



disinformation
waiting to go

THE PATTERNS OF
DISSEMINATING
DISINFORMATION IN
THE ARMENIAN
ONLINE MEDIA

Sociological Research | Analytical Report

The research called *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media* has been conducted in the framework of Media Initiatives Center *Disinformation Narratives Study*, with the financial support of Zinc Network.

This report summarizes the results of the study conducted in June-August, 2020. This is an attempt to disclose the characteristics and patterns of how disinformation is formed and disseminated in the Armenian online media, the framing mechanisms implemented in the coverage of various social and political events and phenomena, as well as the messages they are based on.

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CONTENTS

A LIST OF TABLES, DIAGRAMS AND GRAPHS.....	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
DEFINITIONS OF THE MAIN CONCEPTS	8
METHODOLOGY	9
The Research Problem	9
The Framework of the Research	10
The Methodological Strategy of the Research	10
The Methods of the Research	11
The Sampling of the Research	12
The Data Reliability and Analysis.....	14
THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH.....	16
Part 1. The Particularities of Disinformation in the Armenian Media Discourse	16
Part 2. The Framing of the Topics of Coronavirus, the Karabakh Issue and the Lanzarote Convention in the Armenian Online Media	21
The Framing of Coronavirus	21
The Framing of the Karabakh Issue	28
The Framing of the Lanzarote Convention.....	34
CONCLUSIONS.....	39
APPENDIX 1. A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPERT INTERVIEWS	40
APPENDIX 2. THE CODING SCHEME OF MEDIA ARTICLES	41

A LIST OF TABLES, DIAGRAMS AND GRAPHS

Table 1. The Sampling of Expert Interviews.....	12
Table 2. The Criteria for Article Search.....	13
Table 3. The Quantitative Sampling Frame.....	13
Table 4. Number of Articles on Coronavirus.....	21
Table 5. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on Coronavirus.....	22
Table 6. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=2193).....	24
Table 7. The Number of Articles on the Karabakh Issue.....	28
Table 8. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Karabakh Issue.....	29
Table 9. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=239).....	31
Table 10. The Number of Articles on the Lanzarote Convention.....	34
Table 11. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Lanzarote Convention.....	35
Table 12. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=47).....	36
Diagram 1. Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods.....	11
Diagram 2. The Grounds for Disclosing Disinformation.....	17
Diagram 3. The Media that have Disseminated Flows of Disinformation, according to Interviewed Experts.....	19
Diagram 4. The Goals and Contexts of Disinformation Messages.....	20
Graph 1. The Number of Articles on Coronavirus for the Target Period.....	22
Graph 2. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1814).....	22
Graph 3. The Authorship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1814).....	23
Graph 4. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1113).....	23
Graph 5. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to News Outlets (N=1814).....	25
Graph 6. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=1814).....	25
Graph 7. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=1113).....	26
Graph 8. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to News Outlets (N=1814).....	26
Graph 9. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=1814).....	27
Graph 10. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=1113).....	27
Graph 11. The Messages Statements on Coronavirus, according to the Origin of the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=115).....	28
Graph 12. The Number of Articles on the Karabakh Issue for the Target Period.....	29
Graph 13. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=229).....	29
Graph 14. The Authorship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=229).....	30
Graph 15. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=113).....	30
Graph 16. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to News Outlets (N=101).....	31
Graph 17. The messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=101).....	32
Graph 18. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=39).....	32
Graph 19. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to News Outlets (N=58).....	33
Graph 20. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=58).....	33
Graph 21. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=33).....	34
Graph 22. The Number of Articles on the Lanzarote Convention for the Target Period.....	34
Graph 23. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=38).....	35
Graph 24. The Authoship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=38).....	35
Graph 25. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=15).....	36

Graph 26. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to News Outlets (N=34)	37
Graph 27Graph 27. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=34).....	37
Graph 28. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=6).....	37
Graph 29. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to News Outlets (N=11)	38
Graph 30. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Authorship (N=11)	38
Graph 31. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=4).....	38

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research called *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media* has been conducted by Media Initiatives Center, in June-August, 2020. The research aims at revealing the patterns of disinformation dissemination in the Armenian media.

The research attempts to disclose the characteristics and patterns of how disinformation is formed and disseminated in the Armenian online media, the framing mechanisms implemented in the coverage of various social and political events and phenomena, as well as the messages they are based on.

A mixed method research has been conducted, combining the results of expert interviews and frame analysis of news stories. The research problem has been identified and articulated, based on the model of three Armenian online news outlets - News.am, Tert.am, 168.am. The coverage of Coronavirus, the Karabakh Issue and the Lanzarote Convention has been observed in the above-mentioned outlets.

The research analysis is presented in two parts in the report. The first part discusses the particularities of disinformation in the Armenian online media, whereas the second part sums up the framing of the selected topics in the above-mentioned outlets.

The research data should not be taken as statistically representative and cannot present other Armenian online media.

The key findings of the research are the following:

1. Based on the experts' estimates, that disinformation flows have significantly escalated in the Armenian online media after the "velvet revolution."
2. A scheme developed on the basis of expert assessments can be applied in order to reveal the main patterns of disinformation. The scheme comprises three components: the information sender, the information message and the communication context.
3. The majority of news stories on selected topics published by the researched media in the selected period are not original articles. Having been copied from the social media or other Armenian media outlets, they represent opinions and comments by third parties.
4. According to the quantitative data of the research, the observed media outlets disseminate content, rather than create some.
5. The political framing of Coronavirus in the above-mentioned outlets is a result of "internal Armenian media discourse", and has not "penetrated" from foreign sources.
6. The conspirational framing of Coronavirus has been mostly penetrating into the Armenian media environment from web sites of Russian origin.

7. The foreign policy conducted by the authorities has been framed as “miserable” in most stories covering the Karabakh issue.
8. The Lanzarote Convention has been mainly framed as something contributing to child sexual abuse.
9. The framings of the Karabakh issue and the Lanzarote Convention form a part of the Armenian media narrative in the observed media outlets. Their primary sources have no foreign origin.

DEFINITIONS OF THE MAIN CONCEPTS

Framing: presenting a problem only from a specific viewpoint, in a specific context or from the perspective of a certain ideology

Frame analysis: a research method applied in mass media sociology to reveal the specific aspects of an issue emphasized in an information message, or the context it is presented in.

Articles containing thematic statements: articles where the main messages were related to the topics of the research.

Articles not containing thematic statements¹: articles where (1) the main messages were related to other issues, the 75% of the contents covered another topic but the searched keyword could be found in the story; (2) the coverage was mostly non-related to the Armenian context; (3) there were only “dry” factual statements with no additional messages; (4) there was a video story but there was no accompanying text (containing a thematic statement); (5) the content was not written in Armenian.

Coding scheme/Codifier: a scheme of categories applied in the framework of the document analysis method, based on which the selected content undergoes systematized coding.

N number: the total number of units of observation, based on which the percent proportions of a given variable are calculated.

¹ Articles not containing thematic statements have not been analyzed.

METHODOLOGY

The Research Problem

Media outlets are among primary agents of socialization in the society. They have a serious capacity to form public opinion, in view of the fact that they make easy access to social reality, its various aspects and existing phenomena for the general public, in other words, simplifying and interpreting the reality and identifying the key issues on the public agenda. Often you can come across non-accurate or non-complete information disseminated in the media, as well as deliberate or non-deliberate misinformation. Such information flows involve providing incomplete or inaccurate information, deliberately or non-deliberately. This problem becomes more acute when it is related to the online media which, combined with social media platforms, further expand the boundaries and the audience of information flows.

The decentralization of the Armenian media environment after the “Velvet Revolution” not only allowed to mitigate the media censorship but also further enhanced the media discourse between the new government and the former authorities. Taking into account the fact that some online media outlets are being politically, ideologically and/or financially influenced by former authorities, the new government is often framed in the current media discourse as authorities “governed by the West” that can harm the Armenian statehood and hinder the Karabakh conflict regulation.

In the Armenian online media, you can often come across narratives related to George Soros’s actions to weaken Armenia and to destroy traditional values, a number of manipulations on domestic violence and gender equality, as well as numerous conspiracy theories on geopolitical issues. Such information flows are accompanied with hate speech, black PR, fake stories and disinformation

In this regard, there is a need to identify the patterns and particularities of how disinformation is formed and disseminated in the Armenian online media, how various social and political events and phenomena are framed and covered, as well as the messages such information flows are guided by.

The Framework of the Research

This research aims at identifying the patterns of disinformation² dissemination in the Armenian online media.

The Armenian online media is the object of the research, whereas the subject is the disinformation patterns circulated in the online media.

The problems of the research to be examined are the following³:

To find out

1. the general logic of disinformation dissemination;
2. the most relevant disinformation flows and topics circulated in the Armenian media discourse;
3. the news sites disseminating disinformation;
4. the particular features of covering the topics of Coronavirus, the Karabakh Issue and the Lanzarote Convention in News.am, Tert.am and 168.am online media outlets, including
 - the thematic statements circulated in them;
 - the primary sources of information;
 - the implementation of misinforming elements.

The Methodological Strategy of the Research

The methodology of this research is based on the strategy of mixed methods. It stipulates a purposeful combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The mixed method research allows using the toolkits of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in the phase of data collection, as well as combining the analytical resources of both methodologies in the phase of data analysis and interpretation.

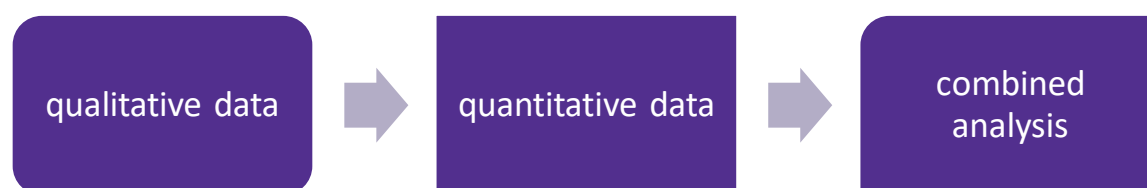
Exploratory sequential mixed methods design has been chosen to implement in the framework of the methodology. It allows using the qualitative and quantitative methods in phases, and integrating the obtained data with each other⁴. Qualitative data is collected in the first phase of the research, the analysis of which leads to the second – quantitative – phase. Finally, the data collected in both phases are analyzed in a combined way (see Diagram 1). Thus, in this case, the qualitative analysis becomes the basis for identifying and formulating the research problems to be studied.

² The concept **disinformation** is used in the broad sense of the word, involving all the variations (i.e., deliberate or non-deliberate misinformation, fake news, manipulations, etc.).

