

THE IMPACT OF INFODEMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF RESTRUCTURING PERSONAL VALUES

MANANA YENOKYAN

National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia
International Scientific-Educational Centre
Assistant to the Deputy Director of Scientific Research,
Leading Specialist at the Educational Department,
Department of Psychology, PhD student
manana.yenokyan@isec.am

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Abstract

In recent decades, the rapid expansion of the information environment and the intensive use of social platforms have led to the emergence of new social phenomena, among which infodemics can be identified as a process of rapid and mass dissemination of information. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the forty-four-day war, infodemics manifested themselves not only in the widespread dissemination of false or misleading information but also in their influence on the restructuring of individuals' value orientations.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the impact of infodemics on the formation and rethinking of human value systems in the context of social change and the circulation of large flows of information on social networks. The article examines how the information environment from various sources, including both reliable and false information, circulates rapidly on media platforms, contributing to increased social uncertainty and the spread of anxiety.

It is assumed that the processes of obtaining and disseminating false information may be driven by the human desire to form basic social connections and satisfy the need for security. When these conditions are violated, people may find themselves under constant threat, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, as a result of which staying within the circle of disinformation can serve as a symbolic mechanism for reducing internal tension and restoring social identification and group belonging. In this process, the formation of “We” becomes not only a communicative but also a value-based process, expressed through the spread of rumours, trust in false sources, and the dissemination of information.

In times of information crises, the values of solidarity, unity, truthfulness, social responsibility, transparency, and empathy become more important in the human value system, acting as potential resources for strengthening social stability, public solidarity, and trust.

Keywords: Infodemic, Infodemic Narratives, Value, Value Restructuring, Spreading Information, Demand, Crisis, Age Group.

ԻՆՖՈՂԵՄԻԱՅԻ ԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԱՆՁԻ ԱՐԺԵՔԱՅԻՆ ՎԵՐԱԿԱՌՈՒՑՈՒՄՆԵՐԻ ՀԱՄԱՏԵՔՍՏՈՒՄ

ՄԱՆԱՆԱ ԵՆՈՔՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոնի
գիտահետազոտական աշխատանքների գծով փոխտնօրենի օգնական,
ուսումնական մասի առաջատար մասնագետ,
հոգեբանության ամբիոնի հայցորդ

manana.yenokyan@isec.am

Համառոտագիր

Վերջին տասնամյակներում տեղեկատվական միջավայրի արագ ընդլայնումը և սոցիալական հարթակների ակտիվ կիրառումը պայմանավորել են նոր սոցիալական երևույթների ի հայտ գալը, որոնց շարքում կարելի է առանձնացնել ինֆոդեմիան՝ որպես տեղեկատվության արագ շրջանառության և զանգվածային տարածման գործընթաց: 2020 թվականի COVID-19 համաճարակի և քառասունչորսօրյա պատերազմի ընթացքում ինֆոդեմիկ գործընթացները դրսևորվեցին ոչ միայն որպես կեղծ կամ մոլորեցնող տեղեկատվության լայն տարածում, այլ նաև որպես անհատների արժեքային կողմնորոշումների վերակառուցման վրա ազդող գործոն:

Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է՝ վերլուծել ինֆոդեմիայի ազդեցությունն անձի արժեքային համակարգի ձևավորման և վերափոխման վրա՝ սոցիալական փոփոխությունների պայմաններում և սոցիալական մեդիայում տեղեկատվական մեծ հոսքի շրջանառման համատեքստում: Հոդվածում դիտարկվում է, թե տարաբնույթ աղբյուրներից եկող տեղեկատվական միջավայրը, որը ներառում է ինչպես հավաստի, այնպես էլ կեղծ բնույթի տեղեկություն՝ ինչպես է արագորեն շրջանառվում մեդիա հարթակներում՝ նպաստելով սոցիալական անորոշության աճին և տագնապային բնույթի տրամադրությունների տարածմանը:

