

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FIGHT FOR HEARTS AND MINDS: GENERATIVE
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS POLITICAL CAMPAIGN INFLUENCE TOOL**

Abstract:	<i>Social networks are important tools at the hands of political actors due to the direct connection with voters. Candidates and campaign teams can easily send messages to voters and can also see how they react to those messages and access the personal data available in each account. From the aggregation of this data through specific technical instruments, it is also possible to obtain segmented voting profiles. Campaign teams can thus adapt their communication flow to the expectations of the electorate and develop campaign strategies based on data.</i> <i>In the era of digital revolution, political actors' use of generative artificial intelligence through social media gives them the ability to create personalized messages, but also to accurately estimate their impact on individuals and groups. Different state and non-state entities can interfere with ongoing campaigns, influencing the electorate by favoring certain political actors and jeopardizing the democratic practices that should govern the electoral process.</i>
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Introduction

In the era of the digital revolution, social networks have become very effective tools in communicating messages from political actors to voters, influencing personal beliefs, shaping public opinion and, finally, determining voter behavior. Platforms like Facebook, X (former Twitter), Instagram and TikTok serve not only as channels of communication, but also powerful tools of influence and persuasion. This paper explores the mechanisms of influence and persuasion in social media, examining how these platforms work, the methods used by influencers and politicians, and the implications for electoral process in the times of generative AI (GenAI). The presentation of the theoretical concepts will be followed by practical examples, to reinforce the theoretical approach.

Social media influence, persuasion and propaganda

“Social Influence Theory”, originally formulated by Herbert Kelman in 1953 is the starting point in explaining conditions under which social influence determines a change in attitude or behavior and highlights the fact that there are three modes of social influence acceptance: namely compliance, identification, and internalization¹. Social media influences political opinions through various mechanisms including social proof, emotional appeals, and the influence of influencers, which are among Robert Cialdini's principles of influence²:

¹ Dinara Davlembayeva, Savvas Papagiannidis, *Social Theory: A Review*, in Savvas Papagiannidis (Ed.), *TheoryHub Book*, 2024, <https://open.ncl.ac.uk/theory-library/social-influence-theory.pdf> (05.11.2024)

² Robert Cialdini, *Psihologia persuasiunii: totul despre influențare*, Bussiness Tech International, București, 2014, pp. 11-15

(1) *Social proof*: The concept of social proof suggests that individuals are influenced by the actions and opinions of others. Social proof is the tendency to believe something not because there are good arguments but because a lot of others seem to believe it¹. On social media, users often align their beliefs with those prominently displayed by their peers, public figures, or trending topics.

(2) *Emotional engagement*: Emotion plays a critical role in persuasion and tailor to a cognitive vulnerability². Social media allows for the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged content, such as videos, memes, and stories that evoke feelings of hope, fear, or outrage.

(3) *Influencer Endorsements*: The rise of social media influencers has introduced a new layer of persuasion in political campaigns. Influencers, who wield significant reach and credibility among their followers, can sway public opinion when they endorse candidates or issues.

Among the many models of influence of mass communication, the one developed by Elizu Katz and Paul F. Lazarfeld in 1955, adapted to the reality of the digital revolution we are experiencing, retains its relevance. The *two-step flow of communication* model was developed following research conducted during the 1940 United States presidential election campaign and concluded that mass media operate in a very complex network of social relationships, and the number of those who receive the media message (individuals) is higher than those who are directly exposed to the message (opinion leaders)³. According to this model of interpersonal influence, the effects of exposure to messages are not felt immediately, they are determined by the multitude of social relationships created around opinion leaders. There are two processes, one of receiving the message, the other of accepting or rejecting the message sent to influence. Opinion leaders are the most active within social networks and are responsible for receiving, processing influence and transmitting the message coming from the media to other members of the social network.

