

DISINFORMATION IN ARMENIA:

EXAMINING

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS



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Research background

As a contemporary public institution, the media plays an important role in the functioning of society and social stability. Giddens examines the role of mass media and shows how they govern and unite societies in conditions of uncertainty and instability. At the same time, he points to the role of the media in mitigating uncertainty and instability by making information about global changes accessible (Giddens, 1990, 77-78).

In this global world of social and political changes, where the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing wars have undermined the foundations of stability, and where public trust in various institutions is gradually decreasing, it is impossible to ignore the role and influence of the media and mass information sources on these developments. The forms of media, the relationship between society and the media, and the place and role of the media in public life are changing. Traditionally, media analyses emphasize the media's function of filtering information and acting as a "gatekeeper" of information in shaping public opinion. The role of information "gatekeepers" may still be relevant, but the ways of communicating with people have changed significantly. The media is perceived by the public as a tool for representing different interests, shaping and advancing political agendas. Various circles can shape different public perceptions and have a specific political influence. Today, the opposite is also relevant: people's public and political "tastes" are becoming the main criterion for choosing media. People

1 | Stroud, N.J. Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure. *Polit Behav* 30, 341–366 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-007-9050-9>

seek information that confirms their expectations and beliefs, and matches their perceptions, a concept best known in literature as “confirmation bias.”¹

Despite the diversity of information sources, the media continues to filter our view of the social world. We have much more limited opportunities to engage directly and deeply with the economy or politics, and our opinions are largely mediated by the media. “*Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media,*” (Luhmann, 2009, 9). But then Luhmann goes on to say: “*On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources. Our way of dealing with this is to suspect that there is manipulation at work, and yet no consequences of any import ensue because knowledge acquired from the mass media merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing structure,*” (Luhmann, 2009, 9).

In the modern world, when freedom of speech is a hallmark of democratic societies, it is also appropriate to refer to its fragility. This fragility becomes especially evident when the media primarily serves the interests of big capital and corporations, media owners, and politicians, instead of developing an agenda that would serve the public interest and make the voice of the public heard. The violation of public interest is especially visible when the media exploits the principle of freedom of speech, becoming a principal source of spreading hate speech, false information, and disinformation.

The focus of media criticism is often also directed at the institutional structures and relationships (such as control, usurpation of the media by large media owners, capital turnover, the advertising market, etc.), within which they operate, propagandizing on behalf of the powerful interests that control and finance the media (Chomsky, Herman,

1988). The representatives of these interests have their agendas, and a key component of that agenda is the reproduction of a loyal media industry. This reproduction is often ensured by journalists and editors, who internalize the priorities of corporations and capital (Chomsky, Herman, 1988). This situation significantly distorts the role of the media as a public sphere. The democratic assumption is that the media is independent and aimed at revealing and covering the truth, but the current situation exposes the media's heavy dependence on large capital and interests of economic and political forces. In this context, a question arises as to whether various segments of the public question the information provided by the media, particularly its accuracy, and whether it is possible to avoid falling into the trap of consuming disinformation.

Public perceptions and debates on the media are primarily linked to political issues and domestic political developments. In the local context, we are witnessing the increasing role of the media in public and political life. In the Armenian context, public perceptions of the role of the media are mainly linked to the domestic political situation and developments, framed by a general atmosphere of uncertainty and the difficulty in conceptualizing political and public changes. Comparing the responses to several questions of the “Caucasus Barometer 2021-2022” survey conducted by CRRC Armenia, we can see that people consider that the effect of social media on the general situation in Armenia is mostly negative (56%), they are very much worried about the false and misleading information on the Internet, including social media, in Armenia (69%), and believe that the negative effect of social media on the general situation in Armenia mainly consists in the spread of disinformation and fake news (63%) and misleading people (14%).² In recent

2 | CRRC Armenia (2022). Caucasus Barometer 2021-2022. Retrieved from https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/%D4%B2%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%B8%D5%B4%D5%A5%D5%B-F%D6%80-2021_pptx_Fin-al_13.06.22-2.pdf

3 | The World Economic Forum defines global risk as “the possibility of the occurrence of an event or condition which, if it occurs, would negatively impact a significant proportion of global GDP, population or natural resources.”

4 | The report is based on the Global Risks Perception Survey, which has been conducted on an annual basis by the World Economic Forum for two decades. Within the framework of the survey, interviews are conducted every year with approximately 1,500 experts across academia, business, government, the international community and civil society.