Ենթադրվում է, որ կեղծ տեղեկության ընդունման և տարածման գործընթացները կարող են պայմանավորված լինել անձի բազային սոցիալական կապերի ձևավորման և անվտանգության պահանջմունքների բավարարման ձգտումով: Դրանց խաթարման պայմաններում անձը կարող է հայտնվել մշտական սպառնալիքի, տագնապի, անորոշության և վախի ազդեցության ներքո, ինչի արդյունքում ապատեղեկատվության շրջանառման օղակում գտնվելը կարող է հանդես գալ որպես ներքին լարվածության նվազեցման, սոցիալական նույնականացման և խմբի պատկանելիության վերականգնման խորհրդանշական մեխանիզմ: Այս գործընթացում «Մենք»-ի ձևավորումը դառնում է ոչ միայն հաղորդակցական, այլև արժեքային գործընթաց, որը կարող է արտահայտվել ասեկոսեներ տարածելու, կեղծ

աղբյուրների նկատմամբ վստահության և տեղեկության տարածման միջոցով:

Տեղեկատվական ձգնաժամերի պայմաններում անձի արժեքային համակարգում առավել արդիական են դառնում համերաշխության, միասնականության, ճշմարտացիության, սոցիալական պատասխանատվության, թափանցիկության և էմպատիայի արժեքները, որոնք հանդես են գալիս որպես սոցիալական կայունության ամրապնդման և հասարակական համերաշխության և վստահության ամրապնդման հնարավոր ռեսուրսներ:

Բանալի բառեր՝ ինֆոդեմիա, ինֆոդեմիկ նարրատիվներ, արժեք, արժեքային վերակառուցում, տեղեկության տարածում, պահանջումը, ձգնաժամ, տարիքային խումբ:

Introduction

Society is characterised not only by relative stability but also by periodic social fluctuations and crisis phases that determine its continuous development. In such conditions, the stable functioning of society is ensured by its ability to adapt to changing conditions. One of the most important prerequisites for adapting to changing environmental conditions is the existence of a universally integrated system of values that helps maintain public trust and social solidarity. In today’s information environment, the concept of “infodemic,” which characterises the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, including the spread of unreliable, disinformation, and misleading information that contributes to mistrust of the media, has a major impact on social stability. Such a large flow of information at the individual and societal levels can lead to cognitive overload and hinder rational decision-making. In a narrow sense, an “infodemic” can manifest itself as the spread of panic-inducing news, unscientific medical advice disseminated by fake or non-existent experts, and various rumours that deepen social tensions and uncertainty. The spread of false rumours is facilitated by negative emotional states, anxiety, and fear, the intensification of which has been noted in many studies (Ahorsu et al., 2020).

This trend is particularly noticeable in the digital environment, which has now become the main arena for information warfare in the context of the emergence of a new socio-political reality associated with the development of new information and communication technologies. Information warfare uses a wide range of manipulative techniques: discrediting, spreading conspiracy theories, imitation, and amplifying the emotionality of text messages. These strategies are guided by a number of psychological mechanisms and forms of influence (Mikheev & Nestik, 2021).

Although infodemic processes existed as social phenomena before, the term “infodemic” was institutionalised by the World Health Organisation in January 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mikheev & Nestik, 2021).

Values in social systems perform a fundamental integrative function, ensuring the unity of individuals and of small or large social groups, nations, and, in a broad sense, humanity as a whole. Manifestations of individual and social crisis usually accompany the destruction of a value system, as it disrupts the mechanisms of behavioural regulation and social control. In such conditions, overcoming a crisis situation may be associated with the formation of new or transformed value orientations. If the weakening of value orientations is not accompanied by the emergence of new values with adequate meaning and significance, a series of social problems begins, including a decline in morality and legal consciousness, social instability, political disorientation of the population, social apathy, and the devaluation of human life (Leontiev, 1996, pp. 15–26). Thus, it can be assumed that value orientations are an important resource for maintaining social order.

