Attitude of the Belarusian Internet Audience Towards Fake News

Mikhail Doroshevich
mikhail.doroshevich@e-baltic.org

The situation with the number of coronavirus COVID-19 infections in Belarus had rapidly worsened in September-October, with a lot of discussions regarding the possibility of using the larger spectrum of WHO-recommended vaccines for vaccination of Belarusian citizens and, of course, also regarding the mandatory mask regime and its scandalous repealing, COVID-dissidence, disinformation.

One of the most relevant digital skills of the Internet audience today is the ability to detect and recognize unreliable information (fake news) and factoids. This skill is one of the most basic from the point of view of media literacy.

Let us take a look at the attitude of the Belarusian Internet audience aged 15-74 towards fake news based on the data of the study “Media Consumption and Media Literacy in Belarus in August 2021” conducted by the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative in August 2021.
The question was formulated as: “Do you think you can identify situations when the media wants to manipulate or change the opinion of residents, by, for example, spreading fake / false news, propaganda, disinformation, etc.?”

Seems like a great result: half of the respondents believe that they can identify fake news and about a third are not sure about it.

Let’s consider socio-demographic characteristics to try to understand who is so optimistic about false information.

The first socio-demographic characteristic is gender:
The chart immediately demonstrates how much more optimistic male respondents are regarding their ability to identify fake information in comparison to women who took part in the survey.

Distribution by age:

The results turn out to be completely unexpected: The older people are, the more they feel that they can easily identify inaccurate information. The largest number of those who found it difficult to answer is found among the young audience aged 18-24.

Based on geographical location: the proportion of people that believe that they can easily determine fake news ranges from 46.4% in the Vitebsk region to 54.9% in Minsk. The number of those who find it difficult to answer varies from 29.4% in Minsk to 38% in the Mogilev region.

An important question in the study was regarding the sources used for obtaining information. Let’s consider five main ones (websites and online media, social networks, word of mouth, telegram channels or other messengers, television):
Members of the Belarusian Internet audience predominantly use several sources of information. For example, only television or only telegram channels, as the only source of information for three 3% of the respondents.

Now let’s create a correlation with the scrutinized issue:

The respondents who indicated telegram channels or other messengers as the source of information believe that they can easily recognize fake information.
The respondents, who indicated television as their source of information, were most skeptical of their skills and believed that it is difficult to detect fake news.

Let's compare two main messengers used as sources for news: Telegram and Viber.

Telegram users assume that they can easily recognize false information.

An interesting behavioral question: what news sites do you use most often in order to find out the news, the necessary information?
Readers of international news sites assume they can easily spot fake news, and there were fewer of those who responded with “difficult to answer” among those than among readers of other news sites.

The socio-demographic portrait of “optimists” regarding recognizing fakes: a man over 45, living in Minsk.

Bearing in mind that this study was conducted by a survey method, it makes sense to pay more attention to the issues of media literacy in these target groups.

**Sources of Fake News**

Question: Based on your experience, where do you most often come across fake news?

Is it unexpected that television “leads” by so much, and for which target groups does it lead?
Among the male audience, 64.2% consider TV the leading source of fake news, among the female audience, 55.5% think so.

Distribution by age:

18-24 — 64.9%
25-34 — 63.7%
35-44 — 56.7%
45-54 — 52.7%
55-74 — 59.7%

That is, Generation Z, born after 1996, are the most critical of television as a reliable source of information.

Geographically, there is a very significant spread from only 51% in the Mogilev region to 70.2% in Minsk!

Every day Belarusian consumers of media information are faced with an increasing amount of false information (fake news) and factoids.

Therefore, there is a need for regular research (quantitative and qualitative) of the Belarusian audience regarding its readiness to identify and recognize fake narratives.

Consider the example of two studies from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

One example is from a recent study conducted in Ukraine, “Setting the Population to Media and Living in New Media 2021”, which showed that almost 50% of Ukrainians believe in a fake narrative about a vaccine that is more dangerous than Covid-19.
Another example is from the Czech Republic, where according to a CTHH study in 2019, up to 70% of Czechs agree with disinformation narratives (for example, “The European Union tells the Czech Republic what to do and violates its sovereignty” or “The Prime Minister cannot influence key decisions of the European Union”)

### Conclusion

Any qualitative (good) analysis of the situation that claims to provide strategic conclusions should be based not on topical issues on the agenda, but on a serious conceptual basis, when the results of the study (studies) can be used effectively not only for answering the topical questions of today, but for developing strategic recommendations.

Source:


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