Closer to the present day, Duncan Watts and Peter Dodds in 2007 adapted the model by insisting that opinion leaders are not leaders in the true sense of the word and that they act as intermediaries between the media and the public, called *influencers* or *stars*. They are trusted advisors who try to produce interpersonal changes on *followers* to create a desirable public opinion⁴. In 2022, Seth Kline, Jonathan Ritschel and Robert Fass renamed the term influencer with star, recognizing the effect of *stars* on society is amplified through social media.

This model of influence seems to be very well valued by social networks sites as intermediaries and message amplifiers between influencers and non-influencers⁵. Nowadays, part of the role of mass media as an intermediary between opinion leaders and the public has been taken over by social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and You Tube.

¹James Pamment, Howard Nothhaft, Henrik Agardh-Twetman, Alicia Fjällhed, *Countering Information Influence Activities*, <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28697.pdf>, p. 36 (25.10.2024)

²*Ibidem*, p.63

³Denis McQuail, Sven Windahl, *Modele ale comunicării pentru studiul comunicării de masă*, Comunicare.ro, București, 2004, pp. 55-57

⁴Duncan J. Watts, Peter Sheridan Dodds, *Influentials, Networks, and Public Opinion Formation*, “Journal of Consumer Research”, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2007, pp. 441-443

⁵Seth A. Kline, Jonathan D. Ritschel, Robert D. Fass, *Social Media, Public Opinion, and Resource Implications for the United States Air Force*, “Journal of Defense Resources Management”, Vol.13, No. 2, 2022, pp. 35-37

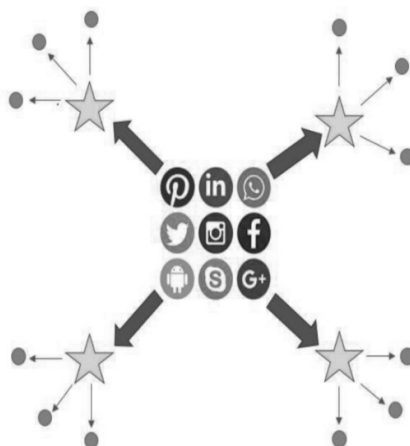


Fig. 1 The Star Model of Influence¹

To illustrate this model of influence with a practical example, we will present a short case study having as its subject the way in which the key messages of Russian propaganda are transmitted on the political scene in Romania by influential leaders. The results of an INSCOP survey, conducted in March 2024, show that Romanians consider social networks as the second main source of information (28.3%), after television (51.6%). The same sample surveyed believes that social networks are the main source of transmission of fake news and disinformation, with a percentage of 43%. In the opinion of 45.6% of Romanians, Russia is the main source of propaganda actions, disinformation and fake news in Romania. The percentage is significantly higher than that registered in January 2022, before Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, when 27.3% believed that Russia supports propaganda actions, misinforms and spreads fake news in Romania. It should be noted that Romanians considered Russian propaganda as the main source of disinformation, even before the invasion of Ukraine².

Due to negative experiences in the common history, more recent or more distant (the end of WW II, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the interference in the Transnistrian conflict), Romanians are not receptive to the messages directly transmitted by pro-Kremlin propaganda through assumed social media channels. This is the main reason why Russian disinformation is propagated through image vectors or influencers who amplify the message created most of the time outside the country's borders. Russian propaganda in Romania follows a regional trend, with the center of gravity on Ukraine and points of interest for the neighboring countries, especially the Republic of Moldova.

Russia's strategic objectives in Romania are to increase distrust within society, between society and government, and between Romania and its allies. This would make Romania a less reliable member of NATO and the European Union, undermining the Romanians' trust in democracy, liberal values, external alliances, thus promoting the destabilization and weakening of the country³. The Russian narratives are promoted in Romania by two types of political actors: (1) image vectors who assume the role of promoters of the Kremlin's messages, such as Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă, the leader of the SOS party, who recently entered the European Parliament, and (2) politicians who do not recognize their affiliation with the pro-Kremlin propaganda, but through the messages sent in the public space they align perfectly with this propaganda, and this category generally includes the representatives of the AUR party and FIDESZ party with a significant influence among the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. The political message is also amplified by the journalists grouped in the new Press Club, founded in 2023.

