PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE TO PROPAGANDA IN THE CONTEMPORARY INFORMATION SPACE*

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of psychological resilience to propaganda in the contemporary information space, with particular emphasis on digital platforms, which represent key channels in the distribution of propagandistic and manipulative messages. The transformation of communication channels has led to a change in the nature of propagandistic activity, which has become participatory, decentralized, and algorithmically supported, thereby significantly increasing its reach and impact. The paper considers the basic theoretical characteristics of propaganda, disinformation, and contemporary forms of manipulation, as well as the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals and communities to defend themselves against propagandistic influences. Special emphasis is placed on a theoretical overview of cognitive and socio-affective individual psychological factors that contribute to resilience to propaganda, as well as on collective resilience factors, given that psychological resilience, particularly in the contemporary information space, does not depend exclusively on individual characteristics but also on the broader social environment. The paper examines the characteristics of inoculation theories in the context of strengthening psychological resilience through the development of individual and collective capacities for recognizing and rejecting persuasive messages. The paper emphasizes that inoculation mechanisms, based on the principle of "cognitive immunization," represent an effective form of preventive action that enables the creation of psychological protection mechanisms against propaganda-related influence. In the conclusion, the significance of defensive psychological resilience in contemporary information conflicts is considered, particularly in the military context, where propaganda can undermine morale, cohesion, and trust in com-

mand structures. The need to integrate media and digital literacy training into military education and training programs is highlighted, in order to increase readiness for action in conditions of information warfare.

Key words: *psychological resilience, propaganda, manipulation, disinformation, information warfare, digital platforms, media literacy, inoculation theory*

Introduction

Propagandistic activity in contemporary information warfare occupies a central position, given that digital media have enabled the rapid and mass dissemination of content across an almost unlimited internet space. The development of digital media, followed by their transformation through social networks, has opened space for more intensive propaganda-related activity that encompasses various aspects of social life. With the development of digital technologies, global connectivity, and social media platforms, propaganda has become an integral part of so-called information warfare, in which military, political, economic, and informational instruments intertwine (Proroković & Parezanović, 2023).

In the contemporary environment, information warfare increasingly takes the form of a struggle for dominance in the information space. Its important objectives include actions directed at the opponent's sources of information, as well as changing the way the opposing side thinks, both in the military sphere and in the broader social context (Miljković et al., 2022). Since propaganda significantly influences the outcomes of these struggles, it is necessary to clarify its basic characteristics in order to understand its importance in the context of the contemporary era.

According to Roth (2010), propaganda can be viewed as a specific form of communication and message transmission aimed at inducing changes in the behavior of those at whom propaganda is directed. In other words, propaganda represents a form of communication that conveys certain ideas, attitudes, and opinions in order to influence recipients and shape their beliefs, seeking to win them over. A more contemporary definition of propaganda states that it is a "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognition, and direct behavior in order to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 7).

Throughout history, the term propaganda did not carry a negative connotation until the First World War, when it began to be used in public discourse to denote manipulation and deception of the public (McCluskey et al., 2023). According to some authors, propaganda became synonymous with manipulation or deception primarily because of the morally questionable methods that were used over time to disseminate information, beliefs, or doctrines, particularly in the period following the world wars. Propaganda is often viewed primarily as media manipulation aimed at achieving social control in a political sense, since it is most commonly associated with the activities of governments, political parties, and various organizations (Moravčíková, 2020). This perception has been further reinforced by the fact that propagandistic activity has often accompanied certain violent actions and the use of force during periods of political

and wartime upheaval (Şutiu, 2012), representing one of the instruments for achieving military objectives and manipulating the intensity of combat morale (Čabarkapa, 2007), which remains the case today.

