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Social Media: Mimesis and Warfare

Ignas Kalpokas PhD*

Abstract

Weaponisation of social media and online information is a real and emerging threat. Hence, this article aims to broaden our understanding of this phenomenon by introducing the concept of mimetic warfare. Borrowing from mimesis, or a particular representation of reality, this article delves into information conflicts as the ones involving a struggle between well-prepared comprehensive narratives that are intended to affect a target population's cognition and behaviour. Mimesis as a concept is seen as particularly useful in explaining the multiplicity, proliferation and appeal of such representations and interpretations of facts, events or phenomena. The article then presents a case for the Western states' proactive involvement in mimetic operations at the home front in order to maintain cohesion and not to cede ground to hostile foreign powers.

Keywords

Mimetic warfare, social media, strategic communications, information warfare, information security

* **Ignas Kalpokas** is also currently a lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University. Ignas holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Nottingham (United Kingdom), where he also worked as a teaching assistant. Before that, he completed his undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Vytautas Magnus University. Here, he was also Chair of the Executive Board of the Academic Club of Political Science (2008-2009) and editor-in-chief of political science students' magazine (2007-2010).

Introduction

The cyberspace undoubtedly has become an extremely important part of security studies. However, whereas cyber espionage, cyber terrorism or cyber warfare are widely discussed and analysed, the social aspect of cyber security, including the use of social media in offensive information operations, has only recently become part of mainstream research and still remains conceptually under-developed. This article will delve into social media storytelling as a tool for changing the cognition and behaviour of substantial groups of people.

This article introduces a concept of mimetic warfare. Mimesis – artistic representation of reality – is taken from Plato's *Republic* in order to define, within the remit of this article, a coherent, well-polished and purposive representation of reality. Hence, mimetic warfare is, essentially, a battle between carefully and purposefully developed narratives that attempt to sway people's opinions and affect their actions. Mimetic warfare is juxtaposed to memetic warfare, the latter being based upon the Internet meme culture and used to describe a fragmented and dispersed way of conveying messages through individual carriers of meaning (memes).

The rise of social media has enabled individuals to actively partake in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Today's information environment is characterised by the absence of a dominant direction of information and a multitude of interconnected information networks. Individuals are thus enabled to participate in political or sometimes even military action potentially without even realising one's involvement, but merely by participating in online communities and sharing information produced by or propagated through such communities. The above situation also signals an important change in comparison to traditional propaganda, which used to be disseminated by specialised institutions. Instead, in the era of social media, everyone can be a (sometimes unwitting) propagandist.

The article concludes with some suggestions as to what is to be done in the current security environment. It is argued that that the West should do more to keep their societies on board and pre-emptively protect and strengthen Western values as the backbone of our everyday lives.

Social media as a security threat

Despite early optimism as to the (almost exclusively) democratic potential of social media, they have since proved to have a rather ambiguous impact on social mobilisation. On the one hand, there is the clear benefit of reduced need for intermediaries (traditional media),[1] thus allowing citizens themselves to actively shape socio-political landscapes, empowering underrepresented groups or the citizenry in general to challenge centrally sourced news and put forward their own perspectives.[2] It is de rigueur to stress the role of social media in spreading information, mobilising people, creating protest networks both nationally and internationally.[3] To this extent, social media provide 'more readily available, immediate and equal access to public sphere'.[4] Also, by erasing distance, it is argued, the social media succeeded in 'making the remote local', i.e. enabling people to connect across geographically dispersed locations.[5] It has even been claimed that social media create an ethic of 'perpetual participation'[6] and that internet penetration, provided there is adequate infrastructure, 'facilitates democratic change by cultivating pro-democratic attitudes'.[7]

On the other hand, however, social media also provide platforms for subversive and extremist views, propaganda, and (deliberate or not) false rumours.[8] There are indications that penetration of social media has a tendency to instigate collective violence by exacerbating group differences, particularly when participation happens along segregated lines.[9] Social media can also have a destabilising effect by causing dissatisfaction with democracy through raising demands that are

[1] Bruce Etling, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, 'Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing', *SAIS Review* 30, no. 2 (2010): 37-49.; see also Anita Breuer, Todd Landman, and Dorothea Farquhar, 'Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution', *Democratization* 22, no. 4 (2015): 764-792.
[2] Brian D. Loader and Dan Mercea, 'Networking Democracy?', *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 6 (2011): 757-769, 759.
[3] See e.g. Mohammad Al-Momani, 'The Arab 'Youth Quake': Implications on Democratization and Stability', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3, no. 1-2, (2011): 159-170; Habibul Haque Khondker, 'Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring', *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 675-679.
[4] Emma Price, 'Social Media and Democracy', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2013): 519-527, 520.
[5] Maxine David, 'New Social Media: Modernisation and Democratisation in Russia', *European Politics and Society* 16, no.1 (2015): 95-110.
[6] Kevin M. DeLuca, Sean Lawson and Ye Sun, 'Occupy Wall Street on the Public Screens of Social Media: The Many Framings of the Birth of a Protest Movement', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 4 (2012): 483–509.
[7] Elizabeth Stoycheff and Erik C. Nisbet, 'What's the Bandwidth for Democracy? Deconstructing Internet Penetration and Citizen Attitudes about Governance', *Political Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 628-646, 642.
[8] See, e.g. Kim-Kwang Raymond Choo, 'The Cyber Threat Landscape: Challenges and Future Research Directions', *Computers & Security* 30 (2011): 719-731.
[9] T. Camber Warren, 'Explosive Connections? Mass Media, Social Media, and the Geography of Collective Violence in African States', *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2015): 297-311.

