Weapons of Mass Disruption: Social Media, Messaging and the Influencing of Public Emotions[1]

Philippe Assouline | February 11, 2024

Introduction: Social Media, Mass Emotions, and Power

Much of the discourse surrounding foreign influence has been predominantly focused on the spread of "fake news" and foreign campaigns aimed at undermining factual integrity.[2] While the negative impact of misinformation is undeniable, whether foreign influence campaigns advance truthful or false claims misses a far more important point. The central thesis of this article is that the true peril of foreign influence resides not in the distortion of facts, but, more critically, in the distortion of feelings: *the use of social media to manipulate mass emotions and thereby engineer mass behavior*. States and non-state actors today have, through social media advertising platforms, the ability to easily and precisely target segments of foreign populations and to shape their preferences and behaviors via repeated exposure to weaponized messaging and content. They can thereby paralyze a society with fear, make it insensitive to risk, or cause it to turn on itself. They can sow doubt or rage in ways that do not benefit the targeted population but rather themselves or third parties. They can weaken or co-opt a target state from within, bloodlessly. This is true regardless of whether the content shared is factual or not;[3] *that is, factual content can also be lethal.*

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[1] This article is part of a forthcoming memorandum on the strategic challenge of foreign influence and intervention. The memorandum includes articles that examine the challenge from the perspective pf adversaries (e.g., Russia, Iran, and China), and deals with the nature of the influence (including via human influence agents and in the economic and academic worlds). The challenge will be examined with respect to routine times, as well as with respect to times of disruptions to democratic processes, deepened social rifts, election campaigns, and war. The articles will reflect a connection between systemic insights and the policy necessary in Israel and Western states. The memorandum is the product of collaboration between the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the Institute for the Study of Intelligence Methodology at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), with the assistance of the Ministry of Intelligence.

[2] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking," *Council of Europe Report* (2017), 27, https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html.

[3] Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan R. Dennis, "Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When it Makes no Sense at all," *Kelley School of Business Research Paper* no. 18-87 (2018), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3269541.

When and how, then, can states or political actors use social content to leverage public emotions as a weapon? And how can states immunize their citizens against foreign emotional manipulation? These understudied questions, I believe, are of the greatest strategic importance at a time when social media and artificial intelligence-driven content feeds are transforming collective psychology and, as a consequence, political behavior. This subject—the psychological dimension of propaganda in the age of social media—remains relatively uncharted in academic inquiry, despite the potentially profound implications for democratic processes and international relations. This essay is an introduction to that topic.

From Russia With Love, A New Art of War

The pen is mightier than the sword

—Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839

In February 2017, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu revealed with surprising transparency that the Russian military had upgraded its "counter-propaganda" operations and formed a division of "information troops" that would engage in "intelligent, effective propaganda" operations.[4] By this revelation, the Russians were, in fact, confirming that controlling public opinion had become central to modern statecraft and warfare, with Russia at the vanguard of such efforts. Elaborating on his superior's motives, Russia's commander-in-chief, General Yuri Baluyevsky, poignantly stated this article's main foundational claim, that victory in information warfare "can be much more important than victory in a classical military conflict, because it is bloodless, yet the impact is overwhelming and can paralyze all of the enemy state's power structures."[5]

Some recent examples hint at how powerful collective emotions might be when wielded as a weapon, via foreign influence campaigns. One case in point is the divisive strategies employed during the 2016 US presidential election by the Internet Research Agency (IRA).[6] The IRA created a multitude of social media accounts impersonating Americans and disseminated content designed to exploit

[4] BBC World, "Russian Military Admits Significant Cyber-War Effort," February 17, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39062663

[5] Ibid. It is unlikely that Shoigu's public comments reveal the true scope or organization of Russian information operations, as it is safe to assume that these statements themselves were part of Russia's information warfare efforts.