Such a development of the concept of propaganda has led to the emergence of numerous classifications, among which the most frequently highlighted in the literature is the division into white, black, and gray propaganda, which is still widely applied today, particularly in the context of hybrid and various forms of psychological warfare (Gaćinović, 2012). White propaganda is based on the open, public presentation of information, the source of which is clearly identifiable and legitimate, and whose content is largely accurate and objective, although it may be selectively presented (Gaćinović, 2012). Black propaganda refers to information originating from concealed or false sources, as well as completely fabricated or falsified information. Such information aims to deceive the audience by concealing the actual sources and motives (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015); the goal of this type of information dissemination is for the audience to remain unaware of the manipulation, that is, not to know who stands behind the messages, while believing the content to be legitimate, thereby granting the messages greater persuasive power and making their verification and contestation more difficult. Finally, gray propaganda represents a phenomenon between white and black propaganda, involving the dissemination of partially accurate or distorted information. These messages are difficult to verify because they combine true and false elements, while the sources behind them remain unclear. The objective of gray propaganda is to create uncertainty and confusion among the audience regarding the content, thereby increasing the influence of the propagandist and making it more difficult to challenge the conveyed messages (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015; Gaćinović, 2012). It can be said that contemporary propaganda is predominantly based on the principles of gray propaganda, due to the specific nature of the digital environment in which it operates, which will be discussed further.

With regard to the use of propaganda in modern conflicts, technical and technological development has led to the necessary transformation of their character. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly conducted in the informational domain, in which unarmed, informational and propagandistic content assumes an almost central role and becomes one of the key instruments of action (Vuletić, 2018). In parallel with the evolution of modes of warfare, propagandistic methods have also advanced, adapting to contemporary technical and technological conditions. For this reason, propaganda-related content and activities today should not be viewed solely within the traditional framework of political or military action; rather, these activities encompass not only classical propaganda methods but also economic and political pressures, thereby making propaganda a key element of information warfare strategy and enabling the manipulation of perceptions, beliefs, and behavior of target groups (Vučinić, 2017).

Modern propaganda, including specific psychological–propagandistic activities, is not limited solely to the dissemination of messages but may encompass an entire spectrum of actions aimed at shaping the perceptions and behavior of target groups—for example, activities such as various forms of pressure (economic or political) often possess a pronounced psychological component in order to exert additional influence on the psychological states of state actors and individuals (Vučinić, 2017). In this

context, according to Alispahić, propaganda can be viewed as an effective system of endangering and destroying an enemy that does not exist in a physical or material form, but rather in an abstract, invisible, and elusive one (Alispahić, 2020, p. 75).

Understanding these processes enables a clearer insight into the ways in which propagandistic strategies are integrated into broader psychological–propagandistic activities, thereby opening space for a theoretical analysis of their operation in contemporary digital media and communication environments. For this reason, within this paper, the term propaganda will be used in a general sense, that is, as any deliberate effort to convey a particular message or attitude to the widest possible audience (Sela et al., 2025, p. 2). Following the theoretical overview of the concept of propaganda, an analysis of the modes of its dissemination in contemporary communication conditions is presented, given that digital spaces have conditioned the emergence of key differences in comparison to traditional models of its transmission.

The Dissemination of Propaganda in the Contemporary Information Space

Propaganda-related activity has always required certain means and channels capable of broadly transmitting and "implanting" appropriate messages into the "hearts and minds" of target populations, whether domestic, friendly, allied, or (most often) enemy peoples (Alispahić, 2020). The evolution of propagandistic techniques, as well as their application, demonstrates that propaganda cannot be viewed outside the social and technological context in which it emerges. Whereas in the past the means of message dissemination were limited and controlled by the state or religious institutions, in the contemporary digital environment they have become more decentralized, significantly faster, and far more difficult in terms of identifying their true sources and intentions.

The rapid development of information technologies, combined with the influence of social networks, has significantly facilitated the implementation of propaganda and various psychological–propagandistic activities. The introduction of new information technologies has contributed to the formation of a complex information environment that encompasses not only physical and virtual components (such as infrastructure, communication networks, rules, and processes) but also a cognitive dimension, that is, the sphere of human perception, understanding, and information processing. This practically means that the contemporary information space includes not only information as such but also the way in which it is understood and interpreted, that is, the manner in which it influences attitudes, emotions, and behavior (NATO, 2023, AJP-10.1). The contemporary information space therefore represents a specific communication environment that possesses the capacity to shape individual decision-making as well as to construct social narratives, which is indeed one of the key tasks of propagandistic messages (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015).

