# MEMETIC WARFARE: EXPLORING THE DIGITAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

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A STUDY RESOURCE FOR *STILLPOINT MAGAZINE*

Recently, I have been troubled by an ambient fear that my insistent ramblings of the importance of memes at social gatherings might be alienating me from peers. Those who are already familiar with the study of memes might be able to offer me their sympathy, and would probably agree that internet memes, as well as being entertaining and cathartic, have an ability to articulate a sense of belonging to a community, and to spread transformative ideas that can be utilized to challenge existing power structures, or conversely, to reinforce existing power structures.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladmir Putin, over fear that it creates an "alternative reality," has recently banned Facebook and Twitter from officially operating in Russia. We see the emergence of discourse surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as the first major "online" European war, where information warfare and the circulation of viral images and videos contribute to a broader understanding of the events taking place, each image making up a unit of the broader narrative of war. These images, including memes, bear a foreboding ability to amplify misinformation and construct harmful narratives of the events taking place. As a result, multiple "alternative realities" are created.

This far along into a global "information war," the significance of memes and misinformation in the context of war have become glaringly obvious, exemplified through the use of memes in mobilizing a growing alt-right movement in the US, in Russia's meticulous construction of war fakes and viral images produced as a justification for the invasion of Ukraine, and Ukrainian's use of memes, slogans, and humor to mock and humiliate Russia and to boost Ukrainian citizens' morale. Right-wing America, Putin's Russia, and the Ukrainian resistance have demonstrated the ability of memes to mobilize, serving as a clear indicator of a communications revolution in conflict. The political left in the West must expand their definition of cyber warfare, in part by considering the importance of memetics in *information* warfare.

The internet meme, a seemingly trivial by-product of social networking, has the tendency to be dismissed as "just a joke," an approach which I find underestimates the collective power of memes in shaping ideas and narratives. Richard Dawkins has conceptualized the meme as ruthless and selfish, replicating and spreading like a pathological weapon, infecting us with something against our will: *information*. With this in mind, it's useful to consider the "information war" as a war where we can imagine

the user as a soldier, a social media platform as the battlefield, and the internet meme as the weapon. This memetic weapon affords the power to both amplify misinformation and to spark resistance, becoming part of a larger strategy to either silence narratives, or uplift alternative narratives that can mobilize or repress civil movements. In essence, memetic warfare can be simply defined as the deployment of memes in the war over narrative, in which an individual, organization, or even a nation state can consciously or unconsciously engage. The transmission of information, ideas, and culture through the circulation of memes bears the potential to transfigure the digital space into a battlefield, and their deployment used to establish a strategic informational and psychological advantage over their opponent in the context of war.

Below I share with you five preliminary readings that aim to guide your understanding of not only memetics as a flourishing field of study, but also its growing significance surrounding politics and conflict.
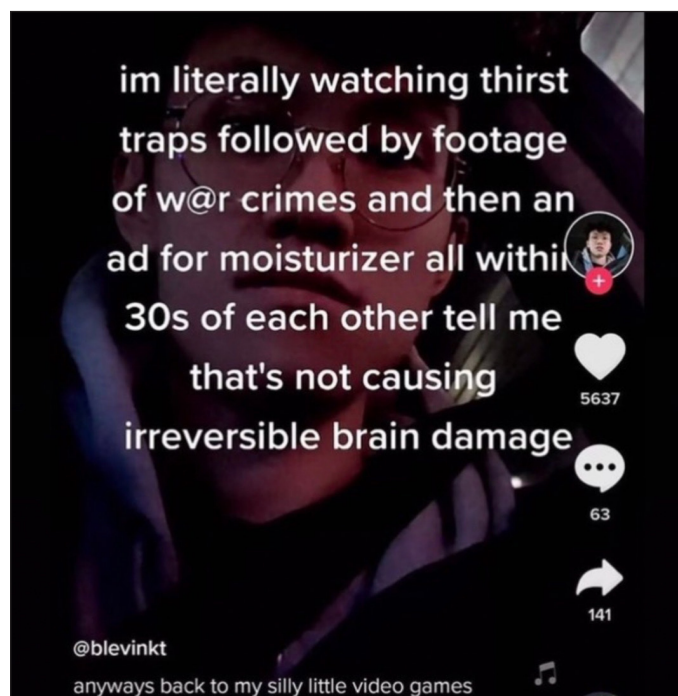




