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INFORMATION WARFARE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A BRAND MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Employing a perspective informed by brand management, this article aims at understanding information warfare operations in social media. The state, seen as brand, must project an image of itself to both internal and foreign audiences to unite the domestic audience and/or attract global support. However, in constructing a brand, states are vulnerable to 'sofa warriors' – ordinary individuals who have been unwittingly recruited by hostile actors to disseminate (over social media or other platforms) a counter-brand, harmful to the state concerned. These new threats are investigated in light of recent tendencies in online branding, elucidating their status as a national security threat, with the potential to significantly disrupt life in political communities.

KEYWORDS

Sofa warriors, social media, branding, security threats, information warfare

INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace, due to its technological, cultural, economic, political, and military importance, has become an important area of security studies. While cyber espionage, cyber terrorism, or cyber warfare have been widely analysed,[1] the social aspect of cyber security is much less conceptualised, even though its importance is increasingly appreciated, particularly in the context of international conflict (e.g. Ukraine), terrorist propaganda and recruitment (most notably, ISIS), and manipulation of information during election campaigns (e.g. the 2016 US Presidential election). Drawing inspiration from brand management, this article aims to fill the gap by arguing that hostile campaigns on social media may jeopardise the country's standing in the eyes of citizen and noncitizen audiences (brand), hindering achievement of its strategic aims and even fostering discontent and disloyalty among its citizenry. This article signals a holistic approach to cyber security: not only threats to technological (hardware and software) wiring of information systems but also threats to mental 'wiring' of societies. Since such 'wiring' is heavily dependent on support for political organisations, both national and subnational, and patterns of consuming (or ceasing to consume) particular ideas, drawing on brand management is a logical way forward.

There seems to be a rough consensus on the need for a state to 'preemptively use all elements of national power to challenge negative perceptions and beliefs regarding its values and actions in the world'.[2] Military authorities must '[e]mbrace new media as a significant enabler of information as 'combat power'.[3] This understanding certainly reflects a broader shift in the information environment, when information is more plentiful than ever – after all, '[t]oday, anyone with an internet connection and a Twitter account can make the news'[4] (BBC, 2015: 2). Equally, however, now '[a]nyone can be a propagandist'.[5] Although social media have now become not only a linking tool but also an important source of information,[6] user-generated and propagated information might not only be unreliable and of poor

[1] And perhaps even overhyped – see e.g. Sean Lawson, "Beyond Cyber-doom: Assessing the Limits of Hypothetical Scenarios in the Framing of Cyber-threats," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 10(1) (2013); Robert M. Lee and Thomas Rid, "OMG cyber!" *The RUSI Journal* 159(5) (2014).
[2] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *Bullets and Blogs: New Media and the Warfighter* (US Army War College, Centre for Strategic Leadership, 2009), 2 // http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA508195.
[3] *Ibid*., 5.
[4] BBC, "The Future of News," (January 2015) // http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/29_01_15future_of_news.pdf.
[5] Paul R. Baines and Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, "Political Marketing and Propaganda: Uses, Abuses, Misuses," *Journal of Political Marketing* 13(1-2) (2014): 9.
[6] See e.g. Nick Newman and David A. L. Levy, eds., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2014: Tracking the Future of News* (Oxford University Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2014), 68–70 // https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Reuters%20Institute%20Digital%20News%20Report%202014.pdf.

quality but also open to manipulations that are virtually impossible to trace.[7] To that extent, social media can be used as a tool to sway public perceptions[8] (van Niekerk and Maharaj, 2013: 1174). In light of the above, information in social cyberspace has to be considered a crucial security issue. Likewise, competition between political ideas and loyalties, or between political brand offerings, as they are treated in this article, is a crucial feature in today's security landscape, national and international alike.

The first part of the article puts forward the case for analysing politics and the state in the categories of branding and brand management. The claim is that approaching the country as a brand helps elucidate new possibilities and dangers in international security. Analysis then moves to the challenges to brands posed by the social cyberspace and looks at how brand management studies have dealt with these novel issues. The third part looks at state branding in the context of hostile influence operations.

1. BRANDS IN POLITICS

Branding, as such, 'seeks to unite every employee activity and communications touchpoint towards a common purpose',[9] i.e. is a holistic approach under which everything an organisation does is subsumed under a single reputational construct. The key here is the production of so-called 'brand equity', i.e. the propensity of target audiences to engage in long-term buying behaviour, in which repeat custom happens without much consideration.[10] Such equity is, first and foremost, consumer-based and oriented, and once a particular mental construct is erected in the minds of one's target audience, it is not for the brand owner to change it unilaterally: that can only be done through gradual two-way interaction. Otherwise, consumer dissatisfaction and rejection of brand loyalty is almost unavoidable.[11] Therein lies one of the major dangers of political branding and also the source for counter-branding threats: hostile actors are bound to attempt to undermine one's brand by either exposing or manufacturing gaps and inconsistencies between the façade of the brand and the underlying substance.

[7] Mark Graham, Matthew Zook, and Andrew Boulton, "Augmented Reality in Urban Places: Contested Content and the Duplicity of Code," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(3) (2013): 468–469.
[8] Bret van Niekerk and Manoj Maharaj, "Social Media and Information Conflict," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1174.
[9] Alex Marland, J. P. Lewis, and Tom Flanagan, "Governance in the Age of Digital Media and Branding," *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 30(1) (2017): 125.
[10] Bruno Schiwinski and Dariusz Dabrowski, "The Effect of Social Media Communication on Consumer Perceptions of Brands," *Journal of Marketing Communications* 22(2) (2016).
[11] Lorann Downer, "It's the Equity Stupid! Protecting the Value of the Partisan Brand," *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 28(1) (2016).

There already is a fair amount of scholarship that deals with individual politicians and political parties as brands.[12] Analysis of political brands operates on the premise that, when making political preferences, people 'are involved in the same cognitive and affective processes that they use and apply when choosing what are traditionally thought of as brands'.[13] Essentially, this approach presumes that societal and political changes have led to a primarily consumption-based politics at the expense of the earlier model of identity and ideology-based politics.[14] A similar shift is presumed to have also taken place in regard of relationships between the state and its citizens.

