

ARTIGOS DOSSIÊ

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Beyond Western cynicism: American Cognitive Warfare through an anti-hegemonic lens

ABSTRACT:

The Mainstream accounts, both in the West and in parts of the Global South, consistently portray China and Russia as the principal actors behind Cognitive Warfare in contemporary conflicts (Wood and Kania, 2021; Cheravitch, 2020; VIGINUM, 2024a, 2024b; Fagins, Nacht and Chafetz, 2021). This article advances a counter-hegemonic perspective by returning to Paul Linebarger's seminal Psychological Warfare (1948) to demonstrate that the conceptual and institutional foundations of Cognitive Warfare are not foreign inventions, but deeply rooted in American strategic thought. By tracing the genealogy of Psychological Operations from their Cold War codification to their digital transformation, we reinterpret Linebarger's eight principles of PsyOps through the algorithmic infrastructures of social media. Our analysis highlights how practices such as audience targeting, emotional saturation, infrastructural control, and perpetual iteration have been rearticulated in the digital era, culminating in what we call Meta-Trumpismo: the fusion of state power with Big Tech infrastructures as a vehicle for 21st-century PsyOps. We argue that Cognitive Warfare should be understood not as an external threat but as the institutional maturity of US influence strategies, now embedded into global communication systems through the convergence of military doctrine, corporate platforms, and algorithmic governance.

Keywords: PsyOps; Cognitive Warfare; Meta-Trumpismo; BigTech; Hegemony

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INTRODUCTION

No longer confined to military handbooks or Cold War propaganda offices, PsyOps now operate through the algorithmic infrastructures of Big Tech, where state power and corporate platforms converge to engineer attention, emotion, and belief on a planetary scale. Far from being a novel or foreign threat, this fusion represents the institutional maturity of a long-standing American tradition: the normalization of psychological warfare as an indispensable instrument of hegemony.

In this article, we understand hegemony through the Gramscian perspective, where domination is never sustained by coercion alone but through the weaving of consent, cultural production, and the framing of what counts as common sense. From this angle, PsyOps are not marginal or exceptional tools but central mechanisms in the maintenance of ideological supremacy, continuously adapting to new media environments to secure legitimacy for ruling coalitions. By applying this lens, we show how Cognitive Warfare is better grasped not as an emergent disruption in global politics, but as the contemporary extension of an entrenched hegemonic strategy that fuses state power, corporate infrastructure, and elite alignment to manage perception and neutralize dissent.

By tracing this trajectory, from Linebarger's

mid-20th-century codification of PsyOps to the contemporary alignment of the Trump administration and Silicon Valley, we can understand how digital social media became not neutral spaces of debate, but strategically managed arenas of influence, where propaganda is embedded in the very architecture of communication itself. The concept of Meta-Trumpismo encapsulates this shift: an unprecedented public-private fusion through which Big Tech platforms not only facilitate but structurally entrench the logics of psychological warfare. In this arrangement, algorithms, moderation policies, and data-driven advertising models converge with state strategic objectives, making the infrastructure of everyday communication indistinguishable from the infrastructure of influence.

What was once the province of Cold War “public diplomacy” has been retooled as a global system of emotional management and perception control, where the capacity to steer attention and shape belief is concentrated in a handful of corporate-state nexuses. Situating the study of PsyOps within this continuum allows us to see digital platforms not as passive tools, but as the decisive battlegrounds of hegemony in the 21st century.

Therefore, this article aims to answer the following research question: **How have Western powers historically applied Psychological Operations, and how Psychological Operations are now operated under Digital Social Media?** To address

this, we reconstruct the genealogy of PsyOps from their codification in Linebarger's mid-century framework through their institutionalization in Cold War and post-Cold War doctrine, up to their digital reinvention in the era of algorithmic platforms. By revisiting Linebarger's eight principles of effective PsyOps and reinterpreting them through the technical and infrastructural conditions of digital media, we highlight both the continuities and the innovations that characterize contemporary Cognitive Warfare. This approach allows us to reposition PsyOps not as external disruptions or emergent threats but as historically embedded instruments of American strategic thought, now augmented by the infrastructural and analytical capacities of Big Tech. In doing so, we propose that concepts such as Meta-Trumpismo capture the structural fusion between corporate infrastructures and state power that enables modern PsyOps to operate with unprecedented efficiency and reach.

Beyond this introductory section, this article will count with further three. The next methodological section will Beyond this introductory section, this article will count with three additional parts. The next methodological section will detail our counter-hegemonic literature review and its theoretical grounding in Gramsci's concept of hegemony, clarifying how we approach doctrinal texts, academic discourse, and media infrastruc-

tures as instruments of power. Following this, the third section on genealogy will reconstruct the evolution of PsyOps, from Linebarger's 1948 codification through their Cold War institutionalization, and into their rearticulation in the digital infrastructures of the 21st century, and then revisit Linebarger's eight principles of PsyOps, interpreting their contemporary expression in digital social media. The final section will synthesize these findings to interrogate the concept of Meta-Trumpismo as the culmination of Western PsyOps doctrine, and will point toward research agendas linking elite theory, far-right studies, and the structural fusion of corporate and military power.

METHOD, CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE

In this section, we explore how the persistence of hegemonic structures after the Cold War shapes the intellectual and operational framing of Cognitive Warfare, and why a counter-hegemonic lens is necessary to reassess its genealogy. By understanding the prevailing post-1991 geopolitical order, widely perceived as an *unipolar moment* in which the United States and its allies consolidated not only military and economic primacy as well as epistemic authority over the definition and categorization of information operations, we establish the discursive environment in which Cognitive Warfare is predominantly portrayed as a threat

originating from non-Western actors, a framing that obscures its historical roots within Western - particularly American - strategic thought. Instead of accepting the prevailing narrative that allows for the retention of a moral high ground by the West, we deconstruct the intellectual foundations of hegemonic power structures, and in the scope of our research, **the assumption that the enactors of PsyOps are not North American**, challenging the mainstream narratives embedded in political, cultural and even academic discourses, understanding that while certain ideas become accepted as *common sense*, they in fact reinforce the *status quo* at the expense of non-hegemonic groups.

Methodologically, we adopt a counter-hegemonic literature review grounded in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, treating narratives and academic discourse as instruments of power that sustain the *status quo*. This approach allows us to critically interrogate the intellectual traditions, doctrinal texts, and policy frameworks that have normalized Cognitive Warfare as a legitimate tool for Western statecraft while simultaneously presenting it as an external, illiberal danger. By situating the evolution of PsyOps, from Linebarger's codification in 1948 to its digital-era adaptation through Big Tech platforms, within the continuum of domination politics, we demonstrate how Cognitive Warfare is less an emergent foreign threat than a long-standing, institutionalized practice em-

bedded in the very architecture of the post-Cold War order.

Let us, then, begin with the hegemony they built:

“The Collective West” and the hegemony they built

In order to build an *anti*-hegemonic theory, we must, first, understand the hegemony itself, and, here, Cognitive Warfare operates through the historical and structural conditions of the post-Cold War era as the terrain on which narratives are constructed, contested, and legitimized. And it is against this backdrop that the persistence of domination politics and the self-conception of the *Collective West* becomes central to understanding both the operational use and the framing of Cognitive Warfare:

In the globalized and primarily unipolar world of the past 30 years, the international political theatre could largely be characterized by the existence of a relatively stable distribution of roles among the participants of the global framework. This implied a deep level consensus, which in turn had a major influence on the paradigmatic analysis of global political activity, giving rise to opinions that even in instability, the world of the 21st century was to be seeing a gradual wane of military force, a decrease of kinetic combat and the lowest

ever risk of large-scale global conflict (Arbatov et al., 2015). This timeframe, referred to by some as an unipolar moment or as *Pax Americana* (Acharya, 2014), was initially presented to the countries of the world as a time “to live in harmony”.

