Ученые записки Крымского федерального университета имени В. И. Вернадского.
Филологические науки. Научный журнал. 2023. Том 9 (75). № 1. С. 181–193.

***УДК 070***

# INFORMATION PROMOTION OF SPUTNIK V VACCINE IN THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING BLOGOSPHERE: STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERING INFORMATION ATTACKS

***Subbotina O. A., Yablonovskaya N. V., Shilina A. G.***

***Institute for Media Communications, Media Technologies and Design,***
***V. I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University, Simferopol, Russia***
***E-mail: subbotiny08@mail.ru*; *yablon@rambler.ru; angela_shilina@bk.ru***

Strategies for countering information attacks that discredit the Russian vaccine Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) against coronavirus, as well as strategies for promoting Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) vaccine in social networks are described and systematized in the article. The authors' attention of the study focuses on the interaction of the mass media system, the state and society, as well as on the ways of information influence on the society's position to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for vaccination. The argumentation of the serious consequences of refusing vaccination in difficult epidemiological conditions is an appeal to study prerequisites and consequences of biological terrorism. Blog texts in Russian are the research material. The information content analysis in Russian in the blogosphere about Sputnik V vaccine within the TOWS matrix reveals strategic alternatives affecting public opinion on vaccination; defines vaccine focused, vaccine promoting and vaccine propagandizing strategies; predicts the patterns of subsequent implementation of Gam-COVID-Vac vaccine (Sputnik V) and other Russian vaccines (EpiVacCorona, CoviVac, Sputnik Light). The methodological approach to material analysis used in the article (SWOT analysis and TOWS techniques) can be used in situations of similar information attacks.

***Key words:*** blogosphere, information attack, bioterrorism, vaccination, Gam-COVID-Vac, Sputnik V.

## INTRODUCTION

158 339 232 people were infected with a new coronavirus infection in the world, 3 293 232 died [5], Russia recorded 4 888 727 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 113 647 deaths [9] in accordance with data on May 10th, 2021.Vaccination has become the main tool in the system to counter the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the modern information and communication space, media and social networks make public mind about the importance or, conversely, insignificance of vaccination against a new coronavirus infection (COVID-19) [8]. Accordingly, Islam M. S. et al. (2020) define social media impact on public health in terms of COVID-19–related infodemic. As a result of the information saturation during the COVID-19 pandemic − the abundance of rumors, stigmatization and conspiracy theories − the infodemic of the media space has become a concomitant phenomenon. According to the study, monitoring in social networks was recognized as the best method of studying false information and rumors in real time and a way to debunk misinformation and reduce stigma. However, identifying fakes and conspiracy theories in real time is not an easy task. Therefore, the authors of the mentioned study traced and revealed rumors, stigmatization and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 circulating on online platforms and online newspapers, as well as their impact on public health. Content analysis of news articles helped to identify 2,311 reports of rumors, stigmatization and conspiracy theories in 25 languages from 87 countries by April 2020, that is, a year earlier than the date recorded in this study. The claims were related to disease, transmission and mortality (24%), control measures (21%), treatment (19%), the cause of

the disease, including origin (15%), violence (1%) and others (20%). Of the 2,276 reports for which text ratings were available, 1,856 claims were false (82%) [19].

