Means of Influence on Public Opinion in Political Context: Speech Manipulation in the Media

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The manipulation problem in the media has been still pressing. Processes and techniques intended for making an influence on public opinion and behaviors are in ongoing improvement, making it difficult to access an objective image of the world. Therefore, this research aims at emphasizing the importance of speech (language) means that form a basis of manipulations in mass communications. To achieve this, authors have provided the systematization of social influence processes in the media and made techniques and means of speech influence clearer. Authors provided a content analysis of texts of 2018 from the media using news resources of different countries ('Russia Today,' 'RIA Novosti,' 'Ukrinform' and 'Fox News Channel') as an example. The research subject consists of news materials of a politico-social nature on Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict. Authors have empirically revealed a clear desire to influence readers of the media resources using covert means of the manipulative influence. In total, they have found five types of manipulative speech influence in texts of the media. There are self-presentation, semantic speech strategies, persuasive strategies, hit piece and information manipulation. A lexical toolkit of speech manipulation includes euphemisms, dysphemisms, slogan words, speech metaphorization, etc. Media texts have become more and more complicated as they contain hints, precedent phenomena, irony, as well as metamessages of informative presentation. Each media of the selected ones more or less uses means of speech manipulation in varying degrees. Applications of such methods of influence (in number) almost directly depend on a political attitude towards an object.

Keywords: Media, manipulation processes, public opinion and behaviors, speech means of influence, advocacy

We can hardly overestimate the importance of the media in the life of today's society. The media have become a proactive institution that forms public opinion and influences the behaviors of most of the population. Influence of the media has not only been getting more and more visible in the consumer market, but also the cultural life of the society. Non-natural pushing of services of the media upon prospective consumers has been recently quite intensive, especially in a political context. At the same time, such media show an opinion of a particular person instead of an impersonal point of view. Therefore, the influence of the media on public opinion along with a utilitarian use and changes in the language as a tool of the social influence is one of the most pressing problems (Lyubimova, 2006).

In academic literature, researchers have unevenly explored the speech influence on public opinion. Despite their interest in it, they have only fragmentarily studied a

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linguistic aspect of manipulations. Most studies (that directly or indirectly relate to the media) are on increasing performance and role in the society, an influence on the worldview of an individual or society in general. A text in the media is of high quality if it is accurate, includes vivid expressions and presents a comprehensible image along with diverse and targeted associations (Dotsenko, 1996). In the media, the theory of semantic influence puts on the first place the concept of speech manipulation that assumes the generation of an unconscious stimulus in recipients to the desired change of behavior. Speech manipulation is a complex influence on an individual using written or oral speech to convince him/her to accept a certain point of view or consciously perform a certain action. Note that in some cases the speech influence might look like a transfer of information using non-speech means (Peleckis *et al.*, 2016, pp. 228-239), including graphic design, for instance, as such means have an additional semantic charge. Thus, in a broader sense, any act of speech is a part of the repeated speech influence, within which it is necessary to deliver a message with verbal (less often- non-verbal) means that are relevant to communication when the message makes a fundamental influence on recipients.

In communications, manipulation can occur when we apply specific language tools (means). Research of basic techniques and methods of efficient speech influence is one of the important challenges in linguistics. Carnegie (2015) was the first who addressed these issues with his description of techniques and rules of the speech influence, and the developed concept of conflict-free communication, which allows you to make business and everyday communications essentially much more efficient. Efficient speech influence involves three objectives achieved:

(i) *Informational* – getting an opportunity to report a message to specific recipients and make sure that they have got it and there is a specific response to the message,

(ii) *Thematic* – receive or learn something or change recipients' behaviors by providing information to them in the manner, in which it is necessary to convey it by recipients' mindset,

(iii) *Communicative* – establishing and maintaining contacts with recipients though open comments, forums, etc.