People, consciously or unconsciously, strive to organise their value orientations into a logically structured system. Influenced by their biological predispositions, socialisation processes, and life experiences, individuals form unique hierarchies of value orientations, resulting of people in the same socio-economic and cultural conditions having different value priorities. Value orientations are closely related to the motivational and needs sphere of a person: on the one hand, they are formed based on existing needs, and on the other hand, new needs and aspirations may arise as a result of the internalisation of values that dominate in the social environment. Values are dynamic and changeable by nature. That is, if they are not constantly created, realised, and actualised, they are lost (Kukubaeva et al., 2020, pp. 15–17). Therefore, the scientific study of life values and value structures is particularly significant, especially in the context of social transformations and crisis processes.

The socio-economic, political, and cultural development of society and the state is largely determined by the interests, views, and value preferences within that society (Dyukova, 2006). The credit for making the problem of “value” the subject of special analysis in philosophy belongs to the philosopher of the last century, R. Lotzen. In his opinion, any phenomenon can be responded to with an emotion of joy or sadness, or a certain variability of these emotions, and a person values what brings pleasure and what asserts itself as a value (Ilichev et al., 1983). Representatives of another school, W. Wundt, F. Jodl, and F. Paulsen, considered emotions to be the source of values; they also believed that emotions (like values) are subjective. In contrast to them, F. Brentano, A. Mekong, and M. Scheler attempted to prove the objective nature of emotions themselves and, accordingly, the universality and objectivity of values (Chilikov, 2000). According to W. Windelband, values are truth, goodness, and beauty. At the same time, science, law and order, art, and especially religion are considered such values—cultural goods without which humanity could not exist (Tugarinov, 1960). In this regard, we can recall L. I. Ivancon, who discusses the main differences between values and norms. In his opinion, the normative system defines activity more

strictly than the value system because, first, a norm has no gradation—it is either observed or not. Values differ in “intensity” and are characterised by a greater or lesser degree of relevance. Secondly, a particular system of norms is based on internal unity. Rejection of any element of this system leads to instability and inconsistency with the personal structure of the latter. As for the system of values, it is usually built on the principle of hierarchy: a person is capable of “sacrificing” some values for the sake of others and changing the order of their application. After all, these mechanisms, as a rule, perform various role functions in the formation of the personal motivational structure of activity. Values, serving as guidelines, set the upper limit of a person’s social aspirations (Ivashchenko & Zubova, 2010). In Russian literature, positivist interpretations of values can be found in the works of V. P. Tugarinov, who believes that values are necessary for people to satisfy their own needs and interests. V. S. Bakirov argues that values in human existence correspond to the objective requirements of social progress. However, if values are needs and interests, then there is no problem with values; rather, the problem lies with needs and interests. This principle contradicts the understanding of the most important factor in individual and social life—values (Makhrova, 2011, pp. 215–224). Based on the approaches to values of Lotzenin, Wundt, and Paulsen, it can be assumed that the formation of values and their reinterpretation at the individual and societal levels carry a subjective context, which is why the same information can cause different psycho-emotional manifestations and corresponding reactions in different people. And if we consider values from the point of view of Brenton and Scheler as universal and objective, then we can assume that the spread of infodemic texts (false medical materials, warning texts, panic texts about “catastrophes,” conspiracy theories) should elicit different reactions in different segments of society in the context of subjective perception, psycho-emotional manifestations, beliefs, and the dissemination of the latter. Windelband’s normative perception of values allows us to view infodemics as a mechanism for the destruction of social norms that affects the hierarchy of values in society. The works of Tugarinov, Bakirov, and a number of other researchers indicate that the existence of values is necessary to satisfy basic human needs and even to identify human needs and values. From this point of view, we again come to the conclusion that in the context of an infodemic, human needs and the sphere of values are subject to a variety of influences. And to maintain stability and inner balance, some previously existing values may cease to be relevant, while new values form, conditioned by the need to adapt to the given reality.