In this regard, it is appropriate to refer to specialized scientific literature covering the various stages of development and implementation of the first Russian vaccine Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) against coronavirus infection. Thus, T. K. Burki [12] provides factual information that: 1) On August 11th, 2020, Russia became the first country in the world to approve a vaccine against severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2); 2) there are widespread concerns that approval is premature, since the vaccine has not started the third phase of trials at the time of approval: the strong immune response caused in all participants of the first and second phase of the trials was not a sufficient reason for the approval of the vaccine for regulatory agencies such as the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Agency Medicines; 3) Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which finances the development of Sputnik V vaccine, drew attention to the fact that some international politicians and the media preferred to focus on the political game and attempts to undermine the credibility of the Russian vaccine instead of studying the scientific platform of vaccines based on adenovirus vectors developed by Russia. C. van Tulleken [26] refers to a previous article by T. K. Burki [12], published in the specialized medical journal *The Lancet*, and argues the method of sources peer review used by this and other authors of *The Lancet* publications, is not sufficient to assess the risk / benefit ratio of new drugs associated with the discreteness of data, as well as with a small number of test participants in groups. G. Lawton [20] presents research on the "controversial start" of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in August, 2020 and the questionable preliminary results of 92% efficacy published by Gamaleya National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology. However, according to the authors of the article, the data on the ongoing clinical trials of the third phase and the effectiveness of the vaccine by 91.6% [22], also published in *The Lancet*, should be considered more convincing. The study also provides comparative information on the technologies used in the development of Sputnik V vaccine and vaccines developed by the international pharmaceutical and holding companies AstraZeneca (UK), Johnson & Johnson (USA), Sinopharm and Sinovac (China). Besides, attention should be paid to the provocative (for a scientific publication) nature of the statement by G. Lawton: "Non-Western vaccines are serious players in the global effort against Covid-19, but we need more transparent data" [20]. Referring to a quote of Nikolai Petrov, an expert at international affairs think tank Chatham House in London: "[President] Vladimir Putin is using vaccines as a tool to promote Russian interests and as soft power in international relations" and the widespread opinion that "China has also been accused of using vaccines to advance its geopolitical interests" the author of the article nevertheless concludes that "the Russian and Chinese vaccines appear at least as safe and effective as other vaccines and for billions of people around the world, they will be a lifeline" [20]. It is also necessary to pay attention at foreign specialized sources that contain exclusively factual data on laboratory tests of Sputnik V vaccine along with other vaccines against coronavirus infection. This is, for example, information that "Sputnik V vaccine is likely to remain highly effective in preventing severe cases of COVID-19 ..." [18]. Later in 2022 the issue of vaccination covers key recommendations stated by the "The Lancet Commission on lessons for the future from the

COVID-19 pandemic": "Epidemic control was seriously hindered by substantial public opposition to routine public health and social measures, such as the wearing of properly fitting face masks and getting vaccinated. This opposition reflects a lack of social trust, low confidence in government advice, inconsistency of government advice, low health literacy, lack of sufficient behavioral-change interventions, and extensive misinformation and disinformation campaigns on social media"; "Economic recovery depends on sustaining high rates of vaccination coverage and low rates of new, clinically significant COVID-19 infections, and on fiscal and monetary policies to mitigate the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and prevent a financial crisis"; "Countries should maintain a vaccination-plus strategy that combines mass vaccination…" [24].

A review of professionally oriented scientific publications showed that the discussions of scientists-communicators include not only the results of laboratory tests of vaccines against coronavirus infection and data comparison, but also a clear trace of the current mass media agenda. The obvious politicization of the vaccination process as the most effective way to counter the COVID-19 pandemic applies equally to representatives of professional and non-professional communication communities. Such a "construction" of a vaccine-sized scientific and mass media agenda is accompanied by certain influencing, suggestive and manipulative methods of the target audience affecting, which in fact are manifestations of information warfare [11]. In this regard, the research is aimed at a detailed study of the mechanisms of information impact on the mass audience, since it is the mass audience that is the ultimate goal of the vaccination campaign against coronavirus.

*The aim and objectives of the study.* This article deals with description of strategies for countering information attacks that discredit the Russian vaccine Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) against coronavirus, as well as strategies for its information promotion.

The research material is represented with blog texts in Russian media space.

**PRESENTATION OF THE BASIC MATERIAL**

The dramatic experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has argued for calls to public health officials and epidemiologists in terms of bioterrorism threats as the situation with mass casualties as a result of the rapid spread of an infectious disease predicts a model of bioterrorist danger and reaction to it. In the end of the 20$^{th}$ century the threat of bioterrorism has been clearly denoted. D.A. Henderson (1998, 1999) has been revealed that points of view claimed only as theoretical possibility have no validity. Author's anxiety has been caused by outbreaks of smallpox and anthrax in different parts of the world. Vaccination as well as medicines stocking and health workers training is seen as obvious and effective strategy against bioterrorism attacks [16]. Exactly a conscious approach to conceptual facilities for bioterrorism prevalence is concerned in the studies [17]. So that vaccination as means for enhancing public health for better overcoming infectious diseases that can be caused by biological weapons.