Notably, brands offer a quick way of differentiating between competing offerings that are otherwise relatively similar or offer solutions to the same problem: they offer quick associations relating to a particular object or institution.[15] Indeed, brands are about reputation, image, and symbolic (rather than tangible) value.[16] That is particularly helpful since politics, after all, is about competing solutions to the same or similar issues. Brands tend to dominate consumers' knowledge of the market, stipulating uncertainty about and distrust of offerings that are non-branded, come under an unknown brand, or come under a brand which is not particularly valued, thus reducing consumers' perceived choice.[17] In fact, brand-value replaces the actual use-value of the item. In political terms, the perceived image, intentions, and mandate for action of a candidate, a party, or even a country is shaped by how people feel about it (i.e. by the political actor's brand).

Admittedly, analysing states as brands needs some justification. It could well be argued that the continued importance of national identity and the institute of citizenship preclude the fluidity of no-strings-attached marketplace of wandering consumers, where brands act as consumer magnets. And yet, two markets for state-

[12] See e.g. Catherine Needham, "Brand Leaders: Clinton, Blair and the Limitations of the Permanent Campaign," *Political Studies* 53(2) (2005); Margaret Scammell, "Political Brands and Consumer Citizens: The Rebranding of Tony Blair," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611 (2007); Alan French and Gareth Smith, "Measuring Political Brand Equity: A Consumer Oriented Approach," *European Journal of Marketing* 44(3-4) (2010); Gareth Smith and Alan French, "Measuring the Changes to Leader Brand Associations During the 2010 Election Campaign," *Journal of Marketing Management* 27(7-8) (2011); Jennifer Lees-Marshment, *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014); Richard Speed, Patrick Butler, and Neil Collins, "Human Branding in Political Marketing: Applying Contemporary Branding Thought to Political Parties and Their Leaders," *Journal of Political Marketing* 14(1-2) (2015).
[13] Gareth Smith and Alan French, *supra* note 12: 718.
[14] Allan Kellehear, "Dying in the UK? Politics, Ideologies, and Futures"; in: Anette Pankratz, Klaus-Ulrich Viol and Arianne de Waal, eds., *Birth and Death in British Culture: Liminality, Power, and Performance* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Robert Ormrod and Hather Savigny, "Political Market Orientation: A Framework for Understanding Relationship Structures in Political Parties," *Party Politics* 18(4) (2012); Guy Standing, "Tertiary time: The Precariat's Dilemma," *Public Culture* 25(1) (2012); Margaret Scammell, *Consumer Democracy: The Marketing of Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[15] Alan French and Gareth Smith, *supra* note 12.
[16] Margaret Scammell, *supra* note 12: 177.
[17] John G. Cromie and Mike T. Ewing, "The Rejection of Brand Hegemony," *Journal of Business Research* 62(2) (2009).

brands can be identified. Firstly, the perception of a state by the international public is extremely important for a state to carry out its strategic goals. The basic premise is that military and economic might of a state is not enough to ensure its interests and security. There is also a need for reputational, or 'soft', power: for the state to be perceived favourably, for its investment to be welcome, for public acceptance of alliances with it in case of (military) threats.[18] (See Nye, 2004). Creating a powerful national brand is a perfect means to achieve that. The second strategic direction of state branding involves attitudes towards one's own state, which are not necessarily clear-cut – rather, 'the legitimacy of appeals to state loyalty must be spoken into existence.' Hence, from a hostile actor's perspective, fostering internal opposition is a tactic that can potentially pay off:[19] after all, competition of state brands should be seen as a zero-sum game between several firms, promoting competing offerings.[20] Meanwhile, a strong country brand imprinted in the eyes of the national public can not only help repel attempts at fostering discontent (competing brands) but also mobilise the population. In short, for countries, just as for companies, reputation creates an environment that either facilitates or hinders the pursuit of their goals. As a result, branding is to be seen as crucial to a broad range of state activities, and, potentially, relating to the central elements of state power, namely, the justificatory basis for the state's existence, actions, and both the presence and the policies of the incumbents.[21]

Of particular importance here is the notion of 'strategic narrative', which focuses on specific ends and specific messages that have to be transmitted,[22] bringing the analysis even closer to branding. Furthermore, international relations, just as any other human sphere of action, are often wrought with habitual perceptions: a particular state is, for the sake of cognitive economy, automatically classified in a habitual way ('friend', 'foe', 'peaceful', 'failed' etc.) regardless of the particular situation, and these interpretive schemes are deeply entrenched in the cultural patterns of the international community.[23] Consequently, it is in every state's interest to foster as favourable habitual associations as possible. Otherwise, even sensible actions of the state can be misinterpreted because of the negative baggage trailing

[18] See, generally, Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
[19] See e.g. Ivan Kozachenko, "How Social Media Transformed Pro-Russian Nostalgia Into Violence in Ukraine," *The Conversation* (October 2014) // http://theconversation.com/how-social-media-transformed-pro-russian-nostalgia-into-violence-in-ukraine-33046.
[20] T. Camber Warren, "Not by Sword Alone: Soft Power, Mass Media, and the Production of State Sovereignty," *International Organization* 68(1) (2014): 120.
[21] Scarlett Cornelissen, "National Meaning-Making in Complex Societies: Political Legitimation and Branding Dynamics in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Geopolitics* (2017) [published online before print on February 1, 2017] // DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1278695).
[22] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War & Conflict* 7(1) (2014).
[23] See, generally, Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 16(4) (2010).

from the past. Thus, the aim is to sway the target audiences and alter their cognitive schemes so that what a country does is interpreted favourably.[24]

State branding, in principle, tends to treat the national brand in the same way as a corporate one: '[it] is deemed valuable, manageable, and it can be marketed and sold like any other asset'.[25] In a similar fashion to the 'permanent campaign' of politicians such as Tony Blair or Bill Clinton, in which re-election battle is fought daily throughout the term in office,[26] states need to constantly mold their image in a favourable light and thus score points both at home and internationally. Branding, for states as well as for businesses, is simultaneously directed towards the cognitive-ideological and practical levels,[27] promoting support for the country abroad and partaking in the national project domestically. Emphasis on branding also introduces competition: countries not only have to project an abstract 'reputation' or 'power' but also must jostle within rather limited confines of contested attributes.[28] This competition also adds to the motivation for countries to become involved in (overt or covert) counter-branding, i.e. attempts to dislodge a competitor's reputation.

