

Words as Weapons and Meme Wars: The New Warfare in Political Discourse

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Abstract: *The study was meant to examine and analyse how used new digital media rhetoric reconfigures traditional power and communication paradigms with the intention of weaponizing language. All this weaponization on digital platforms even affects democratic processes, political participation, and people's confidence. Thus, through a qualitative research methodology, the current study demonstrates how memes and digital media platforms are used as weapons of extreme viewpoints for discrediting rivals and creating narratives. Furthermore, the paper offers an understanding of how language, technology, and politics come together to change contemporary warfare with virtual battlefields which significantly impact political discourse and democratic norms. The method will involve an exclusive and very in-depth case study, as well as a literature review of documents and reports as secondary sources of data. The paper will unveil the complex structure of weaponized words and the influence they exert on people's opinions in the building of a digital-influenced political warfare.*

Keywords: linguistic capital, weaponization of language, meme, cultural transmission, digital platforms

INTRODUCTION

According to Keisha Bryan, language weaponization or weaponization of language is a term to define the process when any type of words, discourse, or language would be able to injure others. (*The weaponization of language is the classroom and beyond*, hardcover by Keisha C. Bryan and Luis Xavier Panton Herrera). The term harm here is crucial because it specifies how certain groups are affected by ideologies and practices that normalize inequalities and injustices in their environments. The rapid advance of digital technology and the persistent incorporation of social media – Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, etc. – have revolutionary changes to how people received, elaborated, exercised, and contested conventional political power. If language expresses, defines, and conveys, then it can be termed the central weapon of political warfare.

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This can only be contested in a free democracy through the exchange of opinions, views, and perceptions with others. In this era of globalization, digital platforms facilitated more dissemination of political beliefs, political parties, leaders, or even the entire nation because it indeed creates public opinion and manipulates elections. A question can come up on how a digital platform turns into a battlefield – a battlefield for any form of political warfare. Just got an answer: all the media spread in short time at all ranges, and every misinformation can be orchestrated, opinionated, or manipulated. Also, because all platforms are flexible for the average citizen, this leaves them free to use a very informal manner entirely devoid of any traditional media source. Memes, basically a tool of internet comedy, were made popular before the vast rise of social media. However, it gradually came to serve more allegorical messages to popular audiences or any nation. A sharp instrument in that it conveys in short something very complicated regarding ideological positions. Why? Because memes are often very eye-catching and precise, yet it can give a strong narrative about any topic. Most importantly, it can be delivered or conveyed or published without any proper traditional medium of communication. Memes can simply throw any judgment, comment, or opinion towards any movements or campaigns, political or not.

By warfare, one would not only think of conventional war tactics like manipulative campaigns or misleading information, but also incorporated into an extended sense of daily conversation. The nascence of language, weaponization, and memes could formulate a new aperture on digital political warfare across many perceptions, comments, and judgments. According to Michel Foucault, power is framed, formed, and could be through anyone or anything mostly through his discourse theory. These days campaigning politics use social media and memes for influencing young voters and supporters to connect to the publicized idea of mocking opponents through satirical and humorous presentations. This would therefore create strong power authority. The study will be done by conducting case studies of the July revolution 2024 in Bangladesh popularly known as Quota Reformation Movement, including how this debate played out in social media. Apart from these, this paper will also put into light how digital political warfare works. Furthermore, the study will also look into bias and manipulation concerning a political agenda. By intersection of language, technology, and political agenda, this paper will present an authentic understanding on reshaping political representations in the twenty-first century.

Objectives:

The study's primary objective is to know how language can be weaponized through digital media and memes. Some other objectives will be pursued as well:

1. to explore the use of social media and memes in digital political warfare.

2. to study the ethical challenges and implications of language weaponization on digital platforms.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was used to execute this study along with case studies of high-impact political memes. The paper will peruse some of the political influenced cases like 2016 U.S presidential Election campaign strategy, the Brexit movement, and especially the Quota reform movement 2024 in Bangladesh. The main thrust of the study would be to evaluate and understand how social media and memes were utilized in the aforementioned case studies of political field. The reason of special selection of July Movement is - it created a greater impact among this generation and it also showed about having or creating agency and power from nothing. The case study really defines how memes are emerging as a central actor in the political as well as in the social in more ways than one. The study placed a strong ethical consideration. The matters involved were dealt with utmost sincerity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By using language in a calculated way in today's online spaces, the pattern of political discourse being highly influenced through social media and internet memes is seen. (MA. AlAfnan,2025). This leads to digital political warfare where information and tools for communication are used as weapons to reach political goals (A.Liguasha). Weaponizing language means using certain vocabulary and symbols to connect to certain demographic of audience to influence them. These are divided in a way that prepares for real action. Propaganda, disinformation, censorship, and mundane discourse, etc. are prime examples of language weaponization (Pascale,2019). The battle to gain the upper hand and assert dominance has changed its facade and the vast space of the internet involving social media spaces are now considered as the new battlefield (Nieuburt, 2021). According to (A. Liagusha, 2025), this battlefield offers alluring benefits such as the viral spread of information and gives power to anyone with/without malicious intent to bring their own spin in a narrative. By using these benefits, the battle of asserting narratives is getting intense. There are loopholes in the open information systems in democracies that are taken advantage of by autocratic regimes like Russia. By using 'sharp power' they spread narratives that benefit them to sway public opinion. This tactic is very similar to the martial art, Aikido, where the strength of the opponent is used against them. In this case the loopholes of democratic freedom are being exploited by autocracy. People are slowly becoming aware of the fact that these democratic loopholes can be misused and as a result, national security can be threatened, which presents the challenge as to how to maintain this freedom of speech while keeping the general public secure from disinformation and propaganda.

