

From Print Propaganda to Meme Activism:  
The Evolution of Graphic Communication and its  
Effect on Socio-Political Climates and Methods of Activism

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## **Abstract**

This project will assess mediums of communication used to create and spread political propaganda, namely from print to digital. The development of graphic communication may provide interesting correlation of how values and ideas are visually represented in society and how the people have reacted to shifting politics. This project is inspired by the recent political climate in the United States, and the continuous impact the media has on the public throughout the many visual forms of communication. Inspiration is also drawn from the advancement of technology in the graphic communication industry. This allows for greater ease of access for the public to create a variety of content—leading to the birth of the internet meme.

Thus, people may be more likely to engage in the phenomenon of participatory media, in which individuals engage in political discourse through their desired means of communication on social media. The purpose of this study is to consider the methods that socio-political discourse is extended through social media, and how these means contribute to the reaction to social issues and political alignment which results in activism.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Project**

The advancement of technology affects a shift in trends year after year. And with every era, the global socio-political climate and the world's leaders shift. For ideas and values to gain momentum, they were most likely aided by forms of public relations, advertising, or marketing. For people who live and base their decisions and biases on what they see or read, graphic communication proves to be the most effective means of spreading messages. Taking these ideas into consideration, a hypothesis develops: Does the evolution of graphic communication influence the growth of political thinkers, sharers, and activists?

#### **Significance of the Project**

Almost all industries are impacted by graphic communication. The industry of politics is not an exception. Typically, the idea of propaganda is smeared with bold art-deco pieces emblazoned with red and black with bold, san-serif typeface to intimidate the audience. Yet all forms of communication that sway an audience politically or socially can be considered propaganda by definition, and it is up to the viewer to decide whether they shall be swayed, based on the actions of the candidate or organization (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

Today, as the United States experiences chaos in the media and with so-called fake news, it is a wonder if this mass media communication chaos reflects how societies

have felt about their leaders in the past (Carson, 2017). Perhaps this chaos ensued because of the massive development in our media technologies, which give journalists and public relations experts easier access to spread propaganda. Regardless, if there is some relationship between the design of, application of, and reactions to political propaganda to the way the public truly feels, there is a lesson to be learned.

### **Interest in the Project**

The author would like to know whether the advancing technology and increasing accessibility of methods of graphic communication promotes more political involvement from the public. What methods were most efficient in mobilizing social justice? Do the values of the public shift as rapidly as the exchange of information with today's technology? As a student activist outside of her academics, she has learned to apply her skills in graphic design, PR, and marketing to aid efforts in advocacy. Whether it be developing a logo for a new coalition or creating propaganda of her own to spread a specific message about the campus and administration, she fully believes it is her duty to apply her creative skills to contribute to a more just and equitable world for generations ahead. The knowledge she gains from this research will aid her in the future to help further her efforts in activism and advocacy.



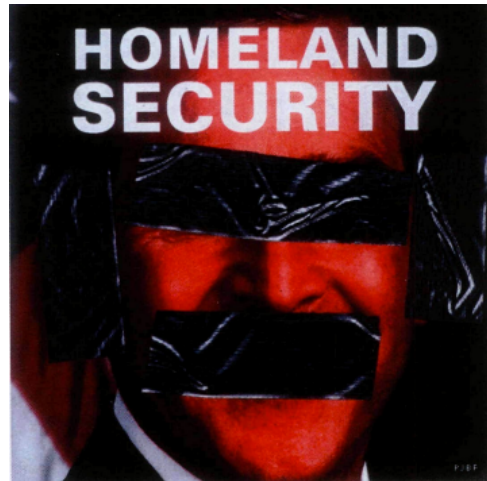
## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### What is Propaganda?

When the term “propaganda” is heard, it is often met with negative connotations of deceit and unjust manipulation to mobilize socio-political ideologies. However, *Merriam-Webster’s* 2017 definition assumes that propaganda is not inherently bad. It derives from the verb “to propagate,” meaning that propaganda can simply be a visual tool to spread ideas, theories, or values (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Any form of advertising can fairly be categorized as propaganda, so why is the term commonly associated with politics?

“Creating a sense of a common goal and mustering morale in times of war and political upheaval has proven to be one of the most powerful ways of uniting people behind an identity or ideology...this need to harness the emotions and actions of populations around the world has been transmitted, for decades, through



*Figure 1. Anonymous guerilla poster after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.*



*Figure 2. 1955, 505<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. Example of flyer/leaflet “paper bombs.”*

the enduring format of a poster” (Cottrell, 2007). *History Today* (1994) explains that the potential of political use for graphic communication wasn’t realized on the global scale until the First World War. The term was first coined around this time, defining the multitude of military recruitment posters and advertisements against the enemies.