During the time political and public health officials have been alarmed by the state's capacity to identify the bioterrorist threat timely and unmistakably [21]. In the conditions of complex foresight and, consequently, prevention of bioterrorism, there is a need for the availability of medical research platforms for the rapid identification of biological threat

agents and their further study. This is an important factor for minimizing the spread of these agents and protecting public health.

The need to transform the global strategy of vaccine prevention is justified by Russian scientists V. V. Zverev and B. F. Semenov (2002) due to the increasing threat of the use of biological weapons by terrorist organizations based on pathogenic viruses and bacteria. As a result of research, a hypothesis is put forward that the cessation of vaccination after the elimination of the disease is not always justified. In this regard, there is a clear need to start vaccination of those people who may first of all face the consequences of the biological weapons use: medical personnel, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, special services (Ministry of Emergency Situations, special services of the Ministry of Health, firefighters, customs officers), transport and public utilities, border troops. As an example, the authors consider the real threat of bioterrorism with the possible use of the smallpox virus, which has put Russia, the United States and the world community before the need to revise national and international programs in order to accelerate the development, creation and improvement of means of treatment, prevention and diagnosis of this disease [1].

With the development of research on bioterrorism and its consequences for the health of society, the definition of the term itself is also being transformed. Thus, Spencer defines bioterrorism as "the use of micro-organisms as weapons of catastrophic effect which can be described as: the category or method of use of a weapon system that results in a significant negative impact on a nation's physical, psychological or economic well-being, thereby causing a major modification of routine activity" [25]. This approach to the definition emphasizes a number of important points. Discussed notion highlights several key points: the range of threats that are regarded as manifestations of bioterrorism are not only physical in nature, but may also include psychological and economic factors. M. D. Christian (2013) turning to empirical research, substantiates the claim that biological weapons have been used for centuries, which means bioterrorism remains a threat to the future [13]. The author emphasizes the importance of adequate preparedness of the state and society to manage the situation with mass casualties. As the experience of media studies shows, the role of various media of mass communication can be crucial for raising people's awareness.

Further studies on bioterrorism threatening to national security reveal among the features of biological weapons as weapons of mass people's destruction secrecy and duration of action; the possibility of simultaneous use of various biological agents, including those with altered biological properties; the potential for the spread of emerging diseases over vast territories; the duration and complexity of identifying microorganisms [4]. Moreover, the anxiety of experts is caused by extremely potential reality of biological means use for terrorist acts in modern conditions. In this regard, health education of the population about the peculiarities of the development of epidemic processes and possible measures to protect the body from infectious diseases, including through information in the mass media space, is an effective way to prevent bioterrorism.

The current situation makes efforts to form national plans to counter biological terrorism necessary, since the possibility of a biological terrorist threat becomes really dangerous. In this regard, potential threats order the need for more active training of the population of our country in the basics of combating particularly dangerous infections [3]. It should be noted the process of 'training' to such complicated epidemiological situation as COVID-19 pandemic has shown huge mass media impact.

While the COVID-19 pandemic information space that responds to social and economic, social and political challenges, the most significant of which is the production and introduction of the Russian vaccine Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik V) against coronavirus, needs effective tools to assess its promotion. SWOT analysis and its complementary TOWS methodology ("TOWS matrix") [27] are used to study the effectiveness of internal and external factors of objects functioning in various spheres of society [2; 6; 7; 10; 14;15; 23] and generate effective strategies for enhancing advantages and neutralizing disadvantages of the internal environment of studied objects, minimizing risks and implementing opportunities of their external environment (Table 1).

