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Digital Transformation of Political Influence: Dynamics of Modern Propaganda

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ABSTRACT

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The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that the implementation of political influence in the digital age extends beyond the classical models of propaganda. A shift is observed towards multi-level, interactive, algorithmically mediated interaction, where digital platforms, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and digital citizen behavior play a key role. The research aims to explore the digital transformation of political influence through the lens of contemporary propaganda dynamics. The paper shows a shift from classical models of ideological mobilization through centralized media to decentralized, algorithmically mediated forms of interaction defined by digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and big data analytics. The hybrid nature of modern propaganda is emphasized, as it combines traditional communication methods with new technologies, including micro-targeting, the use of bots, deepfakes, and algorithmic content filtering. Special attention is paid to the epistemological shift in the paradigm of political communication: from centralized and verbal to fragmented, multimodal, and emotionally manipulative. The article outlines the threats of algorithmic authoritarianism, information overload, and cognitive manipulation, which undermine democratic resilience and blur the boundaries between truth, propaganda, and disinformation. At the same time, the necessity of developing digital sovereignty and media literacy as key mechanisms to counter disinformation and protect democratic values in the digital age is emphasized. It is established that the transformation of communication forms caused by digitalization expands the ontological boundaries of political power, and political propaganda becomes the infrastructural core of the power mechanism. One of the most alarming consequences of the digital transformation of political influence is the increased vulnerability of democracy to manipulation and information attacks. Digital propaganda becomes not just a tool of influence but also a means of undermining the foundations of the democratic order. It not only changes the tools of politics but also changes its very anthropology, eroding fundamental concepts of leadership, participation, trust, and identity.

KEYWORDS

digitalization, digital age, social media, political communication, computational propaganda.



Цифрова трансформація політичного впливу: динаміка сучасної пропаганди

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СТАТТЯ

АНОТАЦІЯ

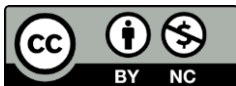
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Актуальність дослідження зумовлена тим, що реалізація політичного впливу у цифрову добу виходить за межі класичних моделей пропагандистського впливу. Спостерігається зсув до багаторівневої, інтерактивної, алгоритмічно опосередкованої взаємодії, в якій ключову роль відіграють цифрові платформи, штучний інтелект, big data-аналітика та цифрова поведінка громадян. Метою наукової розвідки є дослідження цифрової трансформації політичного впливу крізь призму динаміки сучасної пропаганди. Показано зрушення від класичних моделей ідеологічної мобілізації через централізовані медіа до децентралізованих, алгоритмічно опосередкованих форм взаємодії, що визначаються цифровими платформами, штучним інтелектом та big data-аналітикою. Наголошено на гібридному характері сучасної пропаганди, яка поєднує традиційні методи комунікації з новітніми технологіями, зокрема мікротаргетингом, використанням ботів, дипфейків та алгоритмічної фільтрації контенту. Особливу увагу приділено епістемологічній зміні парадигми політичної комунікації: від централізованої та вербальної до фрагментованої, мультимодальної й емоційно-маніпулятивної. У статті окреслено загрози алгоритмічного авторитаризму, інформаційного перенасичення та когнітивних маніпуляцій, що підривають демократичну стійкість і розмивають межі між правдою, пропагандою та дезінформацією. Водночас підкреслюється необхідність розвитку цифрового суверенітету та медіаграмотності як ключових механізмів протидії дезінформації та захисту демократичних цінностей у цифрову епоху. Встановлено, що зміна форм комунікації, викликана цифровізацією, розширює онтологічні межі політичної влади, а політична пропаганда є інфраструктурним ядром владного механізму. Один із найбільш тривожних наслідків цифрової трансформації політичного впливу полягає у посиленні вразливості демократії перед маніпуляціями та інформаційними атаками. Цифрова пропаганда стає не лише засобом впливу, а й засобом підриву основ демократичного ладу. Вона не лише змінює інструменти політики – вона змінює саму її антропологію, підриваючи фундаментальні уявлення про лідерство, участь, довіру та ідентичність.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

цифровізація, цифрова доба, соціальні мережі, політичні комунікації, обчислювальна пропаганда.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital modernization, which is marked by the hyperbolized growth of the role of information and communication technologies in social and political life, there is a significant transformation of forms, means and logic of political influence. Political propaganda, which during the twentieth century was the object of system analysis within the theories of mass communication, social psychology and political science, in the XXI century acquired new, radically modified features, primarily due to the digitalization of public space and the algorithmizing of political communication.