And yet, the 2020s came, with various conflicts¹ either erupting or escalating. Be it in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ethiopia, Yemen, Donbass or Gaza, the so-called unipolar moment seems, instead, to be an interlude masking a continuation of competitive domination politics. The apparent stability of the post-Cold War order, thus, seems less and less a shift towards cooperative governance, than a period in which hegemonic actors reconfigured their strategies to preserve influence under changing geopolitical conditions. No, there is no cooperative governance, and this short period following the collapse of the Soviet Union is, instead, a direct continuation of the geopolitical realia of the 19th and 20th centuries, where, under the paradigm of the *domination politics*, global actors extend and maintain their hegemonic status in their respective dimensions (Dashichev, 2015).

Despite a dislike of the expression “The Collective West” and a general attribution of its use to negative Russian media (Chimiris, 2022), it is, nonetheless fairly evident that due to various reasons, be it economic, cultural, political or otherwise, there is a fundamental set of values that fa-

cilitate a cohesion between countries that are *believed* to represent it. One of the ideas embedded in the term is the perceived alignment and synchronicity amongst countries that believe themselves as a part of the West, especially as they understand that these shared patterns make them a part of this distinct community and their historical and ideological foundation (Bavaj, 2011). Additionally, the notion of a collective West is also tied to a resolute commitment to superiority - especially moral superiority.

This, of course, has already been discussed at length in various critical literature, namely through the “*the West vs. the Rest*” dialectic, by which this perceived Western “universalism” may, instead, be arrogance, aggressive interference, prescriptive attitude, or outright imperialism (Huntington, 1996). Indeed, even materials that are historically associated with various reconceptualizations of European ideals often include traces of this, reflected in the “*civilization vs. barbarism*” narratives seen in the political discourse of the 19th century (Hugo, 1914) or even direct announcements of European superiority followed by the notion that the USA is a European nation in a different political environment (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1924). And while the “Collective West” expression only became known beyond the collapse of the USSR, its roots are traceable in Western Cold War era academic work, having persisted in distinguish-

ing the West as a separate entity with its own operational contour.

Undoubtedly, the most significant Western geopolitical actor of the 20th century is the USA, and US-based studies of the nature of international relations substantially advanced the complexity of the concept. Notably, Hans Morgenthau's (1948) political realism and the concept of national interest rose in 1948 alongside Linebarger's fundamental work on systematizing PsyOps as an independent concept in offense and defense, establishing moral dimensions: the shifts from aristocratic monarchist governments towards collective governments would have led to the loss of moral content in political action as morality was the realm of the individual.

The concept of Hegemony as the foundation for Counter-Hegemonic Analysis

This study is a counter-hegemonic literature review rooted in Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Voza and Ligori, 2017) which emphasizes that dominant groups maintain power not just through force, but through the manipulation of cultural and ideological forms. This interlinkage of domination politics (Acharya, 2014, Dashichev, 2015), shared ideological alignment under the notion of a "Collective West" (Bavaj, 2011, Huntington, 1996), and the codification of psychological influence

strategies (Linebarger, 1948, Goodwin, 2007), to be explored in the coming section, forms the conceptual bridge to our own analytical approach, as it is within this historically consolidated power structure that Cognitive Warfare narratives must be situated and critically assessed.

Cognitive Warfare, Disinformation, and PsyOps are framed in Western intellectual traditions, notably in the USA, and the global conformity to this trend (Wood and Kania, 2021, Cheravitch, 2020) has led to the rise of persistent attribution, whereby even the Global South often points to Russia and China as the primary perpetrators of global Cognitive Warfare through social media manipulation and information control (Wood and Kania, 2021, Cheravitch, 2020). These narratives depict the West (primarily the US, Europe and NATO-aligned powers), as defenders of the democratic global order and a "civilized" and unipolar way of life, while portraying non-Western powers as disruptors.

Moreover, we may observe how the fusion of Big Tech and the Trump government further institutionalizes Cognitive Warfare as conglomerates like Meta, Google, and Twitter/X become integral to shaping public perception, with tech platforms amplifying narratives that align with state interests. The rise of *Meta-Trumpismo*², exemplifies how right-wing populism uses social media to manipulate emotions and polarize opinions beyond

local territories, with the Big Tech providing the toolset for ongoing PsyOps, especially in disputed regions like the Global South. This is particularly troublesome when observed through the thesis that the methods used by the USA in PsyOps are not fundamentally different from those of Nazi propaganda (Goodwin, 2007), especially regarding emotional manipulation, enemy demonization, and public perception control (Goodwin, 2007) - which, to an extent, explains why the extreme right in Latin America adheres so easily to pro-USA narratives³.

In this sense, the infrastructure and principles established during the mid-20th century did not dissolve with the Cold War's end; they were adapted, scaled, and embedded into the digital architectures of the 21st century, where private technology conglomerates now serve as both operational platforms and strategic amplifiers of state-aligned narratives. The very architecture of influence forged in the mid-20th century and rooted in US strategic thought, moral exceptionalism and the codification of PsyOps has endured by adapting to the political economy of the post-Cold War order. The persistence of domination politics, reinforced by the ideological cohesion of the so-called Collective West, ensures that Cognitive Warfare today is not an aberration or a novel invention, but the contemporary expression of long-standing mechanisms for sustaining hegemony un-

der shifting geopolitical conditions.

And, with the growing integration of dominant technological capabilities and American state power, the hegemonic system that shapes ideological alignment and value systems to ensure entry points into other nations' political discourses and controls political discourse has been reinforced, and, as a result, Cognitive Warfare has become the USA's most strategic tool⁴.

This literature review, therefore, is not just an academic exercise but also a call for political intervention. In our analysis of the origins and institutionalization of PsyOps by the USA, we challenge the simplistic, and yet hegemonic view of Cognitive Warfare as a foreign, non-Western threat, and, instead, prove that these tools of psychological manipulation and perception control are the result of decades of American military doctrine, which traces back to the study of enemy propaganda and its adaptation by the USA during and after the Cold War, domination politics and the adoption of the "Collective West" notion as a legitimizing factor that frames US-led strategic influence as both morally justified and necessary for the preservation of a so-called democratic and harmonious world order.

And so, by applying Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Voza & Ligori, 2017) to the historical arc outlined above we reinterpret Cognitive Warfare not as an emergent non-Western tactic, but as a

rebranded, deeply institutionalized feature of Western statecraft.

Finally, it must be mentioned that though the USA military doctrine dictates that PsyOps might only be employed outside of its own territory, in practice, the boundaries have become increasingly blurred as, with the rise of Big Tech, these techniques have found their way into domestic political arenas, shaping Public Opinion and influencing elections. Regardless, this shift showcases how Cognitive Warfare has evolved into a tool not just for foreign manipulation, but also for controlling narratives within the USA and its allied spheres, further consolidating power and reinforcing hegemonic structures.

As Linebarger (1948) noted, information warfare is a tool for shaping beliefs, fears, and hopes to achieve national objectives. By applying Gramsci's theory of hegemony, we aim to deconstruct the ideological framework that allows the USA to retain a moral high ground by presenting itself as a defender of democracy - while simultaneously using psychological manipulation for its geopolitical goals. The counter-hegemonic approach uncovers how intellectuals and institutions in the West have normalized Cognitive Warfare as a legitimate tool for statecraft, and our chosen methodology challenges the assumptions in mainstream narratives, urging fellow academics to acknowledge that Cognitive Warfare is not a new

or foreign phenomenon employed by a supposedly undemocratic East, but a long-standing feature of American - and Western - military strategy.

