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INFORMATIONAL TOTALITARIANISM: SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A TOOL OF MASS CONTROL AND MANIPULATION

This article explores the phenomenon of informational totalitarianism as a new form of social control and manipulation in the digital age. Special attention is given to the role of social networks, which have transformed from communication tools into mechanisms of algorithmic control over mass consciousness. The article analyzes how technologies of content personalization, psychological influence, and big data are altering the nature of freedom, identity, and critical thinking. The necessity for a philosophical and scientific reflection on the new challenges faced by humanity in the context of the information revolution is emphasized.

Keywords: *information, digitalization, informational totalitarianism, social networks, mass manipulation, digital age.*

Problem Statement. In the contemporary era of global digitalization, a profound transformation is taking place in the forms of communication, knowledge exchange, and social interaction. Social media platforms, which initially emerged as tools for connecting individuals and expanding the space for freedom of self-expression, have over time acquired fundamentally different functions. Today, they increasingly serve not merely as channels for information transmission but as complex mechanisms of social programming, consciousness manipulation, and covert mass control.

Within this context, a phenomenon arises that may be characterized as informational totalitarianism – a new form of domination operating through algorithmically governed information flows, manipulative influence techniques, and psychological behavior modeling. Unlike the traditional forms of political

or ideological totalitarianism of the twentieth century, which were based on direct coercion and repression, contemporary informational totalitarianism functions more subtly: by creating the illusion of choice, encouraging voluntary participation in surveillance systems, and programming thought within pre-designed frameworks.

The issue of informational totalitarianism becomes particularly pressing amid the intensification of information wars, the spread of disinformation, the use of artificial intelligence for analyzing user behavior patterns, and the development of targeted influence technologies. Social networks today not only reflect the interests of their users but also actively shape their views, emotions, and value orientations, thereby fundamentally altering the very nature of individual and collective identity.

From a philosophical standpoint, a series of fundamental questions arise: Is freedom possible under conditions of algorithmic control of the informational environment? How are notions of truth, identity, and personal autonomy transformed in the digital age? Can critical thinking be preserved amidst pervasive informational manipulation?

In analyzing the problem of social networks as instruments of mass control and manipulation, it is crucial to comprehend the deep mechanisms underlying the operation of informational power and to identify the new forms of human dependency and subjugation within the digital society. As O. Dzoban and V. Bryzhko aptly note, «manipulation of consciousness is possible only through the distortion of information and control over communication, which determine the attitudes, rules, and models of human activity. Therefore, information constitutes the source of genuine power over human consciousness, while manipulation is associated with the deliberate distortion of information, including the substitution of concepts, the use of different words for the same object, and the employment of kinesic methods of nonverbal communication» [1, p. 58].

Analysis of recent research and publications. The analysis of scientific sources indicates that contemporary social media have become a powerful tool of mass control and manipulation within the framework of informational totalitarianism, which has not only transformed the ways users consume information flows on social networks but also significantly impacted public consciousness and political engagement. As E. Morozov notes, technological solutionism – the aspiration to address global social problems through technological means – may itself become a source of new forms of manipulation. Social media platforms facilitate the controlled dissemination of information, often through algorithms that not only organize content but actively influence user behavior by means of psychological triggers, emotional responses, and social interactions [2]. Consequently, social

networks can serve not merely as tools for advertising campaigns but also for political manipulation, creating artificial «filters of reality», as described in the works of Eli Pariser, leading to the formation of so-called «filter bubbles» [3].

One of the key features of these manipulations is the use of algorithms to personalize content, allowing for the construction of individualized information streams that significantly alter the perception of reality. This, in turn, exerts a direct impact on political processes. As C. O'Neil demonstrates, big data can exacerbate social inequalities and pose threats to democracy through the improper use of algorithmic systems [4]. The relevance of these concerns is further underscored by Luciano Floridi's conclusions regarding the ways in which the digital revolution is shaping new social realities, including the control of information via network technologies and their capacity to influence both individual and collective worldviews [5].

M. Foucault, in turn, emphasizes the growing complexity of disciplinary power and control in the digital age. He draws attention to how social networks represent contemporary manifestations of the «cartography of power», where control over information and the manipulation of attention become fundamental tools of political influence [6].

Another important aspect relates to the mobilization of social movements through manipulative strategies. As T. Shlemkevych notes, manipulation via social networks can be employed to construct images of enemies or threats, thereby mobilizing electorates around particular political forces, especially in the context of the radicalization of political discourse [7]. Thus, manipulations in the informational space can simultaneously intensify political apathy and mobilize certain social groups in support of political and social change.