In “The Art of Lying” (2013), author Steven Heller describes propaganda as “subversive storytelling,” further citing Edward Bernays, the father of American public relations, who described it as, “[t]he conscious and intelligent manipulation of...habits and opinions on the masses...” and that “[t]hose who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute...the true ruling power of our country” (Heller, 2013). Using deep analyses of a selection of five images (see Figures 1–3, 7–8) used to propagate political agendas in history, Heller presents a strong foundation arguing the power of visual communication to influence culture, politics, society, and beyond.



**Figure 3.** 2002, “Propagandists promoting the idea that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling lethal weaponry” (Heller, 2013)



**Figure 4.** Example of North Korean propaganda poster. Translated: “Let’s drive the U.S. Imperialists out and reunite the fatherland

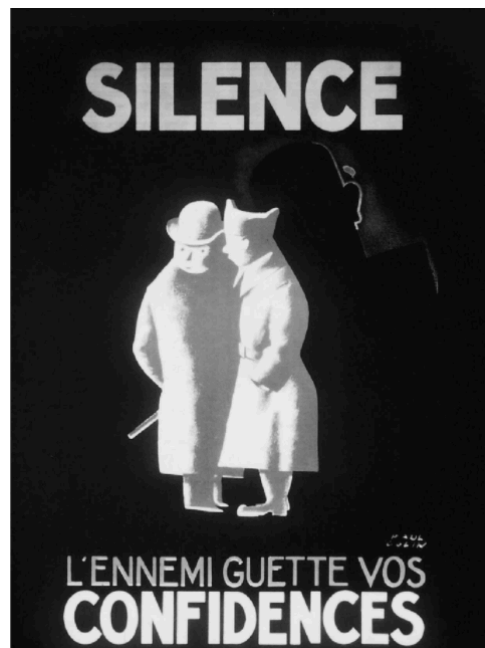
## A Brief Global History of Propaganda

This paper also touches on a brief history of propaganda in select parts of the world. North Korea uses art to “systematically ‘correct’ reality” (Jeppesen, 2014). In China, Mao Zedong stated: “...art fit[s] well into the whole revolutionary machine...” (Powell, Wong, 1997). Cubanxs used “theories of radical media and social movements” to develop their anarchist networks in the early 20th century (Shaffer, 2009). In times of crisis, propaganda was used to promote “war as the only possible response to a genocidal campaign” during the Biafran War in the late 60s (Doron, 2014).

Furthermore, perhaps the most recognizable forms of propaganda are rooted in the uprising of communism and fascism in Eastern and Western Europe. Author Victoria E. Bonnell analyzes Stalinist political art in “The Peasant Woman in Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s,” specifically how women are depicted in Russian propaganda as “larger than life,” resisting to the patriarchy as she journeys to



**Figure 5.** 1930, Poster by Vera Korableva. Translated: “Come, Comrade, Join Us in the Collective Farm!”



**Figure 6.** 1940, Paul Colin. Translated: “The enemy is listening for your secrets.”

join the *kilkhoznita*, “a young and vigorous worker but seldom a mother” (Bonnell, 1993). In mid-19th century France, the paramount impact of propaganda was recognized in that Frenchmen generally had the freedom of press, “that complete liberty was not possible with ‘drawings,’ for they could ‘incite to action” (Weltz, 2000). The power of print and visual media certainly was realized on an international scale.

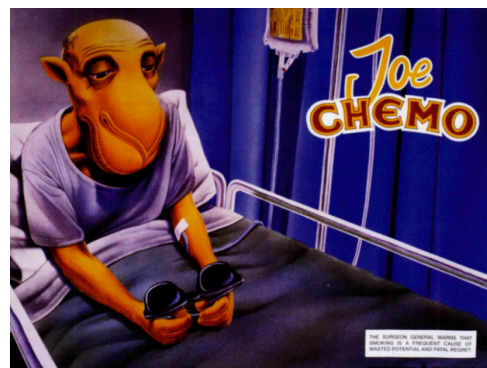
### **A Deeper Look at Propaganda in United States History**

It is indisputable that Uncle Sam dominates the minds of those who think about “American Propaganda.” From Political campaigns to recruitment to general consumerism, the United States’ capitalistic society has allowed for propaganda to be innumerable prevalent in the daily lives of civilians for as long as history can show.