either impossible or detached from underlying realities[10] or through fostering disagreement on fundamental issues.[11] This contradictory nature of social media was particularly evident in Ukraine, where social media were both crucial in organising pro-democracy and pro-Europe protests, which ultimately led to the overthrow of President Yanukovitch and have extensively been used for propaganda purposes in the ensuing Ukraine–Russia conflict.

In fact, it is by now quite obvious that 'aggressive communication tactics and broader warfare through trolling and memes is a necessary, inexpensive, and easy way to help destroy the appeal and morale' of the opposing camp.[12] The intention is always 'to get effects, actions, and changes in behaviour from [...] target audiences'.[13] Such effort is being actively employed by both state actors, such as Russia and China, and non-state ones, such as ISIS.[14] Hence, the early enthusiasm regarding information on social media as 'authentic, transparent, user-driven'[15] has proved to be premature: it is authentic only inasmuch as a significant amount of people (with the exception of professional salaried trolls) do believe in what they are sharing but not in terms of a more immediate access to underlying 'reality', it is anything but transparent, and user-driven only in terms of its propagation rather than creation. In fact, even the positive effects, such as connecting and mobilising individuals and spreading information can be used to a detrimental effect by hostile forces through strategic communications or information warfare: social media enable rapid propagation and strong psychological impact of such endeavours.

In terms of weaponised information, it is useful to distinguish between two paradigms: strategic communications, employed by NATO, and information warfare, used by Russia.[16] In NATO's doctrine, strategic communications are defined as the use of 'Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations, as appropriate [...]

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[10] Andrea Ceron and Vincenzo Memoli, 'Flames and Debates: Do Social Media Affect Satisfaction with Democracy?', *Social Indicators Research* 126, no. 1 (2016):225-240.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Jeff Giesea 'It's Time to Embrace Mimetic Warfare', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (2015): 68-76, 69.
[13] Miranda Holmstrom 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1: 119-133, 119.
[14] Giesea, 'It's Time to Embrace Mimetic Warfare', 73.
[15] Mark Drapeau and Linton Wells, 'Social Software and National Security: An Initial Net Assessment', *Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defence University* (2009) dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA497525.
[16] Timothy Thomas, 'Russia's 21st Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (2015): 11-26, 11-12.

in support of Alliance policies, operations, and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims'.[17] Information warfare, meanwhile, is characterised by an effort towards 'undermining the political, economic and social systems, a massive psychological manipulation of the population to destabilize the state and society, as well as coercion of the state to take decisions for the benefit of the opposing force'.[18] It is thus clear that strategic communications offers a more restrictive scope of actions than information warfare. This might also be indicative of a deeper conceptual and doctrinal difference: NATO's emphasis on conventional military power and deterrence and Russia's embracing of asymmetric capacities and a proactive – aggressive – stance.[19] As a result, it must be stressed that Western militaries approach the era of weaponised social media from a position of relative weakness.

Information warfare largely relies on trolling as a specific type of behaviour. A troll, in this context, can be defined as 'a person who often chooses to remain anonymous, while posting statements that are designed to persuade or influence thinking or emotions through the use of half-truths or deceptive information'.[20] In fact, it might not even be of substantial importance whether the troll believes what she or he is sharing: what might be a purely performative act for one, can represent reality to others, inducing very real belief and action. Hence, even half-honesty can be the basis for others' truth claims and corresponding behaviour. Meanwhile, the aim of information warfare operations is to achieve reflexive control: 'a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent information that is specially prepared to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action'.[21] This manipulation includes both affecting the perceptions and corresponding actions of foreign decision makers and of substantial sections of foreign (or domestic, for that matter) populations. In fact, the two are interrelated: elite discourse and decisions have an impact on popular opinion (or at least set the agenda for public debate) while public opinion, if swayed, influences political agenda and impacts upon political decisions.

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[17] PO(2009)0141, NATO Strategic Communication Policy, 29 September 2009 https://info.publicintelligence.net/NATO-STRATCOM-Policy.pdf.
[18] Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *Russian Federation Armed Forces' Information Space Activities Concept*, http://eng.mil.ru/en/science/publications/more.htm?id=10845074@cmsArticle.
[19] On Russia's current strategy, see e.g., Timothy Thomas, 'Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric – and Putin-Led', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 3: 445-461.
[20] Thomas, 'Russia's 21st Century Information War', 13.
[21] Ibid., p. 15.