From the point of view of sociologists, the integrity of the social system is determined by the hierarchy and functioning of values, which are considered the sole factor of socialisation. In research across various sciences, schools, and disciplines, the importance of values in human life remains a central issue. The main emphasis is placed on understanding the world and studying the role of

humans in it, setting goals in real activities and behaviour. Virtually all teachings that address the question of the functions of values agree that values are, first and foremost, norms, ideals, and standards that regulate human activity and through which moral actions are chosen and evaluated. (Diukova, 2006, pp. 227–229)

The question of why people tend to spread and believe false claims during crises, disasters, and epidemics requires reference to cognitive and evolutionary psychology, the history of journalism, and folklore. Today, the following causes of infodemics have been identified:

1. Every human society has a natural tendency to spread rumours.

This is a natural process that helps strengthen bonds within a social group (Sullivan, 2010, pp. 434–449).

According to cognitive psychologists D. Sullivan and M. Landau of the University of Kansas, people who lack political or social influence, as well as those who are emotionally unstable, are more likely to spread rumours (Parsons et al., 1999).

From the above, it can be inferred that, although society tends to spread rumours, it is nevertheless important to clarify which group is most susceptible to this influence: those who are emotionally unstable and do not occupy a significant social or public position. Interestingly, in the aforementioned target group, people’s values change more easily and new ones form.

A study conducted by Landau, Sullivan, and Rothschild proved that people with low self-control are also prone to spreading false news.

2. People’s belief in the accuracy of information plays virtually no role.

People share information they believe in just as readily as information they doubt. This was demonstrated by a study conducted in March 2020, when a target group was asked to decide whether the news presented to them was true or false. Based on this, they had to decide whether to share it on social media, but as a result, the target group agreed to share even the news they considered false (Pennycook et al., 2020).

From the above, we can assume that the most important human need is to exchange information within a wide social circle; here, it does not matter how reliable the information is; what matters is verifying its authenticity and then disseminating it.

3. Harvard University researcher Gary Allen notes that the number of rumours and fake news stories increases in proportion to the degree of instability (Fine, 2010, pp. 5–18).

In this regard, there is a growing body of scientific research on how gossip and lies “infect” the carrier and influence their behaviour. In 2001, the journal *Mathematical Sociology* published an article by E. Neumer in which the author illustrated the spread of rumours using an epidemiological model (Neumer, 2001). As a result, he concluded that some rumours are incredibly “persistent” and can exist for generations, changing periodically but retaining their essence, similar

to new strains of viruses. At the same time, young people (mainly students aged 18–25) are most susceptible to rumours. However, Neumer believes that critical thinking is hampered not by age but by a lack of relevant experience. As soon as young people learn new rumours, they forget them, so most conversations in this environment quickly die down. According to Neumer, sceptics play a key role in the infodemic cycle, taking on the role of an “immune response,” that is, trying to suppress rumours. Neumer calls this process “autocatalysis.” As a result, under pressure from constructive facts presented by sceptics, part of society stands out and refuses to believe the rumours. Y. Brainard and P. Hunters, who have identified the same pattern of misinformation spread with the pattern of infectious disease spread, have also concluded that people, regardless of demographic characteristics, do not trust medical information. At the same time, they trust false medical information when it is spread by their close circle (Brainard & Hunter, 2020, pp. 365–374). Therefore, it is necessary to develop a strategy to counter or slow the spread of infodemic and to strengthen the dissemination of reliable health information so that it reaches the population before infodemic texts do. This requires the efforts of doctors, journalists, and government officials themselves. This is why the approach to managing and containing the infodemic must be revised. As appropriate measures, activities aimed at increasing media literacy among the population are proposed (Zemlianski, 2021).

Thus, participation in the spread of fake news is not influenced by gender, age, or education. But if we exclude the stress factor, people with higher levels of education are more likely to identify fake news and less inclined to agree to spread it (Pennycook et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that the over-40 age group is more likely to have difficulty objectively assessing the credibility of news and facts. And it is important to identify the internal motivations in different age groups that drive people to believe, share, and be inspired by the information.

