternative (independent) media, and the smallest part of them – less than one-fifth (18.80%) – prefer mainstream (opinion-forming) media (graph 3).

The higher trust of students in alternative (independent) media compared to mainstream (opinion-forming) media is also confirmed by the following answers to the question, which was used to determine whether they consider the information presented in both types of media true or objective. It follows from the answers of the respondents that only 20 students (3.76%) consider the information presented in the mainstream (opinion-forming) media to be true, or objective. In contrast, up to 118 students (22.18%) consider the information published in these media false or biased. The largest part of respondents (394), which represents almost three quarters (74.06%), stated that they consider the information published in the mainstream (opinion-forming) media to be true or objective only sometimes (graph 4).



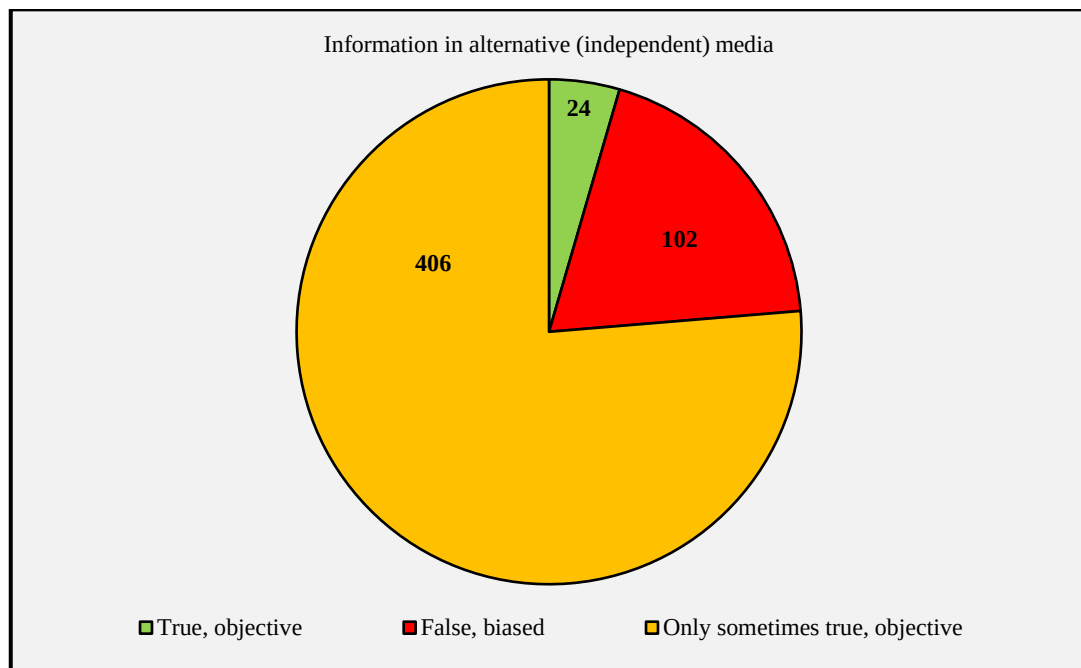
Graph 3. Overview of students' preferences in obtaining information in the media (number of students)

Source: Own research, 2023



Graph 4. Overview of students' opinions on truthfulness or objectivity of information presented in mainstream (opinion-forming) media (number of students)
Source: Own research, 2023

