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## Strategies and Tactics of Digital Propaganda Operations and the Implications for Democracy

A Review of the Relevant Literature From 2018-2022

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# 1. Introduction

The rapidly advancing digital age has transformed the way in which information is disseminated and consumed, reshaping the landscape of communication and its potential influence on societies worldwide. One significant consequence of this transformation is the emergence of digital propaganda operations, which have grown in sophistication and impact. These operations, often carried out by state and non-state actors, aim to manipulate public opinion, influence political discourse, and undermine democratic processes. The prevalence of digital propaganda in contemporary society has generated a pressing need for research to understand its strategies, tactics, and their implications for democracy.

The relevance of this research topic lies in the potential consequences of digital propaganda on the stability and integrity of democratic systems. As misinformation and disinformation campaigns continue to proliferate, their capacity to erode trust in institutions, exacerbate social divisions, and manipulate public opinion poses a significant threat to the functioning of democracies. By examining the strategies and tactics employed in digital propaganda operations, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these threats and inform the development of effective countermeasures to protect democratic processes.

Propaganda has been a critical tool of persuasion and control throughout the 20th century, with key figures like Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, and Harold Lasswell shaping its development and understanding. Early 20th-century propaganda focused primarily on print media, radio, and film, with state actors utilizing these mediums to shape public opinion and manipulate the masses. However, as technology and society evolved, so too did the methods and means of propaganda dissemination. The advent of television allowed for even more effective mass communication, while the internet and social media have transformed the way in which propaganda is created, disseminated, and consumed.

Today, digital propaganda operations are more sophisticated than ever, taking advantage of the interconnectedness of modern society to spread disinformation and misinformation with alarming speed and efficiency. The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has further complicated the issue, with deepfakes and other AI-generated content posing new challenges in discerning fact from fiction. As technology continues to advance, it is essential to understand the current state of digital propaganda, anticipate future developments, and devise appropriate countermeasures to safeguard democratic processes.

To address the research question and provide a comprehensive understanding of digital propaganda, this thesis is structured into several chapters. The chapter *Theoretical Background* delves into the historical development of propaganda in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its evolution into the digital age. This

section explores early theories and concepts of propaganda, psychological aspects, the relationship between propaganda, public opinion, and democracy, and the ideological and political dimensions of propaganda, drawing on the work of key thinkers in the field.

In the following chapter the methodology of the study is presented, which consists of mixed methods featuring a thematic analysis and narrative review of the relevant literature from 2018 to 2022, with a systematic approach for finding and selecting the literature to reduce the probability of bias. The databases Communication & Mass Media Complete and Social Sciences Citation Index were used, and the literature search involved the use of keywords, phrases, and Boolean operators. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the sources selected for review.

The main body of the thesis presents a detailed analysis of the findings, focusing on the most prevalent strategies and tactics employed by digital propaganda operations and their evolution over time. This section covers aspects such as disinformation and misinformation, echo chambers and filter bubbles, social and political bots, and trolls, among others. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the preservation of democratic processes and the development of effective countermeasures against digital propaganda.

Propaganda and democracy are inherently at odds with each other. In the digital age it is essential to understand the mechanisms of new forms of propaganda, so structures can be strengthened and people educated, thus preserving the functioning of democratic processes. The relationship between propaganda and democracy will serve as the central theme of this thesis. As we look at the history of propaganda theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we will also explore the thoughts of early propaganda theorists on the issue, the use of propaganda during WWII by Nazi-Germany and the post war situation in democratic societies. After the thematic analysis of digital propaganda strategies and tactics is concluded, we will address the second part of the research question, the implications for democracy, in the chapter *Discussion*.

To address the issue and guide this study, we have formulated this research question:

*What are strategies and tactics of digital propaganda operations used from 2018 – 2022  
and what are the implications for democracy?*

By examining the historical development and current state of digital propaganda, as well as its potential future directions, this thesis aims to provide valuable insights into a critical issue facing modern societies. Through the comprehensive analysis of the strategies and tactics employed in digital propaganda operations, this research contributes to the broader understanding of the threats posed to

democratic processes and the need for timely and effective countermeasures. By shedding light on the complex and evolving landscape of digital propaganda, this thesis endeavours to inform policymakers, researchers, and practitioners on the best course of action to protect the integrity of democratic institutions and maintain the trust of citizens in an increasingly interconnected world.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Early Definitions and Conceptions of Propaganda

#### 2.1.1. Walter Lippmann

Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922) serves as one of the foundational works in the study of propaganda and mass communication (Lippmann, 2011). Lippmann, an influential American journalist and commentator, was deeply concerned with the growing power of mass media in shaping public perceptions and opinion. His work provides an early exploration of the complex relationship between the media, political elites, and the public.

Lippmann introduced the concept of the "pseudo-environment" (Lippmann, 1922, 10). The pseudo-environment refers to the distorted or incomplete version of reality every person forms in their mind based on the incomplete and distorted information they receive through word of mouth, mass media and even first-hand experience, which is often misinterpreted. How close a person's pseudo-reality comes to the "world outside" (Lippmann, 1922, 3) is dependent on several factors, the first one being "Censorship and Privacy" (Lippmann, 1922, 23).

Lippmann argues that a propagandist needs to utilize censorship and privacy, thus distorting the pseudo-realities of those targeted by the propaganda in the propagandist's favour. Without creating a filter between the public and the event, propaganda is impossible. People would still create faulty images of reality with full access to information, but what these images would look like, wouldn't be determined by the propagandists (Lippmann, 1922, 28).

The second reason Lippmann gives for the construction of pseudo realities is "Contact and Opportunity" (Lippmann, 1922, 28). He argues that it is impossible for most people to have a clear vision of reality because they are not able to adequately form one. In Lippmann's time, most people lived lives with little possibility to travel and to experience the world. They existed within their social environments interacting with people of a similar social standing. Then, as today, interaction with people in their day-to-day lives heavily influences their perception of the world. It is impossible for a person to freely move between different social circles and cultures, but the more one does, the richer one's pseudo-reality becomes (Lippmann, 1922, 30-36). Today of course with limitless opportunities to contact others virtually, Lippmann's argument takes on an entirely new dimension and has broader significance than ever.

The third reason is "Time and Attention" (Lippman, 1922, 37). According to Lippmann people simply do not have enough time to shape an adequate image of reality in their minds. Lippman refers to studies done on the time spent on news consumption, according to which most people spend 15 minutes or less

per day reading newspapers (Lippmann, 2012, 37)(First published in 1922). Attention is usually not spread across multiple papers and sources to form an opinion based on different viewpoints. Instead, most people rely on one or two preferred papers for their information. The way in which we consume news and information has changed significantly since Lippmann's time and especially since the introduction of digital media. Given the amount of time the average person spends on social media today – which has been growing continually in recent years (Statista, 2023) - time and attention allocation are more relevant than ever.

The final reason is “Speed, Words and Clearness” (Lippmann, 2012, 41). This refers to the way news is presented in the media. It takes time for information to reach the consumer (although much less so today than in Lippmann's time), which distorts people's perception of reality. Much more important, however, are words used and the format in which news is delivered. Certain words evoke images in people's minds that don't necessarily reflect exactly what happened. The better the writer, the more accurate a picture of the event they can describe, however even the most skilled writer will struggle to fit all aspects of a complex geopolitical event into a few hundred words (Lippmann, 2012, 41-49).

Lippmann goes on to argue that certain simplified images of people, places or events are passed on through society. To describe these phenomena, he coined the word “stereotype” (Lippmann, 2012, 53). Stereotypes are useful to people as they allow a simplified construction of reality that is socially acceptable and doesn't involve the exhausting work of attempting to see things “freshly and in detail” (Lippmann, 2012, 59). They allow for a comfortable, safe and simplified construction of reality in which “people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things” (Lippmann, 2012, 63). These stereotypes are dangerous however, according to Lippmann, as they can be manipulated by propagandists to influence public opinion and policy-making.

Lippmann had a rather pessimistic view on democracy. In *The Phantom Public* (1993)(first published in 1927) he discussed the capacities of the general public in a democracy. He believed that the complexities of modern society and the deluge of information made it nearly impossible for the average citizen to form truly informed opinions on public matters. For Lippmann, the public was ill-equipped to directly tackle intricate policy issues, leading him to champion a technocratic approach where experts would have more influence in shaping public policy. His skepticism about the competence of the 'bewildered herd,' as he sometimes termed the public, challenges the foundational principles of participatory democracy, implying that true democratic deliberation was a mirage.

In response to Lippmann's bleak assessment, John Dewey penned *The Public and its Problems* (1946) (first published in 1927). Dewey acknowledged some of Lippmann's concerns but countered that the issue was not with the inherent capacities of the public. Instead, he emphasized that the environment and the means of communication could and should be improved to facilitate informed public discourse. For Dewey, enhanced education and a transformed media landscape could enable the public to address

the challenges Lippmann outlined. In essence, while Lippmann questioned the feasibility of an informed public, Dewey offered a more optimistic view, suggesting that with the right tools and conditions, the public could indeed fulfill its democratic role.

Overall, Lippmann's work offers valuable insights into the ways in which mass media can shape public attitudes and opinions, highlighting the importance of propaganda in influencing the masses. His ideas about the pseudo-environment and stereotypes remain relevant to the study of digital propaganda in the contemporary era, as new technologies and platforms continue to transform the media landscape. Today with the spread of fake news through ever new media platforms combined with the ability or inability of governments, policy makers, and media outlets to verify news reports and stop the spread of fake news, Lippmann's work seems almost prophetic.

### 2.1.2. Edward Bernays

Edward Bernays, a prominent figure in the history of propaganda, was a pioneer in the field of public relations. His ideas on the manipulation of public opinion were laid out in his influential book *Propaganda* (2005)(first published in 1928), where he argued that propaganda was a necessary and useful tool for managing the masses in a democratic society (Bernays, 2005). Drawing upon the theories of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, Bernays believed that the irrational and emotional aspects of human nature could be exploited for various purposes, including commercial and political interests (Tye, 2006). However, Bernays' work has also been criticized for its manipulation and potential for ethical breaches, as it often prioritized the interests of clients over the public good.

Bernays believed that a small group of elites, whom he referred to as the "invisible government" (Bernays, 2005, 40), could use these techniques to control the masses in a democratic society. He saw this as necessary for maintaining order and stability, arguing that the average citizen was often irrational and incapable of making informed decisions. Bernays posited that these elites, through their understanding of human psychology and the manipulation of public opinion, could guide society in a more rational direction.

Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Bernays was particularly interested in the power of unconscious desires and emotions in driving human behaviour (Tye, 2006). He believed that by appealing to these primal instincts, propagandists could more effectively persuade individuals to adopt specific beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors.

Bernays' work laid the foundation for the development of modern public relations. He believed that in order to persuade the public effectively, a propagandist should appeal to their emotions and desires

rather than relying solely on rational arguments. Bernays' techniques were successful in influencing public opinion and were applied in various high-profile campaigns throughout his career (Tye, 2006).

One of the most famous campaigns orchestrated by Bernays was the "Torches of Freedom" event in 1929. He was hired by the American Tobacco Company to help increase cigarette sales among women. At that time, it was considered socially unacceptable for women to smoke in public. To challenge this taboo, Bernays organized a group of women to march in the New York City Easter Parade while smoking cigarettes, branding tobacco as a symbol of emancipation and modernity (Tye, 2006). The event received widespread media coverage and helped to change public perception, ultimately leading to an increase in cigarette sales among women.

Another notable campaign by Bernays involved his work with the United Fruit Company in the early 1950s. The company faced threats to its business interests in Guatemala due to the nationalization of land by the Guatemalan government. Bernays was hired to create a propaganda campaign that portrayed the Guatemalan government as a communist threat to the United States. His efforts were successful in swaying American public opinion and ultimately led to U.S. government intervention in Guatemala, resulting in the overthrow of the democratically elected government (Tye, 2006). This campaign has been criticized for its manipulation of public opinion and its contribution to the destabilization of a sovereign nation, all in the service of corporate interests.

Edward Bernays' work in the field of propaganda was groundbreaking, but it is essential to critically examine the ethical implications of his ideas and their application in various campaigns. His focus on the emotional aspects of persuasion and the prioritization of client interests over public welfare have had lasting consequences, shaping the way in which public opinion is managed and influenced in modern society. This highlights the importance of ongoing ethical debates and considerations in the practice of public relations and propaganda.

While democracy hinges on the free flow of information and the informed decision-making of its citizenry, Bernays' strategies prioritized the desires of his clients over a fully informed public. His landmark campaigns, although genius in the realm of PR, often blurred the line between manipulation and information, potentially compromising the foundational ideals of democratic societies. Such strategies, if unchecked, run the risk of subverting genuine public discourse and can erode trust in both media and institutions.

### 2.1.3. Harold Lasswell

Harold Lasswell, a prominent political scientist and communication theorist, further developed the study of propaganda by offering a systematic approach to understanding its mechanisms and processes.

In his book *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1938)(first published in 1927) Lasswell provided a comprehensive analysis of the role of propaganda in World War I, examining its use by various countries and assessing its effectiveness in achieving specific objectives.

Lasswell proposed a communication model that sought to dissect the components of the propaganda process. He later refined this model in *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society* (1948), where he famously identified the following key elements:

Who (sender) says What (message) to Whom (receiver) through Which Channel (medium) with What Effect (outcome) (Lasswell, 1948).

This model, known as the Lasswell Formula, served as the foundation for the empirical study of propaganda, as it emphasized the importance of understanding each component and their interrelations and provided a framework for doing so (Sapienza et al., 2015, 605).

Lasswell's work also contributed to the development of content analysis as a method of studying propaganda. He advocated for a systematic and objective examination of media messages to identify patterns, themes, and techniques employed by propagandists. This approach allowed researchers to quantify the prevalence of certain propaganda elements and evaluate their effects on target audiences. (Sapienza et al., 2015, 609; 616-617)

Furthermore, Lasswell explored the concept of "symbolic environment," (Janowitz, 1968-1969, 646) which refers to the cultural context within which propaganda operates. He argued that propagandists must carefully consider the values, beliefs, and traditions of their target audience to craft persuasive messages that resonate with their existing worldviews. This notion of the symbolic environment underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and context when analyzing propaganda strategies and their effectiveness.

Lasswell posited that a democratic society's elite uses propaganda as a tool to maintain control and manipulate the "masses," asserting that the average citizen's incapacity to comprehend the complexities of modern society necessitates such manipulation for societal stability. While Lasswell's view acknowledged the potential for communication to ensure an informed citizenry, it simultaneously underscored a paternalistic, top-down approach to governance, suggesting a fragile view of democracy where elites maintain the upper hand in the dissemination and framing of information (Farr, et al., 2006, 585-586).

Overall, Lasswell's contributions to the study of propaganda, including his communication model, methodological innovations, and insights into the cultural context of propaganda, have significantly shaped the field. His ideas continue to inform contemporary research on propaganda, as scholars seek to understand the complex interplay between senders, messages, receivers, channels, and outcomes in an ever-evolving media landscape (Sapienza et al., 2015, 617).

## 2.2. Nazi Propaganda in WWII

During World War II, propaganda played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support for the war effort in both the Allied and Axis powers. The theories developed in the interwar period were then employed extensively during the war. Lippmann, Bernays and Lasswell contributed to the understanding of how propaganda could be used to manipulate public opinion and support the objectives of governments. Their theories, which emphasized the role of emotion, symbolism, and the mass media in influencing public perception, provided the foundation for wartime propaganda strategies (Finch, 2000, 380).

Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi-Germany, was heavily influenced by the propaganda theories developed during the interwar period (Finch, 2000, 373-374). Goebbels recognized the power of mass communication in shaping public opinion and controlling the narrative, and he studied the works of various theorists to enhance his understanding of propaganda techniques (Finch, 2000, 373-374). Their theories provided the foundation for Goebbels' own strategies.

As a result, Goebbels developed a highly sophisticated propaganda machine that relied on a centralized approach that aimed to bring all aspects of media and communication under the control of the state. This was an immensely challenging and complex process and the level to which this was ultimately achieved, and its effectiveness are debated by scholars (Kallis, 2005, 39). He employed various methods, such as radio broadcasts, films, posters, and newspapers, to disseminate Nazi ideology and foster nationalism among the German population. By developing and repeating key messages and using stark visual imagery, he was able to take control of and mobilize the media while demonizing his opponents. His application of these theories contributed to the widespread support for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime, demonstrating the power and impact of a sophisticated propaganda machine.

## 2.3. Kent Cooper's Appeal for True and Unbiased News

At the height of WWII, Kent Cooper, then president of the Associated Press news agency, made an emphatic appeal before Congress in the U.S. for the necessity of "true and unbiased news" (Vyslozil & Wippersberg, 2014). He had recently published his book *Barriers Down* (1942) in which he emphasized the critical role that objective journalism plays in fostering informed public opinion and promoting the functioning of democratic societies. He argued that honest and accurate reporting serves as a vital counterbalance to the distortions and manipulations of propaganda, which can be wielded by both domestic and foreign actors to shape public discourse for their own ends.

In *Barriers Down*, Cooper also highlights the challenges that journalists face in maintaining their independence and integrity amid the pressures of commercial interests, government censorship, and the

growing influence of public relations. He advocates for the removal of barriers to the free flow of information, stressing the importance of transparency and access to diverse perspectives in fostering a well-informed public.

Cooper strongly advocated for independent news agencies as a means to ensure accurate and unbiased reporting of events. He believed that only through the establishment of such agencies could the free flow of information be protected, and the potential negative effects of propaganda be countered. Cooper's vision for independent news agencies was centered around the idea that journalism should serve the public interest and uphold democratic values, rather than be influenced by commercial interests, government censorship, or public relations.

In the post-war period, Cooper's advocacy for independent news agencies gained traction, as the world experienced the pernicious consequences of propaganda during the war. This led to the establishment of news organizations that aimed to maintain high journalistic standards and prioritize impartiality, independence, and transparency in their reporting. The emergence of non-profit journalism and public broadcasting organizations in several countries, as well as news agencies that were collectively owned by national media organizations also reflected the growing recognition of the role of independent media in democratic societies.

The post-war era saw the development of various international media organizations that aimed to promote cooperation and the exchange of information among journalists from different countries. Notable examples include the International Press Institute, founded in 1950, and the European Broadcasting Union, established in 1950 as well. These organizations sought to foster a more collaborative and transparent media environment, encouraging the free flow of information and upholding the principles of unbiased and independent journalism that Cooper championed.

In conclusion, Kent Cooper's advocacy for independent news agencies played a significant role in shaping the media landscape in the post-war period. His vision of journalism as a force for democratic values and the public good was realized in the establishment of independent news organizations and international collaborations that continue to contribute to the promotion of accurate and unbiased reporting around the world.

## 2.4. Relationship between Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Democracy

Public opinion plays a vital role in democratic societies, as it forms the basis for collective decision-making and the expression of popular will. The concept of public opinion has been central to the understanding of democracy since the early works of political theorists such as John Locke and Jean-

Jacques Rousseau. In modern democracies, public opinion shapes the formulation of policies, the election of representatives, and the legitimacy of governments (Dahl, 1989).

### The impact of propaganda on public opinion

Propaganda has the power to shape public opinion by influencing people's perceptions and attitudes towards various issues, events, and actors. According to Lippmann (2012), the mass media play a crucial role in constructing the "pictures in our heads", which form the basis for public opinion. By presenting selected information, framing issues in specific ways, and appealing to emotions and cognitive biases, propagandists can manipulate public opinion to support their goals.

Propaganda can also impact political choices and behavior by promoting certain candidates, parties, or policies, and undermining others. During election campaigns, political actors often employ propaganda techniques to mobilize support, attack opponents, and shape voter preferences (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Nowhere was this more in evidence than during Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 when his strategy involved aggressive and open disrespect for his opponents and their camps. His use of a very intimidating form of rhetoric in interviews and on Twitter set a new standard for how political actors can impact public opinion.

Research has shown that negative political advertising, a form of propaganda, can affect voting behavior and contribute to political polarization (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). In the case of Trump, the polarization between political parties was pre-existing in the society, and he capitalized on it.

### The democratic paradox: Manipulation vs. informed decision-making

The democratic paradox refers to the inherent tension between the need for a free flow of information in a democratic society and the susceptibility of such societies to manipulation through propaganda. On the one hand, democracy requires open access to information and the unrestricted exchange of ideas to enable citizens to make informed decisions and hold their governments accountable (Dahl, 1989). This principle is central to the democratic process, as it ensures that citizens can engage in rational debate, voice their opinions, and participate actively in the decision-making process (Habermas, 1990).

On the other hand, this openness also leaves democratic societies vulnerable to manipulation through propaganda, as various actors, both domestic and foreign, can exploit the free flow of information to advance their interests, spread disinformation, and manipulate public opinion (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Propaganda can distort the democratic process by undermining the formation of an informed public opinion, exacerbating social divisions, and eroding trust in institutions (Sunstein, 2018).

The democratic paradox, therefore, presents a significant challenge to the maintenance of a healthy public sphere and the proper functioning of democratic systems (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It highlights the delicate balance that must be struck between promoting open access to information and protecting democratic societies from the potentially damaging effects of propaganda and disinformation.

Some possible solutions to this paradox include fostering media literacy among the public, promoting transparency and accountability in the media, and implementing policies to counteract the spread of disinformation and misinformation. However, striking the right balance remains a complex and ongoing challenge for policymakers and citizens alike, especially in a time when political figures and top voices in the media themselves are sources for the spread of disinformation. This is further compounded by societal trends that give rise to influential factions. Democratic processes are increasingly being called into question due to the polarization of society and suspicion of democratic practices and assumptions by extreme factions. One case in point here are the activities of January 6 in the United States.

#### The role of media in facilitating or countering propaganda

The mass media serve as a primary channel for the dissemination of propaganda, as they can reach large audiences and shape public opinion. Throughout history, various media, including newspapers, radio, television, and the internet, have been used by propagandists to promote their agendas and manipulate public opinion (McQuail, 2010).

On the other hand, the media can also function as a watchdog and guardian of democracy by providing accurate information, promoting critical thinking, and exposing propaganda (McQuail, 2010). Investigative journalism and fact-checking initiatives are essential for countering propaganda and ensuring that citizens have access to reliable information to make informed decisions (Graves, 2016).

## 2.5. Ideological and Political Dimensions of Propaganda and its Role in Democratic Society

### 2.5.1. Habermas, Ellul, Chomsky & Hermann

#### Habermas on the Role of Media in Shaping Public Opinion

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1990), Jürgen Habermas explores the way public opinion is formed and endangered in democratic societies. According to Habermas, public opinion is formed by citizens engaging in rational discourse, debate, and reaching consensus on issues that impact their lives. The formation of public opinion in a democratic society is, therefore, a critical

component of the decision-making process, enabling citizens to express their will and influence political actions.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere emphasizes the importance of open and inclusive dialogue, wherein individuals from diverse backgrounds can participate in discussions and contribute their perspectives. This idealized public sphere, characterized by equal access and the free flow of information, is essential for the proper functioning of a democratic system, as it ensures that all voices are heard, and collective decisions are made based on informed deliberation (Habermas, 1990).

However, the public sphere faces numerous challenges in society. Significant challenges are the concentration of media ownership, and the structure of parliamentary democracies. Concentrated media ownership can result in the dissemination of biased or misleading information that skews public opinion and stifles genuine debate and debates often happen at party meetings and other private gatherings inaccessible to the public. Formed opinions are then merely expressed, but not actually debated in parliament, creating the illusion of a public sphere (Habermas, 1990).

The increasing influence of powerful interest groups and the growing prevalence of disinformation campaigns can undermine the integrity of public opinion, making it difficult for citizens to distinguish between facts and propaganda. These challenges pose significant threats to the ideal of a democratic public sphere envisioned by Habermas, necessitating ongoing efforts to promote transparency, media literacy, and critical thinking among the public, as well as the development of mechanisms to counteract the negative impact of misinformation and biased reporting on the formation of public opinion (Habermas, 1990).