Overall, the findings of the analysis suggest that under the conditions of contemporary informational totalitarianism, social networks serve as a crucial instrument of control and manipulation, capable of influencing political processes and shaping new social realities in which access to information and its processing determine political engagement and civic consciousness.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the role of social media as a tool of informational totalitarianism in the implementation of mass control and manipulation in contemporary society.

Presentation of the main material. Informational totalitarianism can be defined as the systematic and pervasive practice of controlling and manipulating individual consciousness through information technologies, primarily social networks. It operates through the integration of mass surveillance, algorithmic content selection, the creation of «cognitive bubbles», and the deliberate shaping of emotional responses [2; 8]. Unlike the classical forms of totalitarianism

characteristic of 20th-century political regimes, which were based on overt coercion and repression, informational totalitarianism functions covertly, relying on the voluntary participation of individuals in processes of digital communication.

The paradox lies in the fact that individuals themselves become complicit in the process of their own subjugation – one of the most alarming aspects of contemporary digital control.

The foundational ideas regarding the invisible nature of power were formulated in the works of M. Foucault, particularly in *Discipline and Punish*, where he asserted that power functions most effectively when it is internalized within the consciousness of its subjects [6]. In the digital age, these observations have acquired a new dimension: social networks, big data, and algorithms have become the principal tools for shaping behavioral patterns that restrict individual freedom of choice without the need for explicit coercion.

According to the conclusions of S. Zuboff [8], set forth in the concept of «surveillance capitalism», technological corporations, by gaining access to vast amounts of personal data, have developed mechanisms for predicting and manipulating user behavior. In such a context, informational totalitarianism not only centrally imposes certain narratives but also commercializes individuality. Every online action – clicks, likes, or comments – becomes a component of a vast control system where personalized content not only reflects user preferences but actively shapes them.

In 2009, Danish psychologist A. Kolding-Jørgensen conducted an illustrative experiment using Facebook. He created a special group that disseminated false information about the supposed destruction of a popular monument in Copenhagen – the «Stork Fountain» [9, p. 42]. Within a short period, through the active and passive engagement of users, the campaign gained significant traction. This case vividly demonstrates that even passive participants in social networks can exert a considerable influence on public opinion.

In the current realities, social networks have become powerful channels for the dissemination of disinformation, which can harm individuals, societies, and states alike. Although such content is typically initiated by a relatively small number of activists, its mass dissemination often occurs due to the involvement of passive users. Thus, passive participants within the informational environment can exert a decisive influence on shaping public sentiment. Social networks have empowered individuals to express their opinions, find like-minded peers, and promote their own ideas.

At the end of the 20th century, some researchers, such as D. McAdam, expressed doubts regarding the possibility of forming sustainable international social movements via the Internet, citing the difficulties of maintaining interpersonal

connections in virtual space [10]. However, contemporary practice demonstrates that such concerns were premature. Today, the manipulation of individual political consciousness has become commonplace. The rapid shifts in information flows, the fragmentation of messages, and the overwhelming abundance of information make it increasingly difficult for the average individual to resist information overload.

Evidence of this trend can also be found in studies by Ukrainian scholars. As S. Bula emphasizes, in today's networked society, the process of information manipulation occurs much more rapidly than in traditional hierarchical structures. The popularity of an informational product – whether a marketing campaign or a social media publication – is determined by a number of factors: social currency, the presence of triggers, emotional resonance, societal engagement, practical usefulness, and a clearly articulated origin story. These psychological mechanisms underpin the strategies of viral marketing, whereby informational products are created or adapted to achieve maximum dissemination [11, p. 23].

At the same time, the active use of manipulative techniques has a detrimental impact on the political engagement of the population. As noted by O. Feshchuk, frequent exposure to manipulative influences fosters a sense of helplessness among citizens, which in turn diminishes their motivation to participate in electoral processes and political life more broadly [12, p. 47]. This phenomenon results in declining voter turnout and the strengthening of radical and less democratic political movements.

Concurrently, as T. Shlemkevych emphasizes, manipulative technologies may also serve as a catalyst for the mobilization of certain social groups, particularly those who perceive a threat to their interests or identity. The construction of an «enemy image» and the cultivation of a sense of danger are effective tools for consolidating electoral support around specific political forces [7, p. 44]. However, the use of such manipulative strategies contributes to the rise of populism, the radicalization of political attitudes, and the deepening instability of democratic processes.

The algorithms employed by social networks further exacerbate the radicalization of public opinion by creating «information ghettos» – closed «cognitive bubbles» wherein users are isolated from alternative viewpoints. Under such conditions, the classical notion of the public sphere as a space for rational debate is eroded, posing a particular threat to democratic societies.

