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Innovation, Regulation or Compensation: 5G Fakes and Rumors during Coronavirus

During the pandemic, many people have had free time. Some of them fell into depression against the backdrop of job loss and earnings. Various phobias began to develop. The most of them were unthinkable and illogical. One of them is very indicative of our study - this is the spread of the virus due to the introduction and development of progressive 5G Networks in different countries of the world - the high image technology and data transfer speeds (video for cell phones, for example). In the creation and popularization of this topic, despite its absurdity, many mysteries remain. As it turns out, each country has its own as well as interpretation. Some people believe that the virus has spread due to technology, they are sure that high-frequency radio waves are harmful to the body, etc.

The mechanism for transmitting high-frequency electromagnetic waves using 5G is the same as any smartphone owner is used to: the signal is transmitted from the satellite to a specially constructed ground tower that distributes this signal to your mobile phone. The security principle laid at the very beginning of production of any mobile technology, during its development. It consists in the fact that the closer you are to the tower, the “calmer”, the weaker the radio signal will be, because your phone does not need to strain its SAR (Specific Absorption Rate) indicators, which the consumer rarely pays attention to when he buys a new one mobile phone.

Here, the rumors' essence about 5G just started. Excluding the completely ridiculous interpretation of the connection and interdependence between the virus and 5G, let’s consider the most common and most plausible version of the effect of radio waves on human health. The danger of a radio signal could come not from a communication tower, but from a cell phone. If the market had a choice of such phones with radio waves that can change your DNA like the sun ultraviolet radiation. Today, the choice of phones for 5G is small, and is represented mainly by Chinese brands: Oppo, Xiomi and Huawei. Another interesting fact, isn't it? The likelihood of telecom brands influencing digital wars is increasing along with market competition. Not without reason, both the United States and the European Union are trying to work to prevent the dominance of Chinese manufacturers in their local telecom markets.

It is easy to guess now, where the fears about the introduction of 5G actually come from and who contributes to the spread of fakes on a global level. Plus, it is worth adding that the state was not noticed in the confrontation of the inhabitants of the planet with mythical 5G emitting, until recently. However, at the beginning of July 2020 the European Commission has drawn conclusions from the situation and adopted small cell regulation for 5G. In Russia, this issue has been disputed since 2018 by business and security services. Intelligence does not want to concede the frequencies occupied by them, which are necessary for telecom companies to work with 5G Networks. Obviously, the Russian authorities are not ready to intervene in the already traditional confrontation between business and control agencies in the conditions of the economy crisis. Recently, the budget for digital development has been significantly reduced.

The aim of the study was to investigate the topic of perception and interpretation by residents, authorities, experts of science and the telecom industry of different cities of Russia, Europe and North America of the new generation 5G Networks. This topic became problematic in 2019 already, when the authorities of some countries began to introduce 5G (for example, China, USA, Great Britain) or announced their intentions to implement it (for example, Russia, Belarus). Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the topic suddenly escalated and became global, thanks to free quarantine time and open access to the Internet for those people who want to become popular on the top.

In addition, the 5G legends acquired protest symbolism locally: in some cities around the world, residents expressed different protests in connection with the introduction of technology. In the UK and Holland cell towers were burned. In Russian cities, petitions were distributed through pages on the Internet to ban a new generation of communication due to supposedly harmful radiation. Various celebrities performed on state television and social networks: directors, stars of shows and cinema. But in Russia, television appearances were removed from the air, and posts on social networks disappeared along with the removal of the quarantine regime. A particularly active phase in popularizing the topic of the damage and dangers of 5G Networks was observed during the most dramatic pandemic period for all countries of Europe and America – from March to May.

The main research methods are the semiotic and content analysis, structural analysis of texts, dispositive and comparative analysis.

The empirical base was the content of 87 social network accounts in Russian and English. More than 60 expert opinions on the subject and object of research were studied in 34 media.

At the moment, the study continues: timeline compiled with the key news- and opinion- makers at the pandemic; also, actors and content for analysis were defined.

The theoretical basis of the study was determined by the works of Y. Lotman and M. Foucault, P. Mason and U. Eco.

The main conclusions that can be done at the preliminary stage of the study so far are reduced to five points: the conditions for the development of conspiracy theory; scheme for creating fake content; populist content models; distribution methods; and the role of science, government and business in actively or passively supporting the production and dissemination of false information.

1. The conditions for the development of a theory require experience and knowledge, and for a conspiracy theory, a crisis consciousness is needed that cannot find a way out under conditions of constant pressure of instability. Saturated with emotions, metaphors and allegories, content is quickly accepted by such an audience, without critical mind.

2. The scheme for creating inaccurate or fake content is based on a common scheme: facts in retrospect (historical data) and / or facts in the present plus fictional details from a possible future (for a creator). This reminds us of the archetype of myth or even fairy tales (later - urban legends), already familiar to us, when each storyteller added his details and expressive elements during the time of folklore. Thus, we can say that conspiracy theory is an intellectual process and, as a rule, a mass one.

3. The model of political populist content, as a rule, depends on who is being blamed, who is being attacked. In our case, this is technology, which complicates and erodes the process of identifying the enemy and extends the geography of a fake to a global scale. Sadly, such data indicate that the manipulation of this topic may continue in order to legalize it.

4. The distribution scheme of conspiracy theory and popular urban legends today is not limited to the city, but is initiated on social networks.

5. The role of science, government and business in the prevention and dissemination of rumors remains largely weak. On the one hand, the EU countries actively and quickly were able to appreciate the people's imagination during quarantine and respond. On the other hand, the Russian authorities do not provide the entire spectrum of communications to prevent rumors and conspiracy theories, at least in the field of technology. Independent telecom operators are so suppressed by prohibitions, taxes and fees that they also do not take decisive action. At the same time, Russian science actively and objectively commented on both conspiracy theories.