¹ *Idem*

² INSCOP Research, *Disinformation, fake news, trust in information sources*, <https://www.inscop.ro/martie-2024-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-viii-a-dezinformare-stiri-false-increderea-in-surse-de-informatii/> (15.10.2024)

³ Global Focus, *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats and Answers in Romania in the context of the war in Ukraine*, <https://www.global-focus.eu/2024/10/foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-and-answers-in-romania-in-the-context-of-the-war-in-ukraine/> (30.10.2024)

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the main narratives¹ are generally anti-Ukrainian, anti-UE, and anti-NATO, rather than pro-Russian:

- Russia was forced to invade Ukraine as a result of the provocative actions of NATO, the EU and Ukraine;
- Ukraine has historical territorial disputes with Romania and ethnic Romanians in Ukraine are discriminated on the basis of language, religion and access to education in their mother tongue;
- EU/NATO protection against Russia's provocative actions is weak, and countries like Romania lack security guarantees in the event of an expansion of the war;
- The EU encourages the consumption of cricket flour, gives too many rights to sexual minorities and the environmental agenda affects the economic interests of citizens;
- Inflation and economic instability as a result of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

According to Expert Forum report², the Tik Tok network is the most used in terms of transmitting pro-Kremlin messages, and with the help of the Exolyt tool, anti-NATO propaganda videos were identified with over a million views in Romania, over 2200 of anti-EU videos and 1076 videos containing themes of territorial revisionism.

Disinformation and manipulation in online political campaigns

Social media provides suitable platforms for influence and persuasion but raises concerns about information authenticity and manipulation of voters. The rapid spread of misinformation poses significant challenges, as false narratives can quickly gain credibility through social sharing. This phenomenon has been particularly evident during political campaigns and COVID public health crises, where misinformation can lead to widespread confusion and potentially harmful behaviors.

In a general sense, *disinformation* represents the creation and distribution of false or misleading messages, with the aim of misleading the public and creating the desired effect on it³. While *misinformation* is an unintentional disinformation that consists in the transmission in the public space of information without real support without the obvious aim of causing damage to the public image, *malinformation* involves the intentional dissemination of content with the aim of producing negative effects on the intended target⁴.

Social networks have amplified the importance of *fake news*, which are the basis of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation; fake news is news that claim to be factual, but which contain intentionally wrong information from a factual point of view, made with the intention of attracting the audience and deceiving⁵. Fact-checking is the process by which the accuracy of a news story is verified, in the effort to combat disinformation, before or after dissemination⁶.

Along with disinformation, propaganda is another 'dark side' of online communication. According to H.D. Lasswell *propaganda* refers to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication. Propaganda is concerned with management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion rather than by altering other conditions in the environment or in the organism⁷.

¹ Global Focus Report, *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats and Answers in Romania in the context of the war in Ukraine*, <https://www.global-focus.eu/2024/10/foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-and-answers-in-romania-in-the-context-of-the-war-in-ukraine/> (30.10.2024)

²Expert Forum, *Monitoring report -Architecture of Disinformation: Kremlin propaganda. Disinformation*, <https://expertforum.ro/en/files/2024/09/Arhitectura-dezinformarii-romanesti-Relatia-cu-Kremlinul.docx-1.pdf-1.pdf-en.pdf> (30.10.2024)

³European Commission, *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach> (30.10.2024)

⁴ Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă, *Ghid de prevenire și combatere a acțiunilor de dezinformare a alegătorilor*, https://www.roaep.ro/prezentare/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GHID_GLFN_FINAL.pdf (25.10.2024)

⁵ Bogdan Oprea, *Fake News și dezinformare online: recunoaște și verifică*, Polirom, Iași, 2021, p. 88

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 194

⁷ Corneliu Bjola, *Propaganda as Reflexive Control. The Digital Dimension. Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism*, Routledge, 2018, p.14

