



News content as an environment of triggers for maladaptive daydreaming

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◆ **Abstract.** In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, news content shapes emotions and behaviour, making it especially important to study the psychological mechanisms of influence, in particular maladaptive daydreaming, which increases audience vulnerability through immersion in imagined scenarios, detachment from reality, and functional impairment. The aim of the study was to analyse the relationship between the state of maladaptive daydreaming and informational and psychological influence through news content, as well as to test the hypothesis regarding the presence of triggers in news content capable of activating or intensifying this state. The methodological basis of the study comprised an interdisciplinary approach, doctrinal analysis of informational and psychological operations, content analysis, narrative analysis, and descriptive statistical processing of the results of coding maladaptive daydreaming triggers in news content. The empirical basis consisted of two blocks of internet materials, ten of which belonged to the Russian segment of the information space and ten to the Ukrainian segment. Each item was coded according to five parameters: the title of the material, the core narrative, the identified maladaptive daydreaming trigger, the probable psychological mechanism of influence, and the expected impact on the target audience. The characteristics of maladaptive daydreaming triggers in news content were identified, namely: narrative incompleteness and “serialisation”, oversaturation with emotional evaluations, intrusive modelling of future scenarios, personalisation of the war, hyperbolisation of threats or victories, as well as the use of multimodal amplifiers (clickbait headlines, audiovisual materials). The results of the study indicate that in the Russian block, counterfactual, catastrophic, fatalistic, and compensatory narratives predominate, modelling alternative realities, scenarios of rapid rescue, inevitable defeat, or final ending. Such semantic constructions potentially contribute to escapism, rumination, imagined restoration of control, and a reduction in audience agency. In the Ukrainian block, trigger potential was also identified; however, it is largely associated not with deliberate influence, but with the thematisation of trauma, loss, deferred life, exhaustion, and counterfactual scenarios – for example, “if not for the war...”. It was established that the vulnerability of target audiences to such messages may increase under conditions of prolonged stress, psychological fatigue, and mass traumatisation, which correspond to the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war

◆ **Keywords:** target audience; information operation; psychological operation; escapism; rumination; cognitive influence

◆ Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war has radically transformed the role of the information environment. It has become a fully-fledged, continuous and often decisive arena of confrontation. Online news, social media platforms, messaging apps and digital aggregators no longer function as neutral channels for transmitting objective data, but increasingly serve as a medium for emotionally “priming” target audiences, constructing visions of the future and

shaping behavioural patterns. Accordingly, for successful defence and effective counteraction in the context of information warfare, it is necessary to have a deep understanding not only of the technological algorithms used to deliver destructive messages, but also of the specific, hidden vulnerabilities of the human psyche that these messages skilfully exploit. Modern information warfare is increasingly shifting towards the cognitive dimension.

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F. Ibrahim *et al.* (2023), in their study of cognitive and psychological warfare, emphasised that contemporary influence practices are primarily directed at human mental processes and the exploitation of cognitive vulnerabilities. A. Flood & R.J. Keegan (2022), summarising data on military personnel's cognitive resilience to psychological stress, demonstrated that a decline in cognitive performance under pressure affects the ability to perform complex tasks; consequently, a state of overload and exhaustion increases sensitivity to external stimuli. T.-A. Tran *et al.* (2024) further emphasised that cognitive resilience is shaped by the interaction of environmental stressors, the nature of the activity, and the characteristics of the individual themselves. In this context, news content should be viewed not only as a channel of information but also as a factor of cognitive load, which under certain conditions may exacerbate the psychological vulnerabilities of the target audience.