[6] The IRA, also known as Glavset, was a Russian company (or "troll farm") engaged in online propaganda and influence operations on behalf of Russian business and political interests, see, for example, Mick Krever and Anna Chernova, "Wagner Chief Admits to Founding Russian Troll Farm Sanctioned for Meddling in US Elections," *CNN*, February 14, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russia-yevgeny-prigozhin-internet-research-agency-intl/index.html.

and amplify existing political, social, and racial divisions within the United States. By focusing on contentious and emotional issues, such as immigration, gun control, and race relations, the IRA aimed to sow discord, erode trust in the electoral process, and influence the election outcome to favor a specific candidate.[7] Similarly, the Chinese influence operations during the Hong Kong protests in 2019 portrayed pro-democracy protesters as violent and a threat to societal stability through digital media platforms, aiming to incite fear and anger among the global populace. The objective was to discredit the pro-democracy movement, sway international opinion in favor of the Chinese government, and suppress global support for the protesters.[8] Iranian actors also established fake social media accounts and websites to disseminate content that portrayed Western countries and their allies in a derogatory light. The exploitation of emotions aimed to foster divisions among target populations, promote narratives favorable to Iran, and shape public opinion against its adversaries.[9]

Social Media and Public Emotions Today

According to Statista.com, a majority of humankind—over 4.8 billion people—are active on social networks today.[10] Some 5.25 billion people use smartphones.[11] According to Pew Research, over 68 percent of social media users use social media platforms for news consumption.[12] With such extensive reach, third parties, whether or not they have nefarious intent, can now directly and continuously communicate with the majority of voters in many democracies. Without the need for any network intermediary, they can influence decision-making, preferences, and behavior. They can target specific populations at a relatively low cost, offering them a constant barrage of engaging, impactful, and even personalized content.

[7] US Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," Vol. 2: Russia's Use of Social Media with Additional Views (2019), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.
[8] Twitter, "Information Operations Directed at Hong Kong," (blog), August 19, 2019, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html.
[9] Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Additional Inauthentic Activity from Facebook," *Facebook Newsroom,* October 26, 2018, https://about.fb.com/news/2018/10/removing-inauthentic-activity/. See also, for example, Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Revealed: 50 Million Facebook Profiles Harvested for Cambridge Analytica in Major Data Breach," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election.
[10] Stacy Jo Dixon, "Social media—Statistics and Facts," *Statista*, January 10, 2024, https://www.statista.com/topics/1164/social-networks/.
[11] Ibid. J. Degenhard, "Number of Smartphone Users Worldwide from 2013 to 2028," *Statista*, https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1143723/smartphone-users-in-the-world
[12] Pratim Datta, Mark Whitmore, and Joseph K. Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm: Social Media News, Psychological Biases, and AI," *Digital Threats: Research and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2021): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1145/3428157.

Consequently, these actors can gradually disrupt the decision-making processes and the internal stability of many states, particularly democracies.[13]

As one researcher writes, "Social media creates a point of injection for propaganda and has become the nexus of information operations and cyber warfare."[14] One recalls, in particular, large segments of the American public losing faith in the validity of the 2020 national elections, as a result of online conspiracy mongering and fake news.[15] Public opinion exerts a significant influence on domestic and foreign policy-setting,[16] especially in the age of social media.[17] As noted by many,[18] public opinion can constrain a leader's range of bargaining in international affairs. Moreover, voter opinion often shapes a leader's decisions regarding conflict, international cooperation, trade, and alliances.[19] This is all the more salient when considering the impact that digital communication can have on collective emotions. Studies have demonstrated that even when the public is informed that a news item or content is fake,[20] they may still believe it if the content triggers the right emotions.[21]

While much ink has been dedicated to elucidating how social media use contributes to anxiety and depression,[22] few studies have addressed the equally important fact that, conversely, young people, in particular, are drawn to and actively seek out specific social media content that elicits desired emotions.[23] Digital content can appeal to audiences much like a drug might.[24] At times of crisis in particular, people gravitate to digital content whose colors, composition, music

[13] Michael R. Tomz and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Human Rights and Public Support for War," *Journal of Politics* 82, no. 1 (2020): 182–194.
[14] Jarred Prier, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2017): 50–85.
[15] Giulia Carbonaro, "40% of Americans Think 2020 Election Was Stolen, Just Days Before Midterms," *Newsweek*, November 2, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/40-americans-think-2020-election-stolen-days-before-midterms-1756218.
[16] Robert Y. Shapiro, "Public Opinion and American Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 5 (2011): 982–1017.
[17] Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media," *Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (2019): 747–756.
[18] Dino P. Christenson and Douglas L. Kriner, "Does Public Opinion Constrain Presidential Unilateralism?," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 4 (2019): 1071–1077.
[19] Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies," *International Organization* 74, no. 1, (2020): 119–143.
[20] Datta, Whitmore, and Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm."
[21] Moravec, Minas, and Dennis, "Fake News on Social Media."
[22] See, for example, Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739.
[23] Verolien Cauberghe and others, "How Adolescents Use Social Media to Cope With Feelings of Loneliness and Anxiety During COVID-19 Lockdown," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 24, no. 4 (2021): 250–257.
[24] See, for example, Caroline Brooks, "Excessive Social Media Use Is Comparable to Drug Addiction," *MSU Today*, January 10, 2019, https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2019/excessive-social-media-use-is-comparable-to-drug-addiction.