The dissemination of propaganda in the contemporary digital space has a markedly different character compared to traditional forms. Social media platforms have led to a transformation of communication models, reflected in the loss of a clear boundary

between senders and receivers of information, that is, between propagandists and the target audience (Lewandowsky, 2022). Instead of static and passive recipients of messages, users of these platforms have become so-called prosumers, who simultaneously receive messages while actively participating in their production and further distribution. This aspect is of fundamental importance for online propaganda, as it transforms message recipients into active participants in the propagandistic process, as a result of which propaganda, in comparison with its traditional form, becomes participatory and seeks to engage the target audience in the active dissemination of its messages (Wanless & Berk, 2022).

The characteristic of participation has led to a shift in the understanding of contemporary propaganda, and the scholarly literature increasingly refers to the concept of participatory propaganda, through which traditional definitions of propaganda are adapted to the contemporary technological and communicative capacities of the digital age, given that propagandistic activity has acquired new dimensions, reach, and influence (Wanless & Berk, 2022). Active participation in the process of message dissemination within the information space is further facilitated by the fact that almost all existing digital network platforms are easily accessible and designed to be user-friendly, while at the same time functioning as both a "lure" and a "target" for certain, specifically defined user groups (Carr, Cuervo Sanchez, & Daros, 2020). It should be emphasized that the idea of audience participation in the dissemination of propaganda is not new; however, in the contemporary digital environment there has been a change in power relations among actors. Namely, although strategies of propaganda dissemination continue to spread "top-down," that is, from influential actors and organizations toward the broader public, the contemporary environment exploits the phenomenon of participation in order to encourage audiences and media to react actively, thereby further disseminating, amplifying, and legitimizing messages through the participation of users themselves (Briant, 2024; Lewandowsky, 2022).

Participatory propaganda enables the establishment of dominance in the information space, as it is based on the distribution of messages that spread through the actions of real users as well as automated accounts (so-called bots), thereby deliberately blurring the boundary between false and authentic content and making their differentiation more difficult (Wanless & Berk, 2022). Finally, another important characteristic of participation on digital networks is reflected in the possibility of social engagement, which provides users with a psychologically rewarding and socially acceptable opportunity to participate in online activities; namely, participation creates a sense of directly influencing important social issues. It is important to note that this form of participation requires minimal effort, which further increases the likelihood of engagement and content dissemination. Although this sense is most often superficial and illusory in nature, it represents one of the main motivations for the transition from the passive role of message recipients to active participants in their dissemination, which directly enables propagandists to more effectively amplify their messages, obscure their sources, and increase their acceptance among the wider public (Wanless & Berk, 2022).

Digital networks play a key role in the information space, serving primarily as channels for message distribution, but not merely as passive transmitters—through them,

messages are shaped, adapted, and further amplified in order to exert influence on target audiences. Various digital network platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and others, represent fertile ground for the placement and processing of messages, which may originate from different actors, whether known or anonymous. According to Tadić (2025), the aforementioned social networks have become the main channels for the dissemination of contemporary propaganda, which largely takes place through the spread of disinformation and fake news, the publication of fabricated content, as well as false "testimonies" of individuals and groups.

What makes these platforms suitable for the placement of propagandistic and manipulative messages is the use of specialized digital tools, algorithmic systems, and bots, which can automatically disseminate predefined content as well as target specific user groups or territories, thereby significantly increasing the reach and impact of propagandistic messages in the digital space (Sela et al., 2025). Another advantage of automation in message dissemination lies in the fact that, in addition to improving distribution efficiency, it allows propagandists to remain anonymous throughout the entire communication process, which is a key aspect of concealing not only their identities but also their true intentions (Nerino, 2023). The lack of clear authorship and control creates fertile ground for the spread of false or manipulative content, as identifying the original creator is often very difficult or even impossible (Usher & Carlson, 2018).

These processes significantly undermine the quality of public information, contribute to the formation of alternative sources of information, and encourage the gathering of individuals into closed online communities, within which the capacity for critical assessment of reality is considerably limited (Bubanja, 2024). This represents one of the main challenges posed by digital media and social networks—namely, the increasingly intensive spread of disinformation and deception, which are often viewed as part of propaganda-related activity aimed at shaping audience attitudes and behavior.