At the same time, psychology is actively investigating states in which a person loses touch with reality and favours imaginary scenarios as a way of coping with stress, anxiety or helplessness, one of which is maladaptive daydreaming. S. Rana & M. Vyas (2022) described it as a persistent, compulsive and emotionally intense immersion in alternative imaginary realities, accompanied by distress and impaired social and occupational functioning. Unlike ordinary daydreaming, maladaptive daydreaming is characterised by a pronounced narrative nature, repetitiveness, high emotional involvement and a tendency towards compulsive continuation of the imaginary plot. The findings of N. Soffer-Dudek *et al.* (2025) demonstrated that maladaptive daydreaming is a common phenomenon, most frequently observed among younger age groups and individuals experiencing chronic stress. Researchers are increasingly linking maladaptive daydreaming to trauma, dissociative processes, emotional dysregulation, and self-regulation difficulties. Thus, P. Thomson & V.S. Jaque (2023) highlighted the link between maladaptive daydreaming, emotional hyperarousal and difficulties in regulating emotions. I.J. Pietkiewicz *et al.* (2023) pointed to the connection between this phenomenon and certain personality traits. Meanwhile, J.I. Burrell *et al.* (2025) drew attention to intense imagery as a factor sustaining maladaptive daydreaming. On the one hand, maladaptive daydreaming is associated with daily fluctuations in psychopathological symptoms and negative affect, which may heighten vulnerability to informational stimuli. On the other hand, in the information environment of the Russian-Ukrainian war, narratives and trends may be deliberately amplified by information networks and the algorithms of social platforms. This creates structural conditions for repeated exposure to the same narrative, which is an important prerequisite for the formation of "serial" perception (Pezzi *et al.*, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming, its connection with news content as a tool for informational and psychological influence remains insufficiently explored. This gap is

particularly acute in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, where news serves not merely as information but also as a medium for destructive influences. Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate the capacity of specific narrative and multimodal characteristics of news content to act as targeted triggers that activate or intensify manifestations of maladaptive daydreaming in the target audience. In view of the above, the study puts forward the hypothesis that news content may contain triggers capable of activating or intensifying manifestations of maladaptive daydreaming in vulnerable target audiences. It was anticipated that such triggers would manifest through counterfactual, catastrophic, compensatory and emotionally overloaded semantic constructs, which facilitate escapist immersion, rumination, imaginative modelling of an alternative reality and temporary distancing from current traumatic experiences. Accordingly, testing this hypothesis required an analysis of news materials for the presence of such triggers, the nature of their manifestation, and their likely psychological impact on the target audience. The aim of the study was to test the hypothesis regarding the informational and psychological impact on the cognitive abilities of specific target audiences through the targeted or algorithmic use of content triggers. The research objectives were defined as follows: to outline the criteria for coding triggers of maladaptive daydreaming in news content; to compile a corresponding matrix and conduct a comprehensive analysis of triggers of maladaptive daydreaming in news content; to compare the results obtained with current research.

◆ Materials and Methods

The empirical basis of the study consisted of two blocks of internet materials. The first block comprised ten publications from the Russian segment, and the second block comprised ten publications from the Ukrainian segment of the internet. The empirical data blocks were collected using the capabilities of the advanced analytical platform Osavul (n.d.), which specialises in in-depth assessment of the information environment, detection of coordinated inauthentic behaviour on social media, internet monitoring, and analysis of narrative dynamics. Data selection was carried out using specially developed clusters of keywords related to the most traumatic and contentious themes of the Russian-Ukrainian war: the course of the war, human and economic losses, the demographic crisis, the contours of the post-war future, and the conditions of peace negotiations. The sampling approach was based on purposive selection. News content was selected according to the following criteria: (1) direct thematic relevance to issues of the war or its delayed socio-economic and psychological consequences; (2) availability of open and complete access to the full text of the material; (3) the presence of a clearly expressed narrative component (defined actors, a traceable cause-and-effect structure, and emotional framing of the anticipated outcome); (4) representativeness across different digital channels of content distribution (official news websites, author blogs, and news aggregators).

