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МЕДИАВОЙНА В УСЛОВИЯХ КРИЗИСА: АНАЛИЗ ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЯ США И КНР В СМИ ВО ВРЕМЯ COVID-19

Пандемия COVID-19 стала не только вызовом для систем здравоохранения всех стран, но и плацдармом для информационного противостояния между некоторыми государствами. В многополярном мире СМИ могут использоваться как инструменты «мягкой» или «жесткой» силы, что подтверждает их существенную роль на международной арене. Так, США и КНР в период распространения коронавирусной инфекции добились взаимной дискредитации в медиaprостранстве, используя манипуляции и пропаганду, что в итоге оказало значительное влияние на эпидемиологическую обстановку в некоторых странах.

В данной статье рассматриваются ключевые аспекты информационной войны между двумя державами, включая анализ медиаповестки, используемой обеими сторонами для формирования общественного мнения и управления восприятием пандемии. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как СМИ в США и Китае не только освещали факты о распространении вируса, но и активно формировали нарративы, направленные на дискредитацию противника.

Анализ включает изучение методов и стратегий, применяемых в информационном пространстве. Также рассматривается влияние этих информационных кампаний на восприятие населения, уровень доверия к правительствам и систему здравоохранения в разных странах. Кроме того, статья анализирует последствия этого противостояния для международных отношений и глобального сотрудничества в области здравоохранения.

Ключевые слова: Китайская Народная Республика, Соединенные Штаты Америки, средства массовой информации, многополярный мир, COVID-19.

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MEDIA WARFARE IN CRISIS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE US-PRC MEDIA CONFRONTATION DURING COVID-19

The emergence of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has precipitated a multifaceted crisis, not only engendering a substantial challenge for healthcare systems worldwide, but also inciting a heightened exchange of information between certain geopolitical entities. In a multipolar world, the media assumes a pivotal role as an instrument of both «soft» and «hard» power, thereby underscoring its indispensable function within the global landscape. During the period of the spread of the virus, the US and China engaged in a media campaign of mutual discredit, employing manipulation and propaganda, which had a significant impact on the epidemiological situation in some countries.

This article examines key aspects of the information war between the two powers, including an analysis of the media narratives used by both sides to shape public opinion and manage perceptions of the pandemic. Particular attention is paid to how the media in the United States and China not only reported the facts about the spread of the virus, but also actively shaped narratives aimed at discrediting the adversary.

The analysis encompasses an examination of the methods and strategies employed in the information space, with a focus on their impact on public perceptions, the level of trust in governments, and the healthcare systems in various countries. Furthermore, the article delves into the implications of this confrontation for international relations and global health cooperation.

Key words: People's Republic of China, United States of America, Media, Multipolar World, COVID-19.

Introduction. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus, officially designated as SARS-CoV-2, began in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The rapid dissemination of the virus across the globe led to a global outbreak of the disease, known as «coronavirus», an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) [6].

On 30th January 2020, the WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern, and on 11th March of the same year, the outbreak was first described as a pandemic. Only three years later, on 5th March 2023, a WHO committee issued a recommendation that the state of emergency caused by the virus be lifted.

According to the WHO, by December 2024, 777 million cases of the coronavirus had been confirmed, with the highest numbers of cases reported in the US (103 million cases), China (99.4 million) and India (45 million) [17]. By the same period, the number of deaths worldwide exceeded 7 million. The United States (1.2 million), Brazil

(702 thousand), and India (534 thousand) accounted for the highest numbers of deaths, while the People's Republic of China (PRC) ranked 15th (122 thousand deaths) [18].

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most significant global disasters of the 21st century, with a profound impact on all spheres of society, including international relations, economics and social structures. Due to its high infectivity and low awareness of prevention, the virus spread rapidly, posing a real challenge to the health systems of all countries. The solution to this problem was not limited to medical research aimed at finding a vaccine, containing the disease, preventing the illness, this process also became a ground for aggravation of the geopolitical situation.

The pandemic exacerbated existing contradictions between the United States and China. Both countries used the crisis to strengthen their influence in the international arena, initiating campaigns to disseminate information about their achievements in the fight against the virus and criticizing the actions of the opponent. One of the tools in this confrontation has been the media.