# 1. *THE SELFISH GENE*, CHAPTER 11: "MEMES: THE NEW REPLICATORS" (1976) – RICHARD DAWKINS

*Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.* (Dawkins, 249)

To begin to understand the significance of memetic warfare, one must first begin with biology. Memes and biology may seem like an unlikely pairing, yet by examining the gene and Darwinian biological evolution as a framework to understanding the meme, we can understand the significance of memes as a weapon of war. Evolutionary biologist and conceptor of the field of memetics, Richard Dawkins, lays the foundation to an exploration of memetics through an inquiry of cultural evolution. How is culture transmitted between animals, or what he refers to as "survival machines"? How does this transmission propagate cultural progression or evolution? In this 1976 work, he attributes cultural evolution to a self-replicating agent, what we know today as the meme. Much like the gene is the "self-replicating unit" for biological evolution, the meme is a replicator, a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. Dawkins claims that the brain becomes "a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (249). As the gene is burdened with the selfish task of survival, so is the meme. Biological evolution is driven by the survival of the fittest genes in the gene pool, while cultural evolution may be driven by the most successful memes.

Dawkins commits to this inquiry, ultimately, out of dissatisfaction of how evolutionary theory can "square up to the formidable challenge of explaining culture, cultural evolution, and the immense differences between human cultures around the world" (248). His solution in addressing gaps in theories of cultural evolution is simple: the replicating entity we know as the meme. Memes can be anything that contributes to the creation of a "culture," like images, phrases, fashions, recipes, or even a method for making pots. Although we see the word "meme" being used mostly in reference to images that are circulated online, it is interesting to consider that Dawkins could not have predicted the phenomenon that is the internet meme. Having published this book before the invention of the internet, Dawkins could not have foreseen how his conceptualization of the meme would become reappropriated, popularized, and, ultimately, alter the evolution of digital culture globally. If we can conceive the meme as a "building block" of culture, it becomes easier to understand the significance of what is a seemingly arbitrary cultural phenomenon. Continuing with Dawkins' logic, it follows that an entity which has the ability to shape existing realities, narratives, and culture can also be utilized as a weapon in wartime.

Richard Dawkins when he created the word "meme" in 1976

I guess you guys aren't ready for that yet

but your kids are gonna love it.

## 2. *POLITIGRAM AND THE POST-LEFT* (2021) – JOSHUA CITARELLA

*Consider; a mass leaderless online movement organized around open source digital images which create cultural agitations and contribute to a major shift in public discourse at a volatile time in history.* (Citarella, 14)

Joshua Citarella is an artist, writer, and podcaster, or "internet sociologist," researching online political subcultures. This book is an attempt at mapping the online spaces of "Politigram," or "political radical Instagram," which is made up of teenage ideologues and activists that largely share their ideologies in the form of internet memes. Citarella theorizes that the users of these online spaces have been radicalized through slow exposure to politicized memes, or "slow red pilled." His research attempts to make sense of these niche and politicized internet subcultures that he believes indicate a loss of faith in "the old left" and that have formed as a response to late capitalism, neoliberal dystopia, climate anxiety, and the rise of the alt-right. From there, Citarella examines the political power of the internet meme and the extent to which the meme can mobilize a political community online, allowing alternative politics to flourish.