#### Jacques Ellul on Propaganda and Its Role in Modern Society

French sociologist and philosopher Jacques Ellul developed a comprehensive understanding of propaganda in his seminal work *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (Ellul, 1965). In it Ellul argues that propaganda is an essential component of modern society, stating that "propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world" (Ellul, 1965, p. xii). He posits that propaganda is not only about spreading false information or manipulation but also about creating a specific environment and mindset that shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviours.

According to Ellul, modern society relies heavily on propaganda to maintain its complex structure and function. Propaganda serves as a tool to help individuals adapt to this complex environment by providing them with a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging. He contends that propaganda "fills a need of modern men" (Ellul, 1965, 138), which the individual would never admit to, instead claiming

to be “free and mature” (Ellul, 1965, 138) while subconsciously desiring the security and certainty propaganda provides.

In *The Technological Society* (1954) Ellul argues that it is necessary for society to integrate individuals and technology into a “‘man-machine’ complex or risk total collapse” (Ellul, 1954, 414). He suggests there will come a future in which knowledge will be stored in “electronic banks” (Ellul, 1954, 432) and people will receive information from machines directly to their brains. With the internet the first part of this prediction has already come true and with the rise of AI and companies like Neuralink working on brain-computer interfaces, the second looks to be increasingly likely.

### The Propaganda Model: Chomsky and Herman's Perspective on Media and Propaganda

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's Propaganda Model, introduced in their book "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media" (Chomsky & Herman, 1988), provides a critical analysis of the relationship between media, power structures, and propaganda. According to their model, the mass media serves the interests of the dominant elite by disseminating information that reinforces the prevailing power dynamics, maintains the status quo, and suppresses dissenting voices.

Chomsky and Herman identify five "filters" that shape the production of news and information in mass media, contributing to the creation and dissemination of propaganda (Chomsky & Herman, 1988):

Ownership: The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few powerful corporations and individuals leads to the prioritization of their interests and the promotion of content that aligns with their political and economic goals.

Advertising: The reliance of media outlets on advertising revenue creates pressure to produce content that appeals to advertisers and their target audiences, often resulting in the marginalization of less commercially viable perspectives and issues.

Sourcing: Media outlets often rely on a limited number of sources, such as government officials and corporate representatives, for their news and information. This can result in biased coverage that favors the interests of these powerful actors.

Flak: The fear of criticism, negative responses, or loss of access to sources can lead media outlets to self-censor or avoid covering controversial topics that might challenge the status quo.

Anti-Communism/Ideological control: Dominant ideologies, such as nationalism and free-market capitalism, shape the media's framing of events and issues, resulting in coverage that reinforces these beliefs and marginalizes alternative perspectives. Herman and Chomsky (1988) demonstrate these using

examples of strong anti-communist fear-mongering in the media during the cold war. While anti-communist rhetoric has become less frequent in US media, the aspect of ideological control remains relevant.

These filters work together to produce a media environment that is conducive to the dissemination of special interest propaganda and the perpetuation of existing power structures (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

In their conclusion they reject the notion that the news media serve the societal purpose of informing and educating citizens thus enabling them to “assert meaningful control over the political process by providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of political responsibilities” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, 298). Instead, they argue, they serve a different societal purpose: “to inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and state” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, 298).

In the final passages of the book, however, the authors do offer some suggestions of what a more democratic media environment might look like. The creation of publicly and small scale privately owned local media organizations and vigorous opposition to the commercialization of public media companies are deemed necessary, or more generally “a far wider control of and access to the media” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, 307) by the public.

#### 2.5.4. Propaganda in Authoritarian and Democratic Contexts

In authoritarian regimes, propaganda is often employed as a means of social control and the maintenance of power (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). State-sponsored propaganda can be used to shape public opinion, reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling regime, and suppress dissent (Ellul, 1965). Control of information and the manipulation of mass media are essential tools for authoritarian governments to maintain their grip on power (McQuail, 2010).

A contemporary example of this is China, where the media landscape is characterized by its tight control under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Unlike Western democracies where the press operates with a degree of autonomy, Chinese media outlets function primarily as an arm of the state, adhering to strict censorship rules and guidelines set forth by the CCP. The party's Propaganda Department, along with other regulatory bodies, ensures that all published content aligns with the state's political agenda and ideology, filtering out any information deemed harmful to the party's image or China's social stability. This central control extends to all forms of media, including newspapers, television, radio, and, increasingly, digital platforms. The rise of the internet and social media platforms has posed new challenges for the CCP, leading to the implementation of the "Great Firewall" – a sophisticated system of digital censorship blocking numerous foreign websites and surveilling domestic online activities

(King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Moreover, the Chinese government invests significantly in propagating positive narratives about China overseas, aiming to shape global perceptions (Shambaugh, 2015). In this tightly controlled media environment, dissenting voices or independent journalism find little space, ensuring that the Chinese public's access to information remains under the stringent watch of the CCP.

In democratic societies, independent media and civil society play a crucial role in resisting propaganda and promoting the free flow of information (McQuail, 2010). Investigative journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and public awareness campaigns can help counter the effects of propaganda and ensure that citizens have access to accurate information to make informed decisions (Graves, 2016).

## 2.6. Propaganda in the Digital Age

With the advent of the digital age and the rise of social media platforms, the role of media in facilitating or countering propaganda has shifted dramatically. Social media has transformed the information ecosystem, providing new avenues for the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation, as well as opportunities for citizens and organizations to counteract such efforts (Tucker et al., 2018). On the one hand, social media platforms enable the rapid spread of information, allowing individuals and groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers and share their perspectives directly with the public. This decentralization of information can, in theory, lead to a more diverse and democratic public sphere (Benkler et al., 2018).

On the other hand, social media platforms have also been exploited by state and non-state actors to conduct sophisticated propaganda campaigns, leveraging the characteristics of these platforms, such as personalization, targeting, and virality, to manipulate public opinion and undermine democratic processes (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Additionally, the proliferation of echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media can exacerbate social divisions and reinforce existing biases, making it more challenging to counteract propaganda and disinformation (Pariser, 2011).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have significantly changed the way people access and consume information, providing new opportunities for propagandists to spread their messages and influence public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Social media enables the rapid dissemination of content, often with little or no editorial oversight, and allows for the targeting of specific audiences based on their interests and preferences (Tufekci, 2017). Research has shown that social media can contribute to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and the formation of echo chambers, where users are exposed primarily to content that confirms their existing beliefs (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

In addition to the rise of social media, other technological advancements have contributed to the evolution of digital propaganda. These include the development of sophisticated algorithms for audience targeting, the use of bots and trolls to manipulate online discussions, and the creation of deepfakes, which are realistic digital manipulations of images, videos, and audio that can be used to spread false information or discredit opponents (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Chesney & Citron, 2019). Tucker et al. (2018, 61) find text to be the main source of disinformation but suggest that audiovisual content may be used more in future and recommend more research to ascertain its effectiveness.

The digital era has brought about unprecedented access to information, which in theory could enable more informed decision-making and greater democratic participation (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). The internet and social media platforms have the potential to empower citizens by providing them with diverse sources of information and facilitating the exchange of ideas across geographic and cultural boundaries (Castells, 2012).

However, the digital era has also introduced new challenges for democracy, including the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and the polarization of public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The rapid and unregulated dissemination of information online can lead to the spread of false or misleading content, which can distort public opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017).

One approach to addressing the challenges of digital propaganda involves promoting media literacy and public awareness. Young people are particularly vulnerable and in need of educational programs. By teaching them, and the public, to critically evaluate the information they encounter online, media literacy programs can help individuals recognize and resist propaganda (Hobbs, 2010). The earlier they begin, the better. Public awareness campaigns can also play a role in educating citizens about the risks of misinformation, disinformation, and the manipulative tactics used by propagandists (Graves, 2016).

In addition to media literacy and public awareness efforts, regulatory and technological solutions can be employed to combat digital propaganda. Governments and social media platforms can work together to develop policies and guidelines for addressing the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and harmful content (Tucker et al., 2018). Technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, can also be used to detect and counter the dissemination of propaganda online (Ferrara, 2020). However, with the rapid advance and adoption of AI programs like Chat GPT, even technology leaders have warned of the dangers and pitfalls of AI.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Utilization of ChatGPT (GPT4) in Thesis Composition

ChatGPT was used throughout this thesis as a tool, not to do the scientific work itself but to assist the researcher in doing so. This involved an iterative process whereby the researcher would prompt ChatGPT with a question or task and incorporate the answer-text into the study as deemed appropriate. Often portions of the answer would be used, sometimes the whole answer, and often none of it. The researcher would then modify the prompt in a manner that was deemed most likely to get an appropriate result from ChatGPT and the process would repeat itself. All output was compared to literature cited and adjusted if incomplete or incorrect. A plagiarism software was used to check for any similarities, incase the ChatGPT output contained plagiarized text.

#### Structuring and Organization

In the foundational stages of this thesis, ChatGPT played a role in crafting a robust framework. It was leveraged to outline the primary structure and key thematic areas. Engaging with ChatGPT facilitated brainstorming sessions, enabling the identification of crucial dimensions and intersections that might otherwise have been overlooked. By posing queries and seeking clarifications on various subjects, an initial blueprint was sketched out, ensuring that the thesis was anchored in comprehensive insights and well-defined parameters. This AI-assisted approach not only streamlined the process but also enriched the breadth and depth of the thesis' conceptual framework.

#### Drafting and Editing

During the initial stages of this research, preliminary drafts were crafted to set the direction and tone of the thesis. However, ChatGPT played an indispensable role in fleshing out these drafts, transforming skeletal outlines into well-articulated sections based on the researcher's specific instructions. Beyond merely generating content, the model was invaluable in refining the academic language, ensuring it met the standards expected in scholarly work. This involved elevating the lexicon, ensuring syntactical precision, and providing structured coherence to the text. In essence, ChatGPT functioned as both a real-time collaborative writer and a meticulous editor, assisting in the seamless development and refinement of the thesis.

#### Writing the theoretical background

After a structure for the thesis was developed, ChatGPT was used to write the texts for the theoretical background. This was done by prompting ChatGPT to write each section. Prompting included asking ChatGPT to provide citations. The cited literature was then consulted to look for any mistakes. While the software was usually good at giving general summaries of relevant literature, the citations often had to be corrected, perhaps due to the researcher having access to different versions of the texts. Sometimes ChatGPT was prompted to summarize specific literature. This sometimes worked well, other times it didn't. The content of the ChatGPT output was carefully analyzed and paragraphs were added or expanded wherever necessary.

### Assisting the research process

In the formulation of my literature review, ChatGPT proved to be an invaluable tool, particularly in streamlining the extensive research process. Employing the Braun and Clarke method for thematic analysis, I harnessed the capabilities of ChatGPT to expedite the search for relevant papers and assist in initial code generation. By feeding specific thematic codes and relevant quotes into ChatGPT, the AI produced textual drafts that were subsequently reviewed, revised, and refined by me to ensure accuracy and alignment with the study's objectives. This interactive process not only enriched the analysis but also facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the literature at hand. Furthermore, in the assembly of the discussion chapter, findings from the literature review were utilized as prompts for ChatGPT. This innovative approach enabled the rapid generation of content that was subsequently curated and edited to produce a cohesive and insightful discussion, underscoring the transformative potential of AI-assisted academic research.

### Use and limitations

The utilization of ChatGPT in academic work brings forth a unique set of challenges and limitations that need careful consideration. First and foremost, while ChatGPT excels at generating coherent and well-structured text, it inherently lacks the critical thinking, originality, and deep analytical capability crucial for academic scholarship. It functions based on patterns in existing data, meaning it doesn't produce genuinely novel insights or perspectives, which are often the cornerstone of scholarly contributions.

Moreover, ChatGPT's vast training data, while extensive, has a cut-off point, making it unaware of very recent advancements, findings, or debates in specific academic fields. This means that any assertions or claims it produces might not always reflect the current state of knowledge or the nuances of ongoing scholarly discussions. Sometimes claims or statements made can be outright wrong.

Another point of concern is the potential for perpetuating biases. Even though the model is trained on a vast array of texts, it could inadvertently reproduce or amplify biases present in its training data. In academic work, where neutrality and objectivity are paramount, such biases could undermine the integrity of the research.

Therefore, it's essential to delineate the role ChatGPT played in this thesis. It did not participate in the core research processes. The responsibility of sourcing relevant literature, undertaking analysis, and the review process rested entirely with the researcher. ChatGPT's involvement was confined to aiding in the formulation of text based on the researcher's drafts, instructions, and insights. Rigorous fact-checking was employed to validate every piece of information and assertion generated with ChatGPT's assistance. Furthermore, sections that were found to be incorrect or incomplete underwent refinements and expansions as necessary. Thus, while ChatGPT served as a valuable tool for textual articulation and refinement, the intellectual and analytical heavy lifting was carried out by the researcher to ensure the highest standards of academic rigor and integrity.

The integration of ChatGPT into the thesis-writing process exemplifies the harmony between human intelligence and AI capabilities. While the AI provided tools for efficiency, consistency, and refinement, the human element ensured critical thinking, discernment, and a touch of individuality. Together, this synergy aimed to produce a piece of work that is both comprehensive and reflective of the highest academic standards.

## 3.2. Mixed Methods

In this thesis, a systematic narrative literature review method was employed to explore the strategies and tactics of digital propaganda operations and their evolution over time. This approach combines the rigor of a systematic literature review with the synthesis and interpretation of a narrative review (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). By adopting this method, the thesis aims to ensure a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research question while providing a coherent and structured analysis of the existing literature.

Systematic literature reviews offer several advantages, including the ability to minimize bias through the use of predefined search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a transparent process for screening and selecting literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This approach allows for a thorough and replicable review of the available evidence, ensuring a high level of rigor and credibility in the research findings. However, one limitation of systematic literature reviews is that they may not fully capture the complexity and nuance of a topic, particularly when it comes to synthesizing and interpreting qualitative or theoretical research (Munn et al., 2018).

On the other hand, narrative literature reviews provide a more flexible and interpretive approach to reviewing the literature, allowing for a deeper exploration of themes, concepts, and relationships within the research (Green et al., 2006). This approach can facilitate a richer understanding of the topic and support the development of new insights and theoretical perspectives. However, narrative literature reviews may be more susceptible to bias, as they rely on the reviewer's judgment in selecting and interpreting the literature, and may not provide the same level of transparency and replicability as systematic reviews (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

After using Petticrew & Roberts (2006) systematic approach for finding, reviewing, and selecting the relevant literature, Braun & Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was applied to the literature to generate codes related to the research question, which were then in turn used to generate themes. The themes functioned as the basis for the narrative review.

By combining the strengths of both systematic and narrative literature review approaches and a structured thematic analysis, this literature review aims to provide a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the existing literature while also incorporating the flexibility and interpretive depth necessary to explore complex topics and research questions (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). In the context of this thesis, a mixed methods approach using elements of systematic and narrative literature reviews as well as a thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method, as it allows for a thorough examination of the strategies and tactics of digital propaganda operations, while also supporting the development of a coherent and engaging narrative that synthesizes the diverse body of literature on this topic.

### 3.2.1. Systematic Approach to Finding and Selecting Literature

The systematic approach to finding literature involved a clearly defined and transparent search strategy, ensuring that the search process is replicable and potential biases are minimized (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

After developing clear research questions, as mentioned in the introduction, and objectives, the we established a focused and targeted search strategy.

Identifying relevant databases and search engines: Selecting appropriate databases and search engines ensures that the literature search covers a wide range of relevant sources.

Using well-defined search terms and Boolean operators: Applying appropriate search terms and Boolean operators helps refine the search process and retrieve the most relevant literature.

Applying a predetermined timeframe: Defining a specific timeframe for the literature search ensures that the review includes recent and relevant developments in the field.

The systematic approach to selecting literature requires the application of transparent and replicable inclusion and exclusion criteria to assess the quality and relevance of the identified sources (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

This process involves:

Screening titles and abstracts: Reviewing the titles and abstracts of the identified sources helps exclude irrelevant publications and narrow down the selection.

Assessing the full text of the remaining sources: Reading the full text of the remaining sources enables the reviewer to determine whether they meet the established inclusion criteria.

Evaluating the quality and relevance of the sources: Assessing the methodological quality and relevance of the sources ensures that the review includes high-quality research that directly contributes to the research question and objectives.

By adopting a systematic approach to finding and selecting literature, a narrative literature review can provide a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the research topic while maintaining the rigor and transparency expected of a systematic review (Grant & Booth, 2009; Green et al., 2006).

## Literature Selection Process

### Databases

The databases chosen for this research project were Communication and Mass Media Complete (CMMC) and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). These databases were selected because they are particularly well-suited for the study of digital propaganda, as they offer comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature in the fields of communication, media studies, and social sciences.

Communication and Mass Media Complete is a leading database for communication and media research, providing access to over 700 journals in these fields, including many key publications on propaganda, media manipulation, and political communication. This database offers a wide range of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles that address various aspects of digital propaganda, its strategies, tactics, and impact on democracy.

The Social Sciences Citation Index, part of the Web of Science Core Collection, is a multidisciplinary database that covers over 3,000 of the world's top-tier academic journals across social sciences disciplines. Its extensive coverage includes research on communication, political science, and

sociology, among others. The SSCI is known for its rigorous selection criteria, ensuring that only high-quality, peer-reviewed publications are included in the database.

Both databases are curated to ensure that they include only reputable and high-quality scholarly publications, minimizing the risk of including substandard or unreliable sources in the literature review. This is particularly important in the context of a study on digital propaganda, where misinformation and disinformation can be pervasive.

By using CMMC and SSCI, the researcher was able to conduct a comprehensive and focused search for relevant literature, ensuring that the resulting review was grounded in a solid foundation of high-quality, peer-reviewed sources. The combination of these databases provided a wide range of perspectives and insights on the topic of digital propaganda, enabling a thorough examination of the research question and facilitating the development of a coherent and well-informed analysis.

### Search strategy

The search strategy for this research project involved using keywords and phrases related to digital propaganda. Four distinct axes were defined to guide the search and selection of relevant terms.

- Propaganda/Disinformation Axis: The terms propaganda and disinformation were chosen for their organized and purposeful nature. Unlike misinformation and fake news, which may not be intentionally created or disseminated, propaganda and disinformation are designed to serve a specific purpose by the creator.
- Digital Axis: As the study focuses on online digital propaganda, the search terms included online, social media, cyber, internet, digital, and computational.
- Democracy Axis: The relationship between propaganda and democracy is essential to this study. The terms democracy, voting, elections, referendum, polls, and public opinion were selected to guide the search.
- Strategy and Tactics Axis: This axis was used to include studies focusing on the strategies and tactics of organized propaganda efforts. The search terms were organized, campaign, strategies, tactics, and operation.

To refine the search process and retrieve relevant literature, Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed in the search strategy. These operators allowed for the effective combination of keywords, phrases, and terms to narrow down the search results. A search query using Boolean operators and the selected search terms in all their variations was created and used to search both databases.

Search query:

(propaganda OR disinformation) AND (online OR social media OR cyber OR internet OR digital OR computational) AND (democra\* OR elect\* OR vot\* OR referend\* OR poll\* OR public opinion) AND (organi\* OR campaign OR strateg\* OR tactic\* OR operation\*)

The timeframe selected for the literature review was from 2018 to 2022. This timeframe was chosen to capture the most recent research and developments in the field of digital propaganda. As the digital landscape is continuously evolving, it is crucial to examine the latest scholarship to understand the current state of digital propaganda and its implications for society.

Using these criteria, the search yielded 167 results on CMMC and 230 on SSCI as of March 7, 2023.

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the literature included in the review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

#### Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters.
- Publications focused on the theory, framework, or model of digital propaganda.
- Publications focused on specific digital propaganda organizations.
- Publications focused on strategies and tactics of digital propaganda operations.
- Publications that analyzed the relationship between digital propaganda and democratic processes.
- Publications in English and German.

#### Exclusion criteria:

- Publications not specifically focused on digital propaganda or its theoretical aspects.
- Publications in languages other than English or German.
- Publications that didn't specifically study organized propaganda efforts.
- Publications that primarily focused on countermeasures to propaganda.

These criteria were applied by carefully reading the abstracts of the papers retrieved through the search process. Papers were included or excluded based on whether they met the above criteria. After adjusting for duplications (papers found in both searches), a set of 58 high-quality and relevant sources were

identified for the literature review. This selection ensured a thorough and accurate analysis of the current state of digital propaganda and its implications for democratic processes.

### 3.2.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely-used qualitative research method that aims to identify, analyze, and report themes or patterns within data sets, offering a rich and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexible approach involves six phases: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, thematic analysis was employed to systematically review the literature on digital propaganda strategies and tactics. The process began by thoroughly reading and re-reading the selected literature to gain a deep understanding of the content. Initial codes were then generated, capturing the essence of relevant passages and concepts. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes, reflecting the key aspects and patterns of digital propaganda in the context of democracy.

By organizing the data according to these themes, the study offers a structured and coherent understanding of the research question, allowing for the synthesis of a wide range of perspectives and evidence. The thematic analysis also highlights the relationships between various aspects of digital propaganda and democracy, shedding light on the complex interplay between these elements.

The use of thematic analysis in this research project not only ensures a rigorous and comprehensive investigation of the literature but also provides a flexible and nuanced approach to understanding the multifaceted nature of digital propaganda operations and their impact on democratic processes.

### Synthesis and evaluation of findings

Following the identification of themes through thematic analysis, the analytical framework proceeds with the synthesis and evaluation of findings. This crucial step entails a rigorous examination of the literature, where the researcher compares and contrasts various perspectives and evidence presented by the sources, ultimately drawing connections and identifying overarching trends.

During the synthesis process, the researcher critically assesses the quality, relevance, and coherence of the evidence in relation to the research question. This assessment enables the identification of gaps and inconsistencies within the existing body of research, highlighting areas that require further exploration or clarification. It also allows the researcher to discern the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments and methodologies employed by the authors, providing valuable insights into the robustness of the findings.

The evaluation stage of the analytical framework seeks to determine the broader implications of the synthesized findings for our understanding of digital propaganda operations and their impact on democratic processes. By examining the relationships between different themes and aspects of digital propaganda, the researcher is able to discern patterns and trends that may inform policy interventions or guide future research in the field.

In summary, the synthesis and evaluation of findings play a pivotal role in the analytical framework, as they enable the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of digital propaganda operations and their implications for democracy. This process not only enhances the rigor and depth of the study but also contributes to the generation of actionable insights and recommendations that may inform future research, policy-making, and the development of effective countermeasures against digital propaganda.

### 3.2.3. Narrative Review

A narrative literature review, unlike systematic reviews or meta-analyses, offers a comprehensive overview of a particular topic or subject area (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). Its primary objective is to provide a critical interpretation of the literature, allowing the author to share their perspective on the topic's current state and potential future directions. The strength of a narrative review lies in its ability to draw from both quantitative and qualitative research, lending itself well to a mixed-methods approach (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016).

The process of reviewing and synthesizing the literature enables the study to offer an in-depth understanding of the research question, effectively contextualizing the investigation within the broader academic discourse. By engaging with a wide range of sources, the literature review helps identify key themes, patterns, and gaps in the existing body of knowledge, which subsequently informs the thematic analysis and synthesis and evaluation of findings.

By first utilizing thematic analysis to identify and refine central themes in the literature, one can ensure that the narrative review maintains a clear focus on the most salient topics. Following the thematic analysis, the identified themes serve as a framework for the narrative literature review. Each theme can be critically discussed in light of the broader literature, incorporating findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies (Sandelowski, Voils, & Barroso, 2006).