Reframing the Dominant Narrative and the role of the Intellectuals

Cognitive Warfare is most often narrated through a selective lens, where Russia and China emerge as the archetypal antagonists (Cheravitch, 2020, VIGINUM, 2024a, 2024b, Fagins, Nacht, and Chafetz, 2021, Wood and Kania, 2021) accused of deploying Eastern-born disinformation, psychological manipulation, and social media influence to undermine ostensibly democratic institutions. From a Gramscian standpoint, this framing is not accidental, it legitimizes Western power and the imperative to align with the Collective West to achieve any sort of institutional stability within the global world order.

In continuity with the post-Cold War order described above, this review repositions Cognitive Warfare as an extension of American strategic thought, tracing its operational lineage from Paul Linebarger's 1948 codification through its adaptation in the digital age via Big Tech platforms. By doing so, it dismantles the binary East-West narrative, revealing Cognitive Warfare not as an emergent threat from geopolitical rivals, but as an institutionalized, decades-

old feature of US and NATO statecraft.

Thus, our objective is to reposition Cognitive Warfare as an extension of American strategic thought by tracing the evolution of PsyOps, starting with Linebarger's seminal work (1948). This historical context challenges the idea that Cognitive Warfare is a toolset that is to be associated with China and Russia, the two states that pose the biggest strategic challenge to Western influence, positioning PsyOps instead as a systematic and long-standing instrumental framework, developed and employed by the USA.

Finally, Gramsci's attributed role of intellectuals is significant to our review as they are understood not merely as passive transmitters of knowledge, but instead, as active contributors to the construction of hegemony by shaping ideas that serve the interests of the ruling class - or, in the scope of this research, Western hegemony. In the case of Cognitive Warfare, intellectuals, including military strategists, scholars, and policymakers, have played a central role in shaping how psychological operations and information control are understood, especially now in a digitally disputed public sphere, where the moral high ground is of great importance for democratic legitimacy.

This is particularly concerning when PsyOps is not being recognized as having a direct connection to eroding trust towards democracy itself. That is, when the issues of polarization, dissolution

of institutional trust, or even the growing influence of populist movements and disinformation are perceived as inherently internal, rather than as potential results of external PsyOps operations. The prevailing narrative often frames this erosion of democratic norms as a domestic threat, overlooking the ways in which Cognitive Warfare has been systematically embedded within foreign and interventionist political strategies - especially by the USA. This blind spot not only distorts the true origins of the crisis but also perpetuates a hegemonic worldview that obscures the external, structural factors driving democratic instability.

Our counter-hegemonic review challenges this monopoly over definition and legitimacy. By revisiting foundational texts, mapping the historical continuity of US PsyOps, and foregrounding non-Western paradigms as legitimate interpretive frameworks, we reframe Cognitive Warfare as an inherently American doctrine, one that has been adapted, scaled and normalized under the moral and ideological cover of the "Collective West". The intellectual double standard is visible in the dissonance between the moral outrage over the 2016 "Blacktivist" case (Muhić, 2025) and the absence of equivalent recognition for operations like Brazil's Lava-Jato (Romano, 2022), which, under the banner of Cognitive Defense, functioned in strikingly similar way.

Finally, we also call for an alternative intel-

lectual space, whereby non-Western paradigms are recognized as viable alternatives and their integration does not automatically signal the activation of anti-Western rhetoric, and where the geopolitical context of Cognitive Warfare is properly framed as an inherently American doctrine.

THINKING MODERN PSYOPS: GENEALOGY AND PRACTICES

While some contend that it is impossible for any state to achieve true global hegemony, and that the United States does not actively seek to dominate the world, particularly Europe and Northeast Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014), the reality is that Psychological Operations have never been confined by land, sea, or air. Freed from the geopolitical counterweight of the USSR, US PsyOps expanded with fewer restraints, aligning with a national interest that became increasingly global in scope.

While many will view the Cold War through the lens of the space race or its mirror reflection, the race in developing the most advanced nuclear delivery and retaliation system, PsyOps seems now to have more significance than nuclear weaponry in the paradigm of offensive realism, as they have proven to be one of the few areas where there was no evident stalemate between the US and its rival. After all, with the USSR tending to strategize

conflict in more conventional, physical terms, the US has amassed an undeniable advantage in non-conventional forms of impact, eventually leading to the claim that US soft power won the Cold War (Smirnov et. al, 2021).

In the decades since, this advantage has been amplified by the integration of new communication technologies, global media networks, and later, digital platforms, turning PsyOps from a specialized Cold War instrument into a ubiquitous tool of geopolitical competition. This transformation set the stage for their normalization in US strategic doctrine and for the continuity of their operational logic into the post-Cold War and post-9/11 eras, where they increasingly blur the lines between wartime and peacetime influence operations. Let, us, then, explore how PsyOps came to be, from the post-WWII era to today's digitalized international environment:

The genealogy of Psychological Warfare

Much of the momentum for the non-military US international political activity was forged in WWII, with great strides made in anthropological and intercultural communication studies. Linebarger's work, first published in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, has been understood as the formal crystallization of this shift: a manual that systematized influence as an operational sci-

ence, detaching it from the ad hoc improvisations of wartime propaganda and embedding it into the permanent architecture of US strategy. By codifying techniques for shaping perception, manipulating affect, and structuring narrative dominance, Linebarger translated the emotionally charged, totalizing propaganda frameworks of the Axis powers into a rationalized, exportable doctrine.

Goodwin (2007), major at the US army, observes that the differences between Linebarger's American PsyOps doctrine and Goebbels' propaganda machine are fundamentally ideological rather than operational, placing this codification in sharper relief. It suggests that the institutional adoption of psychological warfare by the United States was not about repudiating fascist techniques, but about stripping them of their original mythos and integrating their mechanics into a new strategic vision. In this vision, emotional saturation - fear, pride, humiliation, and *righteous* anger - remains the decisive force multiplier, enabling sustained obedience and cohesion under a reframed moral banner. Once embedded into the US military and diplomatic apparatus, these methods became a standing capacity: deployable in peacetime to shape perceptions, and in wartime to secure strategic advantage, without ever appearing as overt coercion.

In the seminal work "The Silent Language" by Edward Hall (1954), exposed not only the deep-

seated superiority complex guiding the conduct of US troops as they carried over the "*civilization vs. barbarism*" narrative, but also the underlying principle that communication was not to be corrected by changing the intention to influence, but rather by refining the modus operandi: success was defined as persuading the other party to act according to the communicator's will.

Pursuant to the above, the earliest uses of PsyOps in Western geopolitical efforts after WWII paid explicit attention to the role of language, both domestically and abroad. The doctrines of "containing communism" articulated by Kennan and Dulles, alongside the term "containment by deterrence", provide clear examples of *domestic* PsyOps deployed through euphemistic language. Namely, the word *deterrence* was one of the instances of the US shaping a global narrative of its moral defensive action, functioning as a narrative device that framed US military posture, even domestically, as morally superior.

As the founding father of PsyOps, Linebarger's (1948) work is referenced by most military academies and intelligence manuals as a provider of core concepts, techniques and institutional logics that inform Psychological Operations and modern Cognitive Warfare. By elevating propaganda (understood before 1948 and in the context of WWII as a mere auxiliary to kinetic combat) into formal military strategy, Linebarger argues for its

use before, during and after armed conflict. Most importantly, beyond a mere theoretical treatise, his work is a **practitioner's guide** that brings to light the facilitation of influence on opinions, emotions, attitudes and behavior of *hostile* foreign groups for the sake of achieving national goals. And, following such reasoning, **moral equaled morale**, especially for a democracy-sensitive society, meaning that **the propagandist's task was as much to erode the adversary's confidence as to bolster domestic pride in national actions**.