The book is illustrated with an array of screenshots and memes, archiving the core beliefs of the research subjects in question and their self-proclaimed identities, ranging from transhumanist, anarcho-primitivist, fully automated luxury communist, green-anarchist, syndicalist, Christian Bolshevist, national Trotskyist, and even eco-extremist. Despite their major ideological differences, these online spaces come together and ignite political discussion through
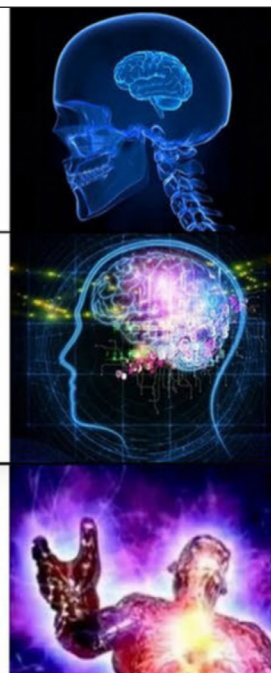
one unifying factor: memes. Despite the strong influence of memes in shaping ideologies in these communities, Citarella finds that Politigram is too young in age, too contradictory, nihilistic, and unorganized to mobilize a meaningful resistance from the left. As a casual observer of these communities, I am left wondering: is it "just a post-left phase," or will these teenagers grow up to mobilize a meaningful resistance that exists outside of Politigram? And what would a memetic mobilization of the post-left look like? Regardless of these questions, this research reinforces the idea that the internet meme has the ability to transform a "joke" into a political weapon, and ultimately sustains a potential to radicalize users.



Democrats vs Republicans

Libertarians vs Authoritarians

Anarcho-Primitivists vs Transhumanists

## 3. "IT'S TIME TO EMBRACE MEMETIC WARFARE" (2016) – JEFF GIESEA

*Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.* – Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO, 1946

This essay is published under the NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence (NATO StratCom COE), which is a "multi-nationally constituted and NATO-accredited international military organization" that engages in research and analysis to contribute to the strategic communications capabilities of NATO. When I first encountered this paper, I was excited to discover that someone, somewhere was advocating for memetic warfare to be examined at an intergovernmental level. I read it keenly and was inspired to delve deeper into the topic of memetic warfare, only to later learn that the author, Jeff Giesea, has his affiliations with the Trump movement, neo-nazi's, and white supremacists. Despite Giesea's politics, his argument shouldn't be discredited—he makes an uncomplicated argument for the growing relevance of the internet meme in information warfare, and he identifies the obstacles that would need to be overcome in order for governments to better understand the implications of social media in

strategic communications between both state and non-state actors.

Giesea references Dawkins' definition of the meme as a unit of cultural transmission and claims that it is important to consider when understanding anti-Western sentiment in Islamic State or Russian internet propaganda. He likens memetic warfare to a "'digital native' version of psychological warfare, more commonly known as propaganda," and calls for NATO and member governments to address memes as propaganda at an international level, as part of a system of global peace and security (Giesea, 69). This is certainly a bold recommendation, but one that is not unfounded. There is undoubtedly a need to expand our paradigm of cyber warfare, as we can not ignore the importance of the "trivial" internet meme when it is beginning to shape the course of global communication, war, and life. As a representative of the Trump movement, Giesea's writing serves as an example of the alt-right's preoccupation with occupying the memetic space to achieve political ends. If this is a preoccupation of "the right," then is it not also the responsibility of "the left" to understand it too?



## 4. "WEAPONIZING MEMES: THE JOURNALISTIC MEDIATION OF VISUAL POLITICIZATION" (2022) – CHRIS PETERS & STUART ALLAN

*The creation, curation and circulation of memes in the digital news landscape:* refashions journalism's communicative relationships *with its various publics;* recalibrates people's civic orientation *to news and current affairs; and* re-appropriates visuals *in increasingly sophisticated ways* for strategic political ends.*" (Peters & Allan, 4)

This article develops the concept of memetic weaponization for future theory building in the field. Peters and Allan define weaponization as "the purposeful deployment of memetic imagery to disrupt, undermine,

attack, resist or reappropriate discursive positions pertaining to public affairs issues in the news" (2), and they conclude that the role of memes is generally overlooked in digital journalism, and that the mobilization of memes is weaponized to create or sustain "us" versus "them" binaries, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of mainstream news reporting. We can observe such behavior surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict—combined with a general distrust in mainstream media reporting, we observe people turning to social media for information, reinforcing and sustaining the creation of alternative narratives.