and so forth offer them relief from their anxiety. Young people, especially in times of social crisis or instability, may unwittingly seek out content to find relief and use the sharing of content to self define in that context.[25]

Any savvy operator with a mind to affecting political behavior, then, can craft content and messaging and an influence strategy to satisfy strong emotional and cognitive needs of target audiences to trigger specific emotions, like relief, tie certain political beliefs to those emotions, and, therefore, specific behaviors as well.[26] This will result in not just influence but also loyalty. The emotional needs that create a fertile soil for foreign influence can themselves be created (by triggering anxiety, for example) via content. Whether the actual messages are factual or not is, largely, secondary. Understanding that phenomenon—the ability of political actors to identify or create psychological opportunities and the means by which to easily manipulate the automatic, affective, and cognitive responses of large audiences in order to advance political ends, that is, propaganda in the age of digital media—is a matter of pressing urgency.[27] It is this mechanism, the role of specific emotions in subconsciously shaping opinion about political events, which I will delve into next.

The Indispensable Role of Emotions in Political Judgment

When bombarded daily with information, which happens as we are on social media, our basic and arguably predictable impulses—and not rational thought—become the chief mechanism by which we make decisions.[28] In other words, as we are exposed to more information every day, we become less reliant on that information, *more* reliant on emotions, and increasingly subject to our automatic

[25] See, for example, Ross Simmonds, "The Psychology of Sharing Content Online in 2024," *Foundation*, October 9, 2023, https://foundationinc.co/lab/psychology-sharing-content-online/. Notably, Dentsu Tokyo and I conducted an extensive study in December of 2020, in which we used proprietary artificial intelligence tools to examine tens of thousands of social media posts with the aim of analyzing the behavioral patterns of Japanese audiences on both Instagram and TikTok before, during, and after the peak of the Covid19 pandemic (before March 2020, March to July 2020, and after July 2020). The images posted focused on non-political topics, namely food, beauty, electronics and tourism. Our study revealed clear evidence that in times of crisis, people are drawn to digital content whose colors, composition, music, and so forth offer relief from anxiety. While before the pandemic, posts about healthier foods were the most popular in terms of likes, during the initial peak of the pandemic, people flocked to posts about sweets, desserts, and ice cream—comfort food. While stark colors were popular in beauty posts, posts that featured warm colors, such as orange, red, and pink, became more appealing after the pandemic began. Musical tastes shifted from classical to relaxing or upbeat. People, we concluded from our analysis, were unconsciously drawn to content that helped them meet their psychological needs in the moment and manage their emotional states. That is, without realizing it, people seem to consume social content for comfort, as a form of therapy.

[26] Ian A. Anderson and Wendy Wood, "Habits and the Electronic Herd: The Psychology Behind Social Media's Successes and Failures," *Consumer Psychology Review* 4, no. 1 (2021): 83–99. See also, Arild Bergh, "Understanding Influence Operations in Social Media: A Cyber Kill Chain Approach," *Journal of Information Warfare* 19, no. 4 (2020): 110–131.

[27] "While human biases predate artificial intelligence (AI), AI can amplify and entrench (anchors) biases, leading to faster and often deadlier instances of fake news internalization and propagation, especially in light of a SM [social media] news deluge." See Datta, Whitmore, and Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm."

[28] Datta, Whitmore, and Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm."

impulses and, therefore, to the content that plays on them. Accordingly, a growing body of scholarship underscores the critical influence of primary, automatic emotional responses in shaping all facets of political cognition, from strategic analysis to final decision-making.[29] Emotions, often preconscious and automatic, provide a means of assessing new information and navigating novel, uncertain situations.[30] Unconscious political assessments overwhelm emotions,[31] which subsequently shape cognitive or strategic evaluations of that stimulus by highlighting particular concerns,[32] directing attention to facts congruent with those emotions, or determining the depth of cognitive processing.[33] Furthermore, individuals often modify their attitudes in accordance with their emotional states.[34]