It often happens that a recipient does not have a critical attitude towards texts in the media, believing that each of them is a reliable source of information. Texts in the media, along with information on a particular event, often include certain judgmental connotations that make one's attitude towards reported phenomena. The media do not only report an incident but also interpret it (Aribova, 2017). Owing to repeated manipulations, this feature finally results in ideas or images, associations or stereotypes that have been successfully introduced, perhaps, from outside, in the consciousness of recipients. Thus, the research aims at identification of the features and techniques, with which the media use means of speech influence on public opinion in language manipulations. The research focuses on an analysis of the sample (texts from the Russian and overseas media) to find applied means of verbal manipulation. As its object, the content analysis had materials from such news resources, as Russia Today, RIA Novosti, Ukrinform, and Fox News Channel, for 2018 on Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict. Achievement of this goal depends on solutions to some research tasks:

– Systematize processes of the social influence in the media,

– Identify ways of manipulations with public opinion and justify the speech influence as a manipulation mean,

– Reconfirm active techniques and means of the speech influence using cases from texts of the media.

Literature Review

It seems reasonable to refer to a large number of research papers that deal with an analysis of means of the speech influence on public opinion, especially in journalism, linguistics, and psychology. Oratynskaya (2013) believes that with active development of the modern society, there is a need in control over other people, which one might associate with development of significant methods and techniques, with which we can influence recipients, which are in active use and which are a subject of various academic disciplines.

Sternin (2017) and Sedov (2018) pay much attention to the theory of speech influence on prospective consumers of information content. Galperin (2017a) highlighted main types of information in a printed text: content-factual, content-conceptual and content-subtext. The information that has a content-factual load rests upon meaningful reports of facts, various events or processes in the social life. It often has its verbal expression, being explicit. Words are in use in their direct meaning. Content-conceptual information makes it possible for recipients to get an author's understanding of the phenomena that are significant for him/her and that he/she will describe using means of the use of fact-based information. In a time of an intensified manipulative influence on recipients, content-subtext information is the information that includes hidden or fragmentarily open data. This information one should extract from fact-based information, and in specific sentences, it will have its true manifestation. We believe that subtextual information will play a significant role in manipulations, an underlying feature of which will be a hidden nature of the impact.

Danilenko (2016) and Kirillova (2014) analyze the possible relationship between neuro-linguistic programming and activities of the media. According to Vinogradov (2017), communication influence is the most important language function along with a message receipt and people communication. Giessen (2015, pp. 154-162) explained the role of a language in a learning process. When there is a communication influence, the language should be in use for a practical implementation of a process, in which we deliver available information, and for making a comprehensive influence on recipients.

Maksimova (2015) believes that the ongoing speech impact is a rather complex linguistic process. Dotsenko (2015), Zelinsky (2008), Shteinov (2015), Vasilyeva (2015), Garimov (1987), Svinchenko (2017), etc. pay much attention to an analysis of specifics in text linguistics. Leontyev (2014) concludes that an influencing power of speech and language is a subject in contemporary linguistics, as well as its subfields (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, media linguistics, and pragmalinguistics). Bulygina (2014) and Nikolaeva (2016) deal with theoretical foundations and applications of media linguistics in language manipulations of public opinion in the media.

In today's linguistics, it is possible to regard the applied speech influence as a side of an implemented act of speech. The presented phenomenon led to the development of the science of integral action. Blakar (1987, pp. 131-169), Bolinger (2017), Marianikina (2014), etc. analyze main aspects in the psychology of manipulations with public opinion. Tarasova (2016) points out to the fact that the language regulates social and interpersonal relations, manifestations of emotions, as well as people behaviors in their ongoing interaction.

Issers (2017), Kirichenko (2016) and Sviridova (2015) analyze a discourse in the media. Grebenkina (2016) describes the communication process, where each participant of interaction might have his/her own goals, objectives and personal interests, and therefore recipients will not strictly follow instructions of their information provider.

An analysis of any text in the media and its efficiency primarily depends on how recipients perceive information and on the validity of the information. Despite a journalists' desire to achieve as high objectivity and reliability of the information provided as possible, almost all of the media have their own subjective opinion. Interpretation and completeness of the provided information directly depend on a type of publication, the point of view that founders of the media have, depending on its sponsors and many other factors.