It is rather intuitive to begin from an analysis of such endeavours in the context of open hostilities, i.e. cases such as Ukraine. However, to do this would mean unduly limiting the scope of enquiry. In fact, it is necessary to have in mind that Western societies themselves are objects of manipulation through all kinds of media, including social media,[22] particularly in the context of such developments as the rise of radical political movements and parties or the migration crisis.[23] A central premise to keep in mind here is that Western values are not shared by everyone, a fact particularly manifested in comparison with other regions of the world.[24] However, this premise is both illustrative and deceptive: it is illustrative because it allows understanding the contingent nature of whatever we consider to be the organising principles of our societies; however, it is deceptive because the umbrella term 'Western' implies that people in this part of the world are somehow naturally inclined to value the same things. The success of, for example, ISIS in recruiting Westerners further demonstrates the point. As a result, there also is a need for more assertiveness in protecting and strengthening values *inside* Western societies. Hence, Western strategic communications effort should be directed not only at Sun Tzu's ideal of winning even without fighting[25] but also at making sure that we ourselves do not succumb to an adversary in the same way.

In an effort to describe and analyse challenges in the area of information security and strategic communications, the concept of memetic warfare has recently been gaining some traction. Defined as 'taking control of the dialogue, narrative and psychological space',[26] and borrowing from internet memes 'their capacity to spread with extreme rapidity',[27] this concept is, certainly, an interesting innovation. Memetic warfare works by employing the social media logic of viral spread of

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[22] NATO Strategic Communication of Excellence, *Redefining Euro-Atlantic Values and Russia's Strategic Communication in the Euro-Atlantic Space*, 2015, http://www.stratcomcoe.org/redefining-euro-atlantic-values-and-russias-strategic-communication-euro-atlantic-space.

[23] See, e.g. BBC, 'Migrant crisis: Russia and Syria 'Weaponising' Migration', 2 March 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35706238; for characteristic example of shifting the blame in order to further perpetuate manipulation, see e.g. Sputnik, 'EU Politicians Use Migration Crisis to Manipulate Voters', 28 October 2015, http://sputniknews.com/europe/20151028/1029251623/eu-refugee-crisis-voters-manipulation.html; Sputnik, 'US Blames Putin When Erdogan Caught Weaponizing Refugees', 11 February 2016, http://sputniknews.com/columnists/20160211/1034590138/putin-erdogan-refugees-europe.html.

[24] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', 119.

[25] Ibid., p. 128.

[26] Giesea, 'It's Time to Embrace Mimetic Warfare' 71.

[27] Paolo Gerbaudo, 'Protest Avatars as Memetic Signifiers: Political Profile Pictures and the Construction of Collective Identity on Social Media in the 2011 Protest Wave', *Information, Communication & Society*, 18, no. 8 (2015): 916-929, 918.

information, particularly with regards to memes – images that contain a comprehensive and catchy message. These images then act as conveyors of information, objects and symbols of identification, and rallying cries. However, as it will be argued in the next part of the article, the proponents of memetic warfare only identify the surface layer (the aims and the means) correctly but miss the crucial cognitive and motivational factors behind the actions of individuals involved, the latter being best captured by mimesis as a particular representation of reality.

Although sharing protest memes, changing social media avatars in solidarity with social movements or with victims of terrorist attacks could easily fall into a category of 'slacktivism', devoid of any real-world effects,[28] these actions are, at least in some cases, not only public pledges of allegiance but also vehicles for collective identifications and disseminators of calls to action.[29] Emphasis on memes and online identity formation is particularly potent in our current environment, in which 'identity is constructed as a result of our interaction with digital media'.[30] However, as it is to be argued, the difference between memes-in-themselves and mimesis is also precisely the difference between the calls that have remained virtual and calls that have broken through to real life. This transformation from potential to actual cannot happen without an explicit understanding of what, why and how is to be done. This explanatory function, as argued in the following part of this article, is being carried out not by sporadic memes but by mimetic representations of reality.

