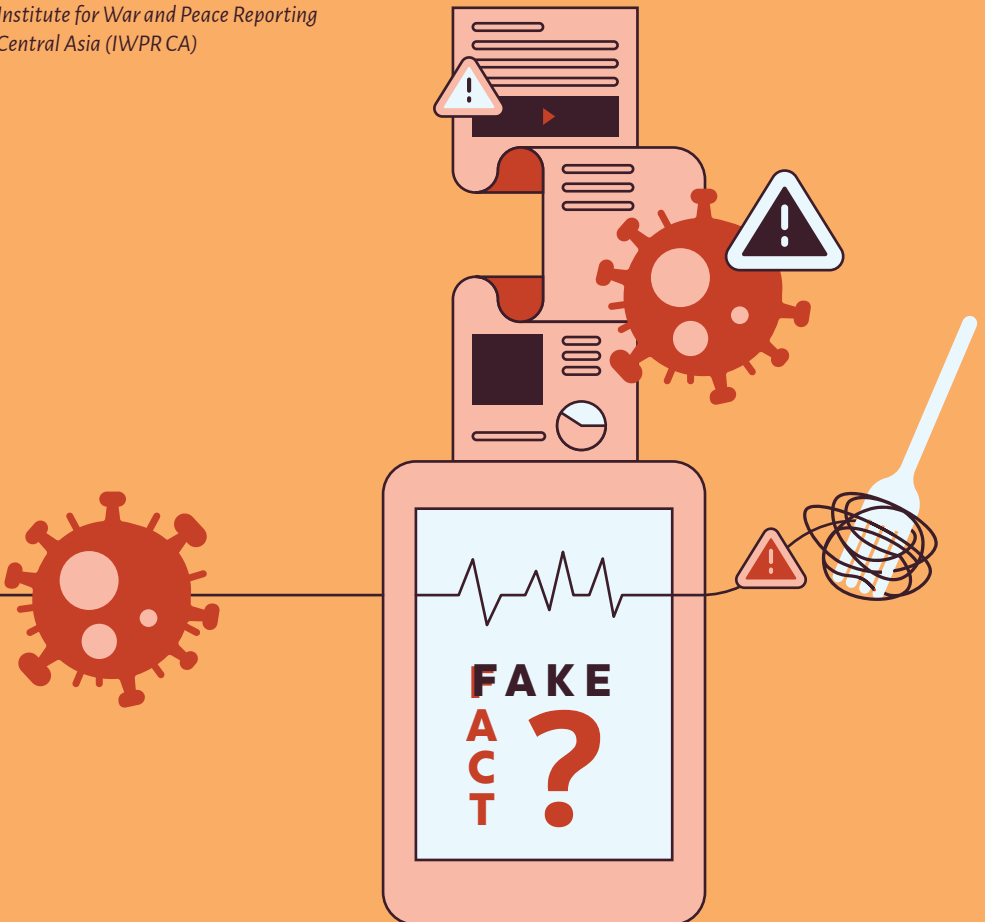# CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 'FAKES'

on Social Media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Institute for War and Peace Reporting
Central Asia (IWPR CA)

FAKE
FACT
?

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The opinions expressed in this research are those of the authors and IWPR CA. They do not necessarily reflect the position of other individuals and/or organisations involved in this research.

IWPR is an international organisation for media development that supports local reporters, citizen journalists, and civil society activists in thirty countries around the world. IWPR has operated in Central Asia since 1999; its regional head office is located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
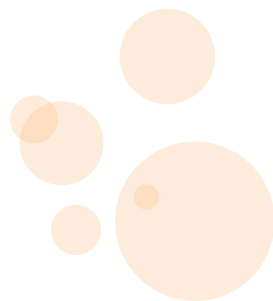
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BRIEF SUMMARY

This research is an attempt to analyse the spread of COVID-19 "fakes" [1] in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and to identify their main features. Our analysis will outline their defining characteristics, – their similarities and differences in comparison to other news materials, and their format, channels and platforms of distribution and distribution frequency. In addition, our analysis will examine at what stage or stages these fakes were integrated in and became relevant in the region.

A number of social factors shape research into the origins and distribution of fake information among social media users: the underdeveloped information sphere in Central Asia; the need to study the influence of information products on social phenomena; and the general absence of research on public opinion among internet users in the region.

This research will be useful for media, journalism faculties, bloggers, as well as government bodies and international organisations.

KEY FINDINGS

The major share of incorrect information during the coronavirus pandemic can be considered 'fake' – something completely fabricated or false in content, and, to a lesser extent, as 'manipulation' – a half-truth or conspiracy theory.

The topics of infection treatment and prevention were prevalent among COVID-19 fakes. This is obvious. There was also a great deal of fake information, direct and indirect, about the activities of governments, ministries, and various institutions, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO). A defining feature of these fakes was their intercountry relevance.[2] Most originated outside of the countries they impacted and were not related to any specific country; on the contrary, they had the ability to seem "relevant" to several countries at once. Most were distributed in the Russian language. It should also be noted that the primary sources of most fakes in our sample were texts in Russian and/or published on '.ru' websites.[3]

In terms of format, fakes appeared mostly as event updates or as commentary – as a short text or title or as a text, video, or audio message. Visual components rarely played a key role in the popularity of fakes.

Most of the fakes examined in the course of this research appeared on social media sites, though there were also fakes on websites in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that positioned themselves as news media.

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1 — We are using the word "fakes" to describe online information that is manufactured, in whole or in part. We are using the term "fakes," as opposed to "fake news," because the source is often individuals rather than media and owing to the fact that "fake news" originated as a politically motivated term meant to denigrate traditional news organisations and the free press.
2 — Published in another country and relevant for several countries at the same time.
3 — For more information about distribution channels, see the section "Mechanisms and Channels of Distribution".

Facebook was the primary social media platform for disseminating disinformation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whereas Telegram dominated in Uzbekistan.

Our analysis allows us to conclude that most fakes have several identifying characteristics, such as:
- a "clickbait" title or a title meant to draw attention;
- a lack of georeferencing and time referencing;
- exaggerated emotionality;
- numerous rhetorical questions and exclamations;
- appeals to conspiracy theories and calls to action;
- allusions to 'respected' sources and experts that are not named or identified.

The research identified three main stages in the integration and actualisation of fakes:
1. Fakes evoked similar feelings (fear, panic, shame, and sometimes, relief) and an emotional response (call to action);
2. The fakes appeared as reposts numerous times on social media, and as a result, earned a certain degree of trust among people;
3. Certain people, including influencers, the famous, and various interest groups, disseminated and published the information.

INTRODUCTION

Fakes gained new impetus worldwide in 2020. The coronavirus pandemic demonstrated that fake information has a long-lasting social impact: it affects pricing, spreads panic, or, in contrast, undermines public faith in the basic measures meant to protect against the virus.

We term false information differently as disinformation, fake news, inaccurate news, or as rumour, though this does not change the essence of the problem. There is still no single definition of 'fake'. The British Collins English Dictionary named "fake" Word of the Year in 2017.[4]

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated numerous negative and positive trends worldwide. The coronavirus pandemic spread rapidly around the world beginning with the second half of February 2020. It infected hundreds of thousands of people. The absence of treatments and pervasive fear led to an increase in false information about the origin, symptoms, and methods of preventing the virus. Disinformation flooded the Internet and social media. Due to the introduction of certain restrictions in all countries, frightened people turned to social media to learn more.

In the absence of reliable and accurate information, COVID-19 fakes impacted the behaviour of individuals and entire societies, spreading fear and panic and causing inappropriate reactions.

According to research conducted in several countries, some 800 people died owing to false information about the benefits of alcohol disinfecting the body. The use of methanol against the coronavirus resulted in six thousand hospitalisations; another 60 people went blind.[5] There is no such data for Central Asia.

Spanish scientists[6] maintain that studying the dynamics and types of coronavirus-related fakes will help mitigate the negative impact of the healthcare crisis. In the current situation, scientific research on false healthcare information is more necessary than ever.

A number of social factors shape research into the origins and distribution of fake information among social media users: the underdeveloped information sphere in Central Asia; the need to study the influence of information products on social phenomena; and the general absence of research on public opinion among internet users in the region.

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4 — 'Fake news', 'Insta' & 'Unicorn' – Lucy Mangan's take on #CollinsWOTY 2017:
https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/fake-news-insta-unicorn-lucy-mangans-take-on-collinswoty-2017/
5 — COVID-19–Related Infodemic and Its Impact on Public Health: A Global Social Media Analysis, Am. J. Trop. Med. Hyg., 103(4), 2020, pp. 1621–1629.
6 — Spanish scientists are researching the fake news phenomenon in the COVID-19 health crisis:
https://www.bbva.com/en/spanish-scientists-are-researching-the-fake-news-phenomenon-in-the-covid-19-health-crisis

RESEARCH GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the present research is to analyse the most common COVID-19 fakes in Central Asian countries. **The research aims to identify:**

- **the key features of fakes during the pandemic;**

- **their channels and mechanisms of distribution;**

- **the peculiarities of the most popular fakes in terms of structure and presentation.**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researchers from four Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – conducted qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the fakes.

The researchers developed the features and criteria for sampling the fakes and their subsequent coding and analysis.

The researchers carried out this work after an initial review and study of fact-checking resources, and following a series of educational webinars that IWPR CA organised.

The researchers then summarised the criteria they developed and created coding sheets; these were the primary tools used in analysing the content of fakes and in confirming the characteristics that identify them.

Researchers applied quantitative content analysis to define the most common features of fakes, to interpret quantitative results, and to compare fakes with verified materials; this helped identify the kinds of structures and content particular to disinformation.

