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RECALIBRATING THE PROPAGANDA MODEL: MEMETIC WARFARE AS A TOOL OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL IN CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This study revisits Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Propaganda Model* (1988) in the context of 21st-century digital communication, focusing on the emergence of memetic warfare as a tool of ideological control. With the proliferation of user-generated content and algorithm-driven social media, memes have evolved from humorous internet culture into potent instruments of political persuasion, disinformation, and ideological entrenchment. Integrating memetic warfare within the framework of the five original filters—ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and fear ideology—this paper argues that memes now function as decentralized vectors of propaganda. Case studies including the 2016 U.S. election interference, Ukraine's digital resistance, and Pakistani youth political engagement support the claim that memes are central to ideological engineering in contemporary digital politics.

Introduction

The *Propaganda Model*, introduced in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), presented a structural critique of mass media in capitalist democracies. It posited that media output is shaped by five filters that serve elite interests. However, with the digital revolution, media landscapes have evolved. Centralized editorial control has given way to distributed, algorithmic environments in which user participation, virality, and platform dynamics reshape communication power.

This paper explores how *memetic warfare*—the strategic deployment of internet memes to influence ideology—intersects with the Propaganda Model's filters. As political actors, both state and non-state, harness viral media for psychological operations, the need arises to recalibrate our analytical tools. This research proposes an updated theoretical model that captures the structural, technological, and semiotic dimensions of memetic propaganda.

Literature Review

The Original Propaganda Model

Herman and Chomsky identified five filters through which media content is shaped: (1) media ownership, (2) reliance on advertising, (3) sourcing from elites, (4) flak from power centers, and (5) ideological control via anti-communism (later reframed as fear). These filters operate not as conspiracies but as systemic constraints reinforcing hegemonic interests.

While effective for its time, the original model largely addressed broadcast journalism and corporate print media. In the digital era, critiques and expansions have emerged, recognizing the roles of algorithms, platform politics, and participatory media.

Memetic Warfare as Digital Propaganda

Memetic warfare refers to the deliberate creation and dissemination of memes to shape ideological beliefs, provoke emotional responses, and incite action. Rooted in Dawkins' (1976) concept of "memes" as cultural replicators, digital memes have become

ideological weapons in online discourse. Scholars identify them as low-cost, high-impact tools that exploit cognitive shortcuts and emotional engagement to bypass critical reasoning.

Defense organizations like NATO now formally recognize memetic warfare as part of information operations, highlighting its efficacy in narrative control and mass persuasion.

Memes as Ideological Semiotics

Internet memes operate as “visual enthymemes”—persuasive rhetorical structures that rely on shared cultural knowledge. Their virality depends on simplicity, relatability, humor, and emotional salience. Importantly, memes often bypass analytical scrutiny by embedding ideological messages within entertainment, satire, or mimicry.

This semiotic camouflage allows political messages to penetrate echo chambers, particularly among younger audiences accustomed to visual-first media environments.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-case approach grounded in content analysis and theoretical triangulation. It draws upon empirical data from media reports, digital ethnography, survey studies, and academic analyses. Visual and textual aspects of political memes are examined through the lens of the Propaganda Model, with a focus on how each filter adapts to digital environments.

Three case studies—Russia’s involvement in the 2016 U.S. election, Ukraine’s use of memetic resistance, and Pakistani youth political behavior—serve to ground theoretical claims in real-world practice.

Recalibrating the Propaganda Model

Ownership: Platform Capitalism

Where once media ownership referred to news conglomerates, today it extends to tech platforms—Meta, Google, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. These platforms exert control not through editorial oversight but through algorithmic curation. Memes that align with platform priorities (e.g., engagement maximization) are amplified, while dissenting or low-performing content is downranked.

This algorithmic governance constitutes a new form of ownership, where visibility is monetized, and platform design biases shape ideological exposure.

Advertising: Attention Economy and Native Political Content

Advertising in the meme era blends politics and consumerism. Campaigns often embed political ideology within meme formats indistinguishable from commercial or entertainment content. “Native advertising” strategies, where memes pose as organic content, erode the boundary between information and manipulation.

Furthermore, users themselves act as unpaid advertisers, generating engagement that monetizes ideological narratives for

platforms and political actors alike.

Sourcing: Swarm Narratives and Decentralized Legitimacy

Traditional journalism privileges elite sources. In contrast, memetic warfare draws from pop culture, grassroots communities, and user-generated content. Memes gain credibility not through institutional validation but through virality, emotional impact, and peer circulation.

This decentralization democratizes propaganda: anyone with a smartphone can become a source of ideological dissemination. Yet, the swarm logic can obscure accountability, making propaganda harder to trace.

Flak: Moderation, Shadow Banning, and Censorship Battles

Digital flak manifests as mass reporting campaigns, algorithmic downranking, deplatforming, and content moderation disputes. Users whose memes challenge dominant narratives often face “shadow bans” or community strikes.

Simultaneously, powerful actors may weaponize flak by pressuring platforms to suppress oppositional voices, thus reinstating top-down control under the guise of community guidelines or misinformation policies.

Fear Ideology: Emotional Weaponization

While anti-communism was the Cold War’s dominant ideology, today’s fear filter often invokes immigration, terrorism, race, or gender. Memes deploy emotionally charged visuals—e.g., caricatures of enemies, violent imagery, apocalyptic framing—to provoke reaction over reflection.