³ *The 4th problem and its sub-problems* have been identified and defined, based on expert assessments (see the subsection *The Research Methods*).

⁴ Creswell, J., Clark, V. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. SAGE Publications.

Diagram 1. Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods



The Methods of the Research

Two sociological methods of data collection have been applied in the framework of the research – **expert interviews** and **document review**.

The **expert interviews** were conducted with persons, well-informed about the topic, including media analysts⁵, fact-checking experts, investigative journalists and online media opinion-makers⁶ or influencers.

The method implementation allows finding out, with the help of experts, the general logic of disinformation dissemination, disclosing the primary sources of their dissemination in the Armenian media, identifying the most relevant disinformation flows and topics circulated in the Armenian media discourse, as well the news sites disseminating the disinformation.

The expert interview method was implemented with the help of a pre-designed quantitative interview questionnaire.

Document reviews were conducted, implementing the combination of a content analysis and the traditional approach. A content analysis of documents stipulates measurements of the quantitative aspects of information, whereas the content and context-related aspects are studied in the framework of the traditional approach. The online articles identified as a result of expert interviews were considered as documents in the framework of this research.

The method implementation has allowed retrospectively measuring and comparing the data on disinformation topics, primary sources and patterns, obtained as a result of expert assessments.

The document review method was implemented with the help of a codifier that was pre-integrated into *MS Excel* software package. All the news articles, selected as a result of a quantitative sampling, were coded in it. The data collection and their preliminary

⁵ The subgroup *media analysts* included media critics, media researchers and media development experts.

⁶ The subgroup of *opinion makers* include persons that have influence, influential opinion and a clearly-defined audience in the social media and that actively follow the circulated flows of information, responding to them in various social platforms.

processing were conducted by a fieldwork team, consisting of four data collection specialists and a data quality control expert.

The Sampling of the Research

Expert Interviews

The expert selection was conducted, based on the principle of four-layered typical case sampling, according to the table below.

Table 1. The Sampling of Expert Interviews

Type	Stipulated quantity	Actual quantity
Media analyst	3	5
Fact-checking expert	3	3
Investigative journalist	3	3
Opinion maker (media influencer)	3	3
Total	12	14

The sampling requirements in qualitative studies are rather content-related than quantity-related because the qualitative methods are not intended to ensure data representativeness, in the first place. Instead, they aim at a profound and comprehensive identification of research problems, to the extent possible. Thus, the stipulated quantity of expert interviews in the framework of this research has been a conditional one. As a result, taking into account the need for complete information, 14 expert interviews were conducted, instead of 12. The implementation of the method was terminated at the point when a theoretical saturation was observed, i.e. when the obtained information was being repeated or when no new insights were being generated.

Document Review

Taking into consideration the logic of exploratory sequential mixed methods, the sampling of the document review method was formed in the process of expert interviews. Based on the most frequent mentions in the assessments of the interviewed experts, the following has been singled out and selected:

1. three Armenian media outlets - News.am, Tert.am and 168.am;
2. three topics – Coronavirus, the Karabakh issue and the Lanzarote Convention;
3. a fixed time period of article publication for each of the topics.

The sampling frame – the list of articles – was formed according to the database of Rumorsmonitoring.com platform⁷, based on the criteria presented in the Table 2. The sequence of actions is the following:

1. Three different search actions were conducted in the system, one – for each topic, using the relevant keywords.
2. All the three search actions were conducted only among the publications of the chosen media outlets.
3. The search action for each of the topics was conducted only in the most active⁸ time period for the relevant topic.
4. The thematic lists generated by the system were downloaded in the XLW (Excel Workbook) format to serve as a sampling frame (see Table 3).
5. All the articles selected as a result of the sampling were coded in the database, with the help of a codifier that was pre-integrated into *MS Excel* software package (see Appendix 2).

Table 2. The Criteria for Article Search

Topic	Keywords	Time Period	Media Outlets
Coronavirus	Coronavirus, covid	01.03.2020 – 31.05.2020	News.am Tert.am 168.am
Karabakh issue	Karabakh, Artsakh	01.04.2020 – 31.05.2020	
Lanzarote Convention	Lanzarote, Lanzarote	01.05.2020 – 30.06.2020	

Table 3. The Quantitative Sampling Frame

Topic	The quantity of articles
Coronavirus	23593
Karabakh issue	2464
Lanzarote Convention	78
Total	26135

⁷ Rumorsmonitoring.com is an electronic automated system of media monitoring that collects round-the-clock media content in the online data library. The platform allows conducting a keyword search for the articles published at a certain time period and generates lists of articles containing the searched keywords.

⁸ The most active coverage time periods were selected based on expert assessments.

The Data Reliability and Analysis

The implementation of several techniques ensured the quality and reliability of the data, collected with the help of two research methods.

1. Chain Sampling Technique

Trying to reduce the factor of the researcher's subjectivity in selecting the experts, the chain technique was applied to generate sampling units. It means that, at the end of each interview, the researcher asked the expert to mention a name of a person (for each of the sampling types) that, according to them, could provide valuable information for the research. It allowed re-establishing the list of experts, outlined from the very beginning in the framework of the research.

2. The Exploratory Sequential Model

The factor of subjectivity in choosing the websites and coverage topics was neutralized with the help of the selected methodological strategy - the exploratory sequential model. That is, the implementation of the document review method was based on the information obtained from expert interviews, and not on the researcher's preferences.

3. Data Quality Inspections

To ensure the database accuracy, routine and final content-related and technical data quality inspections were conducted in the data collection phase. The data quality control expert and the research coordinator were correcting the omissions in the database on a daily and weekly basis, conducting re-coding and other types of non-content-related inspections, as well as random inspections of the coding accuracy and completeness of some of the logged articles. More than 10% of the actually coded articles underwent random inspections.

4. Data verification

The quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted in a combined way in the data analysis phase. It allowed conducting data verification when finding controversies in the information obtained with the help of both methods, once again discussing the data with the experts, if necessary.

While analyzing the information, not only the traditional analytical qualitative and quantitative techniques were used but also the frame analysis approach was adopted. This approach allowed identifying the discursive elements implemented by information

senders for framing a certain topic, idea or event, thus revealing the values and impressions they expect to form among the audience⁹.

In the framework of this research, the frame analysis approach made it possible to understand the coding typical for disinformation, the definitions of certain phenomena, as well as the techniques for guiding and managing the perceptions and impressions.

⁹ Lindekilde, L. (2014). Discourse and Frame Analysis: In-Depth Analysis of Qualitative Data in Social Movement Research. In D. della Porta (Ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* (pp. 195-227). Oxford University Press.

THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Part 1. The Particularities of Disinformation in the Armenian Media Discourse

The media industry significantly changed after the “Velvet Revolution” - the events that happened in April-May, 2018. Almost all the interviewed experts mentioned that there was a drastic increase in disinformation flows. The number of fake social media users greatly increased as well. According to the experts, it was resulted by the changes in public perceptions of the media potential and role.

“The biggest concern is also about the fact that people realized the power and resources of social platforms during the velvet revolution. Now this has become an integral part of each Armenian citizen.”

Heghine Buniatyan | journalist | Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty¹⁰

According to the experts, this is also caused by the fact that currently the media industry is much more diverse due to the reduction of political control that was apparent before the movement in 2018.

“After the revolution, people started taking advantage of the fact that there was freedom of speech, and they began implementing it as a tool for disseminating disinformation and not be persecuted in any way. [...] Before the revolution, people were much more scared, much more discreet, and expressed themselves much more thoughtfully.”

Arusik Mkrtchyan | media influencer | Be Informed public awareness NGO

The media diversity has led to a larger information polarization. As a result, disinformative propaganda is being disseminated much easier than the refutations of false information.

According to the experts, the motivations of disinformation disseminators have also changed – mainly moving from the field of interests to the field of values.

¹⁰ All the expert names were mentioned in the direct quotes of the report with their consent.

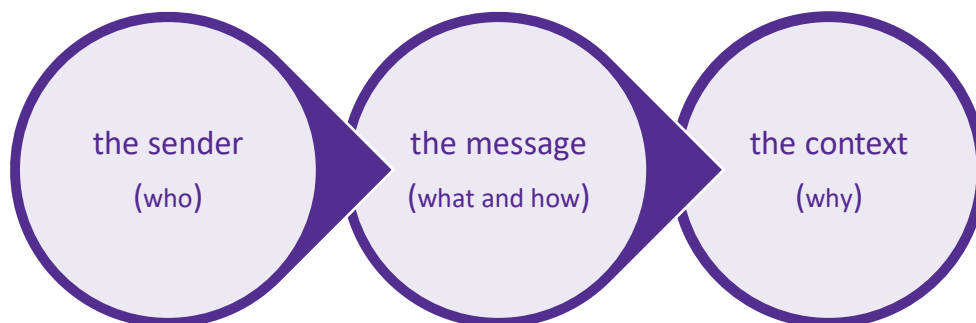
“Before the revolution, people involved in it had special interests, and almost all of the most active fake users were professionals and were being paid for their activities. During and immediately after the revolution, a rather serious army of volunteers appeared. They were involved in protecting the revolution and the new authorities, willfully and without getting anything in return. [...] Actually, this army turned out to be bigger than the paid fake users. [...] Today, the role of the volunteer advocates has decreased because volunteers have been found on the other side as well. However, they [the army of fake users] are still one of the key factors.”

Boris Navasardyan | media development expert | Yerevan Press Club

Through expert interviews, there was an attempt to discover the disinformation particularities and similarities in the Armenian media texts, as well as to find out how people can tell the difference between disinformation and accurate information.

Combining the experts' assessments, it was possible to state that disinformation particularities are caused by a number of factors or criteria that could be conditionally categorized on the basis of three questions – “who is saying?”, “what are they saying and how?”, “why or in which context are they saying?” (see Diagram 2)

Diagram 2. The Grounds for Disclosing Disinformation



One of the criteria, most mentioned by the experts, is the information sender, i.e. the source or the primary source. Here, the familiarity and reliability, as well as the credibility of the source are being emphasized. According to the experts, disinformation propaganda is commonly found in the articles where the author, the primary source or the link to the primary source are missing, and where a reference is made to unknown and undetermined sources (often referring to “our sources”).

“Very often I don’t even click on the story because it is obviously a less trustworthy or a totally unreliable source.”