IWPR CA structured the research as a learning process: it formed a team of coders in each country consisting of two lecturers and from three to five senior undergraduate and graduate students of journalism faculties .

The students filled in the coding sheets; the tutors carried out the final check and analysis of the fakes' structure. The researchers then processed the data and compiled a final report.

The coding took 20 days (November 20 – December 10, 2020).

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7 — For more information, see the section "Feedback of research participants on the research process".

SAMPLING

The research team reviewed coronavirus-related materials with the COVID-19 tag from the fact-checking resources Factcheck.kz (Kazakhstan), Factcheck.kg (Kyrgyzstan), and Factcheck.tj (Tajikistan). These materials were published from February 1 to October 31, 2020.

When collecting data for analysis in Uzbekistan, the researchers used the following resources: Poynter.org, Factcheck.kz, Factcheck.kg, and Factcheck.tj. The research team chose these resources due to the relative similarity of the information sphere.

SAMPLING DISTRIBUTION

In total for Kazakhstan, the team found 149 fact-check materials on the Factcheck.kz website, of which every third was selected for content analysis. 48 materials in total were included in the sample for Kazakhstan.

The total sample for Kyrgyzstan included all materials from the Factcheck.kg website found by keywords and matching verdicts. Our research revealed 38 materials of this kind.

The total sample for Tajikistan included 30 materials found by keyword. Of these, 26 materials are from Factcheck.tj; the remaining 4 are Tajik-relevant materials from Factcheck.kz (as an exception).

The total sample for Uzbekistan included 38 materials, with the research team from Uzbekistan noting that these most often appeared on Uzbek social media sites.

Table No.1. Sampling Distribution by Country

Number of materials selected for analysis

Country	Materials	Percentage
Kazakhstan	48	31%
Kyrgyzstan	38	25%
Uzbekistan	38	25%
Tajikistan	30	19%

154 materials
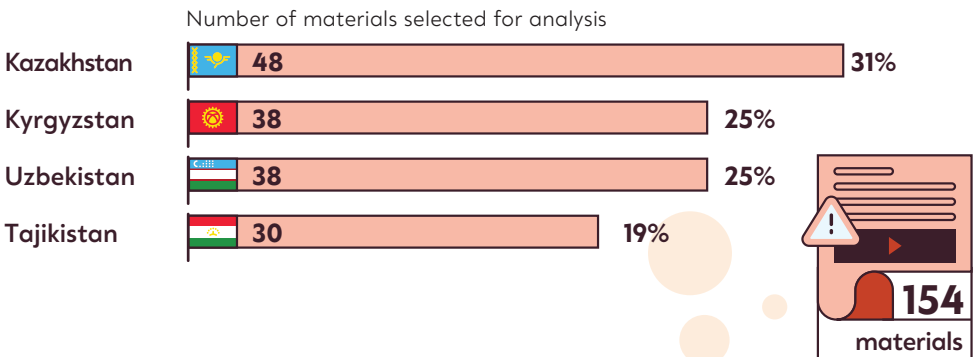
FACT-CHECK RESOURCES

FΛCTCHECK.KZ

Factcheck.kz — fact-checking resource in Kazakhstan; regularly monitors and verifies socially significant and high-impact news, facts, figures, as well as statements of public figures for reliability. In accordance with the collected evidence, as well as the "Truth-O-Meter" criteria (see below), the editor's office delivers a verdict and publishes it on the website along with the collected evidence.[8]

Factcheck.kg — fact-checking resource in Kyrgyzstan; positions itself as a public mass media source operating independently of state, private, commercial, religious, and other interests. The main goal of this initiative is to promote the culture of fact-checking and media criticism, and to develop critical thinking skills among media representatives.[9]

factcheck.tj

Factcheck.tj — fact-checking resource in Tajikistan; its activities are aimed at countering the spread of fakes in Tajikistan's information sphere by forming and developing a culture of fact-checking.[10]

INTERNATIONAL FACT-CHECKING NETWORK @Poynter.

All three resources follow the principles of the International Fact-Checking Network. This is a unit of the Poynter Institute dedicated to bringing together fact-checkers worldwide. The IFCN was launched in September 2015 to promote best practices and facilitate exchanges among a booming crop of fact-checking initiatives.[11]

Coronavirus Fact-Checking Alliance **IFCN**

Coronavirus Facts Database — a database containing fakes discovered by the Coronavirus Facts Alliance. It brings together fact-checkers from over 70 countries, including Kazakhstan, and contains articles published in at least 40 languages. The Coronavirus Facts Database is updated daily.[12]

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8 — More information: https://factcheck.kz/o-nas/
9 — More information: https://factcheck.kg/
10 — More information: https://factcheck.tj/ru/
11 — International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN): https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/
12 — The CoronaVirusFacts: https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/

CLASSIFICATION OF VERDICTS

Each fact-checking resource uses clearly defined assessment categories to measure truthfulness on the "Truth-O-Meter" – this is an index of the reliability of socially significant and high-impact news, facts, figures, as well as statements of public figures. The "Truth-O-Meter" contains the following ratings (*verdicts*):

"Fake/False" – an incorrect presentation of information (place, time, figures, participants, circumstances of the events) or a statement based on non-existent data.

"Manipulation" - presents deliberately distorted data, takes information or parts of information out of context, exaggerates or understates facts to influence public opinion or to improve or worsen the reputation of a certain public person/event; restricts access to information or conceals the true situation.

"Half-Truth" – the material is either partially verified, or contains inaccuracies, insignificant errors, misinterpretations, irrelevant or general concepts.

"Lies" – the events that are described are distorted and do not correspond to the facts.

"Factual Error" – the event is verified, but there is an error in the presentation of facts, date, time, place, or digital data.

This classification is relative. Each resource determines its own editorial policy. For example, there are such verdicts as "Deceptive Statement" and "Impossible to Verify" in Czech classifications. Kazakh and other classifications include a label for when a verdict cannot be reached, i.e. "Without a Verdict". In such cases, the resources create a working group of experts who decide on the appropriate verdict.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The present research does not claim to provide an objective or comprehensive picture of the spread of fakes during the pandemic. The following factors were limiting in this regard:

- it is not possible to track sources of information, or to search or trace feedback, on social media sites such as Viber, Instagram, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Twitter;

- it is not possible to track distribution channels and reactions in private groups or profiles;

- it is impossible to trace the primary source of information, or to track the distribution of publications, on dark social media (those sent or distributed via messengers);

- it is impossible to analyse reactions to deleted fakes in Uzbekistan given the existing criminal liability for publishing fake information;[13] some social media channels and groups deleted their incriminating content in response to this;

- a number of materials from Uzbek sources – allegedly fake but not verified by fact-checking resources – were excluded due to methodological limitations;

- the linguistic fragmentation of social media is also a limiting factor. Social media algorithms and available data make it impossible to draw correlations between the language of fakes and their degree of influence. As a result, we excluded the language of fakes from the list of features.

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13 — Law on Amendments and Additions to the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes of the Republic of Uzbekistan and to the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Uzbekistan:
https://uza.uz/ru/posts/o-vnesenii-izmeneniy-i-dopolneniy-v-ugolovnyy-ugolovno-prots-26-03-2020

KEY FEATURES OF FAKES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Researchers structured their analysis around quarantine intervals. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan introduced quarantines at almost the same time in March 2020; these were in force with varying restrictions through June. Though Tajikistan did not introduce strict quarantine measures, the content of fakes did not differ from those in other countries of the region during this timeframe.

Fakes involving global conspiracies to rebuild the world order proliferated in this period together with those claiming the virus did not exist or that it was a simple flu. This was in addition to numerous fakes extolling the benefits of certain foods (garlic, ginger, and lemon) in countering the coronavirus. The scepticism of the population about the coronavirus reached its peak during this period.

The second period, which began in the second half of July 2020, included fakes about the origins of the virus or detailed treatment methods involving alcohol inhalations. Our analysis of social media comments in this period revealed increasing quarantine fatigue, growing discontent with the resulting social and economic crises, and intensifying debates over the benefits and dangers of wearing masks.

According to verdict classifications on the Factcheck.kz database, the volume and number of the most common fakes fluctuated from February to October 2020, though there was a slow decrease in the number of such materials beginning in August 2020.
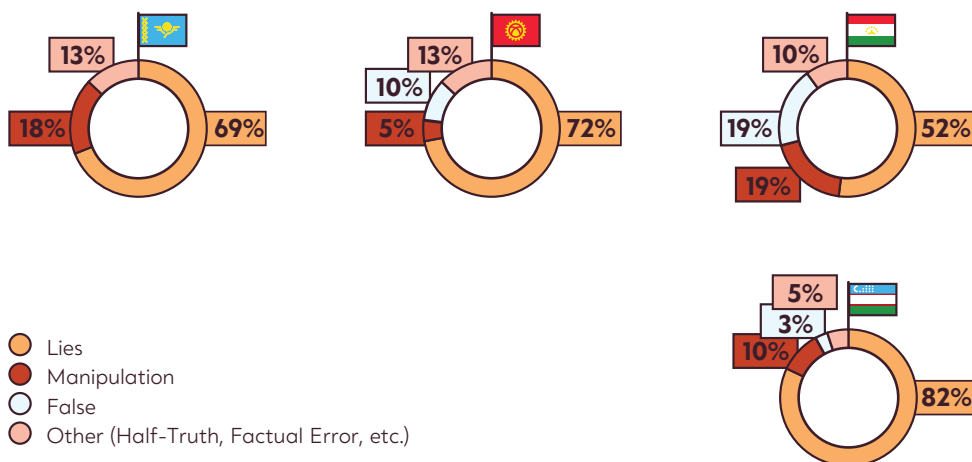
VERDICT/RATINGS

We followed the same classification of verdicts or ratings used by the Central Asian fact-checking resources. According to our analysis, the verdict "Lies," indicating something completely falsified, applied to the majority of COVID-19 fakes in all countries. This label was used most often, followed by "Manipulations," "False," and other verdicts (Table No.2). Presumably, these trends correspond to the fact that most fakes about conspiracy theories, including 'zombie fakes' , recur repeatedly in new contexts, as they did in this case, remerging in concert with the infodemic and coronavirus.