Significant contributions to the understanding of informational totalitarianism have also been made by foreign researchers analyzing the role of artificial intelligence and automated systems in societal governance. According to C. O'Neil

[4], algorithmic systems tend to reinforce existing inequalities and biases, operating through logics that remain opaque to the broader public. This concentration of control over information flows within a narrow group of actors poses additional risks to democratic development.

Informational totalitarianism extends beyond the political or economic domains; it transforms the very nature of individual consciousness, altering mechanisms of reality perception. Under the influence of technologically constructed environments, individuals modify their criteria for assessing facts, form new belief systems, and make decisions that undermine the possibility of authentic autonomous choice [5].

Thus, informational totalitarianism emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon that integrates elements of control, manipulation, and voluntary participation. It operates through the convergence of advanced surveillance technologies, algorithmic data processing, and psychological influence, necessitating a fundamental rethinking of traditional concepts of freedom, autonomy, and human rights in the digital age. Recognizing the nature of this phenomenon is critically important for the development of effective mechanisms aimed at safeguarding personal autonomy and preserving democratic institutions.

The role of social networks in this process is particularly significant, as they have become the primary instruments in shaping the new digital reality that defines individual consciousness and behavior.

In the contemporary informational environment, social networks have evolved beyond mere communication platforms into powerful tools of manipulation capable of constructing social realities. By creating a specific informational architecture, these platforms do not remain neutral: their algorithms are designed to maximize users' engagement time, which is achieved by amplifying emotional responses among audiences [13]. Algorithmic mechanisms operate according to the principle of «engagement», prioritizing content that evokes anger, fear, awe, and other strong emotional reactions [14]. In this context, social networks serve not only as environments for communication but also as instruments for the deliberate manipulation of consciousness.

One of the key mechanisms of manipulation is the creation of cognitive bubbles, within which users are exposed predominantly to information that reinforces their pre-existing views. According to the theory of cognitive bubbles proposed by E. Pariser [3], social network algorithms isolate users within an informational environment where alternative viewpoints are rarely encountered. This phenomenon fosters confirmation bias, diminishes critical thinking, and constrains the capacity for rational comprehension of reality. Consequently, rather than facilitating open exchange of ideas, social networks increasingly transform

into closed spaces of like-minded individuals, where users are artificially isolated from divergent perspectives.

The selective presentation of information on social media platforms leads to a gradual erosion of individual cognitive autonomy. Users become subjects of manipulation, as information flows are shaped not according to the principles of objective representation of reality, but through emotionally charged and selective content delivery. It is crucial to note that these manipulations are not carried out through direct coercion but rather through users' voluntary participation, wherein they accept the information as their own without subjecting it to proper critical scrutiny.

However, the problem extends beyond the psychological dimension. Cognitive bubbles generated by social network algorithms give rise to serious social and political consequences. They contribute to the radicalization of public opinion and the polarization of society, where groups become increasingly less inclined toward compromise and dialogue, as their beliefs are continuously reinforced by information from their closed informational environments [15]. As a result, not only is the level of critical perception diminished, but the danger of extreme political and social tendencies also increases.

Social networks are thus shaping a new architecture of public life, wherein manipulation operates not overtly but through mechanisms of engagement and cognitive asymmetry. They are altering the processes of decision-making, belief formation, and human interaction, thereby threatening the foundations of democratic society. This phenomenon carries profound implications for the understanding of contemporary informational processes and demands comprehensive analysis across psychological, political, and legal dimensions.

Thus, social networks emerge not merely as means of social interaction, but as architectures of manipulation, employing emotional influence, cognitive isolation, and selective information presentation to shape and control societal processes. Understanding these mechanisms is an essential prerequisite for developing strategies to counter manipulation and to restore critical thinking within society.

In this context, it is essential to draw attention to the manner in which social networks, despite their formal declarations of freedom and equality, effectively create new mechanisms that restrict access to alternative viewpoints within the digital space.

In the digital era, where social networks have become primary platforms for communication, the ostensibly proclaimed freedom of expression and equality of access to information face significant constraints. At first glance, virtual spaces offer individuals the opportunity to express opinions, share experiences, and interact

without geographic or social barriers. However, in reality, such freedom often proves illusory, as algorithmic filters, hidden restrictions, and behavioral control mechanisms largely determine what individuals encounter in the information environment. As Zeynep Tufekci [14] notes, social media systematically shape users' experiences through algorithms oriented not towards objectivity, but rather towards emotional reaction and user engagement. Consequently, an illusion of freedom emerges: individuals perceive themselves as free to choose, while their decisions are significantly conditioned by external factors.