Politically charged propaganda has a history of manipulating the consumer beyond stimulating the economy. In “Less Sugar, More Warships,” the author discusses the impact of food-related marketing used as a propagating tool to antagonize other countries in the World



*Figure 7. “With America at war with Japan...propagandists [drew] portraits of monstrous creatures void of human emotion but full of lust for American’s blood” (Heller, 2013).*

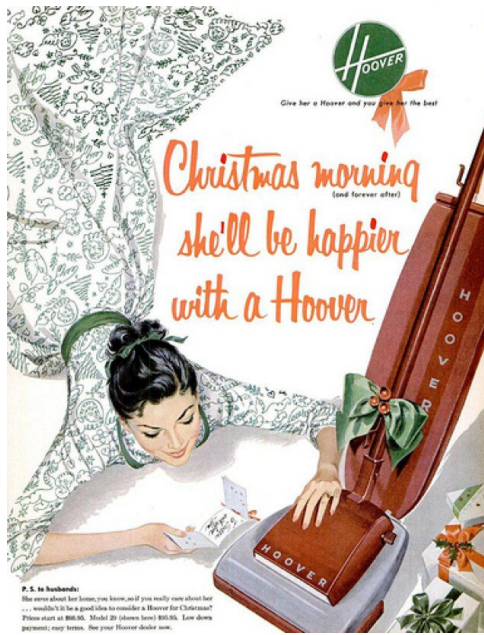


*Figure 8. Propagandists turn the pro-cigarette narrative on its head using Old Joe, the original Camel cigarette trademark.*

War I. For example, particularly patriotic Americans showed outrage in the “French” of “French fries and French toast,” thus prompting Thomas Jefferson “to be the first individual to refer to them as ‘potatoes, fried in the French Manner’” which gained momentum in small, conservative towns (Tunc, 2012).

Regarding consumerism, “10 Shade Origins of Consumerism in the U.S.”

questions and critiques the progress from “a nation founded on Puritan, non-materialistic



**Figure 9.** “Early advertisers understood the only way to keep consumers buying was to ensure they were never wholly satisfied” (Grant, 2013).

tenants” to a country that occupies about 30% of the world’s consumer market (Grant, 2013). The author devises their argument into ten tenets: Edward Bernay’s theory on propaganda, the marketing and advertising industry’s link with the Government, the shift from viewing Americans as civilians to consumers, the development of public relations, the intentional manipulation of messaging to keep consumers “unsatisfied,” the hyper-prioritizing of profit, the similarly absurd prioritizing of the “Elite,” the illusion of equating democracy with consumption, the never-ending

alignment of corporations and their collaborative effort to exploit the proletariat, and, finally, the deception of sustainability with “installment plans” (Grant, 2013).

Undoubtedly, the inherent undertone of politics in the conception of contemporary propaganda confirms the use by and for politicians. Dr. Steven A. Seidman’s article, “Studying Election Campaign Posters and Propaganda” elicits a wider

depth of understanding how “propaganda has been used to influence public opinion” (Seidman, 2008). The author’s study draws multiple conclusions. First, the most effective campaigns have themes—in other words, a slogan that sticks. Second, negative or critical advertising has not been proven to consistently to do more harm to either the target or the candidate responsible. Another conclusion, perhaps the most relevant conclusion to particularly draw from the 2016 election, propaganda’s main purpose is to elicit emotional reactions (i.e. “fearmongering”). Unfortunately, though it would arguably be idyllic to operate society based on ethical and logical opinions of the public, history has shown that knee-jerk, emotional reactions of those in the grassroots and those in power affect decision making.

### **Critical Insight on Digital Media Usage for Political Campaigns**

The inventions and innovations that lead to the development of social media play an essential role to the transfer of information nationally and globally. Considering the rapidness of communication through digital channels, political propaganda naturally took its place in the grand scheme. This also contributes to the rise of the internet meme, which is defined by *Wikipedia* as “an activity, concept, catchphrase or piece of media which spreads, often as mimicry, from person to person via the Internet;” a derivative of *memetics*—the name of the study of the evolutionary models of cultural information transfer. Here, the paper evaluates the effects of the transition from print to digital forms of propaganda. Authors of “The use of memes in the discourse of political parties on Twitter” interpret the role social media and internet memes fulfilled in the Spanish 2015 state of the nation debate: “The transition between traditional politics to social media has given rise to new spaces, forms and languages for political communication” (Martínez-

Rolán, Piñeiro-Otero, 2016). The analysis drew two trends that constructs the “manifestation and ideal of memes:” to strengthen the ideas of the preferred candidate and leader, and to criticize opposition, which was the Spanish government in this study. This conclusion solidifies the notion that internet memes are emerging as the main tool of political propaganda proliferated by individuals who participate in political involvement at the comfort of their keyboard.

### Defining Internet Memes

Richard Dawkins introduced the term “meme” which is defined by “an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). By nature, the circulation of memes depends on the topic displayed. From political scandals to an unflattering photo of a celebrity, meme creators juxtapose and remix “them to create new layers of meaning” (Huntington, 2016). Due to the prevalence of politically-themed memes across multiple social media platforms, the images are becoming an intriguing foundation for rhetorical analysis.