14 — 'Zombie fakes' are fakes that appear occasionally online and in other media, even after fact-checks are performed. The reappearance of 'zombie fakes' is natural during crises (this time, due to the coronavirus pandemic). Because of active sharing, users still believe in them, and this keeps these 'zombies' alive. More information: https://factcheck.kz/sluxi/zombi-fejki-inogda-oni-vozvrashchayutsya/

Table No.2. Distribution of Fakes by Rating (Verdict)

○ Lies
● Manipulation
○ False
○ Other (Half-Truth, Factual Error, etc.)

TYPES/PURPOSES OF FAKES

Fakes continue to evolve and become more complex. Our analysis of COVID-19 fakes revealed a series of 'zombie fakes' that recur at intervals. Today, most fakes are not only published but also promoted with a certain purpose. We were interested in observing and classifying fakes in accordance with the tasks they perform.

Following the Ukrainian "BezBrehni" [Without Lie – Tr.] fact-checking resource[15], the researchers from the various countries participating in this study placed different types of fakes into the following categories:

- defamatory (fakes, containing accusations and criticism, that are meant to undermine trust in organisations, individuals, scientific discoveries and/or the state);
- polarising (fakes designed to sow divisions along lines of gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc.);
- panic/destabilising (fakes that spread fear or panic or which lead to rash, emotional actions);
- entertaining (satirical materials distributed by sources such as clan Memestan or @qloopnews on Twitter. These types of materials usually indicate that they are satire or make their satirical nature plain.. In our case, these fakes included materials distributed for the purpose of entertainment);
- "miraculous recipe" (this category of fakes includes most materials involving self-treatment/ prevention).[16]

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15 — The fact-check project "BezBrehni" (https://www.without-lie.info/) was launched by the Public Organisation "Centre for Analytics and Investigations". It is an open media resource that works on a voluntary basis, and with the support of international donor organisations and the grant programs of donor countries' embassies.
16 — We did not label this category as "fraud", although two materials from the Tajikistan sample demonstrated clear signs of fraud.
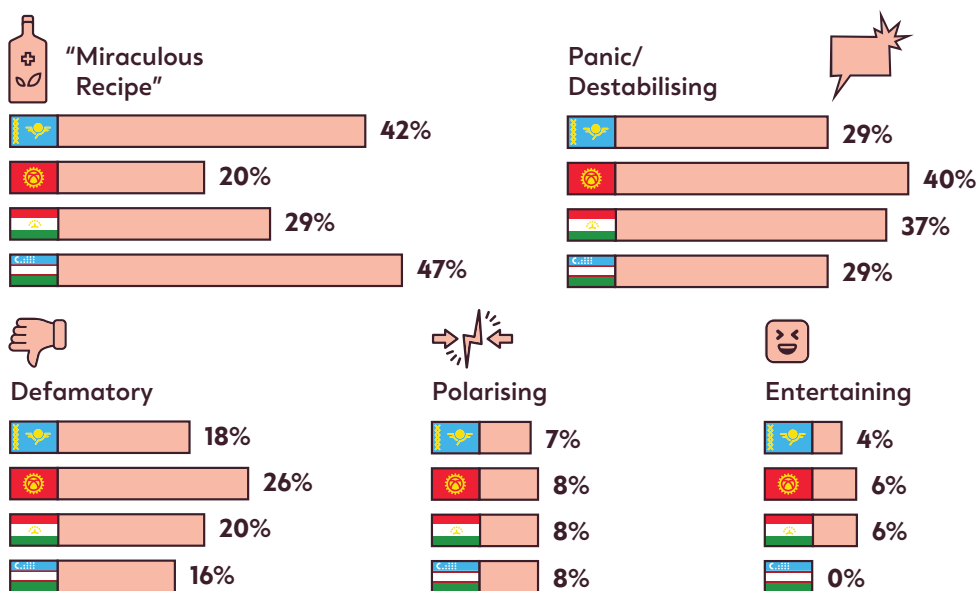
Our analysis reveals that fakes in the category of "miraculous recipe" prevail in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Table No.3). These are directly related to fakes on the topic of self-treatment and coronavirus prevention.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, fakes containing destabilising or panic-inducing messages dominate. These are fakes derived from various conspiracy theories and healthcare materials, particularly those about deaths. Factcheck.kz resource carried out a detailed analysis of global fakes involving conspiracy theories.[17] It showed a surge of such fakes during the pandemic, with their authors using the coronavirus and infodemic not only to earn money and attract website visitors but also to exacerbate political and social polarisation.

Many materials contained elements from different categories. Fakes involving information about deaths, "spraying unknown substances from helicopters", or "new types of coronavirus", for example, contributed to panic, destabilisation, and polarisation. Fakes about new medicines and/or methods of treatment and prevention might also be included in the "fraud" category since they are meant to discredit official treatments while also increasing demand for certain medicines and food products.

It should be noted that fakes about WHO statements were abundant in Central Asian countries. Most were meant to discredit its activities. Given how pervasive these were on Central Asian social media sites, most users in the region did not trust the WHO and responded to reliable news about the coronavirus with sarcastic comments.

Table No.3. Distribution of Fakes by Purpose

"Miraculous Recipe"
- 42%
- 20%
- 29%
- 47%

Panic/ Destabilising
- 29%
- 40%
- 37%
- 29%

Defamatory
- 18%
- 26%
- 20%
- 16%

Polarising
- 7%
- 8%
- 8%
- 8%

Entertaining
- 4%
- 6%
- 6%
- 0%

17 — "Conspiracy Theories and Anti-Vaccination Propaganda: Who, How and How Much Earns From It" // 14.01.2021: https://factcheck.kz/socium/kto-kak-i-skolko-zarabatyvaet-na-konspirologii-i-antiprivivochnoj-propagande/.

EXTENT

We also analysed fakes by the extent of their distribution and labelled them as "international fakes" (relevant in a number of countries) or as "country fakes" (relevant in only one of the countries participating in the research).

Most fakes relevant to Central Asia are international fakes and not associated with any one specific country (Table No.4).

Table No.4. Distribution of Fakes by Extent
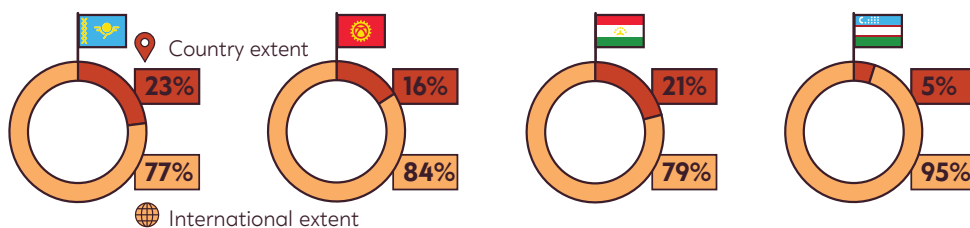
Kazakhstan and Tajikistan had the most country specific fakes at 23% and 21%, respectively, while Kyrgyzstan had 16%. In Uzbekistan, because the group worked with fact-checking resources of other countries, they managed to find only two fakes that had been checked by Factcheck.kz that were relevant to Uzbekistan alone.

Most country specific fakes in Kazakhstan involved self-treatment (advice and recipes for coronavirus prevention) or fabrications related to healthcare and politics: "Are they concealing the COVID-19 treatment protocol in Kazakhstan?", a fake about a statement by the former Minister of Health (completely falsified), and "A vaccine from Nazarbayev's blood", which was derived from a series of conspiracy fakes.

In Tajikistan, country fakes include rumours about coronavirus outbreaks in the country and statistics on infected persons and deaths, including a fabrication about the death of the Head of the Prosecutor's Office. The other two fakes specific to Tajikistan address errors (inaccuracies) in claims about insurance and the costs of ventilators. As we know from Factcheck.tj materials, these fakes appeared due to inaccuracies in official statements. One of these fakes included false information about a Tajik doctor inventing a drink to prevent and treat the coronavirus.

Country fakes encompassed healthcare issues in Kyrgyzstan, including fabrications about house calls and vaccinations by doctors, a false statement by the Ministry of Health about express COVID-19 tests by the Matraimov Foundation, as well as numerous fakes about animal infections, the hospitalisation of foreigners, etc.

Country fakes in Uzbekistan involved the first deaths in the country and a girl immolating herself due to the coronavirus. The Asia-times.org website initially published these false materials.[18] It should be noted that fakes published on this website spread to all four of the countries that this study covers.

Fakes in the international category include 'miraculous recipes' (ginger, onion, garlic, etc.), conspiracy theories, foreign policy issues and/or inaccurate transcripts of the preprints of various studies.[19] Our analysis shows that the primary sources[20] of most fakes in our sample were texts in Russian and/or published on '.ru' websites.[21]

Given this, we can assume that most Russian-speaking users receive and consume content from Russian sources, which is confirmed by the number of fakes of Russian origin. We can also assume that local content is adapted from Russian-language content (including the content translated into Russian from other languages). This is facilitated by limited sources of information and the weaker tradition of analysis in the local media. Accordingly, fakes on Central Asian social media are generally derived from Russian-language sources, regardless of where they initially appear.