In addition to academic research, there are also journalistic articles devoted to the confrontation between Washington and Beijing, some of which have been analyzed in this paper. A key one was an investigation of Reuters, one of the world's largest news outlets, founded in London, UK, in 1851. Chris Bing and Joel Schectman published a study titled «Pentagon ran secret anti-vax campaign to undermine China during pandemic» on June 14, 2024 [4]. In this paper, the authors described U.S. attempts to discredit the PRC during the fight against the coronavirus.

This study aims to analyze the media confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will deepen understanding of the dynamics of contemporary international relations and the role of the media in shaping political narratives.

Methods and Materials. In order to analyze the media confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, several research methods were used to provide a comprehensive approach to the study. The primary research method employed was content analysis, the aim of which was to examine narratives presented in Western and Chinese media outlets such as Reuters, New York Times, USA Today, and others. Qualitative analysis of media materials allowed the following aspects of the study to be highlighted: the perception of the pandemic as a global threat, discussion of responsibility for the spread of the virus, analysis of narratives about the pandemic and the effectiveness of measures taken by both governments, and investigation of the use of scientific data and expert opinions in media publications. The comparative analysis made it possible to compare the media narratives of the two countries, identifying differences and similarities in their approaches to the coverage of the pandemic.

The present study encompasses the period from January 2020 to December 2024. The temporal selection is predicated on the onset of the pandemic and its consequent impact on international relations.

Results. The media play a key role in shaping public opinion and political narratives, especially in global crises. In the context of COVID-19, the media campaigns

of both countries became an important tool to legitimize their actions and discredit the opponent. The media confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China manifested itself in various forms, from accusations of ineffective crisis management to competition for leadership in science and technology, which created a unique environment for analyzing media strategies and rhetoric.

Studying the media confrontation between the two countries during the pandemic allowed us not only to understand how international relations are shaped and transformed in the face of a global challenge, but also to identify the mechanisms of information's influence on public perceptions, political and economic decisions.

The deterioration of Sino-US relations occurred during the presidency of Donald Trump, who was re-elected as head of state in 2024. Consequently, it can be hypothesized that he may initiate similar campaigns against the People's Republic of China in his second term as president.

Discussion. The global Coronavirus pandemic posed considerable challenges to governments worldwide, necessitating urgent action to contain the spread of infection, treat those affected, and develop vaccines. The unprecedented nature of this crisis meant that, in most cases, the usual timeframe of five to fifteen years for developing medical products was significantly reduced.

In December 2020, 200 vaccines were being developed around the world. Such intensive work was necessary because only one-fifth of vaccines reach the stage of clinical trials [2]. The first vaccine was developed in Russia: on July 21, 2020, Deputy Defense Minister Ruslan Tsalikov said that the Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19 was ready [1]. However, China had already begun using the CanSino vaccine for limited treatment of the military and other high-risk professions (a decision that received support from the WHO) [13]. Later, Europe and the United States submitted requests for emergency use of their vaccines.

Vaccine development resembled an arms race only in the field of medicine. This process actively involved not only doctors and scientists, but also the military and the media, as countries sought to create a favorable image of their vaccines and discredit opponents.

It is worth noting that in a multipolar world, the media is recognized as the fourth branch of government due to the enormous influence it has on people. Media resources can be used as a «soft» force to create a favorable image of the state and as instruments of «hard» force directed against competitors. Against the background of the development of a medical drug for the COVID-19 treatment, started an information war between Western and Eastern countries, in particular between the United States on the one hand and China on the other, the confrontation between which has been growing for many years.

It was COVID-19 that caused a new round of tension between the US and China, as the first cases of the disease were recorded in Wuhan. US President Donald Trump in 2020 began calling the virus «Chinese», completely ignoring the fact that such statements can be considered a manifestation of racism and xenophobia. The spread of Trump's words in the media led to Asian Americans reporting insults and even cases of

racially motivated physical violence due to the misconception that the PRC caused the start of the pandemic [15].