Emotions thus function as automatic political assessment mechanisms that inform subsequent deliberative processes. Emotions determine what *we think* that we think about politics. People respond emotionally to politically relevant content, and that automatic, irresistible reaction shapes their subsequent thinking. By stimulating specific emotions through content, one can potentially reshape societal reactions to their own political realities.[35] This possibility underscores the value of emotional manipulation in the public's rational evaluation of political events. [36] Researchers are mapping the ramifications of various emotions on political cognition,[37] with specific emotions having predictable and precise effects on the rational assessment of political facts. For example, there is a correlation

[29] Philippe Assouline and Robert Trager, "Concessions for Concession's Sake: Injustice, Indignation, and the Construction of Intractable Conflict in Israel–Palestine," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 9 (2021): 1489–1520; Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs," *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010): 1–31; G. E. Marcus, "Emotions in Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 221–250.
[30] Amanda D. Angie and others, "The Influence of Discrete Emotions on Judgement and Decision-Making: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Cognition & Emotion* 25, no. 8 (2011): 1393–1422; James N. Druckman and Rose McDermott, "Emotion and the Framing of Risky Choice," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2008): 297–321.
[31] Michael L. Spezio and Ralph Adolphs, "Emotional Processing and Political Judgment: Toward Integrating Political Psychology and Decision Neuroscience," in *The Affect Effect. Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior*, ed. W. Russell Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler, and Michael MacKuen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 71–95; Jorge Moll and Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza, "Moral Judgments, Emotions and the Utilitarian Brain," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 8 (2007): 319–321.
[32] Roger Petersen and Sarah Zukerman, "Anger, Violence, and Political Science," in *International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes*, ed Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger (New York: Springer New York, 2009), 561–581.
[33] Jonathan B. Renshon and Jennifer S. Lerner, "The Role of Emotions in Foreign Policy Decision Making," in *Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, ed. Daniel J. Christie (Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2012), 313–317; Ted Brader and George E. Marcus, "Emotion and Political Psychology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. L. Huddy, Do. O. Sears, and J.S. Levy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165–204.
[34] Richard E. Petty, David DeSteno, and Derek D. Rucker, "The Role of Affect in Attitude Change," in *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*, ed. J. P. Forgas (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2001); Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, "Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues," *Daedalus* 133, no. 4 (2004): 55–66, https://doi.org/10.1162/0011526042365555.
[35] Thomas Peterson, review of *Campaigns for Hearts and Minds. How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work,* by Ted Brader, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18, no. 2 (2006): 256–258.
[36] Petty, DeSteno, and Rucker, "The Role of Affect in Attitude Change."
[37] Robin L. Nabi, "The Case for Emphasizing Discrete Emotions in Communication Research," *Communication Monographs* 77, no. 2 (2010): 153–159.

between enthusiasm and risk-taking behavior.[38] (The impact of specific emotions on cognition, behavior, and political attitudes is further detailed in table 1 below.) By identifying the emotional state of targeted audiences and the use of specific emotions, political actors can arguably shape their opinions.

Emotions, Social Media and the Middle East Conflict

Because they play a significant role in shaping political attitudes and cognition, emotions have been heavily targeted in influence campaigns by states and non-states alike in the Middle East. In 2009, during Iran's "Green Revolution," participants who had Twitter or Facebook accounts were able not only to inform key political blogs (such as Andrew Sullivan's and others) with their posts, but they also conveyed *their* emotional perspective on these events, including heart-wrenching images of victims of regime brutality (often with unedited, raw video) to American audiences.[39] Social media played a crucial role in the Arab revolutions of 2011, including the protests in Tahrir Square, the revolution in Tunisia, and the mobilization of regime opposition in Syria, by sharing *the fate* of the protesters and *generating outrage* on the Arab street.[40] As a result, conflicts in the Middle East have become mediatized battles for Western and global sympathy, appealing to hearts and *not minds*. Actors who fail to recognize this and attempt to counter emotions with facts run the risk of appearing callous, detached, and inadvertently reinforcing their opponents' campaigns.