In summary, the narrative literature review serves as an integral component of the thesis, as it not only equips the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the research question but also helps situate the study within the larger academic conversation on digital propaganda and democracy. By engaging with the existing literature, the researcher is able to identify areas of convergence and divergence, as

well as areas requiring further investigation, ultimately contributing to the development of a nuanced and insightful analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Coding

Study 1: „Alternative truths and delegitimization pragmatic strategies around the 2018 Italian elections” (Baldi et al., 2019)

Appeal to cultural and emotional states:

"These parties, in Europe and specifically in Italy, generally supersede the more traditional right-left, progressive-conservative oppositions and instead refer to contents and, more importantly, atavistic and profound emotional states, such as the patriarchal / natural family, the fears triggered by diversity, and the demonization of civil and personal liberties."

Appeal to traditionalism:

"A deep symbolic background rooted in a traditional interpretation of the world and society leads these people to be hostile to the cultural open-mindedness and free expression attitudes promoted in formal education and favoured by the educated élites."

"Typically, non-standard choices have the effect of signalling traits such as masculinity and strength, as well as group solidarity."

Utilization of Social Media to Bypass Traditional Gatekeepers

"Social media alters the political calculus ... by shifting who controls information, who consumes information, and how that information is distributed."

"... social media allows citizens to self-select their content in a way that avoids any disagreeable ideas or interpretations."

"... the networks themselves exist outside the traditional media machine, allowing political actors – including parties and candidates – to shape and dictate their content."

"the unofficial channels linked to these political forces use the same conduits, the same infrastructures of the web."

Simplification of messages

"Salvini's limited rhetoric and his short messages on social media present facts as apodictic, indisputable, obvious, and natural."

Hate speech & us vs. them:

"It is the new reality of 'farmers at the government'. The reference to a 'single thought' is, of course, there. Plutocracy and the anti-national / anti-popular powers evoked by fascism and communism are – for Salvini – Europe and its bureaucrats."

"It is in this cultural and ideological background that the use of hate speech flourishes, as a typical cognitive abbreviation that combines, at least, two processes: (i) expressing judgments and conclusions without backing them up with solid arguments, solely by appealing to feelings and (ii) suggesting common belonging."

"We are here because we are against clandestine immigrants. Period!", "Fuck off Brussels and all bureaucrats!", and "Because Europe is infamous..."

"Much of his public discourse, as illustrated in (4)–(5), includes forms of coercive impoliteness in the sense that they exploit impolite expressions, like turpiloquium, or direct offences, as aggressive tools to impose a different social and moral representation on the target, enhancing unexpressed emotions and feelings."

"The many scatological or sexual expressions of the leaders of Lega are conveyed through similar metaphors as for instance 'The Northern League has it hard', 'As for the Italian flag, I use it to wipe my ass'."

Delegitimisation of „mainstream“ media:

"Di Maio's goal is clearly to delegitimize traditional media – in this case the "printed press" – by explicitly accusing them of spreading fake news."

"if one of the most authoritative international newspapers is not exempt from spreading false, unverified news, it is logical to suppose that national newspapers will be, in principle, unreliable as well."

"There are Italian journalists who do not check the news and therefore spread fake news."

"The New York Times blamed us for a measles outbreak in Italy and this is ridiculous because it should blame the Ministry of Health and not Grillo, who in 1998, made a joke about vaccines..."

Conspiracy Theories, Fake News and Alternative Facts

"Di Maio wants to convey the following: if a newspaper moves away from current events it cannot be reliable; the fact that it reports old events, means that maybe their goal is to hide a plot; if then it reports

the quips of a comedian (“a joke about the vaccines”), then the conspiracy intent is perhaps even clearer."

"However, note that Di Maio in (10) takes the opportunity to circumscribe, and perhaps even to minimize, the potential impact of fake news. The focus suddenly shifts to the voto di scambio ‘vote buying’."

"The meaning of freedom of expression itself becomes, therefore, overturned insofar as it is no longer the target of an educational process but manifests itself in the acritical and ideological use of post-truth."

Accusations of fake news & victim narrative:

"Di Maio explicitly asserts to be “a victim” in (10)."

"I am also a victim of fake news; not only of fake news on the web, but also of fake news in newspapers and TV news."

"holding them responsible for using the same online platforms, the same “codes” (more properly the same AdSense services) to spread fake news."

Claiming the Moral High Ground

"Renzi pursues the following discursive strategy: his figure and that of the party he represents is authoritative, accredited, able to produce “official” relationships and thus transmit ‘truths’ in a shared system of beliefs."

"The polarization in (13) is between real life and virtual life. Obviously, Salvini places himself at the “virtuous” pole, as the one who cares about real life."

"On the other hand, Salvini wants to discursively convey that his actions are completely legitimate, claiming that he does not “collect any money” through the contents that he publishes on social media."

Use of irony to delegitimise:

"Salvini is delegitimized in his role as a political leader, since he is represented as an unreliable actor, also even through the rhetorical tool of irony"

Accusing opponents of spreading fake news

"The two political forces brought into play are delegitimized: officially they present themselves as separate political forces, but in the underworld of the network they are actually one and the same thing whose ultimate goal is to destabilize the system through the dissemination of fake news."

## Delegitimising opponents

"The attack on Renzi, as mentioned, is frontal. The PD secretary is reaching "madness"; he needs "hospitalization". This implies that Renzi is not a reliable political interlocutor."

Study 2: „Cross-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election” (Golovcgenko et al., 2020)

### Polarization:

"Our results suggest that the IRA had a multifaceted approach to ideological news and YouTube content."

"This evidence could be interpreted as an attempt to increase polarization in the United States and weaken its domestic political fabric."

Supporting One Side "The prevalence of conservative content and YouTube videos, highly active conservative accounts, and conservative lean of the IRA sharing over time are all consistent with attempts to support the Trump campaign."

"More specifically, the conservative YouTube videos are not only propagated by trolls who link to conservative news media, but also by those who link to liberal and moderate news websites. This pattern can be theoretically interpreted as a form of pre-propaganda."

### Cross platform coordination:

"We refer to this technique as "cross-platform pre-propaganda." Here, pre-propaganda is carried out by exploiting the interconnected nature of the different platforms—in this case, the Twitter–YouTube link."

"Here, we contribute to the ongoing discussion by highlighting the important role of the cross-platform link between Twitter and YouTube in the IRA's attempt to promote conservative candidates."

Study 3: "Cyber-troops, digital attacks, and media freedom in Indonesia" (Masduki, 2022)

### Cyber troops:

"This section shows a shift from traditional authoritarianism (marked by the direct intervention of political authorities in the media) to digital authoritarianism (represented by digital attacks by cyber-troops)."

"Overall, the massive digital attacks and the use of cyber-troops to suppress criticism by the media and journalists indicate digital authoritarianism."

Attacks on opponents:

"In 2020, the agency recorded 29 incidents in which journalists were harassed and intimidated for criticizing the Jokowi government on the human rights violations in some provinces."

"Over the course of 2020, at least three civil society groups and two media organizations fell victim to digital attacks, and at least 14 incidents of credential theft targeted government critics on social media platforms."

"Abdul Manan (personal interview, November 18, 2020), the chairman of AJI, highlights five media organizations that were targeted in unprecedented digital attacks from cyber-troops: Tempo, Tirto.id, Konde.co, Magdalene.co and Liputan6.com."

"Informants confirmed that the criminals are cyber-troops who used their attacks to show their loyalty to the Jokowi's political administration."

Effects on media freedom and self-censorship

"This illegal erasure of news coverage posed a clear threat to Indonesia's press freedom."

"The informants of this study feared producing critical media reports, particularly on the issues of government malpractices."

"The informants also shared information about the growing practice of self-censorship among several critical news media and journalists."

Promotion of preferred candidate:

"Tables 1 and 2 inform us that cyber-troops have worked to advance particular political interests."

"Through news manipulation, the cyber-troops are particularly motivated to present a good political image of Jokowi and to create distrust toward Jokowi's political rivals."

Study 4: „Digital propaganda, political bots and polarized politics in India.” (Nayazi, 2020)

Use of hashtags:

"Hashtags such as #modipunishespak, #indiastrikesback and #56InchRocks, celebrated the Surgical Strikes while #fakeindiafakeclaim, #indiadaydreaming and #starplussurgicalstrike, a reference to India's soap opera on television, mocked India's claim of entering into PoK."

"An analysis of Twitter hashtags that started trending soon after the Uri attack covering the five-day period from September 18–22 shows a handful of Twitterati were out there to push India towards war."

Twitter:

"...a minority of Twitter users could create a false perception of public opinion around certain critical national issues."

Derogatory Language & Attacking Opposition:

"Tweets sent by these suspended twitter accounts were derogatory, often targeted at opposition voices."

Use of bots:

"More than one-third of tweets were generated using heavy automation."

"The suspension of a few accounts from our sample suggests that bots were at work during the Uri attack and Surgical Strike."

"I argue that bots have been used strategically by political actors to serve their particular interests and manipulate public opinion."

"There is evidence of the use of automation in the wake of the Uri attack and Surgical Strike as such large amounts of tweets cannot be generated by humans in such a short period."

Polarization:

"The divided opinion about the Surgical Strike was clearly reflected in trending hashtags on Twitter."

"we also need to consider whether or not the rise of political bots and digital propaganda has facilitated political polarization."

"Political leaders follow some of their supporters' accounts, further emboldening these users to be proactive by adopting more extreme positions on controversial issues and tweeting them."

"By following the accounts of Twitter users who advocate violence, political actors are emboldening them to be more proactive, often adopting extreme positions on controversial issues."

'Cyborg' tactics:

"While bots have been used extensively, India's political parties are now resorting to cyborg, combining automation with the human agency to avoid detection because of the increasing scrutiny of digital platforms by fact-checking organizations as well as platform companies themselves."

Trolls:

"The use of real human beings to do the job of political bots is a pragmatic approach by propagandists as the humans are more likely to be familiar with local

Study 5: „Disinformation by Design: The Use of Evidence Collages and Platform Filtering in a Media Manipulation Campaign” (Krafft & Donovan, 2020)

Leveraging structural aspects of online platforms:

"The mechanisms of evidence collaging and platform filtering leverage structural aspects of social media in order to overcome endogenous impediments to disinformation flows."

"Not only have adversarial groups aligned and collaborated within specific web communities, they have also learned how to leverage the design of online communication infrastructure to reach new audiences."

"Previously, decentralization of the web was heralded as a value of web architecture. In recent years, however, this characteristic has been exploited as a tool by disinformation agents and media manipulators who use it to filter dissent and exploit computational propaganda techniques as they push content across platforms."

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Alternative truths:

"This function of disinformation is to perpetuate or exacerbate ambiguity by offering alternative narratives of events so that an uncertain environment emerges wherein individuals lose trust in authoritative sources of information because they are awash with conflicting information."

Selective curation of evidence:

"However, the person who created the evidence collage aggregated only confirming evidence, and the collage was then removed from the conversational context where negative evidence was represented."

Decontextualization:

"In our observations, we saw that an important factor for the spread of the Joel V. disinformation campaign was the decontextualization of the content as it moved across conversations and platforms."

"The platform filtering effect we identified can be viewed as one way that disinformation agents take advantage of open and fragmented conversational contexts."

"Even if we observe a degree of rational discourse within an integrated conversational context, that discourse, which could lead to disinformation being debunked, can easily be discarded by reposting the distilled disinformation into a new context where no such dissent has taken place."

Study 6: "Disinformation, social media, bots, and astroturfing: the fourth wave of digital democracy" (García-Orosa, 2021)

Creation of artificial public opinion:

"There is concern about the manipulation of citizens, especially around elections and referendums, through the creation of artificial public opinion that could provoke chaos and conflict in politics (Frost, 2020)."

Polarization:

"Some question the significance of phenomena, such as polarization or online disinformation, whose pre-eminence in the social imaginary is not supported by empirical results, which indicate rather that it is a phenomenon with limited scope."

Control over who can participate in the debate:

"In some cases, they even explicitly decide who can have a voice in the debate or conversation, as seen in the recent case of Trump on January 6, 2021, when Twitter decided to delete his account during the assault on the Capitol or in 2019 when Facebook banned four Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO) of Myanmar from said platform by labelling them as dangerous organizations (Sablosky, 2021)."

Delegitimization of institutions:

"In it, the author analyses a process of de-institutionalization which undermines the role of institutions such as the state, political parties and the media and transfers some of their actions to broader and more volatile actors which must be analysed."

Targeted messaging:

"Following in the footsteps of Obama's campaign, political parties and candidates begin developing detailed profiles of voters and individualised messaging, in addition to relying heavily on social networks, micro-segmentation and big data."

AI & big data:

"In the current and fourth wave, beginning in 2016 with the pro-Brexit campaign and the actions of Cambridge Analytica, various watershed developments have arisen: ... c) the rise of falsehoods as a political strategy (among other fake news and deepfake phenomena)"

"b) the intensive use of artificial intelligence and big data"

Astroturfing:

„In the construction of this social imaginary, two phenomena stand out: astroturfing and bots."

"A paradigmatic example is astroturfing, understood as disinformation campaigns to promote the interests of those behind the campaigns, who typically conceal their identity and impersonate people who may add value to the network (often that of perceived credibility) or to democracy, as happens with "the voice of the people"."

"Recent literature has reached a consensus in defining astroturfing as fake grassroots campaigns which use disinformation to manipulate audiences in favour of the interests of the entities behind said campaigns."

"Astroturfing poses an even greater threat, as a campaign's masterminds can use the appearance and words of legitimate social movements to conceal their identity."

"Astroturfers (Peng et al., 2017) simulate public support for or rejection of a certain leader or an opinion, for example, public support for a bill so that private companies can create the illusion of public support for their cause. By concealing a message's author, astroturfers propagate inauthentic communication and undermine democratic values and plurality."

"The hypothesis is that astroturf groups employ different frames than genuine grassroots movements to comply with the private interests they truly represent."

Bots:

"Concern about the influence that the internet may have on the classic values of democracy is increasing, especially following studies on the use of social networks and bots in the 2016 US election campaign and the Brexit referendum...In the construction of this social imaginary, two phenomena stand out: astroturfing and bots."

"These campaigns have been bolstered, at times, by the use of bots whose influence on election campaigns in various countries seems to continue unabated."

"In the April 2019 election campaign in Spain, the ratio of bots to non-bots was 0.063, and bots sent 1.903% of messages."

"Though bots were a small minority of accounts in Spain's elections and those of surrounding countries, their ability to create artificial public opinion and turn non-existent opinions into majority opinions has caused their influence to continue growing."

"In terms of structure, a bot can either be a set of algorithms or a human with bot-like behaviour."

"In what Frost (2020) refers to as hybrid strategies, some bots use the enunciations of real humans and the credibility of real people to carry out automated manipulation strategies."

"Regarding bots' purposes, they tend to make (a) pro-government statements; (b) create false opinion leaders; (c) delegitimize government systems; (d) drum up support for opposition groups; (e) empower the public; (f) set political agendas and debates; and (g) weaken political dissent."

Study 7: “Hacking Culture Not Code: How American Racism Fuels Russia's Century-Long Memetic Disinformation Campaign” (Foster Bhusari et al., 2022)

Facebook as digital laboratory:

"Facebook, as DiResta et al. (2018) argued, was used as a digital laboratory to study, target, and cultivate Black Americans “as human assets” (p. 8)."

Emotional appeal:

"The IRA’s content used visceral images and an insider’s voice to share real news stories about police brutality and other forms of racial injustice."

"For example, in an advertisement about an event to remember Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy who was shot dead by a Cleveland police officer in 2014, an image of Rice smiling is positioned next to all capitalized text, “REMEMBER TAMIR RICE.”

Decontextualization:

"These ads, echoing early Soviet-era strategies, blended facts with myth and used decontextualized representations of Black people."

"By “distorting or fabricating information” (p. 64) about the lynching of Black Americans, according to Roman (2012), the Soviets could more easily craft narratives to fit their messaging needs."

"In addition to recirculating an unsubstantiated news story, the advertisement used the decontextualized representation of Black people to prove the story’s validity."

"As Diresta et al. (2018) argued, the IRA’s influence campaign was designed to sow distrust in American news media, and our findings present how this manifested through the passage of real news that used decontextualized images of Black people as emotional currency."

"A second way the IRA’s advertisements trafficked decontextualized images as emotional currency was by sharing stories of police brutality about unnamed victims, which we observed in five instances."

Social destabilization:

"The advertisements employed knowledge of police brutality, stereotyped representations, and the historical disenfranchisement of Black Americans to encourage offline civic action before and after the election."

Blending of facts with falsehoods:

"The IRA's distribution of real news through advertisements often blended verifiable facts with incorrect assertions, again resembling early Soviet propaganda."

"An advertisement published on November 1, 2016, by the Blacktivist account showed a smiling white mother with her newborn in a hospital bed and a Black doctor gently caressing the child's head. The advertisement offers partially accurate information by conveying that a "Nigerian doctor" removed a baby from the mother's uterus to remove a tumor and successfully returned the baby to the womb."

"While we observed the IRA's advertisements used real news stories to share misleading, unverified, or untrue information, six of the advertisements were based upon existing conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated rumors."

Attack on traditional media, decontextualization and emotional appeal:

„The image featured a woman named Ellen Jorgensen and her son Garrett Jorgensen, not the patients of the 2016 surgery, Margaret Boemer, and her daughter LynLee Hope Boemer. It should also be noted that the surgery was conducted by the team of U.S.-based medical professionals Dr. Oluyinka Olutoye, and Dr. Darrell Cass, respectively Black and White. By referring to Dr. Olutoye simply as a "Nigerian doctor" and repurposing an old image as multimodal evidence that Black achievement goes unnoticed, the Blacktivist account used the story as emotional currency to cultivate trust with Black audiences while sowing doubt in mainstream news media."

Conspiracy theories:

"For example, an advertisement published on October 20, 2016, by the Black Matters accounts circulated the "Willie Lynch Letter" conspiracy theory."

Positive messaging to minority groups:

"While the IRA's publication of real news stories blended facts and myth to draw attention to racial injustice, a large subset of advertisements celebrated Black histories, activism, aesthetics, and achievement."

"The advertisement text also includes a wide array of hashtags such as #melanin, #blackisbeautiful, #blacklivesmatter, #blackgirlmagic, #USA, #blackisproud, #icantbreathe, #Africanamerican, and #uniteforjustice."

"Sixteen of the advertisements we studied celebrated natural hair, Black skin and encouraged Black people to be proud of their "roots," "Blackness," and "ethnicity."

„Two of the advertisements within this subset resembled a Soviet-era propaganda strategy to depict racial harmony."

"In the weeks preceding and after election day, Facebook advertisements encouraged Black Americans to engage in multiple forms of community organizing and political participation."

"In the months and years prior to the 2016 election, books such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and films such as Ava Duverney's *13th* raised awareness about the systemic racism that Black Americans have endured."

Staging real-life events:

"The Russian-created Facebook accounts promoted twelve rallies, protests, and vigils during this period, six of which we verified took place."

Priming:

"This is illustrative of priming, a design strategy in which a symbol or image that contains shared cultural significance is used to encourage a future action or behavior by the message creator."

„Our finding suggests the IRA used priming as a memetic tool that would allow them to use representations of historic Black activists and leaders to encourage political activity that both enriched democracy and sought to undermine it."

Inciting action:

"After the election, representations of the Black Panthers were used to encourage Black Americans to bear arms and liberate themselves from "the system."

Study 8: "It's funny cause it's hate: Political satire as right wing propaganda - A study on activism in disguise" (International Communication Association, 2018)

Use of satire:

"Right wing activists employ political satire as a fig-leaf covering up extremist positions and the use of populist strategies."

"For the satirical content posted, a strong preference for visual satire such as memes (combining pictures and text), cartoons and caricatures became evident."

"Political satire gives the right wings the means and measures to voice concerns that are allegedly unwelcome and suppressed within democratic societies and mass media outlets."

"Problematic, however, is that the right wing satire tries to conceal the political agenda of their doing. And that some of the contents they share and curate are only disguised as satire in order to prevent criticism and to hide behind the freedom of the arts."

Stereotyping:

„enforcing stereotypes by illustrating ‚the typical Indian‘, ‚the typical African‘ and so forth are commonly used to ridicule the supposed enemy“

Anti-establishment:

"In the presentation of the groups and pages, the establishment is mostly reduced to political elites and politicians of major parties in power."

"Criticism and degradation of the establishment was implemented by the use of satirical ad hominem attacks against elite politicians."

Us vs. them:

"Satirical attacks against strangers from outside the respective countries or perceived communities of shared values emerge around discourses on immigration, cultural wars and fear of foreign infiltration."

"In particular, visual satire and stereotypes about strangers inside (i.e. transgender people, homosexuals, political opponents) and outside the country (i.e. immigrants), convey simplistic divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, to help establishing collective identities among the right wing supporters."

#### Populism:

"Solidarization with the common people is the third populist strategy identified in the analysis. Groups and pages claim to give a voice to the unheard and rescue the disadvantaged national people who are threatened by strangers and oppressed in the course of new progressive movements."

"This tendency is enforced by the narrative of the underprivileged, oppressed people struggling with progressive ideas and societies."

#### Counter-narratives against mainstream media:

"In the case of media criticism, all four pages and groups engage in the construction of counternarratives, as the mass media institutions allegedly dissimulate topics of political importance, such as racism against white people."

#### Pop culture references:

"Pop cultural references (such as The Simpsons, Barbie, Pirates of the Caribbean or the Walking dead) are employed to shed a negative light on the political actors, and function as an anchor of popularity and comprehensibility."

#### Victim narrative:

"Connected to this narrative is an apparent self-victimization: Right wing supporters and social groups commonly understood as privileged (white people, men) are orchestrated as oppressed minorities and victims of the new progressive ideas and values."

#### Ideological appeal & satire:

"In the course of our analysis, some ideological strains and common themes became visible that were satirically revived, while at the same time worldviews across and within pages and groups appeared fragmented and eclectic."

#### Demonization of opposition:

"As mentioned earlier, political opponents are labelled 'communists', 'Marxists', 'socialists' and so forth and alternative ideologies are presented as the forces 'destroying civilized societies'."

Claiming liberal values:

"Despite the explicit demarcation from liberal values particularly visible in the US American and the Canadian pages, all four groups and pages repeatedly refer to liberal ideas such as freedom of speech, diversity, and equality to emphasize their own legitimate aspirations."

Nationalism & satire:

"Non-surprisingly, the right wing Facebook pages and groups are strongly focused on political events, institutions, processes and actors within their own national contexts. Hence, the satirical contents also refer to national political occurrences and at the utmost expand to countries of geographical, linguistic or cultural proximity."

Concealment of political orientation:

"The groups partly tried to conceal their political orientation by including some satire against politicians or typical topics from the right."

Study 9: "Liquid Disinformation Tactics: Overcoming Social Media Countermeasures through Misleading Content" (Ferreira, 2022)

Use of visual imagery:

"The analysis shows that the disinformation in the 2018 Brazilian election sought more imagery formats aiming for a more credible facade and to boost the spread."

"Although narratives with a video were less numerous (N=29 out of 153) compared to the ones with photos (N=73), they were more popular (i.e., shared) on average."

"Table 3 also indicates that adulterated photos and videos represented a relevant 23% of the sample."

Adapting to platform algorithm changes:

"Although there was some perceived reduction in the presence of links to misleading content on the platform, the results suggest that algorithmic change was ineffective to remove disinformation, as message producers sought other formats and circumvented this countermeasure."

Distorting truth:

"More than half of the disinformation with an image presented a true and unadulterated photo or video accompanied by false data, misleading the reader."

"These results demonstrate that, as is the case with text format, the most frequent tactic with imagery content for Brazil's 2018 election disinformation was a mixture of false and true data."