Crucially, in a social media environment, individuals co-create their own and group opinions by exchanging and discussing information, and as soon as 'someone has found the "truth" they in turn become propagandists and help others to reach the same conclusions'.[31] It is this mutuality and solidarity that makes social media information warfare particularly dangerous by removing intermediaries and easily recognisable propaganda agents while replacing them with otherwise ordinary individuals whom nobody would suspect of having a political agenda (and often they indeed do not have a conscious agenda of their own).[32] In fact, then, such individuals step in

[28] See e.g. Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Joel Penney, 'Social Media and Symbolic Action: Participation in the Facebook Red Equal Sign Profile Picture Campaign', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20 (2015): 52-66.
[29] Gerbaudo, 'Protest Avatars as Memetic Signifiers'.
[30] Andrew White, *Digital Media and Society: Transforming Economics, Politics and Social Practices* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 43.
[31] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media' 126.
[32] Ignas Kalpokas, 'Influence Operations: Challenging the Social Media – Democracy Nexus', *SAIS Europe Journal of Global Affairs* (forthcoming 2016).

precisely at the point at which the more visible trolls have left. A mimetic warfare operation has then reached a stage of self-sufficiency: no or very little input for the original perpetrators is needed, and the adherents of a particular narrative take over not only the propagation but also, to a large extent, the creation of content.

In such networked environment, harmful information spreads in a fashion similar to a computer virus: from one 'infected' user to another (or to many others). A network of such users (which could be called a social botnet) can be employed in spreading the message (i.e. enlarging the network itself) or remain nearly hibernated to the degree of only carrying out low-level background activity (in order to maintain collective identity), or be activated to its full capacity for pre-planned large-scale information offensives, when a large amount of information is released in conjunction with other – political and military – actions in order to ensure dominance over the information supply and demand chain. Hence, while 'traditional' cyber security is preoccupied with threats to networks and infrastructure, information security should concentrate on the social/identity infrastructure of communities within a state.

Understanding mimetic warfare

As already indicated in the previous part, instead of a scattered memetic approach, one should employ a concerted mimetic effort. Essentially, as evidenced by the proliferation of weaponised information, '[t]ruth, as in fact or piece of information, has no intrinsic value. It is up to the narrative to create that value'.[33] The narrative itself, however, has a very dubious relation to truth: to be more precise, '[t]the truth in the narrative is [...] not in its verifiability, but in its verisimilitude – the appearance of it being real or true'.[34] And the latter observation brings us to the concept of mimesis. Indeed, it must be argued that promotion of an underlying representation of reality, which unifies all efforts, is crucial, and mimesis is an indispensable tool for understanding weaponised information on social media.

[33] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', 124.
[34] Ibid., p. 124.

Mimesis, as a concept, refers to 'the interpretation of reality through literary representation or "imitation"'.[35] The term itself comes from Ancient Greece, having originally meant to mimic, to represent, or to imitate.[36] Socrates, as represented in Plato's *Republic*, had turned it into an object of critique for being removed from a fact or a thing and being concerned with only human representation of it.[37] To be more precise, there is a triple removal from reality in mimesis: the ideal idea of the thing, the thing itself as produced by a craftsman and only then its mimetic representation.[38] Essentially, then, mimesis is all about appearance and not truth: an imperfect representation of something that was itself imperfect in the first place (since any manufactured object can only strive to approximate the idea of that object).[39] In fact, according to Socrates' critique of mimesis, both visual and verbal representations have nothing to do with truth at all and deal with the lower part of the mind only.[40] But the most serious allegation, and immediately relevant for this article, is that '[w]e surrender ourselves, let ourselves be carried along'.[41] Crucially, there is something captivating in mimesis as representation and in the way in which it creates the appearance of reality: it is extremely difficult to escape its appeal. That something, it will be subsequently argued, is a narrative that gives sense to the disparate elements of representation and also makes one feel like he or she is part of the story being told, hence encouraging to emotionally and otherwise invest in a particular issue under description.

Mimesis, to reiterate, is inherently and unavoidably flawed: it is but an imperfect representation or imitation of reality. This means a few things: first, there may be, and usually are, many mimetic representations of the same phenomenon; second, no mimetic representation is unassailable – there is always a gap between a representation and what is being represented. Both of these problems have a significant impact on security. The ability to always interpret facts otherwise provides the basis for the very existence of mimetic warfare: no interpretation is ever final and stable, and counter-interpretations spring up. This particularly applies to value judgements (e.g. 'the absence of

[35] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957): 489.
[36] Diskin Clay, *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 118; see also Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture - Art - Society* (Berkely, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), 27.
[37] Clay, *Platonic Questions*, 122.
[38] Plato, *Republic*, translated and edited by Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press,1994), XIII: 597b; see also Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis*, 37-38.
[39] Plato, *Republic*, XIII: 598b.
[40] Ibid., XIII: 600e-601b; 603a-605c.
[41] Ibid., XIII:605d.

borders in Europe is a major achievement' vs. 'the Schengen area is a threat to economic and public security') but can also extend to discursive (although, of course, not factual) realities (e.g. 'MH17 was downed by a Russian missile' vs. 'MH17 was downed by a Ukrainian fighter jet'). These discursive realities, however, become real through their own effects: in terms of how people act and think (which is, ultimately, the all-important dimension of politics), it is immaterial who actually downed MH17 or what effect the Schengen area actually has – the only thing that matters is what people *consider* to be the case. In terms of the triple remove, characteristic of mimesis, one can distinguish between the fact, its effect and a representation of that effect or between an event, direct/eyewitness experience and a representation of that experience. In both cases, this remove clearly obscures access to the object in question. For this same reason, it is always possible to (truly or at least discursively) challenge any truth claim made through mimetic representation. If that was not the case, mimetic warfare would be futile – people would just be throwing ideas and representations past one another. Instead, there evidently is some 'stickiness': people do switch sides or, more often, turn from neutrality to commitment to a cause.