With the advent of social media, networks of a country's own citizens and citizens of other countries can produce information and launch campaigns that are capable of altering the national brand in all possible ways.[29] After all, brand, both business and political, is now characterised by simultaneous co-creation of identities by both individuals and respective organisations.[30] Moreover, a plethora of other actors, such as NGOs, individuals and their collectives, international organisations, terrorist groups, and other non-state bodies are able to make use of communication technologies that enable them to reach and shape large audiences.[31] Furthermore, there are indications that the very presence of competing narratives contributes to suspicion and cynicism among audiences with regards to any narrative provided[32] while discussions between the proponents of different narratives have been found to only increase radicalisation.[33] These tendencies perfectly feed into the broader picture of modern brand management challenges that will be discussed in the

[24] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, *supra* note 22: 74–75.
[25] Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen and Henrik Merkelsen, "The New PR of States: How Nation Branding Practices Affect the Security Function of Public Diplomacy," *Public Relations Review* 38(5) (2012): 812.
[26] See e.g. Catherine Needham, *supra* note 12.
[27] Nadia Kaneva, "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011).
[28] Yee-Kuang Heng, "Beyond 'Kawaii' Pop Culture: Japan's Normative Soft Power as Global Trouble-shooter," *The Pacific Review* 27(2) (2014): 187.
[29] Jan Servaes, "The Many Faces of (Soft) Power, Democracy, and the Internet," *Telematics and Informatics* 30(4) (2013).
[30] Iain Black and Cleopatra Veloutsou, "Working Consumers: Co-creation of Brand Identity, Consumer Identity and Brand Community Identity," *Journal of Business Research* 70 (2017).
[31] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, *supra* note 22: 78.
[32] *Ibid*.
[33] Jae Kook Lee, Jihyang Choi, Chensoo Kim, and Yonghwan Kim, "Social Media, Network Heterogeneity, and Opinion Polarization," *Journal of Communication* 64(4) (2014).

subsequent part. Meanwhile, the security threats posed by counter-branding of states will be analysed in more detail in the last section of the article.

2. SOCIAL-MEDIATED[34] INFORMATION AND CHALLENGES TO BRANDS

Having established the relevance of a brand management perspective on the national polity and its domestic and foreign policy, the next step is to enquire into the effects that social media have had on marketing. In fact, the new social media landscape has created ample opportunities and numerous threats to brands, whence '[e]quipped to do battle with large competitors, [brand owners] may be caught unawares by small-scale adversaries in command of a surprisingly potent new-media and social network arsenal: blogs, tweets, text messages, online petitions, Facebook protest sites, and digital videos'.[35] The defining model of brand message formulation is, therefore, shifting from 'organization as source' to 'user-initiation'. [36] If traditionally brand management was conducted through occasional publicity events and clearly defined marketing campaigns (or election/promotional campaigns in case of politics), in the online social environment every action might have huge ramifications and be amplified through a variety of channels.

Clearly, social media can be of great benefit since it enables actors to 'engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools'.[37] At the same time, however, harnessing social media is a task that requires skills and ways of thinking that are completely different from traditional marketing. Since a crucial part of the value-added social media content is now produced by the consumers of the brand, the latter are now at the helm. The means of consumer-led promotion or demotion of brands range from informal discussions on social networking sites to production of reviews and blog posts, self-created videos, etc.[38] Increasingly, the cornucopia of user-generated content becomes 'the primary source of information for both consumers and businesses'.[39] Hence, branding has become, to a significant

[34] In this article, 'social-mediated information' is taken to refer solely and exclusively to the specificities of information and branding content as it is communicated through social media. This article does not delve into the concepts and phenomena of social mediation, mediation, mediatization, etc. While these strands of research are not unrelated to the subject matter of this article, proper engagement with them would necessitate a much more expansive study.
[35] Leslie Gaines-Ross, "Reputation Warfare," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2010): 2 // https://hbr.org/2010/12/reputation-warfare.
[36] Brian G. Smith, "Socially Distributing Public Relations: Twitter, Haiti, and Interactivity in Social Media," *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010): 333.
[37] Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53(1) (2010): 67.
[38] Pierre R. Berthon, Leyland F. Pitt, Kirk Plangger, and Daniel Shapiro, "Marketing Meets Web 2.0, Social Media, and Creative Consumers: Implications for International Marketing Strategy," *Business Horizons* 55(3) (2012): 263.
[39] Yang Yu, Wenjing Duan and Qing Cao, "The Impact of Social and Conventional Media on Firm Equity Value: A Sentiment Analysis Approach," *Decision Support Systems* 55(4) (2013): 919.

extent, open source, i.e. companies and institutions are forced to both entrust much of the promoting effort to their followers/consumers but also to put up with whatever the outcome is, including the followers' resistance to dominant brand message(s), the latter often leading to splintering and creation of alter-brands – significant modifications to the original that are produced and owned by a community itself – robbing the brand owner of its consumers and income.[40] Consequently, the modern world of brand is a world of inevitable risk.[41] In addition, once the fans of a brand start imputing it with their own meanings and interpretations and applying their own strategies of brand promotion, the end result is often out of touch with the original intention of institutional promoters.[42] Another challenge is that information on which consumer-generated content operates often tends to be unverified and, hence, likely untrue,[43] either by intention or by negligence. But, because of the power of the message, the brand image often becomes true through its own effects, i.e. even a portrayal based on false information can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, a new 'collective truth' about what an organisation or a product is and/or should be.[44] Transposed to the state environment, these processes carry significant risks, best illustrated by the recent emphasis on 'fake news' and the effects it may be having on processes at both national and international levels. In fact, if the information environment has been so democratised as to enable the spread of any news whatsoever to the extent that 'everyone has their own facts',[45] convincing one's followers and getting one's message across, potentially against the resistance of communities structured around 'alternative' knowledge, is a daunting task. After all, it is immaterial if people do not support a political actor because they mistakenly believe in his/her lack of integrity or due to its actual lack of integrity: the end result – absence of support – is still the same.