Galperin (2017b) and Karmenov (2016) pay considerable attention to linguistic demagogy. In applications of linguistic demagogy, interested parties introduce deliberately false ideas of the reality in the consciousness of recipients. At the same time, manipulation as such rests on the situation when independent sources of information are unavailable or closed for recipients in a structure of speech, acting as a stimulus to use false perceptions or distortions with false conclusions from formally true prerequisites. This creates such conditions that make recipients share a viewpoint of a subject. The available specific structure of a written text (that facilitates news misconceptions in recipients) might be not only a significant sign of manipulation but also a sign of applied language demagogy.

Izosimova (2017) believes that in the process of influencing a recipient, the available linguistic component quite closely interacts with significant psychological components. Speech manipulations rest on such mechanisms that might force the recipient to perceive a particular speech message with not enough criticism that might significantly contribute to the generation of certain illusions and misbeliefs, encouraging behaviors that are profit-making for manipulators. Kopnina (2016) says that the manipulative influence should rest upon a shift of responsibility for all of the actions to the recipient, generating at the same time his/her illusions of independent decision-making.

Further, in the research, we will attempt to identify methods of speech manipulation in political texts in the Russian media.

Materials and Methods

Russia's participation in the armed conflict in Syria was our choice as a subject of content analysis. For full and objective coverage of the subject, we considered both Russian and foreign news materials. Among Russians, there were news articles from Russia Today, international news resource, as well as RIA Novosti news agency. Among foreign news sources, in the content analysis researchers included articles from Ukrainian national news agency Ukrinform, as well as well-known U.S. news media Fox News Channel. The choice of Ukrinform agency depended on the fact that this is an official government-owned media. This news agency, similar to RIA Novosti, is the main information provider in its country. Researchers considered U.S. Fox News Channel promising, as its coverage was several million people and almost all of the continents. Fox News Channel has been an acknowledged main U.S. information channel.

In the methodology aspect of the research, experts choose the quantitative-qualitative method to collect and analyze the information. They did not only consider texts from the mentioned media but also figures from news articles. The content analysis started from an inductive approach, that is, there was no initial assumption, and researchers got findings upon processing of media materials and finally stated findings only upon a thorough examination of the materials in question.

A unit of analysis was a case of an applied mean of speech manipulation in the media. At that, a news article was a contextual unit, while a fragment of a text containing speech manipulation was a unit of account. In the finished content analysis, researchers

explored news articles in the media, identifying means of speech manipulation in them by the following types:

– *Self-presentation*. That is, the generation of a certain image, profitable for a political force. There might also be an inverse strategy, generation of a negative image,

– *Semantic speech strategies*. This type of speech manipulation implies the use of a certain set of *established ideologemes*. That is, generation of readers' loyal or disloyal attitudes towards a subject of a news article using established words and expressions from a certain subject group (for instance, in discussions on a political figure, such words, as *dignity*, *honesty*, and *decency* would create a desired positive image),

– *Persuasive strategies* are those, for which it is typical in the media to consider a problem situation in a creative manner and propose a certain method to achieve a result and solve the problem,

– *Hit piece strategies*. These methods aim at the erosion of confidence in an object of a news article,

– *Manipulative strategies*. They refer to hidden actions of a psychological nature, aimed at the introduction of ideas. Here we can find distortions of the information or its incomplete representation, exaggerations and biased generalizations.

All of the abovementioned strategies have been in wide use in today's media discourse.

Results and Discussion

Content Analysis of News Resource *Russia Today*

For the content analysis, we had chosen news articles for 2018 with hashtag *#Syria* in the *World* section on the main page of the *Russia Today* website. In total, we had analyzed 48 news articles with subjects divided by four main blocks:

(i) Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria and evaluation of this event by the global community,

(ii) Turkey, scheduling military operations in Syria,

(iii) Russia's diplomatic relations with other countries regarding the Syrian conflict,

(iv) In-house events in Syria.