After that, Donald Trump decided to limit the number of Chinese citizens (100 people fell under such sanctions) working in news organizations in the United States. The Chinese government reacted sharply to such actions, expressing its condemnation and announcing its intention to deport from the country American journalists who most actively and even aggressively reported on the pandemic gaining momentum in China in the first months of 2020, when Beijing sought to contain the general panic and stabilize the situation in society [16].

On February 18, 2020, Donald Trump declared that Chinese journalists were agents of Beijing, and leading media outlets, which included Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio, China Daily, and The People's Daily, were henceforth «foreign government functionaries» who must obey the same rules as diplomats [7] (such wording also underscores the importance of media in today's world). China then announced the deportation of three journalists from The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) in response to Walter Russell Mead's article «China Is Asia's Real Sick Man,» which was a critical piece that discredited Beijing [10]. Later in the summer, Beijing refused to renew the visa of another WSJ journalist, marking the first actual expulsion of foreign journalists from the PRC since 1998. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo derided such actions by Beijing and expressed hope that Chinese officials would change their minds about the deportation of American journalists. In addition, Pompeo followed Trump in calling Chinese news reporters part of China's propaganda machine [16]. And while this confrontation between Chinese and US media and governments has taken place virtually in the public eye, there were other instances that required a full investigation to uncover.

As The New York Times has observed, China has also been accused of propagating rumors that the US military, which visited Wuhan in October 2019, was responsible for the initial spread of the virus worldwide. Steven Lee Myers published a related article on March 13, 2020, stating that the Chinese Foreign Ministry supported accusations against the U.S. military that had no evidence. X (Twitter) was also involved here, where such news first appeared: Chinese ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian published a series of posts that hinted at US guilt. According to the author of the article, China used this method of propaganda to sow chaos and divert attention from its own mistakes [11].

A few days later Steven Lee Myers together with Alissa J. Rubin also published an article that China after the situation with covid there stabilized, Xi Jinping began to actively help other states. Beijing's «mask diplomacy» has affected countries not only in Southeast Asia, but also in other parts of the world. This, as the authors note, allowed China to create an image not as an «authoritarian incubator of a pandemic» but as a «responsible global leader,» gaining geopolitical recognition and mitigating general anger over China's alleged involvement in the spread of the virus [12].

Thus, even in the context of describing China's assistance to other countries, U.S. publishers tried to point out, without stinting on negative epithets, that Beijing was thus trying to restore its image, spread its geopolitical influence, and act in its own

interests. It should not be forgotten that such a political strategy for any state is quite natural and adequate, and in the conditions of the global pandemic, not only the donor state benefited from the «mask diplomacy» [19]. The positive impact of this strategy on the global epidemiological situation was evident, as the novel virus was able to transcend national borders, thereby transforming the pandemic into a universal problem. Consequently, the stabilization of the situation within a nation constituted a pivotal step in the global effort to eradicate the pandemic.

On June 14, 2024, Reuters published an article about a clandestine US operation started in the summer of 2020 directed against the PRC [4]. The Americans launched an online campaign against the Chinese vaccine Sinovac inoculation. They created at least 300 fake accounts with thousands of followers, within the Philippines, a region in which China was actively endeavoring to expand its influence. The sale of vaccine and other medical equipment to Manila could have strengthened Beijing's position in the state, to prevent this, Washington decided to launch an online information warfare, which was led by the Military Psychological Operations Center in Tampa, Florida. They spread the hashtag #Chinaangvirus, which in Tagalog (one of the main languages in the Philippines) means «China is a virus»; «COVID came from China and the VACCINE also came from China, don't trust China!» [4] Such and similar tweets were published by fake accounts. After the appeal of Reuters, the administration of X removed these accounts, as they were bots and worked in a coordinated manner based on internal data and unified behavioral patterns, which allowed to adapt the published content to the target audience [4].

It is noteworthy that subsequent to the Philippines, a similar campaign was initiated in other countries of Central Asia and the Middle East, where the Muslim population predominates. In these regions, American intelligence agencies adopted a novel strategy, disseminating information that the Chinese vaccine contains pig gelatin, thereby rendering it unacceptable for adherents of Islam.