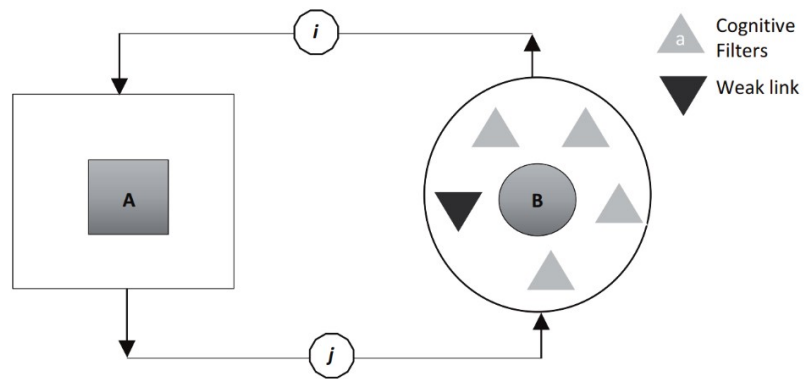


Fig. 2 Model of Reflexive Control¹

In short, the *model of reflexive control* shows how propaganda campaigns work by suggesting that “gaining access to the cognitive filter by which an opponent makes sense of the world, the controlling party might be able to induce him/her to voluntarily take decisions in favour or at least not against its interest”². From the perspective of social media use, the data generated online are used to realize cognitive profiles of individuals using 4 layers of cognitive filters: conversation filter, network filter, demographic, and psychographic filter. Corneliu Bjola highlights five counter-disinformation tactics:

- Ignoring - official communication flow will keep the discussion focused on key message and prevent unnecessary escalation;
- Debunking - correct false and misleading statements by using factual evidence;
- Turning the tables - 'jiu-jitsu' principle of turning the opponent's strengths into a weakness;
- Discrediting the opponent - pro-active counter measure that consist of discrediting the opponent not to try undermine the credibility of the message;
- Disrupting - consist of disrupting the network the opponent uses for disseminating information online³.

The following practical example wants to show how disinformation wears the latest techniques, which combine the use of social media, online news platforms and GenAI. In the last decade, the Republic of Moldova, like Ukraine, has been a kind of testing and training ground for Russian propaganda and its disinformation capabilities. Using key-message, thematic and similar methods, the pro-Kremlin propaganda tried by all possible methods to divert Moldova from the European path, to divide society, which is already fragmented from an ethnic point of view, and to make citizens to be less supportive to the process of integration into European institutions.

Disinformation actions reached their peak during the presidential elections in October this year, and the favorite target was the pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu. According to the European monitoring portal EUvsDisinfo, in the period before and after the elections there were no less than seven actions of transmitting fake news related to Maia Sandu and a possible fraud of the electoral process and the referendum.

Just two days before the voting day, to influence the outcome of the election, one of the Telegram propaganda channels transmitted false information according to which Maia Sandu suffered from schizophrenia and panic attacks, receiving treatment at a clinic in Vienna⁴. In support of this fake news, a medical document issued by a doctor of the clinic, most likely generated by AI, was posted. This fake news

¹ *Ibidem*, p.18

² *Ibidem*, p.17

³ Corneliu Bjola, *The 'dark side' of digital diplomacy: countering disinformation and propaganda*, Routledge, <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ari5-2019-bjola-dark-side-digital-diplomacy-countering-disinformation-propaganda.pdf>, 2019 (20.10.2024)

⁴ EUvsDisinfo, *Documents show Moldovan President Maia Sandu has schizophrenia* <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/documents-show-moldovan-president-maia-sandu-has-schizophrenia/> (20.10.2024)

was automatically picked up by a Pravda page, in Spanish and English, to engage the press on a much higher level.