This trend proved highly effective. Euphemistic language became a structural tool of influence, evolving into alternative vocabularies that distinguished “good,” “democratic” Western activity as opposed to the activity of the political antagonist, the USSR. By the 1960s, “public diplomacy” emerged as a positive substitute for “propaganda” (Cull, 2006): if propaganda is the manipulation of the mind, then public diplomacy was made to appear as a mode of cooperation on equal terms – despite ultimately being deployed through the same channels for the same outcome.

Post-Cold War literature confirms this continuity: seemingly benign “cultural affairs,” such as US educational promotion activities in Leningrad, were in fact designed by the United States Information Agency (USIA) with explicitly strategic objectives: Frank Shakespeare, then director of USIA, openly stated that their mission was to “overthrow

the Soviet Union” (Richmond, 2008).

Victory, as understood by Linebarger, is not to be achieved on the ground alone. Perception and informational control are mechanisms towards sustained dominance through an open-ended, borderless and temporarily diffused theater of operations, as, in his view, war is not to be confined to the battlefield, but bled into media, language and the mental frameworks of populations. Though now it seems more obvious that controlling people's beliefs, fears and hopes is strategically decisive, his work was then revolutionary as a **systematic** understanding of propaganda as a supportive architecture to the warmachine.

In a way, Linebarger is one of Clausewitz' (2007) many heirs. War is but the continuation of politics through violent means, and PsyOps articulates the same national, or political objects through, into, during and after war. Rather than a preparatory or auxiliary domain, psychological warfare becomes a political technique in its own right, operating across the spectrum of conflict, from pre-hostility to post-occupation. It is not merely that war produces propaganda; it is that propaganda becomes a method of governing the perceptions that sustain war, legitimize it, and manage its aftermath.

Linebarger's writing acknowledges this openly. He is not concerned with normative ques-

tions of truth, nor with the moral boundaries of influence. His concern is with efficacy: how to generate compliance, fracture enemy morale, and align populations with national objectives. That instrumental rationality, deeply Clausewitzian in spirit, is what makes his work foundational not only for PsyOps, but for the modern apparatus of information power. Through Linebarger, political objectives are not just pursued by military means, but through the shaping of cognition itself, rendering psychological warfare not an exception to politics, but one of its most refined expressions.

PsyOps and Digital Connectivity

If the Cold War institutionalized PsyOps as a formal pillar of US strategic doctrine, the advent of the digital era exponentially expanded both their reach and their granularity. The same principles that guided Linebarger's mid-20th century framework (control of perception, manipulation of affect, and narrative primacy) are now embedded into the architecture of global communication systems. What once required physical presence, broadcast infrastructure, or prolonged cultural exchange could now be executed instantaneously through networked platforms that transcend borders and operate in real time. This transformation did not merely modernize PsyOps: it altered their ontology,

producing a persistent, always-on theater of influence where data analytics⁵, algorithmic curation, and targeted content delivery serve as precision instruments of psychological shaping. In this environment, the lines between propaganda, public diplomacy, and social media engagement blur, creating a strategic continuum where influence operations are no longer episodic campaigns but sustained, adaptive ecosystems of narrative control.

In this regard, the role of the Internet and the World Wide Web as an infrastructure for the conduct of PsyOps cannot be overstated and is directly reflected in the US strategic planning, as, by the late 2000s, US strategic planning had already begun formalizing the digital dimension of influence operations. In 2008, James Glassman, then US Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, introduced the concept of public diplomacy 2.0, explicitly linking Joseph Nye Jr.'s idea of soft power to the interactive potential of globally accessible, US-hosted online platforms and social media.

In other words, as recently as in 2008, the United States was already engaged in using the world wide web infrastructure for social impact. This further complicated an already complex theoretical basis for PsyOps, since online interaction is generally to offer validation - what is understood in contemporary literature as

echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017)-, thus creating the impression of user control. While the stated goal was to increase interactivity and “*reduce threats while promoting freedom*” (Glassman, 2008) - language that preserved the Cold War’s moralistic framing while adapting it to the networked age-, Internet was transformed into both a delivery system and a feedback mechanism for influence, creating digital walled gardens that simulated participatory dialogue while structurally privileging US-aligned narratives.

In this environment, Goodwin’s notion of emotional saturation becomes not just a legacy of mid-20th century propaganda, but a catalyst for digital-age PsyOps. The architecture of online interaction, driven by algorithmic curation and designed to maximize engagement, thrives on the same affective triggers that Linebarger once codified and that Goodwin (2007) identified as central to operational success. Anger, pride, fear, and humiliation are not incidental outputs; they are the primary fuels that keep users returning, posting, and amplifying. In echo-chamber dynamics, these emotions are continually reinforced, transforming fleeting reactions into sustained states of identification or hostility. This creates a closed-loop system in which emotional intensity serves both as the content and the engine of interaction, allowing influence operations to operate with unprecedented persistence, granularity, and plausible deniability.

This notion might be also understood within the framing of Public Opinion research, and the concept of *pseudoenvironment* (Lippmann, 1998), where individuals form opinions based on simplified, mediated realities rather than direct experiences, relying on stereotypes and preconceived notions to navigate the overwhelming complexity of modern political life. This phenomena is intensified in contemporary digital platforms, under the premise that Public Opinion is not formed through rational deliberation but through pre-structured societal values that are reinforced by visibility and repetition. Susan Herbst’s (2018) critical perspective adds a Marxian dimension to the notion of pseudo-environment by emphasizing how power structures and hegemonic forces control the flow of information, by all means shaping Public Opinion to maintain dominant narratives. Rather than emerging as an aggregate of freely expressed individual views, she understands Public Opinion as a curated and strategically managed product of communicative systems. The media’s role – digital or otherwise –, therefore, does not merely mirror social divisions, but functions as a constitutive agent in the reproduction and amplification of those divides, particularly within digital ecosystems.

From this point forward, online environments became not just adjunct channels but pri-

mary theaters for perception management, and the United States laid down an official plan to dedicate sizable resources to amassing civil society representation and activity (within its own civil society and others around the world) on assets hosted on US servers. And, the density of global events between 2008 and 2025 allows one to hypothesize whether the goal of using digital infrastructure in a social environment is, ultimately, consensus imitation and consensus control. This hypothesis may be partially proven by the high-octane media coverage of the alleged 2016 Russian meddling in the US elections, in which disinformation as a supposed weapon against democracy (Ross et. al., 2022), as, the same digital infrastructures that the United States used to project influence abroad could also be reframed domestically as vulnerabilities, turning foreign disinformation into both a national security issue and a domestic political tool. Competing partisan narratives, whether depicting Russia as a collapsing authoritarian regime or portraying the “Russia-collusion” investigation as a politically motivated hoax, illustrated how PsyOps logics migrated inward, shaping internal legitimacy struggles as much as foreign policy postures. Such cases can also be observed around the world (Scheglova, Gradoselskaya, Karpov, 2020).

One way or another, beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union and well into the 21st century, the US has been at the forefront of inciting global

conflict, with more than 200 military interventions around the world (CRS, 2023) and an even larger number of undisclosed clandestine operations. However, it is in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine and a continuously shifting position on Russia - that the US is demonstrating that PsyOps are all-encompassing. Global media ecosystems, algorithmic amplification, and platform moderation policies became integrated into wartime strategy, weaponizing attention flows and framing contests in real time. Here, the United States’ advantage lay not only in conventional military capacity but in its ability to mobilize transnational networks, corporate, governmental, and cultural, to align public perception with strategic objectives.