Limor Shifman’s argues that memes “encapsulate some of the most fundamental



**Figure 10.** “A side-by-side comparison of an image macro meme form (left) and a reaction Photoshop meme form (right) within the Pepper Spray Everything Cop meme of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Pepper Spray Cop meme based on a photo by Louise Macabitas” (Huntington, 2016).

aspects of the Internet...and of the participatory Web 2.0 culture..." in her book, "Memes in Digital Culture" (Shifman, 2013). One particular meme, borne from the Occupy Wall Street Movement, was the Pepper Spray Cop, an image from a sit-in protest at the University of California, Davis. The nonchalance of the police officer as he pepper sprays the students as he would "spraying a garden for weeds" illustrates the level of absurdity that occurs not only in the United States, but on college campuses. Accordingly, the act of meme-ing is to take a hot-button topic and reduce it to a humorous image, as displayed in Figure 10. Perhaps this phenomenon of reactions is the public's method of coping with the disturbing realities faced outside of the Internet.

### **The Development of Hashtag and Armchair Activism**

Social media invites all who have access to engage and participate in political discussions because the transfer of news and information is swift. Additionally, the importance of social media is growing as it allows for faster organizing. This leads to the rise of Hashtag and Armchair activism (Manderlink, 2015).

Prudence Cumberbatch and Nicole Trujillo-Pagán, authors of "Hashtag Activism and Why #BlackLivesMatter In (and To) the Classroom" argue the importance of how social media, specifically the propagation of "#BlackLivesMatter" and the BLM movement, "offers the immediate potential of democratizing voice." Furthermore, the authors link their findings to the importance of normalizing Armchair Activism in the classroom, to remind the students of "their ability to influence their lives by seizing their story and their voice" (Cumberbatch, Trujillo-Pagán, 2016).



Taking these findings into consideration, social media plays a very important role in mobilizing the youth to be involved in political activism to determine their future



**Figure 11.** Screenshot of Meme Generator created by Ryan M. Milner. Social media icons at the top of the window indicate ease of access between meme creation and social media.

(Terrazano, 2016).

Additionally, the accessibility of graphic communication technology for the public to generate memes invites a wave of cultural participatory media. Furthermore, the younger generation's ease of access and quick

understanding of technology will turn into forms of activism through the usage of social media and the creation of memes—today's digital propaganda. "...[M]emes...are important because social texts are the raw materials in the construction of societal discourses" (Milner, 2012). Ultimately, this paper serves as a guide to evaluate the past effects of propaganda and its everlasting role in society, as well as understand the research gathered to further analyze and forecast the digital future of propaganda which is left in the hands and control of the public, particularly in the United States.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to research the trends in political activism through methods of graphic communication, and the methods of graphic communication has on impacting socio-political climates. College-aged individuals compose a demographic that is both constantly on the internet and engage in politics, given the voting age of 18. Therefore, the survey was shared through multiple Facebook pages of a variety of U.S. college campuses to gather results from the target demographic.

### **Procedure**

Through the survey, responses will be assessed based on whether the participants recognize a change in their opinions and political views based on the variety of media used to convey ideals. This includes, but is not limited to: printed propaganda, infographics, videos of varying lengths, and internet memes. The demographics of the sample will include a diverse group of people because it is important to consider that politics affects everyone with many backgrounds.

This will also require participants to rank methods of media and decide which presents a larger influence on their views. The methods evaluated will be: typed out blogs on timelines, links to shared articles, infographics, memes, videos less than five minutes, and videos more than five minutes.

### **Analysis**

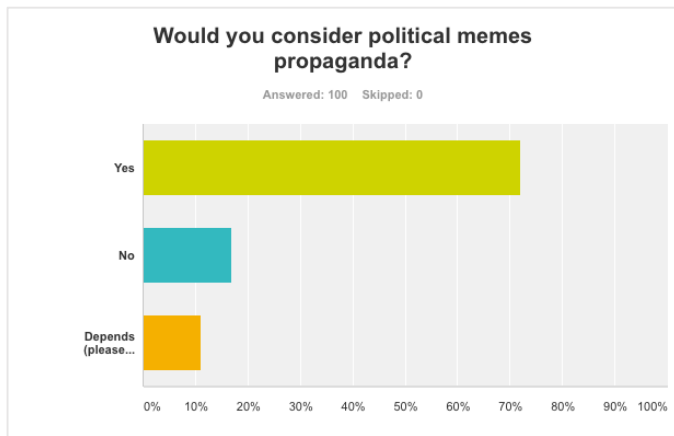
The results gathered from these surveys will contribute to understanding the impact of graphic communication methods on the ideas and values of people. Further

research will include discovering the correlation of the methods of graphic communication in junction with political candidates and parties. By evaluating the methods used by parties to gain power, it will further determine which methods are most effective. With these findings, a conclusion may be drawn to discover which method is the most effective in shaping socio-political climates.

