

THE
POWER
OF
MEMES

WHY NATO'S MEMBER STATES SHOULD
EMBRACE THE POTENT DIGITAL TOOL

By Maj. Matthew Schlepner, U.S. Army

In 2017 there were 2.46 billion unique social media users worldwide. By 2021, the number is expected to exceed 3 billion, according to the database company Statista, with 71% of all internet users on social media by then. Most of this growth is coming from the world's developing regions: China, Africa, South Asia — areas where large populations are being introduced to high levels of technology and sophisticated methods of information operations. Beyond this, the reach of these sites makes them indispensable for those trying to relay a message to their citizenry. For example, during the September 2018 referendum in North Macedonia concerning changing the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia, the Global Engagement Center, the newly authorized lead for the United States government's efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries, estimated that the U.S. Embassy in North Macedonia (based on its follower counts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) had the power to reach the entire population of the country simply by using its social media accounts. That is how powerful social media can be.

This power can affect every instrument of military power. The ability of adversaries to use these networks to advance a narrative has grown rapidly, and the form that many of these messages takes is a meme. The meme has become a dominant tool of NATO's adversaries and there exists a void in how to counter that messaging. NATO can compete in this information space by adopting a more proactive mindset, having senior leaders engage on social media, treating messaging as a marketing tool of the Alliance, and adjusting its mindset to allow for more experimentation in messaging.

MEMES AND MEMETIC WARFARE

In his article, "Evolutionary Psychology, Memes and the Origin of War," Keith Henson defines memes as replicating information patterns: "ways to do things, learned elements of culture, beliefs or ideas." A meme is information that "propagates, has impact and persists." Memes can be ideas or symbols, catchphrases, hashtags, or words wrapped in cultural significance. Memetics tries to study this process within a form of neuro-cognitive warfare, a subset of information warfare.

A meme is defined in Richard Dawkins' book, *The Selfish Gene*, as a "self-reproducing and propagating information structure analogous to a gene in biology." The meme, he explains, has evolutionary effects on the human culture and physiology. It has the ability to replicate using hosts and to influence behavior to promote replication. Memetic warfare is certainly not a new concept. One could argue that Benjamin Franklin was the U.S.' first meme maker, creating the poignant "Join or Die" image of a snake cut into pieces, each part representing an American colony. There are thousands of examples similar to this, but Western security institutions still have not wrapped their heads around how to be effective, or as effective as the adversary, in the memetic space.

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The only thing new about the memetic revolution is the space in which the narrative is happening — cyberspace. Cyberspace is so open and so vast that the power of the information it contains is multiplied many times over the normal impact. Yet Western institutions did not begin to understand the scope of the problem until U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Michael Prosser's 2005 thesis on memetic warfare as a growth industry and studies afterward by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and others into ongoing memetic warfare. Through its Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, NATO enlisted well-known social media and technology thinker Jeff Giese to explain the power of the meme and how it should be embraced. In his article, "It's time to embrace memetic warfare," Giese starts not by quoting technology or warfare experts, but by discussing a conversation he had over a beer with a well-known internet troll on ways to attack ISIS through trolling. Every idea they



A protester in Berkeley, California, holds a poster with the likeness of the meme Pepe the Frog. In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, a group that supported then-candidate Donald Trump successfully appropriated the meme.

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developed was low-budget but creative, exploiting the openness and cost efficiency of the internet to attack the weaknesses of ISIS. Giese writes that “trolling, it might be said, is the social media equivalent of guerrilla warfare, and memes are its currency of propaganda.” He argues that NATO needs to conceptually grasp the concept of memes — to not think about memes as a weapon but rather as a tool in “competition over the narrative.” He explains that much of the time discussing memetic warfare is spent confusing it with cyber warfare. He maintains that while cyber warfare is about taking control of information, memetic warfare is about taking control of the dialogue — the psychological space.