The chronological scope of the selection corresponded to the most intense phases of the information struggle in the Russian-Ukrainian war (2015-2025). The procedure for the comprehensive analysis of news blocks was systematised and divided into four sequential stages. In the first stage, a conceptual review was conducted of current doctrinal approaches to the objectives of information (psychological) operations and research into the phenomenon of maladaptive wishful thinking, with a view to utilising modern conceptual frameworks and cutting-edge research data. A search, collection and segmentation of news content by language were carried out. In the second stage, a standardised record was created for each news item, comprising the following sub-sections: language segment, publication title, publication date, link to the publication, and publication content. In the third stage, narrative and content analysis were applied. The unit of analysis was an individual news publication, including the headline, main text and, where available, accompanying multimodal components (images, audio and video materials). The core narrative, value positions, emotional states that the material sought to evoke in the target audience, and the proposed behavioural models (action or inaction) were also identified. This approach made it possible to treat the news material simultaneously as a communication product and as a potential carrier of psychological triggers capable of influencing the cognitive and emotional state of the target audience. In the fourth stage, the identified triggers of maladaptive daydreaming in the news content were coded. In this study, the term “trigger of maladaptive daydreaming” referred to a specific content-related, stylistic or formal-structural element of a media message that objectively facilitates the process of dissociative immersion in an alternative (imaginary) reality or supports counterfactual thinking, emotional avoidance or compensatory fantasising. These psychological indicators of maladaptive daydreaming are documented in the study by N. Soffer-Dudek & N. Theodor-Katz (2022) and are not the subject of this study.

The coding of news content was carried out according to five parameters: article title, narrative, trigger of maladaptive daydreaming, probable psychological mechanism of influence, and expected impact on the target audience (though as a hypothesis rather than a diagnostic conclusion). For example, increased rumination, reduced motivation for real-world action, detachment from reality, and so on. The rationale was based on data regarding the link between the intensity of maladaptive daydreaming and psychopathological symptoms and negative emotions in the daily measurements by J.R. Andrews-Hanna *et al.* (2014). To improve the reproducibility of the study results, several key indicators of triggers for maladaptive daydreaming were identified.

At the same time, the study's findings should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. These limitations include: a small, purpose-selected sample of content; the qualitative nature of the main phase of

the analysis; and the absence of direct measurement of reactions among the target audiences. The sample of news content does not claim to be statistically representative of the entire internet. As the sample was purpose-selected rather than random, quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive analytics. Furthermore, the study is not aimed at the clinical diagnosis of maladaptive daydreaming in the target audience and does not claim that the presence of a particular narrative automatically induces the corresponding state in every content consumer. The aim was to identify triggers in informational materials that could potentially activate or intensify relevant mechanisms in psychologically vulnerable audiences. This is precisely why the parameter “expected impact on the target audience” was treated as an analytical hypothesis rather than a directly measured clinical outcome.

◆ Results and Discussion

Maladaptive daydreaming is described as a syndrome characterised by excessive, vivid fantasising involving immersion in alternative realities, which is compulsive in nature and has a detrimental effect on professional and social functioning. Research by J. Bigelsen & C. Schupak (2011) showed that immersion can be intensified by stimuli that support an “emotional soundtrack”, imagery and narrative (in particular music, visual images and speech). In news content, such stimuli can be reproduced in the form of multimodal blocks (clickbait headlines, narrative introductions, and the reinforcement of material through audiovisual content). The Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (2023) established the principle of “narrativity” (the coherence of actions, images and words) and a focus on behavioural change as the objective of influence. Following this logic, it is reasonable to assume that the widespread intensification of states associated with detachment from reality, impaired attention and emotional dysregulation potentially reduces social cohesion, productivity and the capacity for rational perception of events. Within the scope of this study, the following characteristics of triggers for maladaptive daydreaming in news content are proposed:

1. Plot incompleteness and repetition (“seriality”), which creates a need to “finish” the plot internally to a logical or desired emotional conclusion.

2. Emotional overload (fear, anger), which strengthens the emotional connection with the imagined scene. The systematic use of language conveying extreme, paralysing fear, unconditional triumph or destructive anger. Such framing strengthens the target audience's emotional “connection” to the imagined scenario, blocking their ability to engage in rational, critical analysis of the information.

3. The personification of global processes and role-playing scenarios, which facilitate the formation of idealised or catastrophic alternative realities. The artificial reduction of complex, multi-layered macroeconomic or geopolitical phenomena to primitive archetypal interactions involving a “strong hero”, a “traitor” or a “saviour”. This facilitates

the formation of idealised or, conversely, catastrophic alternative realities in the target audience's consciousness.