Even though some subjects have no direct relations to the Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict, each selected news article contains either an assessment of the event by representatives of Russia or a reference to actions performed by Russian politicians and military officers in the region of the conflict.

News articles from Russia Today contain a large number of examples of applied speech means of manipulation (Figure 1). Among the analyzed 48 news articles, only seven are without any of the above-mentioned manipulative ways of influence on readers. Often, such news articles contain no comments from an editorial board or expert; they only refer to individual facts or events.

For instance, the news article (Russia Today, 2018, December 17) only contains an announcement of an upcoming event and presents its participants.
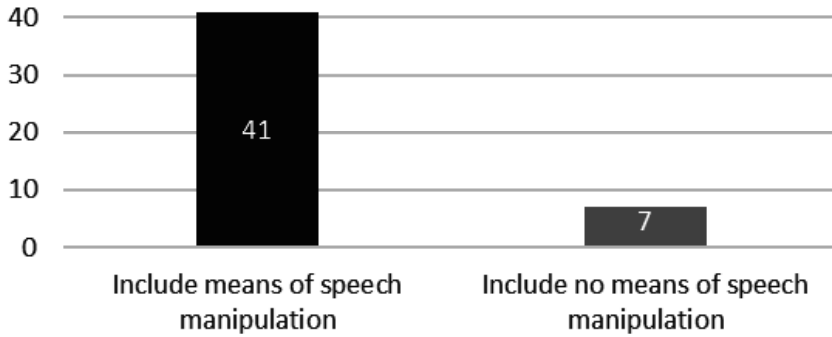
Figure 1.   The share of news articles that include means of speech manipulation
(Russia Today)

Then, researchers made a frequency count of individual means of speech manipulation. A counting unit was a separate case of speech manipulation. At that, if a single type of manipulation occurred twice or more times in an article, they regarded this as a single case for the correct occurrence representation of manipulation means about an entire content in question. That is, for each type of speech manipulation, zero was a minimum frequency index, while 41 was the highest (Figure 2).
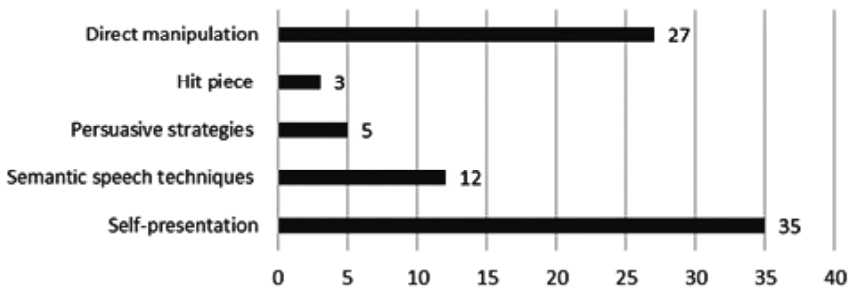

Figure 2. Number of cases of speech manipulation (Russia Today)

Let us explore cases of speech manipulation. Self-presentation is in use here to form a favorable image of the Russian military operation and the country as a whole. The source (Russia Today, 2018, December 21) contains the following text, 'He also mentioned that Russia legitimately, under international law and at the request of Syria, had supported the Syrians in freeing the country from international terrorism.' It is obvious that this emphasis is not accidental. With this wording, they highlight a positive description of Russia's actions in Syria. Use of the self-presentation method is the most common type of speech manipulation in the sample.

There are also 12 applications of semantic speech strategies. For instance, in Deliagin (2018) such words, as *capitulation, war, panic flight, exile, lie,* and similar ones turn a reader against the U.S. mission in Syria. At the same time, the author openly refers to actions of the USA in Syria as the war, whereas in news articles on activities of Russia in the conflict region, there are no such words. Such words, as: *operation, mission, contribution, etc.* are used more often.