The Pentagon has been spreading COVID-19 misinformation for several months. It is known that the campaign was launched under Donald Trump, and Joe Biden issued an executive order ending the fight against Chinese vaccines only during the spring of 2021 [4].

Ironically, around the same time then-Vice President Kamala Harris spoke at an anti-COVID-19 event in Greenville, South Carolina. In her speech, she emphasized the importance of vaccination and described the procedure with a scripture quote, «Love thy neighbor.» The politician also emphasized the importance of spreading accurate information about the coronavirus rather than misinformation, which is a serious problem. The VP expressed confidence that those who do not believe in the American vaccine have heard «things that aren't quite true» about it, after which she went on to praise the American medical product [14].

In addition to disseminating misinformation regarding the Chinese vaccine, the US government has initiated a substantial domestic campaign exhorting citizens to receive the vaccination. Despite this, as of September 2021, only 62% of eligible citizens have been fully vaccinated [16]. Recall that the US was ranked first in the number of deaths

from COVID-19 (1.2 million people), while China is only in 15th place (122,000 deaths) [18].

According to Reuters, neither Trump nor Biden's representatives responded to requests for comment on the covert operation, but one of the publisher's sources, a senior US Defense Department official, acknowledged that the American military did engage in covert propaganda against the Chinese vaccine. She also added that China has launched a similar campaign against the USA, accusing it of distributing COVID-19. It was also revealed that US diplomats stationed in Southeast Asia were against the operation, but the Psychological Operations Center in Tampa decided to disregard their opinions and also ignored the possible side effects of the propaganda on ordinary citizens. They only sought to «drag China through the mud.» [4]

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said in an email that they have long claimed the spread of misinformation and manipulation by the US on social media. The Philippine ministry, as well as the Americans, did not respond to the news agency's questions at the time the investigation was published.

The operation essentially called into question government health initiatives and undermined public confidence in imported vaccines (it should be noted that China's Sinovac vaccines have been approved by the World Health Organization). Academic studies note that misinformation did play a significant role in worsening attitudes toward vaccination during the coronavirus pandemic, and «the rate of transmission of false information about COVID-19 was more dangerous than the rate of spread of the virus» [3. P. 516-528] because skepticism of any particular vaccine eventually spread to all others.

The Pentagon's media propaganda campaign did have an effect in the Philippines: citizens there began refusing vaccinations en masse. The government was extremely alarmed by the situation, leading President Rodrigo Duterte to issue an ultimatum: vaccination or imprisonment. When he made this announcement in June 2021, the Philippines had one of the worst vaccination rates among Southeast Asian countries (only 2.1 million people out of 114 million were fully vaccinated, with COVID-19 cases reaching 1.3 million and a mortality rate of over 24000). It is worth noting that President Duterte was also against the development of further relations between Manila and Washington and threatened to cancel the military treaty that allowed the American military to stay in the Philippines. It is known that he also asked Xi Jinping to deliver vaccines to the country as soon as possible, as the epidemiological situation was critical in the first months of the spread of the infection; at the same time, the president said that in return the Philippines would no longer challenge China's actions in the South China Sea, thus violating the then existing agreement with the United States. Consequently, Chinese vaccines emerged as the most accessible option at the country, a status that persisted until the provision of US-sourced pharmaceuticals to the Philippines in early 2022 [4].

A month after the Reuters investigation was published, USA Today ran an article titled «US admitted it spread anti-vax COVID propaganda in Philippines to disparage China.» The authors, Christopher Bing, Karen Lema and Joel Sheckman, report that

the US Department of Defense admitted it spread propaganda within the Philippines against China's Sinovac vaccine. The Pentagon characterized its activities as «missteps in COVID-related messaging.» [5] The department also assured the Philippine government that they have been able to improve the control and process of implementing various information operations since 2022. This statement was made directly as a reaction to the British investigation. The authors of USA Today also confirmed that Washington deployed this operation because of Beijing's extension of its geopolitical influence in the region [5].

It is worth noting that many American experts from various fields of activity have spoken out against the Pentagon's anti-China campaign because such actions have put lives at real risk for the sake of potential geopolitical gains [5].