Liana Sayadyan | investigative journalist | Hetq.am

While mentioning the disinformation senders and disseminators, the experts single out several groups of sources:

1. The media belonging to (influenced by) the former authorities;
2. Ideological groups (radical conservative, ARF-Dashnaktsutyun);
3. Russia-based websites;
4. Facebook groups and users;
5. Social media opinion makers;
6. “Mushroom Media”¹¹
7. “Clickbaits”¹²

“Basically, their main agenda is about creating a media buzz and misleading the public into forming certain positions, opinions and ideas. That is, creating an environment where people cease to understand what is happening, after all. [...] They also manage to make the media environment uncontrollable, and very often it becomes hard for people to recognize the difference between disinformation and accurate information.”

Arpi Manusyan | media researcher | Socioscope NGO

The experts have singled out a group of Armenian media outlets where they have noticed disinformation flows. The diagram 3 has arranged the media outlets mentioned by the experts from left to right, in descending order of reference frequency.

¹¹ Media.am defines the “Mushroom Media” the following way: “...semi-news outlets, semi-entertaining websites, which do not create their own content, are full of contextual advertising and spread like mushrooms” (see <https://media.am/hy/verified/2019/02/15/11062/>, available as of 29.08.2020).

¹² Websites whose main commercial goal is to encourage visitors to click on particular links.

Diagram 3. The Media that have Disseminated Flows of Disinformation, according to Interviewed Experts



The next factor that is considered to be important by the expert is the text style, quality and the contents of the **message**, transmitted through the news story. This is possible to observe on two levels - in the title of the article and in the original text.

According to the experts' assessment, guiding elements are commonly found in the titles of the articles containing disinformation, which adds interest and makes the audience read more. Three types of guiding examples were singled out – titles containing questions, sensational titles, and titles not expressing the article context.

““Urgent!”, “Exclusive!”, “Stop what you’re doing and Click Here!”... When you click on stories with such titles you realize that either the information is incomplete, or has nothing to do with the reality.”

Ani Grigoryan | fact-checking expert | Fip.am

The experts consider that the texts of the articles contain disinformation if they come across at least one of the following characteristic features:

- Violations related to reporter’s professionalism, literacy and ethics;
- Applying several types of styles in a text;
- Irrational, emotional, intuitive connotations;
- Subjective characteristics, adjectives, adverbs, connotations;
- Exclamation marks;
- Attention-capturing images.

According to the experts' assessment, while disclosing disinformation messages, it is also important to identify the exact influence and impression that the message imposes upon the audience, deliberately or non-deliberately. Actually, the above-mentioned techniques are used to guide and manage the audience’s impressions and emotions, which enhances the possible influence of the disinformation message over the information recipient.

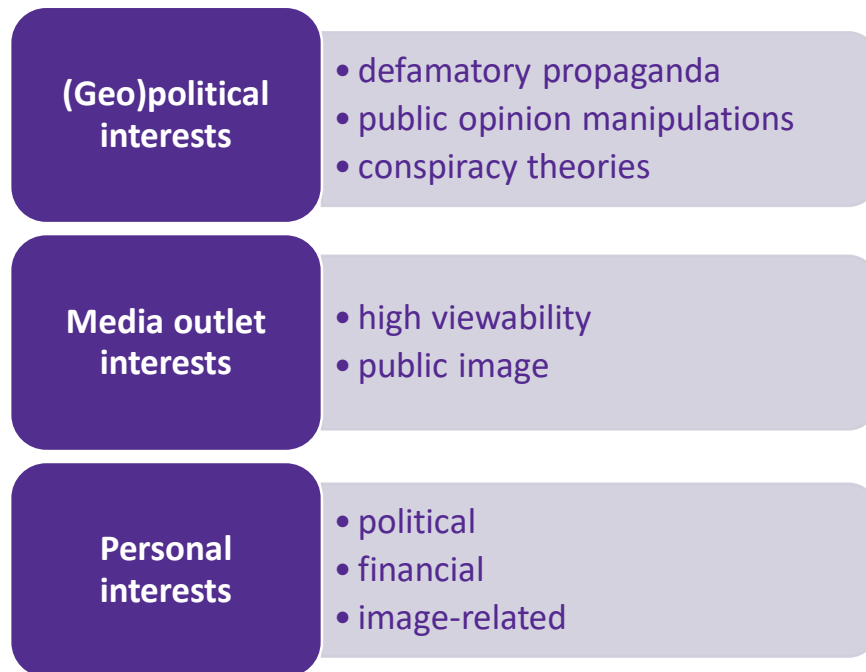
“When a reporter wants to convince the audience of something, he uses some redundant or exaggerated characteristics. [...], obviously, a certain connotation is used, and it means that they are trying to guide me and make a certain impression on me.”

Samvel Martirosyan | media analyst | ArmSec foundation

The third essential criterion that is possible to formulate, based on the experts' observations, is the **contextualization** of the information that was sent. This factor has a special significance since it focuses on the context and the goals, in response to which certain information is transferred, highlighting some specific aspects of the contents.

Accordingly, the experts have singled out three groups of goals and contexts of disinformation messages (see Diagram 4).

Diagram 4. The Goals and Contexts of Disinformation Messages



Here are the most relevant topics that recently received the highest media coverage, accompanied with disinformation propaganda: Coronavirus, the Artsakh issue and gender problems (the Lanzarote Convention, the Istanbul Convention, LGBT issues, etc.)

In this context, the experts have also mentioned (although less frequently) some other topics, including the relations between Armenia and Russia, the current authorities being “Soros adepts”, corruption, migration and the church.

Taking into account the results of the expert interviews, an attempt was made to conduct quantitative measurements of the coverage particularities of the most relevant topics in the Armenian online media. The data that was received from observing the news articles led to valuable research findings that are presented in the next subsection of the report.

Part 2. The Framing of the Topics of Coronavirus, the Karabakh Issue and the Lanzarote Convention in the Armenian Online Media

This part of the analysis is based on the data obtained in July, 2020. The data were received in the process of a systematized observation of the articles on the relevant topics, published in the mentioned media outlets (see the subsection *The Sampling of the Research*). The methodology of frame analysis was applied to interpret the data: attempts were made to identify the framing characteristics of the observed topics.

Framing is a selected transfer of information¹³, where the information sender transfers the message in a way and in a formulation that helps to emphasize a certain issue or a specific angle of the issue, thus guiding the information recipient to pay attention to certain aspects and to understand it in a certain way. After all, the framing of various events and phenomena shape people's perceptions of the reality.

In this regard, the methodology of frame analysis allows to identify how certain aspects of social reality are constructed.¹⁴ Based on the experts' assessments, we have presented the frame analysis of the coverage of Coronavirus, the Karabakh Issue and the Lanzarote Convention in News.am, Tert.am and 168.am media outlets. It includes the analysis of coding scheme categories that contain interesting data, from the researching viewpoint.

THE FRAMING OF CORONAVIRUS

The Quantitative Description of News Articles

The total number of coronavirus-related pieces in the observed media outlets was 23595 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Number of Articles on Coronavirus

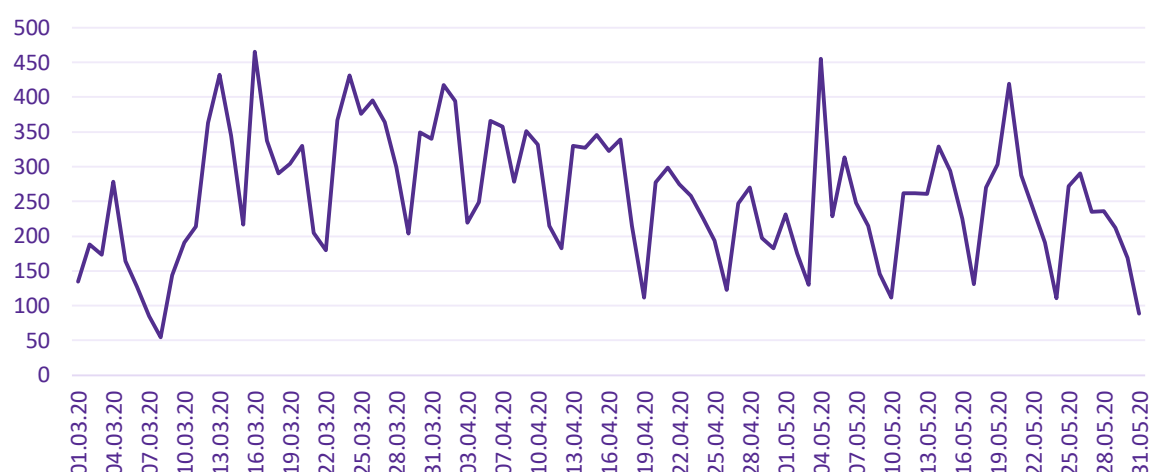
The Media	The number of articles	Time period
news.am	11545	01.03.2020 – 31.05.2020
tert.am	6556	
168.am	5494	
Total	23595	

The distribution of thematic articles in the selected time period is presented in Graph 1.

¹³ Entman R. (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4): p. 55

¹⁴ Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Freeman.

Graph 1. The Number of Articles on Coronavirus for the Target Period



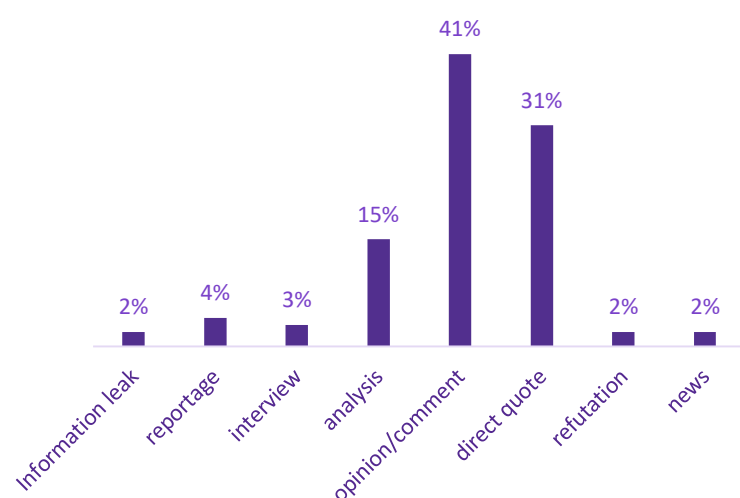
Only 7.4% of the observed articles (1814 articles) contained a thematic statement (see Table 5).