Emphasis on mimesis, rather than memetic effort, also challenges the common assertion that in today's world grand narratives are dead or, at least, ineffective,[42] a condition further exacerbated by shortening attention spans in the wake of technological development.[43] Narratives, however, help to sift through the noise and conflicting information that one gets by offering a simple and seemingly uncontroversial answer, which (re)establishes the order of things. Where previously one encountered only a cornucopia of disparate things (and that includes the memes of memetic warfare), now one encounters an ordered totality, which makes sense as to how the status quo has developed, its normative value (good or bad), and direction of action (protect or change).

Crucially, mimetic warfare taps into a democratic paradox, where citizens are expected to have opinions on all important questions and yet usually lack the knowledge to hold such opinions.[44] Moreover, despite the online environment now being the main (and, for the most part, readily

[42] For a characteristic assertion of such a view, see e.g. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[43] See, e.g. Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', in *The Digital Divide: Arguments For and Against Facebook Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (New York: Penguin, 2011) 63- 76
[44] Scott Blinder, 'Imagined Immigration: The Impact of Different Meanings of 'Immigrants' in Public Opinion and Policy Debates in Britain', *Political Studies* 63 (2015): 80-100, 81; see also Walter Lippmann *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

available) source of information, this lack of knowledge cannot be eliminated in the digital environment due to the prevalent tribalism and fragmentation of the public sphere, where different information communities are just shut in their hermetic silos,[45] making it impossible to get a full picture. Such fragmentation is further exacerbated by ever more fragmented media consumption and the shrinking of spaces for real interaction.[46] Indeed, social media tend to facilitate 'the dissolution of "the audience"' but, instead of creating 'dynamic, responsive and empowered publics',[47] as the optimistic narrative would have it, this fragmentation only turns social media users into relatively easy targets for well-orchestrated mimetic campaigns, ready to coalesce under well-prepared narratives.

When faced with impossible demands for mastery and coherence of information, citizens are particularly susceptible to trolls who 'create a simulacrum of public opinion'.[48] And yet, a simulacrum, as noted by Baudrillard, could well be more real than reality itself, not in terms of masking reality but by actually standing in for a reality that does not exist.[49] Essentially, a simulacrum becomes real through its own effects when people, as mentioned above, start acting as if (in this case) particular piece of information is correct, even without this information having a discernible referent in actual life. The popularisation of news, when stories are being condensed to, or even replaced by, images, easy-to-digest narratives, and scandalous instances, a trend that has been constant, albeit uneven, over the past decades,[50] has also contributed to creating a simulacra-saturated culture. When one is being fed simulacra all the time, it is extremely difficult to expect a display of critical thinking with regards to them.

Of core importance is a coherent narrative as a device that provides meaning and explanations: "[i]t describes the past, justifies the present, and presents a vision of the future".[51] Narratives 'explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests'.[52] Such

[45] White, *Digital Media and Society*, 50-54.
[46] See e.g. Todd Gitlin, 'Nomadicity', in *The Digital Divide: Arguments For and Against Facebook Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (New York: Penguin, 2011), 207-214.
[47] Rob Kitchin, Denis Linehan, Cian O'Callaghan and Philip Lawton, 'Public Geographies through Social Media', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3, no. 1 (2013): 56-72, 57.
[48] Thomas, 'Russia's 21st Century Information War', 14.
[49] See Jean Baudrilliard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[50] See e.g. Andrea Umbricht, and Frank Esser 'The Push to Popularize Politics: Understanding the Audience-Friendly Packaging of Political News Since the 1960s', *Journalism Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 100-121.
[51] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', 120.

narrative is of particular importance in the era of information overload, when our understanding of the world and its phenomena is becoming more and more muddled.[53] When faced with uncertainty, people demand 'simple stories that provide them with relevant information, talking points, and an explanation of how the topic in question fits into their worldview'; such narratives are usually also laden with value judgements.[54] These online narratives cut through the normal condition of fragmentation: mimetic representations of the socio-political environment are intended at bringing some audiences together to create a supposedly enlightened public. Hence, a concerted effort is unleashed against a fragmented landscape, which only serves to enhance the effect of mimetic warfare: any hermetic silos are just too limited and weak to provide a counterbalance to a mimetically united public.