It is in this sense that the war in Ukraine also operates as a mirror to US domestic political fractures. Societies abroad, subjected to destruction and dislocation, become the backdrop for competing narratives at home: on one side, institutions such as the Center for a New American Security, aligned with the Democratic Party, depict a Russia in terminal decline, its defeat a moral imperative for the United States to secure; on the other, following Donald Trump’s re-election, the “Russia-collusion” narrative is recast as a politically engineered fraud, allegedly fabricated by a Democratic-leaning CIA and FBI to undermine a Republican president (House Permanent Select Committee on Security, 2025). These opposing frames do

more than shape public opinion, they instead signal potential realignments in the US-Russia relationship and, by extension, shifts in the broader architecture of global power.

Which is why, we claim that when stripped of the haze of its ideological self-glorification, PsyOps conducted by the Collective West or by the US independently are as real as any other tool of offensive realism used by global actors: built to serve national interest domestically and abroad, used as an instrument of political domination and completely detached from the moral plane.

Thus, we argue that alongside the perceived gradual decline in the significance of conventional weaponry, there has been a period of intense weaponization of media, internet-based infrastructures and numerous cases of PsyOps that rather indicate a development of alternative, “quiet” delivery channels, with no fundamental paradigm shift in global domination politics and a continued relevance of the offensive realism paradigm. Psyops, with the reliance upon digital infrastructure is a tool of hegemonic domination, may instead be perceived as a successful attempt at sidestepping the problematic nature of deterrence based on nuclear weaponry and filling the gap between the latter and other, less ruinous forms of mass-destruction conventional weaponry.

Yet as states grow increasingly attuned to digital sovereignty, cyber resilience, and the sub-

versive potential of hostile foreign actors, the enduring value of conventional force projection, particularly nuclear capability, remains evident. The 2025 confrontations between Pakistan and India⁶, as well as between Israel and Iran, have proven that while digital PsyOps may complement strategic aims, they do not displace the deterrent and coercive power of traditional military arsenals.

This continuum, from Linebarger’s mid-century codification to today’s digitally networked theatres, makes clear that modern PsyOps are less a novel invention than an adaptive lineage. The emotional saturation Goodwin identified, the euphemistic narrative framing perfected during the Cold War, and the structural manipulation of Public Opinion’s pseudoenvironments described by Lippmann and Herbst, all find renewed expression in the architectures of Digital Social Media. In this sense, the Linebarger canon survives not as a relic, but as a living operational grammar: its principles transposed into algorithmic recommendation systems, viral content strategies, and platform governance protocols that replicate the psychological logics of wartime propaganda under the guise of peacetime connectivity.

What follows is an examination of how the literature to date has traced this translation: mapping the doctrinal DNA of Psychological Warfare into the mechanics, affordances, and rhetorical economies of contemporary digital influence.

The Eight Principles of Effective Psychological Operations in the current Digital Social Media environment

Linebarger understands eight principles for effective PsyOps. They are as follows:

First, the setting of a **clear strategic objective**. Objectives are determined at the highest levels of policy, then embedded within the linguistic, emotional, and technological architectures that carry the message. Whether framed as *containment*, understood as the strategic objective of halting Soviet geopolitical expansion into a doctrine with both military and psychological dimensions; *deterrence*, operationalized the same aim by projecting credible threats (military, economic, or reputational) that would preempt adversary action without direct confrontation; and *public diplomacy* and *freedom promotion*, using moral universals to legitimize interventions and align global opinion with US strategic imperatives and promoting ostensibly egalitarian language, making influence operations more palatable to foreign publics while preserving their underlying purpose; the strategic throughline remains constant: **to shape the adversary's will and the public's perception until both conform to American interests**.

Second, **the audience must be precisely targeted**. For Linebarger, the success of any psychological operation depends on a granular un-

derstanding of the audience's cultural codes, fears, aspirations, and internal divisions. In the Cold War, this meant differentiating between Soviet leadership, satellite-state elites, and the broader populations under their influence, crafting messages calibrated to each group's vulnerabilities and potential levers of persuasion. In the digital era, that principle is amplified through data analytics, algorithmic segmentation, and behavioral profiling, allowing for the micro-targeting of individuals and communities with narratives designed to resonate at a personal level while advancing strategic objectives.

Echo chambers are an important aspect of this. If, once, we understood Echo Chambers as a byproduct of socialization and homophily, it is clear that they now operate as engineered environments where segmentation is both produced and intensified by digital infrastructures. Sunstein (2017) already warned that the architecture of choice online fosters group polarization by filtering out dissenting views and reinforcing preexisting beliefs, and studies also demonstrate how algorithmic curation accelerates this process, structuring information flows so that repetition, visibility, and endorsement signals create self-reinforcing bubbles of consensus (Garimella et al., 2018) These echo chambers are not passive containers but dynamic ecosystems of persuasion, in which narratives are continuously recirculated and re-

framed to maintain emotional arousal and group cohesion (Kim, 2023).

In the context of PsyOps, echo chambers become not simply unintended consequences of digital interaction but deliberate arenas of influence, where micro-targeting and narrative control converge to lock audiences into closed informational loops that amplify vulnerability to strategic manipulation. Algorithmic mediation plays a decisive role in this process. By privileging content that maximizes engagement, platforms filter information through ranking systems that naturally reward emotional intensity and partisan alignment. This curation not only reinforces group boundaries but also accelerates the repetition of the same frames, gradually excluding alternative perspectives. For PsyOps, such conditions are ideal: operators can inject tailored narratives into these pre-structured environments knowing that algorithms will amplify them, and that audiences already shielded from contestation will interpret them as organic consensus. In effect, echo chambers transform into force multipliers, reducing the cost of persuasion while magnifying the durability of psychological influence.

Big Tech has long mastered this precision for commercial ends, building platforms that harvest and analyze vast amounts of user data to deliver hyper-personalized advertising. The same infrastructure that predicts consumer preferences

and drives purchasing behavior is readily adaptable to the requirements of modern PsyOps, where the “product” is not a commodity but an attitude, belief, or political alignment. Algorithmic recommendation systems, optimized to maximize engagement, can be tuned to privilege content that reinforces desired narratives, nudges specific behaviors, or deepens divisions within targeted groups. Increasingly, these capabilities are being repurposed in the context of geopolitical conflict: social media platforms, content distribution networks, and search engines become not just marketplaces of attention but theaters of influence, where narrative dominance is pursued with the same precision, adaptability, and scale that once served the advertising industry. The convergence of corporate data economies with state strategic objectives marks a new phase in psychological operations, one in which the tools of persuasion honed in the market are deployed in the battlespace.

This principle, however, presents a dilemma: Linebarger was explicit in warning that psychological operations should never be turned inward against domestic populations, as the legitimacy of a state depends on the clear separation between governance and manipulation. Yet the infrastructure that sustains today’s PsyOps – digital social media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and data-driven tar-

getting architectures - operates simultaneously within the United States as much as abroad. This creates an inherent contradiction: the very tools that Washington employs to destabilize adversaries are embedded in the everyday informational diets of its own citizens.

The unease with this duality is evident in the American attempts to ban TikTok⁷, framed under the pretext of national security. By treating the platform as a hostile vector of cognitive influence, US lawmakers acknowledged that digital social media is not a neutral communication tool but a battlespace for perception and persuasion. The refusal, however, to apply the same standard to Silicon Valley platforms, such as Meta, Google, X, among others, demonstrates that the threat is not the existence of algorithmic infrastructures per se but who controls them. In practice, this amounts to a tacit admission that while social media is recognized as a cognitive weapon, the United States is willing to tolerate, even promote, its deployment domestically so long as the architecture remains under its own corporate and political influence.