Table 5. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on Coronavirus

The number of articles			23595
Articles containing thematic statements			1814

For the most part (41%), the observed articles (see Graph 2) were based on the opinion or comment of a third party, or completely consisted of a direct quote of a third party (31%). Only 15% of the articles on Coronavirus contained analysis produced by a reporter or the media outlet.¹⁵

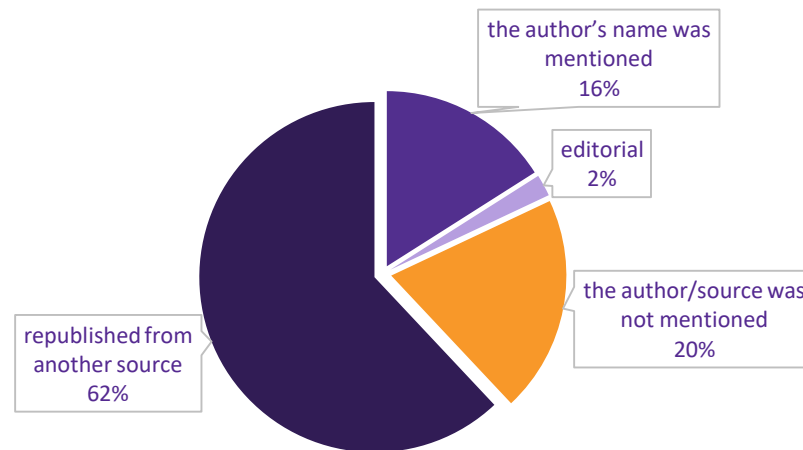
Graph 2. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1814)



¹⁵ Seven types of news articles were defined in the framework of the research (see Appendix 2, point 7).

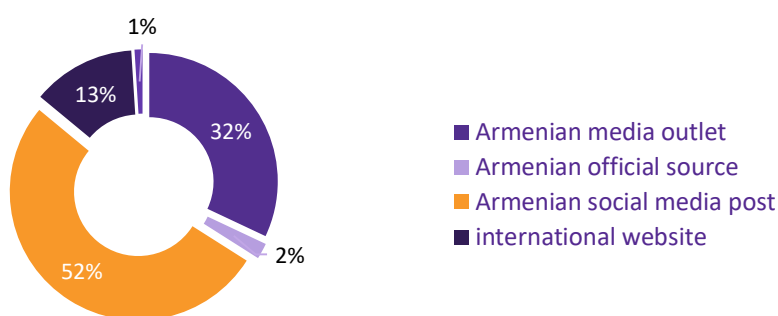
It's quite remarkable that the overwhelming majority of coronavirus-related articles – 62% - was re-published in the observed media outlet from another source, and, in 20% of the cases, the author or the source was not mentioned (see Graph 3).

Graph 3. The Authorship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1814)



More than half of the primary sources of the republished articles (52%) were from the Armenian content of the social media (see Graph 4). Apparently, the social media not only serve for the observed outlets as information dissemination platforms but also as a main source of information. This once again enhances the assessments of the interviewed experts, stating that the social media have obtained a key significance in the aspect of getting information.

Graph 4. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=1113)



"A lot of non-filtered information gets disseminated through the social media as "trashy information." It's mainly Facebook because that's the number one social media in Armenia [...]. It's mainly the two of them – media outlets and the social media."

Vahe Sarukhanyan | fact-checking expert | Hetq.am

The research has shown that more than half of the Coronavirus-related articles contain political statements (see Table 6). Conspiracy messages are mainly found in the other articles¹⁶.

Only 1% of the articles contain statements that the virus really exists and has transmitted from animals to humans. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that all the other articles claim the contrary.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Coronavirus-related statements in the observed media outlets are not intended to neutralize the conspiracy theories widely spread in the Armenian society.

Table 6. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Statement on Coronavirus (N=2193)¹⁷

	proportion	quantity
1 The authorities are powerless in fighting the virus	42%	916
2 The authorities keep the epidemic situation under control	9%	194
The authorities take advantage of the virus, using it for their own		
3 benefit	6%	128
4 Citizens are to blame/responsible for the spread of the virus	5%	102
5 Armenia tends to become a dictatorship	4%	93
The authorities keep hiding the real number of COVID-positive		
6 patients	3%	71
7 An effective remedy against the virus has been discovered	3%	64
8 We should join efforts to fight the virus	3%	62
9 It really exists and has transmitted from animals to humans	1%	32
10 The virus is a tool to control the population	1%	30
It was created as a result of the political competition between the		
11 great world powers	1%	24
12 It does not really exist or is no different from flu	1%	22
It was created to serve the commercial interests of certain		
13 people or groups	0%	8
14 The tests can infect you with the virus	0%	1
15 Other	20%	446

The Political Framing of Coronavirus

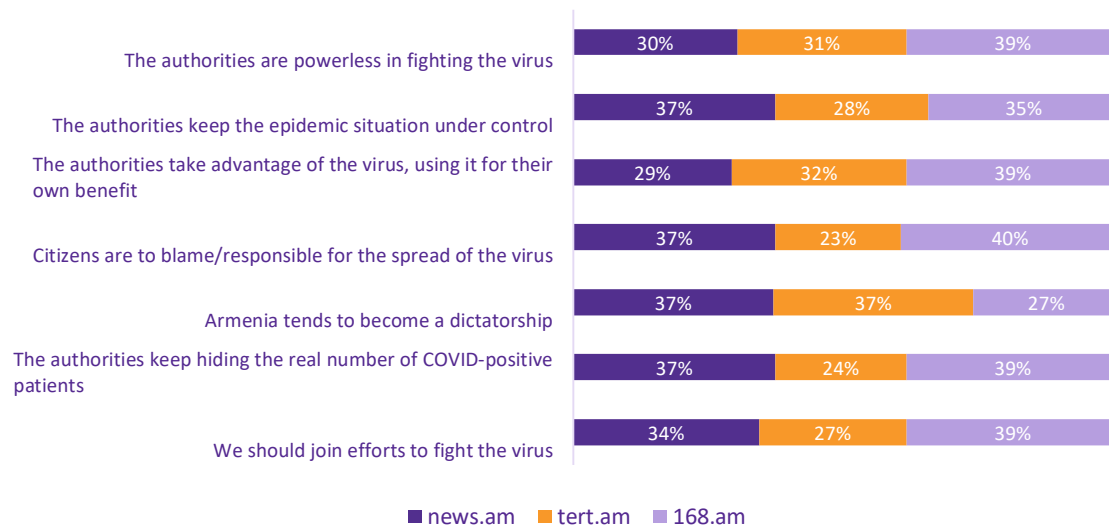
The political framing in the coverage of Coronavirus was conducted through the Messages #1-6 and 8 that are mentioned in Table 6. Those Messages contain apparent political messages. Their overwhelming part (42%) somehow conveys the message that the authorities are helpless in fighting the virus.

The frequency of their mentions in the observed media outlets is presented in Graph 5.

¹⁶ Articles containing frequently recurring or non-recurring statements were grouped under the code *Other*.

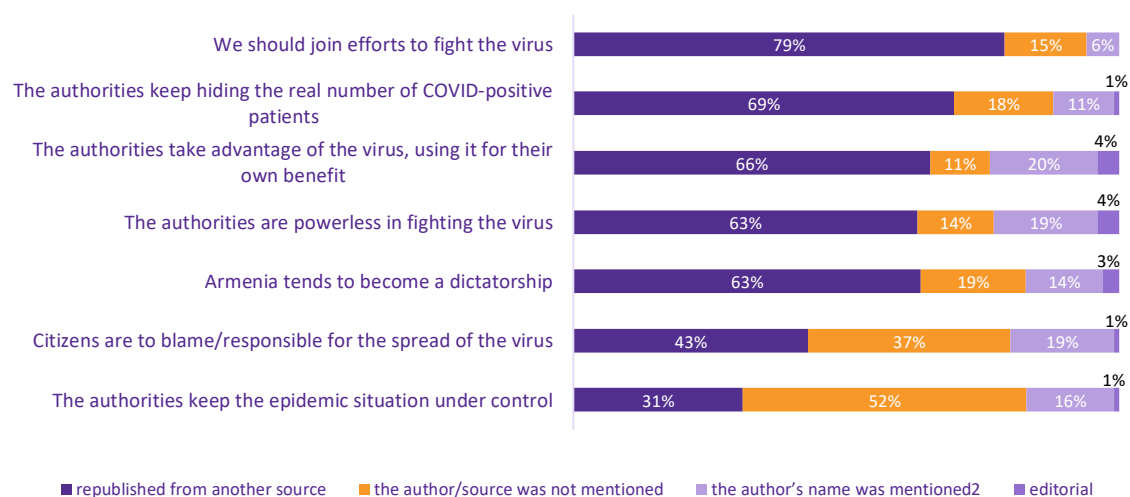
¹⁷ The data for the fields *Key message 1* and *Key message 2* were combined.

Graph 5. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to News Outlets (N=1814)



The study shows that most articles containing political framing are republished from other sources (see Graph 6). The only exceptions are the Messages claiming that *Citizens are to blame for the spread of the virus* and *The authorities keep the epidemic situation under control* (actually those ones present the viewpoint of the authorities). The articles, where the author/source is not mentioned, constitute a large percentage of them.

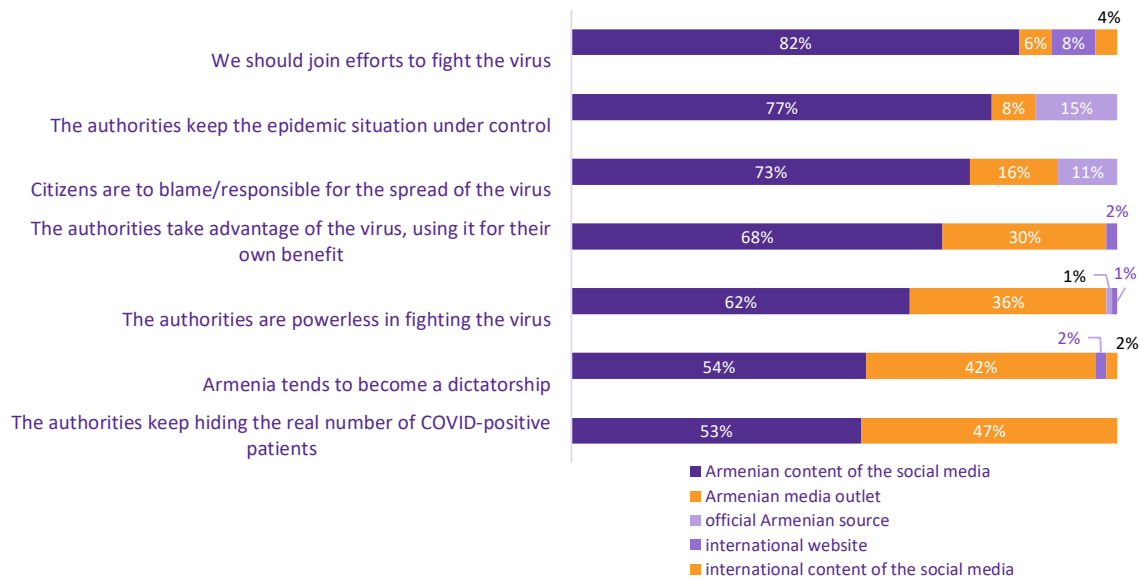
Graph 6. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=1814)



The articles that were republished from other sources mainly refer to the Armenian content of the social media or the Armenian media, as their primary source (see Graph 7). In this regard, the quantitative data received from these media outlets do not confirm the experts' viewpoint about the political statements "imported from outside"

into the Armenian internal discourse. In this case, we can claim that the political framing of Coronavirus has emerged exactly in the internal Armenian media discourse.