In the contemporary era, disinformation has been recognized as a significant social and security challenge. According to the Global Risks Report 2025 of the World Economic Forum, disinformation and misinformation, together with social polarization, continue to represent key contemporary risks, ranking fourth and fifth on the global list, respectively (World Economic Forum, 2025). Such a high ranking is not surprising given the accelerated spread of false and misleading content, which further amplifies other leading risks faced by contemporary societies, including armed conflicts and extreme weather events.

Disinformation represents a complex and evolving concept that changes depending on the involvement of various actors, as well as on new techniques and technologies for the production and dissemination of falsehoods and manipulations, particularly within the information space. In order to understand the complexity of this phenomenon, it is first necessary to operationalize the concept of disinformation and distinguish it from related forms that are often used in parallel, despite referring to different phenomena. To introduce clarity into the terminology, under the auspices of the Council of Europe a conceptual framework was defined in which this phenomenon is referred to as information disorders, within which three basic types are classified: disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. This classification takes into account

the dimensions of harm and inaccuracy, on the basis of which the main differences between these concepts are described.

Disinformation refers to deliberately created false information intended to cause harm to an individual, a social group, an organization, or a state (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), and according to some interpretations represents the smallest unit in the chain of propaganda dissemination (Kazić, 2025, p. 106). Disinformation can also be considered a form of propaganda when it is used to achieve political, economic, or military objectives, regardless of whether it is supported by official institutions or not (van der Linden, 2023; Majchrzak, 2023).

Misinformation also consists of inaccurate information, but information that is shared without the intention to cause harm. It represents a milder form of incorrect information, most often shared under the belief that its dissemination may be useful or informative to others (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Such information often appears credible and reliable, yet is the result of misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Misinformation also includes accidental journalistic errors, such as incorrectly reported dates.

Finally, the third concept refers to malinformation. These are information based on true and factual data but used with the intention to cause harm to individuals, organizations, or states (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For this type of information, the term malicious information may be used, as it involves a direct and deliberate intent to cause harm.

We consider it important to mention another significant term that frequently appears in the scholarly literature, namely fake news. The use of this term has experienced a sharp increase in public discourse, to such an extent that it was designated the "word of the year" by the Collins Dictionary in 2017. Given that the heterogeneity of meanings and the breadth of usage of the term exceed the scope of this paper, a more recent definition will be adopted, according to which fake news refers to news articles or messages that are published and disseminated through the media and contain inaccurate information, regardless of the means and motives behind their publication (Sharma et al., 2019). As can be seen, within the classification of information disorders, the term fake news is not distinguished as a separate category, despite its particular popularity and widespread use in public discourse; fake news should be viewed as part of the broader phenomenon of disinformation, that is, as its subset, since it involves inaccurate information and the potential to deceive audiences (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

According to the aforementioned classification, disinformation represents the most serious form of information disorder, as it combines the fabrication of content with the deliberate intent to cause harm. The combination of false content and harmful intent renders disinformation particularly dangerous, as it can undermine trust in institutions and the media. This outcome is achieved through the creation of false representations and perceptions, whereby efforts are directed toward shaping a distorted worldview or interpretations among recipients, based on inaccurate beliefs (Hameleers, 2023).

However, it should be noted that disinformation is not always consciously devised by the actors who further disseminate it, particularly within the information space. In practice, it often occurs that propagandists (creators) deliberately produce false