In line with this, "the war over public opinion and, therefore, over media coverage, including social media, has become central to the Arab–Israeli conflict."[41] Groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah have invested heavily in social media,[42] particularly to elicit and harness Western compassion by highlighting the fate of young Arab victims of Israeli military actions. Accompanying these efforts have been the activities of supporters of both sides, in the United States and elsewhere, who use social media to influence the sympathy of the Americans regarding the Arab–Israeli conflict. The anti-Israeli Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has aggressively used the internet, including through its affiliates, to advance its interpretation of the conflict among Americans. The pro-Israel community has

[38] Druckman and McDermott, "Emotion and the Framing of Risky Choice."
[39] Somayeh Moghanizadeh, "The Role of Social Media in Iran's Green Movement" (master's thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2013); Nima Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures: Social Networking, Neda, and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections," *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 56–69.
[40] Mark Wheeler and Petros Iosifidis, "Public Diplomacy 2.0 and the Social Media," in *Public Spheres and Mediated Social Networks in the Western Context and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 149–173.
[41] Richard M. Perloff, "A Three-Decade Retrospective on the Hostile Media Effect," in *Advances in Foundational Mass Communication Theories*, ed. Ran Wei (London: Routledge, 2017), 196–224.
[42] Wheeler and Iosifidis, "Public Diplomacy 2.0 and the Social Media."

responded in kind, seeking to promote its own narrative of events and publicly organizing student and online activists to have a better social media presence.[43]

During Israel's military campaign in Gaza in the summer of 2014, and similarly in subsequent campaigns, Hamas distributed via social media detailed accounts of clashes and viral images of Palestinian dead or wounded, especially children. Tellingly, a Hamas official explained that the aim was to *humanize* the victims in order to sway public opinion against Israel.[44] It is emotional rather than informational messaging, and its effectiveness is in garnering support by *humanizing* one side of the conflict, which Hamas uses for strategic ends. In fact, the Hamas government issued guidelines for social media activists aimed at swaying Western audiences, which included using affective terms such as "genocidal aggression," "resistance," and "martyrs."[45]

Crucially, studies have found that the success of Hamas's anti-Israel messaging on social media significantly influenced Israel's behavior. Shifts in public support correlated with Israel's reducing the intensity of the conflict, while Hamas was less affected by negative social media portrayals and reports.[46] Thus, social media has been leveraged as a weapon to influence public opinion and limit the military margin of maneuver of an opponent.

How to Make Friends and Influence People: The Weaponizing of Discrete Emotions

The regulation of emotions through political communication is being explored also as a means of resolving intractable conflicts and not just as a means to advance nefarious ends. This approach has been tested in experimental settings by adjusting the emotional priming associated with political facts.[47] Emotions play a crucial role in mediating perceptions of fairness and moral acceptability of

[43] Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, "The Aesthetics of Violent Extremist and Counter-Violent Extremist Communication," in *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism*, ed. Cornellu Bjola and James Pamment (London: Routledge, 2018), 121–139; Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, "Visually Framing the Gaza War of 2014: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter," *Media, War & Conflict* 11, no. 4 (2018): 369–391.
[44] Wheeler and Iosifidis, "The Social Media and the Middle East," in *Public Spheres and Mediated Social Networks in the Western Context and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 257–283.
[45] Thomas Zeitzoff, "Does Social Media Influence Conflict? Evidence From the 2012 Gaza Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 1 (2018): 29–63.
[46] Zeitzoff, "Does Social Media Influence Conflict?"
[47] Sophie Lecheler, Andreas R. T. Schuck, and Claes H. de Vreese, "Dealing With Feelings: Positive and Negative Discrete Emotions as Mediators of News Framing Effects," *Communications-The European Journal of Communication Research* 38, no. 2 (2013): 189–209; David DeSteno, Richard E. Petty, Derek D. Rucker, Duane T. Wegener, and Julia Braverman, "Discrete Emotions and Persuasion: The Role of Emotion-Induced Expectancies," *Journal of Personality and social Psychology* 86, no. 1 (2004): 43.

outcomes, which, in turn, shape attitudes to foreign policy by providing an evaluation heuristic.[48]

In other words, influencing public emotions via messaging can determine whether a given public favors war or peace. In fact, emotions can be strategically used to elicit specific behaviors from a targeted public. For example, in table 1, consider the predictable impact of the following emotions on behavior:

Table 1. The cognitive, behavioral, and political impact of some emotions triggered by propaganda campaigns

Emotion	Impact on Risk Assessment	Impact on Cognition	Impact on Political Judgment
Fear[49]	Increases perception of risk	Narrows attention, promotes vigilant and detail-focused processing	Fear, especially about threats, can lead individuals to support more conservative policies, especially concerning security, defense, and immigration.[50]
Anger[51]	Decreases perception of risk	Simplifies thinking, increases reliance on heuristic cues and mental shortcuts	Anger can mobilize individuals and make them more politically active. It can lead to support for more punitive policies and also drive populist sentiments, leading to support for anti-establishment politicians or parties.[52]
Sadness[53]	Mixed effects; can increase or decrease risk perception	Promotes analytical processing, introspection	Sadness can make individuals more compassionate, leading to increased support for social welfare policies or humanitarian causes. However, it can also demobilize individuals, making