Generative AI as political campaign influence tool

Generative AI (GenAI) is an advanced type of machine learning that comes with a new and advanced tool based on technology mainly intended for creating, disseminating text, image and video messages of political actors and analyzing the effects on the target audience¹. Initially used in marketing and fundraising campaigns, generative AI can fundamentally change the way electoral campaigns are conducted. Based on Large Language Models (LLMs) and Large Visual Models (LVMs) generative AI has the possibility of analyzing very large amounts of data, from the perspective of opinions, online behavior, areas of interest of individuals who are under various digital identities. These individuals, potential voters, are grouped by category according to their opinions and common interest, in the process of segmenting the target audience. The next stage of the process is the elaboration of messages adjusted to the previously identified audience categories. This cyclical process can be supplemented with a further evaluation of the effect on the voters in terms of change in perception, opinions or behavior because of exposure to the messages. Based on *Large Language Models* (LLMs) and *Large Visual Models* (LVMs), GenAI could accomplish the main following tasks²:

- Generate image, audio and video and detection of AI generated image, audio and video content;
- Generate text and detect the AI generated text.

As a *microtargeting* tool³, GenAI can conduct data analysis and insights processing large volume of social media data (text, video, audio, image) and extract important identify trends, key influencers, perspectives on a fact, the main concerns of the public based on:

- Social listening and monitoring - through algorithm-based tools, GenAI can monitor social media in real time by identifying brand mentions, customer feedback and emerging trends. From this process can result an almost exact perspective on the preferences of the target audience, the feeling towards an organization and the levels of involvement in supporting the politics of this organization.

- Social media influencer identification - based on conversational dynamics and reactions to messages, GenAI can contribute to the process of identifying relevant influences in a certain campaign.

- Voter's segmentation – GenAI can aggregate social media users based on their behavior and preferences. This helps political actors create personalized messages for different people audience segments achieving very good results in terms of attachment and a better understanding of specific political objectives.

Malicious use of microtargeting and GenAI is that it provides support for misinformation and disinformation activities, associated in most cases with political propaganda. The use of information and communication technology to monitor, coerce, deter, manipulate individuals or groups to discourage certain activities or beliefs is defined as *digital repression*⁴. Algorithms, automation, and AI are working together to improve efficiency, and sophistication of manipulation of public opinion online⁵. The most relevant examples of malicious use of GenAI, associated with disinformation and online propaganda, are AI generated text and audio, video, and image deepfakes⁶. *Deepfakes* are manipulated audio-visual material which is virtually

¹ William Marceliano, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Amanda Kerigan, Lev Navare Chao, Jackson Smith, *The Rise of Generative AI and the Coming Era of Social Media Manipulation 3.0*, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2679-1.html> (25.10.2024)

² Kalina Boncheva (Ed.), *Generative AI and Disinformation: Recent Advances, Challenges, and Opportunities*, https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Generative-AI-and-Disinformation_-White-Paper-v8.pdf (25.10.2024)

³Sourav Majumdar, *Large Vision Models (LVMs): The next branch on the evolutionary tree and how it can help Marketers*, <https://www.position2.com/blog/author/sourav-m/> (25.10.2024)

⁴ Katarina Kertysova, *When 5G Meets AI: Next Generation of Communication and Information Sharing*, February 2022, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/when-5g-meets-ai-next-generation-of-communication-and-information-sharing/237> (05.11.2024)

⁵ *Idem*

⁶ Kalina Boncheva (Ed.), *Generative AI and Disinformation: Recent Advances, Challenges, and Opportunities*, https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Generative-AI-and-Disinformation_-White-Paper-v8.pdf (25.10.2024)

indistinguishable from real material¹. GenAI can produce fully synthetic manipulated text, images, audio, and video, misleading voters and undermining governments' capacity to engage with citizens and influencing public opinion and deepening societal divisions.

*Deceptive identities*² are an umbrella that covers: (1) *shills* – dedicated manipulators that give the impression that are neutral; (2) *impersonators* - persons hiding behind another identity; (3) *impostors* – pretend to have skills that they don't possess; (4) *hijackers* – people who take over a social media account for the purpose of using it in their own interest. On the other hand, a *troll* is “a user of an online social platform who deliberately tries to aggravate, annoy, disrupt, attack, offend or cause trouble by posting provocative and unconstructive content”³. From a technical point of view, GenAI could clone existing social media accounts or create fake depersonalized accounts. *Bots* and *botnets* are pieces of automated computer software that performs tasks based on algorithms, and act as force multipliers for influence activities⁴.