In terms of spreading particular memes and mimetic messages online, perhaps the core difference is that between an individual-centric relation to an issue in memetic warfare and collective identification with an issue with mimetic warfare (because mimesis provides a community narrative). Those identifying with an issue individually may be numerous but, lacking the collective power of a movement, are likely to remain within the 'slacktivism' framework and are, therefore, a lesser security threat (this does not deny their usefulness in mimetic warfare as propagators of information – they are just unlikely to go beyond that). In the meantime, those possessing collective identity and conscious of their strength in numbers can be expected to be more inclined towards action outside the online environment. And at the heart of this difference is the absence or presence of a unifying narrative, which explains why and how collective action is to be taken.

Crucially, mimetic warfare operations are not always easily perceptible because the aim rarely is to openly contradict the adversary (that would require a seismic shift in public opinion, which is extremely difficult to achieve) but, building on already well-known and accepted stories, try to attach new meanings or reassign the order of values, so as to achieve a shift in opinion in the long term.[55] After all, public opinion is mostly built upon what people *think* to be the content of an issue,

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[52] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power', *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70-84, 76.
[53] Holmstrom, 'Narrative and Social Media', 121.
[54] Ibid., 121.
[55] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', 127; see also e.g. Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies', *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 637-655; James N.

a problem or a concept.[56] The mimetic emphasis on representation and imitation is particularly important when considering subtle alterations of the images and stories that people already have in mind: again, not the underlying object, not the relationship between this object and the truth claims made with regards to it, but the internal structure of the claim and its internal veritability that is at stake. As long as that internal coherence and veritability is not diminished, all other elements of a particular mimetic representation are malleable.

In fact, it is only through its accumulated effects that mimetic warfare becomes truly visible. To give an extreme example, any anti-state disturbance indicates that the national mimetic effort has already failed to reach or convince a section of the population,[57] and an enemy narrative has taken over. But the effects could easily (and more likely) be less extreme, albeit still rather clearly visible, since another target of mimetic warfare is trust – an attribute crucial to healthy societal interactions and in helping solve collective action problems,[58] openness to one's vulnerability,[59] political engagement and participation[60] and so forth – especially when it is reciprocal.[61] In its purely political dimension, trust denotes one's attitude towards the state and society.[62] Therefore, instilling distrust among different groups of the opponent's citizenry and/or between the citizenry and the government can easily be seen as a strategic aim. Once distrust is sown, it is relatively easy to pitch different groups against each other and manipulate their actions; in a similar manner, such situation creates conditions for provoking hostilities towards the state itself and/or a heavy-handed response by the state apparatus, thus further antagonising the sides. And even if an internal conflict is not provoked, once the citizens have lost trust in their state, any hostile action becomes much easier to carry out.

Druckman, Jordan Fein and Thomas J. Leeper, 'A Source of Bias in Public Opinion Stability', *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 430-454.

[56] Blinder, 'Imagined Immigration'.

[57] Warren, T. Camber, 'Not by Sword Alone: Soft Power, Mass Media, and the Production of State Sovereignty', *International Organization* 68 (2014): 111-141, 112.

[58] Marc Hooghe, Sofie Marien and Thomas de Vroome, 'The Cognitive Basis of Trust: The Relation between Education, Cognitive Ability and Political Trust', *Intelligence* 40 (2012): 605-613.

[59] Dean Lusher, Garry Robins, Philippa E. Pattison and Alessandro Lomi, ''Trust Me': Differences in Expressed and Perceived Trust Relations in an Organization', *Social Networks* 34 (2012): 410-424.

[60] Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Kristin Strømsnes, 'Inequality, Diversity and Social Trust in Norwegian Communities', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 23, no. 3 (2013): 322-342.

[61] Ryan E. Carlin and Gregory J. Love, 'The Politics of Interpersonal Trust and Reciprocity: An Experimental Approach', *Political Behavior* 35 (2013): 43-63.

[62] Erika van Elsas, 'Political Trust as a Rational Attitude: A Comparison of the Nature of Political Trust across Different Levels of Education', *Political Studies* 63, no. 5 (2015): 1158-1178.

Mimetic operations can make use of some fertile ground here. After all, the perceived image of a candidate, a party or even a country is shaped by how people feel about it, and these preconceptions are even capable of determining the perception of actual policies once they are implemented. The only thing that is needed is a particular representation of the background, the agenda and the (potential) vested interests of the government. Regardless of the underlying substance of such claims, their effect, nevertheless, depends primarily on the mimetic verisimilitude of the narrative itself. Yet again, though, a scattered approach is insufficient – one needs a coherent mimetic structure – a narrative – to provide effective explanation. For example, austerity measures affecting the benefits system can be seen as necessary and reasonable in order to tackle dependency culture or as heartless calculations of an out of touch government, intent on hurting the most vulnerable. In this case, the core determining factor is the preconception of the dominant party of the government: either as economically sound and reasonable or as only caring for the rich. Of course, politics has always been about different preconceptions. However, whereas previously that struggle was one between ideologies, i.e. people first had a preconception of what the society is and ought to be and then chose to stick with a certain party regardless of its image, the current tendency is for the party image to come first, with the actual ideological background fading away.[63] Different interpretations as to why this has been the case notwithstanding, one thing is clear: it is the 'feel good' factor that has become particularly important. And this factor can only be added or subtracted by succinctly but unequivocally explaining how and why a particular actual or desired outcome is 'right'.