Cross platform coordination:

"Among 153 narratives, 133 circulated on Facebook and 58 on WhatsApp. The proportion rather reflects the use of these platforms in the country but around one-third of the sample circulated in more than one, with the highest overlap between Facebook and WhatsApp."

WhatsApp:

"WhatsApp's more private and poorly regulated operation favours the spread of disinformation, where manipulated photos can be easily shared without the input of fact-checkers."

Study 10: "Disinformation in Facebook Ads in the 2019 Spanish General Election Campaigns"  
(Cano-Orón et al., 2021)

Disinformation:

"All of which means that only 2% of the ads contained disinformation. This is by no means a negligible proportion, but it does indicate that it is not a technique applied by Spanish political parties across the board..."

"'If you're a woman, you're paid 22.3% less than a man for doing the same job. This means that it's like working for FREE for two months of the year.' [...] On average, women still earn 22.3% less than men. Be that as it may, this should be qualified. Women do not earn 22.3% less than men for doing the same job, but, as a rule, men have better-paid jobs."

Victim narrative:

"Only these last two parties posted ads reporting alleged disinformation practices against them."

Distorting truths:

"In short, in this ad, as in the previous one, the truth (the agreements that the PP and the PSOE had brokered with the nationalists in the past) was distorted by mixing it with false or misleading information."

Direct communication via text messaging:

"The other invited readers to receive the party's information directly on their cell phones to avoid 'fake news against Podemos'"

Aggressive discourse:

"Regarding Ciudadanos, its use of disinformation can be directly associated with its often-aggressive discourse."

Study 11: "Political Astroturfing on Twitter: How to Coordinate a Disinformation Campaign" (Keller et al., 2020)

Temporal coordination:

"NIS accounts tweet commonly during regular office hours, while tweets by other users are posted most frequently in the after-work hours."

Astroturfing:

"Almost all of the 702 accounts appear to have at least one, if not several accounts with near identical activity patterns, and these accounts often turn out to be manned by the same agent."

"Why did this orchestrated campaign only have a modest impact on Twitter? One reason might be that many astroturfing accounts needed to start from scratch and thus lacked the necessary reputation to attract large followings, retweets or @-mentions."

"the agents may well have become more concerned about fulfilling the specific and easy-to-supervise task of posting or retweeting a large number of messages rather than achieving the overarching, but hard to measure, goal of swaying online political opinion."

#### Amplification:

"Retweeting is the simplest way in which an astroturfing account can amplify the campaign's message – it requires only one click. It is therefore not surprising that half (48%) of the NIS tweets are retweets – in many cases of a fellow NIS account."

"Co-tweeting is also a very common phenomenon in our dataset: it contains 100,000 original NIS tweets (i.e., non-retweets), of which only a bit more than half are unique. About 45,000 tweets are posted multiple times by different NIS accounts."

"The third pattern of coordinating messages across accounts is that of contemporaneous retweeting of the same content. "Co-retweeting" – retweeting within a short time period the same message from an account which may or may not be part of the campaign – is again extremely common in our dataset: only 17% of the retweets are unique."

"Retweeting is often used to amplify the impact of a campaign, and retweet patterns usually reflect political divisions among Twitter users. Thus, looking at the accounts retweeted by the NIS should help us understand the goals and underlying motives of the astroturfing campaign."

"a phenomenon most easily explained by a coordinated strategy of mutually following all other NIS accounts to boost follower counts."

"NIS (69 retweets) and suspect accounts (23.1 retweets) do receive more retweets on average than regular users (7.9 retweets)."

#### Bots and cyborgs:

"The heaviest co-tweeting of original content occurs among a group of (semi-)automated accounts that share links to news articles."

#### Trolls:

"The agents had to submit a regular summary of their work to the chief officer, containing information such as the number of tweets sent, number of followers gained during a specific period, and number of right-wing opinion leaders' tweets they retweeted."

Shaping public opinion:

"More specifically, the NIS wanted to promote the Saenuridang's conservative ideas, draw attention away from negative news about that party, denigrate liberal candidates, raise divisive issues on North Korea, and pollute the general public discourse on social media platforms dominated by liberals."

Promotion of specific individuals:

"Not surprisingly, the popular Twitter accounts retweeted by the NIS accounts are right-wing opinion leaders that the NIS officials wanted to systematically promote."

Selective communication:

"The NIS accounts rarely retweeted the liberal accounts that were highly popular among other groups, which again reveals their intentions."

Emotional appeal:

"North Korea is one of the most prominent topics that triggers fear and nationalism among the public and boosts support for the conservative party."

"Due to the powerful priming effects of North Korea, conservative politicians have used the threats from North Korea (and even created pseudo events) to frame liberals as North Korea sympathizers to win the elections."

Artificial trend creation:

"The sharp spikes before the election were only visible in the NIS-related accounts. This pattern is consistent with what the court records describe as attacking those suspected of sympathy with North Korea (i.e., North Korea followers “중북”) and liberals."

Professionalized organization:

"A highly professionalized organization employed actual humans, native speakers familiar with local politics and culture."

Flexibility in strategy:

"The campaign was flexible and adjusted daily to changing political conditions."

Preying on ignorance:

"Without previous publicly known cases of astroturfing, only few citizens would have suspected that political actors manipulate social media."

#### Study 12: "Recursion Theory and the Death Tax" (Carson et al., 2021)

Self referencing:

"We name this process recursion, after a well-known process in computer science and mathematics that involves a procedure of self-referencing."

Disinformation:

"Under Wardle's typology, it amounted to 'fabricated content...designed to deceive and do harm' and is a clear form of disinformation rather than misinformation (2018, 953)."

Amplification:

"The misinformation was then amplified by the mainstream media which altered the death tax discourse by linking it to Labor's franking credits policy, providing a new 'false context' according to Wardle's information disorder categories."

Omission of facts:

"Whilst arguably not misinformation, the stories and posts had an obvious omission: they only blamed online groups and right-wing politicians for spreading the death tax stories and failed to consider how Labor politicians played a role in perpetuating the story by amplifying the death tax narrative through their commentary and refutation during the campaign."

Study 13: “Sources, Channels and Strategies of Disinformation in the 2020 US Election: Social Networks, Traditional Media and Political Candidates” (Benaissa Pedriza et al., 2021)

Use of social media:

"Social networks (Figure 3) represented the most used way to convey fake or misleading information (67.4%) compared to the media (32.5%)".

Astroturfing:

"The fact-checking organizations only managed to identify nominal accounts of social media users in a minority of cases—14.7%—compared to 85.3% of anonymous users."

Ideological disparity:

"Regarding the identified users, 60% were pro-Trump voters, 30% were well-known conspirators and the remaining 10% were members of an NGO with a conservative ideology (Turning Point USA)."

"In other words, the sources of disinformation ideologically linked to the Republican candidate were 4.5 times higher than those related to the Democratic candidate."

Audiovisual content:

"The formats used by social media users to disinform were posts... followed by videos...pictures or photographs...and electoral graphics and maps."

Supporting candidate:

"First, and in line with the studies on political communication that have been recently published, two types of strategies were examined: the praise of the candidate's virtues through false or inaccurate information"

"The strategy of reinforcing the candidate's public profile by spreading false or inaccurate information in his favor was used by the Republican candidate himself or by the members of his political entourage in 83.3% of the cases"

Attacking candidate:

"and the dissemination of false claims on the political opponent (false statements or non-existent actions)."

Conspiracies:

"Next, other disinformation strategies that emerged at specific times during the election were analyzed, such as the propagation of hoaxes on the official vote counting and the storming of the Capitol by a group of protesters dissatisfied with the election results."

"Social network users disseminated hoaxes on the election results in 58.3% of cases, circulated false claims on the political opponents in 30.5% of cases and misleadingly praised one of the candidate's virtues in 11.1% of cases."

"The media, for their part, spread hoaxes on electoral fraud in 70.5% of cases, attributed false claims to the political opponents in 23.5% of cases and untruthfully praised the candidates' virtues in 5.8% of cases."

Ideological disparity:

"The dissemination of fake news against the political opponent or his closest political entourage was used by the Republican candidate in a percentage of 72.4%, while the same tactic was used by the Democratic candidate in 27.5% of occasions."

"Despite its importance when influencing public opinion and determining the direction of the citizen's vote, the major disinformation strategy that emerged throughout the 2020 US presidential election was neither of the two described previously but the dissemination of conspiratorial hoaxes on electoral fraud and the counting of votes, an issue that alone represented 58.4% of the total news items verified by the fact-checkers."

Amplification:

"Possibly, the success of the disinformation strategy based on the allegations of electoral fraud made public in the first place by the outgoing President Donald Trump resides in its ability to be echoed by other sources of disinformation that spread and amplified the fake news through social networks."

Text 14: “The agenda of disinformation: “fake news” and membership categorization analysis in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections.” (Chaves & Braga, 2019)

Attacking opponent:

"Former president Lula is described as “the country’s most illustrious prisoner” or “inmate Lula”. These categorial descriptions of Lula as a criminal can be seen in a Fato ou Fake post..."

Us vs them:

"We identified the occurrence of the “criminal-good citizen” relational pair... The relational pair “criminal-good citizen” is activated in this post..."

"...which has already pledged to fight til death and defend the true Brazilian people and our leader Bolsonaro..."

Fear mongering:

"The evil left-wing plan will free political prisoners and make it easier for Venezuelan military to enter our territory, fighting a truly bloody battle against our army..."

Sowing doubt in institutions:

"The first one is the categorization of electronic ballots as being a scam. This discourse was used in many false stories."

Exploiting ambiguity:

"One of them claims that wrongdoings occurred in the “section”, and even though this is an abstract notion, it is easy to identify from the context that the enunciator is referring to a polling location."

Assumption of prior knowledge:

"Even though post number 4 does not directly refer to a material "electronic ballot", the object that is allegedly being defrauded ("ballot") is elicited through the context, since the reader of the false story is supposed to have previous knowledge about the "scam" activity..."

Misdirection and misrepresentation:

"The false story makes reference to the percentage of valid votes needed to win majority elections in Brazil... However, it is not clear how this aspect of the Brazilian electoral law relates to the tactic to fight the alleged scam."

Conspiracy theories:

"Rumors have it that Bolsonaro is, in fact, terminally ill with gastrointestinal cancer and that he is not in good health."

Study 15: „The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions." (Bennett & Livingston, 2018)

Emotional Appeal:

"What appear on the surface to be blatantly false and bizarre stories may appeal to deeper myths and emotions among publics who support anti-democratic policies such as limitations on the free press and restrictions on civil liberties."

Populism:

"Mainstream communication research has largely settled on populism as an easy catchall reference for many of these developments."

Foreign interference/authoritarian regimes:

"A second dimension of the disinformation order is the targeting of domestic political processes, parties and politicians by foreign agents and governments as a growing form of strategic information warfare."

"Scholars have associated such forms of disinformation more commonly with authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, among others."

Cyber troops:

"For example, Russian hybrid warfare measures now include coordinated efforts by troll factories, hackers and bots to disrupt democratic processes from elections, to legislative communication, to public discussions of issues."

Disinformation:

"This chaotic mix of disinformation is rendered even more challenging to study due to the ranks of apolitical disinformation entrepreneurs producing fake news to make money in the booming 'attention economy' of online media."

"Disinformation – Inaccurate or manipulated information content that is spread intentionally. This can include false news, or it can involve more subtle methods such as false flag operations, feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information."

Study 16: „Trend towards extreme right-wing populism on Twitter. An analysis of the influence on leaders, media and users.” (Pérez-Curiel, 2020)

Content Repurposing:

"Many of them are created with retweets and links to information, images, and videos from the media and other sources (parties and leaders)."

Creating communities:

"In addition to the lack of interaction, the data show a high percentage of positive comments in favor of the published messages, which evidences the existence of fans communities around the figure of the populist candidate."

Attacking opponents:

"Matteo Salvini, a leader with the highest rates of popularity on Twitter, stands out for his attack strategies, marked by negative personalization against parties and candidates from his own country

(including the coalition government of which he forms part), against European leaders and against representatives of the EU."

Use of social media:

"The press selected for the study is fed by the issues that populist politicians publish most intensely on Twitter and that cause most attraction among network users."

Selective selection of topics:

"In addition to the most tweeted blocks projected on the home page, the three media analysed also include subjects less disseminated by the leaders, such as Social policies (education, health, gender violence, abortion, euthanasia) or political corruption, which the press deals with from a critical approach to management and populist discourse."

Study 17: „Turkey’s Twitter public diplomacy: Towards a “new” cult of personality” (Uysal & Schroeder, 2019)

Twitter:

"The seven accounts in the sample produced 2769 tweets during the four-month period."

Possible use of bots

"The analysis revealed that dozens of tweets were retweeted exactly 360 times, which might call the legitimacy of follower engagement into question."

One-way communication

"The findings from the current study showed that one-way communication is still pervasive in public diplomacy tweets (97%)—posts almost exclusively provided information and did not solicit feedback."

Audiovisual content:

"Ninety percent of the posted content contained visual materials (e.g., photos, infographics, videos)."

Hashtags:

"The accounts also consistently employed, hashtags, such as #Turkey, with about two-thirds, on average, of the tweets including such tools (N=1,838/2769)."

Cult of personality:

"First, the Turkish accounts consistently created a sense of cult personality around President Erdogan."

Study 18: „When Machine Behavior Targets Future Voters: The Use of Social Bots to Test Narratives for Political Campaigns in Brazil“ (Santini et al., 2021)

Scale of bot use:

"The three most mentioned profiles by the bot accounts were not related to political content sharing: @c0nvey (854 mentions), @canaistvonline (509 mentions), and @youtube (426 mentions)."

"Regarding sharing and engagement, 719 bots retweeted 4,146 posts (20.8% of the total 19,915 bot posts) from 1,234 unique users."

"One can identify bot networks retweeting the candidates Marcelo Freixo (99 retweets, 33 degrees), Jandira Feghali (113 retweets, 59 degrees), and Índio da Costa (327 retweets, 44 degrees) in Figure 2."

"Our data set suggests that this botnet was developed with a greater degree of strategic organization and coordination, indicating that the Jair Bolsonaro presidential campaign was using bots on Twitter during the 2016 municipal election to prepare the ground for the 2018 electoral campaign."

"Following the content analysis of the heavy bot tweets, we classified these accounts into three categories: user-generated bot, media spambot, and political bot. We subdivided the political bot category into two subcategories: inciting agent bot and campaigner bot."

Testing future campaign strategies

"Despite a data collection strategy based on keywords and hashtags related to the Rio de Janeiro municipal election, the popularity of #Bolsonaro2018 and @jairbolsonaro among bot tweets may indicate that key communication strategies of Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential campaign had been tested since 2016."

Bots use for content promotion:

"User-generated bot accounts presented an automated behavior stimulated by a promotional program called TIM Beta offered by the telecom company TIM, a subsidiary of Telecom Italia in Brazil."

"We identified 35 accounts that only posted links on Twitter to traditional media websites, which we categorized as media spambots."

Bots use for manipulating public opinion:

"Among the heavy bots, we found 20 accounts that behaved like political bots (Woolley & Howard, 2016), spreading artificial opinion on Twitter."

Camouflaging bots:

"We analyzed the extent to which bots simulated real people's accounts and which human characteristics they assumed during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro municipal elections..."

"On creating impersonators to act in the political debate, the puppet masters reproduce and make use of a logic of social dominance..."

"Only seven profiles showed religious inclination, all of which were aligned to neo-Pentecostal precepts."

Context shifting:

"They cited Donald Trump and Nicolas Maduro, with frequent references to Lula and Dilma Rousseff, former presidents from the PT, and Jair Bolsonaro."

Testing political narratives:

„Inciting agents disseminated these conservative messages that, when analyzed in connection, indicated that Jair Bolsonaro was synthetically promoting and testing narratives so as to infiltrate social networks and improve social adherence to political information through profiling”

Astroturfing and truth distortion:

"The inciting agent bots mimicked the grassroots supporters of the Bolsonaro family, stimulating a polarized political debate with false accusations and twisted facts."

Aggressive tone:

"Inciting agents adopted an aggressive tone defending the military dictatorship and arming the civilian population to promote social order..."

Narrative convergence:

"Bolsonaro tested, in the 2016 campaign, the creation of a “chain of equivalence” (Laclau, 2007) connecting the elite’s neoliberal agenda to the religious conservative agenda..."

Study 19: “(Re)shaping online narratives: When bots promote the message of President Trump during his first impeachment” (Galgoczy et al., 2022)

Control of narrative:

"Both parties and the President tried to control the public narrative over impeachment."

Shifting terminology:

"Democrats began to talk about abuse of power or corruption by Trump and eventually shifted to the more specific language of bribery and extortion."

Undermining opposition:

"Republican elected officials seemed to be trying to frame this as a coup by the Democrats."

"Trump saw an opportunity to undermine Biden’s presidential campaign by raising doubts about Biden’s integrity."

Diverting attention:

"The President and some of his Republican allies thus tried to divert attention from the President by alleging misconduct by Joe and Hunter Biden."

#### Disinformation:

"The Trump campaign demonstrated a willingness to influence perceptions via social media, by spending ,as much as \$21,000‘ on a Facebook ad entitled “Biden Corruption”, which included debunked claims..."

#### Use of nicknames and derogatory language:

"Strategies have included the use of nicknames, which contributes to painting a gallery of ‘known villains’..."

"This use of nicknames also echoes Trump’s strategy in employing derogatory language when depicting other groups..."

#### Uncivil behaviour:

"Such strategies are part of a broader trend of incivility by American politicians on Twitter, with uncivil tweets serving as powerful means of political mobilization and fundraising..."

#### Trolls:

"Far from isolated individuals with their own motives, research has shown that ‘trolls’ could be involved in coordinated campaigns to manipulate public opinion on the Web."

#### Tailored messaging:

"Given the polarization of public opinions and the “hyperfragmentation of the mediascape”, such campaigns frequently tailor their messages to appeal to very specific segments of the electorate."

#### Bots:

"We found that bots were actively used to influence public perceptions on online social media."

"Posts created by bots were almost exclusively negative and they targeted Democrat figures more than Republicans..."

Biased sources:

"We witnessed a large use of heavily biased websites, disproportionately promoting the views of partisan or extreme right groups."

Study 20: "Active, aggressive, but to little avail: Characterizing bot activity during the 2020 Singaporean elections." (Uyheng et al., 2021)

Significant use of bots:

"Our findings reveal significant bot activity on Twitter surrounding the 2020 Singaporean elections."

"The proportion of red nodes (which represent bots) suggests a significant number of bots participating in the Twitter conversation."

"At a 0.8 probability threshold for bot-likeness, 26.99% of unique users in our dataset may be classified as bots."

"Bots did not only constitute a large proportion of the users participating in the conversation; more bot-like accounts also produced more tweets on average."

Bots as personal informational tools:

"Interestingly, a manual inspection shows that a significant number of bots are personal informational bots, links with services like IFTTT (If This Then That) to retweet posts from either Twitter or other social media platforms."

Bots producing original tweets:

"However, bots generally performed fewer interactions than humans, despite producing more tweets on average. This suggests bots produced many original tweets not directed at others."

Interaction patterns of bots and humans:

"Both bots and humans talk to humans more, as 56.09% of all interactions took place between humans, while 6.40% of all interactions came from bots directed at humans. But 32.66% of all communication by humans was also directed at bots."

Increase in bot use:

"In comparison with the 2015 elections, Figure 3 presents interesting—if mixed—findings. First, we notice that the proportion of tweets by bots is much higher in 2020 than in 2015."

"The most conservative picture presented by our analysis is that bots may have reduced in relative proportion as actors between 2015 and 2020, but their domination of the electoral conversation has nonetheless increased in share."

Abusive language usage by bots:

"In contrast, we found that bots were more likely to use abusive terms, absolutist terms, exclusive terms, and second-person pronouns. This suggests that, on average, bots were consistently engaged in more insulting behavior directed toward the people they interacted with."

Hashtag usage by bots:

"Conversations containing this hashtag cast suspicion on the integrity of elections during the pandemic, particularly by pointing to the dangers of the disease, as well as linking to related issues in the United States."

"Collectively, these patterns suggest that bots—in contrast to humans more associated with mainstream messaging—were more likely to share messages related to the (un)trustworthiness of the elections under the shadow of the pandemic, or to fuel more incendiary political conversations."

Bots operating in social network structure

"Bots operate not just through the messages they send, but also through manipulating social network structure based on artificial patterns of interaction with other users."

"This suggests that bots tended to operate where the conversation was most active and communicated with people talking about a variety of topics."

Bot's lack of influence

"Finally, we consider the level of influence bots had relative to other users in the dataset."

"Bot accounts did not occupy dominant positions in these influencer lists either."

"However, bots tended to have higher in-degree, indicating that they produced more retweets, replies, and mentions in attempts to gain influence, but not necessarily securing it in a meaningful way throughout the larger conversation."

Study 21: "Asymmetric flooding as a tool for foreign influence on social media" (Cirone & Hobbs, 2023)(First published in 2022)

Recruitment of followers:

"we confirm that apolitical content was used in recruitment"

"ambiguous accounts mentioned non-trolls at extreme rates in 2015, suggesting a massive effort to contact and/or recruit Americans to follow the troll accounts."

Polarization and partisan messaging:

"Prior work has documented general patterns of troll activity; our analysis confirms the same."

"Past studies have generally concluded that IRA troll accounts posted political content, namely propaganda, designed to divide, incite, and agitate viewers on both side of the political spectrum"

Biased messaging:

"Similarly, the red line in Figure 1 documents a late-campaign surge toward conservative content in our data"

"Our results also speak to recent work showing distinct differences in hyperlink content sharing among liberal and conservative IRA accounts in the 2016 elections"

Use of apolitical content for demobilization/distraction:

"apolitical content is used as a demobilization strategy"

"In this light, we consider evidence for a possible strategy using apolitical content—for demobilization, or perhaps distraction from and displacement of political content"

Exploiting social division:

"The IRA attempted to capitalize on racial and partisan divides surrounding the campaign by posting BLM content on Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram, among others"

Entertainment flooding:

"We show that this entertainment “flooding” content was more common in the trolls’ artificial liberal community, and that these accounts switched further to entertainment content near the 2016 election."

"it is clear these accounts switched to using apolitical content (talking about music and videos) instead of political or divisive content. This “flooding” may have been used to distract, demobilize, or displace political content"

Demobilization:

"We can also use this same data to look at an explicit strategy to demobilize, which would involve tweets that actively discourage users to participate in the election (“boycott the election,” or “do not vote”)."

"The existence of voter suppression tweets has been documented."

Avoidance of direct voter suppression:

"We show that overall voter suppression tweets are rare, especially compared to entertainment content."

"troll accounts that feared detection and deletion by Twitter may be less likely to engage in direct and obvious voter suppression."

Study 22: “Coordinating Narratives Framework for cross-platform analysis in the 2021 US Capitol riots” (Ng et al., 2022)

Ideological disparity:

"So, while these accounts make up a small portion of the users, less than 5% of all the user accounts, they account for close to 10% of all of the posts by volume."

"The military, patriot and QAnon accounts are all echoed more than the population average."

"So, those accounts that openly identify with QAnon terms tend to see more social engagement with their posts than any other class of accounts and all of the special types of accounts use more social media artifacts than average users."

Selective messaging:

"These groups may have been targeting the Hispanic population, while subgraphs (a) and (b) targeted the general English-speaking population."

Rapid account creation:

"Similarly, these two subgraphs also have the highest proportion of accounts created in 2021."

Study 23: "Deceptive accusations and concealed identities as misinformation campaign strategies" (Bellutta et al., 2021)

Hashtags:

"Using a bot score threshold of 0.6, the hashtag with the highest fraction of tweets coming from bots was #cdnmedia, with 26% of its usages coming from bots."