Third, **the operations must seem credible and remain consistent.** For Linebarger, credibility is not a matter of objective truth but of perceived plausibility within the target audience's existing worldview. A message that aligns with prior beliefs, cultural narratives, and lived experience will be accepted more readily, even if its factual basis

is tenuous. Consistency, in turn, sustains this credibility over time: once a narrative frame is established, it must be reinforced across all channels and contexts, minimizing contradictions that could erode trust. In the Digital Age, this principle is operationalized through coordinated messaging across multiple platforms, the repetition of core talking points, and the strategic use of authoritative voices, whether state officials, experts or influencers, to lend legitimacy to the narrative. Big Tech's algorithmic reinforcement loops further entrench this effect, ensuring that once a user engages with content aligned to a particular frame, subsequent interactions will overwhelmingly confirm that same perspective. In both wartime and peacetime, the fusion of message consistency with the illusion of independent verification creates an enduring informational environment in which the chosen narrative becomes self-reinforcing and resistant to challenge.

This mechanism is particularly visible in the geopolitical discourse of the so-called "Collective West," a term that itself operates as a narrative device. By aggregating the United States, NATO members, and aligned liberal democracies into a single, coherent actor, the label frames international politics in civilizational terms, enabling Psy-Ops to present complex, multi-actor decisions as the will of a unified bloc. This framing benefits from the credibility-consistency dynamic: messag-

es about “Western values,” “defense of democracy,” or “rules-based order” are repeated across diplomatic statements, mainstream media, think tank publications, and social media influencers, creating a perception of unanimity that obscures internal dissent. When algorithmic systems amplify these converging voices, the “Collective West” appears not merely as a geopolitical coalition but as an epistemic authority where its narratives are pre-validated by the very structure of the information environment. This, in turn, facilitates the projection of legitimacy for military interventions, sanctions regimes, and ideological campaigns, while casting dissenting states or actors as inherently suspect or destabilizing.

Fourth, **propaganda is most effective when it triggers strong emotions**. The idea of **emotional saturation**, Fourth, propaganda is most effective when it triggers strong emotions. The idea of emotional saturation, as articulated by Goodwin (2007), frames affect not as a byproduct but as the central operational lever of psychological warfare - in his view, dangerously similar to nazi strategies for mass propaganda. In his view, the sustained immersion of the target audience in an emotional register, whether fear, outrage, pride, or humiliation, maximizes both receptivity to influence and resistance to counter-narratives. Digital PsyOps have operationalized this principle with unprecedented precision, using algorithmic curation to

keep users in high-arousal states that prolong engagement and deepen identification with a cause.

The contemporary extreme right exemplifies this dynamic: their online ecosystems deploy a steady cadence of emotionally charged content - memes, outrage headlines, and adversarial framing - that creates a perpetual sense of threat and urgency. This saturation not only drives mobilization but also binds communities together through shared affect, transforming abstract ideological alignment into a lived, emotional reality. In such environments, echo chambers function as accelerators of emotional saturation, repeatedly exposing users to the same frames and narratives while filtering out dissenting perspectives. This aligns with the notion of the pseudoenvironment (Lippmann, 1998), where individuals form opinions not from direct experience but from mediated and simplified representations of reality. These constructed realities are further entrenched by the visibility and repetition mechanisms of digital platforms, and, instead of a genuine marketplace of ideas, they operate as managed spaces where information flow is curated to reinforce preexisting alignments (Herbst, 2018). In the context of the extreme right, this means that online publics are not simply self-organizing around shared grievances, they are instead inhabiting managed emotional ecosystems that both sustain ideological commitment and heighten antagonism toward perceived adversaries.

Sunstein has already argued that such environments intensify polarization by fostering group polarization dynamics, where repeated exposure to like-minded views pushes individuals toward more extreme positions (Sunstein, 2017). In the digital sphere, algorithmically mediated echo chambers accelerate this process by creating feedback loops in which affirmation and outrage circulate with little interruption. Rather than broadening deliberation, these spaces narrow it, systematically rewarding conformity within the group and hostility toward outsiders.

For PsyOps, this dynamic is particularly advantageous: once a community is locked into a high-arousal echo chamber, subtle narrative injections can escalate into entrenched belief systems with minimal external input. In effect, what Sunstein theorizes as a cognitive tendency becomes weaponized by digital infrastructures, transforming ordinary mechanisms of social influence into programmable engines of radicalization and strategic persuasion. This resonates deeply with the idea of public diplomacy 2.0, which reframes traditional state-led persuasion for the interactive, networked age. By leveraging the participatory affordances of digital platforms, public diplomacy 2.0 cloaks influence in the aesthetics of dialogue and community-building, while retaining the strategic imperatives of narrative control. In this model, emotional saturation is not an accidental byproduct of engage-

ment but a designed feature of the communicative environment that can then be weaponized to create durable alignments between domestic or foreign publics and the objectives of the actor orchestrating the campaign.

This mechanism was clearly visible in Brazil's Operação Lava Jato, which Romano (2022) interprets as a contemporary PsyOp, structurally akin to Cold War interventions in Latin America. Rather than relying solely on juridical procedure, Lava Jato operated through a media-judicial symbiosis that sustained a high-arousal emotional climate with daily leaks, sensational headlines, and moral absolutism, casting political actors in stark binaries of virtue and corruption. Avritzer (2020) situates this within a broader turn from politics to antipolitics, in which judicial and media elites displaced democratic deliberation with moralized spectacle. The informational environment functioned as a managed emotional ecosystem: outrage was kept at a constant simmer, dissenting frames were marginalized, and public discourse was compressed into a pseudoenvironment where the "fight against corruption" became an unquestionable, almost sacred cause. In this sense, Lava Jato not only eroded political mediation but also mirrored the operational logic of psychological warfare by targeting affection, saturating media space, and aligning public sentiment with a broader geopolitical⁸ and domestic agenda.

In short, the broader principle that emotional saturation is not incidental but systematically engineered, whether in the digital ecosystems of the extreme right or in state-judicial-media operations is confirmed by the Lava-Jato example. In both cases, the success of propaganda lies in sustaining polarized, echo-chambered audiences within a continuous emotional register, where outrage, fear, or moral certainty substitutes for deliberation, and perception becomes more decisive than fact.

Fifth, **Psychological Operations must be properly integrated with kinetic operations.** In Linebarger's schema, PsyOps are not an auxiliary to the armed forces but a parallel and mutually reinforcing line of effort, shaping perceptions before, during, and after physical engagements. In contemporary conflicts, such as the Gaza war, the informational battlespace operates in lockstep with military maneuvers, with digital narratives amplifying, justifying, or contesting kinetic actions in real time.

As the moral cohesion and will of a population become decisive factors in sustaining long-term campaigns, the integration of PsyOps extends beyond traditional propaganda into the algorithmic and decentralized ecosystems of social media, where user-generated content, both spontaneous and state-aligned, intersects with formal military objectives. The Gaza case demonstrates this dy-

namic vividly: TikTok videos by Palestinian civilians and supporters have forged a global solidarity narrative, while Israeli soldiers' self-produced content reflects and reinforces national military aims, even absent a formally declared PsyOps strategy (Rocha et. al., 2025).

Yet this integration now unfolds under the structural constraints of Big Tech platforms, whose algorithmic architectures and moderation policies, sometimes perceived as politically selective, can amplify or suppress specific narratives, shaping the informational environment as decisively as artillery shapes the battlefield. Thus, in the era of hybrid warfare and full-spectrum dominance, effective PsyOps-kinetic integration requires not only coordination between communicators and combat units but also strategic mastery over the corporate-controlled digital infrastructure through which the moral and cognitive dimensions of war are fought. This, of course, leads naturally to the next principle:

Sixth, **the media vehicle must be well controlled, and technically efficient.** In the contemporary battlespace, control no longer refers solely to the ability to broadcast unfiltered messages through state-owned or allied media outlets; it extends to ensuring operational leverage over the algorithmic, infrastructural, and moderation layers of the corporate platforms that now mediate much of the political conversation. Here, the concept of

Meta-Trumpismo becomes particularly salient: it refers to the strategic alignment between the Trump administration and Big Tech corporations, which consolidated an unprecedented private-public control over the spaces where political discourse takes place.