NATO AND THE MEME BATTLEFIELD

Strategic messaging in the security space should be viewed as a debate rather than a conversation. There needs to be an aggressiveness to it that seeks to control the narrative space, much like an infantry battalion seeks to hold ground. At the same time,

there must be an awareness that ethical standards preclude democracies from creating a traditional Soviet-style propaganda system. Rather, better ways must be sought for spreading the truth in these modern times. At a time when attention spans are shorter because of technology, and the amount of available information has dramatically expanded, NATO needs to redefine the way it works in the memetic space. It understands the problem; it just isn't very good at trying to solve it. This involves a reframing of NATO's mindset and that of its member states. NATO as an institution, along with its member states, can begin or improve this with three easy steps.

1. Get on social media

There is a hesitancy by senior political and military leaders to be active on social media. Concerns about privacy and security are real. But this is mainly a mindset problem. At the Marshall Center in 2018, leaders from security institutions and NATO/European Union nations, along with



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partner nations, gathered to discuss challenges to strategic communications in the 21st century. In their discussions, leaders from NATO and the EU discussed how they are combating false narratives on the internet. NATO representatives said they had set up a page labeled “NATO truths” and “NATO-Russia: Setting the record straight” to combat false narratives on NATO-Russia issues. The page was a direct response to a series of Russian messaging campaigns using memetic warfare techniques. I remember thinking: How many of these leaders are personally active on social media? How many see how quick memetic warfare can work, and how effective it really is?

A new kind of thinking is needed in the age of Twitter and Instagram. It appeared as if Alliance leaders did not understand how social media works. For example, in the 2016 U.S. presidential

campaign, a meme called Pepe the Frog took off among supporters of then-candidate Donald Trump through the Reddit group /r/Donald. The supporters were tremendously successful in appropriating the meme to help their candidate. No fewer than 20 stories appeared in *The New York Times* about Pepe the Frog, and there was an effort by the Pepe the Frog creator to sue trolls on the internet for copyright infringement. If you simply view the comments of an internet news article critical of Russia, China or Iran, you will find them filled with odd statements, usually similar, attacking the article and working to shape the narrative in a way that negates factual reporting. *The New York Times* later reported that the Democratic National Committee used a false-flag campaign in the U.S. Senate race in Alabama between Roy Moore and Doug Jones, replicating what they thought were the techniques

In this authentic photograph, then-U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Tefft speaks to journalists in 2017 at the place in Moscow where Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down two years earlier. Tefft was the victim of a meme when his image was inserted into an altered photograph to make it appear he had attended a political rally in Russia that he had not attended.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

of Russian bots to create viral memes against Moore, then blaming Russia for efforts to interfere in the election.

A senior leader who is not active on social media will have a hard time understating the full effect of this activity. To be active is at least to see the battlespace. I would argue that leaders should be active, but also vocal in messaging against false, viral campaigns. For example, consider how President Donald Trump or U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell have fought back against false narratives or have advanced the truth through their own messaging. Other examples of leaders using this type of online voice are former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini in Italy, Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom or President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. The list continues to grow. An example of this is when the U.S. Embassy in Russia countered publication of an altered photo of then-U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Tefft that made it appear he was attending

understand that a gap exists in the understanding of this new communications technique. But the strategy is in its infancy, with online trials that fail for various reasons. The strategy here needs to flow from successful marketing principles and from the fact that NATO should not overthink its memetic messaging. Each problem set, each messaging campaign should be different and depend on the market NATO is trying to reach, the hook it is trying to employ, and the total presence it is attempting to achieve. Because information on the internet moves so quickly, the messaging strategy must be flexible, with maximum leeway given to those creating the messaging program. NATO should create a committee in this communications field and not be afraid to discuss and/or employ figures who are successful at memetic messaging.

This could be controversial at times because of the types of people generally associated with spreading memes. But experts in marketing, psychology and technology could be employed for oversight. Still, reaching out to personalities in the social media realm would be an absolute must. To be clear, when I say personalities I mean trolls — from Twitter, Reddit, 4chan and other social media platforms. Even if they aren't directly employed by NATO, their methods must be studied and understood. The power of memes is that they appear organic rather than corporately produced. Understanding what youths in Estonia or Ukraine

find persuasive within their cultural context will be difficult without surveying and employing people in those domains. As Giese points out, there is a sense of guerrilla warfare in the execution of trolling and memetic warfare. So the more NATO can develop a plan to gather bottom-fed information, the better.