In the sample of news articles, there are five cases of applied persuasive strategies. For instance, in (Russia Today, 2018, December 15), the problem is a catastrophic

situation of refugees in Er-Rukban camp, and a reason for this is the presence of U.S. military men. Quote, 'At the same time, main obstacles for the refugees to receive the necessary support and organized return to former homes are the U.S. military base in Al Tanf camp and US-controlled armed gangs in the zone.' Such a causal link is a clear manipulative technique to influence s reader.

There are three cases of a hit piece. For instance, in (Deliagin, 2018), there is the following text, 'Of course, systematic lying has turned the American state into the same recognized source of fake news, like CNN or BBC.' It is unlikely that one can consider this statement a reliable fact.

Examples of manipulation strategies are also very common, in 27 cases out of 41. The news article (RIA Novosti, 2018, December 12) has a manipulative nature as its author emphasizes such positive markers, as children, gingerbread and New Year instead of showing a real situation of children in the conflict zone with no focus on their real needs.

Content Analysis of News Resource *RIA Novosti*

From the entire news content of the RIA Novosti website, for the period in question, we chose 52 articles on Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict and divided them into certain subject blocks:
  (i) The relationship between Syria and Russia, the U.S. participation in the conflict in Syria,
  (ii) The attitude of Europe towards Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict and relationship between Russia and Israel (in the context of IL-20 collapse).

In the analyzed articles, there were 47 cases of speech manipulation, the vast majority of news articles (Figure 3).
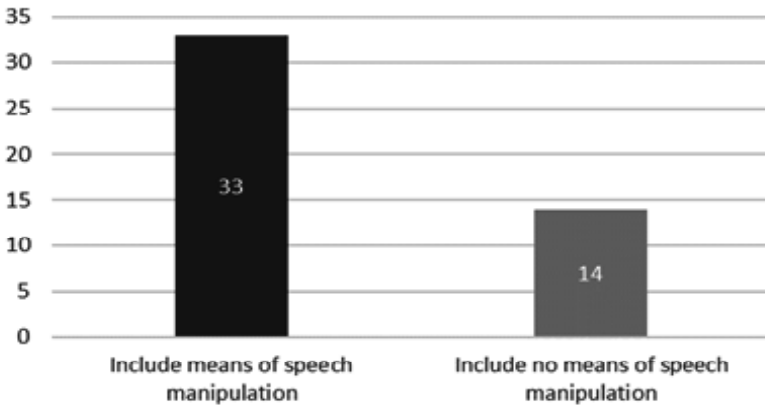

Figure 3. The share of new articles that include means of speech manipulation (RIA Novosti)

Similar to the previous media, news articles had no means of speech manipulation not because of objectivity of narration, but because a lack of author's comments (news articles only describe events and facts). To make it clear, which manipulation means authors had used, researchers also divided cases of their application into five categories and presented as a graph (Figure 4).
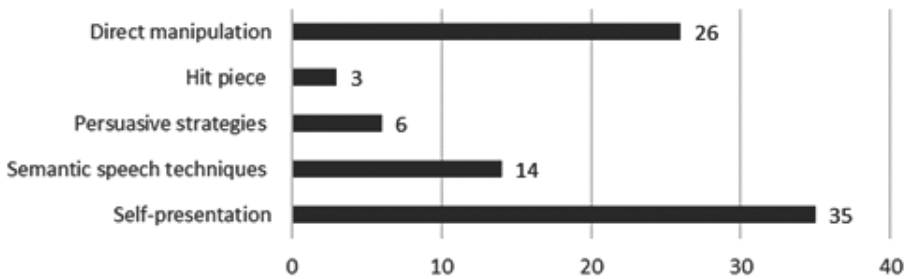
Figure 4. Number of cases of speech manipulation (*RIA Novosti*)

Consider cases of the mentioned manipulation types. Self-presentation is the most often type. In (Kalmykova, 2018), the author described Russia as a useful and important strategic partner, the achieved agreement with which had led to peace kept in a Syrian province, 'Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir told RIA Novosti that Idlib agreements between Russia and Turkey are *excellent* and *positive development* of the situation around this Syrian town.' The author does explain whether this situation is beneficial for other world powers and Syria itself.