***Table 1.*** **Matrix of strategic alternatives TOWS** [27]

| | Internal advantages / strengths (**S** – Strengths) | Internal disadvantages / weaknesses (**W**– Weaknesses) |
|---|---|---|
| External opportunities (**O** – Opportunities) | **SO**: strategy ***Maxi-Maxi*** *using advantages / strengths to maximize opportunities* | **WO**: strategy ***Mini-Maxi*** *minimizing disadvantages / weaknesses to enhance capabilities* |
| External threats (**T** – Threats) | **ST**: strategy ***Maxi-Mini*** *using strengths to minimize threats* | **WT**: strategy ***Mini-Mini*** *minimizing disadvantages / weaknesses and overcoming threats* |

Information about the Russian vaccine Sputnik V belongs to the category of objects that can be effectively studied using the SWOT and TOWS analysis methods: it "does not imply any specific set of indicators that would be applied to any object under study. SWOT factors (*TOWS – Noted by authors*) are formulated by experts in the form of value judgments in natural language [6]: for example, *"A close-knit team"* (in Russian: *«Сплоченный коллектив»*); *"Weak material and technical base of medical institutions"* (in Russian: *«Слабая материально-техническая база медицинских учреждений»*). According to the research, the significance of this approach lies in the reason that factors of the internal and external environment are taken into account, which are not subject to uncontested assessment.

Advantages / strengths (S) of the internal environment: in fact, the information material can be considered facts, personal experience (interviews), personal opinions and

arguments. So that internal disadvantages / weaknesses (W) are quotes from doctors, forecasts of negative consequences, examples of the ineffectiveness of vaccination, statements of distrust in Russian medicine, statistics (Table 2).

***Table 2.*** **Internal factors of information content about Sputnik V vaccine**

| Internal advantages / strengths (**S** – Strengths) | Internal disadvantages / weaknesses (**W**– Weaknesses) |
|---|---|
| **S1.** Positive facts and statistics: "out of 20,000 volunteers who risked testing the vaccine on themselves, only 273 people (1.5% of the total number of "testers") fell ill with coronavirus". | **W1.** Quotes from doctors who took part in the development of the vaccine about "frequent and very frequent" side effects. |
| **S2.** An interview in which the journalist said about his good health after vaccination: "I felt nothing". | **W2.** The statement about the unknown consequences of the vaccine "in twenty years or in eight". |
| **S3.** The fact that the Russian vaccine Sputnik V received support in Europe: "Hungary became the first country to issue a permit for the use of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V". | **W3.** Question and statement: "Where does a good vaccine come from? Russian medicine is one of the worst in the world. Russia is a country incapable of creating and offering anything to the world". |
| **S4.** The opinion that the safety of vaccination with Sputnik V, CoviVac, Pfizer and other vaccines have not been proven, but the disease is more dangerous than the possible risk; the benefits of herd immunity are noted. | **W4.** Forecast of mandatory vaccination with an incompletely studied vaccine and, as a result, the presence of victims. |
| **S5.** Reasons about the worth of getting vaccinated against coronavirus; illiterate people refuse vaccination. | **W5.** Arguments that the vaccine has not yet "proven its effectiveness and safety" and has not "passed the third stage of clinical trials". |
| **S6.** Objective information about vaccination from the perspective of personal experience. | **W6.** Statement about the ineffectiveness of the vaccine, based on the fact: "Two months ago, the journalist was vaccinated with Sputnik V. Today he announced that he had contracted the coronavirus. This is all you need to know about this vaccine and its declared "95% effectiveness". |
| | **W7.** Statistics from a survey that "more than 70% of Russians do not want to be vaccinated against coronavirus". |

The factors influencing the formation of the external information field around the Russian vaccine against coronavirus include: examples, facts, statistics, jokes, irony, personal opinions and statements of bloggers, which are perceived as external opportunities or external threats (Table 3).