Graph 7. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=1113)

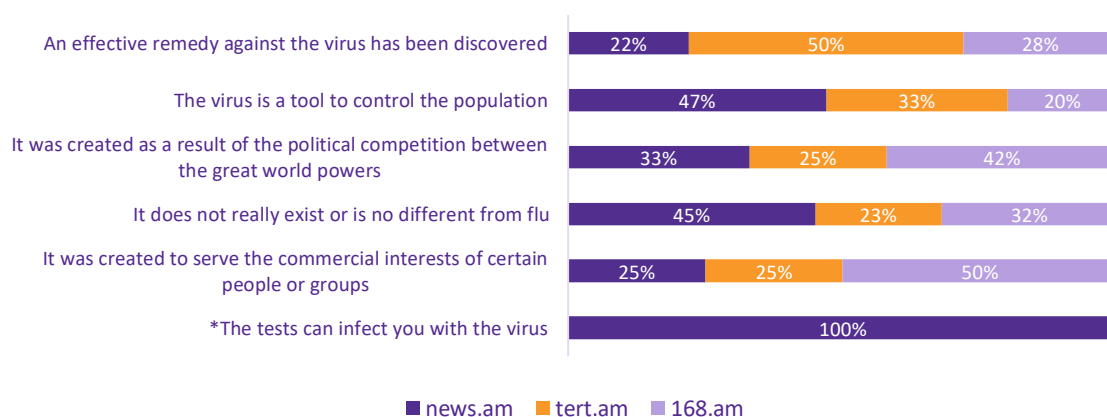


The Conspiracy Framing of Coronavirus

The conspiracy framing of Coronavirus coverage was conducted with the help of the Messages # 7 and ## 10-14, presented in the Table 6.

The proportions of the Messages in the observed media outlets are presented in Graph 8.

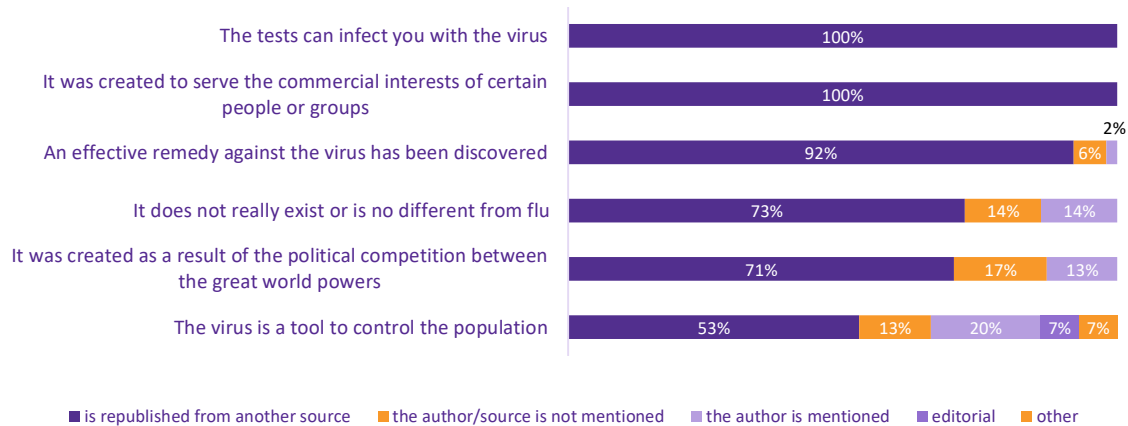
Graph 8. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to News Outlets (N=1814)



* *The tests can infect you with the virus* – this Message was found only in one article published by *news.am* media outlet.

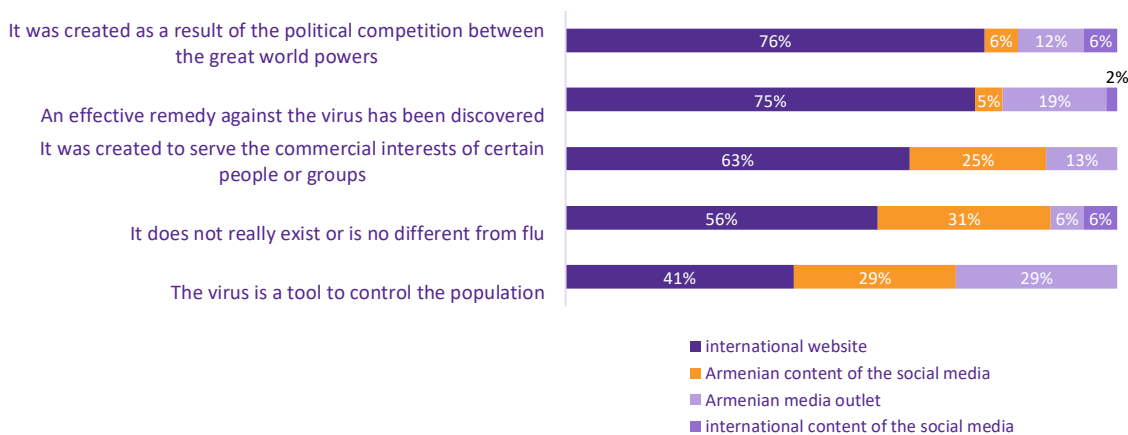
Apparently, the conspiracy framing is also based on articles republished from other sources (see Graph 9).

Graph 9. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=1814)



Furthermore, if the political framing of Coronavirus was mainly conditioned by the internal media discourse, the conspiracy theories get into the observed media outlets and spread mainly from foreign media discourses (see Graph 10).

Graph 10. The Messages on Coronavirus, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=1113)



In fact, primary sources of Russian origin apparently prevail in conspiracy statements. In this regard, the observation of the selected media outlets confirms the experts' viewpoint about disinformation intruding into the Armenian media mainly from Russian sources.

“It’s mainly the Russian media but the American media is involved, too – although less frequently. It’s about “paid investments” of disinformation that are brought into the Armenian market. They are posted in Russian websites or Telegram channels and later get here.”

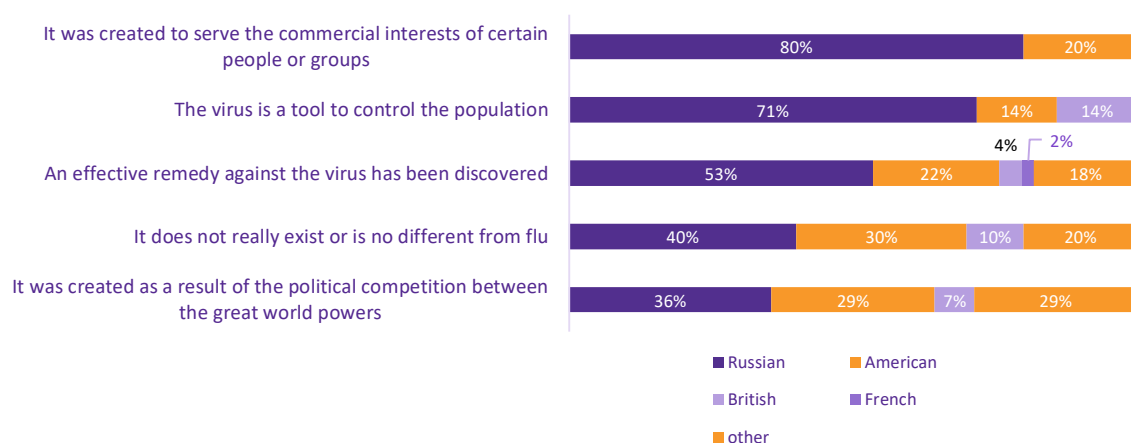
Samvel Martirosyan | media analyst | ArmSec foundation

“The most absurd idea is playing tricks on people’s health issues in these critical times, spreading things like [...] 5G, Bill Gates and such disinformation [...]. When you click on it you see that it’s only about quotes from Russian sources, excerpts from Russian-language videos.”

Tatev Hovhannisyan | investigative journalist | OpenDemocracy.net

Graph 11 suggests that there are quite a few conspiracy theories disseminated from sources of American origin, and in some cases – from sources of British origin.

Graph 11. The Messages Statements on Coronavirus, according to the Origin of the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=115)



THE FRAMING OF THE KARABAKH ISSUE

The Quantitative Description of News Articles

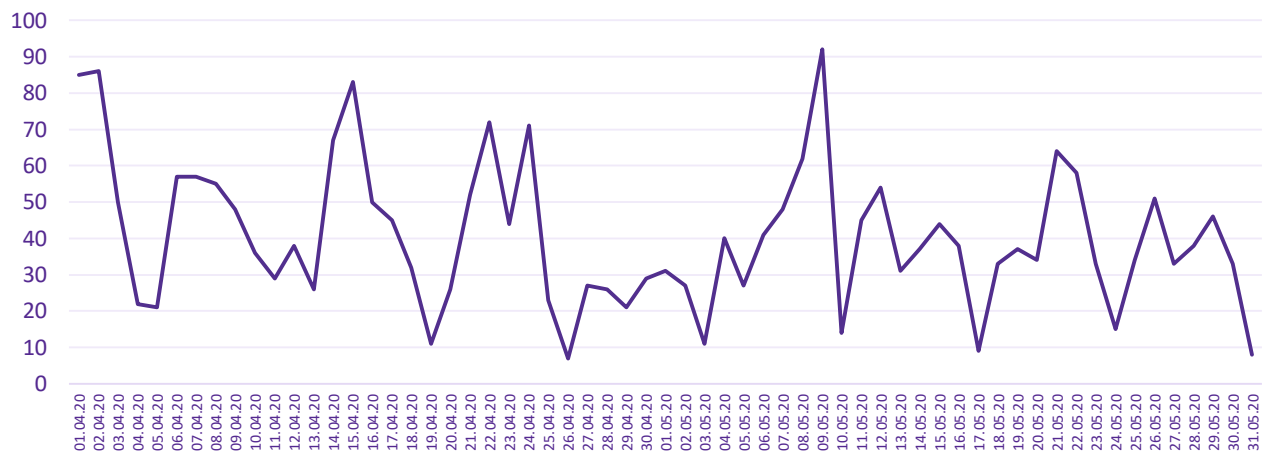
The total number of pieces related to the Karabakh issue in the observed media outlets was 2464 (see Table 7).