4. Intrusive modelling of the future ("what will happen next", "how this will end"), which may develop into cyclical "replaying" of fantasies. Among psychologically vulnerable audiences, this may trigger a mechanism of compulsive rehearsal of worst-case or best-case scenarios, depleting cognitive resources.

5. Multimodal amplifiers (audiovisual materials in publications), which function as external "anchors" for deeper immersion. They sustain attention and accelerate immersion, operating similarly to kinaesthetic stereotypes

(rocking, rhythmic movements) that often accompany maladaptive daydreaming.

News content may contain triggers capable of activating or intensifying maladaptive daydreaming, and thus act as one of the factors of informational and psychological influence on target audiences. The coding of ten Russian online materials confirmed that their content systematically reproduces counterfactual, catastrophic, fatalistic and compensatory narratives, which may act as triggers for maladaptive daydreaming through mechanisms of escapism, rumination, dissociative immersion and the imagined restoration of control over the situation (Table 1).

Table 1. Comprehensive analysis of news content in the Russian segment of the internet

Title of the material	Narrative	Maladaptive daydreaming trigger	Probable psychological mechanism of influence	Expected impact on the target audience
"Peace at any cost": what do Ukrainians think about continuing the conflict?	Peace through concessions to the aggressor (Russia)	Fantasy of a rapid end to suffering (the war)	Escapist avoidance of traumatic experiences	Passivisation, reduced readiness to resist the adversary
Will Russians and Ukrainians be able to live together?	Coexistence is only possible after Ukraine has been forcibly "reformed"	An imagined "purified" future	A compensatory fantasy of order and control in the future	Normalisation of coercion and violence against Ukrainians
Without being left with nothing. What Ukraine will be like after the end of the JFO	Once the war is over, Ukraine is supposedly doomed to ruin	A catastrophic image of the future	Anxious immersion with a search for external rescue	Acceptance of hopelessness and helplessness
"Let's be elves." Ishchenko on what would have happened to Ukraine if there had been neither Russia nor Donbas	Ukraine is supposedly unviable without Russia	A counterfactual scenario of an "alternative" Ukraine	Orientation towards an alternative history	Undermining belief in Ukrainian agency
What would have happened to Ukraine and Russia if the Maidan had been defeated	Maidan is supposedly the source of all subsequent losses	Nostalgia for a "lost" past	Ruminative re-experiencing of an alternative scenario	Shifting blame from the aggressor onto Ukraine
In the USA, they explained what would have happened to Ukraine without Washington's military assistance	Ukraine is incapable of resisting the Russian Federation without external support	An alternative scenario of inevitable defeat	Premature psychological capitulation	Demoralisation, reduction of Ukraine's agency
Those same record sanctions, lack of allies, and the threat of collapse: what Russia would be like if it had not launched the "SVO"	The Russian Federation's aggression is presented as pre-emptive self-defence	A heroised fantasy of a "decisive saving strike" by the Russian Federation	Rationalisation of violence through imagined necessity	Legitimation of the war, mobilisation of loyalty to the actions of the Russian Federation
Could the war in Ukraine have been avoided?	The war was allegedly historically almost inevitable	A fatalistic narrative	Removal of moral responsibility through fatalism	Reconciliation with the war as an "inevitability"
Ukraine's independence: it would have been better if there had already been a war	Ukraine's independence is presented as a historical mistake	A dystopian image of Ukrainian statehood	Destructive imagined "correction" of reality	Devaluation of Ukrainian statehood and identity
This war could have been avoided. Ukrainian and Russian experts believe that Ukraine will no longer exist	Ukraine has allegedly lost its chance of survival	A scenario of the final end of statehood	Traumatic fixation on hopelessness	Anxious rumination, a tendency towards external dependence

Note: JFO – Joint Forces Operation; USA – United States of America; "SVO" – a Russian euphemism referring to military aggression against Ukraine

