

Weaponising Memes: Reflections on Digital Propaganda

Written by Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu

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MIHAELA-GEORGIANA MIHĂILESCU, NOV 9 2024

In today's hyper-connected world, memes – those trivial and satirical messages – are anything but that. They have morphed into strategic tools of propaganda that shape opinions, spread ideologies, and, at times, disrupt social harmony, their appeal lying in their simplicity, making complex issues digestible for audiences worldwide. This evolution from humorous content to strategic tools of influence reveals profound implications for how societies communicate, perceive truth, and negotiate power in the digital age. Hence, we must ask ourselves: how do memes shape our beliefs and identities?

At the heart of memes' influence is their capacity to distil complex ideologies into digestible messages that resonate emotionally and intuitively with audiences. Memes have become ideal vehicles for a form of psychological and ideological warfare. Hence, the meme becomes the weapon, influencing public thought through humour, satire, or fear. This perspective reframes the way we think about conflict in the digital era. Unlike traditional forms of warfare, which rely on physical force, memetic warfare operates on the cognitive level, using images and symbols to affect public opinion and sway ideological perspectives.

An effective technique in memetic warfare is the use of satire and irony to create ambiguity. By masking propaganda in humour, meme creators make it difficult to distinguish between genuine belief and sarcasm. This strategic power was evident in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Russian actors leveraged memes to exploit societal tensions and manipulate public opinion. Through platforms like Facebook and Instagram, they created memes targeting controversial issues around race, immigration, and class. Similarly, in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, memes play a vital role in psychological operations. Ukrainian social media accounts use humorous memes to ridicule Russian military failures, boosting morale and resilience among Ukrainian citizens. Meanwhile, Russian accounts circulate memes questioning Ukrainian leadership's legitimacy, attempting to sow doubt and erode public trust.

In this way, memes become tools not only for spreading ideas but also for reinforcing cognitive biases, creating what is essentially a feedback loop of belief validation and ideological fortification. In today's media ecosystem, where attention is a prized commodity, a single meme can resonate more deeply than a lengthy argument. The viral nature of memes amplifies their reach, allowing them to serve as tools of influence for anyone willing to wield them. When a meme spreads, it doesn't just reach one person; it reaches entire communities, with the potential to subtly alter their worldview. How much control, then, do we truly have over our own beliefs when memes are so adept at bypassing critical thought and appealing directly to our biases?

Memes are more than merely disseminate messages – they forge identities and foster a sense of belonging within ideological communities. By participating in the creation and sharing of memes, individuals align themselves with particular worldviews and signal shared values; memes become a symbolic “badge” that reinforces shared beliefs and sets community members apart from outsiders. For instance, the once-innocent “Pepe the Frog” meme began as a popular internet cartoon but was co-opted by the alt-right and transformed into a symbol of that movement. By integrating symbols like Pepe into their memes, alt-right members signalled shared beliefs, creating an “in-group” dynamic that alienated those who did not share their ideology. The meme became a coded language, creating an insular identity and reinforcing a sense of belonging among members.

However, this dynamic is not confined to extremist groups. Many online communities use memes to strengthen their

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ideological ties, from environmental activists using memes to protest climate inaction to political movements rallying supporters around specific messages. In Brazil, memes have been instrumental in political movements, especially during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaigns. Bolsonaro's supporters employed memes to portray him as a champion of traditional values and a defender against corrupt elites. Through WhatsApp and other social platforms, memes targeting former President Lula da Silva cast him as incompetent or corrupt, resonating deeply with working-class voters' frustrations. These politically charged memes fostered a shared narrative and identity among Bolsonaro supporters, reinforcing a sense of unity against perceived enemies of the Brazilian state. Whereas, in India, memes have also become a prominent force in nationalistic and religious identity formation. Memes circulated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its supporters frequently depict Muslims and Pakistan as existential threats to Indian unity. This strategy appeals to Hindu nationalist sentiment, strengthening the BJP's voter base by framing its narrative as protective and inherently aligned with the nation's "true" cultural identity. Such memes not only reinforce in-group cohesion among Hindu nationalists but also deepen religious and cultural divides within the Indian population.