## Chapter 4

### Results

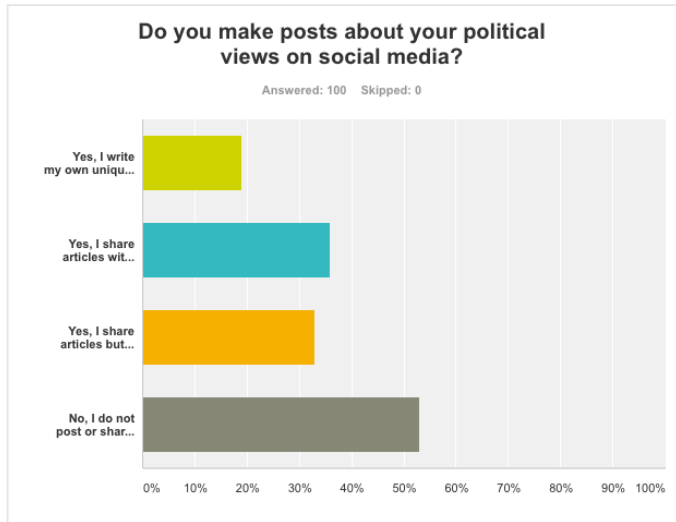
Hosted on SurveyMonkey.com, 100 responses to the survey were recorded and readily displayed in charts and tables for easy usage. At the beginning of the survey, the author provided a dictionary definition of “propaganda” and a disclaimer which read: “This survey is not indicative of the political views of the author of this survey. Furthermore, no matter what they are, your political views have more than likely been represented by propaganda, so remove any negative connotation you have associated with the word.” The following chapter discusses the results of each question presented in the survey.



*Figure 12. Question 1:  
Would you consider political  
memes propaganda?*

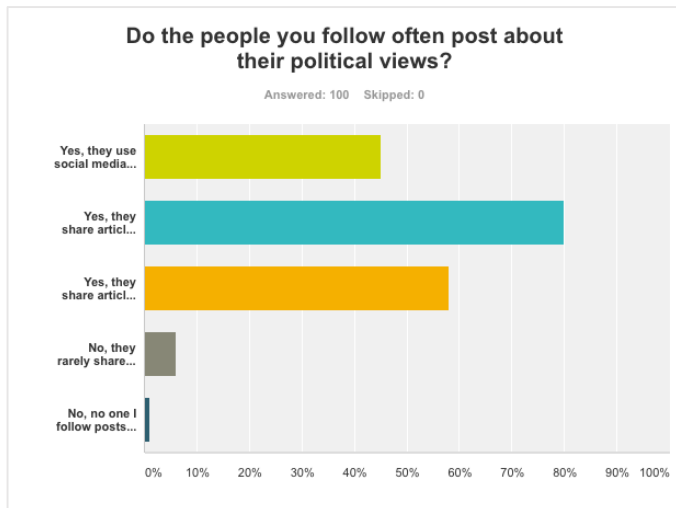
The survey began with a very broad question as to whether the respondent considered politically-theme memes as a form of propaganda. A heavy majority of respondents replied “yes” to the question. Others provided explanation as to the specifics of political memes and propaganda. According to one person’s response, “Memes are not always propaganda. Sometimes, they are a medium for propaganda, other times, they are

just memes.” Many respondents mentioned the intent of the meme creator. Others said that political memes are not propaganda if they do not focus on an individual political party. However, this response begs the question: does an image need to target specific political parties to be considered propaganda if it already involves the political sphere?



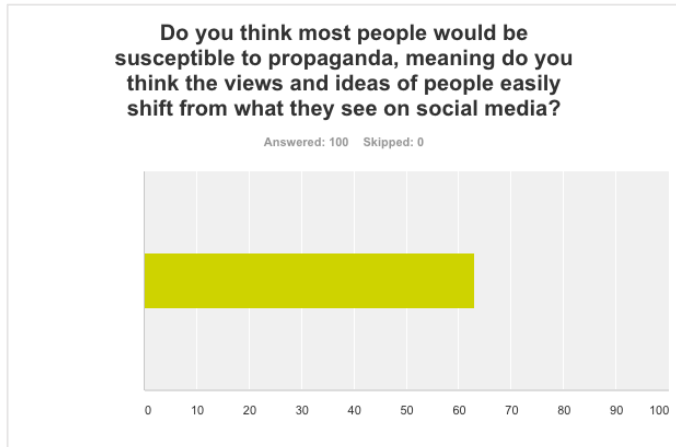
**Figure 13.** Question 2: Do you make posts about your political views on social media?