TOPICS

By topic, most confirmed fakes revolve around self-treatment and coronavirus prevention, with these comprising 26% of fakes in Kyrgyzstan and 40% in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan had the most fakes involving conspiracy theories at 26%, though they also made up 19% of fakes in Uzbekistan. Fakes involving state and national policies dominated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; these were generally international fakes that referred to measures taken abroad (additional payments to doctors or free access to Internet), as well as to quarantine measures and treatments in other countries (in Sweden, Singapore, etc.).

It is worth noting that fakes related to religion appeared throughout the region and were mostly 'zombie fakes'. All of these were similar in theme to fabrications about the mass adoption of Islam in Italy, France, China, and the USA. We should also note that all confirmed fakes involving religion were completely falsified: the photos/videos use materials that do not correspond to either the location or the time of the events, and have nothing to do with the coronavirus. According to Factcheck.kz, these 'zombie fakes' persist because users who still believe in them actively share the misinformation.

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18 — A Russian-language website of questionable origin; covers the issues of politics, society, economy, religion, migration and security of the Central Asian countries, Iran and Iraq. The website lacks information about the creators; the location of the editorial office is "Astana, Kazakhstan".

19 — "Preprint" is a full draft research paper that has not been published in a scientific journal and has not been peer reviewed. More information: "Everything You Need to Know about Scientific Studies' Preprints":
https://factcheck.kz/nauka/chto-nado-znat-o-preprintax-nauchnyx-statej/

20 — The primary source is the source that fact-checkers refer to with the mention of where they got the information for verification.

21 — For more information about distribution channels, see the section "Mechanisms and Channels of Distribution"

Table No.5. Distribution of Fakes by Topic

Treatment/
Self-Treatment/
Prevention   Healthcare   Politics/
Government

36% 26% 35% 40%

21% 19% 22% 19%

11% 21% 19% 12%

Conspiracy
Theory   Religion   Other   Migrants

26% 18% 9% 19%

4% 8% 3% 3%

2% 8% 6% 7%

0% 0% 6% 0%
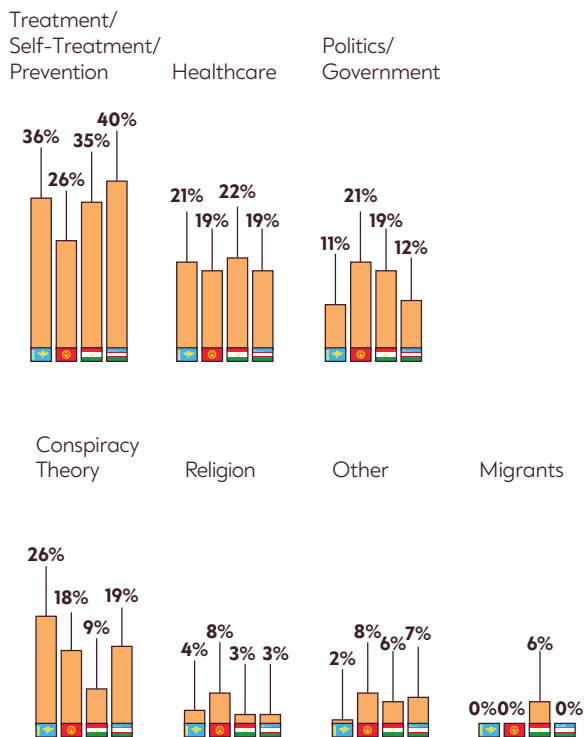
THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

Self-treatment and virus prevention are the most common subjects of COVID-19 fakes at 36%. These fakes include simple solutions, groundless advice, or recipes shared in messages or comments. There are materials about alternative medicines such as *"Treating coronavirus with 'garlic water'"*, *"Dog and badger fats, adyraspan [harmala, a perennial herbaceous plant], Kyst al Hindi [Indian costus, a herbaceous plant] and horseradish provide protection against the coronavirus"*, *"Vodka kills the coronavirus in half a minute"*, *"Will sheep tail fat cure the coronavirus?"*.

The coronavirus treatment involving dog and badger fats was extremely popular among Kazakh language fakes.[22] Using ginger and garlic to prevent coronavirus infection was also a common topic. A video on a channel with 302 thousand subscribers (which was deleted after being refuted by Factcheck.kz) argued that ginger was a panacea for almost all diseases.

It should be noted that information about the disease-curing properties of garlic, ginger and the like was shared not only in the Russian language but in all languages of the world, which demonstrates the enormous extent of disinformation distribution. The WHO even had to refute the garlic myth officially. These facts do not make onions, garlic and ginger any less wonderful food products, but they do not make them a panacea.

Residents in Kazakhstan continue to believe in the healing power of adyraspan[23] despite numerous refutations, and even burn fires with this herb. An allergist/immunologist detailed its uselessness against the coronavirus and the harm it might cause to people suffering from allergies on 24.kz[24] in March 2020; the myth had become popular among Atyrau residents at that time.

Fakes involving conspiracies were popular on social media sites in Kazakhstan, with 26% of these including some variant of a conspiracy theory: *rumours about disinfection by helicopters, 5G deployment, the idea that US laboratories allegedly created and patented the coronavirus;* some of these fakes stated that *80% of humanity would die from the coronavirus.*

22 — "Tail Fat Became a Popular Product": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPy3teZHlW0
23 — Adyraspan (péganum hármala) — a perennial herbaceous plant, usually growing in saline soils, hills and steppes of Central Asia.
24 — "Adyraspan Will Not Save You From Coronavirus – Immunologist" //24.kz:
https://24.kz/ru/news/social/item/382378-adraspan-ne-spasjot-ot-koronavirusa-immunolog

THE CASE OF KYRGYZSTAN

In Kyrgyzstan, most fakes revolved around treatment (26%) and healthcare (19%). They included 'miraculous recipes' against the coronavirus that had allegedly been published in Soviet newspapers, materials about an 'asymptomatic strain of the coronavirus' in Kyrgyzstan, and disinformation about the number of COVID-19 deaths in China and Uzbekistan. There was even a fake about the death of the Head of WHO.

One fifth of the fakes (21%) were related to government and country national policies in order to discredit them or undermine stability. These fakes spread misinformation about quarantine policies in other countries (Sweden) and/or unrest and protests (mainly in Russia).

At the same time, the most popular fakes in Kyrgyzstan, and those most shared and discussed, were related to healthcare topics and the politics of other countries; most of these fall into the 'international fakes' category and spread falsehoods about *disinfection by helicopters, WHO statements on the Russian vaccine*, etc.

Fakes involving COVID-19 tests by the *Matraimov Foundation*,[25] and fabrications about coronavirus infections in horses in Issyk-Kul, were also widespread in Kyrgyzstan.[26]

The first case involved the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic allegedly reporting that the WHO had recommended using the express tests of the Ismail Matraimov Foundation, which had supposedly allocated them as humanitarian aid. A dubious letter from the Ministry of Health was published on the Facebook and Instagram accounts of Iskender Matraimov, a member of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic and co-founder of the Foundation that bears his father's name. This information turned out to be fake: **the WHO had urged people to refrain from taking express tests due to their low effectiveness.** The Head of the Unit of Licensing Medical and Pharmaceutical Services in the Ministry of Health announced this in the official media. Later, the WHO representative in the Kyrgyz Republic explained that the Ministry letter of 04.07.2020, which bore the signature of the Official Secretary, had been falsified, and was invalid.

In the second case, messaging services shared a video stating that horses in Issyk-Kul were infected, presumably with the coronavirus. The director of the Issyk-Kul Veterinary Inspectorate denied this information, and stated that there was no connection between the coronavirus and equine diseases.

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25 — More than 100 shares, 100 comments and 500 likes – the available data from the official pages of the Matraimov Foundation on Facebook and Instagram, where the publications and data on reactions are still available.
26 — The fake was actively shared via WhatsApp.

THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

In Tajikistan, most fakes dealt with self-treatment/prevention (34%) and healthcare (22%). The fabrications encompassed alternative medicines (about dexamethasone, inhalations, diagnostics from 100 metres, treatment protocols and vaccines) and non-traditional methods of treatment (Medicine of the Prophet, ginger, garlic, soda, black cumin, hot drinks, rinsing, vodka). There were also widespread fakes meant to discredit WHO recommendations on quarantine restrictions.

19% of the total sample involved politics. In addition to statistics on the number of deaths, there were also fabrications about famous persons (the coronavirus infection of the wife of the Uzbek President, for example, or the death of Saidislom Abdujjaborzoda, a prosecutor in the Prosecutor General's Office in the Republic of Tajikistan); measures taken by governments (payments to doctors in Uzbekistan or insurance issues in Tajikistan); migration and migrants (distortions of Sobyanin's statements about Tajiks or false information regarding flights between Russia and Uzbekistan).

We identified several fakes that were particularly resonant by tracing reactions to them. For example, there were more than 10,000 views of fabrications claiming that dexamethasone helps to cure the coronavirus. We found this material on more than eight resources, four of which were websites (Oila.tj, Sputnik-tj.com, Dialog.tj, Pressa.tj). Fact-checkers rated this material as "Manipulation" and as "Half-Truth" owing to its distortions of content and the use of clickbait headlines: "...the WHO Claims", or "Our Doctors Are Ahead of the Whole Planet". The WHO then announced preliminary findings on the presence of the virus in Tajikistan, but did not confirm the information officially.