"For the not-a-bot hashtags, #TrudeauMustGo was by far the most commonly co-occurring hashtag...providing more evidence of a coordinated campaign."

"These hashtags were used to promote several different topics of discussion on Twitter."

High bot presence in particular hashtag discussions:

"After discovering the noticeable bot presence in the users of fake-news and not-a-bot hashtags, we became interested in understanding more about the behavior of these bots."

Amplification:

"The results show that when using fake-news hashtags, the vast majority of bot activity (76% to 85%, depending on the bot score threshold) actually consists of retweeting."

Bots concealing identities:

"This makes sense, since not-a-bot hashtags should be most useful when used by bots to conceal their identities when tweeting new content."

Study 24: "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets: Measuring Regime Social Media Strategies During Protest." (Munger et al., 2019)

Manipulating topics:

"The results from the topic diversity scores are shown in Figure 3. Recall that lower topic diversity reflects more focused Twitter behavior (i.e., tweets are concentrated across a smaller number of topics). The absolute levels are quite different, as the opposition is far less focused than the regime."

"Just before the planned, countrywide protests that shut down Caracas, the slope of the regime's focus abruptly changes: after nearly two months of becoming more focused, the regime becomes significantly less focused during the protests."

Hashtag use:

"Hashtags are a Twitter-specific linguistic tool used to coordinate discussion between strangers on a given subject."

"The opposition's use of hashtags is predicted to be designed to connect with the dominant extant narrative and encourage different groups to join in on the ongoing conversation."

"The regime was more likely to use discourse-structuring hashtags, but only once the protest started."

"To illustrate, the regime diputados used the following hashtags at different times to encourage their followers to talk about specific topics. #DesconectateDeLaGuarimba [...] #ChávezViveLaPatriaSigue [...] #GringosyFascistasRespeten [...] #VzlaBajoAtaqueMediatico."

"In both cases, there were few tweets containing multiple hashtags before the protest started, and a much larger increase in this technique for the opposition than for the regime during the high point of the protests."

"the most frequent opposition hashtag to mention the president is simply "#Nicolás," but for the regime it is "#RodillaEnTierraConNicolásMaduro." The latter is clearly intended as support for the president, in keeping with an explicitly designed narrative."

"#"#Nicolás" is only seven characters longer (compared to 31), so a tweet containing it has more room to include other hashtags or more discussion. We call this a "labeling" hashtag."

### Developing competing narratives

"In a context in which they could not silence or sufficiently discredit La Salida's narrative, the regime diputados attempted to distract from the protesters by discussing many different issues and developing competing narratives and talking points."

"We have shown that the regime tended to discuss more distinct topics per day during the protest than before or after the protest, and the opposite is the case for the opposition."

### Study 25: "Good News, Bad News: A Sentiment Analysis of the 2016 Election Russian Facebook Ads." (Alvarez et al., 2020)

#### Positive sentiment:

"as the sentiment increased by one unit, the expected average impression per sentiment scores increased by approximately 487.28"

"as the sentiment increased by one unit, the expected average clicks per sentiment score were expected to increase by approximately 30.27"

#### Avoidance of sarcasm:

"For sarcasm, the impressions were expected to be lower by -3563.57 for advertisements with sarcastic sentiment compared with those that were not sarcastic when all other variables were controlled."

"For sarcasm, the number of clicks was expected to be lower by -287.36 for ads with sarcastic sentiment compared with those that were not sarcastic when all other variables were statistically controlled."

#### Tactical use of sentiment:

"There, the negative swing of the ad's sentiment is visible in the period before the November 2016 election. September's ads were especially negative."

"The positive sentiment after the election is unmistakable."

#### Linking sentiment and political events:

"The timeline does illustrate the variance over time, and it is tempting to conclude that some of it is deliberately in line with domestic political events."

Study 26: "Harass, mislead, & polarize: An analysis of Twitter political bots' tactics in targeting the immigration debate before the 2018 U.S. midterm election." (Nonnecke et al., 2022)

Amplification:

"This indicates that the bots were engaging in the interaction tactic of retweeting each other's tweets and shared contacts' tweets, in a likely attempt to give a false sense of popularity."

Anti-immigration rhetoric

"all tweets distributed by the 10 most influential bot accounts in our dataset presented an anti-immigration stance."

Harassment, polarization and fear mongering:

"coordinated messaging tactics by bots to spread harassment and fear, disinformation, and politically divisive language."

"Over half of the unique tweets (n = 347) contained harassing language targeting undocumented immigrants."

"These tweets contained prejudiced and racist language using pejoratives against undocumented immigrants (e.g., criminals, criminal mob, illegals, disease carriers)."

"many of the polarizing language tweets also included polarizing hashtags, for example: #DemocratsHateAmerica, #VoteDemsOut, #VoteDemsOut2018, and #VoteRedtoSaveAmerica."

Fearmongering:

"Claims intended to stoke fears that the caravan included violent criminals were rampant. An image of a bloodied Mexican police officer was widely shared in an attempt to bolster claims of the caravan's violence."

"Numerous tweets claimed the caravan was trafficking children."

"In addition, seven tweets with over 8,000 retweets distributed statements alleging undocumented immigrants committed murder in the United States."

Disinformation:

"Bots employed disinformation messaging tactics targeting Democrats in their tweets."

"The most widely retweeted disinformation campaign in our analysis claimed that Democrats and George Soros, the billionaire founder of Open Society Foundations, were funding the caravan and registering members to vote."

Vilifying opposition:

"Over half of the unique tweets (n = 304) contained polarizing language vilifying Democrats."

Examples: "#INVASION! Dirty #Democrats manufactured this #Caravan crisis! Here's the proof, watch this video! #Trump is right again!" and "WE DON'T WANT... People Winning Elections Base On Mob Rule & Violence! Do Not Give Democrats The Power in Congress Way Too Dangerous For The American People VOTE THEM OUT At MidTerms!"

Study 27: "Hashtag Wars: Political Disinformation and Discursive Struggles on Twitter Conversations During the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Campaign" (Soares et al., 2021)

Utilization of hyperpartisan outlets & ideological disparity:

"The pro-Bolsonaro group gave more visibility to hyperpartisan outlets than mainstream media."

"The anti-Bolsonaro cluster mostly reverberated mainstream media discourse and did not engage in disinformation campaigns."

Disinformation:

"All the hyperpartisan media tweets that used fabricated information on 28 September reproduced the false story."

"@RenovaMidia: After using information from a troubled divorce in 2007 to attack Jair Bolsonaro, the hashtag #Veja600Millions is one of the most commented topics on Brazilian Twitter this Friday morning."

Biased framing:

"On 28 September ... It was the use of biased framing."

„The strategy of biased framing was not only the most frequent but was also used in the two most retweeted messages.“

Polarization:

"Polarized ideological discourse structure was used in both conversations to diminish the accusations by linking them with the Workers' Party."

Change of focus:

"This strategy (change of focus) was mostly used by giving voice to political actors, including Bolsonaro, who denied the accusations and attacked the Workers' Party and Folha de S.Paulo."

Opinion leaders & disinformation:

"We identified hyperpartisan content and disinformation within the pro-Bolsonaro group in both conversations..."

"The presence of opinion leaders is also an important result because they are capable of influencing others on social media due to their reputation."

"In both datasets, the pro-Bolsonaro group mostly gave centrality to actors involved with politics, reproducing the same tendency found in other studies of giving visibility to actors who invest in their reputation."

Study 28: „How Russia's Internet Research Agency Built its Disinformation Campaign.“  
(Dawson & Innes, 2019)

Complex organizational structure:

"The picture painted is of an organisation based around an orthodox division of labour with different departments focussing upon specific geographic regions/countries, accompanied by some platform specialisation."

Content creation and engagement:

"trolls were expected to make around fifty comments on news articles every day."

"they were tasked with maintaining six Facebook pages, posting three times daily about the news, and discussing new developments in groups on Facebook twice daily, with a target of at least 500 subscribers by the end of the first month."

"On Twitter, operators were generally responsible for around ten accounts with up to 2,000 followers each, tweeting at least fifty times daily."

"One source suggests they were required to make 135 comments per twelve-hour shift, working in internet forums and that they would be provided with five keywords to feature in all posts to encourage search engine pickup."

Managed content:

"The latter is consistent with workers describing receiving regular 'taskings' from their managers in terms of a list of subjects/topics to focus upon."

"Similar tasks were defined in relation to targeting comments towards outlets such as CNN, BBC and the New York Times."

Debate simulation:

"One interviewee described working in teams of three: operator one would function as 'the villain' criticising the authorities; then the others would enter a debate with him/her."

Gradual political alignment:

"Other intriguing comments include a suggested pattern for developing accounts in that they are started with a politically neutral stance, which is amended later."

Amplification:

"Operators wrote Twitter bots to amplify visibility and because the costs of doing so were low."

Mimicking users:

"For example, sixteen confirmed Internet Research Agency accounts all used quotations from Orwell, Shakespeare and other famous literary figures as part of the account biography."

"most of the time these accounts were engaged in mimicking the kinds of interests and values coherent with the social identities that they were 'spoofing', and then occasionally they would message avowedly political content."

Buying followers:

"Buying followers: An alternative to the normal organic strategy and long-term investment required to grow follower numbers, is to 'buy' a following."

Follower fishing:

"A second pattern of behaviour designed to build audience and influence is 'follower fishing'."

Narrative switching:

"A third pattern of IRA account behaviour was 'narrative switching'."

"The IRA not only switched from banal to pro-Russian views, but also switched abruptly between different political positions according to current Russian operational priorities, or even just to create confusion."

Repurposing:

"A collection of IRA accounts were identified where there was a significant 'pause' in their messaging, lasting several months."

"Potentially, this might mean that they were dormant accounts that had been purchased by IRA operators. Alternatively, this break could have been used to suppress past political affiliations so the account could be 'repurposed' by the operator."

Political alignment switching as responses to real-world events:

"Possible (unsubstantiated) explanations for this switch in position are that it was a direct response to Chancellor Merkel's public statement on 14 September that the EU would not consider lifting sanctions on Russia."

Multiple account operation:

"IRA operators were required to run multiple accounts and to generate certain volumes of activity."

Hashtag manipulation:

"As with other IRA tweets, they frequently integrated an unrelated trending hashtag in order to push their own hashtag, for example #WorldElephantDay."

Polarization:

"The Russians were amplifying both sides of the political argument simultaneously, trying to increase the social fissures associated with them."

Duplicated content with minor variations:

"There were significant similarities between the content of tweets being posted by these accounts. Some were copied verbatim, and others had single word differences, usually a hashtag."

Selective messaging:

"Around the edges of the diagram, are a large number of smaller 'satellite' clusters. The accounts here can often be distinguished on the basis of them using different languages, or focussing upon particular social identity politics (such as Black Lives Matter)."

Evolving techniques:

"Moreover, this has enabled the IRA and other Kremlin backed units to learn how they are being detected and to adapt their methods accordingly, the consequence being that some of their approaches have become more sophisticated and harder to detect."

Study 29: “International dimensions of electoral processes: Russia, the USA, and the 2016 elections”  
(Ziegler, 2018)

Internet as „free space“ in Russia:

"This relegated critical commentary of Putin, Medvedev, and United Russia largely to the Internet."

"The opposition's ability to utilize social media to rally thousands of protestors convinced the Kremlin of the political dangers stemming from an uncontrolled internet..."

Clamping down on online spaces:

"From 2011 to 2016, the Russian government moved aggressively to control the Web domestically, empowering Roskomnadzor to block objectionable Web sites, requiring bloggers with over 3000 subscribers to register as public media outlets, requiring firms to store data on Russian servers, supporting international laws to regulate content, and intimidating opposition bloggers as foreign agents or extremists."

Accusations of foreign meddling:

"The White Revolution was viewed in the Kremlin as proof that the USA was using color revolution tactics to effect regime change in Russia."

"Putin blamed then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for attempting to influence Russia's internal political affairs."

Weaponizing the internet:

"Apparently, the Kremlin also realized that the internet could be turned against the far from perfect electoral systems in Western democracies, to deepen social divisions, erode confidence in the electoral process, and weaken Russia's adversaries."

Hybrid warfare:

"The idea of using cyber attacks as part of a new 'hybrid warfare' strategy may be attributed to Valerii Gerasimov... who in 2013 advocated using non-military capabilities to incite chaos and instability in an adversary."

Accusations of information warfare:

"By engaging and encouraging opposition movements, utilizing (often in secret) information warfare and economic measures... the West was able to destabilize regions and open the way to military intervention."

"In a subsequent article, Gerasimov claimed that informational resources had become one of the most effective types of modern weapons."

Spreading narratives:

"Significantly, the pro-Russian group CyberBerkut hacked into Ukraine's electoral system prior to the May 2014 presidential elections... by reinforcing the Kremlin narrative of fascists and nationalists dominating Ukrainian politics."

Social division:

"Western Europe has also been impacted by Russian cyber and informational warfare, together with political and financial support for extremist movements."

"Internationally, Russian interference in elections in both Europe and the USA can weaken NATO by strengthening the position of extremist and nationalist parties opposed to NATO membership, or at least critical of the sanctions levied on Russia."

Dissemination of hacked information:

"Distribution of damaging information from the DNC files and personal emails of Hillary Clinton, John Podesta, and other Democrats was largely through Wikileaks... making the media, as a New York Times story reported, effectively an accomplice in Moscow's efforts to foment discord in the American electoral process."

Delegitimising democracies:

"By discrediting American electoral processes and democracy promotion institutions, the Kremlin can enhance its reputation as a vigilant protector of Russian national sovereignty against American efforts to effect regime change."

"By encouraging challengers to the status quo (in the form of extremist parties and candidates on the left and right), and by highlighting flaws in the electoral process, Russia can delegitimize democracies."

"Encouraging dysfunction in real democracies and then drawing attention to their flaws deflects attention from the Kremlin's inability to address the country's manifold problems."

"A longer-term objective is to highlight flaws in the American electoral and party systems, thus undermining America's legitimacy as an example of mature democracy."

"In his December 2016 news conference, for example, Putin responded to an RT question about the American elections by describing them as 'archaic and unfair'."

Election interference:

"The immediate goal by interfering in the US elections presumably was to reduce the chances of a Clinton victory, which would have meant continued sanctions, in favor of a Russia-friendly Trump administration."

"Russian electoral interference has helped achieve Putin's primary goal—restoring the balance of power upended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and positioning Russia once again as a key player in great power politics."

"Internationally, Russian interference in elections in both Europe and the USA can weaken NATO by strengthening the position of extremist and nationalist parties opposed to NATO membership, or at least critical of the sanctions levied on Russia."

Capitalising on weakening American influence:

"As American liberal hegemony weakens, the world is transitioning toward a multipolar order."

"Washington's moral foundation for directing political change in Russia, and its political will for promoting democracy more broadly, are eroding."

Text 30: "Mapping state-sponsored information operations with multi-view modularity clustering" (Uyheng et al., 2022)

Managing international reputation:

"Chinese state-sponsored actors bore an overarching goal of managing Chinese international reputation."

Boosting influencers:

"Following the literature on social cyber-security [2, 13], we classify the major information maneuvers according to previously well-studied strategic categories of: boosting influencers..."

Building communities:

"...building communities..."

Emotional appeal:

"...producing dismaying negative messages..."

„constructive projections of solidarity during the pandemic."

"...producing enhancing positive messages..."

"Projecting a positive sense of national solidarity was also vital to managing China's influence on the international stage, especially amidst a global crisis"

Distraction:

"...distracting publics with irrelevant or misleading content."

High centralization:

"This overall structure revealed a highly centralized campaign among Chinese state-sponsored actors..."

Coordinated messaging:

"However, unique hashtags as well as hashtags with high tf-idf scores also reveal important nuances within shared narrative lines."

Framing dissenters:

"powerful, dismay-oriented narratives that painted Hong Kong protestors as “thugs” responsible for “violence and chaos” against which Hong Kong needed to be “defended”.

Promotion of state loyalty:

"state-sponsored accounts sought to detract from support for the protestors by enjoining the public to “love” “the police” and “the country”.

Emotional appeal:

"indicated that these narratives were communicated in terms of cognitively complex yet emotionally targeted attacks".

Pop culture references:

"popular culture is used here to masquerade as regular user activity while producing more cognitively complex messaging around key narrative lines of effort"

"a cluster which amplified Hong Kong anti-protest frames also used hashtags related to entertainment, specifically regarding Justin Bieber’s recent album release"

Associating dissent with foreign influence:

"Cluster 0 links the protests to the concept of the “color revolution”, a claim that historically associates anti-Chinese sentiment with alleged foreign influence, such as from the United States"

Dehumanising language:

"dehumanizing them as “cockroaches” and faceless “mobs”"

Discrediting opponents:

"the narratives in Era 1 primarily sought to discredit him [Guo Wengui] and his critical attacks against China"

Bots mimicking users:

"one of the important network tactics used in the information operation involved structuring information flow in a manner that enabled masquerading as human – that is, through more conscious interactions with others, and by mimicking more natural leader-follower dynamics"

Creation of echo-chambers:

"tantamount to the creation of an echo-chamber effect. Such an egalitarian structure for information flow, in this view, would potentially be beneficial for such a narrative strategy"

Study 31: "Playing Both Sides: Russian State-Backed Media Coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement." (Bradshaw et al, 2022)

Selective truth:

"Information sharing—or neutral posts that provided information about protests, arrests, or updates on the events around the Black Lives Matter movement—was the largest category of posts coded in our dataset."

"Rather than ‘reinventing’ reality with a flood of lies, sharing news and information about civil unrest in the United States can build news credibility for more propagandistic messaging down the line."

"Many of the Russian-backed outlets covered the BLM protests with continual updates about protests, court hearings, and events in a way that reflects the recognizable broadcasting features of traditional state-backed outlets that suggest mainstream media is not covering the whole story."

Strategic framing and audience engagement:

"And despite the fact that Russian state media is often viewed as agents of the Kremlin, they have been able to somewhat ‘bridge the credibility gap’ through strategic framing and audience engagement."

Conspiracies:

"One example of this strategy is the series of increasingly outlandish conspiracies about the downing of the Malaysia Airlines flight 17 pushed by Russian state media."

#### Creating division:

"The six channels in our sample used racial identity as a divisive point, inflecting divergent frames and facts based on the sensibilities of left-leaning and right-leaning audiences and their views on racial justice in the United States."

"Russia's overt, state-backed media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement mirrors many of the contemporary strategies of its covert influence operations, which aim to sow division."

"posts calling attention to racism highlighted specific incidents of racist actions and systemic inequality in America."

"The video, titled 'ARE WHITE DUDES SABOTAGING THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING?', depicted a white man in a gas mask who bashes in the window of a building and is then confronted by BLM protesters."

"The video is crafted to engender rage at the mainstream media's 'obvious attempts to discredit this movement' (as the text overlaying the footage puts it) by wrongfully attributing the destructive actions of the gas mask-wearing man to the BLM movement and portraying BLM as promoting violence and looting."

#### Emotional appeal:

"These channels tended to frame Black Lives Matter protestors as violent rioters and looters. For example, in one post, Sputnik referred to protests in Minneapolis as 'mob violence'."

"Redfish shared a video of a BLM protestor dancing in front of a group holding Confederate flags with a caption that read, 'Black joy is a form of protest'."

#### Narrative framing

"In some notable cases, the state media outlets covered the same incident—at times with the same footage—but with diverging narrative frames."

#### Selective messaging:

"In the coverage of the summer 2020 protests, overt channels used divergent frames to mobilize different, competing narratives to their respective audiences."

"In The NOW, Redfish, and Soapbox published clickbait-style videos and posts that leveraged contemporary slang and memes used by younger audiences in their discussions of race and racism in America."

"The video dubs the woman a "Karen," a pejorative meme that refers to "a specific type of middle-class white woman, who exhibits behaviours that stem from privilege".

Use of livestreams:

"The use of video and livestreams—in contrast to article- and text-based content—is an important feature of the content produced by Russian state-backed media outlets."

"Video content also, on average, generated more engagement than text- or article-based posts."

"Livestreams are also a growing component of Russian state-backed media coverage."

"livestreams about the BLM movement made up 7.7% of the total number of posts across all channels in our sample."

"The shift to multi-media content, as well as the growing use of livestream content, is noteworthy, particularly because studies about disinformation emphasize how imagery is more persuasive than text."

Stealthy branding

"Other times, the logo was not easily visible. For example, in almost all (84%) of Redfish's livestreams, we were able to identify a Ruptly logo during video disruptions or at the end of a livestream."

Study 32: "Populism, cyberdemocracy and disinformation: Analysis of the social media strategies of the French extreme right in the 2014 and 2019 European elections." (Carral et al., 2023) (First published in 2022)

Increased use of Twitter:

"an increment of 400% in the number of tweets published or retweeted by the own political party on its official Twitter account, moving from 254 messages in 2014 to 1.002 during the 2019 campaigns."

Use of audiovisual content:

"The change in the origin of audiovisual content signals the first major transformation in the strategy carried out in these 5 years."

"86.8% of the tweet sample was accompanied by images (44.3%) and videos or audio (33.9%)"

Interaction with traditional media:

"RN has timidly opened the door, and paradoxically through social networks, to a closer relationship with traditional media."

"one in three tweets published being directed at this future or past promotion of the different members in the media."

Audience engagement:

"The mentions are just provocative bait that is exposed in front of the audience because it is only interested in making its followers aware of the figure of its enemies ('the others') according to the description in 140 characters that benefits the RN."

Different authors:

"the message received by RN supporters comes from many different personalities, widening the possibilities of connecting with various user prototypes"

"On the other hand, those messages published by the other authors, and retweeted by the RN profile, make up a smaller part of the sample, but have, in the upper intervals, a higher range than those of the account itself."

Creation of the 'enemy':

"H3.1. The creation of the 'enemy'. Generally, political enemies are formed in the wake of parliamentary events, except in the case of populisms, whose second lesson—after the appeal to a united 'people'—is, in fact, the construction of the 'other'. This enemy is drawn as an entity with multiple faces and various defects, which have led this antagonistic French 'people' into the critical situation in which it finds itself."

"In 2014, when France was immersed in a climate of political discontent, the RN communication strategy was based on creating a multiplicity of diffuse enemies through its "representations" in order to differentiate itself from the traditional actors."

"TWEET 1. Projection of the media as 'enemy' / @RNational\_off"

Polarization:

"H3.2. Polarisation in the use of Twitter. In order to see whether the way in which the RN uses Twitter stimulates nativism, it must first be shown that there is a Manichean double discourse, where good is related to Le Pen's own party and evil is attributed to the 'enemy'."

"By contrast, in 2019, there is a clear polarisation of the message, with the party ceasing to promote its ideas on any subject and devoting itself to two very different movements: 'purifying' its party and criticising its wide repertoire of enemies."

Us vs. them

"In this way, following the RN's predisposition to promote its arguments in its official profile, in Fig. 72 we can see how, in 2014, posts about the party and the campaign (93%) were spoken about in a positive way."

"By contrast, in 2019, there is a clear polarisation of the message... all the messages written in positive terms refer to his party and the European election campaign (72%); while all the publications on specific subjects have a pessimistic and judgmental tone."

Study 33: "Relating foreign disinformation through social media, domestic online media fractionalization, government's control over cyberspace, and social media-induced offline violence: Insights from the agenda-building theoretical perspective." (Arayankalam & Krishnan)

Biased news

"And the circulation of such biased news on social media platforms is more likely to create a conducive environment for people in using such platforms to organize violence."

"For instance, leveraging its control over cyberspace, the government in Myanmar was instrumental in normalizing hateful expressions against the Rohingya community on various domestic media outlets, resulting in the spread of violent narratives about them on social media platforms (Lee, 2019)."