5 | World Economic Forum (2024). The Global Risks Report 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>

6 | Altay, S., Berriche, M., Heuer, H., Farkas, J., & Rathje, S. (2023). A survey of expert views on misinformation: Definitions, determinants, solutions, and future of the field. Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 4(4)

7 | Canadian Center for Cyber Security (May 2024). How to identify misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Retrieved from: <https://www.cyber.gc.ca/sites/default/files/misinformation-mesinformation-it-sap.00.300-en.pdf>

years, the issue of disinformation and fake news in the media has been widely discussed and studied within various social science disciplines and is the focus of attention of different researchers. Moreover, the World Economic Forum Global Risks³ Report⁴ has ranked disinformation as the top global risk challenge for two years in a row.⁵ As for why people believe and spread disinformation, experts point to reasons such as partisanship, group identity, confirmation bias, and distrust of state institutions.⁶

This context, our constant monitoring of the media, and our observations regarding public sentiment also prompted us to reach out to experts and NGOs to find answers to questions related to media and disinformation. In this study, we use the term “disinformation” to describe false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage, or guide people, organizations, and countries in the wrong direction.⁷

Methodological framework

The research is based on an in-depth study conducted in two stages, which allowed us to identify disinformation prevalent in public discourse and the specifics of public perception and response. In the first stage of the research, we conducted expert interviews aimed at answering research questions about what kind of disinformation is spread in the media, and what impact it has on public sentiment, particularly focusing on disinformation related to gender and sexuality, security and democracy, revealing their interactions, as well as the reasons and sources of disinformation, the actors and their interests. We conducted expert interviews with the following experts:

- gender experts from civil society;
- an expert in fundamental human rights;
- media experts;
- representatives of international organizations;
- a researcher studying media-related issues.

In total, we conducted 10 expert interviews with 4 women and 6 men. We conducted both face-to-face and online interviews to ensure the engagement of all possible experts. We conducted the interviews in June-July 2024.

Based on the results of expert interviews, we organized and conducted focus group discussions in urban and rural communities of Armenia to unveil public perspectives on these issues. During the focus group discussions, we tested a new method for verifying disinformation, which uncovers public practices of responding to disinformation, reveals media consumption traditions, public reactions to disinformation, as well as potential pillars of trust. Thus, we identified six news items from the media that contain disinformation and asked the participants in the focus-group discussions to read them, provide feedback on whether they are aware of, have heard of them, or have read about them, as well as to indicate which of them contains disinformation and why they think so. Each participant took turns reading and evaluating each piece of news presented, after which we discussed them in the group. We conducted 23 focus group discussions, 3 of which in Yerevan and 20 in the regions. We conducted 2 focus group discussions in each region: one in an urban community, and the other in a rural community. In organizing the focus group discussions, we identified age and gender as criteria for selecting participants, and held mixed group discussions with two age groups: 19-35 years old and 36-50 years old. The total number of participants in

the focus group discussions was approximately 210, of which 124 were women and 86 were men. We conducted the discussions in July-August 2024.

By combining the methods of expert interviews and focus group discussions for collecting information, we were able to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

General overview of social practices of media consumption and disinformation

The media has a key effect on public sentiment, and today it has become a generator of a more negative environment and mood in Armenian reality. On the one hand, the issue of isolation of the public from the media is under discussion, and on the other hand, the issue of the disconnect between the media as an institution and the public, as well as the lack of trust towards the media.

The Second Karabakh War had a pivotal role in transformations in the relations between the public and the media, which we can observe not only under this, but also different other studies and analyses by journalists. *Calls to follow only the official news and systematic state propaganda condensed, discharged, and released the emotional and conscious wave of society after the war, which would later be defined in different ways but under the umbrella concept of distrust of the media.*⁸ Indeed, it is distrust that has become the main characteristic of the relationship between the media and the public, and distrust is also the primary attitude that people express during focus group discussions when asked any question related to the media. Apart from distrust, the war was the point that generally disrupted people's present and their emotional world.

Both expert and public concerns highlight the increase in negative news items in the media, particularly news about unfortunate events, crimes, murders, and car accidents. Among public concerns, we also see the discussion of the

8 | Yeghiazaryan, A. (2023, 10 April) Transformations in media literacy after the war and today. Retrieved from <https://media.am/hy/medialiteracy/2023/10/04/36275/>

issue of media content, particularly the persistent lack of content and polarization of the media. The participants in the study consistently refer to the problem that the media lacks pluralism on specific issues, and as regards political issues, there is dominance of the same content from media outlets belonging to either the ruling or opposition forces (the “*black or white*” framework). After the Second Karabakh War, personal and emotional layers have been added to discussions about the media. In particular, the war and its coverage in the media became a reason to isolate oneself from the media, to see certain media sources only as a reflection of a “desired image.” The study participants interpret alienation from the media as a way to live a peaceful life or a different reality, an opportunity to escape from reality.

Focus group discussions also allow us to assert that after the Second Karabakh War, there is an increased public reflection, questioning of the media content, but in many cases this is expressed at the level of speaking, rather than acting. Especially when people have information about who owns the given media outlet and which political interest it serves, they interpret the information provided by the media outlet from that perspective.

In this regard, the focus group participants refer to the public demand for getting accurate information, rather than interpreting that information, stating that based on political or other interests, everyone, especially journalists and political analysts, may interpret information differently. By comparing this with the information obtained from expert interviews, we can observe some discrepancies in opinions since experts noted that the public needs interpretation of information, and it is for this reason that the number of “political” analysts has also increased in the public and political spheres.

Among the public's general observations about the media, it is also important to refer to public perceptions and multiple interpretations of freedom of speech. According to the participants of focus group discussions, freedom of speech is often equated with insults, defamation, hate speech, and permissiveness.