However, co-creation of brands can also have significant benefits, most notably, formation of brand communities that have a higher stake in a brand's success than passive consumers would. This so-called 'linking value' drives consumer relationship with particular products beyond mere functionality,[46] in a sense placing the self in

[40] Bernard Cova and Tim White, "Counter-brand and Alter-brand Communities: The Impact of Web 2.0 on Tribal Marketing Approaches," *Journal of Marketing Management* 26(3-4) (2010): 265.
[41] Susan Fournier and Jill Avery, "The Uninvited Brand," *Business Horizons* 54(3) (2011); Joonas Rokka, Katariina Karlsson, and Janne Tienari, "Balancing Acts: Managing Employees and Reputation in Social Media," *Journal of Marketing and Management* 30(7-8) (2014).
[42] Bernard Cova and Tim White, *supra* note 40: 257.
[43] Pekka Aula, "Social Media, Reputation Risk and Ambient Publicity Management," *Strategy and Leadership* 38(6) (2010): 45.
[44] *Ibid*.: 46.
[45] Katharine Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth," *The Guardian* (July 2016) // https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth.
[46] Bernard Cova and Tim White, *supra* note 40: 258; Margaret Scammell, "Politics and Image: The Conceptual Value of Branding," *Journal of Political Marketing* 14 (2015): 12.

the product and the product in the self.[47] And because these communities are virtual, they easily spread quantitatively and geographically. In fact, social media engagement can be a crucial way of attracting new consumers – perhaps even more so than necessarily retaining the existing ones.[48]

As for states, interest-based communities, coalesced around an issue pertinent to a certain country or following a particular country-brand, are able to attract members globally, expanding the network of a nation's stakeholders.[49] After all, social cyberspace might have expanded the very notion of a stakeholder by enabling a 'social stake', whereby messages posted by a social media user 'influence the credibility they maintain in their online communities', meaning that aligning of one's personal profile to a state, an issue, or a cause 'creates stake for a social media user'.[50] Therefore, a successful influence campaign causes not only a change of opinion but also emotional and social investment. Issue-based global stakeholder networks are a new reality and they can be formed and mobilised in a short period but with significant effects. They offer an ambiguous addition to the security landscape: these networks can be both supportive of and averse to a country and its interests, thereby adding to or damaging the country's brand.

As such, social media does not necessarily create completely new forms of interaction: some of the most effective tools for spreading information are merely adopted old practices. For example, word-of-mouth has been around since, perhaps, the beginning of society but with the advent of social media it has become more far-reaching and rapidly spreading than ever before, no longer being confined to physical boundaries.[51] Such electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) seems to increasingly not only supplement but also replace traditional authoritative sources of information, such as magazines, newspapers, or television.[52] Indeed, the current trend appears to be putting online comments and reviews above traditional expert advice,[53] although the actual willingness to trust user comments seems to be more dependent on the actual attitude towards eWOM as such rather than the quality of individual comments.[54]

[47] Richard Kedzior, Douglas E. Allen, and Jonathan Schroeder, "The Selfie Phenomenon: Consumer Identities in the Social Media Marketplace," *European Journal of Marketing* 50 (2016).
[48] Corné Dijkmans, Peter C. Kerkhof, and Camiel J. Beukeboom, "A Stage to Engage: Social Media Use and Corporate Reputation," *Tourism Management* 47.
[49] Anthony Stefanidis, *et al*., "Demarcating New Boundaries: Mapping Virtual Polycentric Communities through Social Media Content," *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* 40(2) (2013): 117.
[50] Brian G. Smith, *supra* note 36: 333.
[51] Weijing Duan, Bin Gu and Andrew B. Whinston, "Do Online Reviews Matter? An Empirical Investigation of Panel Data," *Decision Support Systems* 45(4) (2008): 1007; see also Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, "The Influence of eWOM in Social Media on Consumers' Purchase Intentions: An Extended Approach to Information Adoption," *Computers in Human Behavior* 61 (2016); Sabrina Gottshalk and Alexander Mafael, "Cutting through the Online Review Jungle: Investigating Selective eWOM Processing," *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 37 (2017).
[52] Yang Yu, Wenjing Duan, and Qing Cao, *supra* note 39; Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, *supra* note 51.
[53] Hailiang Chen, Prabuddha De, Yu Hu, and Byoung-Hyoun Hwang, "Wisdom of Crowds: The Value of Stock Opinions Transmitted through Social Media," *The Review of Financial Studies* 27(5) (2014).
[54] Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, *supra* note 51.

There are significant dangers involved: for example, research indicates that in terms of online reviews, consumer attitudes depend even not necessarily on the quality (although it remains important for some categories) but on the quantity of negative reviews.[55] As such attitudes extend to more and more fields, the danger of (deliberate) disinformation increases significantly. Even in the context of state-brands, as will be demonstrated in relation to so-called 'sofa warriors', eWOM is a crucial way of spreading a particular narrative, usually an intentionally negative one, among people, in one way or another related to or having a stake in a particular country.

Arguably, the social-mediation of brands helps increase the number of stakeholders and promotes accountability and transparency on the part of corporations and institutions[56] as well as greater accountability on behalf of political actors, including states. That is much easier online where community formation is almost costless and communication has virtually unlimited reach. However, the same applies to communities aimed at denigrating a particular brand: they can easily spread, multiply, and disseminate their messages even without any institutional resources. Social bookmarking ('tagging') has also had a significant effect: it allows for categorisation of information, makes its spread along interest lines much easier, simplifies search for particular information, and makes sure certain messages do not get lost in the information noise of the Web.[57] Hence, information, both positive and negative, true or falsified, can become viral and spread exponentially.