But are memes fostering genuine identity or trapping people in echo chambers? If a meme reduces a complex idea to an "us vs. them" dichotomy, are we engaging in meaningful political discourse or simply deepening the divides that separate us? As we share and circulate these memes, we must ask whether we are using them to express ideas or to reinforce biases, perpetuating a worldview that leaves little room for difference or dissent.

Globally, memes are weaponised differently depending on political systems, reflecting unique socio-political goals. While memes play a significant role in democratic societies as forms of satire, critique, and civic engagement, they serve a different purpose in authoritarian regimes. In democracies, memes are often used to critique leaders, satirise policies, and promote open dialogue. However, memes can simplify complex political issues, leading audiences toward polarisation and misinformation. For example, in Romania, anti-corruption activists used memes as rallying points during the 2017 protests against government corruption. Satirical memes depicting government officials as self-serving tyrants spread across social media, uniting Romanians in opposition to political corruption and fostering a sense of civic empowerment. By reducing complex issues into humorous or satirical visuals, memes catalysed civic participation while also framing a complex political issue in polarised terms.

In contrast, authoritarian regimes harness memes to advance state propaganda, stifling dissent by monopolising the narrative and projecting government-approved ideologies. China exemplifies this approach, where state-sponsored "50 Cent Army" members create and disseminate memes that praise government policies and ridicule perceived threats. During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, Chinese state-backed accounts flooded social media with memes portraying protestors as violent and unpatriotic. This campaign aimed to shape both domestic and international perceptions of the protests, painting them as illegitimate and foreign-influenced threats to national unity. By controlling the narrative through memes, the Chinese government shaped domestic and international perceptions of the protests, effectively stifled sympathy for the protestors and reinforced its authoritarian grip. Russia's memetic approach undertakes a similar approach, although more focused on external influence. Russian state actors frequently disseminate memes to influence foreign elections and destabilise rival nations.

For instance, during the Brexit referendum, Russian operatives shared memes promoting anti-European Union sentiments, framing the EU as an oppressive force infringing on British sovereignty. This tactic not only fuelled pro-Brexit sentiment but also exploited existing divisions within British society, showcasing Russia's use of memes as digital tools of global influence. This raises several questions. Can democratic societies defend against such manipulation when memes appeal to personal identity as much as public discourse? Conversely, in authoritarian contexts, are memes simply the digital manifestation of state power, another layer of control over public consciousness? The divergence in how memes are used under these regimes reveals a critical tension in modern governance: the challenge of balancing freedom and security in the age of digital influence.

In a world increasingly driven by digital communication, the power of memes is undeniable. They highlight the complex interplay between humour, identity, and ideology, where seemingly simple images can carry profound, often divisive messages. Recognising memes as tools of influence compels us to engage more thoughtfully with the digital content we consume, ensuring that our beliefs and actions remain aligned with informed and conscious choices

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rather than automated reactions to clever images. Memes have become the shared language of digital propaganda, crafted to reflect the unique socio-political dynamics of each country. Whether it is the anti-corruption movements in Romania, the nationalist fervour in India, or the ideological influence campaigns by Russia, memes have proven effective in subtly but powerfully reshaping political landscapes.

Ultimately, the global weaponisation of memes invites us to confront a fundamental question: in a world where images speak louder than words, how can we retain control over our beliefs? As digital citizens, we bear the responsibility of engaging critically with the memes we encounter, understanding that beneath their humour may lie powerful forces seeking to shape our minds and societies. The challenge is not merely to regulate content but to cultivate a culture of informed scepticism, where we value truth and reason above clever visuals and emotional appeals. Only by understanding the true power of memes as ideological tools can we hope to navigate this complex and often unsettling terrain of digital propaganda.

About the author:

Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu is a PhD candidate at the University of Bath, holding an undergraduate degree in Media, Culture, and Society from the University of Essex, and a Master of Arts in Digital Media and Culture from the University of Warwick. Her research lies at the intersection of internet culture and politics, exploring the deep and complicated world of memes, social media networking, and digital media studies.