[48] Cecilia Albin, *Justice and Fairness in International Negotiation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[49] Jennifer S. Lerner and Dacher Keltner, "Fear, Anger, and Risk," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 1 (2001): 146.
[50] Leonie Huddy and others, "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Anti-Terrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): 593–608.
[51] Jennifer S. Lerner and Larissa Z. Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker: How Appraisal Tendencies Shape Anger's Influence on Cognition," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 19, no. 2 (2006): 115–137.
[52] Nicholas A. Valentino and others, "Election Night's Alright for Fighting: The Role of Emotions in Political Participation," *Journal of Politics* 73, no. (2011): 156–170.
[53] Norbert Schwarz and Gerald L. Clore, "Feelings and Phenomenal Experiences," in *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, ed. A. W. Kruglanski and E. T. Higgins (Guilford Press, 2007), 385–407.

	depending on context		them less likely to participate in political activities, including elections.[54]
Happiness/ Joy[55]	Decreases perception of risk	Broadens attention, promotes heuristic and integrative processing	Happiness can make individuals more optimistic about the status quo, leading to support for incumbent politicians or current policies. It can also make individuals more open to cooperative and inclusive policies.[56]
Disgust[57]	Increases perception of contamination or moral risk	Simplifies thinking, promotes rejection of the source of disgust	Disgust, especially moral disgust, can lead individuals to adopt more conservative stances on issues related to purity, such as sexual behavior or immigration. It can also deter support for politicians perceived as corrupt or unethical.[58]
Surprise[59]	Temporarily suspends judgment, prompting reevaluation	Interrupts ongoing processes, demands cognitive reappraisal	Surprise can temporarily suspend established political beliefs, prompting individuals to reevaluate their positions. It can make individuals more receptive to new information or perspectives.[60]
Contempt[61]	Elevates moral risk perception	Promotes distancing and	Contempt can lead to rejection or denigration of specific politicians, parties, or policies. It can foster

[54] Deborah A. Small and Jennifer S. Lerner, "Emotional Policy: Personal Sadness and Anger Shape Judgments About a Welfare Case," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2008): 149–168.
[55] Barbara L. Fredrickson, "The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *American Psychologist* 56, no 3 (2001): 218.
[56] Alice M. Isen and others, "Affect, Accessibility of Material in Memory, and Behavior: A Cognitive Loop?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 1 (1978): 1
[57] Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, "Disgust," in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, and L. F. Barrett, 3rd ed. (The Guilford Press, 2008), 757–776.
[58] Yoel Inbar and others, "Disgust Sensitivity, Political Conservatism, and Voting," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 5 (2012): 537–544.
[59] Wulf-Uwe Meyer, Rainer Reisenzein, and Achim Schützwohl, "Toward a Process Analysis of Emotions: The Case of Surprise," *Motivation and Emotion*, 21, no. 3 (1997): 251–274.
[60] David P. Redlawsk, Andrew J. W. Civettini, and Karen M. Emmerson, "The Affective Tipping Point: Do Motivated Reasoners Ever 'Get It'?" *Political Psychology* 31, no. 4 (2010): 563–593.
[61] Agneta H. Fischer and Ira J. Roseman, "Beat Them or Ban Them: The Characteristics and Social Functions of Anger and Contempt," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93, no. 1 (2007): 103.

		superiority judgments	political polarization and decrease trust in institutions.[62]

And that is not all. **Indignation** can play a significant role in shaping political attitudes, including in the context of deep-seated conflicts. Triggering indignation in culturally effective ways can significantly affect attitudes toward proposed concessions on previously intractable issues (such as Jerusalem) or harden positions in negotiations. In experiments, Israeli respondents became far more favorable to punitive measures and more desiring that Palestinians make concessions when reminders of Palestinian leaders' rhetoric praising terrorist attacks triggered their indignation. Conversely, Palestinian respondents became far more supportive of making concessions, even on core symbolic issues such as control over the Temple Mount, when they were told that these concessions were the result of negotiations that had humiliated Israelis.[63] **Compassion**, elicited by showing images of dead and suffering children in particular, as discussed above, is widely used in influence campaigns seeking to undermine Western support for Israel, including those by Hamas and Hezbollah.[64]

Arguably one of the most powerful means to emotionally persuade audiences to adopt a particular view is to **create a sense of "us" and "them" identification**. Group and social behavior are key mechanisms that humans developed to survive. Shared morality, then, has a profound impact on our moral evaluation and can cause us to act in specific ways that overcome even our selfish interests.[65] In an age where people are increasingly exposed to social and political divisions, as well as identity politics and rampant online bullying, feeling a sense of kinship with others may be more powerful than ever.