3. Don't be afraid to make mistakes

NATO commissioned a series of videos revolving around its 60-year anniversary in 2009 that attempted to adopt a memetic warfare posture, but they did not go viral in the way many expected. The U.S. State Department, in response to the success of ISIS' online recruiting, created the "Think Again, Turn Away" program. But it ended without achieving the success many had hoped for. At least institutions are trying. The field of technology permeates with the theory that you must test and continue to test, always to the point that things break. Moving fast is critical, and that type of thinking can be antithetical to a military and political

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an opposition party rally. In response, the embassy distributed a series of obviously altered photos that made it appear Tefft was speaking on the moon, on the ice at a hockey game, and standing next to U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur as he landed in the Philippines during World War II. These things seem small, but they set a true narrative and undermine false ones. In the world of memes, seizing the narrative and demeaning your adversaries is a total communications victory.

2. Memetic warfare as marketing

Marketing experts identify four principles necessary for success: define the strategy before the tactics, narrow the market focus, differentiate from the competition, and create a total online presence. Since marketing is a business field focused more on offensive messaging to create business and control what people are saying about a business, this fits well in the memetic model. NATO and other Western security institutions seemingly



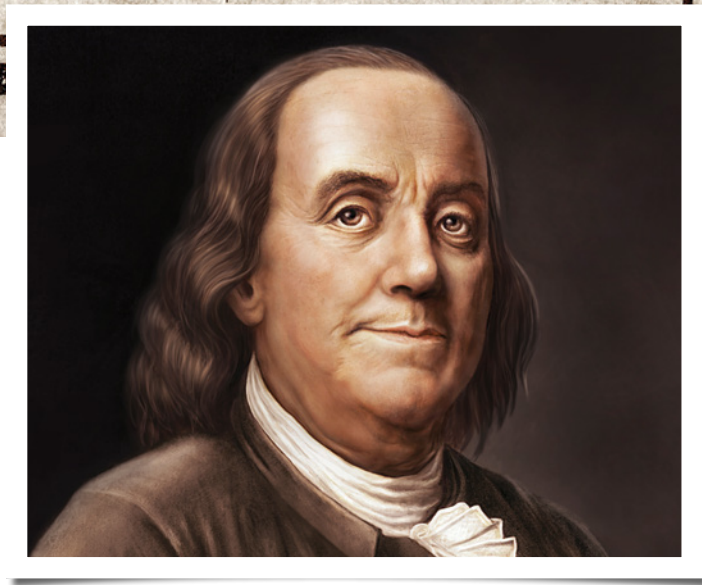
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Benjamin Franklin can be considered the United States' first meme maker, creating the poignant "Join or Die" image of a snake cut into pieces, each part representing an American colony.

mindset that values polished and deliberative communications strategies. On the internet, there may be a need to respond to viral memes that have a maximum impact of 10 hours or less.

CONCLUSIONS

Memes are important because they aim to influence our beliefs. Therefore, while there can be an impression that memes are little more than clever, funny, timely messages seeking an aim with no specific end, there is a psychological effect on the reader that is inescapable and aimed at changing beliefs. By shifting our mindset on memetic warfare, dispelling the notion that memetic warfare is some sort of cyber warfare campaign directly against an adversary — but rather a tool to fight propaganda with true information — NATO and member states can take steps to have an effective memetic campaign. This starts with knowing where gaps are and seeking those who are skilled at the



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craft to explain them. More resources is key, along with working with private-sector individuals and institutions to build an overarching strategy. Once this is complete, it is critical that flexibility be given to meme specialists to build specific narratives and respond at the pace of the internet. We will not be able to entirely compete with our adversaries in the internet trolling realm because they are unhindered by our norms, but we can understand this and build our strategies around it. It is complicated, but in time we can get better by working smarter. □