Table 7. The Number of Articles on the Karabakh Issue

The media	The number of articles	Time period
news.am	1322	01.04.2020 – 31.05.2020
tert.am	271	
168.am	871	
Total	2464	

The distribution of thematic articles in the selected time period is presented in Graph 12.

Graph 12. The Number of Articles on the Karabakh Issue for the Target Period



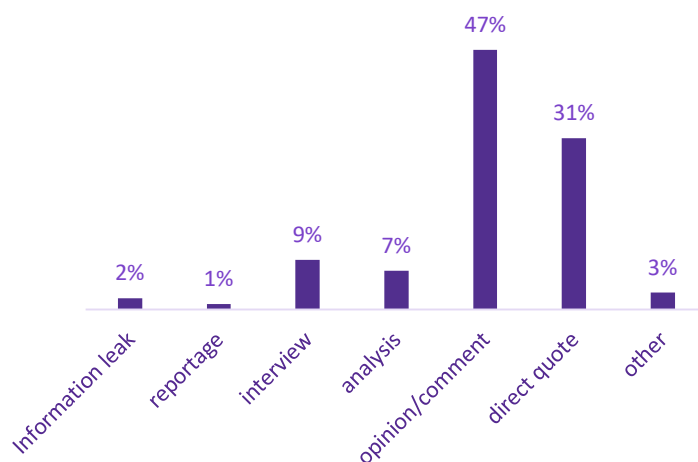
Only 9.3% of the observed articles (229 articles) contained a thematic statement (see Table 8).

Table 8. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Karabakh Issue

The number of articles	2464
Articles containing thematic statements	229

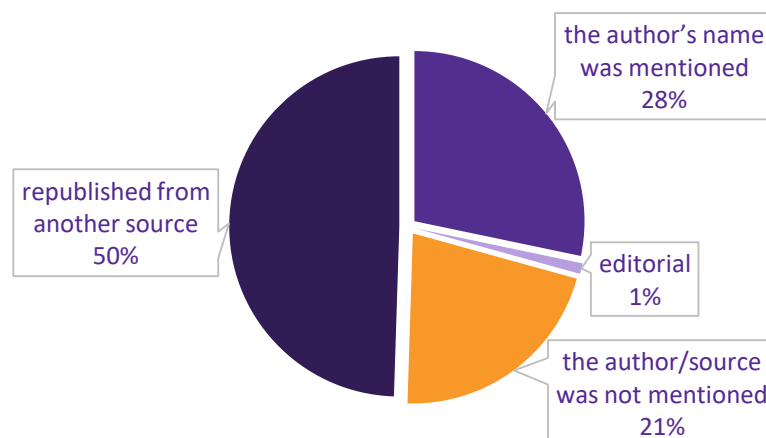
For the most part (47%), the observed articles (see Graph 13) were based on the opinion or comment of a third party, or completely consisted of a direct quote of a third party (31%). Only 7% of the articles on the Karabakh issue contained analysis produced by a reporter or the media outlet.

Graph 13. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=229)



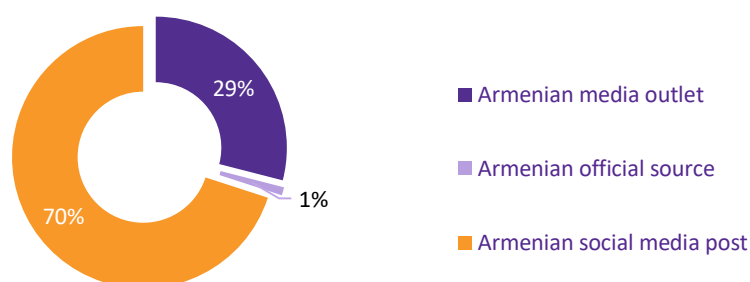
It's quite remarkable that the overwhelming majority of the articles related to the Karabakh issue – 49% - were re-published in the observed media outlet from another source (as in the case of Coronavirus coverage), and, in 22% of the cases, the author or the source was not mentioned (see Graph 14).

Graph 14. The Authorship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=229)



The overwhelming majority of the primary sources of the republished articles (70%) were from the Armenian content of the social media. It should be noted that, as in the case of the Coronavirus coverage, the Karabakh issue coverage, for the most part, is heavily dependent on the social media content (see Graph 15).

Graph 15. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=113)



The research has made it clear that the Karabakh issue is being framed with specific political statements, for almost half of the time. Most articles present the authorities' efforts to regulate the Karabakh issue in a negative light¹⁸.

¹⁸ Articles containing frequently recurring or non-recurring statements were grouped under the code *Other*.

In particular, the most common message is the one that the authorities' foreign policy in the context of the Karabakh conflict is "miserable" (see Table 9). Statements criticizing the transparency of the negotiation process, as well as statements on "handing over the lands" are also commonly found in the articles.

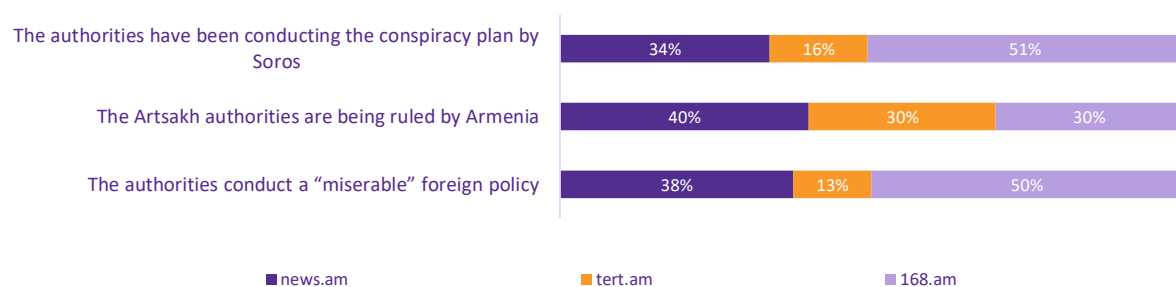
Table 9. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Karabakh Issue (N=239¹⁹)

		proportion	quantity
1	<i>The authorities conduct a "miserable" foreign policy</i>	35%	83
2	<i>The authorities hide the information on the negotiation process</i>	13%	32
3	<i>The authorities have been "handing over the lands"</i>	6%	15
4	<i>The Artsakh authorities are being ruled by Armenia</i>	4%	10
5	<i>National heroes are being "neutralized"/prosecuted in order to solve the Artsakh issue in an anti-Armenian way</i>	4%	10
6	<i>The authorities have been conducting the conspiracy plan by Soros</i>	3%	8
7	<i>The authorities of deserters cannot negotiate over the Artsakh issue</i>	0%	1
	<i>other</i>	33%	80

The Political Framing of the Karabakh Issue

The political framing in the coverage of the Karabakh issue was conducted through the Messages ##1, 4 and 6 that are mentioned in Table 9. Those messages contain apparent political messages. Their overwhelming part (42%) somehow conveys the message that the authorities are helpless in fighting the virus. The proportions of the messages in the observed media outlets are presented in Graph 16.

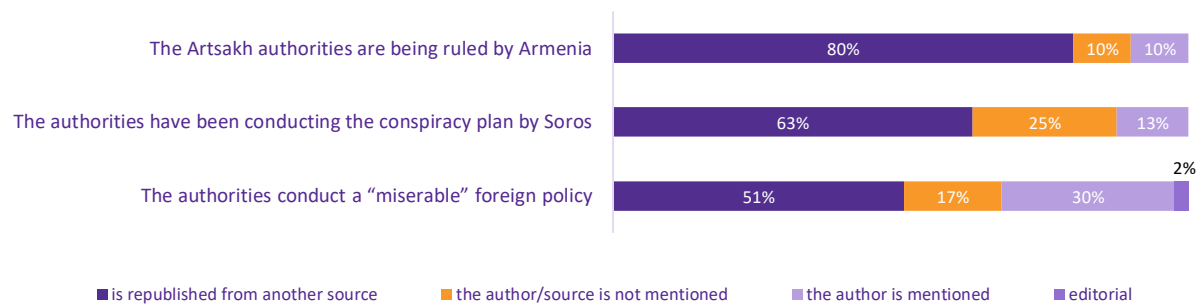
Graph 16. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to News Outlets (N=101)



Once again we can notice that the circulated political messages are mostly republished from other sources (see Graph 17). The articles, where the author/source is not mentioned, constitute a large percentage of them. The message claiming that The authorities have been conducting the conspiracy plan by Soros is mainly found (88%) either in republished or unsigned articles.

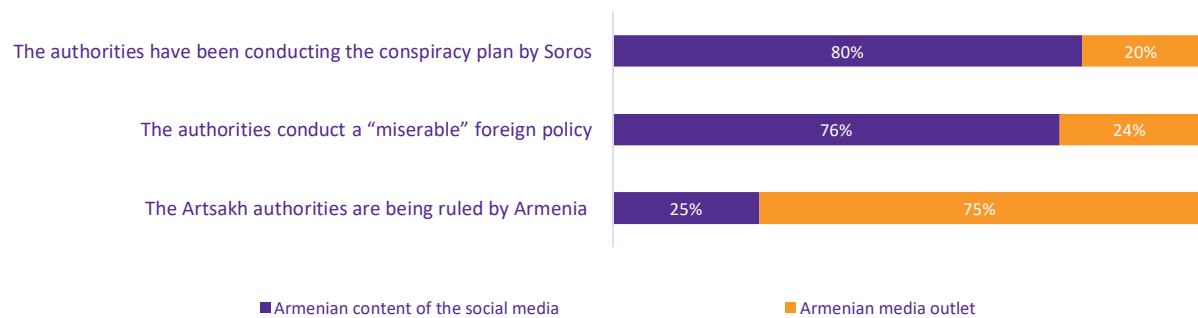
¹⁹ The data for the fields *Key Message 1* and *Key message 2* were combined.

Graph 17. The messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=101)



In fact, the articles republished here are exclusively products of internal discourse. They are disseminated from the Armenian content of the social media or Armenian media outlets (see Graph 18). The conspiracy statement about "Soros adepts" is mainly spread from the social media.