content and then inject it into information flows at points where it can be picked up by more credible or widely followed actors (amplifiers), thereby increasing its reach, credibility, and speed of dissemination (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In this way, media organizations and individuals frequently act as intermediaries in the spread of disinformation, often unknowingly, by adopting unverified content or distributing it through algorithms that are designed to favor popular and emotionally engaging material. Thus, even unintentionally, they become channels through which manipulative information reaches the wider public (Falis, 2009). The business models of modern digital platforms are based on maximizing user engagement and retaining attention for the purpose of monetization. Such a model prioritizes content that generates higher engagement and viral potential, not necessarily content that is accurate (Lazer et al., 2018). Research has shown that false content spreads "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly" than truthful information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018, p. 1147). As a result, disinformation attains greater reach and an appearance of legitimacy, thereby further amplifying its impact. Empirical studies confirm that audience attention is particularly attracted by content that is controversial, sensationalist, surprising, confirms existing beliefs or prejudices, and contains strong emotional charge and visual salience—precisely the characteristics that often define disinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Given that disinformation poses a serious threat to the adequate understanding and perception of reality for individuals as well as for entire groups, nations, and states, the development of resilience becomes one of the key factors in preserving psychological stability and social cohesion (Rød, Pursiainen, & Eklund, 2025). For this reason, understanding the psychological mechanisms of resilience is of essential importance for protection against propagandistic influence.

The Concept of Psychological Resilience

Although the concept of resilience is present across various scientific disciplines, psychology can be said to occupy a central place in its study, given that resilience represents an important concept within its specific fields (clinical, developmental, social, and health psychology). The broad use of the term has led to multiple interpretations of the concept of resilience which, due to its interdisciplinary nature, encompass both individual and broader social aspects and largely depend on the context of application. The concept itself covers a wide range of phenomena—from cells and biological systems, through individuals and organizations, to environments, nations, and states (Southwick et al., 2014). The term resilience derives from the Latin word resilire (re – back, salire – to jump), meaning to bounce back or "return to the original position." This etymological origin forms the basis of contemporary definitions and conceptualizations (Den Hartigh & Hill, 2022).

Theoretical approaches emphasize the multidimensionality and complexity of the concept of resilience to varying degrees, yet they share common essential elements. In brief, psychological resilience may be defined in the scholarly literature in various ways: as the ability to recover and return to a state of balance after adversity; as a set of individual traits and attitudes that enable successful coping with difficulties; as the

capacity for persistence and growth despite unfavorable circumstances and challenges; as a dynamic process that develops through the interaction of personal, social, and societal factors; and as a form of positive adaptation that involves the use of one's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resources when facing challenges (Rutter, 1993; Southwick, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2005; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Sisto et al., 2019).

Despite the heterogeneity of approaches and definitions, the fundamental characteristic of resilience lies in its connection to confronting challenges or threats, which constitute necessary elements for its emergence (Bracke, 2016). In situations in which an individual faces threats, whether real or anticipated, resilience denotes the ability to withstand such threats, adapt to them, and recover from them, thereby

mitigating potential negative outcomes for the individual (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). It can be observed that across all conceptualizations of resilience, the capacity for adaptation is particularly emphasized, as most of its aspects are grounded in it to a greater or lesser extent (Sisto et al., 2019). Resilience therefore represents a key component in managing emotional and social difficulties, as it enables individuals to employ psychological and behavioral resources when confronting adversity (Shrivastava & Desousa, 2016). These resources primarily include individuals' cognitive and emotional capacities, social networks and support, as well as various motivational factors underlying resilience, which are interrelated, complementary, and together contribute to the overall level of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

The presentation of different understandings and definitions of resilience serves to illustrate the breadth and complexity of this construct and to facilitate a better understanding of its key components that enable adaptation, recovery, and stability under conditions of threat and adversity. It is precisely these dimensions of resilience that provide the foundation for understanding its significance in the context of defense against contemporary propagandistic influence within the information space.

The Role of Psychological Resilience in Defense Against Propaganda

The concept of resilience has only recently begun to be applied in the context of propaganda practices and the spread of disinformation. This concept can be adapted to contemporary forms of informational and communicative digital channels, given that propagandistic activities, as part of broader information warfare, represent a specific type of challenge that requires the development of resilience at both the cognitive and the broader societal levels.

According to Hansen (2017), it is possible to distinguish two dimensions of resilience that counter information attacks: physical and cognitive. The physical dimension aims to prevent propagandistic content from reaching users at all. This includes various practices implemented by digital platforms, such as limiting the visibility of certain content (e.g., shadow banning) or the complete removal of content. On the other hand, the cognitive dimension is viewed as a kind of psychological firewall, that is, as a filter that prevents the penetration of disinformation by retaining or blocking information that is assessed as potentially harmful (Hansen, 2017). Although there is

a theoretical distinction between these two dimensions of resilience, it can be said that they operate in parallel and that a deficiency in one requires compensation through the other, and vice versa (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020).