Another fake refers to a panacea against the coronavirus, stating that a cure has been found in the Medicine of the Prophet. This information was published in five closed Facebook groups and shared on more than five private user accounts. The primary source of this publication is the islam.ru website.[27] This, again, confirms that the origin of most fakes are Russian-language websites. The original publication provides several recipes purporting to be effective not only against COVID-19, but also against all types of flu, including swine flu, avian flu, etc. Ginger, cumin and *Hijama*[28] are also listed among these recipes.

The fake about Hijama was also relevant in Kyrgyzstan, but there was no verification of this information on fact-checking resources. This suggests that some of the "miraculous recipes" might have been derived from earlier fakes with religious motivations and, possibly, fraudulent purposes (in particular, to increase the sales of cumin).

27 — The online resource islam.ru is a Russian informational online portal aimed to cover the provisions of Islam and its social and cultural impact. It is one of the largest Islamic websites in Russian segment of Internet.

28 —Cupping therapy was actively used as a coronavirus treatment method, especially among believers. However, while investigating this topic, the participants of the CABAR.asia Media School's COVID-19 Documentary Filmmaking Workshop were unable to find an official refutation of the hijama's effectiveness against coronavirus, both from the health authorities and the country's clergy. More information: https://school.cabar.asia/ru/iwpr-provel-dvuhnedelnyj-trening-dlja-uchastnikov-vorkshopa-po-sozdaniju-dokumentalnyh-filmov/

THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

Most fakes in Uzbekistan concerned coronavirus treatment and prevention (38%), though a significant number also related to healthcare (19%). The most popular fakes about coronavirus treatments and prevention detailed the purported benefits of lemon, ginger and alcohol. One such fake, which encouraged spraying roads with chlorinated water, had a significant social impact. People washed roads, entrances to offices, and markets with chlorinated water through summer even though a practicing doctor refuted this method.[29] It should be noted that by November 2020, about $3 million of the Anti-Crisis Fund for Countering Coronavirus had been spent on disinfecting public places in Uzbekistan.

12% of the fakes covered topics related to government and politics. Their popularity was directly proportional to the unpopularity of government measures in countering the coronavirus. These fakes disseminated rumours about infections among families of state leaders or efforts to impose mask wearing. Others purported to detail those who engineered the virus. A fake claiming that masks caused hypoxia was widespread, and is still popular among many social media users. Comments on various posts attest to this. On March 26, 2020, legislation made failing to wear a mask a criminal act in Uzbekistan.[30]

29 — "Interview With Immunologist and Infectious Disease Specialist Aziza Khojaeva on the Nature of Immunity, Cytokine Storm, Quarantine and Chlorine", 20.07.2020: https://kun.uz/ru/news/2020/07/20/intervyu-s-immunologom-infeksionistom-azizoy-xodjayevoy-o-prirode-immuniteta-tsitokinovom-shtorme-karantine-i-xlorke
30 — "Moving around without masks is prohibited from March 23": https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2020/03/22/mask/
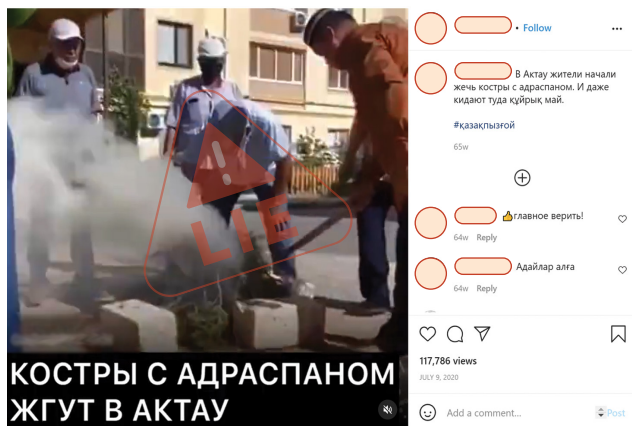
FORMAT AND GENRES

According to the results of our content analysis, most fakes in Central Asian countries took the form of an event update and included a photo. Users on social media sites and messaging services shared fakes that involved clickbait headlines or posts, text messages of one or two sentences, and/or audio/video messages.
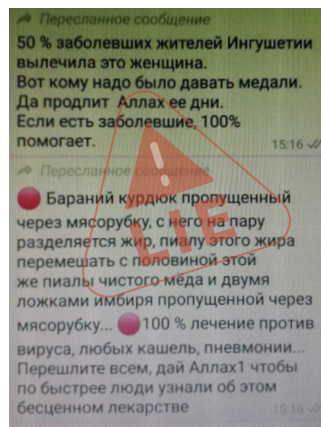
Visually, COVID-19 fakes mixed video and photo content with text, though our analysis revealed that the photos and videos rarely corresponded to the text. The photos and videos, however, usually provoked emotions indirectly referenced in the text.

For example, a video that showed some kind of liquid being sprayed to infect the population in Bishkek was in fact a video about disinfecting trees in Almaty. Fakes often used images of suffering patients and doctors in special protective equipment to illustrate 'news' about the coronavirus.

Not all fakes can be classified according to type, as is the case with a fake in Tajikistan entitled "Treatment Protocol for Patients with Suspected COVID-19 at the Outpatient Stage." It became very popular. A document included a table describing the main symptoms of the disease and a daily coronavirus treatment protocol, with strict requirements for taking certain drugs and avoiding others.

https://factcheck.kz/claim-checking/verdict/lozh-sobachij-i-barsuchij-zhiry-adraspan-kyst-al-xindi-i-xren-pomogayut-ot-koronavirusa/
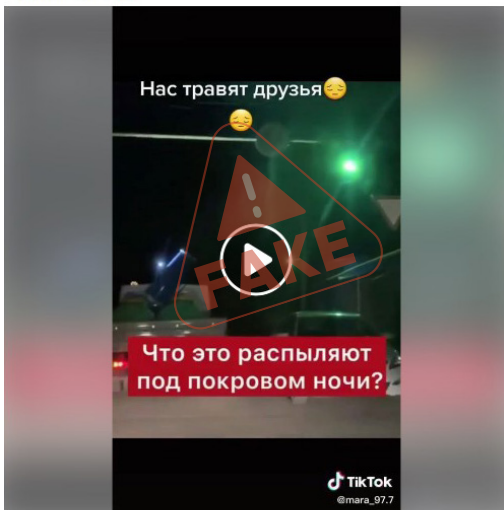
https://factcheck.kz/claim-checking/verdict/false/lozh-baranij-kurdyuk-propushhennyj-cherez-myasorubku-100-pomogaet-ot-koronavirusa/
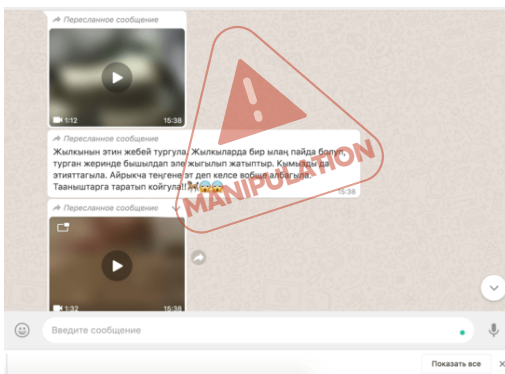
6 июля в 01:37 ·

ТАИНСТВЕННАЯ ОБРАБОТКА ГОРОДА НОЧЬЮ НЕИЗВЕСТНЫМ ВЕЩЕСТВОМ.
ЛЮДИ ПОДОЗРЕВАЮТ, ЧТО ИДЕТ ИСКУССТВЕННОЕ РАСПЫЛЕНИЕ КОРОНАВИРУСА

Нас травят друзья

Что это распыляют под покровом ночи?

TikTok
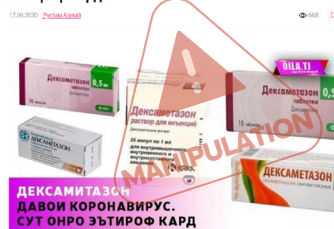@mara_97.7

180   Комментарии: 158 Поделились: 1,3 тыс.

https://factcheck.kg/raspylenie-neizvestnogo-veshhestva-po-nocham-eto-ne-v-kyrgyzstane/

https://factcheck.kg/ky/kyrgyz-ysyk-k%d3%a9ld%d3%a9-zhylkylardyn-oorugany-chyn-birok-alardan-koronavirus-anyktalgan-zhok/

Дексаметазон давои коронавирус. СУТ онро эътироф кард!