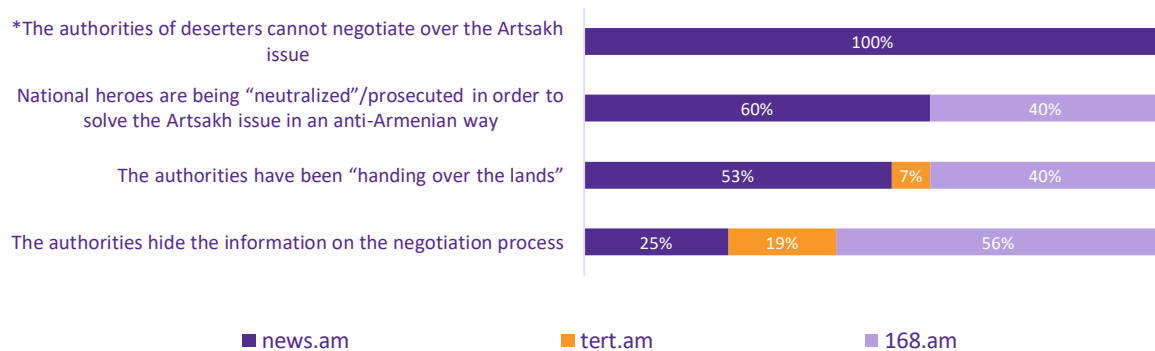
Graph 18. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=39)



The Framing of the Karabakh Issue Regulation

The framing of the Karabakh issue regulation coverage was conducted with the help of the messages ## 2-3, 5 and 7, presented in the Table 9. The proportions of the messages in the media outlets are presented in Graph 19.

Graph 19. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to News Outlets (N=58)



*The message *The authorities of deserters cannot negotiate over the Artsakh issue was mentioned only once, by news.am website.*

The Graph 20 makes it clear that most articles framing the conflict regulation were also republished from other sources. Original articles constitute a statistically significant percent (38%) only in the case of the message “The authorities hide the information on the negotiation process”.

Graph 20. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=58)



In this case as well, the republished articles are mainly products of internal Armenian media discourse. However, the content obtained from the social media prevails this time as well (see Graph 21).

Graph 21. The Messages on the Karabakh Issue, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=33)



THE FRAMING OF THE LANZAROTE CONVENTION

The Quantitative Description of News Articles

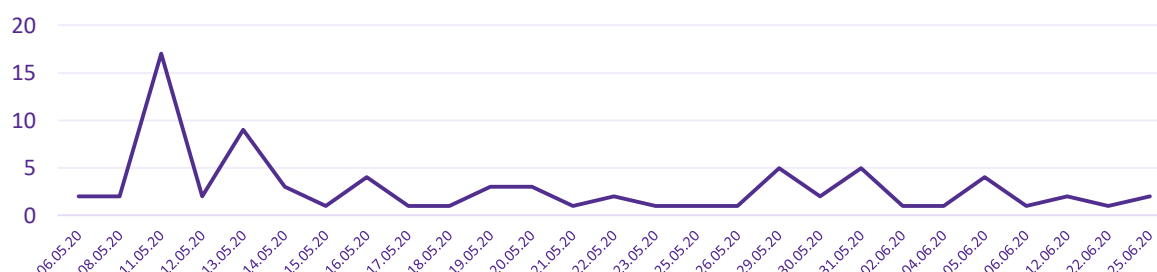
The total number of pieces related to the Lanzarote Convention in the observed media outlets was 78 (see Table 10).

Table 10. The Number of Articles on the Lanzarote Convention

The media	The number of articles	Time period
news.am	36	01.05.2020 – 30.06.2020
tert.am	10	
168.am	32	
Total	78	

The distribution of thematic articles in the selected time period is presented in Graph 22.

Graph 22. The Number of Articles on the Lanzarote Convention for the Target Period



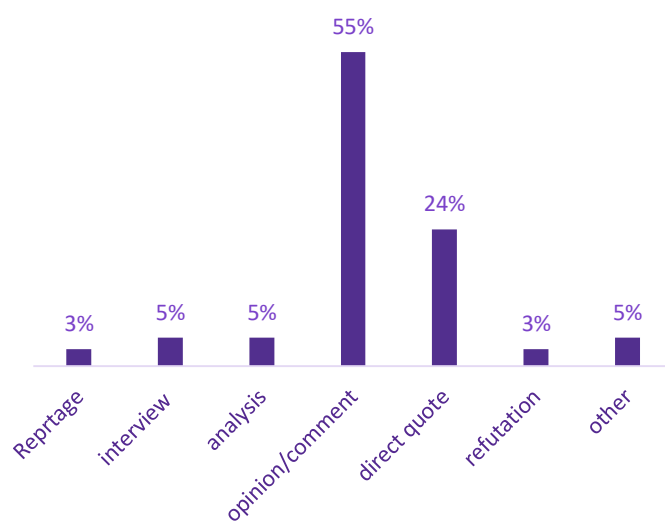
Only 48.7% of the observed articles (38 articles) contained a thematic statement (see Table 11).

Table 11. The Number of Articles Containing a Thematic Statement on the Lanzarote Convention

The number of articles	78
Articles containing thematic statements	38

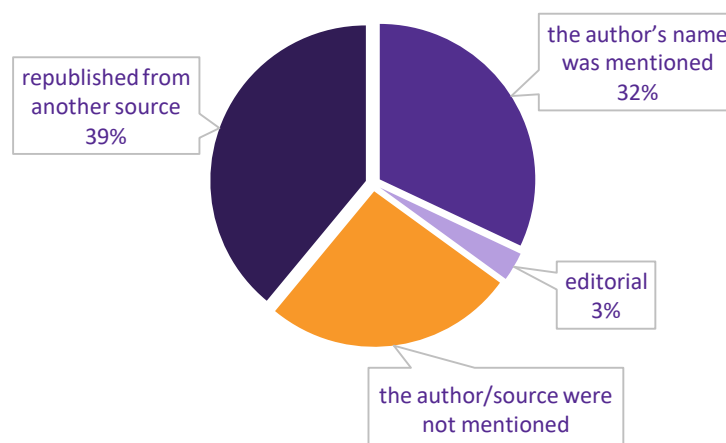
For the most part (55%), the observed articles (see Graph 23) were based on the opinion or comment of a third party, or completely consisted of a direct quote of a third party (24%). Only 5% of the articles on the Lanzarote Convention contained analysis produced by a reporter or the media outlet.

Graph 23. The Types of Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=38)

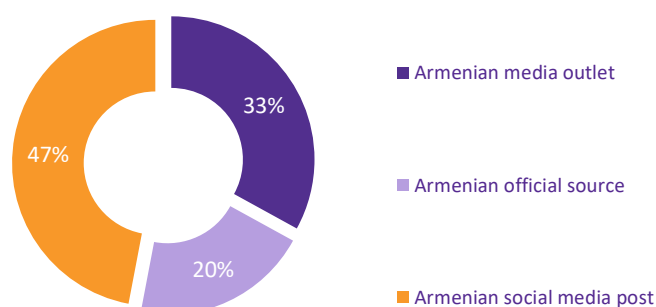


The overwhelming majority of the articles related to the Lanzarote Convention (39%) were re-published in the observed media outlet from another source (as in the case of Coronavirus and Karabakh issue coverage). In this case, the authors were mentioned in 1/3 (32%) of the articles (see Graph 24).

Graph 24. The Authorship Description of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=38)



Graph 25. The Primary Source of the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=15)



Almost half of the articles on the Lanzarote Convention contain political statements (see Table 12). The main message of the 30% of articles claims that the convention exposes children to sexual abuse²⁰.

Table 12. The Mentions of Messages in the Articles Containing a Statement on the Lanzarote Convention (N=47)²¹

	proportion	quantity
1 <i>The Convention exposes children to sexual abuse</i>	30%	14
2 <i>The Convention protects children from sexual violence</i>	23%	11
3 <i>The Convention creates conditions for violence against children</i>	15%	7
4 <i>The Convention promotes homosexuality</i>	6%	3
other	26%	12

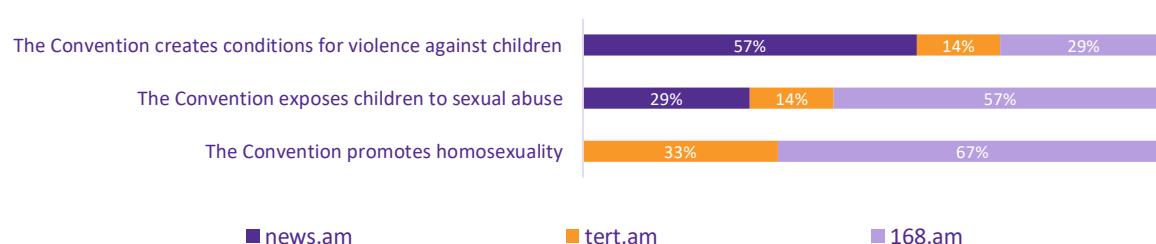
The Sexual Framing of the Lanzarote Convention

The sexual framing in the coverage of the Lanzarote Convention was conducted through the messages ##1, 4 and 6 that are mentioned in Table 12. The proportions of the messages in the observed media outlets are presented in Graph 26. The sexual framing is based on the messages related to violence against children, sexual abuse and homosexuality propaganda.

²⁰ Articles containing frequently recurring or non-recurring statements were grouped under the code *Other*.

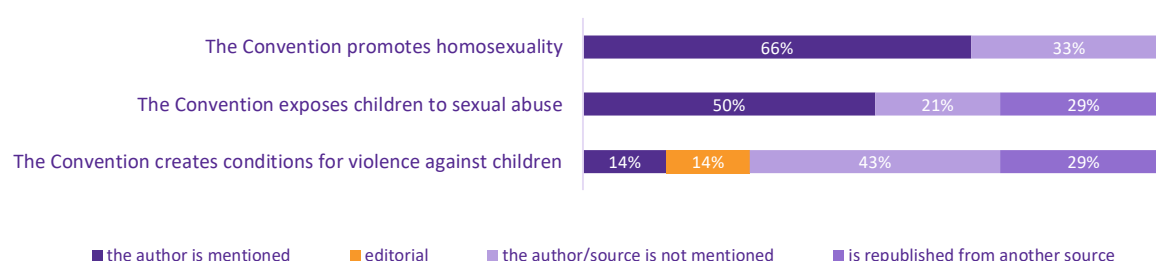
²¹ The data for the fields *Key Message 1* and *Key Message 2* were combined.

Graph 26. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to News Outlets (N=34)



Interestingly, unlike the coverage of Coronavirus and the Karabakh issue, original articles prevail in the coverage of the Lanzarote convention (see Graph 27). The statements on creating conditions for violence against children are mainly found in unsigned articles or in the articles that contain no reference to the source.