At 55%, the majority of survey takers do not post about their personal political opinions or share related articles. However, a considerable amount still share articles that align with their values.



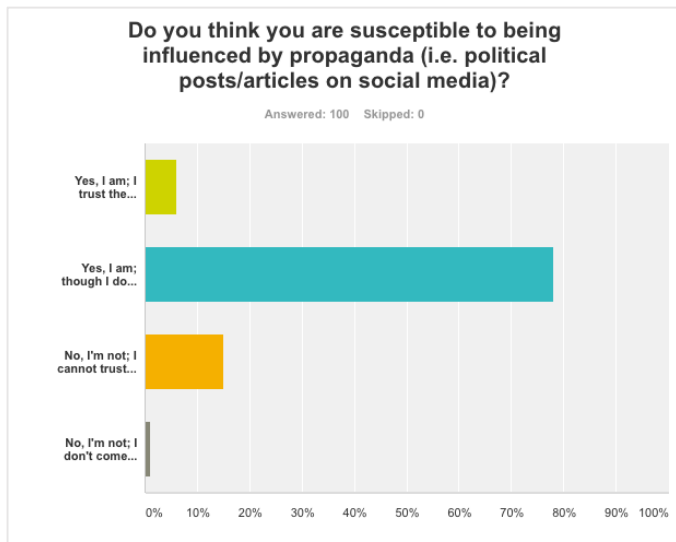
**Figure 14.** Question 3: Do the people you follow often post about their political views?

Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming majority follow other people or pages that share their political values on social media. There was only one respondent that said that no one they follow creates or shares political posts.



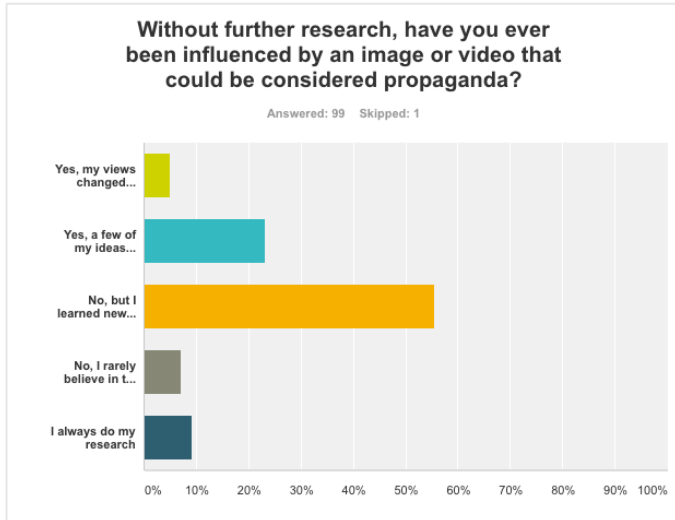
*Figure 15. Question 4: Do you think most people would be susceptible to propaganda, meaning do you think the views and ideas of people easily shift from what they see on social media?*

According to Figure 15, respondents believe that the general public are susceptible to propaganda 63% of the time. However, ten of the responses rated that people are influenced 100% of the time.



*Figure 16. Question 5: Do you think you are susceptible to being influence by propaganda (i.e. political posts/articles on social media)?*

A great majority of respondents admitted to their susceptibility to propaganda, but continue to do further research to solidify their values.



**Figure 17.** Question 6: Without further research, have you ever been influenced by an image or video that could be considered propaganda?

Given the context of the previous question, the poll takers were asked if they have been influenced without doing their own external research. The majority responded that they had not been influenced without research, but they gained knowledge at the very least. In addition to this question, they were prompted to answer what they particularly learned about.

Kony 2012 Chemtrails Racial Superiority  
5/10/2017 5:49 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

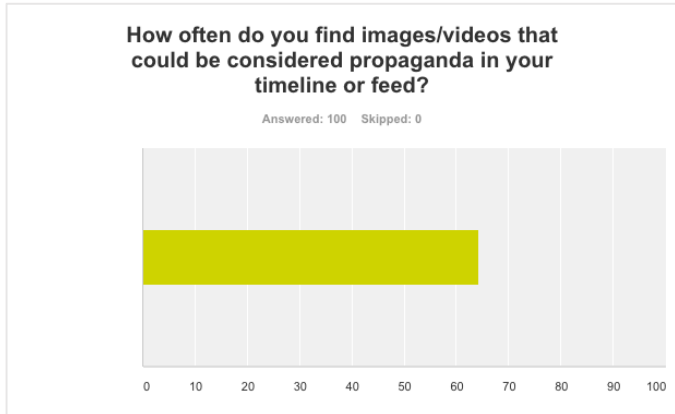
I watch VOX videos sometimes about Trump  
5/10/2017 5:48 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