Issues of trust in the media also arise from the vast amount of information and misinformation available today. The volume of information simply does not allow much room for different segments of the public to distinguish between true and false information. In many cases, the lack of trust even leads to people questioning accurate information. This is perhaps a projection of the public apathy onto the social practices and principles of consuming media.

Definitions and perceptions of disinformation

We live in an era where digital technologies are an integral part of almost every aspect of our lives, and the dissemination of information has never been easier or more instantaneous. Disinformation is also spread instantly, with the click of a button, having become a global challenge in recent years. In Armenia, disinformation has been one of the issues that has polarized the public over the past decade. It was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Second Karabakh War, and the forced displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.⁹

Disinformation is false information that does not correspond to the reality. Several terms are used around the world to define disinformation, distinguish its types, as well as targets and levels of impact: misinformation, disinformation, fake news, or malinformation. Thus, fake news are false stories that appear to be news, are spread online, in some cases by the media, and are sometimes used to influence political views or are merely used as a joke. Misinformation is false information that is not necessarily intended to cause harm. Disinformation refers to false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage, or guide people, organizations, and countries in the wrong direction. Propaganda may sometimes be part of this type of disinformation. And malinformation refers to information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm.¹⁰

9 | Freedom House (2021, 18 May). The Boundaries Between Information, Disinformation, and Confidentiality in Matters of National Security: What is Media Terror: Summary. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Armenian%20Text.pdf>

10 | Canadian Center for Cyber Security (2024, May). How to identify misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Retrieved from: <https://www.cyber.gc.ca/sites/default/files/misinformation-mesinformation-itsap.00.300-en.pdf>

In Armenian, the term “սպառնդեկատվություն” is the main concept for describing the phenomenon, it still has no distinctions, and includes the entirety of the phenomena described in the above concepts, and the tendencies to spread disinformation.

The research participants were generally able to define what disinformation is, providing definitions and characteristics that, in one way or another, were in line with the above-mentioned distinctions of disinformation. When defining “disinformation,” the focus group participants most often use the following phrases: “fake news,” “false news,” “information that does not correspond to reality,” “distorted information,” “exaggeration,” “information that spreads panic,” “incomplete information,” “information not based on facts,” etc.

When defining “disinformation,” research participants often also refer to clickbait, which is when the media uses eye-catching headlines and photos to entice readers to click on an article or image, or a link that takes them to another website, where the information does not always match the headline or photo. Clickbaits are mainly used by the media to attract more advertisers in serving certain political or economic goals.¹¹

When defining disinformation, focus group participants also refer to cybercrime. There is an increase in cybercrime around the world, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote work, distance learning, as well as the online planning of various functions and the unprecedented growth in Internet use have increased the number of cybercrimes and people affected by them, both worldwide and in Armenia. The use of artificial intelligence also plays a major role in digital disinformation or cybercrime, having become particularly relevant in recent years. During focus group dis-

¹¹ | Grigoryan, R., (2023, 17 January). Who and why are spreading disinformation? Who are the targets? Aliq Media. Retrieved from <https://www.aliqmedia.am/2023/01/17/99633/>

cussions, the participants also shared their experiences of how they too had become the target of similar scams.

We live in an overloaded and oversaturated information environment, where we receive too much information through various platforms. The development of information technology, in turn, contributes to this burden in many ways: through the amount of information produced, the easy ways to disseminate it, as well as the wide audience. Under these circumstances, it is more difficult to comprehensively analyze the information received, which makes it difficult to comprehend the information and the decisions made on different issues. It is also difficult to comprehensively analyze and understand what is and is not disinformation. Research participants also found it difficult to define disinformation.

Some research participants also tend to believe that information that they “do not like” or “does not align with their political views” is disinformation. Moreover, in their definitions and assessments of disinformation, fewer participants often refer to public debates or current topics.

Who is spreading disinformation and why?

12 | Abed, S. F. et al. (2024). Understanding disinformation in the context of public health emergencies: The case of COVID-19. *Wkly. Epidemiol. Rec. Relevé Épidémiologique Hebd.*, Vol 4, 38–48.

13 | UK Parliament Post (2024, April 25). Disinformation: sources, spread and impact. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/uk-parliament>

14 | World Economic Forum (2024). The Global Risks Report 2024. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>

15 | UK Parliament Post (2024, 25 April). Disinformation: sources, spread and impact. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/uk-parliament>

16 | Lee, S. K. et al. (2022). Misinformation of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine hesitancy. *Sci. Rep.*, Nature Publishing Group. Government Office for Science (2023). What impact do climate Disinformation: sources, spread and impact change misinformation and disinformation have? GOV.UK. Retrieved from: <https://shorturl.at/te5Ab>

17 | UK Parliament Post (2024, 25 April). Disinformation: sources, spread and impact. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/uk-parliament>

Sometimes it is extremely difficult to identify which sources are spreading disinformation. Typically, coordinated disinformation campaigns use a multidimensional approach to spreading disinformation, where new or existing disinformation is systematically published in various sources, over time going beyond the previously defined framework and growing into a larger campaign that encompasses various platforms.¹² Experts studying disinformation identify several main entities spreading disinformation:¹³

- Foreign states - disinformation supported/spread by a foreign state may aim to cause confusion, exacerbate political polarization, undermine democracy, and/or sow distrust in societies.¹⁴
- Politicians and journalists - research shows that very often politicians and journalists around the world can be primary sources of disinformation.¹⁵
- Activists- certain groups of activists can also spread disinformation, such as climate change deniers or anti-vaccination groups, which became particularly active during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶
- Individuals and corporations - business owners, celebrities and influencers, trolls tend to spread disinformation to serve their own political/ideological agendas or financial interests.¹⁷

When discussing sources of disinformation, research participants also often mention foreign states as entities that spread disinformation. It is interesting to note here that the expert community has mentioned Russia as the main foreign state spreading disinformation, as well as local, domestic sources affiliated with Russia.