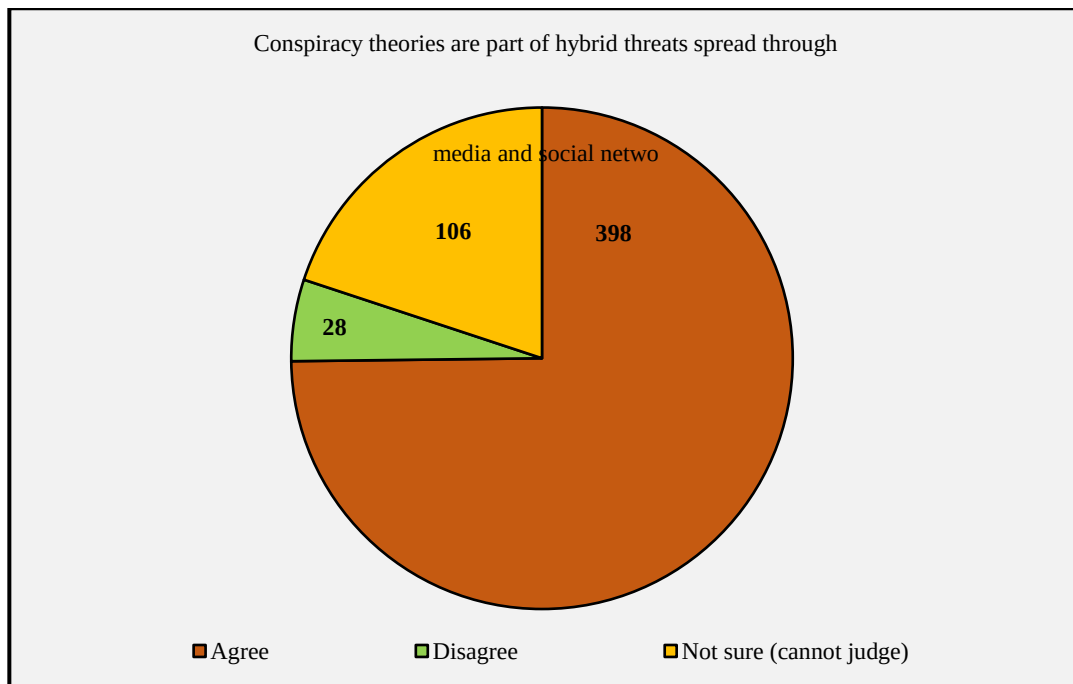
The slightly higher trust of students in alternative (independent) media compared to mainstream (opinion-forming) media is confirmed by the following answers. They show that while 24 students (4.51%) consider the information presented in alternative (independent) media to be true or objective, 102 students (19.17%) consider the information published in these media to be false or biased. The largest part of respondents (406), more than three quarters (76.32%), said that they consider the information published in alternative (independent) media to be true, or objective only sometimes (graph 5).



Graph 5. Overview of students' opinions on truthfulness or objectivity of information presented in alternative (independent) media (number of students)
Source: Own research, 2023

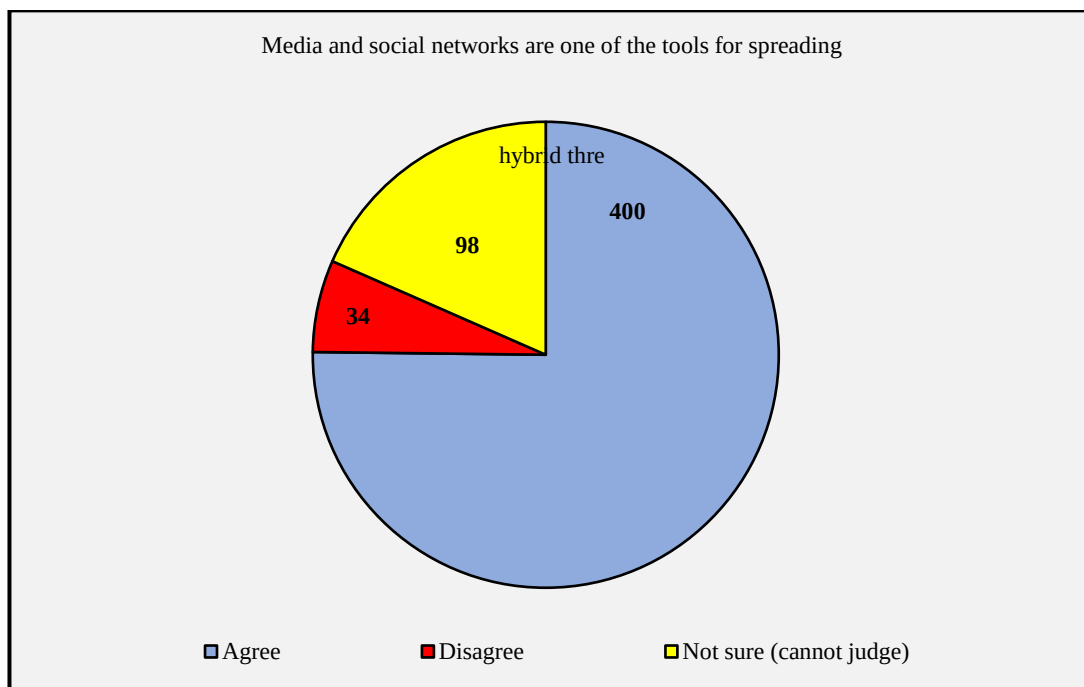
Although students expressed higher trust in the truth and objectivity of information presented in alternative (independent) media than in mainstream (opinion-forming) media, faith in the truth and objectivity of information in both media types is generally low. The largest group of students is those who consider the information presented in both media types to be accurate and objective only sometimes.