The essay focuses on one exemplar, namely Pepe the Frog, and "seeks to build on previous conceptual scholarship to heuristic advantage." It outlines how some "believed the meme had become effectively weaponized to help drive hate-led agendas, including white nationalism, in part by playing on ostensibly innocuous readings" (Peters & Allan, 5). The authors demonstrate that this is not accidental: users intended to promote Pepe "as a means to combat an infowar on message boards and social media sites conceived of as battlespaces." With this ready-for-battle mentality, users deployed memes on message boards strategically, affording memes with "tactical functionalities," meaning the visuality, appropriation, repurposing, adaptability, and shareability of the meme, and ultimately encouraging affiliation with far-right discourse. In this manner, Pepe was embraced by a "culture of hopelessness, one which sought to reveal how the 'system was rigged,'" and ultimately "'part of a concerted attack on democratic consensus'" (7). Pepe the Frog, an innocent and fun-loving character, had been strategically transformed into a sinister symbol of the far right, highlighting the risk in viewing a right-wing meme as "just a right-wing meme," and underestimating the "strategic work underpinning the creation and maintenance of its symbolic status" (7).

me listening to both sides of the argument so I can take in double the amount of the misinformation

# 5. CAN JOKES BRING DOWN GOVERNMENTS? (2014) – METAHAVEN

*Imagine a joke. Imagine a joke that hits, again and again. A joke that self-replicates until it becomes the inescapable, omnipresent truth that hovers over each and every one of your political opponents. Why jokes? And why now? Here's why. Jokes are low budget. They are among the cheapest goods we all have access to; they don't cost anything, and they work. They are austerity-proof. Jokes, like laughs, are contagious, even if their intention is deadly serious. Governments the world over are fortifying themselves against their own citizens, and most of all against their jokes. But jokes easily pass through the walls of the fortresses. The joke is an open-source weapon of the public.* (Metahaven, 15)

As the title of this book suggests, the question put forth is one that pushes us to ask: are memes anything more than "small cultural portions of the zeitgeist" (Metahaven, 3)? Published by a design studio spe-cializing in aesthetics and politics in 2014, this text comments on the internet meme phenomenon in a timely manner, and demonstrates how memes, like jokes, function as political instruments by tapping "into a collective memory and tranform[ing] the 'outcome' of a commonly held starting point to different ends," and how "visual information on the internet can, through the spectre of self-politicisation, become revolutionary …" (12).

The book examines the historical role of the court jester who was "employed by the king, and was free to say whatever he wanted, but unfree to say it to anyone but the king" (Metahaven, 16). The "smartest is the king who, indeed, is his own jester" (17), as it eliminates the ability to resist, attack, or undermine the king. Such behavior is exemplified by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's use of jokes and memes on social media to build up Ukrainian morale and to attract international support for Ukrainian war efforts, and has evidently contributed to his idiolization

as a wartime leader. Alongside his personal presence on social media, the official Ukrainian Twitter page has also circulated memes in the same vein, contributing to the positive memeification of Zelensky and pro-Ukrainian sentiment in some corners of the web.