Graph 27. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Authorship Description of an Article (N=34)



There are 6 articles on this topic that were republished from other sources. This time as well, they refer to the Armenian content of the social media or some other Armenian media outlet, as a primary source, partly suggesting that this framing, too, is typical for internal narratives (see Graph 28).

Graph 28. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=6)

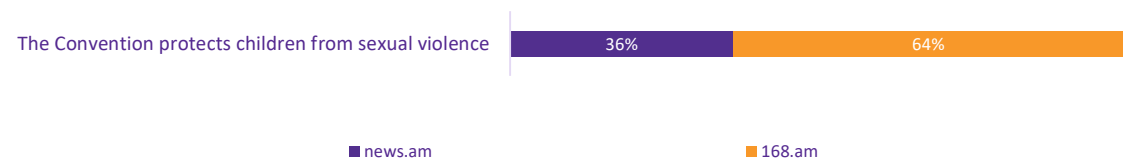


The Fact-based Framing of the Lanzarote Convention

The fact-based framing in the coverage of the Convention was conducted through the message #2 that is mentioned in Table 9. Those articles mainly convey the message that the Convention is intended to protect children from sexual violence. The proportions of the messages in the observed media outlets are presented in Graph 29. The sexual

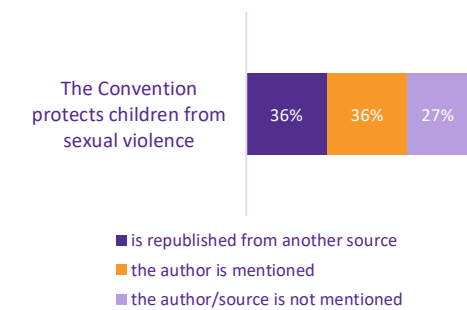
framing is based on the messages related to violence against children, sexual abuse and homosexuality propaganda.

Graph 29. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to News Outlets (N=11)

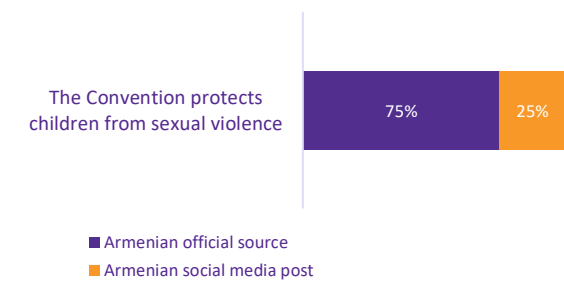


In this case, the authorship descriptions are almost equally distributed between republished, unsigned and original articles (see Graph 30). And, as you can see from Graph 31, this statement as well is a product of an internal media discourse.

Graph 30. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Authorship (N=11)



Graph 31. The Messages on the Lanzarote Convention, according to the Primary Source of the Republished Article (N=4)



CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the research results, we could draw a few conclusions.

1. Based on experts' assessments, disinformation flows have significantly escalated in the Armenian online media after the "velvet revolution."
2. A scheme developed on the basis of expert assessments is implemented in order to reveal the main patterns of disinformation. The scheme comprises three components: the information sender, the information message and the communication context.
3. Most news stories on selected topics published by the researched media in the selected period are not original articles. Having been copied from the social media or other Armenian media outlets, they represent opinions and comments by third parties.
4. According to the quantitative data of the research, the observed media outlets disseminate content, rather than create some.
5. The political framing of Coronavirus in the above-mentioned outlets is a result of "internal Armenian media discourse," and has not "penetrated" from foreign sources.
6. The conspiracy framing of Coronavirus has been mostly penetrating into the Armenian media environment from websites of Russian origin.
7. The foreign policy conducted by the authorities has been framed as "miserable" in most stories covering the Karabakh issue.
8. The Lanzarote Convention has been mainly framed as something contributing to child sexual abuse.
9. The framings of the Karabakh issue and the Lanzarote Convention form a part of the Armenian media narrative in the observed media outlets. Their primary sources have no foreign origin.

APPENDIX 1. A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Media Initiatives Center is conducting a research called *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media*. The research aims at revealing the patterns of disinformation dissemination in the Armenian media.

Your expert assessments will help us to reveal the general patterns of disinformation dissemination, to disclose the main primary sources of their dissemination in the Armenian media, as well as to identify the most relevant disinformation flows, topics and media websites that transmit that disinformation.

The interview²² will last for an hour and, if you have no objections, will be recorded, to make sure our notes fully represent what you say.

If you have no questions, let's start.

1. Please briefly present your relation to the media industry, as well as your experience. How long have you been involved in media-related issues?
2. When you come across new information, how do you figure out if it's disinformation, or not?
3. Who are the disseminators of disinformation? From where and how does disinformation emerge?
4. How do disinformation flows get disseminated and what kind of goals do they pursue? What kind of patterns have you noticed in your experience?
5. How has the media environment changed before and after the "velvet revolution," in the aspect of disinformation circulation?
6. Which are the main primary sources of disinformation disseminated in the Armenian media? Which are the main media outlets that have been disseminating that disinformation? Please mention a few.
7. Which are the most relevant disinformation flows and topics that were being recently circulated in the Armenian media discourse? Which are the media outlets that mostly disseminate it? Which months were the most active ones in terms of dissemination circulation?
8. Which aspects should be specifically taken into consideration in such studies?
9. Who would you suggest as an expert that we could talk to? [please mention a name for each of the subgroups]
10. Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share?

Thank you!

²² The questions, their sequence, the ways they are formulated are conditional, depending on the course of the interview, as well as the expert's professional characteristics.

APPENDIX 2. THE CODING SCHEME OF MEDIA ARTICLES

FILTRATION

1. **Note-taker's code**
2. **Media code**
3. **Date**
4. **Article title**
5. **Thematic statement in the article**
 1. Observed
A thematic statement is observed in all the articles where the key messages are related to the research topic.
 2. Not observed (THE CODING IS FINISHED)
A thematic statement is not observed in all the articles where:
 - the key messages are related to other issues, 70% or more of the posts are related to the coverage of another issue but the searched keyword can be found in the material (for example, a reference is made to the word *Artsakh*, without any thematic comments, in a text that is related to another matter);
 - the coverage is mostly non-related to the Armenian context;
 - there are only “dry” factual statements with no additional messages;
 - there is a video story but there is no accompanying text (containing a thematic statement);
 - the content is not written in Armenian.
6. **Facebook rating of the article** (according to the data of RumorsMonitoring)

TECHNICAL CODING

7. **Article type**
 1. Information leak /non-accurate information from an unknown source/
 2. Reportage
A story that answers to the questions *who?*, *where?*, *when?* and *how?*
 3. Interview
A story presented through questions and answers.
 4. Analysis
All the articles that contain an analytical study conducted by the website reporter or an expert (summaries conducted through combining the facts, as well as materials containing predictions).
 5. Opinion/comment
Materials containing comments by experts or third parties, including the comments of political or public figures on certain events, as well as press conferences and discussions with the involvement of experts.
 6. Investigative journalism /facts, evidences/
Materials that present conclusions, cause-and-effect relationships or related clues, produced with the help of identifying and revealing facts and evidences.
 7. Direct quote

Materials that directly republish a post from another platform (i.e., from social networks), without any additional comments.

8. Refutation

Materials where the main message is about refuting the information contained in one of the previous posts.

9. News

The research takes into account only the news stories the titles of which contain statements. In all the other cases, the article should be coded under one of the previous types.

10. Other

8. Note about refutation

1. Observed /if any types of stories, other than refutations, contain any notes on refuting (including the title)
2. Not observed /if stories, other than refutations, do not contain any notes on refuting, in case a publicly refuted information is observed in the article/
3. Non applicable /is mentioned in cases when (1) the article is a refutation in itself, and (2) the article does not contain a publicly refuted information/

9. The authorship description of the article

1. the author/s is/are not mentioned
2. editorial /PASS to 14/
3. the author/source is not mentioned /PASS to 14/
4. is republished from another source /PASS to 11/
5. other

10. Author/s

11. Primary source

1. Armenian media outlet / PASS to 13/
2. Armenian official source /PASS to 13/
3. Social media Armenian content /PASS to 13/
4. International website
5. Social media international content

12. Primary source origin

1. Russian
2. American
3. British
4. French
5. other

13. A reference to the primary source / register the reference to the primary source; mention 0 if the reference is not available/

DESCRIPTIVE CODING

14. Image availability

1. yes
2. no

15. Title characteristics

1. Sensational
2. Does not express the article context
3. Contains a question
4. Several of the above
5. None of the above
6. Other

CONTENT-RELATED CODING

16. Key message 1 (Coronavirus)

1. It does not really exist or is no different from flu
2. It was created as a result of the political competition between the great world powers
3. It really exists and has transmitted from animals to humans
4. The virus is a tool to control the population
5. It was created to serve the commercial interests of certain people or groups
6. An effective remedy against the virus has been discovered
7. The authorities take advantage of the virus, using it for their own benefit
8. The authorities are powerless in fighting the virus
9. The tests can infect you with the virus
10. The authorities keep hiding the real number of COVID-positive patients
11. Armenia tends to become a dictatorship
12. *Other*
13. The authorities keep the epidemic situation under control
14. Citizens are to blame/responsible for the spread of the virus
15. We should join efforts to fight the virus

Key message 1. (Artsakh)

1. The authorities have been “handing over the lands”
2. The authorities conduct a “miserable” foreign policy
3. The authorities have been conducting the conspiracy plan by Soros
4. The authorities of deserters cannot negotiate over the Artsakh issue
5. National heroes are being “neutralized”/prosecuted in order to solve the Artsakh issue in an anti-Armenian way
6. The Artsakh authorities are being ruled by Armenia
7. The authorities hide the information on the negotiation process
8. Other

Key Thesis 1. (Lanzarote Convention)

1. The Convention exposes children to sexual abuse
2. The Convention promotes homosexuality
3. The Convention creates conditions for violence against children
4. The Convention protects children from sexual violence
5. Other

17. Other – description of message 1

18. Connotation shades for message 1

1. Neutral

If the author has not added a connotation shade to the message.

2. Not neutral

If the author has added a connotation shade to the message.

19. Key Message 2. /use the list of the message 1/

20. Other – description of message 2

21. Connotation shades for message 2

1. Neutral

If the author has not added a connotation shade to the message.

2. Not neutral

If the author has added a connotation shade to the message.

22. Matching the title with the contents

1. The title is a complete match
2. The title matches for the most part
3. The title barely matches
4. The title does not match at all

23. Note-taker's comments

mediainitiatives.am

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Yerevan, 2021