The implementation of political influence in the digital age goes beyond the classical models of propaganda influence focused on ideological mobilization through centralized media channels. Instead, there is a shift towards multi-layered, interactive, algorithmically mediated interaction, in which digital platforms, artificial intelligence, big data analytics and digital citizen behavior play a key role. This is what allows us to talk about an epistemological change in the paradigm of political communication: from verbal to multimodal, from centralized to fragmented, from authoritative to manipulative-contextual.

2. Literature Review

The problem of transformation of political influence in the digital age and its consequences for the formation of public opinion is in the focus of attention not only of political scientists, but also of sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, historians and communication researchers. The field of propaganda is increasingly becoming a subject of discussion in both scientific and media and political discourse, at the same time causing a public outcry. However, the relevance of this issue determines the need for a comprehensive analysis of the transformations of propaganda tools in the context of the digitalization of social processes.

The history of the study of the phenomenon of propaganda originates from the works of scientists who focused on the mechanisms of power that are implemented through the control and use of information flows. The concepts of J. Ellul, G. Schiller and G. Lasswell laid the methodological foundation for understanding propaganda as a structured tool of political domination. Further studies by foreign authors expanded the horizons of analysis, highlighting new forms of influence on mass consciousness in the context of globalized communication processes.

In modern research, digital technologies are considered as a powerful factor of influence on political processes, political communication and public participation (M. S. Shmanatov [16]). The development of digital technologies goes through several phases – from enthusiasm for the democratic potential of the Internet to awareness of the risks and challenges associated with digital platforms (Y. Ariel & V. Elishar [1]). This requires increased media literacy and a critical approach to new communication tools.

The researchers' research traces several areas, in particular, the impact of digital platforms on civic engagement, election campaigns, government bureaucracy and foreign policy.

Social media has significantly transformed political campaigns, making them more personalized, targeted, and based on big data analysis (L. Bejko [2], F. Y. Dharta et al. [6]). Official government accounts use social media to promote digital initiatives and engage citizens in government programs (Y.-P. Yuan et al. [24]). Modern digital technologies open up new opportunities for political participation and communication, but at the same time carry risks of manipulation, increased polarization, violation of privacy and threats to information security. The need for an integrated approach to the study of digital influence, the development of effective strategies for countering disinformation, as well as the adaptation of political and state structures to the digital reality is emphasized (M. S. Shmanatov [16], P. Tamuli & A. Dasgupta [18], S. C. Woolley [22]).

A. Velasco Molpeceres et al. [19] investigated the European Parliament's use of the Threads and X platforms during the 2024 elections. The results showed differences in communication strategies, with X focusing on video and engagement, while Threads focused on infographics and informing. The authors emphasize the need to adapt political communication to the specifics of digital platforms. At the same time, F. Y. Dharta et al. [6] emphasize the growing risk of political polarization and the spread of disinformation through digital platforms. A study by M. J. Riedl et al. [13] reveals the phenomenon of political influencers – persons who “cross” their media presence with politics, spread social or political messages, influencing public opinion.

S. C. Woolley [22], studying the evolution of digital propaganda through the prism of modern information and communication technologies, notes that governments, corporations and other actors are increasingly using automated bots and anonymous accounts to strengthen or suppress information flows during key periods, such as elections or security crises. The author analyzes the transformation of Internet manipulations from simple both campaigns to more complex “semi-organic” operations that combine human activity with artificial intelligence. Considerable attention is paid to the growing role of social influencers and private messengers as tools of political influence.

B. Olaniran, & I. Williams [11] study the impact of social networks on democratic processes and civic engagement. While social platforms are often seen as tools to give a voice to marginalized groups and stimulate civic participation, the authors emphasize their dual role. Social networks also become a medium for the spread of fake news, propaganda and destructive ideologies, which can undermine democratic values. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google have powerful potential to shape public opinion, sometimes replacing traditional democratic mechanisms and influencing people’s minds by guiding them to certain ways of thinking.

Authoritarian regimes, in particular China, adapt traditional propaganda, using “soft news” and infotainment for more effective influence (Y. Zhu [25]). Generative AI creates new challenges – the phenomenon of “slopaganda” (low-quality, mass disinformation), which complicates the critical perception of information and threatens the quality of democratic decision-making (M. Klineciewicz et al. [9]).