Furthermore, an international aspect exists just as well, particularly since international relations, just as any other human sphere of action, is often wrought with habitual perceptions: a particular state is, for the sake of cognitive economy, automatically classified in a habitual way ('friend', 'foe', 'peaceful', 'failed' etc.) regardless of the particular situation, and these interpretive schemes are

[63] See e.g. Russell J., Dalton, 'Political Cleavages, Issues, and Electoral Change', in *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, eds. Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 319-342; Shanto Iyengar, Gauray Sood and Yphtach Lelkes, 'Affect, not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405-431; Agnieszka Walczak, Wouter van der Brug and Catherine Eunice de Vries, 'Long- and Short-term Determinants of Party Preferences: Inter-generational Differences in Western and East Central Europe', *Electoral Studies* 31, no. 2 (2012): 273-284; R. Michael Alvarez, Ines Levin, Peter Mair and Alexander Trechsel, 'Party Preferences in the Digital Age: The Impact of Voting Advice Applications', *Party Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 227-326; Margaret Scammell, 'Politics and Image: The Conceptual Value of Branding', *Journal of Political Marketing* 17, no. 1 (2015): 7-18.

deeply entrenched in the cultural patterns of the international community.[64] Consequently, it is in every state's interest to foster as favourable habitual associations as possible. Otherwise, even sensible actions of the state can be misinterpreted because of the negative baggage trailing from the past. As a result, the aims are to sway the target audiences and alter their cognitive schemes so that what a country does is interpreted favourably,[65] to retain a positive image, or to reshape what is considered to be a stigma.[66] Correspondingly, mimetic warfare is intended not on hindering such efforts by the target state but also on actively degrading its reputation.

Finally, thinking beyond a particular state, one could turn to a regional dimension. If regional cooperation is to be successful, several things are needed: first, a shared framework of values that are perceived as both authoritative and worth being preserved and promoted; second, a spirit of solidarity and trust between the states in the region. Both of these are based on narratives: who we are, what we stand for, what our shared (national or supranational) history, identity and destiny are, what common rituals, symbols and taboos we observe etc. If the mimetic representations of these imagined (national or supranational) communities are in place, it could be reasonably expected that successful interaction and cooperation would prevail. However, if such representations fail and/or counter-representations, disparaging the importance of shared values or sowing distrust among partner states take hold, effective joint effort is unlikely. Hence, the regional dimension is yet another battlefield of mimetic warfare: whoever controls the representations of whatever is shared within that particular region can legitimately lay claim to overall dominance, either actual or, as yet, potential.

A call to mimetic arms

Starting from the final passage of the previous part, it is evident that the shared values and the spirit of cooperation among the trans-Atlantic community have to be actively preserved. To reiterate, mimetic warfare is not necessarily about rescinding one's own state and its independence (although, in some instances, this might be the case) or rejecting democracy or freedom of speech. However, it

[64] Ted Hopf, 'The Logic of Habit in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 539-561.
[65] Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 'Strategic Narrative'.
[66] Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society' *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 143-176.

might well be about values not being worth fighting for, induction of a sceptical or ironic attitude towards any value systems, refutation of European or trans-Atlantic solidarity and so forth. In the era of mimetic warfare, it is not enough to simply expect these values to be sufficiently self-evident to everyone so as to remain dominant without additional effort. Also, since mimetic representation is primarily concerned with its internal coherence and verisimilitude and not with its own relation to facts, mere provision of a counterbalance or of a 'more correct' interpretation is not sufficient either: it is the appeal and explanatory power of the particular narrative that determines success. As a result, it must be argued that it is vital for Western governments and NATO itself to get involved in active mimetic operations that are directed, first and foremost, internally, i.e. at the home audiences.

The West already begins from a position of relative weakness. Whereas, for example, Russia's information warfare doctrine employs 'a combination of propaganda, deception, and an intent to destabilize adversary societies', the West is still struggling 'to find "appropriate uses" for strategic communications'[67] – and that is the West's core weakness, not only abroad but also domestically. There is a need for a counter-effort: precisely not destabilisation, but its opposite: stabilisation and maintenance, in conjunction with promotion. Citizens have to be (re)convinced about the narrative that holds the West, as a community, together, and those already (or still) convinced have to be reassured in the face of competition. In this sense, the 'home front' is perhaps the most crucial battleground, since no adversary can be successfully engaged without initially winning here. And that involves struggles against both state and non-state adversaries.