These results are very closely related to the opinions expressed by students when asked if they consider conspiracy theories to be part of the hybrid threats disseminated through the media and social networks in the context of hybrid warfare. It follows from the answers of student respondents that almost three-quarters of them (74.82%) identify with this opinion. Only roughly one-twentieth of students (5.26%) disagree with it, and one-fifth (19.92%) are not entirely sure or cannot assess it (graph 6).



Graph 6. Overview of students' opinions on whether conspiracy theories are part of hybrid threats spread through the media and social networks (number of students)

Source: Own research, 2023



Graph 7. Overview of students' opinions on whether the media and social networks are one of the tools for spreading hybrid threats (number of students)

Source: Own research, 2023

Following this, we asked the students whether they consider the media and social networks to be one of the tools for spreading hybrid threats in the conduct of hybrid warfare. The answers were very similar, as more than three-quarters (75.19%) of the student respondents believe that the media and social networks are one of the tools for spreading hybrid threats in the conduct of hybrid warfare. Only 6.19% of respondents do not agree with this opinion, and less than one-fifth (18.42%) are not entirely sure or cannot assess it (graph 7). The views of students reflect processes in contemporary society. Therefore, the obtained results must be considered when designing policies to fight against disinformation spreading via social media.

Conclusions

In recent decades, our way of social functioning has changed significantly due to the dynamic development of human society, especially in the field of information and communication technologies, systems, and means. In the last three years, the coronavirus pandemic and measures taken to eliminate its spread and protect public health have significantly contributed to this change. The progressive internetization, computerization and digitization of society, as well as the advent of new media and the massive use of social networks, have brought many positives, but also several negatives. These are usually related to anonymity on the Internet and social networks, distorting reality or showing unrealistic values that should not even be values. Media, the Internet, and social networks have become a fixed part of our daily lives. These, especially the Internet and social networks, have become very powerful information and communication tools that have changed the way of interpersonal communication.

There is nothing surprising about this because it brings many positives; for example, we can talk to a classmate from primary or secondary school or from the university or a friend from childhood whom we haven't seen for years. We can find out the interests of a person we like, whom we recognize, where we can go on vacation or a trip, what accommodation options are there, etc. The Internet and social networks also significantly accelerate the flow of information and data and the spread of thoughts and ideas. Among the positive effects, we can also mention various support groups for people who have different health problems or belong to a minority community, help in education or provide space for education, creativity, or self-expression, if used correctly.

Unfortunately, the Internet and social networks and their mass use (and in many cases also abuse) also have their dark sides, and there are quite a few of them. One of them is (among others) the fact that they provide an opportunity to spread through them various conspiracy theories that can very adversely affect people's thinking, actions, and behaviour, disrupt the functioning of society, question existing democratic values and principles, the functioning of democratic institutions, the ability to act, to solve problems, thereby endangering the entire democratic society. Together with some media, some conspiracy theories represent one of the tools for spreading hybrid threats within the framework of conducting a hybrid war. The above is also confirmed by the results of research carried out among students of internal and external studies as part of bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies at the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava and the Academy of the Armed Forces in Liptovský Mikuláš.

This is also why the state and its competent institutions need to take effective and efficient measures to combat hybrid threats, support prevention and education in media literacy, and work with information. Increasing awareness of conspiracy theories, improving the ability to recognize and detect them, as well as eliminating their spread as much as possible, would certainly mean fewer opportunities for, for example, populism, radicalism, extremism, xenophobia, or polarization in society. For this reason, the state's involvement in this issue is desirable and necessary. On the other hand, we all must realize that the possibilities of the state are not endless; not everything will be solved by the state, so we must contribute to eliminating the influence of conspiracy theories and their spreaders on our lives.

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