The foundation of psychological resilience consists of various factors whose combined action enables individuals to confront propagandistic information in a way that reduces its psychological impact. Factors of resilience to propaganda represent interconnected cognitive and socio-affective characteristics of individuals that participate in the processing and evaluation of information. Although differences exist among them, none of these factors operates in isolation; rather, they are integrated and form adaptive strategies of information processing, thereby contributing to defense against propagandistic activities (Ecker et al., 2022).

With regard to cognitive factors, research has shown that the ability for analytical thinking is one of the most important protective factors of psychological resilience, whereas, on the other hand, a tendency toward intuitive reasoning, as well as various forms of memory errors, contribute to greater vulnerability to inaccurate information and reduced resilience to propagandistic influence (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Ecker et al., 2022). In this context, it has been established that individuals with pronounced analytical thinking evaluate information content and sources more rationally and demonstrate a greater ability to recognize inconsistencies, exaggerations, and implausible claims, particularly on digital platforms (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). Conversely, memory errors refer to situations in which individuals forget the sources of information, disregard or fail to attend to contradictory information, or misattribute accuracy to information simply because it is familiar to them (Mitchell & Johnson, 2009; Ecker et al., 2022). These processes lead to the phenomenon known as the illusory truth effect, which occurs when repeated false claims are perceived as more accurate and credible due to a sense of familiarity and cognitively easier processing of content (Fazio, 2020; Brashier, Eliseev, & Marsh, 2020). Consequently, the level of resilience is weakened, as the ability to distinguish reliable from manipulative information is compromised, given that detailed and thorough analysis of content and its accuracy does not take place (Ecker et al., Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

Among socio-affective factors, a key role in resilience to propaganda and manipulative content is played by the capacity for emotional regulation, which represents the ability to control and adjust one's own affective reactions (Southwick et al., 2014). Research indicates that individuals with reduced emotional regulation during content interpretation show a higher likelihood of believing false information (Martel, Pennycook, & Rand, 2020; Lühring et al., 2024). However, it should be noted that emotions arising during content interpretation are neither unidirectional nor do they invariably reduce levels of resilience; their influence largely depends on the broader context—on the type of emotion, the moment of its emergence, and the way in which the individual interprets it in accordance with prior beliefs. In other words, the effect of emotional responding is shaped by situational factors as well as by cognitive processes accompanying information processing (Lühring et al., 2024). It can be said that emotional arousal and affectively charged reactions, particularly when expressed automatically, contribute to diminished critical judgment, whereas well-developed skills of emotional self-regulation contribute to higher levels of resilience (Martel et al., 2020; Ecker et al.,

2022). Research has also shown that certain emotional states, such as positive mood (Koch & Forgas, 2012), social exclusion (Poon et al., 2020), and the need for social validation (Melchior & Oliveira, 2023), may increase susceptibility to deception and contribute to the emergence of the aforementioned illusory truth effect, particularly in situations where credibility judgments rely on subjective feelings of familiarity or ease of information processing.

Within socio-affective factors, personal beliefs and values, political affiliation, identification, and the attractiveness of information sources also play a significant role in psychological resilience (Ecker et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2023). This is consistent with the view that individuals tend to process information in ways that confirm their existing attitudes and protect their social identity (Kahan, 2013). However, when these patterns become overly rigid and closely tied to personal identity, vulnerability to propaganda increases. This is explained by findings showing that individuals are more likely to accept information that affirms their identity and beliefs, while being less inclined to accept information that threatens their identity (Kahan, 2017; Zmigrod, 2022)..

