# Participatory propaganda and the intentional (re)production of disinformation around international conflict

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# Participatory propaganda and the intentional (re)production of disinformation around international conflict

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the changing role of the public in persuasion. I focus on participatory propaganda—which I define as the involvement of publics in the (re)production of persuasive, manipulative, or false content through social networks. Specifically, I draw attention to two underexplored areas: participatory propaganda in *international* rather than domestic politics, and motivations for publics to *knowingly*, rather than unwittingly, share propagandistic content. The discussion is illustrated with brief insights from a large-scale study of online narrative battles between the Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas during the 2020 Karabakh war.

## Introduction

Throughout 2020–2023, I was interviewing Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Europe and North America about their online activism during the 2020 Karabakh war. Diasporas played a huge role in this conflict, not only by fundraising and lobbying foreign governments, but also by narrating this war to global audiences on social media. Ordinary citizens became online warriors, producing and sharing information to shape public opinion, while international news media paid more attention to the U.S. election than this distant war. Armenian and Azerbaijani users shared information, produced infographics, reposted casualty figures and graphic photos, boosted hashtags like #StopAzerbaijaniAgression or #StopArmenianOccupation, coordinated interactions with alternative content, and engaged in other forms of information activism in support of their homeland. Many of my interviewees admitted to knowingly sharing false and propagandistic content—either individually or as part of a coordinated campaign—and described their motivations and tactics. In the words of one participant, "Of course we shared propaganda and fake news—if a [made-up[1]] event may well have happened, does it really matter if it did not?" Studies of propaganda often assume a misled and misinformed public, who unwittingly become propaganda (re)producers, and suggest solutions in improved media literacy skills. Yet why do some ordinary people knowingly

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share propagandistic content? This paper questions the deliberate (re)production of propaganda beyond domestic politics (e.g. sharing misinformation in elections) and explores participatory propaganda around an international conflict.

## Participatory propaganda

The rise of social media has enabled a *participatory* shift in the way politics, conflict, persuasion, and propaganda involve audiences. Top-down propaganda models that relied on censorship and government control of news media had to adapt to the interactive nature of digital media that enables publics to create, disseminate, amplify, contest, and curate content. Today, anyone with an internet connection can produce and spread narratives —in other words, become a *participant* in the highly contested information environments of war and propaganda, even if through the seemingly banal actions of liking and reposting content. As a result, modern conflicts turn into global narrative battlefields where publics play a major role as participants and amplifiers and not just as targets (Chernobrov, 2022; Merrin, 2018); citizen journalist voices can seem more authentic and credible than those of government or professional media (Patrikarakos, 2017); and individuals can engage in online political action with minimal effort and from the relative safety of their homes (Asmolov, 2021). Active public participation in the (re)production of propaganda is blurring the traditional distinctions between the "propagandist" and their "target audience" (Wanless & Berk, 2021), between civilians and combatants in war (Crawford, 2015), and even between foreign and domestic publics (Szostek, 2018).

However, the greater visibility of publics as participants should not detract attention from the deliberate actors of the digital influence industry, who often "develop top down strategies to *use* participatory dynamics' (Briant, 2024, p. 92). Audience participation in propaganda preceded social media, and it is the altered relative power of actors rather than the idea of participation itself that is new to digital-age subversion (Briant, 2024). Lewandowsky (2022) too, draws attention to strategic actors who seed disinformation to trigger participation from publics and the media. Participatory propaganda is a collaborative process as it "co-opts its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Wanless & Berk, 2021, p. 113). Participatory disinformation and propaganda are characterized by the interplay of both top-down and bottom-up dynamics, where elites help seed the narratives, non-elites amplify them and produce new content, which elites then amplify in turn (Starbird et al., 2023).

Participatory propaganda benefits deliberate actors in several ways. Social media platforms attempt to regulate and remove inauthentic accounts such as bots (Wanless & Berk, 2019), while participation of authentic, even if unwitting users is harder to challenge. As individuals are more likely to believe people they personally know or find influential (Turcotte et al., 2015), participatory propaganda can be more persuasive than top-down communications. The public themselves are co-producing and spreading the message, meaning that manipulative intent is less evident, and the original source is often obscured (Lewandowsky, 2022). Additionally, the sheer volume of content that is spread and amplified by users can dominate the information space. With social media algorithms shaping content visibility, participatory propaganda can be less about persuasion and changing opinions and more about gaming algorithms or simply drowning

alternative viewpoints through coordinated interactions with content (Chernobrov, 2022). The objective is often to polarize audiences and internalize conflict (Asmolov, 2021). Participatory propaganda exists both in democracies, where political actors have developed a range of tactics for drawing audiences, wittingly or unwittingly, into active dissemination of messages (Wanless & Berk, 2021) and authoritarian states, where "the very production of pro-regime content is turning into an increasingly shared process between citizens and officials" (Repnikova & Fang, 2018, p. 770).