Jokes disrupt order, the circulation of discourse, and sometimes in their nonsensical nature, disrupt the existing order of "sense-making," which when used strategically has the potential to be a dangerous political weapon. In this way, the circulation of jokes in the kingdom, as memes in the online space, hold a distinct role in protest and resistance. In our current age of austerity where we are told that "these are very serious times, demanding serious decisions," there are always more pressing, or more important activities to be engaging in than jokes or memes, and as a result, they are wistfully dismissed as an invalid form of resistance or sense-making.
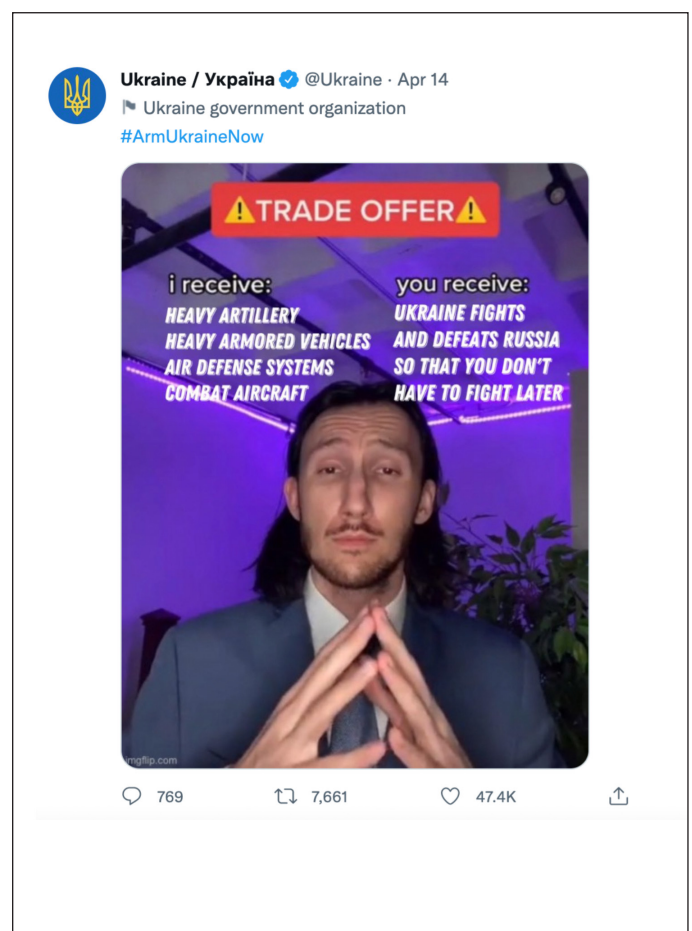


# CONCLUSION

By observing the activity of pro-Russian, anti-NATO trolls, or the online activity of the alt-right in the US, our conception of warfare is intermeshing with the digital and psychological space in ways we could previously not imagine. These, maybe sometimes unconscious, digital psychological operations see the weaponization of memes in a broader "information war" and present us with a future vision of wartime communication that deserves the attention of further research. With an aging and "digitally illiterate" global bureaucratic environment, there is no doubt a great risk of dismissing an online phenomenon that truly has "IRL" consequences in peace and war.
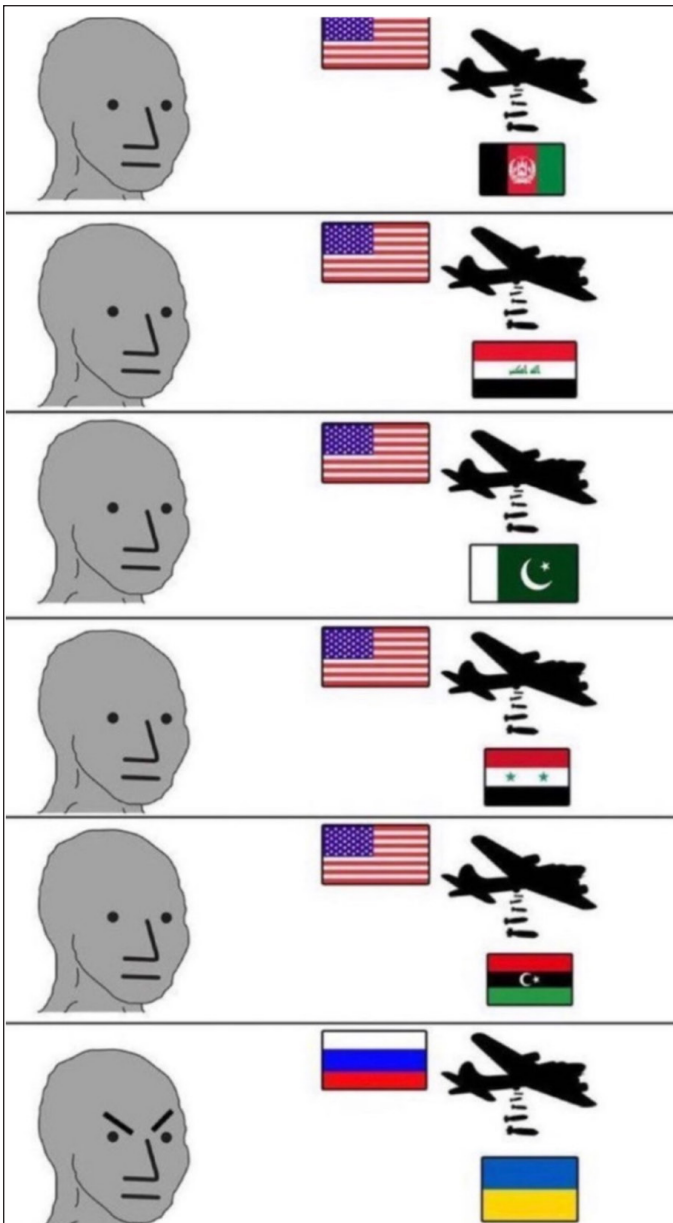
STOP MAKING MEMES