Clearly, the boundaries between different environments and different roles have a tendency to blur online, making prediction and regulation increasingly difficult.[58] Traditional hierarchies are flattened and communications networks are enabled for both institutionalised and dispersed informal groups to share information and coordinate their activities.[59] Notably, competitors and critics now need significantly fewer resources to cause damage, levelling the playing field and causing the brand owner's time to react to shrink completely.[60] This leaves even strong brands very vulnerable to the effects strong consumer and/or challenger networks.[61] Not surprisingly, then, for brand managers, the online environment is the source of both

[55] Jumin Lee, Do-Hyung Park and Ingoo Han, "The Effect of Negative Online Consumer Reviews on Product Attitude: An Information Processing View," *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 7(3) (2008).
[56] Dara Schniederjans, Edita S. Cao and Marc Schniederjans, "Enhancing Financial Performance with Social Media: An Impression Management Perspective," *Decision Support Systems* 55(4) (2013): 911.
[57] Pieter Rutsaert, *et al*., "The Use of Social Media in Food Risk and Benefit Communication," *Trends in Food Science and Technology* 30(1) (2013): 85-86.
[58] Paricia Sánchez Abril, Avner Levin, and Alissa Del Riego, "Blurred Boundaries: Social Media Privacy and the Twenty-first Century Employee," *American Business Law Journal* 49(1) (2012).
[59] Anthony Stefanidis, *et al*., *supra* note 49.
[60] Leslie Gaines-Ross, *supra* note 35.
[61] Bernard Cova and Tim White, *supra* note 40; Robert V. Kozinets, Kristine de Valck, Andrea C. Wojnicki and Sarah J. S. Wilner, "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-mouth Marketing in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing* 74 (2010); Susan Fournier and Jill Avery, *supra* note 41; Joonas Rokka, Katariina Karlson, and Janne Tienaari, *supra* note 41.

opportunity and anxiety. As will be argued in the next chapter, the same must apply to national strategists.

What is even more important, in what is increasingly being acknowledged as the 'Experience Age',[62] factual accuracy and correction of misinformation may not matter that much. In fact, research demonstrates that even after fake news stories have been disproved, negative attitudes still linger, either due to some complex mental acrobatics (e.g. 'no smoke without a fire') or because of an affective affinity with the recipient's worldview.[63] The latter aspect is of particular importance: since the Experience Age is all about how we connect to a particular piece of information prior to (or even in absence of) cognition, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that *affective is effective*, i.e. in order to achieve its aim, a message must have emotional/experiential 'stickiness', regardless of other attributes, including veracity.[64] And even though emphasis on affinity and psychological perception has long been a crucial part of constructing brand equity, the current social-mediated environment has only further exacerbated the importance of emotion.[65] Hence, a significant challenge is posed to the institutional owner of a brand, either corporate or political: it is impossible to completely wash away the mud that is being thrown at you while simultaneously one has to beat the opposition at their own game by outdoing their affective capacity.

3. THE SOCIAL CYBER AS A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

As Collings and Rohozinski[66] demonstrate, the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict (and, from today's perspective, one might add the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict as well) shows that even losses in the physical battlefield can be turned into strategic informational victories; in fact, informational victory on the branding front might be the actual aim of the conflict, rendering the opponent's military advantage meaningless. The eye-opening factor was that 'although Israel and Hezbollah were wildly mismatched in terms of their resources and training […] the outcome had not hinged on those factors'.[67] The weapons that really mattered were informational:

[62] Daniel Newman "In the Age of Experience: The Best Brands Tell Better Stories and Make you a Part of Them," *Forbes* (March 2016) // http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2016/03/08/in-the-age-of-experience-the-best-brands-tell-better-stories-and-make-you-a-part-of-them/#781372ca4e2c; Mike Wadhera, "The Information Age is Over; Welcome to the Experience Age," *Tech Crunch* (May 2016) // https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/09/the-information-age-is-over-welcome-to-the-experience-age.
[63] See, notably, Emily Thorson, "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation," *Political Communication* 33(3) (2016).
[64] The Economist, "The Role of Technology in the Presidential Election" (November 2016) // http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21710614-fake-news-big-data-post-mortem-under-way-role-technology.
[65] See e.g. Darren G. Lilleker, "Interactivity and Branding: Public Political Communication as a Marketing Tool," *Journal of Political Marketing* 14(1-2) (2015).
[66] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *supra* note 2, 11.
[67] Leslie Gaines-Ross, *supra* note 35: 3.

'Hezbollah, the weaker side in conventional military terms, had used new media to win hearts and minds around the world, discrediting Israel's position and sapping its political will'.[68] In fact, Hezbollah's entire military effort was only an enabler for an influence campaign, ultimately leading to political victory.[69]

Modern internet users are connected for increasingly long periods of time, with the potential of being online non-stop. Information is being fed into an ever-increasing number of devices, from stationary to wearable, in an increasing number of formats.[70] Consequently, the information environment stands in for reality more fully than ever before. Moreover, the very nature of cyberspace implies that 'hundreds of millions of people can be approached, simply and at a low cost'.[71] And, once online, information begins a life of its own, being transformed and changed as it moves through the countless nodes of the network, substantially increasing the potential for manipulation in order to transform power relations and to acquire soft power.[72]

Unsurprisingly, whereas most of the early discourse about social media emphasised their democratic potential, some of the latest research has challenged this trend.[73] Social media have demonstrated the capacity for becoming a fertile soil for 'propaganda of every kind', aimed at swaying individuals towards certain actions or agenda, subverting public order through hoaxes and scaremongering, and exploiting the ensuing chaos.[74] Social media is an ideal environment in which to 'mobilize, intimidate or terrorize a targeted population'.[75] Hence, there is potential to rally a significant amount of people ready to act for a particular cause which they