Source: compiled by the author

According to the results of the coding, counterfactual or alternative-historical triggers were identified in 5 out of 10 materials, catastrophic or finalised images of the future also in 5 out of 10, compensatory models of "rapid rescue" in 3 out of 10, and fatalistic constructions that removed moral responsibility through the idea of the inevitability of war in 2 out of 10 materials. At the same time, it should be noted that these categories partially overlapped across different materials. In particular, materials such as "peace at any cost" directly appeal to mechanisms of escapist avoidance of pain. A target audience exhausted by daily stress and anxiety, when encountering such material, effectively

receives a psychological "permission" to immerse itself in a fantasy of the immediate cessation of suffering. Thus, the comprehensive analysis of the Russian block of news content demonstrated the dominance of semantic constructions that model alternative reality, emotionally simplified solutions to complex events, and images of inevitable destruction. In most materials, the key element was not information as such, but the construction of an imagined scenario in which the target audience was offered an emotionally complete framework for explaining the war, the future of Ukraine, or the supposed expediency of coercing Ukrainians into certain actions. Taken together, this

provides grounds to assert that in the analysed Russian sample of news content, triggers of maladaptive daydreaming perform not an auxiliary but a structural function. They do not merely amplify publications emotionally, but create an alternative reality in which the target audience withdraws from a complex reality into a simpler scenario shaped by emotional and ideological framing.

At the same time, the study of this issue cannot be limited solely to the Russian information segment. In the

context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, triggers compatible with the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming may also be present in Ukrainian news content, even in the absence of adversarial intent. This is because the very themes of loss, trauma, exhaustion, a “lost future”, or “rapid peace” are capable of activating escapist and ruminative psychological mechanisms. For this reason, the next step is a comprehensive analysis of the Ukrainian block of news content (Table 2).

Table 2. Comprehensive analysis of news content in the Ukrainian segment of the internet

Title of the material	Narrative	Maladaptive daydreaming trigger	Probable psychological mechanism of influence	Expected impact on the target audience
“If not for the war”. A reflection on how the 2022 grain harvest had been forecast and what the Ukrainian agricultural sector has lost	The war has disrupted the trajectory of stable economic development	A counterfactual image of a “lost normal life”	Nostalgic rumination	Sadness, fixation on losses
Constantly preparing for war: what life in post-war Ukraine will be like and the risks posed by an ageing population	The post-war future will be prolongedly strained and marked by demographic crisis	An image of an exhausting future	Catastrophisation of the future	Anxiety, emotional exhaustion, a sense of hopelessness
Among Ukrainians abroad, 17% do not plan to return after the war	A portion of citizens may be lost for the country's post-war recovery	A probable narrative of the breakdown of social ties	Traumatic fixation on the loss of societal cohesion	Demoralisation, weakening of belief in national recovery
Before the war, ageism was widespread in Ukraine; now employers are “hunting” for pensioners, – Libanova	The war has radically distorted the labour market and demographic balance in the country	An image of social deformation and a deficit of human resources	Social anxiety projection	A sense of systemic crisis and instability of economic development
AI-generated videos with the narrative of “peace at any cost” are being spread on TikTok	Exposure of information and psychological influence with a demobilising narrative	The formula of rapid peace as an imagined removal of traumatic thoughts	Escapist fantasy as a means of alleviating moral and psychological strain	Among vulnerable audiences: a tendency towards capitulatory attitudes; among resilient audiences: heightened vigilance
Half of Ukrainians support peace “at any cost” – a survey by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation	War fatigue increases the demand for its rapid conclusion	The perception of peace as an immediate escape from suffering	Emotional avoidance of pain	Passivisation, reduced resilience to informational and psychological influence
“If not for the war, I would hardly have linked my life with the army”, – combat medic of the Kalush Battalion	The war has radically altered personal biographies and professional paths	A counterfactual scenario of an “alternative life”	Personalised nostalgic rumination	Sadness, emotional immersion, increased empathy
How Ukrainians’ lives would have changed if there had been no war	An alternative history of Ukraine without the large-scale invasion by the Russian Federation	An extended scenario of a “parallel reality”	Imagined re-experiencing of an alternative past	Shift into counterfactual thinking, reduced focus on reality
What Ukraine’s development might have been like without the war	The war has interrupted economic growth and the trajectory of prosperity	An idealised image of unrealised national development	A compensatory fantasy of lost prosperity	Frustration, intensified sense of historical loss
“If there had been no war...”	The war has postponed personal dreams, careers, and the private lives of volunteers	An image of deferred peaceful life	Emotional immersion in unrealised scenarios	Melancholisation, empathy, psychological exhaustion