Study 34: "Social Media and Elections in Southeast Asia: The Emergence of Subversive, Underground Campaigning" (Tapsell, 2021)

## Philippines

Use of social media:

"The plan was very simple. It started from the realisation 45 per cent of people are on Facebook, via mobile phone. This [the Philippines] is really a Facebook country."

"Directly under me during the campaign were 800 Facebook pages and groups. When people asked to help in the campaign, we would tell them "set up a Facebook group"."

Complex organisational structure:

"Gabunda hired around 20 people who would handle 30 to 40 Facebook groups each, and hired a "team of writers and videographers" who produced material that was picked up and amplified through all social media channels"

"Duterte's PR team had employed what was described as a "machine" of "paid trolls, fallacious reasoning and propaganda techniques""

Using paid promotions:

"including by paying Facebook professional services to boost their coverage"

Fake news:

"For example we're going to spin a story about a drug addict raping a two-year-old or something like that... we just try to make up a story in the content and make it a bit more believable and we're just going to crop some names and click publish."

Alternative truth:

"They were made to look like local news sites, or alternative news sites that claimed to be telling the 'real truth' that the mainstream media was suppressing."

Anti-establishment rhetoric:

"Central to this new media ecosystem was the rise of prominent pro-Duterte social media campaigners who undermined the existing information system, including mainstream media."

### Synchronized messaging across platforms

"Importantly, they all sang from the same campaign song-sheet; what those in the campaign industry described as 'message discipline'."

### Leveraging pop culture:

"Most prominent during the 2016 election campaign was Mocha Uson, a popular singer and model, who campaigned strongly for Duterte through her blog"

### Influencer engagement:

"We are continuously talking to social media influencers in person. We are going around the country and discovering the new social media superstars."

### Indonesia

#### Use of social media:

"So we thought to upload the whole YouTube video so that when I speak like that [directly] it is placed in proper context, that I use reason and argument."

"Ahok didn't need TV commercials... Through social media you put up whatever you say, whatever you do."

#### Creation of echo chambers:

"As Lim (2017) has shown, 'algorithmic enclaves' produced multiple forms of tribal nationalism throughout this campaign."

"The algorithmic enclaves described by Lim in 2017 seem to have continued through to the 2019 presidential elections, and the result was an election highly polarised, divisive..."

#### Underground campaigning:

"Yet, on the other hand, these were only one part of a larger network of underground social media campaigning that included groups such as the Muslim Cyber Army and pro-Jokowi 'black campaign' teams set up by presidential advisers."

Disinformation:

"Social media campaigning via disinformation is now a central part of any election campaign in Indonesia... terms such as 'black campaigning' (attacking one's opponent online) and 'buzzers' (the equivalent of trolls in the Philippines) are very much part of the modern-day campaign vernacular."

### Malaysia

Alternative platforms:

"Malaysia's mainstream media is largely owned and controlled by the government and as a result the opposition is restricted in its ability to get its message out, and relies strongly on alternative platforms such as Facebook and Twitter."

Use of social media:

"All political parties were well prepared for online campaigning in GE14, but WhatsApp was seen as crucial."

"We need to try to make sure that we have someone in each of these groups... We instruct all of our members to make sure that they have State parliamentary level down to polling district level – various WhatsApp groups, in order to send information down."

"Prime Minister Najib was well aware that the opposition had used social media effectively in the 2009 and 2013 elections. As a result, Najib poured money and resources into the social media landscape."

"a major concern for government officials was their increasing inability to manage and manipulate the channels of information on social media."

Emotional appeal:

"People share content on WhatsApp when they feel excited, angry, funny, or they have sympathy. Emotional attributions are important. That's what creating WhatsApp content is all about."

Cybertroops:

"The BN was known for employing "cybertroopers" in the 2013 elections."

“We coordinate our messaging through these online platforms. Previously we relied on blogs and Facebook; now the communication infrastructure of WhatsApp is core business”

“Anti-fake news” law:

"In the lead-up to GE14, the government passed an ,anti-fake news‘ law, designed to encourage self-censorship among Malaysians on social media throughout the election campaign."

Underground campaigning:

"The Malaysian opposition campaigners attested to the importance of a subversive, underground social media campaign that allowed them to dominate political discourse in the election in order to focus on corruption scandals involving the Prime Minister, scandals that were otherwise restricted in coverage in the mainstream media."

Study 35: “Social-Cyber Maneuvers During the COVID-19 Vaccine Initial Rollout: Content Analysis of Tweets.” (Blane et al., 2022)

Bots:

“The BotHunter results revealed that anti-vaccine agents consisted of a higher percentage of bots than the pro-vaccine agents.”

“The super spreaders show that bots are effectively diffusing tweets through the network.”

“These bots have managed to connect with users on Twitter, which makes them susceptible to the information or disinformation that these bots can be posting.”

Emotional appeal:

“Pro-vaccine communities had varying messages before the vaccine rollout. Many of them were excite messages...”

“Users posted positive tweets about the vaccine’s approval and then encouraged others to get their vaccine when it became available.”

"The most popular types of messages were the emotionally appealing dismay messages about side effects from the vaccine."

#### Hashtag hijacking:

“Throughout these periods, pro-vaccine communities engaged in hashtag hijacking by tying pro-vaccine narratives to hashtags intuitively associated with anti-vaccine messages.”

“By adding #antivax, #antivaxxer, and other similar anti-vaccine-related hashtags to their tweets, pro-vaccine communities used these hashtags in large numbers to draw attention to pro-vaccine messages with anti-vaccine keywords...”

“In another case, hashtag hijacking tied the hashtag to satirical messages related to anti-vaccine individuals’ actions.”

#### Pseudoscience:

"These messages were further enhanced with references to scientists, doctors, former Pfizer representatives, and politicians. In many of these messages, the side effects were explained using plausible arguments and pseudoscientific methods and information."

#### Counter messaging:

"To counter pro-vaccine messages, anti-vaccine proponents attempted tactics such as dismissing the vaccine effectiveness, suggesting that a person’s immune system is more than sufficient against the virus."

#### Misdirection:

"They also countered with the distract maneuver, which uses misdirection by making other topics seem more important."

#### Selective messaging:

"In another narrative, messages specifically targeting pro-life supporters described the use of fetal cells derived from an abortion during the vaccine development process."

#### Boosting credibility:

"Proponents then enhanced these messages by attaching supportive messages from major religious organizations."

"New explaining messages to support these dismaying claims included citing the vaccines' published lists of adverse effects and a cost-benefit analysis on the benefits versus the severe reactions resulting from getting the vaccine."

Conspiracy theories and fake news:

"They countered the scientific facts about the construct of the vaccine with the lack of peer-reviewed literature to support it, spread manipulated images of Dolly Parton purporting that the vaccine caused her to have Bell's palsy, and suggested that the mRNA vaccines contain nanobots and can change a person's DNA."

Discrediting opposition:

"Anti-vaccine users, however, had a large selection of leaders that they attempted to neutralize or decrease in importance."

Study 36: "Talking to Trolls—How Users Respond to a Coordinated Information Operation and Why They're So Supportive." (Linville et al., 2021)

Trolls types:

"The estimated rate of support is very stable around 70% for right and left trolls. Except for the week leading up to the election, it is also similar for the newsfeeds..."

Increased activity before election:

"The cross-sectional gap between news feeds and the ideological trolls, however, is not consistent over time. Rather, it is driven by a small period of time immediately before the election..."

Engagement influence on account growth and response rate:

"For both right and left trolls, high, but not unanimous, rates of support predict high follower growth rates."

"For newsfeeds, in contrast, there seems to be no relationship between supportive mentions and follower growth..."

"For hashtag gamers, account-days with maximal growth are those with a more even mix of estimated supportiveness."

Positive mentions and their relationship with follower growth and retweets:

"For both right and left trolls, high, but not unanimous, rates of support predict high follower growth rates."

"On this metric, the locally linear smoothed patterns for left and right trolls are similar, both to each other and to the first metric of engagement, with peaks near 70% supportive."

"In contrast to the first metric, there is a substantial relationship for newsfeeds between supportive mentions and retweets, with about 40% more retweets on positive mention days."

Different response patterns:

"For news feeds, the pattern seems to depend on how we measure engagement. For follower growth, there appears to be no consistent relationship between supportiveness and engagement, with the caveat that the overall levels of growth are quite low for this troll type. For retweet engagement, however, the pattern looks more like the left/right troll types..."

Study 37: "The public accountability of social platforms: Lessons from a study on bots and trolls in the Brexit campaign." (Bastos & Mercea, 2018)

Amplification:

"Our findings indicated that bots can potentially amplify a subset of accounts, but that their influence in the network is limited and falls short of a megaphone."

Exploitation of social media platform opaqueness:

"Facebook, a platform averse to bots and requiring real identities, resisted publicly releasing any data, thereby increasing concerns that the opaqueness of social media platforms shields disinformation campaigns."

Psychological warfare:

"Not only can activation occur due to secondary network effects, but also propaganda campaigns can successfully employ psychological warfare techniques that bypass activation altogether."

"The objective of psychological warfare is not to move public opinion, but to create confusion, disorder and distrust."

Microtargeting:

"Social platforms, however, incorporate network externalities, so that users subjected to microtargeted propaganda are also likely to be embedded in cliques or communities equally exposed to the campaign, thereby snowballing the cumulative impression garnered by the piece."

"Social platforms consequently occupy the centre of a media ecosystem that allows hyper-segmentation of social groups and highly targeted political communication with customizable messages that are invisible to the broader public."

Polarization:

"Disinformation campaigns thrive on polarized discourses by mobilizing supporters in opposing clusters, but clusters do not have to convince each other of a prevailing or a minority opinion."

Targeting „influentials“:

"If an organization seeks to optimize the reach of their campaign, they might resort to a social platform as an information diffusion system and target ‘influentials’—i.e. users that are central to the network and perform the role of hubs relaying information to the periphery of the network."

"Trolls and botmasters do not necessarily have to convince ‘influentials’ of their political agenda. For disinformation purposes, it might suffice that opinion leaders inhabiting the network perceive one side of the public debate as contentious and potentially damaging."

Bots and trolls:

"Equally important, the distinction between automated and supervised information warfare has remained peripheral to public deliberations."

"Surpassing bots in complexity and capillarity in the communities in which they operate, supervised accounts (e.g. trolls) were pivotal in the successful disinformation campaign led by the Kremlin-linked and St Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency."

"The contrast between the two covert strategies raises topical questions about human-driven, curated and supervised high-volume posting and, conversely, automated, unsupervised and scripted machine bots."

"One objective common to both automated and supervised activity is increasing the likelihood of activation. While bots might present potential for generating larger exposure, the benefits of network effects can only be achieved when multiple agents are coordinated through endogenous activation."

Activating opinion leaders:

"... a savvy strategy for activating opinion leaders such as journalists while at the same time assisting activists to coordinate across national boundaries and protest sites."

Inflammatory messaging:

"Disinformation strategies centred around inflammatory social media messaging constitute a pressing research agenda for social scientists..."

Exploitation of social media structure:

"... social platforms and Facebook in particular are continuously building a complex apparatus of content moderation and user governance that enforces a set of opaque guidelines to public discourse with no public or external expert supervision..."

"Indeed, researchers continue to face mounting obstacles erected by social media companies that at times have actively blocked access even to publicly available data."

"... social media companies that at times have actively blocked access even to publicly available data."

"Social platforms thus balance the untenable task of convincing regulators that rampant propaganda on social platforms is ineffective while telling advertisers the very opposite."

"These endpoints for data collection are intended for programmers building application software that adds to the growing ecosystem of services offered by social platforms, whose business model remains

focused on selling users' data by making them available to advertisers and campaigners targeting individuals with specifically tailored content."

## 4.2. Themes

For the thematic analysis codes were clustered into thematic groups that each represent a strategy or tactic of digital propaganda. These strategies in turn were grouped into overarching themes. Four general dimensions of digital propaganda were identified: Communicative, political, technological and social.

### Communicative Dimension

#### Strategy: Ideological manipulation

Codes:

Ideological disparity

Anti-establishment rhetoric

Self victimization/victim narrative

Claiming liberal values

Anti-immigration rhetoric

Self victimization/victim narrative

Us vs. them narratives

Claiming liberal values

In the digital propaganda landscape, anti-establishment sentiment has become a salient tool for shaping public opinion. As observed, establishment figures, especially political elites and prominent politicians of major parties, are often portrayed in a reductive light, with their roles and contributions simplified and frequently maligned. This reductionist portrayal extends beyond mere criticism. Rather, satirical ad hominem attacks serve as a means to degrade and lampoon these elite figures, further establishing an antagonistic view of the establishment. This dichotomy in representation underscores a broader "us vs. them" narrative pervasive in digital propaganda. A keen examination of the content reveals that such divisive tactics aren't confined solely to domestic players. Satirical narratives and stereotypes, often

deeply rooted in visual content, target not only "strangers" from outside the nation, such as immigrants, but also those within the borders who might deviate from traditional or majoritarian norms, such as the LGBTQ community and political dissenters. These caricatures, grounded in discourses on cultural wars, immigration, and perceived threats to national identity, serve to solidify an 'us' and 'them' distinction. Such depictions do more than merely alienate; they assist in fortifying collective identities, particularly among right-wing supporters, embedding deeper divides in the social fabric (International Communication Association, 2018; Nonnecke et al., 2022; Tapsell, 2021)

The exploitation of the victim narrative in digital propaganda offers a poignant example of how perceptions are strategically shaped to elicit sympathy and align public sentiment. Notably, figures like Luigi di Maio in Italy have overtly positioned themselves as "victims" (Baldi et al., 2019, 311-312), drawing attention to their perceived persecution not just by the mechanisms of online misinformation, but also by traditional media outlets, including newspapers and television news. This victim narrative isn't exclusive to individual political figures. A more expansive observation reveals a broader pattern wherein groups typically perceived as privileged, such as white individuals or men, are framed as oppressed minorities (International Communication Association, 2018, 15). This narrative turn positions them as casualties of progressive ideologies and values that supposedly marginalize them. Such portrayals serve to galvanize support, fostering unity among right-wing proponents who feel besieged by these emerging societal norms. Cano-Orón et al. (2021, 220-221) found two parties to have specifically drawn attention to purported disinformation campaigns targeted against them during the 2019 Spanish election campaigns, reinforcing their status as victims in the political arena. This strategy of self-victimization, when disseminated widely, has the potential to rally support and consolidate base by cultivating a shared sense of grievance.

Interestingly, amidst these narratives of confrontation and victimhood, right wing propaganda efforts in Canada and the US were found to claim an adherence to liberal values. By asserting allegiance to principles like freedom, democracy, and equality, they strategically cater to a broader audience, cloaking potentially divisive or extremist ideologies in universally cherished values. This juxtaposition serves as a smoke screen, granting the propaganda an aura of respectability (International Communication Association, 2018, 16).

In essence, the ideological dimensions of digital propaganda are a tapestry of interwoven narratives and tactics, each serving to bolster the overarching agenda of the propagator while destabilizing or discrediting the opposition.

#### Strategy: Controlling the Narrative

Codes:

Alternative truth/misrepresentation of facts/distorting truths

Fake news

Disinformation

Conspiracy theories

Selective messaging/tailored messaging/microtargeting/selective truth

Creating controversy

Biased sources

Use of apolitical messaging

Legitimizing falsehood

Strategic framing

Engagement of different personalities

Biased news

Influencer engagement

Pseudoscience

Counter messaging

Misdirection

The essence of propaganda in the digital age revolves around the manipulation and control of narratives. At the core of this strategy is the craft of constructing, distorting, or selecting truths to shape public perception. This sophisticated tapestry of tactics and techniques serves to mold opinions, guide emotional responses, and influence actions.

Digital propaganda harnesses disinformation and fake news to achieve its objectives. Central to the function of disinformation is the creation and perpetuation of ambiguity. By disseminating alternative narratives, an environment of uncertainty is crafted, leading individuals to grapple with conflicting information and consequently lose trust in traditionally authoritative sources. Digital propagandist will take this a step further by encouraging the spread of conspiracy theories, if this fits their purpose (Chaves & Braga, 2019; Benaissa Pedriza, 2021; Blane et al., 2022).

This strategy is further weaponized by camouflaging disinformation as legitimate news. Many platforms have been designed to resemble local or alternative news sites, purportedly offering the "real truth" that mainstream media allegedly suppresses. (Tapsell, 2021, 121).

Analyzing the content itself, the gradation of disinformation can vary. Some might be outright fabrications, designed intentionally to deceive and harm. Others could be subtle distortions of the truth, such as an example cited by Cano-Orón et al. (2021, 223) that claims women earn 22.3% less than men. While the statement in its essence is correct regarding the wage gap, the misleading aspect is the implication that the disparity exists for the "same job," whereas, in reality, men often occupy higher-paying positions.

Another dimension to this issue is the entry of apolitical entrepreneurs into the disinformation arena, capitalizing on the lucrative "attention economy" of online media. These actors, driven by profit rather than political objectives, further muddy the waters of digital discourse (Bennett et al., 2018, 133).

The willingness to spend large sums on online disinformation is exemplified by the Trump 2020 campaign's spending of \$21,000 on a Facebook ad, making debunked claims about "Biden Corruption" (Galgoczy et al., 2022, 17). Further research into digital propaganda financing may be an effective way of understanding the scope of these kinds of influence operations.

The use of hyperpartisan online media outlets in disinformation campaigns has been evident in various global contexts, such as the political landscape in Brazil. In their study on the 2018 Brazilian presidential election campaigns, Soares & Recuero (2021) found the pro-Bolsonaro group to be amplifying hyperpartisan outlets over mainstream media and often engaging in disinformation. In contrast, the anti-Bolsonaro cluster primarily reflected mainstream discourse without resorting to falsehoods. These outlets often function as a basis to legitimize specific narratives, by giving them credibility – in the eyes of a gullible audience.

The role of opinion leaders in this digital ecosystem cannot be understated. Their ability to influence, stemming from their online reputation, provides them with a unique position to shape narratives. Whether it's in the Brazilian context, where the pro-Bolsonaro group centralized around political actors (Soares & Recuero, 2021), or in Indonesia, where "black campaigning" (Tapsell, 2021, 126), referring to the act of attacking opponents online and "buzzers" (Tapsell, 2021, 126), a form of trolls have become campaign staples, the influence of these key figures is palpable.

Disinformation and fake news act as powerful tools to shape public perception, sow division, and erode trust in authoritative sources. As these tactics become more deeply ingrained in political and social discourse, understanding their nuances, sources, and impacts becomes paramount for any informed democracy.

Yet, not all manipulations are outright falsehoods. Selective messaging, tailored to resonate with specific groups, is a nuanced way of controlling the narrative. Microtargeting has refined this, allowing propagandists to cater messages to individual preferences or biases, often presenting a selective version of the truth tailored to the recipient's worldview. This granular approach to communication is both a testament to technological advancements and a reflection of the increasing sophistication of digital propaganda strategies (Bastos & Mercea, 2018).

In their study of the South Korean National Information Service's (NIS) disinformation campaign during the 2012 Korean presidential election, Keller et al. (2020) found that NIS accounts infrequently retweeted popular liberal content, a choice that demonstrates a strategic intention to craft a particular narrative or sentiment. Topics like political corruption and social policies were less disseminated by leading figures, suggesting a purposeful omission or downplaying of certain subjects to maintain a controlled discourse or protect populist narratives.

This method of curated communication becomes especially potent when targeting specific demographic groups. In their analysis of the online communication surrounding the 2021 capitol riots in the USA Ng et al. (2022) found that certain groups specifically targeted the Hispanic population, there was an evident contrast in messaging compared to that tailored for the general English-speaking audience. The presence of 'satellite' clusters in information diagrams, characterized by different languages or a focus on specific socio-political movements like Black Lives Matter, further substantiates this.

A significant component of selective communication is the strategic sharing of neutral or factual information, which can be seen in the extensive posts providing updates about events related to the Black Lives Matter movement during the 2020 protests in the USA, as analyzed by Bradshaw et al. (2022). By presenting unbiased news or updates on civil unrest, propagandists can establish a semblance of credibility, paving the way for more skewed messaging in the future. The coverage of these events by Russian-backed outlets, for example, hints at the idea that mainstream media might be withholding the full story (Bradshaw et al., 2022, 14), thus subtly undermining their credibility. The researchers also noted the use of contemporary slang and memes tailored for younger audiences, aiming to resonate and engage them effectively. Employing terms like "Karen" to describe privileged behaviors showcases a keen awareness of current internet culture and its utility in propaganda messaging (Bradshaw et al., 2022, 17).

Additionally, crafting narratives that align with pre-existing beliefs or sentiments proves effective. This is exemplified in the targeting of pro-life supporters with messages focusing on the use of fetal cells in vaccine development, during the roll out of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine (Blane et al., 2022, 9). By tapping into deeply held convictions, propagandists can more effectively sway or reinforce audience perspectives.

In essence, selective communication, through its targeted and strategic dissemination of information, offers a refined approach to shaping public sentiment. By understanding and catering to specific audiences, propagandists amplify the impact of their campaigns, making it a pivotal strategy in the modern digital landscape.

This orchestration of narrative is further compounded by reliance on biased sources. Such sources, often masked as neutral, amplify the propagandist's message while sidelining or discrediting dissenting voices. The strategic use of apolitical messaging, wherein propaganda is disguised as neutral or universally accepted truths, blurs the lines between fact and fiction. This tactic, along with legitimating falsehoods by presenting them alongside genuine facts or through seemingly credible platforms, serves to muddy the waters of truth (Galgoczy et al., 2022, 18).

Strategic framing is a technique to present the same fact or event a way that benefits the propagandist. „Rather than ‘reinventing’ reality with a flood of lies, sharing news and information about civil unrest in the United States can build news credibility for more propagandistic messaging down the line“ (Bradshaw et al., 2022, 14).

Ultimately, all these tactics converge towards a singular aim: boosting the credibility of the propagated narrative while undermining or sidelining opposing voices. In the digital age, where information flows are vast and rapid, controlling the narrative is both an art and a science, with propagandists employing a multifaceted approach to shape perceptions, emotions, and actions.

#### Strategy: Emotional manipulation

Codes:

Emotional appeal

Vulgar language

Nicknames

Derogatory language

Dehumanising language

Fear mongering

Aggressive tone/discourse

Uncivil behavior

Emotional appeal in digital propaganda plays a pivotal role in swaying audience sentiments, reinforcing narratives, and achieving specific objectives. Aggressive language and uncivil behavior was used strategically to emotionally engage audiences and rile them up, usually against an opposing candidate (Galgoczy et al., 2022; Santini et al., 2021)

The Russian trollfarm Internet Research Agency (IRA) harnessed visceral imagery and firsthand accounts to target the black community in the USA share real stories of racial injustices, exemplified by the use of a smiling image of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old victim of police brutality, paired with the emphatic text, "REMEMBER TAMIR RICE". By strategically presenting decontextualized images of black people, the IRA sought use these as emotional currency to instill distrust in mainstream media. A stark example of this strategy is the misrepresentation of an old image of a surgery, suggesting a an achievement by black doctors had gone unacknowledged, to foster both trust in their narrative and doubt in conventional news outlets (Foster Bhusari et al., 2022, 350).

Digital propaganda, with its vast reach and precision-targeting capabilities, allows for the dissemination of fear-inducing narratives tailored to specific demographics or cultural contexts. Such narratives often exaggerate threats, amplify uncertainties, or stoke prejudices to create an atmosphere of perpetual crisis. This state of heightened alarm can paralyze rational discourse, making populations more malleable to simplistic solutions or extremist viewpoints. In the era of real-time information, fear mongering can quickly snowball, leading to widespread panic or distrust, undermining societal cohesion, and paving the way for manipulative actors to consolidate power or push divisive agendas (Chaves & Braga, 2019; Nonnecke et al., 2022).