17.06.2020   Руслан Алиев   668

ДЕКСАМЕТАЗОН
ДАВОИ КОРОНАВИРУС.
СУТ ОНРО ЭЪТИРОФ КАРД

Олимони Британиё доруеро, ки сатхи марги мир аз бемории коронавирусро паст мекунад, пайдо карданд. Бастаи ин дору хамагӣ 5 фунт стерлинг (65 сомонӣ) нарх дорад

Созмони умумиҷахонии тандурустӣ аввалин санҷишҳои клиникӣ дар дороро дар Британия гузаронидааст.
"Санҷишҳо нишон додаанд, ки дорӯи "Дексаметазон" сатҳи марги миёни нафарони гирифтори COVID -19 паст мекунад,", - хабар медиҳад котиботи Созмони мазкур.

https://factcheck.tj/2020/07/06/dastkor-va-a-i-at-deksametazon-davoi-koronavirus-sut-onro-etirof-kard/

Авиган: табибони Чин доруи муассир алайҳи коронавирусро пайдо карданд

11:23 19.03.2020   12780
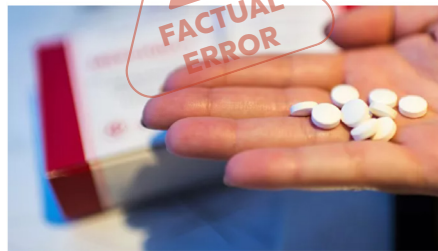
Гузаштан ба хазинаи акс

Тадқиқот аз ҷониби Маркази миллии рушди биотехнология гузаронида шудааст. Дар озмоиш 320 нафар сироятшуда иштирок карданд

ДУШАНБЕ, 19 мар   Пизишкони Чин доруи муассир алайҳи маризии коронавирусро пайдо намуданд, ки ин дору Авиган мебошад, хабар медиҳад шабакаи

https://factcheck.tj/2020/03/20/ishtibo-dar-dalel-avigan-tabiboni-chin-dorui-muassir-alaj-i-koronavirusro-pajdo-kardand/

Коронавирус в Кыргызстане: трупы в коридорах переполненных больниц и падающие люди на улицах ВИДЕО
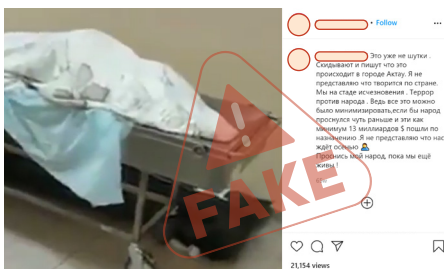
⊘ 06-июл, 08:07   ☐ Главная / АЗИЯ И МИР   ⊚ 2 855

В Узбекистане первая смерть от коронавируса умер мужчина

⊘ 17-мар, 07:42   ☐ Главная / УЗБЕКИСТАН   ⊚ 124 341

https://factcheck.tj/2020/03/18/fejk-nahustin-favt-dar-zbekiston-az-karonavirus/

https://factcheck.kz/v-mire/fejk-o-trupax-v-kyrgyzstanskom-morge-privyol-v-kazaxstan/

MECHANISMS AND CHANNELS OF DISTRIBUTION

To analyse the distribution channels of fakes', we collected data on the primary sources to which fact-checking platforms refer.

More than half of the materials submitted for verification in Kazakhstan (69%) and Kyrgyzstan (64%) were from social media and instant messengers (Table No.6), whereas most were from websites in the case of Tajikistan (57%). The figures in Uzbekistan are similar to those in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This is because most materials in the sample were taken from the fact-checking resources of these countries.

Table No.6. Distribution of Sources by Platform

● Social media
● Websites
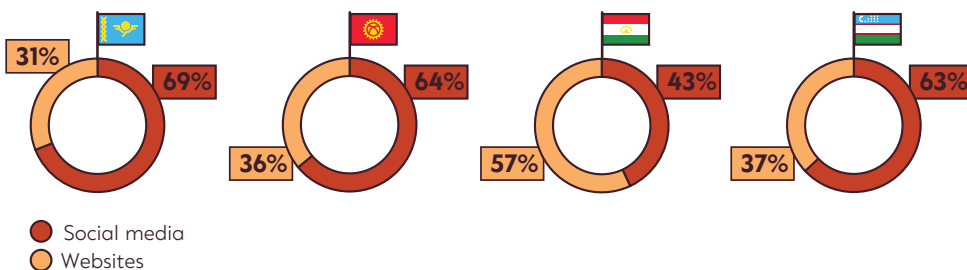
WEBSITES AS THE SOURCES OF FAKES

When looking at websites as the source of fakes in the region, we found that the absolute majority were Russian-language websites, including those positioning themselves as news media.

Given our analysis, we also assume that search engines such as Yandex, Mail.ru, or Google provide a possible *organic*[31] channel for the distribution of fake/unverified materials from '.ru' websites. Users do not normally disable news recommendations in search engines.

It is worth mentioning Asia-times.org, a Russian language website reporting on various issues in Central Asia, Iran and Iraq, which is a frequent source of fakes. The website can be included in any list as an origin point of COVID-19 fabrications. The headlines on fact-checking resources confirm the frequency with which fabrications originate on this site: "Another Fake from Asia Times. This Time, It Is About Deaths from the Coronavirus in Kyrgyzstan".

Our research also identified the local websites in each country that either republished fake material referring to a '.ru' source or that reprinted a false headline. In some cases, users built the entirety of their fakes from the clickbait headline of a '.ru' source.

A random search in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan identified several websites that republished fake materials. These are the blog http://usmonov.uz/?p=323 (currently not functioning), or the so-called 'garbage' websites (Xs.uz, Yuz.uz, Repost.uz, Oila.tj, Pressa.tj).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS SOURCES OF FAKES

Our content analysis showed that social media sites are reliable predictors of the distribution of unverified information about COVID-19. It also revealed that fears of new infections, and the absence of proven treatments, helped multiply false information about the virus's origins, symptoms, and prevention methods.

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others adopted numerous policies to identify and remove COVID-19 fakes. Uzbekistan[32] and Tajikistan[33] tightened local laws on distributing false information. This contributed to the removal of fakes but significantly complicated the work of research groups trying to identify channels of distribution and coverage.

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31 — Unpaid search results.
32 — Law on Amendments and Additions to the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes of the Republic of Uzbekistan and to the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Uzbekistan:
https://uza.uz/ru/posts/o-vnesenii-izmeneniy-i-dopolneniy-v-ugolovnyy-ugolovno-prots-26-03-2020
33 — Law on Amendments and Additions to the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Tajikistan as of July 4, 2020, № 1698 «Jumhuriyat», 07.07.2020 №: 124 — 125: https://khovar.tj/rus/2020/07/zakon-respubliki-tadzhikistan-o-vnesenii-izmenenij-i-dopolnenij-v-kodeks-ob-administrativnyh-pravonarusheniyah-respubliki-tadzhikistan/

We analysed the distribution of fakes on social media in the four countries by examining Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, YouTube and WhatsApp. Data on the coverage of instant messengers, as we have noted, remained unavailable.

Our analysis in Tajikistan revealed that Facebook was the most popular in terms of circulating fakes. Of the 30 materials we studied, 17 were found on Facebook, which is more than 50% of the total. Users published these posts on private accounts and in open and private groups. 5% were distributed via Telegram.

Facebook was also more popular for distributing fakes in Kazakhstan. The researchers explain this by noting that it is one of the most popular platforms in the country. Fakes are more visible to Facebook users (76% of shares) than to users of other social media sites.

STRUCTURE

Our analysis allows us to conclude that, in most cases, fakes can be recognised by a number of primary characteristics, including lack of time referencing and georeferencing.

The analysis also shows that fakes either fully comply with the structure of a news article, having all its components, or contain only certain elements.

At the same time, our analysis indicates that fakes lacking the structure or narrative of a news article become popular online more often. These are posts on social media with provocative short texts and a photo or video, or short text, audio, or video messages on instant messengers.

We have listed a number of characteristics below that are inherent to most of the fakes in our sample:

⚠️ Lack of time referencing and georeferencing. Very often, events that happened a long time ago are repackaged as 'new'. This is also typical of most 'zombie fakes'.

⚠️ Citing respected sources and experts without naming them: "*We visited a professor yesterday, he showed and told us…*", "*yesterday…*", "*personally…*", "*a specialist, doctor, professor…*", "*I will not reveal his name…*"

⚠️ Using the 40/60 Rule, in which 60% is real scientific data, such as listing characteristics of certain parts of the brain like the parietal, frontal, or occipital lobes, the hypothalamus, etc.

⚠️ Addressing readers in such a way that creates an atmosphere of trust: "*This video is for my friends and family*".

The presence of clickbait headlines mentioning global coronavirus problems and in-demand topics like virus treatment and prevention. These headlines also often play on, or manipulate, fears.

The photos and videos that are used rarely correspond to the text and are most often copied from other sources.

The backstory or the background in such materials may be partly reliable, although they will also include incorrect references, false elements, and manipulations of facts, events, and data.

A non-standard, intense message that uses emotive language to indicate the importance of the information: *"impossible"*, *"important"*, *"global lie"*, *"to survive"*.

Using exaggerated emotionality, all caps, rhetorical questions and exclamations to indicate the emotional state of the author and the importance of information: *"CREATING A VACCINE AGAINST THE VIRUS !!! IMPOSSIBLE !!! THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT!!!"*, *"Where do you find oxygen? And where do you put carbon dioxide?"*, *"Why don't doctors talk about the fact that it is impossible to breathe through it? Because they are killing us! This is genocide!"*

Using overly encouraging or frightening quotes and phrases: *"after four days… a negative diagnosis and fully recovered"*, *"the doctor thinks… useful for treating the coronavirus"*, *"the first medicine … reduces mortality…"*, or *"the deaths of two high-ranking employees… was taken… under strict control… all schoolchildren …. infected with coronavirus… are quarantined…"*

The material's structure is formal and brief in order to lead readers to the desired conclusion.

Some materials contain defamatory context and hate speech.

The linguistic style of fakes is often informal, with colloquial expressions and grammatical or punctuation errors.

There are appeals or calls to action: *"Please help us distribute this video: like, comment, save and send to all people still wearing masks"*.

POPULAR FAKES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

In Kazakhstan, fakes about self-treatment involving adyraspan were the most popular.

Adyraspan (péganum hármala) is a perennial herbaceous plant that grows in the salinized soils, hills, and steppes of Central Asia. In Eastern antiquity, many peoples considered adyraspan a sacred plant and believed it cured dozens of diseases, scared away evil spirits, revealed psychic abilities, and brought good luck. Kazakhstanis and others still consider it a sacred herb. Some people hang dry stems on front doors to protect the home against spells and the evil eye. Others fumigate homes with it, believing that its smoke kills various viruses, or make herbal teas from it to treat various diseases.