Participants of focus group discussions also mention foreign countries as sources of disinformation. Most often we encounter the phrase “hostile countries”, by which the participants mainly mean Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani sources. Moreover, the participants in the focus group discussions mean both how Azerbaijan uses disinformation within its own country or in other countries, and how it uses Armenian-language sources operating in Armenia to serve Azerbaijani interests in the context of the ongoing conflict.

The research participants also identify politicians as sources of disinformation, both those from government or pro-government and from opposition circles, through media outlets owned by them and serving the interests of their political forces.

When referring to sources spreading disinformation, the study participants also single out financial organizations, corporations, and businesses of various sizes that have specific financial interests and spread disinformation to serve those interests.

In discussions about entities disseminating disinformation, research participants also discuss the motives or the purpose for which disinformation is being spread. In their judgments about the motives of spreading disinformation, focus group participants, mention that the goal of especially political disinformation is primarily to divert public attention from bigger political issues.

According to the research results, one of the goals of spreading disinformation is to sow panic in the public, as well as to avoid the panic. It is particularly interesting to note that the participants in the focus group discussions generally have a negative attitude towards disinformation aimed at spreading panic, criticizing it and blaming those who do that. However, the disinformation that is spread “*to prevent panic*” is generally perceived in a more positive or neutral light, and to some extent even justified.

The narrative of using disinformation to prevent panic is mainly discussed by the research participants in the context of the “We Will Win” campaign by the RA Information Center during the Second Karabakh War. On the one hand, the participants in the study emphasize that “We Will Win” was the biggest disinformation campaign, but on the other hand, they justify it, noting that it was important to convey positive messages during wartime and “avoid dampening the fighting spirit of the army.”

During focus group discussions conducted in various communities, participants also noted that people may also become sources of disinformation, either unintentionally or for the purpose of “self-glorification” or when they want to do something “positive,” not even realizing how dangerous the disinformation they are spreading is, or they simply are not able to identify or distinguish disinformation.

Common disinformation in the media

According to the research participants (both experts and participants of focus group discussions), disinformation in the media mostly covers the following topics: domestic and foreign policy, personal lives of political leaders and their family members, show business, healthcare, security, economy and business, etc.

Disinformation on political topics is a primary subject of discussion in the opinion of the expert community and the public, and by political they mean both domestic and foreign policy topics. It is important to note that when discussing political disinformation, research participants are influenced by current political events, which are changing and contributing to the formation of disinformation provisions.

Participants in focus group discussions confirm that while it is possible to follow the tracks of disinformation on domestic political topics and verify them through various sources, disinformation related to foreign policy remains largely undiscovered.

Disinformation on political topics also relates to the personal lives of political leaders or other representatives.

The expert community emphasizes that against the backdrop of this political noise and constantly changing political events, the human rights agenda and related issues remain outside the scope of discussion.

The expert community also refers to political topics and security issues, border tensions, disinformation targeting

democracy, and aiming to undermine it, which we will discuss separately in other sections of the analysis.

Perhaps one of the most important findings of the study is that while disinformation on political topics is mainly discussed among representatives of the 36-50 age group, in the 19-35 age group (particularly, among the 19-25 age group), we can observe that political topics are not generally a subject of discussion. For young people, disinformation is mainly around events related to the lives of show business representatives and celebrities: marriage, divorce, deaths, etc. Research conducted among young people in recent years also shows that the majority of young people (about 59%) are indifferent to politics.¹⁸ This speaks of the alienation of young people from political life, which, according to our observations, may be due to the presence of other interests, a different approach to life, and the consequences of war. However, this requires an additional in-depth study.

Both experts and participants of focus group discussions point out disinformation related to health as very common and dangerous. This disinformation cannot be controlled, and it can have a major negative impact on people's health, particularly as regards various prescriptions, advertisements for the use of different traditional and unscientific methods to treat health problems, false and manipulative, amateur information about vaccinations, etc.

There has also been disinformation around support programs and available services provided to the population forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia after September 19, 2023, in particular, what is the sequence of actions to be taken to receive support, or where should one apply, who provides the support, what kind of support is provided, and other issues.

18 | Vermishyan, H., Balasanyan, S., Darbinyan, T. (2023). Research among young people: Generation of (in)dependence in Armenia. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/armenien/20654.pdf>

Disinformation on security and democracy

Perhaps the issue of security-related disinformation is the one that worries the public the most since the Second Karabakh War. Moreover, the discourse of democracy vs. security is another subject of discussion among the public and experts. The disinformation around security issues runs in different directions.