I've seen memes parodying political candidates that have weakened my view of them, as well as memes in support of political candidates that have strengthened my support  
5/10/2017 5:04 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Rarely believe what's in the media  
5/10/2017 4:40 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

One example was seeing an illustrated image of an abortion with the purpose of (assuming) criminalizing planned parenthood (or other pro-choice orgs). My position did not change, but I feel that I understood the opposition (and perhaps their fallacies) more. If anything, seeing propaganda solidified my position.  
5/10/2017 2:23 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

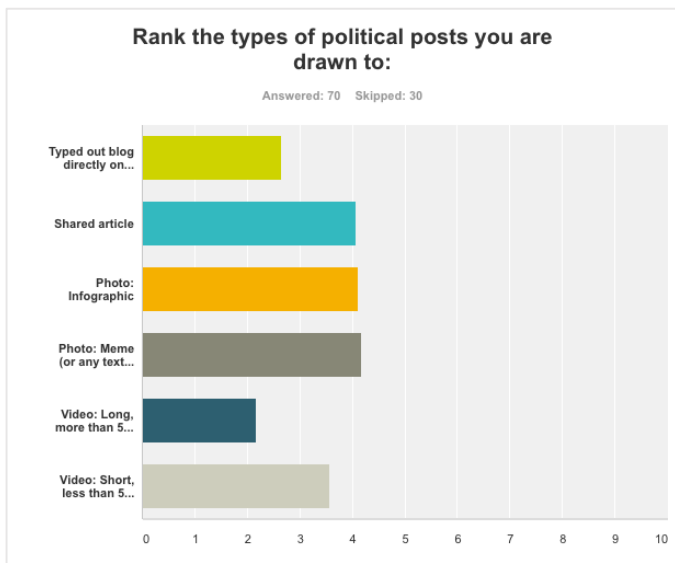
**Figure 18.** Examples of answers regarding the topic of the propaganda respondents came across.



**Figure 19.** Question 7: How often do you find images/videos that could be considered propaganda in your timeline or feed?

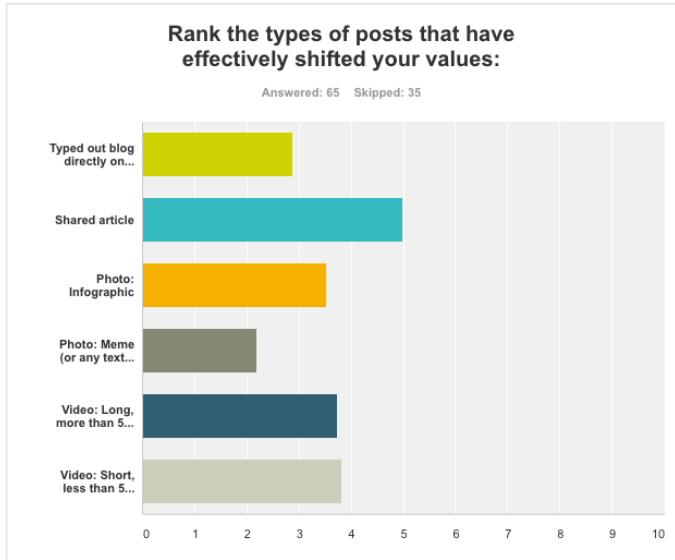
On average, respondents come across some form of propaganda in their timeline or news feed 64% of the time.

The rest of the survey required the poll takers to rate various forms of propaganda on digital media. These forms include: blogs which are typed out directly onto a timeline, shared articles (which are typically represented with a single image and headline), infographics, meme images, and videos, specifying long (greater than five minutes) or short (less than five minutes).



**Figure 20.** Question 8: Rank the types of political posts you are drawn to.





*Figure 21. Question 9: Rank the types of posts that have effectively shifted your values.*

Figures 20 and 21 display the effectiveness of each method of graphic communication, the former addressing which draws the most attention and the latter showing what method is the most effective in shaping values. According to the results, memes are effective in drawing immediate attention, however participants answered that they are the least effective in influencing opinions. Predictably, the most influential method are links to shared articles due to the amount of content included in them.

The tenth and final question of the survey asked: “If any, what other methods of communication have shifted your political views?” The poll takers offered a variety of answers from communication with family and peers, academic settings, and documentaries. However, a considerable number of respondents left their answer blank. Perhaps this is indicative of whether they rely solely on social media for their political information.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

#### **Survey Analysis**

Figure 13 shows that most respondents do not share their political opinions on their social media accounts. However, the overwhelming results shown in Figure 14 proves that the advent of social media contributed to the rise of creators or sharers of content that reflect their socio-political values. Regardless of the participant's involvement in political discourse on social media, their responses indicate that most people are involved.