The phenomenon of restricted freedom can be examined through the lens of the digital age paradox: the greater the opportunities for self-expression and communication, the narrower the space for independent reflection and critical engagement with information. The relentless flow of news, updates, and notifications on social media not only hampers deep reflection but also constructs a superficial worldview, wherein meanings change rapidly and time for contemplation is virtually nonexistent. According to research by C. Zengler and M. MacDonald [13], digital platforms increasingly present content that reinforces users' pre-existing beliefs, rather than encouraging them to seek new perspectives or engage in deeper critical thought. True freedom entails the capacity to critically assess information and transcend imposed patterns; however, within the digital environment, this capacity is progressively eroded.

Analyzing the impact of technology on human beings, Martin Heidegger observed that technological advancement not only expands individual capabilities but also questions human authenticity, as it alters the very essence of human nature. He emphasized that through technical means, individuals increasingly become elements within a system that governs their actions, thoughts, and even emotions [16]. In the context of digital technologies, these observations are particularly pertinent: under the influence of algorithms and manipulations within social media, the individual loses autonomy and becomes an integral part of a cybernetic control system.

Thus, we confront one of the central paradoxes of the digital age: the greater the access to information, the less free individuals become in their capacity for independent reflection and decision-making. Technologies that were initially envisioned to foster intellectual freedom and personal development are, in reality, constraining these potentials, reducing individuals to passive consumers of content whose thoughts and choices are shaped by algorithmic mechanisms designed to serve the economic and social interests of major technology corporations.

Social media and digital technologies more broadly are constructing a new reality in which freedom of choice and self-expression is increasingly conditional and controlled. The illusion of freedom emerges as a product of the interaction

between technological tools, economic interests, and mechanisms of social manipulation. In an environment characterized by an unprecedented number of communication channels, individuals find themselves ever more dependent on information systems that determine not only their interaction with the external world but also their inner world, modeling the range of thoughts, ideas, and emotions deemed permissible for reflection.

Therefore, the digital age – with its unprecedented opportunities for communication – simultaneously fosters the intensification of informational control and manipulation, transforming genuine freedom into an illusion crafted by algorithmic systems that imperceptibly shape our thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

Conclusion. Information totalitarianism, as a new form of power grounded in manipulation through information technologies, challenges traditional conceptions of control and freedom. It differs fundamentally from classical forms of totalitarianism, which typically relied on physical coercion and repression. In the contemporary informational context, control over human consciousness becomes less overt, as it is enacted through the voluntary participation of individuals in the creation, consumption, and dissemination of content across social platforms. Users, often unknowingly, become integral components of digital control mechanisms, resulting in a paradoxical situation wherein the perceived freedom of choice is, in reality, an illusion.

Algorithmic content curation, the construction of information bubbles, and the use of emotionally charged manipulations are all elements of a new informational architecture that actively shapes individuals' cognitive processes, beliefs, reactions, and, ultimately, behavior. This environment, devoid of overt censorship but saturated with hidden methods of manipulation, poses a particular threat to democratic societies. Individuals are frequently unaware of the extent of control exerted upon them and often believe themselves to be acting freely, even as their choices have been subtly engineered and imposed through digital technologies.

Propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation within the information sphere have the capacity to profoundly influence political and social processes, destabilizing societies, fostering uncertainty and misunderstanding, and facilitating radicalization. In this context, the struggle for information becomes not merely a battle for the free circulation of data, but a contest for control over human consciousness.

Thus, information totalitarianism emerges not solely as a consequence of technological advancements but also as a product of broader social and political processes. The escalation of digital threats demands from societies not only technical solutions and legal instruments but also a profound reconceptualization of freedom and responsibility in the digital age.

Accordingly, the primary task of contemporary society is to develop mechanisms that ensure transparency, ethical standards, and accountability in the use of emerging information technologies. Simultaneously, it is crucial to enhance citizens' media literacy, fostering the development of critical thinking skills that enable resistance to manipulation and the protection of individual freedom within the context of digital totalitarianism.

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ІНФОРМАЦІЙНИЙ ТОТАЛІТАРИЗМ: СОЦІАЛЬНІ МЕРЕЖІ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ МАСОВОГО КОНТРОЛЮ І МАНІПУЛЯЦІЇ

У статті досліджується феномен інформаційного тоталітаризму як нової форми соціального контролю та маніпуляції в цифрову епоху. Особлива увага приділяється ролі соціальних мереж, які з інструментів комунікації перетворилися на механізми алгоритмічного управління масовою свідомістю. Проаналізовано, як технології персоналізації контенту, психологічного впливу та великих даних змінюють природу свободи, ідентичності та критичного мислення. Підкреслюється необхідність філософсько-наукового осмислення нових викликів, що постають перед людством в умовах інформаційної революції.

Ключові слова: інформація, цифровізація, інформаційний тоталітаризм, соціальні мережі, масова маніпуляція, цифрова епоха.