In the US, conservative politicians were shown to have utilized the potent emotions stirred by North Korean threats to induce fear, effectively rallying support for the conservative party. These emotionally charged tactics are also evident in election campaigns, where threats from North Korea are weaponized to depict liberals as sympathizers, and in the portrayal of liberals as traitors, intertwining the concept of "threat" with "communism" and stoking nationalist sentiment in the process (Keller et al., 2020, 272).

In a world filled with "fake news," seemingly bizarre stories can resonate deeply if they tap into underlying myths and emotions. The portrayal of Black Lives Matter protestors varies from being framed as "violent rioters and looters" (Bradshaw et al., 2022, 14) to expressions of resistance, such as a protestor dancing joyfully in front of Confederate flags, symbolizing that "Black joy is a form of protest" (Bradshaw et al., 2022, 15).

Different uses of emotional messaging were found in the discourse surrounding vaccines. Before the rollout, communities spread messages of anticipation and hope. However, once the vaccine was available, the narrative shifted, emphasizing either the positive aspects of getting vaccinated or the adverse side effects, depending on the desired sentiment (Blane et al., 2022, 9).

Emotional appeal in digital propaganda is used strategically to trigger emotional responses in the audience. It targets peoples fears and desires, framing narratives in ways that evoke specific feelings and reactions, thus influencing perceptions and actions.

#### Strategy: Use of levity

Codes:

Irony, sarcasm, satire

Pop cultural references

Memes

Avoidance of sarcasm

In the dynamic landscape of digital communication, the use of levity, characterized by humor, sarcasm, satirical elements, the use of memes, and pop culture references has emerged as a tool for propagandists (Bradshaw et al., 2022; International Communication Association, 2018; Tapsell, 2021). This shift towards seemingly less aggressive forms of communication belies the impact such tactics can have on shaping opinions and directing discourse. By weaving humor and popular culture into their messaging, propagandists can subtly introduce or reinforce ideologies while engaging audiences in a manner that often escapes critical scrutiny.

Levety is infused into propaganda messaging through use of irony, sarcasm, and satire. Historically, satire has served as a tool for critiquing power structures, highlighting societal flaws, and pushing for change. However, in the hands of propagandists, these techniques can be weaponized to mock, discredit, or trivialize serious issues or opponents. Irony and sarcasm, in particular, allow for a dual interpretation; a statement can be presented as a mere joke or jest, while simultaneously conveying a deeper, often divisive message. This duality offers propagandists a layer of protection; they can always retreat behind the guise of humor when faced with criticism, while ensuring that the underlying message resonates with those primed to receive it (International Communication Association, 2018).

Intertwined with these humorous tactics is the frequent use of pop cultural references. By tapping into widely recognized movies, songs, television shows, or celebrity incidents, propagandists can connect with vast audiences, creating an immediate sense of familiarity and relatability. Such references not only make the propaganda content more engaging but also embed the propagandistic message within a cultural narrative, rendering it more palatable or harder to contest. The broader the cultural

phenomenon, the wider the net that can be cast, allowing the propagandist to reach diverse demographics and even transcend geographical or linguistic barriers (International Communication Association, 2018, 13; Tapsell, 2021, 122).

Arguably, one of the most potent manifestations of levity in digital propaganda is the meme. These viral pieces of digital content, often comprising images overlaid with text, are deceptively simple yet profoundly impactful. Memes capitalize on humor, absurdity, and the rapid consumption habits of digital audiences. Their shareable nature means that they can quickly proliferate across social networks, embedding themselves into online subcultures and the broader digital zeitgeist. For propagandists, memes offer a perfect vessel to distill complex or controversial ideas into easily digestible, often humorous, bites. Moreover, due to their user-generated nature, memes often bypass traditional gatekeepers or fact-checkers, spreading unchecked and unchallenged (Foster Bhusari, 2022; International Communication Association, 2018, 14).

However, the effectiveness of memes extends beyond their virality. They create a sense of in-group belonging; those who 'get' the joke or reference feel part of a community, while those who don't are alienated (International Communication Association, 2018, 14). This dynamic is invaluable for propagandists looking to solidify their base or subtly indoctrinate new members. Furthermore, the humor in memes can mask or normalize extreme views, making them appear less threatening or more mainstream than they truly are.

Interestingly, one study (Alvarez & Strover, 2020) specifically mentions the avoidance of sarcasm as a tactic, as its use was shown to lower audience engagement.

In summary, the use of levity in digital propaganda represents a sophisticated understanding of contemporary communication dynamics. Techniques like irony, sarcasm, and satire, coupled with pop culture references and the formidable meme culture, offer propagandists an arsenal of tools to subtly influence, engage, and rally audiences. While these methods might appear light-hearted on the surface, their implications for shaping discourse, normalizing ideologies, and fostering divisions are profound. It underscores the need for digital literacy that goes beyond fact-checking, delving into the nuances of humor and the subtle ways in which it can be employed for manipulation.

## Political dimension

Authoritarian regimes have harnessed digital tools to project narratives beyond their borders, aiming to destabilize democracies by exploiting societal divisions, undermining trust in institutions, and manipulating perceptions. However such tactics are not solely reserved for international targets;

domestically, these regimes employ digital propaganda to solidify their control, suppressing dissent and promoting a singular, state-sanctioned narrative. In some nominally democratic countries digital propaganda has become a pervasive tool as well, used by political campaigns to influence public opinion and election outcomes. The ubiquity of digital platforms and the rapid spread of information make digital propaganda a tool of unprecedented power, wielded both to consolidate internal control and to maneuver in the broader geopolitical arena.

As the primary focus of this study is the impact of digital propaganda on democratic mechanisms, we will begin the analysis of the political dimension of digital propaganda by exploring the strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to wield it as an instrument of foreign influence within democratic countries. Subsequently, we will delve into its domestic utilization and its implications on democratic procedures.

#### Strategies and tactics of foreign influence operations

Codes:

Attribution to foreign meddling

Weaponising the internet

Delegitimising democracies

Influencing elections abroad

Managing international reputation

Creation of the enemy

Supporting extremism and populist movements

Capitalising on weakening American influence

Accusing adversaries of information warfare

The digital age, characterized by a borderless information ecosystem, has paved the way for a myriad of opportunities for foreign entities to wield influence over other nations. Digital propaganda has evolved into a strategic element of geopolitical maneuvering, with certain usually authoritarian nations harnessing its power to pursue geopolitical objectives, influence public opinion, and destabilize adversaries. A deep dive into their strategies and tactics reveals the intricate web of maneuvers undertaken by these entities.

The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) stands as a striking exemplar of state-backed digital influence operations. It was mentioned in several of the papers analyzed in this study (Golovchenko et al., 2020; Foster Bhusari, 2022; Cirone & Hobbs, 2023; Dawson & Innes 2019).. Operating from St. Petersburg, the IRA, sometimes referred to as a trollfarm, is an organization that uses computational propaganda techniques (more on this in Technical Dimensions of Digital Propaganda) aiming to destabilize democratic processes in various countries. The agency disseminates disinformation, sows discord, and amplifies societal divisions through an intricate web of social media accounts, websites, and bots. A significant focus of its operations has been to manipulate public opinion during election cycles, notably in the U.S. during the 2016 presidential elections (Golovchenko et al., 2020). By leveraging pre-existing tensions and crafting divisive narratives, the IRA seeks not just to influence electoral outcomes but more insidiously to undermine trust in the democratic institutions themselves.

Central to the goal of many foreign influence campaigns is the delegitimization of democracies. By undermining faith in democratic institutions, processes, and leaders, external entities can weaken the internal cohesion of target nations. If people begin to doubt the efficacy and authenticity of their democratic processes, it becomes easier for external narratives to take root (Ziegler, 2018). A specific manifestation of this strategy is the aim of influencing elections abroad. This can range from the release of damaging information on specific candidates and promoting divisive issues to tampering with electoral infrastructure. The end goal remains consistent: to shape the electoral outcome in a manner conducive to the foreign actor's interests.

Parallel to these disruptive tactics is the drive to manage international reputations. Propaganda is adeptly employed to craft a favorable image of the foreign nation, whitewashing any negative aspects and promoting its cultural, political, or economic narratives on the global stage. This is especially true for Chinese propaganda efforts (Uyheng et al., 2022, 14).

The creation of an enemy is another salient tactic. By designating a common adversary, foreign actors can rally domestic support, justify their actions, and create a sense of unity. This perceived enemy, often another nation or a global institution, is portrayed as an existential threat, thereby legitimizing a wide range of aggressive or defensive actions (Cerral et al., 2023, 7).

A more covert strategy involves supporting extremism and populist movements in other countries. By fueling these movements, foreign entities can destabilize regions, divert global attention. These movements often serve as proxies, furthering the foreign entity's objectives without direct intervention (Ziegler, 2018, 558; Cirone & Hobbs, 2023, 167; Bradshaw et al., 2022). One especially perfidious case of such meddling was studied by Bradshaw et al. (2022). During the Black Lives Matter protest following the death of George Floyd in 2020, Russian propaganda efforts were found to be stoking the flames both among black and liberal communities in favor of the protests and conservative ones against them. I will go into more depth on this case in the section Social Dimensions of Digital Propaganda.

Lastly, a weakening American geopolitical influence has begun to create a vacuum that different nations are trying to fill. With perceived retreats by the U.S. on various fronts, other nations see an opportunity to fill the void, using digital propaganda to present themselves as viable alternatives on the global stage, be it in leadership, trade, technology, or culture. While American foreign influence exertion was allegedly based on democratic values, this is not the case for states like Russia and China. Democratic values themselves thus come under attack as a means to undermine Western power (Ziegler, 2018, 570).

In conclusion, the political dimension of digital propaganda, particularly in the realm of foreign influence, is vast and multifaceted. It spans from overt actions like influencing elections to subtler strategies like reputation management. Understanding these tactics is not merely an academic exercise; it's crucial for nations and their citizens to safeguard their sovereignty in an interconnected digital world.

#### Strategies and tactics of domestic influence operations

Codes:

Ideological disparity

Supporting one side/attacking opposition

Character assassination/discrediting opponents

Personality cult creation

Testing campaign strategies/narratives

Internet as “free space” in Russia

Framing dissenters

Promotion of state loyalty

Associating dissent with foreign influence

“Anti-fake news” law

Underground campaigning

Within some democratic nations, the use of digital propaganda has emerged as a potent tool for internal political maneuvering as well. Driven by the unparalleled reach and immediacy of social media platforms, political parties, interest groups, and even individual influencers employ digital propaganda

to shape public opinion, rally support, and discredit opposition. Such strategies can involve the dissemination of misleading information, amplification of divisive issues, or the strategic framing of narratives to resonate with specific voter bases. While the open nature of democracies allows for a free exchange of ideas and robust political discourse, it also leaves them vulnerable to the misuse of digital channels for manipulating public sentiment, eroding trust in institutions, and polarizing societies. The challenge for democracies lies in distinguishing between genuine political communication and malicious propaganda while preserving the core values of free expression.

One of the standout observations in the realm of digital propaganda is the marked dominance of right-wing narratives, which often eclipse left-wing perspectives. This trend towards right-wing messaging is not arbitrary. Several factors have been identified to account for this imbalance. Some suggest that certain propaganda techniques inherently align better with right-wing ideologies, allowing for more effective and resonant messaging within these circles. Additionally, the architecture and user dynamics of specific digital platforms may inadvertently favor the spread of right-wing narratives. These platforms often operate with algorithms that amplify content based on engagement metrics, which could result in the widespread dissemination of popular right-wing viewpoints. The natural virality of these narratives, combined with the structural intricacies of online platforms, serves to further entrench this ideological disparity in the digital sphere (International Communication Association, 2018).

Often extensive digital propaganda efforts were found to be supporting one specific candidate, usually, but not always, the right wing and/or populist one. Examples of such candidates are Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (Tapsell, 2021), both Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini in Italy (Baldi et al., 2019), or famously Donald Trump in the USA (Benaissa Pedriza, 2021). Digital platforms become saturated with messages lionizing a particular candidate, often juxtaposed against disparaging content about rivals (Masduki, 2022). This dual strategy not only sways public opinion in favor of the chosen candidate but also shapes the larger political discourse. Character assassination and discrediting opponents are tactics as old as politics itself, but digital propaganda has revitalized them with fresh potency.

Taken even further these efforts go so far as to create a cult of personality around a candidate. The creation of a personality cult revolves around the relentless glorification of a leader. This was observed to be happening specifically in Turkey with Erdogan (Uysal & Schroeder, 2019), but can arguably also be said about Donald Trump, Narendra Modi and others. This is in so far disturbing as the creation of a personality cult is usually associated with dictators or other authoritarian rulers and can be seen as a symptom of democratic erosion.

The testing of future campaign strategies and narratives was another tactic observed by Santini et al. (2021). In their analysis of digital propaganda during the 2018 Brazilian presidential election campaign, they found that Jair Bolsonaro's campaign had employed digital propaganda techniques to test and refine his campaign strategies and narratives as early as 2016. This strategic move was designed to

permeate social networks effectively, enhancing the public's receptiveness to political information by aligning it with their social profiles.

In Malaysia an “Anti-fake news” law was enacted by the government that was purportedly designed to combat misinformation, but actually encourages self-censorship among citizens (Tapsell, 2021, 119). During crucial times, such as elections, this can suppress genuine critique and dissent. This is just one instance where the concept of fake news itself is used to discourage unwanted information from being circulated.

Lastly, underground campaigning, away from the public eye, leverages alternative platforms and digital channels. This covert approach allows propagandists to target specific groups, disseminate sensitive information, and mobilize support without the effort of attracting attention (Tapsell, 2021, 129).

The domestic dimension of digital propaganda is rife with strategies that range from relatively obvious efforts to highly insidious, hard to detect measures. They are used in democracies across the world, though it is notable that Western liberal democracies, especially in Europe seem to have more of a problem with digital propaganda originating abroad. While the mediums have evolved, the intent remains age-old – to shape perception, influence behavior, and consolidate power.

## Technical dimension

The technical dimension of digital propaganda emerges as a crucial axis of analysis, central to the dynamics of message proliferation and manipulation. This section endeavors to dissect the underlying mechanisms and strategies that are frequently leveraged to maximize the impact of propagandistic content in digital spaces. While the manifestation of propaganda is often observed at the surface level through the content itself, a myriad of sophisticated techniques—ranging from computational propaganda using automated accounts (bots) and people paid to manage accounts and engage with users (trolls) to the exploitation of the structure of social media platforms through the use of strategic hashtags and algorithmic manipulation. These techniques reflect an evolving digital playbook. The examination of this dimension offers a comprehensive insight into the technological underpinnings that enhance the efficacy and reach of digital propaganda.

### Strategies and tactics of computational propaganda

Codes:

Bots, Trolls, Cyborgs, Cybertroops

Internet Research Agency  
Astroturfing  
Amplification/artificial trends  
Use of hashtags  
Rapid account creation  
Buying followers  
Mimicking user behaviour  
Alignment switching  
Evolving techniques  
Repurposing accounts

Computational propaganda refers to the use of bot and hired trolls to spread propaganda messages online. Bots are scripts automated to perform tasks repetitively, predominantly focusing on amplifying content to reach vast audiences (García-Orosa, 2021; Keller et al., 2020; Neyazi, 2020 etc.). Their mechanical nature allows for large-scale operations, but they lack the nuanced engagement of human interaction. Trolls are human users with an agenda, usually hired by propagandists to spread messages and engage with users on social media (Keller et al., 2020; Linvill et al., 2021). Trolls deliberately post content designed to provoke, mislead, or distort. Their human-driven approach makes their interference more adaptive and often harder to detect. A third category, cyborgs is sometimes mentioned (Neyazi, 2020). Usually, they are people paid to manage a large number of semi-automated accounts. In doing so they meld the strengths of both bots and trolls. All together these entities are sometimes referred to as cybertroops (Mazduki, 2022) and can be state-affiliated or aligned with vested interest groups. They mobilize extensive resources to drive narratives systematically. Their operations are multi-faceted, leveraging various tools from the computational propaganda toolkit to exert influence on a grand scale (Linvill et al., 2021).

Bots have become ubiquitous tools in the arsenal of digital propagandists, automating the dissemination of targeted messages on a massive scale. Their ability to flood platforms with content has made them attractive for those wishing to shape narratives rapidly. However, some studies suggest that their effectiveness in isolation may be limited (Uyheng et al., 2021). The mechanical nature of bots often lacks the nuance and adaptability required to engage and persuade human audiences genuinely. Recognizing these limitations, there's a burgeoning trend towards hybrid strategies that fuse the scalability of bots with the sophistication of human intervention (Nayazi, 2020). These 'cyborg' approaches combine the amplifying effect of bots with the adaptability and emotional intelligence of human trolls. As the digital propaganda landscape continues to evolve, it is probable that such combined strategies will gain prominence.

One prominent example of cybertroops is the Internet Research Agency (IRA). Linked to Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, this organization stands as a testament to the potent capabilities of computational propaganda. Their interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election exemplifies the depth and breadth of such operations (Ziegler, 2018). Harnessing a mix of bots, trolls, and other digital techniques, the IRA demonstrated how narratives, when masterfully executed, can seep deep into the fabric of public discourse, altering perceptions and influencing decisions.

In the realm of online discourse, the challenge often lies not just in crafting narratives but in ensuring their prominence. To this end, artificial amplification techniques are employed. Bots and trolls, operating in concert, create echo chambers, making specific content appear more popular or relevant than it genuinely is. These artificially inflated trends, if executed proficiently, can deceive platform algorithms, catapulting tailored narratives to the forefront of public attention (Bastos & Mercea, 2018, 3-4).

A tactic intricately linked to amplification is the strategic deployment of hashtags. What is designed as a mere organizational tool on platforms like Twitter is misused by propagandists and turned into a potent instrument of influence. By creating or co-opting hashtags, they can effectively channel online discussions in desired directions, offering visibility and, by extension, legitimacy to their narratives (Neyazi, 2020; Pérez-Curiel, 2020, 185; Bellutta et al., 2021).

Ng et al. (2022) observed the rapid creation of a large number of accounts that were used to spread the narrative that Donald Trump hadn't lost the 2020 US presidential election. These accounts flooded platforms with targeted content in a short span, aiming to inundate users and sway opinions. What followed were the January 6, 2021 capitol riots. It isn't clear from their study how much of an impact these digital propaganda efforts had. If they did have a significant impact, this would be cause for great concern. While the riots didn't end with congress being ousted, the potential for digital propaganda efforts to lead to real world attacks on democratic institutions merits further study.

Another facet of the digital influence ecosystem is the commodification of credibility. Buying followers can artificially boost propagandist accounts and enhance their perceived influence, lending weight to their narratives (Dawson & Innes, 2019).

Astroturfing, within the realm of digital propaganda operations, embodies a strategic deception aimed at fabricating the impression of genuine grassroots support or opposition. García-Orosa (2021) highlights this as a trend posing significant threats to democratic processes, alongside other phenomena such as echo chambers and bubble filters. This form of disinformation is characterized by its concealment of the true sponsors of the campaign, often impersonating individuals or groups with perceived credibility to bolster the campaign's legitimacy in the eyes of the public. According to recent literature, astroturfing is consistently defined as counterfeit grassroots efforts that employ disinformation to sway audiences in alignment with the hidden agendas of the orchestrating entities. By

mimicking legitimate social movements and obscuring the true origin of messages, astroturfing operations not only propagate inauthentic communication but also erode democratic principles and plurality. This deliberate obfuscation serves private interests, often distinct from the authentic sentiments of genuine grassroots movements, suggesting that the frames used by astroturf campaigns may diverge significantly from genuine public-driven movements (García-Orosa, 2021).

As digital platforms enhance detection and mitigation tools, propagandists adapt, ensuring their strategies remain both effective and evasive. This cat-and-mouse game underscores the need for perpetual vigilance and research.

In conclusion, the matrix of computational propaganda represents a profound challenge in the digital communication era. The melding of technological prowess with tried-and-tested persuasion tactics has birthed a complex beast, one that demands both understanding and action. As societies grapple with these challenges, the quest to preserve the sanctity of public discourse in our interconnected world remains paramount.

#### Strategies and tactics of exploiting social media structures

Codes:

Structure of social media

Governance

Adapting to algorithmic changes

Cross platform coordination

Creation of echo chambers

Use of audiovisual content

The intrinsic structure and governance of social media platforms have inadvertently facilitated the operations of digital propaganda (Bastos & Mercea, 2018). As highlighted by the observation that "mechanisms of evidence collaging and platform filtering" (Krafft & Donovan, 2020, 207) harness the inherent structural nuances of social media to surpass inherent obstacles to the flow of disinformation, it is evident that these platforms can be manipulated to serve certain agendas. The evolution of online ecosystems has seen adversarial entities not only converge and cooperate within distinct web communities but also exploit the very design of online communication frameworks to access and

influence newer audiences. Furthermore, the initial praise for the web's decentralization, once celebrated as a defining virtue of web architecture, has taken a contrasting turn. Recent developments underscore this decentralization being weaponized by agents of disinformation and media manipulators. They capitalize on it to suppress dissenting views and deploy computational propaganda strategies, strategically disseminating content across various platforms (Krafft & Donovan, 2020).

A defining characteristic of social media platforms is their evolving algorithms. These algorithms determine content visibility, making them crucial for propagandists. Thus, a key component of digital propaganda operations is the constant monitoring of, and adaptation to, these algorithmic shifts. This ensures that propaganda content remains prominently displayed in user feeds, maximizing its impact (Ferreira, 2022, 1545).

The multi-platform nature of modern digital discourse results in digital propaganda efforts being coordinated across platforms. Propagandists often synchronize content release schedules, ensuring that narratives gain traction across the digital ecosystem. Such cross-platform strategies amplify messages, creating a semblance of ubiquity and reinforcing their perceived validity (Ferreira, 2022, 1545 & 1549).

The creation of echo chambers is another tactic employed by digital propagandists, whereby online discourse surrounding a candidate or on a specific topic is carefully curated by flooding it with messages and downvoting or reporting unwanted comments and users thereby creating closed loops of information that repeatedly expose users to similar content, effectively isolating them from dissenting views. Social media, with its recommendation algorithms and group structures, is particularly conducive to this. By strategically populating these spaces with tailored content and artificially boosting engagements, propagandists can cultivate environments that perpetuate specific narratives, unchecked (Tapsell, 2021, 124).

In sum, research shows that social media are not just used for digital propaganda, as any platforms with a wide potential reach would, but the way they are designed is specifically conducive its spread. These platforms, with their vast user bases and unique functionalities, offer propagandists an unprecedented toolkit for shaping public discourse. As we navigate this intricate landscape, understanding these strategies and their implications becomes paramount for any informed digital citizen and necessitates societal awareness and a discourse about possibilities of designing social media in a way that facilitates the functioning of democracy instead of hindering it.

The use of visual and audiovisual content as a tool of digital propaganda was noted by the authors of several papers (Benaissa Pedriza, 2021; Carral et al., 2023; Uysal & Schroeder., 2019). Leveraging the inherently engaging nature of imagery and video, propagandists craft narratives that often hold greater persuasive power compared to solely text-based communication. This is attributed to the human cognitive inclination towards visual information, wherein images and videos are processed faster and retained longer than textual data. Moreover, the interplay of visuals with sound in audiovisual content

further amplifies emotional engagement, potentially leading to more profound impacts on viewers' beliefs and behaviors. Within the context of digital propaganda, the strategic harnessing of visual and audiovisual mediums offers an effective means to obfuscate, mislead, and deeply resonate, thereby shaping public discourse in nuanced ways (Ferreira, 2022, 1545; Uysal & Schroeder, 2019, 6).