Based on this, it can be confidently said that an infodemic does not arise on its own. False news is tied to the emotional stability of both the narrator and the listener and arises in conditions of crisis and lack of balance. Emotional arousal and a lack of a sense of control also foster trust in false news. Therefore, the more emotionally stable a person is and the more in control they feel of the situation, the less likely they are to spread rumours.

Infodemic narratives are unreliable texts and the main component of infodemics. Such texts can vary in length and structure. That is why the common feature of all stories is that they arouse suspicion in people and appear very convincing. The life cycle of an infodemic story consists of two parts: visible and invisible. The visible part of the story is its publication on social media (in public groups, communities, personal pages, etc.). The invisible part is private correspondence, such as a school class parent group. If the story gains popularity there, it moves on to the next group, then appears on public social networks and becomes visible to everyone. Obviously, the transition of the narrative from

the invisible part of the life cycle to the visible part is its transition to active dissemination in the information space, when the “big” media are involved in this process. This, in turn, leads to a change in people’s behaviour. For example, as a result of the story about the “healing properties” of ginger, prices for ginger in Russia rose sharply in March 2020 (Zemlianski, 2021).

Many believe that there is a huge gap between belief in material information and its dissemination, but this is not always the case (Hufford, 1982, pp. 47–56).

If we consider narratives as adaptations, it becomes clear that their purpose is to unite people and indirectly resist external circumstances (Boyd, 2019).

Currently, the following typology of infodemic texts is distinguished (Petrov et al., 2020).

1. *Fake medical information*: This mainly consists of advice, methods of treatment, and prevention of diseases at home using traditional medicine. Such materials usually refer to “closed sources” or use the names of non-existent specialists (Stepanova, 2021). They reflect a crisis of institutional trust and the replacement of scientific knowledge with “folk wisdom,” which, as one might assume, indicates a decline in the authority of science and a reevaluation of personal experience.

2. *Warning messages*: these are texts that predict an impending or already unfolding terrible event. As a rule, the events warned about in these texts are somehow connected with contradictory information from various sources. Such materials are often preceded by statements from government officials that are taken out of context and, as a result, misinterpreted and distorted (Zemlianski, 2021). Warning texts indicate an increased perception of danger and a sense of loss of control, as a result of which the need for security becomes a dominant value. Through misinterpretation or selective use of government statements, such messages contribute to deepening distrust of the authorities and the formation of selective trust in sources of information.

3. *Panic-inducing information about “disasters”*: These texts are not fake news, but they exaggerate certain facts or present them in an overly emotional manner. Such materials are always written in the first person (usually from the perspective of an eyewitness or participant in the events, acting as the primary source). These texts are most often distributed on social media and, over time, acquire nonexistent details, turning into a subtype of fake news (Zemlianski, 2021). Panic-mongering texts about “catastrophes” express the strengthening of the values of emotional solidarity and mutual warning in conditions of collective uncertainty, but at the same time contribute to the blurring of the boundaries between facts and subjective experience.

4. *Information materials based on conspiracy theories*: These include conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19. For example, the theory that the coronavirus is an invention of Bill Gates (Zemlianski, 2021). Texts containing conspiracy theories can be interpreted as an attempt to make the world controllable

and meaningful in conditions of uncertainty. Strategies that reinforce the “us–them” polarisation are used here. These texts contribute to the polarisation of social reality and the deepening of value polarisation.

5. A single article can simultaneously belong to several types of fake news, combining their characteristics. It is worth noting that different types of texts have different effects on the audience. For example, during the coronavirus pandemic, it was not conspiracy theories that were popular on social media and in society, but fake medical materials, in particular, unreliable advice on disease prevention (Zemlianski, 2021).