***Table 3.*** **External factors of information content about Sputnik V vaccine**

| External opportunities (**O** – Opportunities) | External threats (**T** – Threats) |
|---|---|
| **O1**. Convincing examples of the failure of anti-vaccination campaigns and the anti-vaccination movement. | **T1.** Facts and statistics indicating people's distrust of information ("propaganda") about Sputnik V vaccine coming from official (federal) sources. |
| **O2.** Statistics: "Judging by the polls, only 2-3% of the population are afraid of vaccination"; facts and statistics on the importance of herd immunity in the fight against various infectious diseases. | **T2.** The assumption that an official poll among the population will show about 70% of those who believe that it is not necessary to get vaccinated, since this is "another public relations project of the authorities"; generally there is a strong anti-vaccination movement in the country. |
| **O3.** Jokes and irony in a post about vaccination on the Telegram channel, where the blogger answered popular questions about vaccination, for example: 'Will the vaccination be voluntary or compulsory?': "Compulsory, of course. Are you in Mordor or where? Those who disagree will be flogged in the stables and injected at once with a fivefold dose of Sputnik V; and about the availability of the vaccine in Russia: "You are discouragingly right. Therefore, everyone will be given the same single dose of vaccine, with the same syringe". | **T3.** Personal opinion with an indication of the facts: "I wouldn't even want to talk about the Russian vaccine. The Russian vaccine is ridiculous. Israel refused, Turkey refused ...".<br>A controversial argument: "... And in Russia itself it is not visible how people are vaccinated. There are serious problems with this vaccine". |
| **O4.** Persuasive statement "Getting vaccinated is the way out". | **T3.** The forecast that unpopular government reforms in connection with the economic crisis will hit the mood and support of the people. |
| **O5.** Personal opinion: "I suspect that the American and German vaccines will be good, but I will not rush to vaccinate". | **T4.** Examples from open sources about the need for a two-year period to study a vaccine and side effects, as well as an |

| | |
|---|---|
| | example about the use of an unexplored vaccine by a large foreign company and the consequences - the birth of children with deformities. |
| **O6.** Negative attitude to the over-the-counter sale of coronavirus medicines in pharmacies. | **T5.** Reasoning about the competitive nature of vaccination in Russia: "The start of mass vaccination is scheduled immediately after the US-German vaccine was registered in the UK. Is it really so important for us to be the fastest?<br><br>The race with the Russian vaccine reminds me of a competition, but the problem is that no one competes with us".<br>As a result ─ refusal to vaccinate at this stage. |
| **O7.** Fact concerning biopolitics: the state takes responsibility for the health of citizens. | **T6.** Expression of the opinion that "Non-marginal anti-vaccination agents harm the start of Sputnik - it harms, it is killed by promotion with propaganda, a tool for abstract consent. But here you need truth and faith in it ...". |
| **O8.** A comparative analysis of the situation with the development of vaccines in different countries leads the blogger to the opinion that "all vaccine developers worked under great pressure, everyone had to squeeze the standard testing and registration procedures to a vital minimum. Otherwise, vaccine production is a routine task. And most importantly: there is no reason to think that Russian biochemists coped with it worse than American, British or Chinese ... ". | |
| **O9.** Intention to vaccinate: "Of course, I will get vaccinated and take the video about it ...". | |

**FINDINGS**

The study of internal and external factors influencing the development of information about Sputnik V vaccine makes it possible to determine strategic alternatives in working with thematic content within the TOWS matrix:

**1. SO**: *Maxi-Maxi* strategies (using advantages / strengths to maximize opportunities).

1.1. Strengthening the broadcast of positive facts and statistics on vaccine / vaccines **(S1, O2)**.

1.2. Focusing on personal positive vaccination experiences **(S2, S6, O4).**

1.3. Making the facts of Russian vaccine Sputnik V recognition abroad more expressive **(S3, O7, O8).**

1.4. Regular information about the risks and consequences of coronavirus infection (**S4, O1, O2, O9).**

1.5. Systematic coverage of the need for various types of vaccination (including against the COVID-19 virus) **(S5, O1, O2, O9).**

**2. WO**: *Mini-Maxi* strategies (minimization of disadvantages / weaknesses to enhance opportunities).

2.1. Periodic broadcasting of data on the failure of anti-vaccination campaigns and the futility of the anti-vaccination movement **(W7, O2).**