[68] *Ibid.*
[69] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *supra* note 2, 2.
[70] BBC, *supra* note 4: 39.
[71] Roland Heickerö, *Dark Sides of the Internet: On Cyber Threats and Information Warfare* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 154.
[72] *Ibid*., 153.
[73] John Karlsrud, "Peacekeeping 4.0: Harnessing the Potential of Big Data, Social Media, and Cyber Technologies"; in: Jan-Frederik Kremer and Benedikt Müller, eds., *Cyberspace and International Relations: Theory, Prospects and Challenges* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2014); Seva Gunitsky, "Corrupting the Cyber-commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability," *Perspectives on Politics* 13(1) (2015); Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, "Online Social Media and Political Awareness in Authoritarian Regimes," *British Journal of Political Science* 45(1) (2015); Espen Geelmuyden Rød, and Nils B. Weidman, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats? The Internet in Authoritarian Regimes," *Journal of Peace Research* 52(3) (2015).
[74] Rebecca Goolsby, *On Cybersecurity, Crowdsourcing, and Social Cyber-attack* (Office of Naval Research) // http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/127219170-On-Cybersecurity-Crowdsourcing-Cyber-Attack-Commons-Lab-Policy-Memo-Series-Vol-1.pdf; Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili and Sanda Svetoka, *Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Ukraine Russia Conflict* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2015) // https://ccdcoe.org/sites/default/files/multimedia/pdf/CyberWarinPerspective_Lange_Svetoka_12.pdf; NATO STRATCOM, *Internet Trolling as a Hybrid Warfare Tool: The Case of Latvia* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2015a) // http://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/3213; NATO STRATCOM, *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2015b) // http://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/3213; NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH Information Campaign and Its Influence: Results of the Study* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2016) // http://stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/3107.
[75] Panayotis A. Yannakogeorgos, "Rethinking the Threat of Cyberterrorism": 57; in: Thomas M. Chen, Lee Jarvis, and Stuart Macdonald, eds., *Cyberterrorism: Understanding, Assessment, and Response* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2012).

otherwise may not have even been aware of. This use of social media is often referred to as information operations, psychological operations (psyops), or information warfare. Broadly, psyops can be defined as sustained and targeted employment of particular narratives, directed at the civilian population or the military (or both), intended to change the target group's perception of themselves and a referent object, particularly, a state-brand.[76] The aim of such operations is to 'manipulate mass public emotion to [make] individuals or masses of people to spontaneously move in specific ways in response to messaging'.[77] In such operations, the very distinction between war and peace is blurred while the social technologies employed for strategic ends expand the 'theatre of war' to the socio-political networks of a state.[78]

The first occasion when the internet's potential for influence operations became apparent was the Zapatista campaign in Mexico, starting in 1994, when, after being defeated militarily, the movement shifted attention to, among other things, online struggle.[79] (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). Having entered the pre-social media internet at a time when there were few competing voices, the Zapatistas were able to spread their message, acquire global following, and form support networks worldwide.[80] Since then, social media has had a substantial impact in starting and mobilising numerous social disturbances. Another predecessor of psyops dates back to the late 1980s and the early 1990s and the then-new social behaviour called 'trolling', intentioned to 'destroy nascent virtual communities by stirring up conflict'.[81] 'Trolls' would attempt to exacerbate hidden differences between community members by engaging in provocations on controversial issues and thus manipulate communities into open conflict.[82] Crucially, such conflicts tend to be self-perpetuating: those whose self-identity has been attacked retaliate, only to then become the target of reciprocal retaliation, and so forth.[83] Thus, quite often the 'troll' only needs to act as an instigator, without putting in much effort to sustain hostility. The advent of social media has enabled 'trolling' on a much larger scale, introducing it to 'the real world of ethnic division and social unrest'.[84] The two origins illustrate the possible aims of influence operations: spreading of information favourable to the instigator (the

[76] NATO STRATCOM, *Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian State and Defence Forces: Combined Analysis* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2017) // http://www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/5234.
[77] Panayotis A. Yannakogeorgos, *supra* note 75: 57
[78] Stephen Blank, "Russian Information Warfare as Domestic Counterinsurgency," *American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy* 35(1) (2013): 33.
[79] David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham E. Fuller, and Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista Netwar in Mexico* (Santa Monica and Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 1998).
[80] See, notably, Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden and Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2010).
[81] Rebecca Goolsby, *supra* note 74, 4.
[82] *Ibid*., 4–5.
[83] Elisabetta Brighi and Antonio Cerella, "An Alternative Vision of Politics and Violence: Introducing Mimetic Theory in International Studies," *Journal of International Political Theory* 11(1) (2015).
[84] Rebecca Goolsby, *supra* note 74, 5.

Zapatista legacy) and stirring up conflict within the opponent's population (psyops as trolling taken to a whole new level).

When information is often crowd-sourced and almost anybody can, under certain circumstances, become an influencer, the potential for propaganda and deception is significant; moreover, since communication is instantaneous and information spreads virally, the first-mover advantage of the instigator can be a major strategic gain since 'first stories tend to stick (whether true or not)'.[85] Hence, the social cyberspace enables what could be called 'sofa warriors'. These are individuals with or without a clearly pronounced political cause (and, therefore, either conscious or unconscious of their status as 'sofa warriors') who, by partaking in online groups and sharing specific information, help to further an influence operation and make psyops ubiquitous. 'Sofa warriors' disseminate psyop content in the same way as conventional malware is propagated – a network of 'sofa warriors' operates as a botnet. Social botnets can be employed for dissemination of the message (enlarging the network), low-level background activity (sustaining the information environment necessary to propagate a more intensive future psyop), or for orchestrated large-scale operations, similar to Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, in which large amounts of psyop messages are disseminated in conjunction with political or military moves, the aim being to achieve information dominance, thereby reducing resistance to (or even manufacturing support for) one's actions on the ground. Hence, whereas conventional cyber security emphasises threats to information infrastructure, social cyber security must concentrate on the 'wiring' of political communities.

Once started, a social cyber influence campaign is able to largely continue on its own through what has earlier been referred to as open source branding, whence consumers are the creators of the value they themselves consume. Branding and counter-branding efforts then become self-perpetuating, relying almost entirely on the 'sofa warriors' they themselves produce. Of course, these communities must be occasionally prompted, nudged, and kept excited. Also, the message itself must be periodically renewed because otherwise the core audiences may lose interest.[86] Nevertheless, the work of the psyop initiator is still made significantly easier by the social cyberspace, and the potential reach of the campaign is increased exponentially due to the enlargement of the ranks of active agents ('sofa warriors'). What is more, it is reasonable to expect that a psyop, if carried out by 'sofa warriors', will be more effective than an institutionalised one as consumers appear to accord higher

[85] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *supra* note 2, 7-8.
[86] Jeroen van Laer and Peter van Aelst, "Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations," *Information, Communication & Society* 13(8) (2010): 1163.

credibility to information provided by other consumers[87] or, in this case, fellow citizens.