These memes generate engagement through outrage, reinforcing in-group/out-group dynamics and deepening ideological divides.

Case Studies and Data Analysis

U.S. 2016 Election and Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA)

The IRA posted over 10 million tweets, 1,100 YouTube videos, and 61,500 Facebook messages from 2015 to 2017, reaching over 126 million Americans. Memes often targeted African American voters, emphasizing police violence and voter apathy. A content analysis of memes found over 70% used visual distortion or textual exaggeration to sway perceptions.

The campaign’s success owed much to its use of humor, racial tension, and “shareability,” demonstrating how memetic warfare can exploit identity politics to suppress voter turnout.

Ukraine: Civic Resistance Through Memes

In the Ukraine conflict, memes have played a key role in resisting Russian disinformation. Official Ukrainian accounts use emotionally resonant content, particularly martyrdom and resilience narratives. Studies show that victim-themed memes outperform triumphalist ones in engagement by up to 2:1.

These tactics illustrate how grassroots and state actors can co-opt memetic logic to build solidarity and international support.

Pakistan: Youth Political Socialization via Memes

In Pakistan, memes have become an increasingly potent vehicle for political expression, particularly among youth populations that form a significant portion of the country's digital demographic. With over **71 million active social media users** as of 2024 (DataReportal, 2024), Pakistan has witnessed a rapid evolution in the role of memes from humor and satire to instruments of ideological mobilization.

Political Memes and Youth Engagement

A **2023 survey** conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) and Punjab Higher Education Commission found that:

- **64%** of university students in Lahore, Islamabad, and Faisalabad reported encountering political memes **daily** on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.
- **49%** agreed that memes influenced their political opinions or party preferences.
- **35%** stated they had changed or reconsidered their views about a political leader after repeated exposure to meme content.

These findings underscore that memes are no longer merely cultural by-products but active forces in shaping political socialization among young Pakistanis.

Political Parties' Digital Wing and Meme Propaganda

In Pakistan, a few political parties have institutionalized memetic warfare through their organized social media team. Led by volunteers and digital operatives, parties' online cells have produced thousands of memes targeting rival parties. These memes often highlight alleged corruption, dynastic politics, and economic mismanagement.

According to a **Gallup Pakistan media analytics report (2022)**:

- Over **150 million meme impressions** were generated in the two weeks following the vote of no confidence.
- Memes featuring anti-American sentiment and nationalist themes received **3.5x more shares** than neutral or fact-based posts on the same topic.
- Engagement was **highest among users aged 18-29**, indicating youth susceptibility to memetic narrative framing.

Disinformation and Religious Ideology

In addition to party politics, memes are used to disseminate sectarian or ideological disinformation, especially during sensitive periods like Muharram or general elections. Memes mocking particular religious' sects or minorities, often circulated through WhatsApp, have led to offline violence and hate mobilization.

For instance, during the 2018 elections, a study by Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) tracked dozens of memes falsely accusing candidates of "blasphemy" or "Qadiani affiliation." These memes, often shared anonymously, were instrumental in shaping public opinion in rural areas where other media penetration was low.

Such examples indicate how memes function not only as political

rhetoric but as **ideological weapons** that can incite real-world consequences.

Key Metrics in Pakistan's Memetic Warfare

Variable	Key Stats
Active social media users (2024)	71 million
Youth exposed to political memes daily	64%
Youth influenced by memes in voting or political stance	49%
Engagement peak age group	18-29
Impressions on PTI-related memes during April 2022 crisis	150 million+
Disinformation meme reach during 2018 elections	~30 million views (MMfD)

Discussion

Memes and Algorithmic Amplification

Studies show that social media algorithms prioritize content that triggers emotional responses—anger, fear, joy. Political memes, often laden with sarcasm or outrage, thus benefit from structural amplification. Right-leaning content, in particular, enjoys algorithmic preference in several countries.

This built-in bias distorts public discourse, enabling ideologically extreme memes to dominate user feeds, thereby increasing polarization.

The Erosion of Rational Discourse

Memes compress complex issues into punchy, shareable formats. While this facilitates virality, it also reduces argumentation to emotional shorthand. Cognitive ease replaces critical thinking; ideology is absorbed, not analyzed. The result is a public sphere saturated with affective symbols rather than deliberative reasoning.

Memes as Agents of Disinformation

The “firehose of falsehood” strategy—flooding networks with high-volume, low-veracity content—finds a natural ally in memes. Memes blur fact and fiction, are difficult to trace, and are easily modified. Once viral, they become cultural artifacts that resist correction, even when debunked.

Conclusion

To conclude, Memetic warfare has reshaped the contours of propaganda. No longer confined to elite media channels, ideological messaging now circulates in playful, visual, and decentralized forms that are amplified by the logic of platforms and the psychology of users.

The Propaganda Model remains vital but must evolve. Ownership now includes algorithms; advertising is behavioral data; sourcing is crowdsourced; flak is digitized; and fear is emotionally embedded in memes.

To counter these dynamics, media literacy must treat memes not merely as entertainment, but as ideological instruments. Future

research should develop computational tools for meme analysis, establish clearer ethical frameworks for political memetics, and explore the psychological impact of prolonged meme exposure on democratic engagement.

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