Posts about the healing powers of adyraspan gained more than 150 thousand views during the pandemic and more than 700 comments. The comments indicate that social media users employ adyraspan as a disinfectant and for virus prevention. There was much discussion of price increases for adyraspan. 99% of these comments were in Kazakh.

Below is a different example, a comment in which the user ties the pandemic to conspiracy theories:

"This virus appeared for a reason, there is a lot of money changing hands; virologists, biologists and IT specialists need to take joint preventive measures, it is necessary to destroy all equipment, starting with 3G, and only then will this nightmare end".

Users shared most of these fakes in both text and video formats. They were primarily in Kazakh.

According to our analysis, these fakes owe their popularity to what is termed 'post-truth'[34], a situation in which people panic and fail to think critically; it also involves trusting in the existence of panaceas. It is the same with all self-treatments: people interpret information about ginger, garlic or sheep and dog fat in light of well-known and comprehensible value systems (they fit them into what they already know).

At the same time, we should not forget that various preventive measures, including ginger and garlic, and even swimming, were promoted despite having no basis in fact.

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34 — The term 'post-truth' denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. // 'Post-truth' was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year: https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-37995176

THE CASE OF KYRGYZSTAN

The most widespread fakes on Kyrgyz social media involved video messages with short emotional texts meant to incite panic and fear, e.g., fabrications about horse infections in Issyk-Kul or unknown liquids supposedly used at night.

A post by a Kyrgyz journalist on Facebook about this liquid had 1,500 shares, 221 comments and 270 different reactions. It spread widely in many countries and in different languages, and can be situated in the category of 'international fakes'.

Its important features are the absence of references to time or place. Users disseminated the fakes on messengers, using both text in the past tense ("they were spraying") and in the indefinite future ("today/tomorrow they will spray"). It is also an example of a type of fake in which neither the photos nor videos have anything to do with the content. It is worth noting the conspiratorial and discrediting components of these fakes, which are observable in the texts that accompany them: "people suspect that this is an artificial spreading of the virus", etc.

This information continued to spread through mid-July 2020 even though authorities in each country and many fact-checking resources disproved or denied it.

In comments to "Novaya Gazeta", the anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova noted that these fakes emerged and became popular because of "distrust in government institutions and the power of close relations".[35] Messages forwarded from friends, in other words, had and continue to have more impact than official statements. Pavel Bannikov, the editor of the Factcheck.kz resource,[36] confirms this, stating that widespread distrust means that people "tend to believe almost everything they receive via their personal channels, and these are, first of all, instant messengers".

The fake involving equine infections in Issyk-Kul was created on the basis of a real video; it had more than 4 thousand views, 100 reposts, and 90 comments on Facebook and Instagram.[37] The news about horse illnesses in the Issyk-Kul region turned out to be true, though the illness had nothing to do with the coronavirus.

The way this was presented, and its mechanism of distribution, is typical of many fabrications meant to sow panic, undermine stability, or discredit state efforts to contain the coronavirus. The main feature of these fakes is that they combine elements of truth (in this case, the video was authentic, though the horses were not being treated for COVID-19) with distorted interpretations. The posts about the WHO, in which almost all the statements were inaccurate or distorted, are also a vivid example.

35 — "A Virus That Flies in the Night. Why Are the Rumors About Disinfection From Helicopters So Popular?":
https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/03/18/84382-virus-letyaschiy-na-krylyah-nochi
36 — "Fake News on the Coronavirus Pandemic: What Do Central Asians Believe in?":
https://cabar.asia/ru/fejki-na-fone-pandemii-koronavirusa-vo-chto-veryat-zhiteli-tsentralnoj-azii
37 — This is data from the open social media only; the coverage in messengers is unknown.

THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

Fakes popular in Tajikistan involve the interpretation and reposting of international studies.

As an example, we uncovered fabrications about Chinese doctors inventing treatments against the coronavirus; they gained more than 12 thousand views and 100 comments on social media. There were also fakes related to dexamethasone, with several news agencies in Tajikistan (Sputnik-tj.com, Dialog.tj, Pressa.tj) republishing these.

The first news that Sputnik-tj.com published about the doctors contained factual errors, interpretation errors, and a distorted title. The drug discovered by Chinese doctors had been invented in Japan in 2014. The Chinese Ministry of Health did in fact report that the use of certain drugs and treatment methods had yielded results, though these drugs were never approved or accepted as effective treatments against COVID-19.

In the case of dexamethasone, all the media sites that republished information about it, used clickbait headlines to attract readers, though none of these were true. At the same time, the first paragraph of the material contained specific figures – the cost of the drug – from WHO statements but also distorted elements of these statements. The WHO never confirmed this drug as the primary treatment measure against the coronavirus.

Using these and similar fakes, we were able to identify the common features of fakes that incorporate research data. These include, first of all, clickbait or provocative headlines, which increase the popularity of the material. In addition, there is distortion of the truth or incomplete information, including inaccurate translation from other languages.

Factcheck.kz provides a summary of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) report[38] on the preprints of research and scientific experiments,[39] we recommend that all journalists and bloggers study this.

38 —What We're Reading: Tools for Investigating Coronavirus Fakes and Disinformation //April 3, 2020:
https://gijn.org/2020/04/03/what-were-reading-tools-for-investigating-coronavirus-fakes-and-disinformation/
39 — "Everything You Need to Know about Scientific Studies' Preprints" // 06.04.2020:
https://factcheck.kz/nauka/chto-nado-znat-o-preprintax-nauchnyx-statej/

THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

Some of the most popular fakes in Uzbek social media revolved around coronavirus deaths, including the first death from the virus in March 2020. This material was first published on the Asia-times.org website and became popular in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It had more than 120 thousand views on this site alone, excluding coverage on social media and instant messengers.

Another fake involving corpses — purportedly found in black bags — provoked widespread discussion in Uzbekistan and alarm among the population. As it turned out, a similar fake, this time about Kyrgyzstan, was published on the same Asia-times.org website. Fact-checkers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan later revealed[40] that this fake was spread by a user from Kazakhstan; it is possible it appeared long before and may have been previously published in other sources in the countries of the CIS.

In both cases, the Ministry of Health refuted the information in media and Telegram channels. Researchers did not find Uzbek versions of either fake on social media, presumably because they were deleted from groups and channels on social media after the introduction of criminal liability for distributing false information about COVID-19.

40— "Fake About Corpses in Kyrgyz Morgue Has Kazakh Origins":
https://factcheck.kz/v-mire/fejk-o-trupax-v-kyrgyzstanskom-morge-privyol-v-kazaxstan/

FINDINGS

BY KEY FEATURES:

According to our analysis, the majority of COVID-19 fakes in all countries were rated as "Lies", that is, as being completely falsified.

By topic, most confirmed fakes revolve around self-treatment and coronavirus prevention, with these comprising 26% of fakes in Kyrgyzstan and 40% in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan had the most fakes involving conspiracy theories at 26%, though they also made up 19% of fakes in Uzbekistan. Fakes involving state and national policies dominated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; these were generally international fakes that referred to measures taken abroad (additional payments to doctors or free access to Internet), as well as to quarantine measures and treatments in other countries (e.g. Sweden, Singapore, etc.).

Our analysis reveals that "miraculous recipe" fakes prevail in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Table No.3). These are directly related to fakes on the topic of self-treatment and coronavirus prevention.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, fakes containing destabilising or panic-inducing messages dominate. These are fakes derived from various conspiracy theories and healthcare materials, particularly those about deaths. Factcheck.kz carried out a detailed analysis of global fakes involving conspiracy theories. The most popular fakes were intended to sow panic, undermine stability, or discredit someone.

The international fakes rank higher in number of shares when compared to country fakes. Among other factors, this results from the fact that many fakes change in transit to different countries. It may also be because country fakes are easier to trace than international ones. At the same time, inaccuracies in the statements of authorities/organisations may be the reason country fakes appear.

It should be noted that the primary sources of most fakes in our sample were texts in the Russian language and/or published on '.ru' websites.[41]

Accordingly, fakes in Central Asian social media are generally derived from Russian-language sources, regardless of where they initially appear.

41— For more information about distribution channels, see the section "Mechanisms and Channels of Distribution".

In terms of format, fakes appeared mostly as event updates or as commentary – as a short text or title or as a text, video, or audio message. The least commonly used formats were reports and storytelling. Visual components rarely played a key role in the popularity of fakes. At the same time, we found that visual components do not play a key role in the popularity of fakes, since fakes are repackaged for different channels, and in different ways. The same fake could be found as a text only, as a text with photos, or as a video in different sources. The photos and videos that fakes use had little relation to the text, or, in other words, were completely falsified.

BY MECHANISMS AND CHANNELS OF DISTRIBUTION:

Even though fact-checking resources regularly refute fakes, and despite the fact that social media sites monitor, report, and delete them, our research found 465 sources where the fakes were still available.

Most of the fakes examined in the course of this research appeared on social media sites, though there were also fakes on websites in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that positioned themselves as news media.

Facebook was the primary social media platform for disseminating disinformation in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whereas Telegram dominated in Uzbekistan. Users, followed by groups and pages, most commonly shared fakes.

BY STRUCTURE:

Our analysis allows us to conclude that most fakes have a number of identifying characteristics, such as:
- a "clickbait" title or a title meant to draw attention
- a lack of georeferencing and time referencing
- exaggerated emotionality
- numerous rhetorical questions and exclamations
- appeals to conspiracy theories and calls to action
- allusions to 'respected' sources and experts that are not named or identified

At the same time, our analysis indicates that fakes lacking the structure or narrative of a news article become popular online more. These are the posts on social media with provocative short texts with a photo or video on social media, or short text, audio, or video messages on instant messengers.