Disinformation on security topics largely focuses on border demarcation and delimitation, the changes occurring in community life as a result of demarcation and border incidents. People living in border communities are the ones who witness and face these problems, however, they are confronted with a different reality in condensed colors in the media, which differs from the reality in which they live.

Experts state that in many cases, security issues, particularly border issues, are manipulated in the media to such an extent that it becomes difficult even for professional circles to distinguish accurate information from disinformation.

As the participants of focus group discussions put it, information on security topics may become disinformation. For example, if the state wants to hide information from an external audience, particularly an adversary country, or distorts it to hide certain details, the internal audience is also affected by the partial, incomplete information.

Disinformation on security issues also relates to the issues of importing or not importing weapons from other countries. In particular, the issue of changing or maintaining Armenia's line of foreign policy is discussed in a broader context.

Manipulations and disinformation related to the interdependence of security and democracy became especially

pronounced after the Second Karabakh War, when security issues were interpreted by groups representing various political interests as the result of democratic processes, belittling democratic values, and framing democracy as a threat to Armenia's security.

The expert perspective on this issue is framed by the idea that the West, perhaps as a collective force, also shows its support to Armenia in resolving security issues, which is expressed in the provision of weapons and the exchange of military experience, which somewhat breaks the manipulations around democracy being a threat to security in the public discourse.

Focus group discussions about disinformation around democracy are accompanied by a discussion of the concept of democracy in Armenia and the issues of whether or not Armenia is a democratic country. It is mainly stated that after the Velvet Revolution of 2018 democracy is more of a formality in Armenia rather than reality, and people do not feel like they participate in the decision-making, framing such news as disinformation.

Disinformation on gender and sexuality

As topics of high public sensitivity, issues related to human rights and gender identity are always subject to manipulation for groups representing various political interests and agendas. These groups mainly seek to narrow the space for progressive and human rights activists and hinder the increase in legal awareness of the public in Armenia, the development of a culture of legal, democratic public coexistence that strives for gender equality, and openly aim to halt

the democratization of Armenia and the expected reforms (Khalatyan, Manusyan, Margaryan, 2020, 118-120).

In both expert interviews and focus group discussions, we observed that disinformation on gender and sexuality topics was not widespread in public discourse during the period under study. Experts also confirm that the human rights agenda has generally been left out of the realm of discussions and actions by the ruling party, and anti-gender groups have found other topics of political expediency.

The participants in the study did not receive any information or guidance from the researchers about gender-based disinformation in advance, so they perceived and interpreted it in many different ways, depending on their individual definitions of the term “gender”. When referring to gender-based disinformation, focus group participants recall the discourse related to the participation of LGBT community representatives in the Velvet Revolution sponsored by the “Sorosians (Sorosist)”¹⁹. It is interesting to note that people’s criticism and rejection was not about the revolution being influenced by external forces or, as they claim, “financed from outside,” but rather about the participation of representatives of the LGBT community.

The other topic of discussion refers to gender equality or inequality, the issue of equality between men and women in the Armenian reality. Opinions expressed in this context vary, ranging from the view that equality between men and women exists in Armenia, but it is wrong, to the belief that stereotypes are still entrenched in society, and there are spheres where women do not have the opportunity for equal participation. It is important to note here that the research participants have difficulty distinguishing between disinformation and stereotypes, and many participants con-

19 | “Sorosist” or “Sorosian” is a “term” used by anti-gender groups and movements and referring to people either engaged in civic activism or with work experience in civil society organizations, more specifically if it was in OSF-Armenia. Also, all senior political appointees that had such a track record of civic struggle are currently presented as “Soros’s pocket politicians”. Khalatyan, M., Manusyan, A., Margaryan, N. (2020). *Anti-Gender Campaigns, Rhetorics and Objectives in Post-Revolutionary Armenia* (A. Zhamakochyan, Editor): Socioscope.

sider that what does not correspond to their ideas and perceptions is disinformation.

Another area of gender-based disinformation is stories about the personal lives of celebrities, politicians, and international and local leaders, focusing on their sexuality and gender identity. In many cases, this may pursue political goals of shaping public discourse, tarnishing the public image, and causing conflicts among the public.

The expert community emphasizes the amendment to the Law on Domestic Violence,²⁰ and the related discourse, which perhaps attempted to incite certain political sentiments among the public. However, the issue remained largely undiscussed at the public level, perhaps due to the domestic political events taking place in Armenia during the same period.

In 2024, amendments and additions were made to the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Family Harmony. In particular, the title of the law was changed, renaming it Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic and Household Violence, Protection of Persons Exposed to Domestic and Household Violence²¹. The word “partner” was added to the subject of the regulation by the law, which perhaps caused some public discontent, especially among clergymen, but, in a broad sense, it was momentary and did not become part of the public discourse.