Meta-Trumpismo, here, refers to the strategic alliance between Donald Trump's administration and Big Tech conglomerates which provided the technical, algorithmic, and moderation infrastructure to amplify political messaging and consolidate narratives favorable to Trumpism. More than a mere convergence of interests, it represents a politico-corporate symbiosis in which platforms play an active role in engineering the communicational space, shaping the reach, form, and visibility of public debate to serve a specific political project. This alliance not only ensured that the dominant digital infrastructures remained under the influence of actors aligned with US geopolitical and ideological objectives, but also embedded their operational logic into the very code, moderation protocols, and recommendation systems that define the visibility of narratives.

In this configuration, Big Tech platforms are not neutral conduits but active, structural components of the cognitive battlespace, capable of privileging certain frames while throttling or erasing others, all under the guise of community standards or content optimization. The efficiency of the me-

dia vehicle, then, lies in its dual capacity: first, to serve as a technically sophisticated delivery mechanism for influence operations; second, to function as a gatekeeping apparatus whose corporate-state alignment ensures that adversarial narratives struggle to gain traction. Meta-Trumpismo, by fusing political strategy with infrastructural control, demonstrates how the "well-controlled" media vehicle of Linebarger's era has evolved into a privately owned, globally networked system - one that is both the stage for and the arbiter of 21st-century psychological warfare.

Meta-Trumpismo, therefore, is not simply a political tendency but the crystallization of the sixth principle in the digital age: the requirement that the media vehicle be well controlled and technically efficient. Under this framework, the alliance between the Trump administration and Big Tech ensured that the technical infrastructures of communication - the algorithms, moderation systems, and data pipelines - were not neutral tools but tightly managed vehicles of influence. Efficiency here is measured not only in reach and speed, but in the capacity to algorithmically curate affect, suppress adversarial voices, and privilege narratives that align with US strategic objectives. In this sense, Meta-Trumpismo exemplifies how Linebarger's imperative of controlling the means of dissemination has been reconfigured: the vehicle is no longer a newspaper or a radio station but a global, corporate-owned ecosystem whose

technical sophistication amplifies propaganda while cloaking it in the language of optimization and community governance. The strategic resonance lies precisely in this fusion: political power exercised through infrastructural control, where efficiency and control are inseparable from the corporate-state alliance that defines contemporary PsyOps.

Seventh, **Psychological Operations must be iterative - flexible and quickly adapting to feedback.** With live-algorithmic monitoring and real-time engagement metrics, contemporary PsyOps can be continuously recalibrated in ways that Linbarger could not have imagined. The feedback loop is no longer limited to intelligence reports or post-operation assessments: it is embedded directly into the platform's infrastructure, allowing operators to test narrative framings, emotional triggers, and dissemination patterns on targeted audiences, then optimize them within hours or even minutes. This creates a form of "perpetual campaign" in which influence operations are never static but evolve dynamically in response to audience behavior, trending topics, and adversary counter-moves.

Such adaptiveness mirrors the commercial logic of Big Tech advertising, where consumer behavior is constantly tracked and acted upon, but in this case, the "product" is political alignment, demobilization, or destabilization. Under Meta-Trumpismo conditions, the fusion of political strat-

egy with platform analytics means that PsyOps practitioners can exploit the same precision tools used for market optimization to wage ideological and cognitive warfare. The agility of this model lies not just in the speed of adaptation, but in its capacity to integrate shifts in narrative with parallel kinetic, diplomatic, or economic actions, ensuring that the psychological and physical dimensions of conflict remain in continuous synchronization.

For PsyOps, this transforms data analysis from a support instrument into the operational core of influence. The same datasets that advertisers use to refine consumer targeting are appropriated to identify ideological predispositions, measure susceptibility to particular frames, and anticipate moments of narrative breakthrough or collapse. Behavioral traces, likes, shares, dwell time, sentiment patterns, become tactical intelligence, feeding back into the cycle of message optimization with a precision that traditional intelligence collection could never achieve. In practice, this means that psychological operations no longer end when a message is disseminated; rather, they continue as long as data flows, each interaction providing a new datapoint that can recalibrate the strategy. Iteration and data fusion thus constitute the essence of contemporary PsyOps: a warfare of permanent testing, adjustment, and redeployment, where the battlefield is not only percep-

tion but the very metrics through which perception is continuously observed and shaped.

Finally, **Psychological Operations must be deployed before the conflict erupts**. Historically, this preventive dimension was already present in US doctrine during the early Cold War, when information campaigns, cultural exchanges, and covert media funding sought to shape the ideological terrain long before any direct confrontation. The idea here is to soften the target environment, not only by promoting pro-American narratives but by delegitimizing alternative political projects, creating fissures within adversary societies, and embedding US-aligned elites in strategic cultural and institutional positions.

In the digital era, this anticipatory logic has only intensified. Social media allows narratives to be seeded, normalized, and networked months or even years before kinetic operations, fostering the echo chambers, pseudoenvironments, and emotional saturation necessary to ensure public alignment when crises escalate. Under Meta-Trumpismo, such pre-conflict shaping benefits from the infrastructural dominance of Big Tech, which enables not only the rapid dissemination of strategic frames but also their sustained visibility through algorithmic privileging. This means the “opening act” of modern warfare is often invisible as war - unfolding instead as a constant hum of memes, targeted

ads, influencer partnerships, and covert amplification, all working to define the moral coordinates of a conflict before the first shot is fired.

META-TRUMPISMO AND ADVANCED PSYOPS IN DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA

In this article, we set out to reconstruct the genealogy and contemporary practices of Psychological Operations (PsyOps) through a counter-hegemonic perspective grounded in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. We challenged mainstream narratives that portray Cognitive Warfare as a foreign or emergent threat, reframing it instead as a deeply institutionalized feature of American strategic thought.

For that end, we situated Cognitive Warfare within the hegemonic structures of the post-Cold War unipolar order, showing how domination politics (Dashichev, 2015), the ideological cohesion of the so-called Collective West (Chimris, 2022), and the codification of influence strategies by Linebarger converged to normalize PsyOps as legitimate instruments of Western statecraft. Then, we demonstrated how the transition to the digital era exponentially expanded the scope and granularity of PsyOps as concepts such as pseudoenvironments (Lipmann, 1998. Herbst, 2011), public opinion management, and emotional saturation (Sunstein, 2018) reemerged in algorithmic infra-

structures, transforming propaganda into always-on, adaptive systems of psychological shaping. This resonates with modern literature, as echo chambers are testaments to how algorithmic mediation does not merely reflect but actively produces closed informational loops. These echo chambers, far from being accidental, serve as deliberate arenas of influence where micro-targeting, repetition, and emotional saturation converge to maximize susceptibility to manipulation.

Most importantly, we revisited Linebarger's eight principles of effective PsyOps, reinterpreting each through the lens of digital architectures. We showed how strategic clarity, audience targeting, credibility, emotional saturation, integration with kinetic operations, infrastructural control, iteration through data analytics, and anticipatory deployment all persist as guiding logics, but with new technical sophistication.

The concept of Meta-Trumpismo, then, explains how the Trump administration's alignment with Big Tech exemplified the sixth principle - that the media vehicle must be well controlled and technically efficient. In this context, platforms ceased to be neutral spaces and instead became structurally aligned instruments of influence, embedding political strategy into the algorithmic and infrastructural layers of global communication systems. Data analysis has become the operational core of PsyOps, en-

abling perpetual iteration and optimization. In this feedback-driven model, every user interaction becomes tactical intelligence, transforming psychological warfare into a continuous process of testing, recalibration, and redeployment.