Note: AI – artificial intelligence

Source: created by the author

The coding revealed that counterfactual narratives of a “lost life” were present in 5 out of 10 materials, distress-based narratives in 3 out of 10, and the formula of rapid peace as an imagined relief in 2 out of 10 publications. The fundamental difference between this block and the Russian one lies in the intentions of the content creators themselves. While in the Russian segment the embedded triggers function as a carefully calibrated instrument of

targeted influence, in Ukrainian news content they tend to emerge as a secondary, largely uncontrolled psychological effect. This is likely a result of journalists covering a national tragedy, reflecting on collective trauma, objective social exhaustion, and unrealised peaceful life. However, the paradox lies in the fact that, for a human psyche already in a state of prolonged nervous exhaustion, the source of the trigger is not of primary importance. The mechanism of

maladaptive daydreaming activation responds exclusively to the form, semantics, and emotional content of the trigger, rather than to the political position of the media outlet. Nostalgic rumination triggered by an article about the “deferred dreams of volunteers” may produce the same detachment from reality as propaganda from the Russian Federation. For this reason, such content may be utilised by an adversary as a secondary resource for informational and psychological influence.

Research by J. Prier (2017) and Z. Haig & V. Ha-jdu (2017) indicates that social media function as instruments of modern information warfare. The effective dissemination of propaganda occurs through integration into an existing narrative, its subsequent amplification by bot networks, and its transformation into a trend. Contemporary information operations are aimed at altering beliefs, influencing behaviour, and undermining trust. Accordingly, even content of Ukrainian origin – if it contains strong motifs of loss, hopelessness, or “easy relief” from suffering – may be extracted from its original context, scaled, and incorporated into information operations conducted by the Russian Federation. A comparison of the two blocks of news content demonstrates that both segments contain triggers compatible with the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming; however, their function differs. In the Russian block, such triggers more frequently operate as elements of deliberate informational and psychological influence aimed at demoralisation, the normalisation of coercion, the rationalisation of capitulatory attitudes, and the reduction of target audience agency. In the Ukrainian block, the same mechanisms more often arise as a by-product of traumatic experience, counterfactual thinking, and emotional exhaustion. Thus, the study’s hypothesis is confirmed: news content does contain triggers capable of activating or intensifying mechanisms related to maladaptive daydreaming. At the same time, the Russian block demonstrates a higher likelihood of the deliberate use of news content as an instrument of informational and psychological influence.

Overall, the findings are consistent with contemporary research on maladaptive daydreaming syndrome. In particular, F. Ricci *et al.* (2025) conceptualise this syndrome as a dysfunctional coping strategy associated with excessive fantasising, impairment in everyday functioning, and accompanying psychological distress. In this context, the identified triggers in news content may be interpreted as external semantic stimuli that potentially reinforce an existing predisposition towards emotionally intense and maladaptive fantasising. The results also align with findings on the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and stressful life experiences. The study by C. Colpo (2024) demonstrates that adverse experiences in both childhood and adulthood are positively associated with maladaptive daydreaming during the processing of emotionally charged stimuli. This suggests that prolonged exposure to stress is linked not only to increased escapist fantasising but also to changes in the perception of emotional messages, including news content.