Influence operations are further facilitated through 'ghettoization of speech', a tendency for people to 'follow, view, and become a fan of only those sites that accord with their preconceived world view'.[88] Although, in a sense, this tendency is only an exacerbation of earlier trends of conventional media consumption, whereby people would only read certain newspapers and watch certain television channels, social media even further increase ghettoisation as 'people are artificially shielded, often without their knowledge, from views that they are expected by an algorithm not to agree with',[89] meaning that even if there is some public sphere on social media,[90] it is a very fragmented one, ruled not by the power of the better argument but, rather, by the power of algorithms.[91] Hence, the aim of an influence operation would be to either herd the target population into information ghettos or to infiltrate pre-existing ghettos and hijack their narrative production. Once that happens, group members are transformed into 'sofa warriors' while the group itself becomes a social botnet. Moreover, ghettoisation is both reflected and exacerbated by the current news media landscape. Not only '[t]here is a deepening global tilt towards news focused or aggregated around a world view' with shared values becoming 'a new brand loyalty'.[92] but also the news providers themselves are beginning to roll out personalised information offerings targeted at a particular individual through data-refining algorithms.[93] Naturally, this targeting also serves to further fence individuals off from the broader context.

The object of psyops are brand narratives that draw a border between the 'own' and the 'alien', between 'good' and 'bad', simultaneously setting up a symbolic centre.[94] Narratives – including narratives about a state – 'explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests'.[95] As a result, the core struggle of a (counter-)branding effort is the struggle over a narrative about a given country both domestically and abroad. Especially during a conflict,

[87] Bruno Schiwinski and Dariusz Dabrowski, *supra* note 10: 202.
[88] Sarah Joseph, "Social Media, Political Change, and Human Rights," *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 35 (2012): 175; there is also evidence from the Ukraine conflict: see Dinissa Duvanova, Alexander Semenov, and Alexander Nikolaev, "Do Social Networks Bridge Political Divides? The Analysis of VKontakte Social Network Communication in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31(3) (2015). More recently, such ghettoization has been a notable feature of the 2016 US Presidential election.
[89] Sarah Joseph, *suora* note 88: 175; see also Natascha Just and Michael Latzer, "Governance by Algorithms: Reality Construction by Algorithmic Selection on the Internet," *Media, Culture & Society* 39(2) (2017).
[90] See e.g. Dominik Batorski and Ilona Grzwińska, "Three Dimensions of the Public Sphere on Facebook," *Information, Communication & Society* [published online before print on February 6, 2017] // http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1281329.
[91] Michelle Wilson, "Algorithms (and the) Everyday," *Information, Communication & Society* 20(1) (2017).
[92] BBC, *supra* note 4: 24.
[93] *Ibid*.: 39.
[94] Clifford Shearing and Less Johnstone, "Nodal Wars and Network Fallacies: A Genealogical Analysis of Global Insecurities," *Theoretical Criminology* 14(4) (2010): 501.
[95] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, *supra* note 22: 76.

narratives play a crucial role, with the parties attempting to attach their own characterisations, motives, and associations to contested events, grievances, or identities; hence, in an information operation, '[d]ifferent episodes are narrativized, put into cause-effect sequences, and given meaning'.[96] Such strategy is, of course, not new. However, with the advent of social media, this conflict of brands has become ever more intense and, even more important, now takes place on a level ground or, in some cases, might even have shifted the balance of power as non-state actors, having less access to conventional media, often tend to be more prolific in attracting following.[97]

Another target of (counter-)branding is trust. Trust is crucial in societal interactions and in helping solve collective action problems without obsessive monitoring of partners;[98] it stipulates openness to one's vulnerability,[99] political engagement and participation,[100] and so forth. Since trust, in its political dimension, reflects the attitude towards one's society in general,[101] sowing distrust among the adversary's citizens is a crucial target for any influence operation: in this way, the opponent's public sphere is constrained and, if trust in the state is lost, any hostile action becomes much easier to carry out. Social media messages and online communities are very useful tools for trust-erosion psyops, since they offer instantaneous and sustained communication and accumulation of mass. This scalability only serves to further increase the extent of influence operations and lends credibility to debilitating narratives. After all, credibility in the online environment tends to be about popularity rather than traditional factual accuracy.[102]

Both carrying out and countering psyops require tactics that are different from traditional conflict. One has to keep in mind that '[t]he win, especially against irregular adversaries, is in the form of political victory' as '[t]he center of gravity is public opinion – often of multiple audiences'.[103] All those audiences have to be targeted with specifically tailored messages – otherwise, the influence campaign will get lost in the sea of information noise.[104] But it is, perhaps, even more important to cultivate the soil into which the message is to be implanted and to make audiences

[96] *Ibid*.: 79.
[97] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *supra* note 2, 8.
[98] Marc Hooghe, Sofie Marien and Thomas de Vroome, "The Cognitive Basis of Trust: The Relation between Education, Cognitive Ability and Political Trust," *Intelligence* 40(6) (2012).
[99] Dean Lusher, Garry Robins, Philippa E. Pattison, and Alessandro Lomi, "'Trust Me': Differences in Expressed and Perceived Trust Relations in an Organization," *Social Networks* 34(4) (2012).
[100] Elisabeth Ivarsflaten and Kristin Strømsnes, "Inequality, Diversity and Social Trust in Norwegian Communities," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 23(3) (2013).
[101] Erika van Elsas, "Political Trust as a Rational Attitude: A Comparison of the Nature of Political Trust across Different Levels of Education," *Political Studies* 63(5) (2015).
[102] See e.g. Seung-A Annie Jin and Joe Phua, "Following Celebrities' Tweets About Brands: The Impact of Twitter-Based Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Consumers' Source Credibility Perception, Buying Intention, and Social Identification with Celebrities," *Journal of Advertising* 43(2) (2014).
[103] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *supra* note 2, 2.
[104] *Ibid*., 12.

more receptive in anticipation of a 'real' conflict. In other words, global public opinion and, especially, the opinion of the audiences that really matter on specific issues, must always be made ready to choose the 'right' one of the competing offerings. In this case, brand management is particularly relevant: here as well, real brand equity is the ability to make those unaware of the brand or as yet undecided choose a particular offering.[105]

As already stressed, brand competition is not limited to open conflict. In fact, it predates the conflict because any anti-state disturbance indicates that the state-brand has already failed.[106] In the same way as for firms the loss of reputation often causes multifaceted damage by decreasing competitiveness, positioning, consumer trust and loyalty, legitimacy of operations, sometimes even jeopardising the very licence to exist,[107] counter-branding efforts through information operations might significantly weaken a state's ability to achieve long-term strategic aims.