Indeed, a proper question to be asked is, then, 'Why aren't we trying it?'[68] since an aggressive and well-orchestrated strategic communication effort would help to not only protect but also proactively promote the Western national and regional security effort.[69] After all, *some* narrative always must exist, and if one side fails to provide an adequate explanation, some other side will.[70] One reason why there is not enough (if any at all) effort to embrace social media warfare, either memetic or mimetic, is the absence of conceptual grounding among Western states – and that includes the

[67] Thomas, 'Russia's 21st Century Information War', 25.
[68] Giesea, 'It's Time to Embrace Mimetic Warfare', 69.
[69] See e.g. Kalev Leetaru, 'A Few Good Internet Trolls', *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2015 http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/14/islamic-state-twitter-recruiting.
[70] Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', 121.

absence strategic military thinking – with regards to social media[71] (but also, perhaps, the media more generally, because mimetic warfare waged only on social media would fail to achieve its full potential). Then, there are the ethical challenges pertaining to both the content of messages being spread[72] and, more broadly, to state-sanctioned manipulation of public perception being carried out in the first place. And yet, there is always a trade-off: just like in the debate between privacy and national security, information neutrality versus national security is a difficult call to make. However, when facing an adversary who is not intent on making such distinctions and on pondering on them for long, security should be given priority. Moreover, it is already generally accepted that states can, and even have to, build their soft power and brand appeal both abroad and domestically.[73] Involvement in mimetic operations would only take the same logic one step further.

Moreover, while offensive mimetic warfare would certainly require more extensive justification, operations directed at the home audience should be properly seen as proactive self-defence. After all, the domestic population is already a battleground anyway – it is only a matter of engaging an adversary in that already existing battleground. Moreover, there is also some distance to be held. While covert mimetic efforts may come from particular states (or, perhaps, NATO itself), the development of an overt and widespread campaign is neither likely nor productive. In fact, open and active government involvement would do little beyond arousal of suspicion. Instead, overt mimetic effort should involve provision of a basic narrative and enlisting of private sector

[71] Giesea, 'It's Time to Embrace Mimetic Warfare', 70.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Among the most recent studies of soft power, see e.g. Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti, 'Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and Football's 2022 World Cup Finals', *Leisure Studies* 34, no. 6 (2015): 703-719; Kingsley Edney, 'Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China', *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 259-272; Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan and Barrie Houlihan, 'Interrogating States' Soft Power Strategies: A Case Study of Sports Mega-Events in Brazil and the UK', *Global Society* 29, no. 3 (2015): 463-479; Watanabe Yasushi and David L. McConnell (eds.) *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Aakriti Tandon, 'Transforming the Unbound Elephant to the Lovable Asian Hulk: Why is Modi Leveraging India's Soft Power?', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 105, no. 1 (2016): 57-65. On nation branding, see e.g. Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen and Henrik Merkelsen, 'The New PR of States: How Nation Branding Practices Affect the Security Function of Public Diplomacy', *Public Relations Review* 38, no. 5 (2012): 810-818; Andrew Graan, 'Counterfeiting the Nation? Skopje 2014 and the Politics of Nation Branding in Macedonia', *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2013): 161-179; Ulla Hakala, Arja Lemmetyinen and Satu-Päivi Kantola, 'Country Image as a Nation-Branding Tool', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 31, no. 5 (2013): 538-556; Christopher S. Browning, 'Nation Branding, National Self-Esteem, and the Constitution of Subjectivity in Late Modernity', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11, no. 2 (2015): 195-514; Ruben Bagramian, Mine Ucok Hughes and Luca M. Visconti, 'Bringing the Nation to the Nation Branding Debate: Evidence From Ukraine', in *Thriving in a New World Economy*, ed. Kirk Plangger (Heidelberg and New York: Springer, 2016); Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

organisations (both for-profits and NGOs) for the actual communication work. At least in audience perceptions (and that is an added mimetic layer), the campaign has to be as much about grassroots initiative as possible. And this outsourcing could just as well be seen as removing one of the burdens and limitations that governments would otherwise have in engaging in proactive mimetic self-defence.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a mimetic approach to analysing weaponised information online and proactive approach to self-defence of the 'home front'". An emphasis on mimesis enriches the analysis of weaponised social media through revealing the centrality of essentially and unavoidably contestable representational structures through narratives capable of explaining the world and inspiring action.

Crucially, the mimetic opponents involved in promoting certain images, associations and narratives moulding the perceptions of target populations according to particular interests and aims. In this way, (self-)presentation becomes a permanent campaign in which every action and decision contributes, either positively or negatively, to the loyalty and support of the domestic and foreign audiences. The advent of the social media has even further strengthened the trend and added new challenges: since content is now largely socially generated, online communities have become especially powerful – if not central – creators (and, simultaneously, consumers) of the mimetic representations concerning factual (or fictional) events, trends and values pertaining to a particular state or an entire region. And that active creativity can readily be used as a weapon. Hence, it is of particular importance to prevent an adversary from gaining momentum.