An important aspect for interpreting the obtained results is the psychological mechanism that sustains maladaptive daydreaming. A. Lucas & A. Bone (2025) describe this syndrome as a cycle of dissociative immersion in vivid fantasy, which provides short-term emotional relief while simultaneously maintaining long-term adaptive difficulties. Their study also highlights the role of vivid imagery, music, and repetitive behavioural stimuli as factors that deepen immersion. Although the present study did not aim to assess psychomotor patterns, it confirms the importance of the multimodal environment of news content: headlines, emotionally charged introductions, and audiovisual sequences may function as analogues of external “anchors” of audience engagement. Equally significant are the conclusions of A. Nowacki & A. Pyszkowska (2024), who found that maladaptive daydreaming is relatively stable over time and may act as a risk factor for further increases in psychological distress. This suggests that emotionally saturated, counterfactual, and catastrophic news constructions should be considered not merely as a background to the experience of stress, but also as potential factors sustaining a maladaptive cycle in which escapist immersion and psychological exhaustion reinforce one another. Contemporary news media, particularly in the context of prolonged war, function as effective generators of this complex of emotions. They produce heightened anxiety, a persistent expectation of catastrophe, and a pervasive sense of loss of individual control over one’s life. When a civilian or a member of the armed forces is repeatedly exposed to content such as “Ukraine will cease to exist” or to detailed visualisations of irreversible loss and destruction, an overwhelmed psyche may respond through an available defensive mechanism – withdrawal into constructed fantasy.

At the same time, for an accurate interpretation of the results, it is essential not to equate all forms of daydreaming with pathological states. S. Kajimura *et al.* (2022) note that not all forms of maladaptive daydreaming are equally maladaptive. Certain types of self-generated thought may serve neutral or even adaptive functions, depending on their content, context, and direction. It follows that the risk identified in this study is not associated with the human capacity for imaginative modelling per se, but with specific configurations of news content that, in vulnerable audiences, may shift this process towards escapism, rumination, and disengagement from present reality. From the perspective of information (psychological) operations, these identified vulnerabilities of the human psyche constitute an ideal target for influence. Drawing on the Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations (2014) and the Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (2023), it can be reasonably argued that Russian information operations, which skilfully employ triggers of maladaptive daydreaming, function as a form of negative informational and psychological influence. They do not primarily seek to rationally persuade Ukrainians of the legitimacy of the Russian Federation’s armed aggression. Rather, their objective is to induce as broad a target audience as possible into a

state of prolonged cognitive paralysis, continuous rumination, and dissociative escapism. In such a state, any rational, organised resistance loses its coherence, and instead the audience is offered an appealing illusion of immediate relief through capitulatory attitudes (such as “peace at any cost”). The danger also lies in the fact that even entirely organic, patriotic Ukrainian content – containing objective and socially significant reflections on human losses, economic exhaustion, or demographic crisis – may be easily and rapidly appropriated by the adversary. Through automated systems for monitoring the information environment (such as Osavul), such content may be identified, amplified by coordinated bot networks, and transformed into a resource for the demoralisation of the population. When a society begins to shift en masse towards counterfactual and escapist thinking, it risks losing the capacity to act effectively in the present and to construct a real, rather than imagined, future.

◆ Conclusions

The article presents the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming – which, in recent years, has traditionally been viewed by the scientific community solely as a clinical-psychological disorder characterised by an individual’s compulsive immersion in fantasies to avoid personal distress – as a specific, structural vulnerability within the target audience. The study emphasises that, by inducing or intensifying the state of maladaptive daydreaming, news content undermines an individual’s capacity for rational, critical decision-making. The negative impact of maladaptive daydreaming is not limited to the level of the individual. At the societal level, the dissemination of content that reinforces escape into compensatory or counterfactual scenarios may contribute to increased hopelessness, fatigue, passivisation, and a weakening of societal resilience. This corresponds to the doctrinal objectives of information (psychological) operations, which seek to change not only what the adversary thinks about, but fundamentally how they think, effectively transforming their own traumatised psyche into a tool of self-destruction. Thus, for the state, this creates additional risks to information security, as vulnerable target audiences become more susceptible to narratives that replace rational interpretation of events with emotional immersion in simplified models of “rescue”, a “lost past”, or an “inevitable end”.