H. S. A. B. Polanunu [12], exploring the role of digital propaganda in the context of the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, focuses on the transition from traditional hostilities to information and digital warfare, where social media platforms become a key battlefield: both sides of the conflict systematically use digital tools to form strategic narratives that aim to justify military actions, influence international public opinion and mobilize political support.

The digital platform contributes to the undermining of the information monopoly of traditional media and forces them to take into account new topics generated by the online space. Y. Buchmeier [3] raises the issue that in the digital age, social networks lead to an accelerated decline in print newspaper circulation, a decrease in revenues from traditional television, and an increase in the use of news aggregators and online platforms among young people. This creates the potential to weaken the dominant influence of legacy media, which are forced to respond to discussions and topics that are actively discussed in the digital sphere but were previously ignored.

Digital platforms have become the scene of active dissemination of propaganda and disinformation, in particular through automated bots, anonymous accounts and algorithmic mechanisms (“computational propaganda”) (S. Rutsyki [15], S. C. Woolley [22]). These tools are widely used to shape narratives, divide society, and promote geopolitical interests, which is a serious challenge to information security and democratic institutions (S. S. Yanyshchynskyi [23], O. Vysotska [20]).

The interdisciplinary optics of propaganda research covers both historical and current manifestations. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of influence tools in the context of the mass distribution of social networks, algorithms for personalizing information content and the use of artificial intelligence technologies. At the same time, despite the notable achievements in the study of this phenomenon, a number of issues still require systematic analysis. First of all, it concerns the search for effective strategies to counteract manipulative practices in the modern information environment and the spread of artificial intelligence.

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of this scientific research is to study the digital transformation of political influence through the prism of the dynamics of modern propaganda. The subject of the analysis is both institutionally organized and informal (network, decentralized) practices of manipulating political consciousness carried out in a virtual environment.

4. Methods and Materials

The methodological basis of the study is an interdisciplinary approach that combines the concepts of critical political science, communication theory, digital sociology and cognitive science. Such general scientific methods of cognition as analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparison, analogy,

abstraction and generalization were also applied; special scientific methods were also used: content analysis, deconstruction method, etc.

5. Results and Discussion

Digitalization not only changes the forms of communication but also redefines the very nature of political power, expanding its ontological boundaries. As M. Castells points out, power in a network society is a communicative force [4, p. 53]. This means that control over the flow of information becomes identical to control over political reality. In this context, political propaganda appears not as an additional component of the power mechanism, but as its infrastructural core.

Unlike traditional models, where propaganda was vertical in its structure, modern forms of digital propaganda operate within horizontally branched networks in which the subjects of influence are opened: they become not only institutionalized political actors, but also algorithmic agents (bots, automated accounts), opinion leaders, digital influencers, and ordinary citizens – message relays. As A. Chadwick notes, “new media is best understood because of their interdependence with old media... These connections make up what he calls a hybrid media system”, this may indicate that we have entered an era in which old and new media are integrated into a complex configuration of influence [5, p. 26].

Thus, the digital transformation of propaganda is systemic in nature and affects not only technical or instrumental aspects of political communication but also updates the architecture of political discourse, changes the axiological foundations of the perception of truth, fact, and legitimacy.

One of the key features of the modern digital age is algorithmic mediation – a process in which information flows, political messages and symbolic constructions are structured, filtered and hierarchized not by people, but by algorithmic systems. The algorithms that drive news feeds, search results, and personalized ads act as a kind of “information architects” of new publicity. According to L. Winner, there is no more provocative idea in the debate about technology and society than the idea that technical things have political properties [21]. It is about the fact that technology can embody specific forms of power and authority. In this sense, digital algorithms perform not just the function of relaying messages, but form a cognitive framework within which political actors interpret reality. The propaganda effect here is achieved not only by planting fake information, but by changing priorities in access to different types of knowledge, imposing emotionally charged topics, increasing polarizing effects and reducing complexity to binary oppositions.

With this in mind, the latest forms of digital propaganda are post-truthful. They do not seek to persuade with a rational argument, but appeal to emotional reactivity, identical codes and cognitive biases. That is why, as I. Rushchenko emphasizes, “the digitalization of society makes the average person more dependent on information interventions, behind which there are propaganda centers” [14, p. 14].

The modern media space is increasingly appearing not as a sphere of objective information, but as a field of cognitive conflict, in which there is a struggle to determine the “true” political agenda. Propaganda in this context is not just a form of manipulation, but a way of producing political reality. The classic distinction between information, disinformation and propaganda is becoming increasingly blurred today. In the virtual environment, there is a redefinition of the boundaries between fact and judgment, thought and knowledge, which makes it possible to actively exploit elements of cognitive noise – half-truths, contextual manipulations, visual montage.