Driven by this insight, my colleagues and I conducted a series of survey experiments to test the influence of various pieces of social media content on the opinions of American millennials regarding the Middle East conflict. We specifically

[62] Nicole Tausch and others, "Explaining Radical Group Behavior: Developing Emotion and Efficacy Routes to Normative and Nonnormative Collective Action," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 1 (2011): 129.
[63] Philippe Assouline and Robert Trager, "Concessions for Concession's Sake: Injustice, Indignation, and the Construction of Intractable Conflict in Israel–Palestine," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 9 (2021): 1489–1520.
[64] Philippe Assouline, "Manufacturing and Exploiting Compassion: Abuse of the Media by Palestinian Propaganda," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, no. 597, September-October 2013, https://jcpa.org/article/manufacturing-exploiting-compassion-abuse-media-palestinian-propaganda/; see also Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay, "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (2008): 959–978; Paul Slovic and others, "Iconic Photographs and the Ebb and Flow of Empathic Response to Humanitarian Disasters," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114, no. 4 (2017): 640–644.
[65] Michael Tomasello, "Precís of a Natural History of Human Morality," *Philosophical Psychology* 31, no. 5 (2018): 661–668.

examined the influence of the perception of Israelis as sharing the same values as Americans and how social media content could affect that perception. In both logistic and linear regression analyses, a sense of shared values with Israelis strongly predicted the support for the alliance between Israel and the United States as well as military aid to Israel. The impact, in fact, was even stronger than political affiliation or ideology. Additionally, it strongly predicted opposition to the Iran nuclear agreement. Public support for these issues can have a significant impact on the security of Israel or similarly situated countries.

An even more important finding is how easy it can be to foster a sense of commonality between a targeted audience and other people. In survey experiments, exposing target audiences to specific pieces of short video content (approximately 60–120 seconds), easily shared, targeted, and promoted on social media (e.g., showing Israelis with their families)—*even only viewed once for a few seconds*—resulted in a significant and immediate increase in the perception of shared values between American millennials (of various ethnic backgrounds) and Israelis—and therefore a marked change in political attitudes. That is, a short, simple, non-political video that is well targeted can powerfully affect the political opinions of the voting public regarding sensitive conflicts, *if that video can evoke the appropriate emotional and evolutionary responses*. And the ability to rapidly influence the preferences and behavior of targeted publics is not limited, obviously, to responsible political actors or states with good intentions. Hostile states or terrorist groups can—and do—elicit just as easily the us/them identification among targeted Western audiences, which can quickly and almost effortlessly have significant cognitive effects. While these states and groups are seductive and compelling, Western officials fighting them often respond with tone-deaf factual assertions, seeking to educate and argue. One example of this is that support for Israel has decreased among young people and minorities in the West.[66]

In sum, this paper argues that influence operations can be weaponized by targeting emotionally vulnerable populations with messages that exploit their anxiety and fear caused by uncertainty and unpredictability. Such populations unconsciously seek out content that assuages their fears or provides "easy" and compelling narratives that offer more clarity.[67] The messaging that targets the

[66] Domenico Montanaro, "Americans Strongly Support Israel, but There Are Generational and Racial Divides," *NPR News*, Oct. 13, 2023, https://www.wbur.org/npr/1205627092/american-support-israel-biden-middle-east-hamas-poll.

[67] Miguel Alberto Gomez, "Cyber-Enabled Information Warfare and Influence Operations: A Revolution in Technique?" in *Information Warfare In The Age Of Cyber Conflict*, ed. Christopher Whyte, A. Trevor Thrall, and Brian M. Mazanec (London: Routledge, 2021), 132–146.

population aims to affect their automatic reactions and core survival emotions.[68] That is, the content may or may not convey factual assertions, but its primary goal is to compel and seduce, rather than to inform.[69] It achieves this by eliciting specific emotions that lead to particular behavioral tendencies and political changes, as illustrated in the table above. These influence operations typically have a hidden socio-political agenda, which may involve promoting foreign powers, advancing domestic ideologies, or both. This agenda can be advanced most effectively through coordinated activity, often including the use of bots for mass diffusion.