The following examples show how GenAI can decisively influence the outcome of the elections. According to political analysts, the results of the last legislative elections in Slovakia, organized in 2023, were decisively influenced by an election manipulation action that had as its point of origin pro-Kremlin propaganda. It was the first case in which an AI generated deepfake was able to decisively influence the outcome of an election. According to the publication *Wired*, two days before the date of the elections, a fake audio recording was intensively promoted through the Facebook network, which featured a dialogue between a well-known journalist and the leader of the main Slovak opposition party, Progressive Slovakia, Michal Simecka. He was making revelations related to a massive election fraud operation by buying votes from the Roma minority⁵.

Later, conclusive evidence was brought forward that this case was an audio deepfake and that the audio recording was made with the help of Generative AI. This was also confirmed by the information verification department of the AFP news agency. The timing of the distribution of the recording was chosen in such a way as to cancel or limit the reaction of combating deepfake by the protagonists, due to the provisions of the electoral law of prohibiting advertising through the mass media 48 hours before the start of the poll. Instead, in the two days this recording was massively destroyed on social networks, including by opinion leaders. A contributing factor to the manipulation was that under Meta policies at the time, only deepfake video content could be criminalized. The main beneficiary of the manipulation was the Russia-sympathetic party that won the election, SMER, led by Robert Fico.

Conclusions

Social media are appropriate platforms for manipulation, misinformation and propaganda available to political actors. In this respect, media literacy programs for citizens are essential, to distinguish truth from falsehood. Well-coordinated strategic communication and transparency are very important for citizens to feel informed and valued, eliminating the desire to turn to populist and manipulative narratives.

In the usual way, through specific social media analytics and social media listening tools, public data can be extracted from individual accounts in social networks to create individual profiles, which include preferences and consumption habits. In the classical way, this process requires the use of specialized personnel and significant financial and time resources. The great advantage of using AI algorithms is a relatively low cost, the ability to use large amounts of data and the ability to disseminate messages to many recipients, having very good results especially in the activity of mobilizing voters and obtaining financial support for political campaigns. The flow of AI microtargeting can be summarized in the following steps: collecting data

¹ James Pamment, Howard Nothhaft, Henrik Agardh-Twetman, Alicia Fjällhed, *Countering Information Influence Activities*, <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28697.pdf>, p.45 (25.10.2024)

² *Ibidem*, pp. 55-56

³ James Pamment, Howard Nothhaft, Henrik Agardh-Twetman, Alicia Fjällhed, *Countering Information Influence Activities*, <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28697.pdf>, p.62 (25.10.2024)

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 56-59

⁵ Morgan Meaker, *Slovakia's Election Deepfakes Show AI is a Danger to Democracy*, <https://www.wired.com/story/slovakias-election-deepfakes-show-ai-is-a-danger-to-democracy/> (25.10.2024)

from individual profiles, forming groups of people likely to react in the same way to identical messages, and sending messages tailored to previously identified groups.

The use of microtargeting and GenAI also raises serious legal and ethical issues and is in a gray area of political communication because of how voters' personal data is accessed. The use of microtargeting and generative AI also comes with a series of shortcomings or adverse effects. First, it raises serious questions about the use of personal data of social media users and the fact that they are processed without the consent of the owners. Even if these data are public, the purpose of their processing is different than the one for which these data are available.

Human-like behavior of GenAI systems are advancing day by day, increasing accuracy of malicious use such as deepfakes and generated text, and decrease confidence in electoral process and democracy. As a result, it is necessary to improve the ability of political campaign staff to detect AI generated content. It is necessary to regulate the use of AI in campaigns at the national level, in accordance with the EU AI Act and require labelling for some AI generated content.

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