During focus group discussions, particularly young women noted that gender-based disinformation is accompanied by distorted public perceptions of feminist ideology. They specifically noted that there is a public misconception about feminist ideology, which creates the impression that

20 | Arlis.am (2024). RA Law on Making Amendments and Addenda to the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Family Harmony. Retrieved from <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=192526>

Ghalechyan, N. (2024). The amended law on domestic violence will come into force on July 1: What will it change in the lives of victims of violence? Azatutyun.am. Retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/yntanekan-brnoutyan-popokhvats-%D6%85renkn-ou-zhi-mej-kmtni-houli-si-1-its/33007282.html>

21 | Arlis.am (2024). RA Law on Making Amendments and Addenda to the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Family Harmony. Retrieved from <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=192526>

feminist ideology implies misandry, while it is actually about equality between men and women.

The key point is that disinformation around these topics (security and democracy, sexuality and gender identity) is inevitably and politically interconnected, and shapes public sentiment. After the revolution in 2018 and before the Second Karabakh War, democracy and democratic values were mainly associated with the penetration of Western values into Armenia, while after the war, democracy began to be directly linked to security issues. In particular, the circumstance of being the losing side in the war became the basis for various groups to associate democracy with weakness, which is how they interpreted Armenia's defeat in the war. The experts state that this disinformation is influenced by foreign policy, driven by Russian influence and its local satellites.

Another issue that experts highlight is the link between gender identity, military service and security, which is a feeble but nonetheless a discussed narrative. It is packaged and formulated as follows: democratic values encourage gay men not to serve in the army, which is a security threat, especially for Armenia, a country at war.

Fight against disinformation

22 | Avedissian. K., (2023, November). Armenia's Fight Against Disinformation: Towards a Whole-of-Society Approach? Freedom House. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/freedomhouse-disinformation>

23 | e-gov.am (2023). Appendix N 1 to the Decision of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia N 1319 - L. Concept of Struggle Against Disinformation 2024-2026. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/iIHID>

24 | -gov.am (2023). Appendix No. 2 to Decision No. 1319-L of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia: Action Plan for the Concept of Struggle Against Disinformation 2024-2026. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/SbC8t>

25 | e-gov.am (2023). Decision of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia on Approving the Concept and Action Plan of Struggle Against Disinformation 2024-2026. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/LLoZW>

26 | e-gov.am (2023). Appendix N 1 to the Decision of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia N 1319 - L. Concept of Struggle Against Disinformation 2024-2026. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/3GCyQ>

Disinformation is one of the greatest challenges for the Republic of Armenia, a country which has been facing complex crises in recent years. Although the Armenian authorities have taken certain actions to combat disinformation in recent years, experts believe that they are not sufficient to neutralize and counter its long-term negative consequences.²² In particular, in December 2023, the “Concept of Struggle Against Disinformation 2024-2026”²³ and the relevant action plan²⁴ were approved by the decision²⁵ of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the goal of which is to “ensure an appropriate response to disinformation in the Republic of Armenia by preventing, reducing and neutralizing the risks of disinformation.”²⁶

A study of international best practice in combating disinformation shows that its effectiveness is directly linked with the cooperation of as many and diverse stakeholders as possible, and that public resilience increases when the capacities of all actors in society to recognize disinformation and respond appropriately are strengthened. To effectively combat disinformation, it is necessary to engage the public, adopt and implement effective legislation that will create an enabling environment for countering

27 | Avedissian, K., (2023, November). Armenia's Fight Against Disinformation: Towards a Whole-of-Society Approach? Freedom House. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/freedomhouse-disinformation>

28 | Skippage, R. (2020). The role of public service media in the fight against disinformation. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/reutersinstitute-disinformation>

29 | Ibid.

30 | CRRC Armenia (2022). Caucasian Barometer 2021-2022. Retrieved from https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/%D4%B2%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%B8%D5%B4%D5%A5%D5%BF%D6%80-2021_pptx_Final_13.06.22-2.pdf

31 | Ibid

32 | International Republican Institute (IRI) (2024, September). Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia. Retrieved from <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia/>

disinformation, as well as have and implement effective communication strategies.²⁷

Most of the experts who participated in the research emphasize that since the extent of disinformation is such that it will not be possible to identify and refute it in each instance, it is necessary to adopt a bottom-up approach to build the capacity of the public to recognize disinformation through media literacy and educational activities. Experts envision educational activities and the increase in media literacy through both formal education (general education) and non-formal educational activities. Moreover, experts also emphasize the role of the media, especially media funded from public resources, in increasing media literacy.

Increasing the public role of the media and media literacy are often presented as the main way to combat disinformation. One of the most common problems in the world, including in Armenia, is information inequality, which refers to the inequality of access to and distribution of information between individuals, organizations, and governments, which can be affected by technological developments and information policies.²⁸ Age, gender, income, and place of residence are the main factors that influence information inequality, as a result of which some groups in society may not be able to receive high-quality and comprehensive information, which more privileged groups can afford to receive.²⁹ Various surveys conducted in Armenia in recent years show that television still remains the main and most widely used source of information.³⁰ Moreover, the Public Television Company, financed from public funds, is considered one of the reliable sources of political news.^{31, 32} The experts who participated in the research also emphasize the role of publicly funded media,

especially Public Television, in disseminating reliable and timely information, as well as in combating disinformation and increasing media literacy among the public. The experts participating in the study also emphasize the importance of diversifying media tools and introducing new digital solutions in the fight against disinformation. Since, according to experts, disinformation is mostly prevalent in the digital domain, it is logical that digital solutions should be found to tackle the problem. The rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 was fertile ground for the spread of various types of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and in this context, we witnessed the introduction of several digital tools to remove disinformation. In particular, in cooperation with the World Health Organization, Facebook introduced special settings to remove conspiracy theories and disinformation around COVID-19.³³ The introduction of these digital solutions is extremely important and could be an effective tool in the fight against disinformation, but their application in the Armenian context is still problematic, as these tools are not adapted to the Armenian language, and the consumption of information in the Armenian language is not competitive in the global market.³⁴