- ideas were only meant to be shared human-to-human (books are out too)
- you are feeding your unconscious into an AI training algorithm
- why are we psychoanalyzing ourselves publicly?

This is what we are doing with our time.

Ironic Referencing    Deepfried Sexuality    Controversial Frog

"lol did you see my latest post"
"no"

They have played us for absolute fools.

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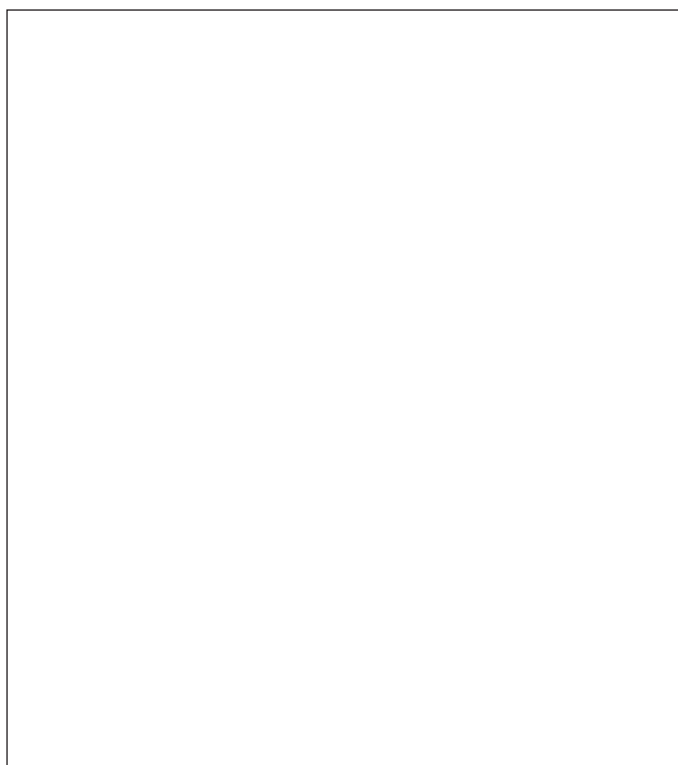
JASMINE ERKAN is a writer and researcher based in Berlin, and her writing explores intersections in politics, technology and digital culture. She holds a BA in political science and an MA specializing in human rights & democratization. Currently, she is working on a memetic worlding project that speculates on a future in which memes are weaponized by a hyper-centralized digital platform.

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