2.2. Turning to humorous content to better promote the importance of vaccination **(W7, O3).**

2.3. Strengthening the information component about standard vaccine production procedures and the relevant conditions in which developers from different countries worked to build confidence in the Russian Sputnik V vaccine **(W1, W3, W5, W6, O7, O8).**

2.4. Effectiveness of statistical data on the consequences of over-the-counter sales of medicines for coronavirus in pharmacies **(W2, W4, O6).**

**3. ST**: *Maxi-Mini* strategies (using strengths to minimize threats).

3.1. Regular reference to the personal positive experience of bloggers constructing information content about Sputnik V vaccine, as well as EpiVacCorona and CoviVac vaccines in order to minimize / neutralize the mistrust that has developed towards messages from government sources **(S2, S6, T1, T2, T6).**

3.2. Popularization of objective statistical data on the results of vaccination against coronavirus in different countries with various vaccines for the possibility of subsequent comparison of the results (**S1, S4, T4, T5).**

3.3. Promoting evidence of support for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine (hereinafter also other vaccines) in other countries to attract attention and strengthen support for the vaccination campaign in Russia **(S3, T3).**

**4. WT**: *Mini-Mini* strategies (minimizing disadvantages / weaknesses and overcoming threats).

4.1. Regular coverage of ongoing research on Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac vaccines: results, risks and side effects (**W2, W3, W4, W5, W6, T3, T4).**

**CONCLUSION**

Analysis of Russian information content in the blogosphere about the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V within the TOWS matrix allowed:

- to identify strategic alternatives influencing public opinion on vaccine prevention;
- to define the strategies *Maxi-Maxi* as vaccine focused, *Mini-Maxi* and *Maxi-Mini* as vaccine promoting and *Mini-Mini* as vaccine propagandizing;
- to predict the regularities of the subsequent introduction of the Gam-COVID-Vac vaccine (Sputnik V) and the distribution of other Russian vaccines (EpiVacCorona, CoviVac, Sputnik Light).

The methodological approach to material analysis (SWOT analysis and TOWS methods) used in the article is an effective blocker of information campaigns, falsifying vaccination results, and a scientific and practical mechanism for countering modern bioterrorism.

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## ИНФОРМАЦИОННОЕ ПРОДВИЖЕНИЕ ВАКЦИНЫ «СПУТНИК V» В РУССКОЯЗЫЧНОЙ БЛОГОСФЕРЕ: СТРАТЕГИИ ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЯ ИНФОРМАЦИОННЫМ АТАКАМ

***Субботина О. А., Яблоновская Н. В., Шилина А. Г.***

В статье описаны и систематизированы стратегии противодействия информационным атакам, дискредитирующим российскую вакцину Gam-COVID-Vac («Спутник V») против коронавируса. Внимание авторов работы фокусируется на взаимодействии массмедиасистемы, государства и общества, а также на способах информационного воздействия на позицию социума в отношении пандемии COVID-19 и необходимости вакцинации. Аргументацией серьезных последствий отказа от вакцинации в сложных эпидемиологических условиях является обращение к изучению предпосылок и последствий биологического терроризма. Исследовательским материалом являются тексты блогов на русском языке. Анализ информационного контента на русском языке в блогосфере о вакцине «Спутник V» в рамках матрицы TOWS выявляет стратегические альтернативы, влияющие на общественное мнение о вакцинации; определяет стратегии, ориентированные на вакцину, продвижение вакцины и пропаганду вакцин; прогнозирует модели последующего внедрения вакцины Gam-COVID-Vac («Спутник V») и других российских вакцин («ЭпиВакКорона», «КовиВак», «Спутник Лайт»). Методологический подход к анализу материала, использованный в статье (SWOT-анализ и методы TOWS), может быть использован в ситуациях аналогичных информационных атак.

**Ключевые слова:** блогосфера, информационная атака, биотерроризм, вакцинация, Gam-COVID-Vac, Sputnik V («Спутник V»).