Influence operations have also been used to foster social unrest and inter-group violence. A good example, involving the use of social media, could be the violence in India's Assam in 2012. This violence was partly instigated by dedicated websites as well as videos and images uploaded on such platforms as Facebook and YouTube, showing graphic images of death and destruction, originating from completely different contexts, such as an earthquake in Tibet or a cyclone in Myanmar, but claiming to show the aftermath of attacks against Assam's Muslims.[108] The messages, once posted online, were rapidly disseminated by and among trusted friends on social media.[109] Despite the falsity of its content, the psyop was able to provoke violent retribution as well as massive displacement of people.[110] Notably, trust in the networks through which information spread as well as in the people who disseminated it (inadvertent 'sofa warriors') appears to have been an important factor as to why the provocation caught on and led to physical violence.[111]

Another clear illustration can be seen in the conflict in Ukraine. For example, on the pro-Russian side, the counter-branding effort is aimed at portrayal of something akin to genocide of Russian speakers in Ukraine.[112] Reports include human rights and international law violations, mass slaughter organised or tolerated

[105] Margaret Scammell, *supra* note 12: 190.
[106] See, generally, Warren, *supra note* 20.
[107] Pekka Aula, *supra* note 43: 44.
[108] Rebecca Goolsby, *supra* note 74, 2-3.
[109] *Ibid*., 3.
[110] Panayotis A. Yannakogeorgos, *supra* note 75: 57.
[111] Rebecca Goolsby, *supra* note 74.
[112] Jill Dougherty, "Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation," *Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Discussion Paper Series* #D-88 (2014) // http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/d88-dougherty.pdf.

by the government, 'fascists' attacking minorities etc.[113] Such messages are, then, transmitted and multiplied through social media and used as basis for even more elaborate narratives. To that extent, the Ukraine conflict has become not only a physical battleground but also 'a battle of narratives'[114] in which social media are used to spread graphic images of violence, often 'borrowed' from other conflicts, such as Syria, Chechnya, Bosnia, and others.[115] Notably, since Russian media were banned in Ukraine shortly after the fall of President Yanukovich, social media became the prime vehicle to mobilise pro-Russian sentiment,[116] in effect, creating parallel realities, in which their users were immersed.[117] Not surprisingly, the Ukraine conflict has been, according to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare'.[118] It would not be at all surprising if the Ukraine experience was used as a framework in planning future influence operations.

In short, the social-mediated information environment can easily be used for influence operations. If a state's brand is seen as a crucial asset in the eyes of both its own population and global audiences (as it should), then the advent of new forms of communication and ever new smart devices that facilitate such communication becomes both an opportunity and a security threat. It comes as an opportunity if the state is to engage in proactive branding measures, similar to those employed by corporate actors to boost their online following, brand awareness, and, most importantly, consumption of the branded product. That move, however, would require changing the current paradigm and embracing the ethical and political challenges of strategically indoctrinating their own citizens. Meanwhile, the social cyber is clearly a threat because it leaves the state-brand, just like a corporate one, much more vulnerable to attacks, hijacking, and the creation of counter-brand communities.

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[113] Andrei Aliaksandrau and Helen Womack, "Brave New War," *Index on Censorship* 43(4) (2014); Sergei Samoilenko, "The Situation in Ukraine: One or Many Realities?" *Russian Journal of Communication* 6(2) (2014).

[114] Deutsche Welle, "Digital Media in Ukraine Conflict: A Blessing or a Curse?" (July 2014) // http://www.dw.de/digital-media-in-ukraine-conflict-blessing-or-a-curse/a-17754636.

[115] Andrei Aliaksandrau and Helen Womack,*supra* note 113.

[116] Ivan Kozachenko, *supra* note 19.

[117] Sergei Samoilenko, *supra* note 113; Dinissa Duvanova, Alexander Simenov, and Alexander Nikolaev, *supra* note 88; see also NATO STRATCOM, *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine*, *supra* note 74; NATO STRATCOM, *supra* note 75.

[118] Cited in John Vandiver, "Allies Must Prepare for Russia 'Hybrid War'," *Stars and Stripes* (September 2014) // http://www.stripes.com/news/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464; However, one should not imply that such information effort was directed outwardly only: there has been a simultaneous drive to sanitise and control memory of domestic audiences within Russia itself – see e.g. Julia Sweet, "Political Invasions into Collective Memories: Russia," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016).

CONCLUSIONS

Since a state's brand is a crucial tool of achieving strategic aims, it is poised to become an important object of contestation. Both the state concerned and its adversaries are involved in promoting certain images, associations, and narratives as belonging to the core state-brand, moulding it according to particular interests and aims. In this way, (self-)presentation becomes a permanent campaign in which every action and decision contributes, either positively or negatively, to the support of the domestic and foreign audiences. The advent of social media has even further strengthened the trend and added new challenges: since content is largely self-generating, online communities have become especially powerful creators of the (state-)brand. However, such creativity can be used as a weapon as well.

The security dimension of the social-mediated information environment must be taken seriously in any national security consideration. The social cyber makes populations – both domestic and international – the target of conflict, both in its active and latent stages, in new ways. But it also weaponises populations themselves by creating 'sofa warriors' who promote the interests of one of the parties to the conflict without being aware of their role (in contrast to paid or ideologically motivated 'trolls'). By no means associated with any military or paramilitary structures, these 'ordinary' individuals are, nevertheless, able to challenge the state-brand, hampering loyalty within a state's borders and diminishing support for that state globally. The distinction between combatant and non-combatant, therefore, becomes virtually non-existent, with anybody anywhere in the world potentially being an enemy's 'sofa warrior'.

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