Computational propaganda is the use of algorithms and automated tools to spread disinformation through social networks. With the development of digital technologies and the popularization of social platforms, propaganda methods have become more sophisticated and effective.

Modern digital propaganda generates a certain simulacrum of trust in an environment of lies. In view of this, state and non-state actors exercising political influence are increasingly turning to strategies of cognitive saturation (information flooding), information substitution (reframing), and fragmentation of ideas (splintering narratives) as means of neutralizing oppositional discourse. Such strategies become a component of the so-called “psychological shaping operations”, focused on systematically changing the worldview constructs of addressees. Thus, political propaganda in the digital age functions as a multi-layered and non-linear process that integrates cognitive influence, digital architecture, and emotional-associative mobilization.

In the digital age, political identity is increasingly being shaped not only through traditional ideological narratives or institutional participatory practices, but through experiences with online platforms, communities, and information flows. Digital identity is becoming dynamic, fragmented, and

flexible – it is created through personalized content, algorithmic targeting, and affective interaction on social networks. This provides new opportunities for targeted political influence, known as “microtargeting”. Thanks to the processing of large amounts of personal data, political actors can form individualized messages for specific segments of the electorate, which makes it impossible for a nationwide discussion and stimulates isolation in “echo chambers”. As noted in the Internet Policy Review study, “one of the key features of microtargeting is that it is difficult to notice that the message is personalized... a voter may believe that a certain message is addressed to the entire electorate, and not only to him personally” [7].

In this context, propaganda acquires a new quality: it is no longer aimed at forming a generally accepted worldview, but at supporting information microworlds, where each user lives in his own interpretation of political reality. This process has a deeply depoliticizing character, because it destroys the idea of the public sphere as a place of general discussion and the formation of collective will. Instead of a single public space, we have a mosaic of digital tribes, each of which forms its own picture of the world, and therefore its own susceptibility to propaganda.

One of the defining features of modern propaganda is its hybridity – a combination of traditional methods and the latest digital technologies. This process involves not only adapting old strategies to new media, but also radically transforming the very logic of influence. Today, political propaganda combines elements of communication management, psychological influence, game mechanics (gamification), visual storytelling, viral marketing, as well as artificial intelligence technologies and deepfakes.

Particular attention is drawn to the use of bot farms and network agents of influence – organized groups of accounts that systematically distribute coordinated content to create the illusion of consensus, create panic, or delegitimize political opponents. Such a practice is a tool of the so-called “social engineering” in the digital dimension – a deliberate reconfiguration of social perception through the manipulation of the symbolic environment. It is also worth noting the growing role of visual propaganda, which functions through memes, videos, GIFs, and visual novels. Their effectiveness is based on the ability to cause an instant emotional reaction and is easy to digest in clip thinking. The presence of bots on social media can negatively influence democratic political debate rather than improve it.

Thus, the hybridity of modern propaganda lies in the fact that it not only disseminates messages, but also reconstructs the channels, forms and modes of perception of political information, transforming the subject of influence at the level of the unconscious.

In the digital ecosystem, the role of algorithms as “invisible conductors” of political communication is becoming more and more obvious. Social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, X, and others) are not neutral intermediaries – they themselves act as subjects that shape political discourse through algorithmic modeling of the information environment. The user does not see the information that is the most objective, but the one that, according to algorithmic models, is most likely to cause an emotional response, attention retention and subsequent interaction. In this context, platforms do not work in favor of democratic discussion, but in favor of attracting attention – and therefore prefer content that is conflictive, emotionally saturated, and polarized. According to A. Smith, almost all the content that people see on social media is not selected by human editors, but by computer programs that use vast amounts of data about each user to provide content that he or she may find relevant or interesting. This has led to widespread fears that these sites promote content that attracts attention but is ultimately harmful to users, such as misinformation or sensationalism [17].

Thus, digital platforms become not only an environment, but also active agents of political socialization, influencing the theme, tone, rhythm and content of political life. They transform political choices into behavioral patterns, determined not by ideology but by algorithmic forecasting. This creates a fundamentally new reality: it is not the state or the party that forms the idea of political reality, but private companies guided by the logic of profit and technological experiment. In the XXI century, there is a threat of “algorithmic authoritarianism”, in which control over political behavior is exercised not by forceful pressure, but by technocratic mechanisms for managing information flows.