Nevertheless, psychological resilience, particularly in the contemporary information space, does not depend exclusively on individual characteristics. It is also conditioned by the broader social environment. According to Humprecht et al. (2020), resilience represents a complex phenomenon that includes collective capacity to overcome adverse circumstances, with particular emphasis placed on the role of social, political, and informational structures, especially the level of societal polarization and the functionality of the media system. Research has shown that in societies characterized by high levels of political polarization and support for populism, environments are created that are less resilient to disinformation, which is explained by greater "information pollution" within the information space and difficulties in achieving consensus on facts (Humprecht et al., 2020). Furthermore, declining trust in mainstream media further undermines collective levels of resilience, as media lose their capacity to unify audiences around reliable information, thereby opening space for the spread of disinformation and manipulative narratives (Humprecht et al., 2020). Such circumstances further lead to an increased tendency for individuals to seek information from dubious alternative sources, which may be composed entirely of false information (Altay et al., 2024). According to domestic authors (Pešić & Miljković, 2025; Petrović, 2021), education about current social phenomena, as well as truthful and regular reporting on them, also represent important factors in defense against information influence, as they can affect the assessment of the credibility of messages aimed at shaping individual perceptions and behavior.

As can be concluded, resilience to propagandistic influence is a complex and multidimensional process that cannot be adequately built once information has already spread. In support of this claim are research findings indicating that post hoc correction of disinformation is often slower and less effective than the proactive development of "cognitive immunity" (Lu et al., 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to act proactively and preventively in order to increase individuals' ability to recognize and reject manipulative messages before they exert their influence.

Inoculation Theory as a Model for Strengthening Defensive Psychological Resilience Against Propagandistic Influence

Contemporary research increasingly points to the importance of preventive action as a key means of strengthening individual and collective resilience to propaganda and manipulative content, particularly within the information space which, as previously noted, is highly susceptible to such threats. One of the most effective theories based on a preventive approach is the classical inoculation theory, which continues to find wide application in contemporary research and practices aimed at strengthening resilience to propaganda, especially in the modern information environment.

Inoculation theory was developed in the 1950s by McGuire (1964), immediately following the Korean War. The primary impetus for the development of the theory was the case of nine American prisoners of war who decided to remain with their captors after the end of the Korean War, which was then interpreted as a consequence of "brainwashing." In response, McGuire began to explore ways of developing resistance to persuasion and propagandistic messages, representing a significant shift away from research that had almost exclusively focused on increasing message persuasiveness (van der Linden, 2023).

At the core of this theory lies a concept based on an analogy with medical immunization. Namely, during the process of medical immunization, weakened forms of a virus are introduced into the body so that the immune system can respond to their presence (for example, through the production of antibodies) and create protection, enabling the organism to successfully defend itself against stronger variants of the virus at a later stage (McGuire, 1964). By analogy, McGuire argued that attitudes can be "protected" against persuasive attacks if individuals are first exposed to milder, weaker versions of persuasive arguments opposing their beliefs, followed by strong and convincing counterarguments to the presented claims. In this way, resistance to future, stronger attempts at persuasion is developed (McGuire, 1964). Because of this parallel with the process of developing "immunity," McGuire's inoculation theory is popularly referred to as a "vaccine against propaganda" (Panjeta, 2012).

In brief, according to inoculation theory, the preconditions for strengthening the resistance of attitudes and opinions (that is, for preventing changes in attitudes and opinions) consist of two key mechanisms: threat (or what some authors refer to as a forewarning of threat) and the preventive generation of counterarguments (Compton, 2013). Threat refers to the recipient's awareness that there is a possibility of exposure to persuasive attacks and manipulative messages (Traberg et al., 2023), as well as recognition that the attitudes under attack are "vulnerable" and thus susceptible to change (McGuire, 1964). In this context, threat functions as a signal and motivational force for activating a "mental immune system," which initiates cognitive defense against persuasive attacks (Compton et al., 2021; Panjeta, 2012). The second key mechanism, the preventive generation of counterarguments, involves providing recipients with concrete content that they can use to strengthen their own attitudes in defense against persuasive messages. This primarily refers to designing and presenting