A matrix for identifying maladaptive daydreaming triggers in news content has been developed and empirically

tested. The hypothesis has been confirmed that the conscious or unconscious use of constructions such as narrative incompleteness, total catastrophisation of the future, rigid personalisation of conflict, and counterfactual modelling (“if there had been no...”) forms an information environment conducive to the activation of maladaptive daydreaming mechanisms. A comprehensive analysis of two blocks of news content demonstrated that, in the Russian information segment, these specific triggers are generated deliberately and systematically. They function as instruments of informational and psychological influence, the primary aim of which is the demoralisation of the population, large-scale passivisation of will, rationalisation of aggression, and legitimisation of external coercion. In the Ukrainian block, maladaptive daydreaming triggers were also identified; however, their nature proved to be different. They were largely formed not as a result of adversarial intent, but as a by-product of covering trauma, loss, exhaustion, deferred life, and counterfactual scenarios such as “if not for the war...”. This made it possible to draw a fundamental distinction between deliberately constructed trigger-based content and content that may produce a similar psychological effect unintentionally. However, despite the absence of malicious intent, such materials carry an essentially identical risk of destabilising the cognitive resilience of the target audience, since the psyche responds to the emotional substance of the message rather than its source. The study does not claim that every consumer of news content will exhibit signs of maladaptive daydreaming syndrome. Nevertheless, it establishes the presence in news content of objective communicative features (triggers) that have the potential to contribute to the development or exacerbation of this state in vulnerable target audiences. Further research should focus on analysing the long-term consequences of maladaptive daydreaming, developing strategies to mitigate its impact, and strengthening critical thinking within society.

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Новинний контент як середовище тригерів дезадаптивної мрійливості

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♦ **Анотація.** В умовах російсько-української війни новинний контент формує емоції та поведінку, тому особливо важливим є вивчення психологічних механізмів впливу, зокрема дезадаптивної мрійливості, яка посилює вразливість аудиторій через занурення в уявні сценарії, відрив від реальності та функціональні втрати. Мета дослідження полягала в аналізі зв'язку між станом дезадаптивної мрійливості та інформаційно-психологічним впливом через новинний контент; перевірку гіпотези щодо наявності в новинному контенті тригерів, здатних активувати або посилювати цей стан. Методологічну основу дослідження становили міждисциплінарний підхід, доктринальний аналіз інформаційних і психологічних операцій, контент-аналіз, наративний аналіз та описова статистична обробка результатів кодування тригерів дезадаптивної мрійливості в новинному контенті. Емпіричну базу сформували два блоки інтернет-матеріалів, з яких десять належали до російського сегмента інформаційного простору та десять – до українського. Для кожного матеріалу здійснювалося кодування за п'ятьма параметрами: назва матеріалу, базовий наратив, виявлений тригер дезадаптивної мрійливості, ймовірний психологічний механізм впливу та очікуваний вплив на цільову аудиторію. Визначено ознаки тригерів дезадаптивної мрійливості в новинному контенті, а саме: сюжетна незавершеність і «серіальність», перенасичення емоційними оцінками, нав'язливе моделювання майбутніх сценаріїв, персоніфікація війни, гіперболізація загроз або перемог, а також використання мультимодальних підсилювачів (клікбейтні заголовки, аудіовізуальні матеріали). В результаті дослідження встановлено, що в російському блоці домінують контрфактичні, катастрофічні, фаталістичні та компенсаторні сюжети, які моделюють альтернативні реальності, сценарії швидкого порятунку, неминучої поразки або остаточного кінця. Такі смислові конструкції потенційно сприяють ескапізму, румінації, уявному відновленню контролю та зниженню суб'єктності аудиторії. В українському блоці також зафіксовано тригерний потенціал, однак він здебільшого пов'язаний не з навмисним впливом, а з тематизацією травм, втрат, відкладеного життя, виснаження та контрфактичних сценаріїв – наприклад, «якби не війна...». Встановлено, що вразливість цільових аудиторій до таких повідомлень може зростати за умов тривалого стресу, психологічної втоми та масової травматизації, що відповідає умовам російсько-української війни

♦ **Ключові слова:** цільова аудиторія; інформаційна операція; психологічна операція; ескапізм; румінація; когнітивний вплив