There are 14 cases of semantic speech strategies. See an indicative example in RIA Novosti (2018, September 8). There are such words and set phrases, as a *missed opportunity*, *failed policy*, *diplomatic beggar*, *loss of influence,* etc. In contrast, the author mentions an ever-growing and consolidated standing of Russia in the conflict region.

There were cases of persuasive strategies in six articles, in particular, on the death of IL-20 crew (Russian aircraft, shot down by the air defense system of Syria). In (Kots, 2018), 'Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu put the full blame for the crashed aircraft on the Israeli side. He directly discussed this on the phone with Israeli defense minister Avigdor Lieberman. Shoigu emphasized that the tragedy with 15 Russian servicemen killed had occurred due to the irresponsibility of the Israeli air force, ignoring repeated calls of the Russian department to refrain from strikes on Syria.' That is, Israel was a guilty side instead of the party that had directly committed the attack. Finally, as a solution, authors propose Israel to stop military operations in the Syrian conflict zone and let Russia settle the problem.

Cases of hit piece were in the minority, but also available. To get an idea of this manipulation method, see RIA Novosti (2018, November 11), 'Double standards in U.S. foreign policy, manifested in different attitudes towards Russia, Iran and Syria, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have led to their next failure in the international arena.'

Data manipulation, their distortion or fragmentary disclosure are available in half of the news articles from the sample. For instance, see the fragment in Kalmykova (2018). Kan Israeli radio station quotes prime minister, 'The collapse of the Russian plane could have far more serious consequences' with the following comment, 'Netanyahu did not specify what he had exactly meant.' The article provides a fragment from the speech of Israel prime minister. Even though the speaker himself had not clarified the meaning of his ambiguous phrase, the context of the article gives a prompt to readers. It is, however, difficult to understand whether the intended meaning is similar to the original meaning.

Content Analysis of News Published by *Ukrinform*

For the content analysis, researchers had chosen 25 articles posted by the portal of Ukrainian information agency (Ukrinform) in the search site area using tag 'Syria.' All news

articles contain certain means of speech manipulation. It is often that there are several types of manipulation statements per article. To give an idea of some speech manipulations used, researchers have made the following graph (Figure 5).
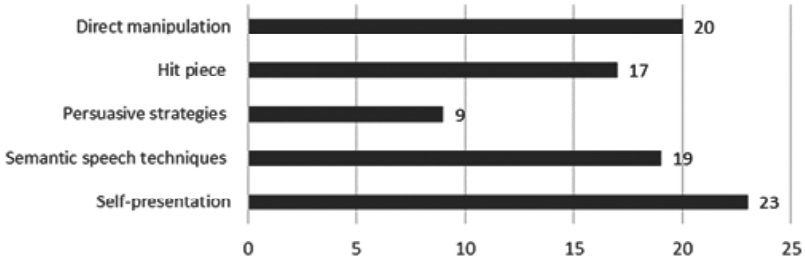

Figure 5. Number of cases of speech manipulation (Ukrinform)

The analysis of the sample of news articles posted by the Ukrainian information agency assumes that some speech manipulations in this media are much higher than in previously analyzed Russian sources, although there is also a high percent of speech manipulations.

If in the *self-presentation* category in materials of the Russian media, we saw the creation of a deliberately positive image of Russian policy and its leaders, then in news articles of Ukrinform the situation is opposite. Here authors build a negative image of Russia almost in every new article on Russia's participation in the Syrian armed conflict. Consider Ukrinform (2018, December 21). The new article begins as follows, 'Russia is a major threat and needs containment. Sanctions against Russia must be valid until it changes its behavior.' This formulation is a typical presentation of the attitude of the West towards Russia as presented by Ukrinform.

The second type of speech manipulation (use of semantic speech strategies) is also frequent in this media (19 out of 25 news articles). To describe applications of this type of speech manipulation, consider Sadalsky (2018). Using such idioms, as *misinformation*, *Kremlin idiots*, a *tale of the gray bull*, *talking heads* and similar expressions will surely generate an image of the deceitful Russian media in an inexperienced reader, which is what the author of this news article wants.