counterarguments that preemptively refute persuasive claims, as well as highlighting possible deceptive tactics that may be employed. The goal is to equip message recipients in advance with an "arsenal" of arguments and knowledge that can be used in future situations involving stronger attempts at deception and persuasion. In this way, cognitive resources that are important for protection against persuasive and potentially deceptive messages are strengthened (Traberg et al., 2023; Compton, 2013). Inoculation can be implemented in an issue-based manner, where the focus is on providing counterarguments related to specific topics (e.g., health-related information), or in a technique-based manner, where the emphasis is placed on broader manipulative techniques used in the production of propagandistic messages (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). According to the classical model, inoculation interventions are considered to function by increasing the perceived sense of "threat" from manipulation, thereby enhancing motivation for self-defense (Compton, 2013). More recent interpretations of the theory emphasize the role of memory processes, suggesting that the strength of established memory traces is a more important factor for the effectiveness of inoculation interventions than motivation or perceived threat (Maertens et al., 2021).

Research has repeatedly confirmed the effectiveness of inoculation theory. It has been found that inoculation significantly increases resistance to propaganda across various domains, including politics, health, and climate change (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Traberg et al., 2022; Cook et al., 2023), improves the ability to distinguish accurate from false information (Lu et al., 2023), and reduces the likelihood of acceptance of online radicalization (Braddock, 2019). As can be concluded, inoculation theory represents an effective approach to strengthening individuals' psychological resilience, as research indicates that the inoculation process provides a certain degree of protection against various forms of persuasion and propagandistic influence and can be considered a significant defense mechanism in the contemporary information environment.

Conclusion

Contemporary technological development clearly indicates that digital propaganda will remain a persistent phenomenon. Although it cannot be completely eliminated, its negative effects can be significantly mitigated through a better understanding of the ways in which it operates and an assessment of the types of influence it produces, as well as through an understanding of the psychological processes that strengthen resilience at both the individual and societal levels.

In the military context, understanding these phenomena is of crucial importance, as the information space increasingly represents the central battlefield of contemporary conflicts. Propagandistic activity in the digital environment does not target only the perception of the enemy, but also the trust, cohesion, and morale of one's own forces. Building psychological resilience among personnel should therefore become a strategic priority, as it enables the preservation of individual stability, collective morale, and trust in institutions and command structures.

Continuous exposure to propagandistic activities and the inability of personnel to resist them may carry the risk of more serious consequences, which can potentially lead to the disruption of the functioning of the military system, both at the unit level and at the institutional level. The application of principles of psychological resilience and inoculation theory within the military should include training personnel to recognize manipulative content and propagandistic mechanisms, as well as to critically evaluate information through various training programs and educational initiatives. In addition to these competencies, it is considered important to implement training focused on the development of media and digital literacy, given that digital media and forms of propaganda-related activities are rapidly evolving; accordingly, military training programs must keep pace with these changes in order for personnel to remain aligned with the contemporary challenges of the information space.

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S u m m a r y

This paper analyzes psychological resilience to propaganda in the contemporary information space, with particular emphasis on digital platforms, which represent key channels in the distribution of propaganda and disinformation. The transformation of communication channels has led to a change in the nature of propagandistic activity, which has become participatory, decentralized, and algorithmically supported, thereby significantly increasing its reach and impact. The paper examines the basic theoretical characteristics of propaganda, disinformation, and contemporary forms of manipulation, as well as the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals and communities to defend themselves against propagandistic influences. Special emphasis is placed on a theoretical overview of cognitive and socio-affective individual psychological factors that contribute to resilience to propaganda, as well as on collective resilience factors, given that psychological resilience, particularly in the contemporary information space, does not depend exclusively on individual characteristics but also on the broader social environment. The paper discusses the characteristics of inoculation theory in the context of strengthening psychological resilience through the development of individual and collective capacities for recognizing and rejecting persuasive messages. It is emphasized that inoculation mechanisms, based on the principle of "cognitive immunization," represent an effective form of preventive action that enables the creation of psychological protection mechanisms against propagandistic influence. In the conclusion, the importance of defensive psychological resilience in contemporary information conflicts is considered, particularly in the military context, where propaganda can undermine morale, cohesion, and trust in command structures. The need to integrate media and digital literacy training into military education and training programs is highlighted in order to increase readiness for action under conditions of information warfare.

Key words: *psychological resilience, propaganda, manipulation, disinformation, information warfare, digital platforms, media literacy, inoculation theory*