The results from Figures 16 and 17 show that even when the participants admit that they are susceptible to propaganda, a heavy majority do external research before they allow their opinions to be influenced or shifted. Thankfully, this is also due to the advancement and accessibility of technology and the internet. Not only do college students have access to create their own content to spread their values, they also use the internet to its full advantage to gather more information to sculpt an educated opinion. This statement is reflected in Figure 21, where the most influential method of communication is the one with the most written content.

#### **Internet Drawbacks: Hostility Borne from Anonymity**

Fascinatingly, a couple respondents provided negative—nearly hostile—comments on the survey. For example, the first question of the survey was supposed to have a screenshot of the Google search for “political meme” to allow participants to have a better idea of what the survey is about. However, without the author's knowledge, the

link to the image was broken for several of the poll takers. One respondent commented on this error with the following:

Your image is broken, you pseudo-intellectual hack. How about trying to provide a bit of economic opportunity to some poor minority and hiring him to proofread your work first.

Another participant wrote the same comment in two portions of the survey telling the author to simply, “[f]ind a different thesis.” This is a result of the culture created by the accessibility and anonymity of the internet.

Internet memes serve as a humorous vehicle for which creators can communicate a variety of messages. Interestingly, the merging of memes and politics produces a unique—yet wide—audience that is either looking for entertainment, political commentary, or both. It represents a fusion between the realities of state of the nation and a phenomenon that began as light-hearted, humorous imagery. Additionally, the act of participatory media and political meme creation is nonpartisan, which explains the vastness of the audience and variety of participants who hold values from every corner of the socio-political gamut. Furthermore, the ability of anonymity on social media allows for the spread of the wide variety of values, which explains the hostility presented in the survey.

### **Continuing the Future of Participatory Media and Activism**

Regardless, the evolution of graphic communication serves as an invitation for people to involve themselves in cultural participatory media, whether it be through creation or sharing of images, videos, and other forms of content. “Memes perform a connective action for ‘citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while

maintaining their sense of individuality” (Huntington, 2016). It is no mistake that propaganda now floods the feeds and timelines of many social media users, and, according to the respondents, it is easily recognizable. As print propaganda was used to mobilize those who saw the posters on the streets, digital propaganda, with the advantage of ease of creation and audience reach, is a powerful tool to mobilize and organize today’s people.

To avoid the dominion of the authoritarian and—as some would say, fascist (Chotiner, 2016)—government the United States is facing and to uphold the democratic system, the power of the people must be maintained. The internet became a means of retaining that power. Through cultural participatory media, armchair activism, and other methods of sharing socio-political discourse, social media is a powerful tool accessible for the public to use and organize to rise against oppression. During these times, “Love Trumps Hate” is a common narrative used to retain optimism to endure the state of the nation. However, the United States has a history of dissent and resistance from the Revolution to the Civil War. Love cannot trump hate, collective action will.

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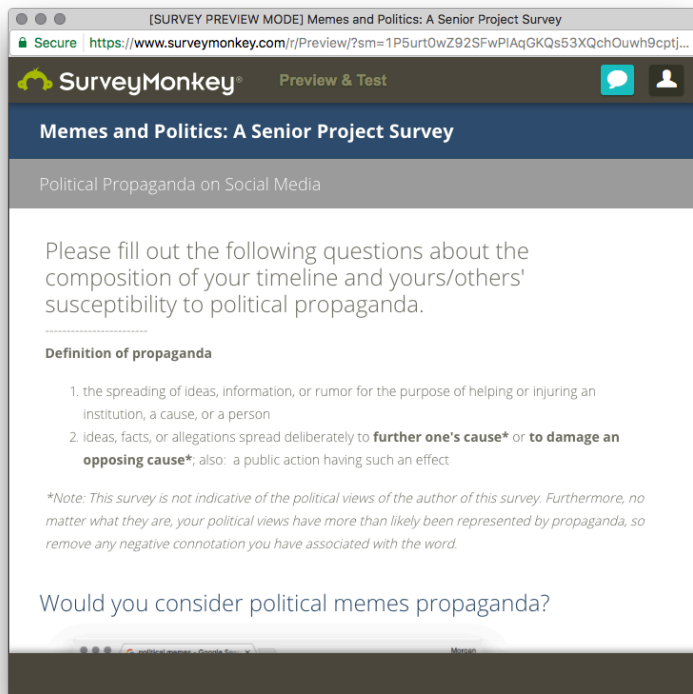
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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Sample Survey Questions

- Do you make posts about your political views on social media?
- Do the people you follow often post about their political views?
- How often do you find images/videos that could be considered propaganda in your timeline or feed?
- Have you ever been influenced by an image that could be considered propaganda?
- Do you think you are susceptible to being influenced by propaganda?
- Do you think most people would be susceptible to propaganda?

### Appendix B: Survey Link



<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KSSM69S>