Persuasive strategies are also available, but in smaller numbers, e.g., in Ukrinform (2018, December 19). The problem raised by the article is misinterpretations of Russia's actions by the global community. That is, according to the author, it is necessary to regard Russia's mediation in contacts with the rebels as a way of collaboration with terrorist forces instead of a way intended for conflict settlement. The author proposes to change a point of view of the Russian policy in the Middle East and prevent Russia's convergence with the Syrian rebels and the Taliban.

The hit piece technique is also very frequent in Ukrinform. The analysis of (Ukrinform, 2018, December 7) suggests that the author resorts to partial citation and interpretation beneficial for him. At the same time, his opinion rests on a personal evaluation instead of facts. E.g., see the following fragment, 'President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko emphasized that Putin is weaker than he wants to appear and that it is possible for the West to make Putin obey. According to him, Russia wants to return to the era when it was normal to take property and land out by force.'

The strategy of evidence manipulations is also available in most of the articles in question. For instance, in (Ukrinform, 2018, November 29), there is the following, 'Russia,

Turkey and Iran failed to achieve considerable progress when they were establishing a Syrian constitutional committee at the meeting in Astana.' At the same time, the author completely ignores the agreements signed at that meeting.

Content Analysis of News Published by *Fox News Channel*

Researchers explored the content of English-language Fox News Channel and textual news articles on its portal. They found articles using an internal site search area with the request "Syria Russia." In total, the sample included 25 news articles with the following main subjects:

- The diplomatic relations between Russia and the Western countries,
- Employment of chemical weapons in Syria,
- The relationship between Russia and the Eastern countries (Turkey, Iran, etc.).

Of 35 analyzed news articles, only eight included means of speech manipulation (Figure 6). This result is strikingly different from the results of previously reviewed Russian and Ukrainian media. Fox News Channel in its news has its major focus on evidence.
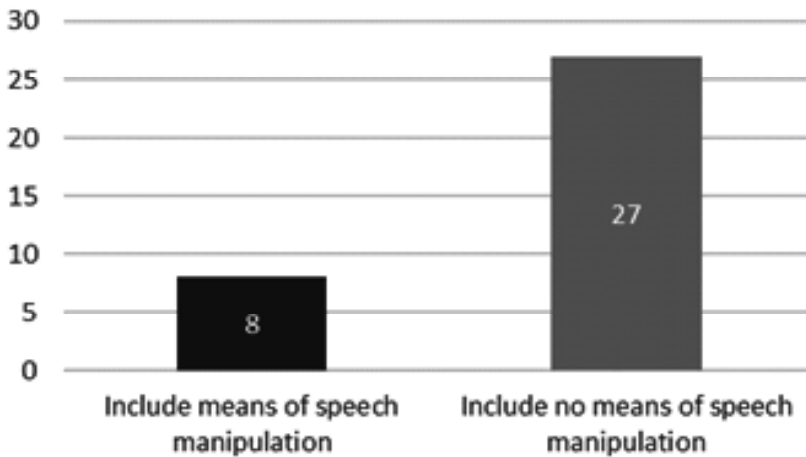

Figure 6. The share of articles that include means of speech manipulation (Fox News Channel)

Having divided the speech manipulations found in articles by previously described types, we got the following graph (Figure 7).
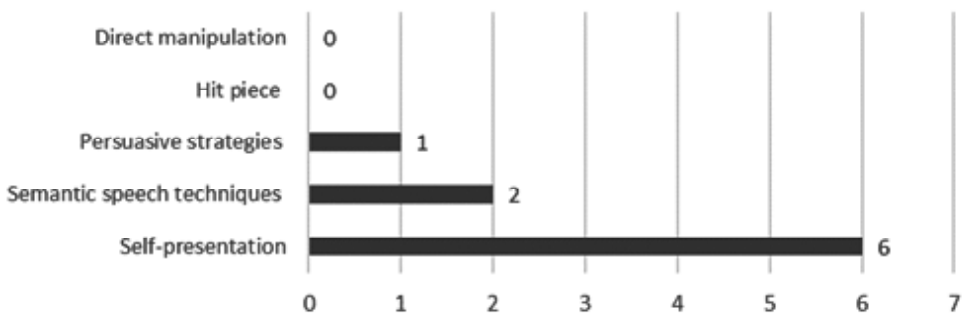