33 | Zuckerberg., M (2020, 3 March). Facebook post. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10111615249124441>

34 | It is important to note here, however, that Facebook's fact-checking program was launched in Armenia on June 1, 2021. As part of the collaboration, GRASS's FactCheck Georgia, which is certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), collaborated with the Media Initiatives Center in June-July 2021 to verify the content of materials distributed in Armenian on Facebook and Instagram. For more information about the project, see https://mediainitiatives.am/mediaam_factchecking/

Participants in focus group discussions also emphasize the importance of combating disinformation, placing it at two main levels: individual and state/institutional.

At the individual level, research participants value their own agency in preventing the spread of disinformation, obtaining information, being media literate, and ensuring self-development. Thus, they believe that, in order to combat disinformation, both they and the public must be *“media literate”* and *“refrain from spreading any information without checking it.”*

Both experts and participants of focus group discussions emphasize the role of education in the fight against disinformation, both in increasing their own or other people's media literacy, and in making changes in the education system so that media literacy is a part of education and children acquire skills in interacting with the media and information starting from school years.

One way to combat disinformation is to rely on one's own experience and pillars of trust. Thus, in recent years, people have singled out a certain circle of trusted people and media outlets that they consider to be reliable sources, and they find that following these people and media is a way to combat disinformation.

In the fight against disinformation, the survey participants also consider a more radical option: "*not believing anyone or anything*," and therefore also question the effectiveness and need to combat disinformation.

According to the majority of participants in focus group discussions, the state should play the biggest role in combating disinformation. People emphasize and list both proactive functions by the state, such as promoting critical thinking, teaching media literacy, cooperating with the media, etc., and stricter measures that can go as far as criminal prosecution or censorship. Thus, the most common opinion is that the state should create some kind of body/agency that should control the information being disseminated, as well as prevent and block news containing disinformation.

The research participants discuss and emphasize the importance of holding those spreading disinformation accountable, some emphasizing the imposition of penalties and fines, and others favoring criminal prosecution.

It is interesting to note here that although this is qual-

35 | Henley, J. (2018). Global crackdown on fake news raises censorship concerns. The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/apr/24/global-crackdown-on-fake-news-raises-censorship-concerns>

36 | arlis.am. (2020, March). RA Government Decision N 298-N on Declaring a State of Emergency in the Republic of Armenia. Retrieved from <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=140212>

37 | arlis.am. (2020, September). RA Government Decision N 1586-N on Declaring Martial Law in the Republic of Armenia. Retrieved from <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=146450>

itative research, we can still conclude that the majority of the research participants are in favor of censorship of one degree or another, restriction of information, which they present as a “possible” and “effective” solution for combating disinformation, considering such censorship a prerequisite for preventing greater harm. Moreover, these opinions mostly relate to both information and disinformation spread around military service and national security and are especially observed in border communities. In many countries around the world, various laws are passed to combat disinformation. However, advocates of freedom of speech express concern about such legislation, especially in environments where authoritarian governments have an “excessive desire to regulate the media,” noting that such legislation could become fertile ground for governments to restrict freedom of speech and expression and silence the opposition.³⁵

In this context, it is worth reminding that in 2020, the Government of Armenia made two attempts to restrict information. The first attempt was made within the framework of the state of emergency³⁶ declared to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the second attempt was made under the martial law³⁷ declared in the Republic of Armenia on September 27 due to the war unleashed by the Republic of Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh. During the declared states of emergency and martial law, the Government imposed restrictions on the media. In particular, under the state of emergency declared during the COVID-19 pandemic, administrative penalties were imposed on media outlets for making posts and publications about the pandemic that did not reflect data from official government sources. According to the explanation provided by the Government, this

38 | Freedom House (2021, June). Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the Power of False Narratives. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/freedom-house-Disinformation>

39 | Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2021). Armenia 2020 Human Rights Report. Retrieved from https://am.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/92/hrr2021_arm.pdf

40 | facebook.com (2024). Armenian Unified Information Center. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/ArmenianUnifiedInfoCenter/?locale=hy_AM