Taken together, our analysis reframes Cognitive Warfare as a lineage that runs from Cold War codifications to today's platform-mediated influence ecosystems. By applying a counter-hegemonic lens, we exposed how Western narratives of external threat obscure the reality that PsyOps are not foreign inventions but longstanding American strategies, updated for the digital era and reinforced through the fusion of state power with corporate infrastructures.

Meta-Trumpismo becomes a point of concern, as it not only cements the alignment of state and corporate media infrastructure but also blurs the boundary between civilian tech leadership and military authority. The recent commissioning of Big Tech executives, CTOs from Meta, Palantir, OpenAI, and others, as lieutenant colonels in the US Army Reserve's Detachment 201 signifies a dramatic institutional fusion: the very individuals who manage the algorithms governing global discourse are now integrated into the military chain of command. This move reinforces Linebarger's sixth principle, that the media vehicle must be well-controlled and technically efficient, by embedding narrative gatekeepers directly into the operational spine of military

power. The effect is structural: not only do these executives oversee the content ecosystems that shape belief, but they also advise the military on how best to mobilize and weaponize the technologies they themselves have built.

Further potential research lies in connecting PsyOps implementation to the frameworks of elite theory in political science, which foregrounds how ruling coalitions, bureaucratic strata, and corporate-military nexuses define and operationalize what is labeled as the “national interest.” By situating PsyOps within this lens, it becomes possible to analyze how specific elite backgrounds, technocratic, financial, or military, shape both the scope and the methods of influence operations. In this sense, the strategic deployment of digital infrastructures cannot be read merely as an impersonal instrument of statecraft, but as the expression of elite alignments whose priorities determine the contours of global rivalry. Thus, the fusion of Big Tech executives with military command structures exemplifies not just an operational innovation but a reconfiguration of the elite compact, where the ability to manipulate perception becomes central to the definition and pursuit of national interest.

Another research potential resides in the exploration of how Goodwin’s (2007) critique of PsyOps as dangerously close to the Nazi propaganda model can be brought into dialogue with the

study of far-right movements in Latin America and Eurasia. These groups, often categorized under the Alt-Right or extreme-right label, operate through digital social media ecosystems that mirror many of the mechanisms outlined in both classical propaganda theory and contemporary PsyOps practice: emotional saturation, echo chambers, adversarial framing, and perpetual mobilization through crisis rhetoric. Future research can hypothesize that such actors are not merely spontaneous grassroots communities but may represent components, witting or unwitting, of broader influence operations aimed at destabilizing political institutions and reinforcing geopolitical objectives in the region. By bridging Goodwin’s historical critique with the empirical study of digitally mediated far-right ecosystems, this line of inquiry would shed light on how contemporary PsyOps blur the lines between domestic extremism and transnational strategic manipulation.

The resonance of Linebarger’s principles in the digital age, combined with the institutional entanglement of Big Tech and military command, signals that PsyOps are no longer auxiliary instruments of war but constitutive elements of political order itself. What was once a tactical weapon for shaping enemy morale has become the operating system of contemporary geopolitics, where perception, affect, and narrative are managed with the same precision as missiles or drones.

By tracing this genealogy, our analysis demonstrates that today's Meta-Trumpismo is not an anomaly but the logical culmination of a decades-long trajectory in which propaganda, corporate infrastructure, and state power coalesce into a unified apparatus of cognitive dominance - and advanced PsyOps. The implication is clear: the future of conflict will not only be fought over territory, resources, or markets, but over the architectures of attention and belief. Any counter-hegemonic strategy, therefore, must grapple not just with armies and arsenals, but with the infrastructures of perception that silently govern how societies imagine themselves and their place in the world.

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NOTES

¹The early 2020s witnessed a resurgence of violent conflicts across multiple regions. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a six-week war in 2020 over the disputed enclave, leading to significant territorial shifts. Ethiopia's Tigray conflict erupted in late 2020, pitting federal forces against the Tigray People's Liberation Front, with devastating humanitarian consequences. The war in Yemen, ongoing since 2014, intensified during this period with escalations between Houthi forces and the Saudi-led coalition. In the Donbass region, the simmering conflict between Ukrainian forces and separatists escalated, foreshadowing the full-scale Russian operation in 2022. Meanwhile, Gaza experienced renewed violence in 2021 following tensions in Jerusalem, highlighting the unresolved volatility of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

²Meta-Trumpism refers to the structural alliance between Donald Trump's administration and Big Tech platforms, in which corporate control over the digital public sphere was aligned with US strategic objectives. Rather than a simple question of content moderation or partisan bias, Meta-

Trumpism designates the consolidation of political communication spaces under the ownership of private technology corporations, which simultaneously serve as commercial infrastructures and as instruments of state power. In this configuration, Big Tech companies become both arbiters and actors in political conflict, providing the technical, algorithmic, and distributive mechanisms through which narratives are amplified, suppressed, or weaponized. This concept was first introduced by Rocha and Silva (2025) in *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*, following president Trump's ascension to presidency. Available at: <https://diplomatique.org.br/meta-trumpismo-e-meta-politica/>.

³This parallel between Meta-Trumpismo, Nazi propaganda methods, and the adoption of pro-USA narratives by the Latin American extreme right will be more fully developed in future research.

⁴Conflict is increasingly conducted not only through conventional military means but via integrated technological infrastructures. The US government's "Project Nimbus" (involving Google Cloud and Amazon Web Services) and partnerships with firms like Palantir serve to embed Big Tech within military apparatuses, effectively turning digital platforms into operational theaters and amplifiers of state-aligned narratives. Gaza is cited as a testing ground for this hybrid doctrine, and what is described as a military rehearsal in which data, algorithms, and surveillance technologies are validated in real-time and weaponized under the governance of tech-enabled strategic power (Rocha,

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⁵Companies like Palantir epitomize this fusion of data analytics and PsyOps infrastructure, offering governments and corporations advanced tools for surveillance, predictive modeling, and influence operations, often under the banner of national security and counterterrorism.

⁶Despite the growing sophistication of digital PsyOps, recent clashes in 2025 reaffirmed that the balance of power in South Asia remains primarily defined by conventional military arsenals and nuclear deterrence. While both states engaged in online disinformation campaigns and influence operations to shape domestic and international perception, these efforts did not fundamentally alter the calculus of escalation and de-escalation. Rather, it was the credible threat of kinetic retaliation, particularly nuclear, that constrained behavior and imposed limits on the effectiveness of digital operations.

⁷The US Supreme Court upheld a law enforcing the forced sale or removal of TikTok, owned by ByteDance, because the platform was deemed under the control of a "designated foreign adversary" capable of exploiting its control to collect vast amounts of personal data from roughly 170 million US users. Conceptually, the DC Circuit had already determined that the law met the stringent strict scrutiny constitutional standard. In reaching its decision, the Supreme Court referenced the 1994 precedent *Turner Broadcasting System v. FCC*, permitting governmental action based on predictive

judgments even when complete empirical evidence is not available, thereby validating the law's constitutionality on national security grounds. Source: <https://www.scoobserver.in/journal/tiktok-ban-in-the-united-states-what-did-the-us-supreme-court-say/>.

⁸The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 removed a head of state who had pursued policies of strategic alignment with BRICS, defended Petrobras' control over pre-salt oil reserves, and resisted US-led trade and surveillance frameworks. Her removal paved the way for a government more receptive to US foreign policy and economic interests (Rocha and Silva, 2024), including the opening of Brazil's energy sector to foreign capital and the recalibration of its diplomatic stance away from multipolar coalitions.