The typology of infodemic texts mentioned above can be viewed not only as a manifestation of disinformation but also as an expression of the values undergoing restructuring in society. In the context of the epidemic, established notions of trust, safety, health, and responsibility are being reevaluated, as reflected in the content and structure of circulating messages.

Thus, infodemic texts act not only as distortions of information but also as symbolic expressions of social anxiety and the transformation of values, testifying to the processes of rethinking trust, scientific rationality, and collective responsibility in modern society.

Methodological Basis

The work is based on various scientific approaches. The methodological basis was provided by the works of Mikheev E., Nestik T. on infodemic narratives circulating during the COVID–19 pandemic, the system of life values by S., Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the value orientations of the individual by Dyukova Makhrova, the values of Wundt V., Brenton F., Scheler M., and Ivanconin L. The sample for the telephone survey within the study consisted of 50 representatives of age groups of women and men from 18 to 65 years old.

Research Methods

To conduct the research, a theoretical and comparative literature review was conducted, and a questionnaire was used.

We developed a questionnaire to identify an individual’s value orientations and emotional responses in the context of an infodemic. The questionnaire was created using the 5–point Likert scale, a standardised measurement method widely used in the social sciences. It allows for the quantitative assessment of individuals’ attitudes and value orientations, enabling statistical analysis of the data.

Results

The use of the questionnaire method allowed for the following data to be obtained: 56% of the respondents indicated that in crises, they prefer to trust official sources rather than social networks; 22 of them are female, 6 are male, evenly split between the 18–35 and 36–55 age brackets.

20% of respondents completely agree with the statement that, if information aligns with their beliefs, they are more inclined to accept it without further

verification, while only 9% disagree. In other words, an individual's pre-existing, hardened beliefs and the attitudes derived from them play a greater role in a given phenomenon.

66% of the respondents (aged 18–35) stated that even if the information has an emotional impact on them, they would avoid sharing it without verification. Those who indicated that they were somewhat or completely disagree with the statement were from the 36–55 age group. At the same time, 84% of respondents stated that they have a habit of comparing different sources to assess the credibility of the information. A large percentage are from the 18–35 age group. From this, it can be inferred that participants in the early adulthood age group are more inclined to objectively assess the credibility of information by verifying and correcting it than those in late adulthood.

48% (ages 18–35) fully agree that the public interest should take precedence over personal beliefs when disseminating information. About 60% of respondents consider social solidarity a primary value in crises. Here, the primacy of the need for social belonging is evident. This is when the collective “We” emerges, when solidarity and unity are valued.

18% of the respondents indicated that vague and contradictory information causes fear and anxiety. Interestingly, the majority of male respondents reported not experiencing fear or anxiety under conditions of conflicting information.

About 50% of respondents fully agree that in crises, it is important to feel that the situation is under control. In recent years, the value of health and safety has become more of a priority for about 80% of respondents. A large percentage are representatives of the 18–35 age group. This also confirms the idea that, in conditions of an information crisis, a person's basic needs for safety and security are activated, and uncertainty disrupts their satisfaction of these needs. And the person begins to provide certainty to the situation in various ways.

About 30% of respondents said they find it difficult to answer whether they trust statements from government and public institutions during information crises. And about 46% of respondents (including all male participants) said that transparent conduct by the authorities in the face of information threats is very important to them. Around 70% (men and women alike) noted the importance of public discussions and open communication in reducing the impact of misinformation. These can be assumed to be a consequence of the impact of events in the political and military spheres in recent years.

Conclusion

Infodemic processes affect the value systems of different age groups in different ways, depending on their social experience, level of media literacy, and psychological defence mechanisms. Among young people, infodemics can contribute to rapid changes in value orientations and the adoption of new normative standards. In contrast, among the older generation, defence strategies aimed at preserving existing values, which serve to reduce social uncertainty, are

more often activated.

In an information crisis, the values of solidarity, unity, truthfulness, social responsibility, transparency, and empathy become increasingly important in a person's value system, serving as potential resources for strengthening social stability, solidarity, and public trust.

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