The uncertainty and confusion caused by today's changing world and the excess of information that comes with it render social media audiences susceptible to influence or disinformation that plays on their biological and primal responses.[70] Indeed, as argued above, emotions play a central role, as do habits, the familiarity and ease of absorbing content, and heuristics such as anchoring,[71] priming, loss of framing, and so forth.[72] These powerful evolutionary behaviors, partly detailed in this piece, present a toolkit for the savvy campaign strategist to affect the views of the public on issues in the news.[73]

A Note on Counter Measures

If, as we have seen, states or political actors can quickly and predictably shape the preferences of Western publics to achieve strategic ends, what then can exposed democracies do to protect themselves? While there is no sure way to inoculate the public from nefarious influence, some measures can be taken, including the following:

- *Media Literacy Education*: Media literacy education involves teaching individuals how to critically evaluate and interpret media messages. It encompasses understanding media's roles in society, questioning media content, and recognizing media's influence on beliefs and behaviors.[74]

- *Prebunking*: Prebunking involves preemptively debunking misinformation before individuals encounter it. This method is grounded in the idea of

[68] Douglas Foyle, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.472.
[69] Gomez, "Cyber-Enabled Information Warfare and Influence Operations."
[70] Datta, Whitmore, and Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm."
[71] Ian A. Anderson and Wendy Wood, "Habits and the Electronic Herd: The Psychology Behind Social Media's Successes and Failures," *Consumer Psychology Review* 4, no. 1 (2021): 83–99.
[72] Datta, Whitmore, and Nwankpa, "A Perfect Storm."
[73] Foyle, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy."
[74] Se-Hoon Jeong, Hyunyi Cho, and Yoori Hwang, "Media Literacy Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 3 (2012): 454–472.

"preemptive refutation," where addressing misconceptions in advance can prevent their acceptance later.[75]

- *Algorithmic Detection and Deranking*: Machine learning algorithms can be trained to detect patterns associated with fake news, leading to automatic deranking or flagging of such content on platforms.[76]

Conclusion

As more of the global population becomes immersed in digital content every day, and as our daily activities become increasingly digitized, the issue of information security has become one of growing concern. Governments, now that they can capture the attention of large, targeted audiences through social platforms and can analyze their behavior, are paying attention. As a result, fake news and disinformation campaigns have become a central issue, with security services and global technology giants investing more heavily in means of preventing what is deemed false or misleading information. But beyond the challenge of defining what is true, and the controversies and moral challenges inherent in curating the truth in public discussions on the internet, the question is not what is harmful content, but rather why it is dangerous in the first place. As I have argued above, the veracity or falsity of content is not the main issue when it comes to foreign influence operations. Just as it is less important whether a virus is natural or man-made than whether it is deadly and highly contagious, it is the appeal of content—and understanding why an audience will readily adopt, become attached to, and promote certain politically salient messages—that should be understood.

Studies show that the public can be drawn to online content in much the same way people gravitate to comfort food or drugs to alleviate unpleasant emotions. Emotions strongly influence how we, in turn, rationally evaluate political facts and projects. Heuristics and other non-conscious, automatic reactions—which can still be influenced by design—do the same. Other evolutionary quirks, such as our deep-seated need to feel a sense of belonging and being part of a group, may have an even greater impact. That is, we are all vulnerable to manipulation through online content. And savvy political actors can not only study large target audiences to understand their unconscious triggers, they can easily craft messages that pushes those buttons to advance often questionable agendas.

[75] Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden, "The Fake News Game: Actively Inoculating Against the Risk of Misinformation," *Journal of Risk Researc*h 22, no. 5 (2019): 570–580.
[76] Kai Shu and others, "Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective," *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 19, no. 1 (2017): 22–36.

It behooves us, then, to emphasize the science and the psychology of content and our automatic, evolutionarily responses to it. We need to understand how weaponized digital experiences can profoundly affect political reality by rapidly shaping public opinion, in unprecedentedly simple ways. Only in this way, and not by censoring content deemed to be false, can we hope to educate and thereby immunize democratic societies against the darker forces of the networked age.