Figure 7. Number of cases of speech manipulation (Fox News Channel)

In the considered sample, no speech manipulation techniques were assuming a hit piece and data manipulations. News portal Fox News Channel presents facts correctly, trying to avoid manipulations of its readership. Researchers have still discovered some of the highlighted categories of text manipulations. For instance, six articles rested upon the self-presentation method, see, for instance, Isachenko (2018). The article has the following words, 'Russia is a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and its intervention in the civil war, beginning in 2015, turned the tide in his favor.' This presentation of Russia as an ally of the Assad regime affects the reader's perception and is contrary to an official position of the Kremlin saying that it does not support any of the parties and that the military intervention only took place to fight against ISIS (the organization had been banned in Russia).

In two articles, there are semantic speech strategies of manipulation. One of them (Associated Press, 2018, July 5) is on negotiations with Russia on the Syrian conflict with such words, as for *reject*, *attempt to circumvent*, *fruitless round*, etc. This influence method aims at a showing off a dead-end character attributed to the Russian policy and diplomacy to report that agreements with Russia on this issue are useless.

Finally, the persuasive strategy is the last mentioned method of the manipulative influence in the news of Fox News Channel. In the proposed sample, an application of the method was one-time in (Vasilyeva, 2018), where authors positioned Russia as an accuser of Israel for the crime that Israel had not committed. The author says that pilots of the aircraft had had warnings of a possible attack in advance (the Russian side claims that they had received the warning just a minute before the attack). Therefore, the author focuses on the fact that Israel had elected not to comment on this accusation as a military base of Hezbollah militants instead of the Russian aircraft was a target of the attack.

Conclusion

Thus, we have identified that a desire to achieve the covert manipulative influence on recipients is a typical feature of texts in the media. It is typical for the media that have a different focus and are in political confrontation. Manipulations with the perception of information (by recipients) have direct relations with distortion of the information and suppression of evidence. At the same time, it is rather difficult to distinguish between types.

To summarize the analysis, note that we have identified in a total of five types of speech manipulative influence in texts of the media. There are self-presentation, semantic speech strategies, persuasive strategies, hit piece strategies and strategies of information manipulation. A lexical inventory of speech manipulation consists of euphemisms, dysphemisms, slogan words, speech metaphorization, etc. Media texts have been getting more complicated due to the hints used, precedent phenomena, irony, as well as the hidden text of an informative presentation. Use of various colloquial words, speech constructions, colloquialisms, jargonisms, and harsh words can make a text much expressive and emotional. Skilfully selected speech constructions make it possible to accentuate hues or their meanings in the message. This will result in double meanings of certain words in a text, distorting the reality in an imperceptible way in ideas of a particular recipient.

Significant signs of a practical manipulation are a hidden nature of the influence, specific speech organization of a text that might contribute to some misconceptions in mind of a reader. As the content analysis has shown, most often the media resort to self-presentation. Russian and Ukrainian media often use the method of information manipulation, that is, its distortion or fragmentary coverage of a topic. The sample of

articles from U.S. Fox News Channel has not confirmed usage of this method. Semantic speech and persuasive strategies are approximately in equal proportions in all of the studied sources, but Ukrinform is a leader in quantity, followed by Russian sources with a minimum number recorded in texts of the U.S. source (Fox News Channel). Researchers have only found the hit piece method in the Russian and Ukrainian media with a proportionately bigger share of Ukrinform.

The content analysis has shown that each of the selected media uses means of speech manipulation to one or another degree. Some applications of such methods of influence almost directly depend on a political attitude towards an object.

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