One of the most worrying consequences of the digital transformation of political influence is the increased vulnerability of democracy to manipulation and information attacks. In the digital space, classic democratic tools – freedom of speech, public dialogue, pluralism of opinions – can easily be used against democracy itself. Modern propaganda does not require direct censorship or repression – it is enough to oversaturate the information environment with fragmentary, manipulative, half-truthful, or outright false information to destroy trust in any knowledge. Such a strategy, known as “information

flooding”, disorients audiences, promotes political apathy, and ultimately creates an atmosphere of mistrust in which democracy loses its value basis.

J. Herrero et al. interpret the term “information pollution” as the contamination of information sources with irrelevant, excessive, undesirable and low-value information that can mislead individuals, groups, or information ecosystems. Studies have shown that erroneous information (i.e., information pollution) spreads at least six times faster and more widely than accurate information [8].

In the digital age, non-democratic regimes have learned to use the tools of an open society to realize their foreign policy ideological goals – through cyberattacks, information special operations, propaganda campaigns that imitate civic activism. Thus, digital propaganda becomes not only a means of influence but also a means of undermining the foundations of the democratic system, blurring the line between information freedom and information aggression.

Modern democracies are faced with the need to develop a new architecture for protecting the political process in the context of digital dynamics. Traditional forms of legal regulation, which were effective in the conditions of print and television media, turned out to be limited in relation to digital platforms that operate outside the jurisdiction of individual states, have a cross-border nature and operate according to their own corporate algorithms. In response, the concept of digital sovereignty emerges – the ability of the state to regulate the digital environment in a way that ensures both information security and compliance with democratic principles. The European Union, in particular, implements this approach through initiatives such as the Digital Services Act (2022) and AI Act (2024), which aim to ensure platform accountability, transparency of algorithms, and protect citizens’ information rights.

Another important element is the development of digital media literacy as a social institution. Universities, public organizations, and independent journalistic projects take on the role of “information inoculators” designed to form citizens’ critical thinking, the ability to fact-check, and recognize information manipulations. This is especially true in the context of hybrid wars, in particular in the case of Ukraine, which has become the target of a large-scale disinformation campaign by the Russian Federation.

However, the most difficult question remains: how to maintain a balance between the fight against disinformation and the protection of freedom of speech? This challenge forces modern democracies to proceed with caution – avoiding over-regulation that could set a dangerous precedent for censorship, while protecting civic space from propaganda poisoning.

Digital transformation changes not only the structures of influence but also the very nature of the political actor. Traditional elites – parties, leaders, institutions – no longer have a monopoly on initiating a political agenda. In the new conditions, micro-influencers, activist networks, and virtual communities can compete with state institutions for legitimacy and public attention.

The concept of “mediocracy”, proposed by T. Meyer, takes on a new sound: “the concept of mediocracy goes beyond media democracy... Media software solutions almost exclusively cater to the political and cultural tastes of a wide segment of society, which... always seem to be confirmed and reinforced in the self-confirming hypothesis” [10]. But in the digital age, the media is no longer an editorial vertical, but a decentralized environment where everyone can become a source of influence, as well as a tool of manipulation.

In this context, political subjectivity loses stability. Its parameters are constantly redefined in accordance with the logic of digital time – immediacy, visualization, click ability. Constant adaptation to new formats (from streams to memes) forces politicians not only to update their rhetoric, but also to transform the very style of political action. As is commonly believed, a simulacrum is a certain sign that cannot have a signified object in reality, a kind of copy without an original, or a reproduction of something that never existed. This definition can be emphasized that in the postmodern dimension, politics can become a “simulacrum”, where reality is replaced by a play of symbols, and the border between the real and the virtual is significantly blurred.

6. Conclusions

It has been established that the change in forms of communication caused by digitalization expands the ontological boundaries of political power, and political propaganda is the infrastructural core of the power mechanism. In the digital age, it functions as a multi-layered and non-linear process that integrates cognitive influence, digital architecture, and emotional-associative mobilization. The use

of targeted political influence (microtargeting) is deeply depoliticizing, because it destroys the idea of the public sphere as a place of general discussion and the formation of collective will. Thus, one of the most worrying consequences of the digital transformation of political influence is the increased vulnerability of democracy to manipulation and information attacks. Digital propaganda is becoming not only a means of influence but also a means of undermining the foundations of the democratic order. It not only changes the tools of politics – it changes its very anthropology, undermining fundamental notions of leadership, participation, trust and identity.

Further research will focus on assessing the impact of various platforms (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok) on the political behavior of citizens.

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