## Motivations for propaganda (re)production

What motivates audiences to share persuasive, manipulative, or false content is then a crucial question for understanding and addressing the threat of participatory propaganda. It is well known that messages that trigger emotions spread more easily (Brady & Crockett, 2019; Duffy et al., 2019) and can mobilize audiences for specific political goals. For example, populist, conspiracist, and far-right content is often reproduced because it successfully constructs and capitalizes on popular insecurities and fears (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2022; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). Or political propaganda can be packaged in a humorous form, such as a meme or a prank, to maximize outreach. Audiences may be entertained by the joke even if unconvinced by its political message – yet this can be enough to stimulate content sharing (Chernobrov, 2024). Studies of disinformation often conclude a public preference for accurate information (Pennycook et al., 2021) and attribute propaganda sharing to people's limited ability to recognize it, advocating media literacy solutions. Even participatory disinformation literature speaks of "witting agents and unwitting crowds" of motivated but sincere participants (Starbird et al., 2023).

But why do some people *knowingly* share propagandistic, false, or manipulative content? There is a relative scarcity of studies on this aspect of participatory propaganda. Surveys in various national contexts show that sizeable percentages of social media users (17–29%) share news they believe to be false at the time of sharing (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Motivations for the intentional sharing of disinformation and propaganda can vary from political orientation, partisanship, and the goal of mobilizing against an opponent (Petersen et al., 2023), to social motives such as gaining social engagement (Ren et al., 2023), to "interestingness-if-true" outweighing potential inaccuracy (Altay et al., 2021), and to fun and the civic duty of warning others about possible threats (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). And while people generally avoid sharing low-quality information because of reputational concerns (Waruwu et al., 2021), some may be willing to knowingly share propaganda because of the more cynical approach that propaganda and counter-propaganda are now the "default media playground" (Chernobrov & Briant, 2022, p. 405) and that "all news is fake" (Pomerantsev, 2014, p. 49). There are even fewer studies, however, that explore the tactics and motivations of intentional propaganda participation by ordinary publics in the context of *international* rather than domestic politics.

## Participatory propaganda and the 2020 #KarabakhWar

My study involved over 100 interviews over 4 years with online users in both Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas. It captured online information behaviors during and after the

2020 Karabakh war. Here, I present a brief sketch of several relevant points; however, further details have partly been published (Chernobrov, 2022), and similar trends can be found in other recent conflicts including Ukraine and Gaza.

When sharing information about the war online, most interviewees first tried to verify it against multiple sources. If you are a national of a country at war, you can expect to be seen as biased and can easily lose credibility when trying to shape the opinion of your audience. However, many interviewees admitted to knowingly sharing content they knew or suspected to be propagandistic or false. Several key motivations drove participation: political mobilization for a greater cause that justified inaccuracies; a widely shared view that information wars are key to modern conflict and must be won; perceived bias of international media; and empowerment through information activism. Living far from the conflict zone, diasporas were also doubtful about their right to question what officials and media on the ground gave as news—widely seeing their mission in amplifying rather than questioning dubious information that could tip global audiences in their favor.

Participatory propaganda in this conflict developed several common formats and tactics. Online users produced stories that would emotively resonate with third-party audiences, directing anger and outrage at the opposing side. Real and fake images of bombed churches, killed children, and bearded jihadists, along with infographics comparing the war to familiar symbols (such as Vietnam, Hitler, 9/11) were shared individually and even produced centrally by diasporic activist groups. Blocking and unblocking online "armies" were formed to target opponents, report content as hateful or violent, and achieve or reverse user bans or content removal on social media platforms. Algorithms were gamed with coordinated campaigns to like favorable and dislike any unfavorable news posts (for example, from major international media), therefore boosting or drowning content visibility to third-party audiences. In short, participatory propaganda combined individual and networked tactics that maximized the involvement of authentic users— both those ready to share disinformation knowingly, and those trying to pursue accuracy in their posts.

## The unknowns of participatory propaganda

Participatory propaganda redefines the relationship between propagandist and audience, blurring traditional distinctions and actively involving publics in the (re)production of content. It also develops new tactics and targets – not necessarily aiming to persuade, it can shape discourses by maximizing outreach, exploiting algorithms, and managing visibility of alternative content. The limited participatory propaganda literature is dominated by state-centric or elite-centric approaches that trace threats to specific states such as Russia and China or political campaigns. The focus is often limited to domestic impacts, such as election interference and voter engagement.

This essay calls for greater exploration of the motivations, tactics, and impacts of participatory propaganda in international politics, which could take various directions. How does participatory propaganda enable contestation of international events and the construction of multiple, conflicting realities? Mediated realities around Karabakh, Ukraine, Gaza, or Syria, have been shaped by publics and algorithms as well as strategic actors and news media. Moreover, the definition of a "strategic actor" itself is limited: how should

we understand participatory propaganda cascades or their end goal when decentralized, non-state, or even transient actors such as diasporas or grassroot activist groups can seed disinformation and trigger participation? And what would participatory propaganda mean for traditional approaches to peace and reconciliation? As the example of the Karabakh war shows, participatory propaganda and narrative battles continue well after a ceasefire is reached on the ground. Extending war to online spaces and drawing ordinary citizens into it, participatory propaganda presents a new, largely unresolved challenge of reconciling online warriors when there is no physical war any longer.

## Note

1. The interviewee spoke of actively spreading information about a made-up event which they knew had not happened, but which could help turn U.S. public opinion against the opposing diaspora community.

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