The characteristics of the most distributed fakes were identified in this manner. Fakes were most popular when:

- the inaccurate information came from foreign countries or when it discussed other countries;
- the information was completely falsified, i.e., it was a fake or manipulation;
- the information was related to coronavirus treatment or to the activities of governments, ministries, and international institutions (such as the WHO);
- by type or purpose, the material was meant to distort information, to spread rumours or half-truths, or to discredit the status or professionalism of a person or institution.

The research team identified three main stages in the integration and actualisation of fakes:

1. Fakes evoked similar feelings (fear, panic, shame, and sometimes relief) and an emotional response (call to action).
2. The fakes appeared as reposts numerous times on social media, and as a result, earned a certain degree of trust among people.
3. Certain people, including influencers, the famous, and various interest groups, disseminated and published the information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO GOVERNMENT BODIES:

- a lack of official, reliable and verified information is the main cause of what is termed an "infodemic," which, in this context, is the rapid proliferation of true and false information about the COVID-19 pandemic;
- verified information from reliable sources is essential to safeguard progress and to ensure the development of democracy, science, and healthcare and to ensure public trust in government's policies and programmes, including on vaccination
- one of the most effective tools in countering viral fakes is increased media literacy and critical thinking among the population.

TO MEDIA:

- to adhere to professional and ethical standards;
- to avoid publication of unverified information;
- to avoid information that may engage some audiences but which does not meet the interests of society as a whole;
- to constantly analyse materials from fact-checking resources;
- to cooperate with local and international fact-checking resources;

- to regularly check, delete, or block materials on your website if the inaccuracy is revealed;
- to compile a list of websites NOT recommended for reposting news;
- to maintain the accuracy of statements, especially headlines;
- when republishing, to pay close attention to any materials claiming to represent the results of experiments and research;
- to better editorial policy through consultations with experts, who can explain to journalists the specifics of certain studies and data;

To fact-checking resources:
- to build the potential of future fact-checkers, and to attract active students and bloggers to participate in efforts to verify online information.

TO JOURNALISM FACULTIES:

- revealing the key features of fakes and their widespread distribution will help journalists, bloggers, teachers, and students of journalism faculties identify fakes and provide them tools to do this;
- to incorporate fact-checking into the curriculum of future journalists;
- as part of future training, to familiarise journalists with photo and video verification tools and resources;
- to introduce practical assignments for students in analysing and exposing fakes.

TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS/DONORS:

- to assist in creating a fact-checking resource in Uzbekistan to track the features of common fakes in this media environment;
- to support fact-checking resources: help fact-checkers develop professionally by providing training.

FEEDBACK OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

As the research process was specifically designed to improve the practical skills of students and tutors of university journalism faculties on fact checking and combating disinformation, using the 'learning-by-doing' method, IWPR CA have gathered some feedback from the research participants below.

"I have been a trainer in the field of media literacy for a long time. During training, we analyse the development of critical thinking together with students and the basics of fact-checking. Because of this, it was very interesting to participate in a research analysing fakes in our country. The pandemic caused an explosion of fake information. The main reason is fear, both of the disease and of an uncertain future amid the economic crises and losses that the spread of the virus has caused.

Working with a team of professionals helped me gain experience in conducting this kind of research; the results we obtained gave me an understanding of the processes informing the distribution and transformation of fakes. It is too bad that there is no way to analyse messengers — WhatsApp, for example — since, in my opinion, people share information more actively via messengers.

In general, the analysis gave me an understanding of the importance and possibilities of further research. I think that the results of the research need to be reported; more than that, they must be published in academic journals, since they are of high importance for the development of a number of humanitarian sciences".

Maral Aitmagambetova,
Senior Lecturer
Innovative University of Eurasia;
Pavlodar, Kazakhstan

"Participation in this research helped me to better understand fakes. The sessions conducted by professional speakers taught me how to search information online, how to find fakes on social media and analyse them. It was also interesting to participate in a research in which other Central Asian countries participated. For me, the teamwork was useful, because it helped me understand the whole process faster, and if I had any questions, the team helped and guided me.

The main conclusion I made from this research is that people can believe anything. So many men, so many minds. No matter what fake appears, there will always be a person who believes in it, and this sometimes ends badly. It is, therefore, very important to expose fake news and to tell the truth, and to not mislead people or confuse or frighten them.

However, I know that three things cannot be hidden: the sun, the moon and the truth, so every fake will be exposed sooner or later".

Aruzhan Zhakupova,
third-year student
A.Baitursynov Kostanay State University;
Kazakhstan

"Our team from Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University conducted research on COVID-19 fakes in Central Asia. During the sampling process, undergraduate students analysed the fakes that spread on social media from February to October 2020. This research was useful for them, as they saw how fakes went viral and reached a wide audience. This research demonstrated how difficult it is for an inexperienced user to identify fakes and disinformation.

For the undergraduate students and teachers at the Journalism Faculty, the analysis of fakes revealed how fakes and disinformation are distributed and reinforced the need to check facts and use critical thinking when analysing messages for their reliability and truthfulness. We need to improve media literacy among young people".

Aita Sultanalieva,
Associate Professor
Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University;
Kyrgyzstan

"I had been almost everywhere in my search for "clues"... News agencies, groups, forums of different kinds; I even watched video broadcasts of an astrologer and fans of the conspiracy theory "The West is creating these diseases, and the State Department together with the Freemasons are doing it". I began understanding the psychology of a person who posts fakes and distributes them. Now, after your lessons on finding information online, I can easily find anything I need or at least an alternative version. Thank you very much".

Zhakshylyk Saparbaev
first-year Master's student
Kyrgyz National University;
Kyrgyzstan

"I learned to analyse and recognise fakes: where the fakes are distributed, on which social media, how many likes and comments they gain, and the opinions of Internet users about them. I want to share the findings with my fellow students and to teach them to analyse fakes. I will study more and also read more and do more research about fakes. In addition, I will save all the fakes that I find and check them".

Umed Uzokov,
second-year student
Khujand State University named after B.Gafurov;
Tajiksitan

"I have worked as a journalist for four years, and in my work, I often have to research various topics and societal problems. However, I should note that this research enriched my knowledge and skills. Previously, I worked with text search engines too, but within a specific website. This research helped me to gain experience with different ways of searching texts, especially those on social media. Of course, I had experience with fact-checking before, but in this research, I learned to treat fact-checking seriously and to check the facts even better. My skills in working with text and photo search engines have improved.

During this research, I learned to identify fakes, learned about their features, and learned how to work with multiple sources. I want to share this information with my colleagues; they also need to learn and study this".

Maftuna Ismailova,
second-year Master's student
Khujand State University named after B.Gafurov;
Tajiksitan

"I realised that I needed to be more precise when searching for fakes and to do more research as a journalist. I will use this experience in my articles. I used to ignore it, but now, I look into every detail. After this experience, I plan to write a series of books and articles on fakes. The reason is that I realised that identifying fakes is very important for a journalist. Such disinformation causes any number of misunderstandings in society".

Madina Khan Nurutdinova,
PhD in Philology,
Lecturer at the University of Journalism and Mass Communication,
journalist and translator of oriental languages;
Uzbekistan

"This research gave me an understanding and knowledge of fact-checking. Before this research, I, like everyone else, believed in some fakes. You know, I really like this sphere. I really want to engage in fact-checking.

Thanks to this research, I became familiar with the website poynter.org. Since I have learned to work with this website, I will now carefully check the news at Poynter. I would very much like Uzbekistan to have a fact-checking website to identify fakes".

Fotima Chorieva,
fourth-year student
Uzbekistan State University of World Languages;
Uzbekistan

"Hello everyone! I had never participated in research projects like this before, and, to be honest, I really liked it. I learned a lot during this research, for example, including how to work with information. In practice, we work a lot with political information, but I did not know how to check it. We will be more careful now. Thank you for this research project!"

Bekpulat Khudoyberganov,
fourth-year student
Uzbekistan State University of World Languages;
Uzbekistan

GLOSSARY

COVID-19

(Coronavirus Disease 2019) — highly contagious respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (2019-nCoV).

5G

(Fifth Generation) — the fifth-generation mobile network operating on the basis of telecommunication standards 5G/IMT-2020, the planned successor to existing 4G/IMT-Advanced standards. A new generation technology standard.

Fake

— "forgery", "fraud", "fabrication", "imitation". 'Fake' is consistently used as a synonym for unverified and false information.

Bot

— short for "robot". Many processes online are performed by bots, and not real people. The bot can send hundreds of emails in a short time, play online games with us, and even help to earn money.

Infodemic

— a new concept that first appeared in the World Health Organisation's report on February 2, 2020. It is created by combining the words 'information' and 'epidemic'. It refers to the rapid false information during the COVID-19 pandemic;

Clickbait

— web content with provocative headlines, lies or attractive images that is meant to draw attention on social media and to encourage visitors to click on a link and to share the information online.

Content Analysis

— a qualitative and quantitative method for studying large quantities of textual data and media products in order to identify formalised categories and features of social significance.

Critical Thinking

— a person's ability to question informatio, assertions, and even their own beliefs.

Media criticism

— a critical analysis and evaluation of the media and media products for their impact on society and social processes.

Post-Truth — circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

Social Media — online resources that ensure the connection between people and groups, even when they are far away from each other.

Fact-Checking — a process of verifying factual information in media and academic texts and a procedure for assessing their reliability and truthfulness.

Emotive Language — a word choice used to evoke a certain emotional response, to incite a person to do something, to satisfy a request, or to create a subjective impression.

Hate Speech — any form of negative expressions and visual content in media that are considered unpleasant and offensive for representatives of any ethnic, religious, gender or social group.