China has also criticized the US activities. Sinovac representative Yuan Youwei said that such actions lead not only to a decline in vaccination rates and the spread of disease as a consequence, but also to a crisis of public confidence in science and the health care system.

In the Philippines, an investigation of the American operation began in the summer after the Reuters article was published. Senator Imee Marcos, who chairs the Foreign Relations Committee, characterized the US campaign as «evil, wicked, dangerous, unethical.» [5] Also, local humanitarian organizations, medical professionals, and officials expressed their outrage at such activities, which have exploited vulnerable citizens for their own benefits.

This propaganda campaign was one of the psychological operations launched against China and other rivals. Washington has been launching psychological wars around the world for decades, especially after the end of World War II and after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Even then, the Central Intelligence Agency sponsored various news outlets, filming propaganda programs, movies and TV series to sway public opinion in a particular region. In the 2010s, US intelligence agencies also began to actively use social networks: they created websites, fake accounts, published information necessary for Washington [4].

Reuters has learned that Donald Trump had earlier made attempts to destabilize the situation in Chinese society using social networks. In 2019, he instructed to launch an anti-government campaign in Chinese media to turn the population against the government. At that time, fake accounts started publishing posts criticizing Xi Jinping. A year later, the situation was repeated, only the main target was Chinese vaccines [4].

China, according to the US government, also accepted similar attempts to spread disinformation in the media, which was reflected in a complaint by the US Department of Justice, which Chinese officials left without comment. The main military contractor that carried out the disinformation program, according to Reuters, was General Dynamics IT. Apparently, they did not use the necessary measures to conceal their activities back in 2020–2021, but they received \$493 million in government funding in February 2024, signing a contract with the government for future cooperation. This confirms that the Pentagon will continue to use such methods of manipulating public opinion in the future [4].

In addition, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the secret operation was initiated during the presidency of Donald Trump. He generally pursued a rather harsh policy towards China: imposed sanctions, started a trade war, spoke critically about the rival country, saw China as a threat to national security, initiated covert psychological operations, etc. Joe Biden's policy toward China was less hostile. His administration chose a more balanced approach to the development of Sino-US relations, combining competition with the need to cooperate to solve global issues.

In November 2024, Donald Trump was re-elected as the American president. In his election campaign, he stated that he planned to further tighten his policies against China: he would continue to raise tariffs on goods imported from China, revoke China's trade status, impose restrictions on the purchase of U.S. infrastructure by Chinese companies, pressure them to sell existing assets, etc. [8] At least two psychological propaganda operations against China are known to have been carried out during Donald Trump's first term. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Pentagon may make other attempts to manipulate public opinion in the media and not only.

Conclusion. Washington, realizing China's growing influence in the world and in SEA in particular, has decided to counter Beijing's improving image in the international arena.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly publicly accused China of spreading COVID-19. These statements were widely circulated in the media, which contributed to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment, which was also actively influenced by news outlets that multiplied misinformation. As a result, a COVID-19-based information war broke out between the United States and the PRC, which was accompanied by state-level pressure on the media. Such manipulations took place openly, but in addition, there were also covert US psychological operations in social networks, which also had a significant impact on the public in various states around the world.

News outlets, in an effort to capture the attention of their audiences, often emphasized negative aspects associated with China, multiplying misinformation and creating distorted narratives about China's role in the pandemic. This has led to a heightened public perception of the PRC. In addition, such actions have also exacerbated the epidemiological situation in at least the Philippines.

Such attempts at mutual discredit are an example of how the media can be used in a multipolar world. In the face of global challenges such as the pandemic, such actions undermine the foundations of international cooperation and trust between states. It also raises important questions for the global community about the need for more effective mechanisms to combat disinformation and build trust between countries. And while Sino-US relations have relatively stabilized during the Joe Biden administration, the situation could change dramatically with the return of Donald Trump to the White House, who has already promised to tighten his policy against China.

Overall, the study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated the existing contradictions between the two countries, but also demonstrated the powerful influence of the media in shaping public opinion and international politics. Given these

findings, further research in this area can focus on analyzing other countries' media strategies and their impact on global interactions in crisis.

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