Bradshaw et al. (2022) specifically note the increased utilization of livestreams by Russian state backed media, signaling a shift towards more dynamic and real-time engagement with target audiences. Livestreaming, by its very nature, fosters a sense of immediacy and authenticity, creating an environment where viewers perceive content as unfiltered and genuine. The interactive dimension of livestreaming, allowing real-time comments and reactions, provides propagandists with instantaneous feedback, enabling them to adjust their messaging on the fly. This evolving strategy underscores the adaptability of digital propagandists in leveraging emerging technologies to enhance the reach and impact of their narratives.

## Social dimension

The realm of digital propaganda is not merely a technological phenomenon. Beyond algorithms and bots, its impact is profoundly social, reshaping the dynamics of discourse, interaction, and collective identity in digital spaces. By tapping into deeply ingrained social sensibilities, digital propagandists craft narratives that resonate, divide, and ultimately influence. This essay delves into the various social strategies employed in digital propaganda, highlighting the intricate ways in which propagandists seek to mold public sentiment.

### Strategies of social manipulation

Codes:

Polarisation

Praying on ignorance

Destabilisation/creating and exploiting division

Creating/building communities (online, sometimes around a leader/candidate)

Demobilisation (discouraging certain voter groups from voting)

One of the most conspicuous effects of digital propaganda is the intensification of societal polarisation.

In a world where information is abundant and attention is scarce, extreme viewpoints often garner more attention than moderate or nuanced ones. Digital propagandists exploit this trend, feeding polarized narratives to entrenched echo chambers. By consistently reinforcing existing beliefs and demonizing opposing views, they exacerbate divides, making constructive dialogue increasingly challenging. The binary nature of such polarized discourse—us versus them, right versus wrong—simplifies complex issues, often reducing them to emotionally charged sound bites that further entrench divisions (Baldi et al., 2019; Golovchenko et al., 2020; Neyazi, 2020; Cirone & Hobbs, 2023).

Keller et al. (2020) mention people's ignorance of organized propaganda efforts online as conducive to these. While this was only specifically mentioned in one case, it stands to reason that an informed citizenship would be less easy to manipulate. Digital propaganda capitalizes on the general public's lack of expertise or understanding regarding specific topics. By sowing seeds of doubt or presenting misleading interpretations, propagandists prey on ignorance both on the topics presented and ways of manipulation, making it difficult for individuals to discern truth from fabrication. This strategy is especially potent in an age where information overload can lead to cognitive fatigue, and individuals often default to sources or narratives that confirm their pre-existing beliefs, rather than seeking out balanced perspectives.

Another insidious aspect of digital propaganda is the active creation and exploitation of societal tensions. A quintessential example is the way propagandists might exploit movements like Black Lives Matter. By inflaming sentiments against police brutality on one side and simultaneously stoking white nationalist sentiments on the other, propagandists can foster a volatile environment ripe for conflict. This dual-sided agitation ensures a perpetual state of tension, reducing opportunities for consensus-building and constructive dialogue. The ultimate aim here is destabilization, creating an environment where traditional institutions and narratives are questioned, and alternative (often extremist) voices gain prominence. The exploitation of these tensions surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests was observed by Bradshaw et al. (2022) where propaganda messages were both "portraying BLM as promoting violence and looting" and leveraging "contemporary slang and memes used by younger audiences in their discussions of race and racism in America". The exploitation of racial tensions in the USA was also observed by Foster Bhusari et al. (2022). In online discussions about the shootings of black civilians by police officers, Russian backed propaganda was observed stoking anti police resentment and racial tensions through the use of inflammatory messaging and even the sharing of a debunked conspiracy (Foster Bhusari et al., 2022, 351).

Human beings have an innate desire to belong, to be part of communities that validate their experiences and beliefs. Digital propagandists leverage this desire, building online communities centered around specific ideologies, leaders, or narratives. These communities often serve dual purposes: they provide a haven for like-minded individuals, creating a positive feedback loop of reinforcing narratives, and

they also act as mobilization platforms. Whether rallying around a political candidate or promoting a particular ideology, these communities can be activated to take collective action, magnifying the impact of propaganda efforts. While internal cohesion is fostered, different groups can be played against each other to create a general state of unrest within societies (Pérez-Curiel, 2020, 183; Uyheng et al., 2022, 14).

In addition to mobilizing specific groups, digital propaganda also seeks to demobilize or disenfranchise others. By crafting narratives that induce cynicism, hopelessness, or distrust in the electoral process, propagandists can dissuade certain demographic groups from participating in civic processes like voting. This tactic of suppression, often subtly executed, can significantly influence election outcomes, especially in closely contested scenarios. By convincing potential voters that their voice is inconsequential or that the system is inherently rigged, propagandists can suppress turnout, effectively sidelining opposition (Cirone & Hobbs, 2023, 161-167).

In conclusion, the social strategies employed in digital propaganda are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with human psychology and societal dynamics. From polarizing narratives to the insidious suppression of voter turnout, digital propagandists employ a range of tactics to shape public sentiment and influence outcomes. Recognizing these strategies is paramount for societies that aim to preserve the integrity of their civic discourse and democratic processes in an increasingly digital age.

## 4.3. Discussion

### Implications of the findings for democratic societies

The rise of digital technology has transformed the landscape of information dissemination, offering unparalleled opportunities for communication, education, and global connection. However, alongside these benefits, the digital realm has also paved the way for new modes of propaganda. Today's digital propaganda, characterized by its ability to spread rapidly and target audiences with pinpoint precision, poses distinct challenges to democracies worldwide. While propaganda is not a new phenomenon, its digital incarnation has unique implications that can shape public opinion, influence electoral outcomes, and potentially destabilize democratic institutions.

### The Communicative Dimension: Messaging and Narratives

The core of propaganda lies in its messaging. Digital platforms have revolutionized message dissemination speed, scale, and specificity. Tailored narratives, often constructed using half-truths or

outright falsehoods, target specific demographics. These narratives can undermine democratic ideals by sowing discord, misinforming voters, and de-legitimizing genuine political discourse.

At its core, democracy thrives on open, informed, and transparent communication. However, the findings underline how digital propaganda subverts this by meticulously crafting and delivering messages that often sideline countering opinions or inconvenient truths. The emotional appeal, an intrinsic facet of the communicative dimension, is harnessed to elicit strong reactions, often bypassing rational evaluation processes. By integrating relatable stories and testimonials, digital propaganda can create a façade of credibility. Thus, the digitally charged, emotionally resonant narratives not only misinform but can also polarize, endangering the foundations of constructive democratic discourse.

### The (Geo)political Dimension: Foreign Influence and Democratic Destabilization

Digital propaganda is not confined by borders. Authoritarian regimes, seeing the power of digital narratives, have weaponized propaganda to destabilize democracies. By sowing discord or favoring divisive candidates, these entities aim to weaken democratic unity, making democracies more susceptible to external influences and thereby compromising sovereignty.

The foundational ethos of democracy lies in the equitable distribution and exercise of power, grounded in the principle of representation. This system thrives on informed citizenry making choices that reflect their interests and aspirations. However, the rise of digital propaganda presents potent challenges to these democratic principles.

Digital propaganda does more than just spread misinformation—it seeks to methodically manipulate the processes by which power is acquired and wielded in democratic societies. The research underscores the extent to which propaganda can either bolster or subvert political entities, craft or disrupt narratives, and shape or distort ideologies. By strategically framing information, such efforts can alter public perceptions, unduly sway electoral results, and seed cynicism among citizens about their democratic institutions and processes. Digital propaganda operations are found in democracies throughout the world, although they seem to be somewhat less pervasive in Western democracies. A much greater threat to them are foreign influence operations.

A prominent example is Russia's influence on Western democracies. Entities like the Internet Research Agency, backed by the Russian government, have been implicated in vast online campaigns that disseminate divisive content, sow discord, and even influence electoral processes in the West. Their tactics often involve the creation of fake social media profiles, spreading of disinformation, and amplifying extremist views to polarize societies further. Such concerted efforts aim to weaken democratic cohesion, discredit democratic institutions, and, in some cases, favor political candidates or outcomes that align with Russia's strategic interests. It is vital that researchers, policymakers and

citizens alike learn about and understand the mechanisms of these organized propaganda efforts, as they constitute a form of information warfare designed to destabilize our societies as part of a hybrid strategy ultimately aimed at increasing Russian and decreasing Western influence.

China, on the other hand, represents a different but nonetheless concerning facet of the digital propaganda challenge. As China grows in global influence, its attempts to control narratives and project its version of events have expanded beyond its borders. Chinese-backed digital operations usually focus on promoting the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) worldview, discrediting its critics, and leveraging economic power to stifle negative coverage or discussions about China in foreign media.

Furthermore, beyond these two global powers, various authoritarian regimes and politicians worldwide have recognized the potential of digital propaganda. They employ digital strategies to suppress dissent, bolster their narratives, and maintain a tight grip on power.

In essence, the very tenet of democracy—that citizens make informed decisions based on unbiased, factual information—is under siege. The information landscape, once a relatively clear domain of facts, debates, and discussions, is now rife with strategically curated narratives designed to manipulate opinion, driven by both state and non-state actors with varied objectives. Recognizing and countering these threats is pivotal for the survival and thriving of democracies in the digital age.

#### The Technical Dimension: The Increasing Sophistication of Computational Propaganda

This dimension underscores how digital platforms can be manipulated for propaganda purposes. With computational propaganda techniques like hashtag manipulation, artificial trend creation and amplification of messages and narratives by bots and trolls, propaganda agents exploit algorithmic vulnerabilities to spread and amplify messages. This technical manipulation can mislead public opinion, often giving prominence to extremist views and sidelining mainstream discourse, thus eroding democratic dialogue.

At the heart of computational propaganda is the (mis)use of technologies to govern what content is displayed to users on digital platforms. In the hands of propagandists, they can be weaponized to ensure that certain messages gain prominence over others. The ability to micro-target—serving tailored messages to specific user demographics based on their online behaviors, preferences, and even political inclinations—enhances the efficacy of propaganda campaigns. Rather than casting a wide net, propagandists can pinpoint their efforts, ensuring that their narratives resonate with the right audience at the right time, which could decisively tilt the scales in events like elections.

Bots, or automated software that mimics human behavior online, have been employed extensively to amplify messages, create artificial trends, and inundate platforms with specific narratives. Bots by

themselves initially showed limited impact; they often lacked the nuance and adaptability of genuine human interactions. But computational propaganda is becoming increasingly sophisticated. "Cyborgs"—are a potent mix of bots and human agents (often referred to as trolls). Here, the amplifying capability of bots merges seamlessly with the adaptability, creativity, and strategic intent of human agents. Such a combination ensures that propaganda campaigns can rapidly evolve in real-time, reacting to changing circumstances and maximizing their impact.

Yet, as sophisticated as these tactics are, they may only be the tip of the iceberg. While the literature reviewed for the study did not delve extensively into emerging technologies like deepfakes and other AI-driven tools, their potential implications for propaganda are profound. Deepfakes, which refer to AI-generated videos that can realistically superimpose faces and voices onto existing footage, can fabricate entirely believable scenarios, making discerning truth from fiction increasingly challenging. As AI technologies evolve, the capacity for creating realistic, yet wholly manufactured content will rise, heralding a new era of propaganda that could manipulate perceptions on an unprecedented scale.

The democratic implications of these developments are profound. In a system where informed citizenry is key, the proliferation of sophisticated computational propaganda tactics can distort the information landscape, undermining the very principles of democratic discourse. When foreign entities exploit these tools to influence the internal politics of a nation, it constitutes a direct assault on its sovereignty, blurring the lines between domestic policy and international influence. For democracies to thrive in this digital age, it is imperative to recognize, understand, and counter these challenges, ensuring that the sanctity of information and the democratic process remains intact.

#### The Social Dimension: Increasing Tribalization and Societal Destabilization

Social cohesion and unity, though often challenged, are essential for the stability of democratic societies. Digital propaganda, however, exacerbates societal polarization, preys on ignorance, and destabilizes by creating and exploiting societal divisions. By building online communities around specific ideologies and mobilizing them for action, while demobilizing or disenfranchising others, propagandists can deeply influence social dynamics, potentially leading to unrest, increased divisions, and a weakened sense of shared democratic values.

For democracies to function optimally, there's an inherent need for social cohesion—a sense of shared purpose and unity among its diverse citizenry. Even when confronted with differences, a resilient democratic society values dialogue, understanding, and the common pursuit of collective goals. Yet, digital propaganda poses significant threats to this cohesion, using sophisticated strategies to manipulate and distort the very fabric of societal unity.

One of the most evident impacts of digital propaganda on social cohesion is the amplification of societal polarization. The digital sphere, with its vast repositories of information and rapid dissemination capabilities, might seem like a boon for open dialogue. However, it's these very characteristics that propagandists exploit. By inundating platforms with polarizing narratives and reinforcing echo chambers, they ensure that users are continually exposed to extremist viewpoints while sidelining moderate or nuanced perspectives. This amplification of the extremes reduces the space for constructive dialogue, making compromise and understanding increasingly elusive.

Ignorance makes people especially susceptible to propaganda, a fact exploited by propagandists. When the general public lacks expertise or a clear understanding of specific issues, propagandists can sow seeds of doubt or present misleading interpretations, muddying the waters of public discourse. This not only misinforms but often leads individuals to further entrench themselves in their beliefs, resistant to alternative viewpoints.

The destabilization caused by creating and exploiting societal divisions is another cornerstone of digital propaganda. A case in point is the Russian influence during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. While genuine grievances and demands for justice underpinned the movement, propagandists seized this opportunity to fan the flames of division. Not only were grievances against police brutality and institutions like the media and government fanned by exposing black audiences to fabricated or misleading messages, social unity among the black community was also promoted, thereby aiming to create an intrinsically cohesive community that stands in general opposition to what it perceives to be a hostile environment. Similarly white nationalist grievances against the movement were stoked by exposing audiences to decontextualized images of rioting protesters, as well as also promoting distrust in media and government generally.

In doing so propagandists create communities, centered around specific ideologies or narratives, that serve as echo chambers, reinforcing specific viewpoints while silencing or marginalizing dissenting voices. By mobilizing these communities for collective action, they can exert considerable influence on real-world events. Conversely, by demobilizing or disenfranchising certain groups, they can suppress participation in essential democratic processes.

In sum, the challenges posed by digital propaganda to social cohesion in democracies are multifaceted and profound. Without due diligence and counteractive measures, these tactics can erode the sense of unity and shared purpose that democracies rely upon.

## Recommendations

In the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by digital propaganda, a unified front comprising policymakers, tech companies, and civil society is paramount. As we stand at the intersection of

information and influence, the fabric of our democratic societies is at risk, demanding swift, collective action.

Policymakers, entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the public interest, must enact and enforce robust legislation against those disseminating false narratives, thereby signaling that misinformation is no trivial offense. As the architects of our educational landscape, they should also champion the integration of digital media literacy into curricula. This forward-looking approach ensures that citizens, especially the younger generations, are adept at discerning credible sources from the chaff. Moreover, by channeling resources into independent fact-checking bodies, governments can establish a rapid response mechanism to debunk false narratives, ensuring that truth remains a cornerstone of public discourse.

On the frontline of the digital realm, tech companies bear the onus of shaping users' information experiences. Their algorithms, if left unchecked, can inadvertently trap users in echo chambers. By actively recalibrating these algorithms to champion content diversity, tech companies can broaden horizons and challenge pre-existing biases. Paired with robust moderation policies, harnessing both advanced AI tools and human discernment, these platforms can become bulwarks against misinformation. Furthermore, promoting account authenticity and curbing anonymous sources known for propagandist content can further impede the spread of digital propaganda.

Yet, the most potent defense against this menace might lie in the hands of civil society. Education and media literacy, which encompasses the skills to critically assess, interpret, and evaluate media content, becomes an invaluable shield against manipulative narratives. By ingraining these skills into the educational system, we can nurture a populace adept at discerning fact from fiction. Schools and universities should prioritize courses and modules dedicated to understanding the dynamics of digital platforms, the mechanics behind algorithms, and the strategies employed in digital propaganda. Such an educational foundation not only equips individuals to navigate the digital landscape safely but also fosters a societal culture of skepticism towards misinformation. Ultimately, an educated and media-literate society stands as a formidable barrier against the onslaught of digital propaganda, ensuring that citizens make informed decisions based on credible and unbiased information.

In conclusion, digital propaganda's shadows loom large, threatening to distort our understanding and undermine democratic tenets. However, by harnessing the collective strengths of policymakers, tech companies, and civil society, we can illuminate the digital realm, ensuring it remains a bastion of truth, dialogue, and authentic information exchange.

## Limitations of the Study

This study, dedicated to the intricate world of digital propaganda, faces the inevitable challenges that come with exploring such a dynamic and vast field. At the heart of these challenges is the unyielding pace of digital evolution. Today's digital tools, platforms, and tactics are in a perpetual state of flux, with new innovations emerging at breakneck speed. This constant metamorphosis means that certain findings, no matter how meticulously researched, can quickly be overshadowed by new developments, potentially relegating them to obsolescence sooner than anticipated.

Adding another layer of complexity is the vast, borderless expanse of the digital realm. While this global reach is a testament to the power of digital tools, it also introduces a myriad of cultural complexities into the equation. As digital propaganda casts its net wide, spanning digital spaces, continents and cultures, capturing its essence requires a delicate balance between the macro and micro. A sweeping analysis, such as the one undertaken in this study, while invaluable, might inadvertently bypass the nuanced cultural contexts that influence how propaganda is perceived and propagated in various regions. These cultural distinctions, subtle yet significant, can hold the key to a deeper understanding of digital propaganda's impact.

In synthesizing these insights, it becomes evident that while this study endeavors to cast a comprehensive gaze upon the world of digital propaganda, the field's ever-evolving nature inherently limit the nuance and longevity of the findings. It's a poignant reminder of the need for continuous exploration, reflection, and adaptation in this domain.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis, the intricate realm of digital propaganda was explored, dissected and analyzed in regard to implications for democratic societies. The study was foundationally grounded in 20th-century propaganda theories, invoking the influential works of Lippmann, Bernays, and Lasswell. A historical detour then provided insights into the role and manifestations of those theories during WWII, shedding light on the earlier, yet crucial, tactics that paved the way for today's digital strategies.

The ideological and political ramifications of propaganda in democratic societies were subsequently discussed, drawing on the insights of seminal thinkers such as Habermas, Ellul, Chomsky and Hermann. The study delves into the mechanisms through which propaganda interacts with, shapes, and often challenges the core tenets of democracy.

Shifting the lens to the contemporary landscape, the thesis provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of digital propaganda. With the rapid advancements in technology and the ubiquity of digital platforms, propaganda has adopted new tools, techniques, and platforms, becoming more pervasive and sophisticated.

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach to dissect the nuances of digital propaganda in the chosen timeframe (2018-2022). A systematic identification and selection procedure was employed to sift through the vast literature, focusing on the most pertinent and influential works. Following this, a thematic analysis was undertaken using the Braun & Clarke method, breaking down the extensive literature into digestible themes. These themes were then reviewed in a narrative style, allowing for a fluid, comprehensive, yet detailed exploration of each facet of digital propaganda.

Our exploration of digital propaganda led to the identification of four predominant dimensions: communicative, political, technical, and social. Each dimension not only demarcates a unique facet of propaganda but also elucidates several strategies and tactics, thereby answering the first part of the research question.

Communicative Dimension:

**Ideological Manipulation:** The deliberate distortion or promotion of specific ideologies to align audiences with a particular viewpoint or agenda.

**Controlling the Narrative:** Shaping and directing the discourse to maintain dominance over the storyline and suppress alternative viewpoints.

**Emotional Manipulation:** Leveraging and amplifying emotions like fear, anger, or empathy to sway public opinion or provoke certain responses.

Use of Levity: Incorporating humor or satire to make propaganda more appealing or to mask the underlying agenda.

#### Political Dimension:

Strategies of Foreign Influence Operations: Techniques employed by foreign entities to impact the political environment or society of another country.

Strategies of Domestic Influence Operations: Techniques used by domestic actors, such as governments or political parties, to shape or control internal public narratives and perceptions.

#### Technical Dimension:

Strategies and Tactics of Computational Propaganda: Utilizing algorithms, bots, and other automated tools to spread propaganda at scale and speed.

Strategies and Tactics of Exploiting Social Media Structures: Manipulating the inherent algorithms and features of social platforms to amplify propaganda reach and impact.

#### Social Dimension:

Strategies of Social Manipulation: Engaging in tactics that exploit societal divides, cultural norms, or group identities to sow discord or foster specific ideologies.

The findings were subsequently discussed and analyzed in relation to their implications for democratic societies, addressing the second part of the research question.

In the tapestry of our digital age, propaganda threads its intricate patterns, weaving complex narratives that have profound implications for democratic societies. This study, in its pursuit to unravel these narratives, has shed light on the multifaceted strategies and tactics employed in digital propaganda. Yet, as with all academic endeavors, the horizon of knowledge is ever-expanding. While we've charted a course through the labyrinth of digital manipulation, the journey of understanding is ceaseless. The evolving nature of technology, paired with the adaptive strategies of propagandists, beckons continued vigilance and research. As we conclude this study, it serves not as an endpoint but as a beacon, illuminating the path for future scholars and practitioners dedicated to safeguarding the integrity of our democratic discourse in the digital realm.

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# Appendix

## Abstract

English:

This master's thesis delves into the intricate landscape of digital propaganda in today's rapidly evolving digital milieu. Building on the foundational theories of 20th-century propaganda, the research aims to connect historical perspectives with the contemporary challenges posed by digital propaganda. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, a systematic methodology was employed to scout, select, and review relevant literature published between 2018 and 2022. Subsequent to this systematic search, the identified literature underwent a thematic analysis to discern prominent strategies and tactics employed in digital propaganda. The results were then synthesized using a narrative review, offering a comprehensive overview of the tactics, their evolution, and their implications. Central to the study's findings is an exploration of the profound implications of these tactics on democratic societies. Specifically, this thesis probes into how digital propaganda maneuvers can potentially skew public opinion, influence political landscapes, and reshape societal structures. As the digital realm becomes an ever-pervasive medium for information dissemination, this study seeks to contribute critically to understanding the mechanisms through which digital propaganda operates and impacts the foundations of democratic processes and institutions.

German:

Diese Masterarbeit befasst sich mit dem komplexen Sachverhalt der digitalen Propaganda. Aufbauend auf den grundlegenden Theorien der Propaganda des 20. Jahrhunderts zielt die Forschung darauf ab, historische Perspektiven mit den zeitgenössischen Herausforderungen der digitalen Propaganda zu verknüpfen. Unter Verwendung eines Mixed-Methods-Ansatzes wurde eine systematische Methodik angewandt, um relevante Literatur, die zwischen 2018 und 2022 veröffentlicht wurde, zu suchen, auszuwählen und zu überprüfen. Im Anschluss an diese systematische Suche wurde die identifizierte Literatur einer thematischen Analyse unterzogen, um herausragende Strategien und Taktiken der digitalen Propaganda zu erkennen. Die Ergebnisse wurden anschließend mittels einer narrativen Überprüfung synthetisiert und bieten einen umfassenden Überblick über die Strategien und Taktiken, ihre Entwicklung und ihre Auswirkungen. Im Zentrum der Ergebnisse dieser Studie steht die Untersuchung der tiefgreifenden Auswirkungen dieser Taktiken auf demokratische Gesellschaften.

Insbesondere geht diese Arbeit darauf ein, wie digitale Propagandamanöver die öffentliche Meinung potenziell verzerren, politische Landschaften beeinflussen und gesellschaftliche Strukturen umgestalten können. Da der digitale Bereich zu einem allgegenwärtigen Medium für die Informationsverbreitung wird, zielt diese Studie darauf ab, kritisch zum Verständnis der Mechanismen beizutragen, durch die digitale Propaganda funktioniert und die Grundlagen demokratischer Prozesse und Institutionen beeinflusst.