41 | Freedom House (2021, June). Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the Power of False Narratives. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Disinformation-in-Armenia_Am-final.pdf

was necessary to prevent panic and the possible spread of disinformation during the state of emergency. As a result, police visited the editorial offices of various media outlets and forced them to remove certain articles under the threat of fines.³⁸ Media representatives, along with local and international media observers, criticized the move, resulting in the government lifting the novel coronavirus-related restrictions on press freedom on April 13. Among the restrictions under the martial law declared in Armenia on September 27, there was a requirement that local media and broadcasters should present only official information provided by the Government about the hostilities. Amendments to the Decree on Martial Law made in October prohibited the publication of reports criticizing, denying, questioning the effectiveness of, or otherwise belittling the actions of state and local government bodies and officials related to ensuring the legal regime of martial law and state security.³⁹ Within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Relations and Information Center SNCO under the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia launched the Armenian Unified Information Center “*in order to provide the public with reliable and urgent information in emergency situations.*”⁴⁰ During both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Karabakh War, this platform provided daily updates on the “situation.” In particular, during the Second Karabakh War, Lieutenant Colonel Artsrun Hovhannisyan became the face of the Armenian Unified Information Center, providing daily information about the situation on the front. Since the war and reporting restrictions prevented many journalists from going to the frontline, the information provided by Artsrun Hovhannisyan became a primary, as well as a reliable source.⁴¹ From the very first

42 | Aravot Daily (2020, November). The battles are not very fierce and intense. Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZN9bcs05q18>

43 | Hakobyan, T. (2020, November). Martial law does not allow me to work and fulfill my duty as a journalist. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/aniarc-tat-ul-hakobyan>

44 | yerkir.am (2021, May). What punitive measures will be taken against Gayane Ayvazyan? Question to the National Security Service. Retrieved from <https://blog.168.am/blog/334558.html>

45 | Freedom House (2021, June). Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the Power of False Narratives. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/freedom-house-Disinformation>

day of the Second Karabakh War, the “We Will Win” campaign was brought forward by Artsrun Hovhannisyan and other officials, becoming the center line of public discourse. As a result, we found ourselves in a situation where most of the local media did not have access to information on what was happening on the frontline, and Artsrun Hovhannisyan presented every development under the slogan “We Will Win.” Even when interactive maps began to be published at the end of October, where one could see that the reality on the front was different from what was being presented, it was packaged as “tactical retreat” or statements like “there will be a counterattack” were made.⁴² The few journalists working in the frontline who tried to provide alternative information, which somewhat contradicted the official information, were publicly criticized and slandered. The public targeted these journalists, accusing them of spreading ideas of defeatism.⁴³ There were also instances where citizens called on the security services to deal with these journalists or dissidents.⁴⁴ After the signing of the trilateral ceasefire statement on November 9, 2020, when the reality of the war became more visible, the public realized that they had been in an information vacuum for 44 days and had been misled by official information.⁴⁵

The research participants also often retrospectively recall the provision of official information by the state during the Second Karabakh War, the continuous calls for citizens to follow only official information, describing it as “the biggest disinformation” and often questioning the information provided by the state.

It is interesting to note that in almost all group discussions, whenever the “We Will Win” public campaign was discussed, and was qualified as disinformation, it was im-

mediately followed by a discussion about the need for such a campaign. The study participants interpret this as “a necessary step in a war situation to keep the army’s morale high.”

It is worth inquiring into why people question this disinformation and then immediately try to justify it. This question needs to be addressed through additional research.

When referring to the role of the state in combating disinformation, focus group participants also voice highly radical and extreme ideas, such as completely blocking social media, especially during a state of emergency or martial law.

In addition to individual efforts and state intervention in the fight against disinformation, there were unique but vocal opinions about the role of non-governmental organizations in increasing media literacy. Some participants also discussed the need for media self-regulation in the fight against disinformation. In particular, the development of a code of ethics for the media and compliance were discussed.

In addition to self-regulation of the media, there were also unique opinions that the state should not interfere with the exercise of the right to freedom of speech and expression through restrictions, and the fight against disinformation should remain within the realm of public oversight.

Conclusion

Disinformation is one of the greatest challenges of the modern world, undermining democracy, causing public tension, and deepening the polarization between different social groups. The extent of disinformation in Armenia is staggering in recent years. The directly contributing factors have been the COVID-19 pandemic, the Second Karabakh War, and the forced displacement of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian public was not ready to confront the crises and related disinformation at this pace, since they did not have the relevant skills and resilience. Moreover, under the guise of fighting disinformation, the state or other organizations and institutions have often carried out actions that not only did not contribute to the cause, but turned into that very disinformation. In the context of these crises, trust in various institutions has become even more fragile. As a result, people try to independently analyze the information provided to them and perceive and interpret the situation based on their own fears and relying on their experience and skills gained due to the lack of pillars of trust.

The results of the study allow us to state that different segments of the public have some knowledge and information about media literacy, which does not always become a practical skill. People list methods and tools for verifying disinformation, including following official information, checking the information in different sources, paying attention

to when the material was published, searching for original sources, etc. People who participated in various media literacy courses also highlighted more combined methods, such as checking whether a video or image has been edited. When participants were presented with material taken from the media and containing disinformation, the aforementioned set of skills did not seem to be applied and judgments about whether the material contained disinformation or not remained at a rather emotional level. Thus, we can conclude that it is crucial to emphasize the applicability of practical media literacy skills, consolidating the efforts of various actors in this direction.

The results of the study also allow us to conclude that the public is most sensitive to issues related to politics and national security, making these fertile ground for disinformation and conspiracy theories. Therefore, a strategic communication policy and action plan should be developed to present sensitive issues to the public, which will allow to mitigate the existing gaps in communication.

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