The emergence of memes has become a powerful tool in this context (MA. AlAfnan, 2025). Memes are like visual arguments, often using images and texts to reflect ideological practices. Memes have a unique feature of being polysemic which means their meaning can be interpreted

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in various ways, making them highly flexible tools for communication (Lasn, 2013). (A. Liagusha, 2025) also says that due to their easily accessible nature and emotionally charged visual content, they gain a viral reach which makes them difficult to trace. Memes have immense power to sway and change public opinion, shaping their values and perceptions by constant exposure. Memes can be used to make complex issues more palatable and easier to understand for the general public, create and shape identities, advance political objectives, enhance the visibility of political leaders and governments in a global stage, exploit and manipulate sensitive issues and may contribute to the deepening of social inequalities. (A. Liagusha, 2025)

Memos are often weaponized to disrupt, challenge, attack, resist and reappropriate public figures, institutions and discourses (C. Peters, 2022). They are also heavily used in online political debates which are referred to as ‘meme wars’ by netizens (Häkkinen, 2014). Despite their seemingly innocuous nature they have the potential to be powerful propaganda tools (DeCook, 2018, 2020). In order to spread political agenda and ideology as well as become more palatable to the general populace at the same time, memes are carefully crafted to express ideas, emotions, beliefs by combining shared cultural references that are infused with humor (Poepsal et al., 2024). Nations, political parties and other conflicting bodies engage in ‘meme wars’ to become more relatable and garner the support of the public in global online spaces (Lasn, 2013). The vast platform of the internet is now seen as a valuable asset for propaganda (Nieuburt, 2021). In this context, memes are utilized to reinforce ideology and bolster public opinion. Weaponized memes are used to push propaganda, by presenting a one-sided narrative that does not paint the whole picture which ultimately serves to change and dominate the original narrative (DeCook, 2018) Memos are used as strategic tools for disseminating political narratives and can be utilized as instruments to spread propaganda and misinformation. Autocratic regimes exploit the democratic free market of information by utilizing memes to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion. Conversely, many democratic countries like Ukraine have also engaged in “memetic warfare” to have a fair chance at countering Russian narrative. (A. Liagusha, 2025)

In times of political unrest, memes can influence public opinion, unite or divide a nation and destabilize established discourses. Memos by nature, can easily go viral by spreading messages of solidarity, seeds of dissent and criticism. (Seiffert-Brockman et al., 2018) In the same vein, memes are often polysemic, portraying multiple meanings through the amalgamation of visuals (videos, images, graphs etc.) and text. (Shifman 2013) This polysemy is often weaponized as a tool for propaganda but also makes it confusing as their multiple layered meaning may be subject to contest. (Poepsal et al., 2024). The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict serves as a powerful example of digital political warfare where memes play a substantial part. Ukraine, while going up against an autocratic occupation, employed the use of memes both to garner public opinion and as forms of information/disinformation disorder due to its open information market. (A. Liagusha, 2025) Ukrainian government's official X (Twitter) account has actively made use of memes as part of its propaganda to strengthen national unity, garnering international sympathy and depict Russian rule as an autocratic dictatorship. (Poepsal et al., 2024)

Discourse Analysis

The lethal function of language through the digital virtual world is a phenomenon so pervasive in this time and age. This study intends to examine the metamorphosis of political engagement brought about by this virtual weaponization and its emergence as issues in political warfare. Indeed, language nowadays has proved to be one of the most powerful and crucial tools in shaping attitudes and discourses about issues. The weaponization of language refers to the deliberate use of words for the purpose of establishing or manipulating any political ideological objective. Such social media platforms as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are among the chief instruments in organizing public opinion for or against any type of political conflict through propaganda. These platforms are capable of engineering messages that can sway opinion using its rapid proliferation through the net. Nowadays, every political party, group or organization has one of these. Thus, the sense in which it is created has evaded the old news outlets.

They can mock politicians while either bolstering their beliefs, or forming and reinforcing communities of individuals with similar views through memes, personal signals, their political identity, and integration into some belief. Oftentimes, this is realized through digital backrooms where individuals tend to see most strongly content that affirms what they perceive to be true, which increases political division. As Shifman puts it, memes serve as cultural texts that mimic and shape political ideologies through repetition and adaptation (Shifman 28).

The proliferation of the social and digital language through memes has actually severely accelerated the development of political polarization. The short, sharp content that Twitter appears to promote encourages simply worded-excessively emotional language. It eases the easy spread of extremely popular opinions but makes it much more complicated for a person to explain really massively nuanced ideas. Bradshaw and Howard identified that memes are one of the most powerful tools used in large-scale manipulation camps to divide public opinion (Bradshaw and Howard 14).

Viral content, according to the algorithmic boost of engagement rewards, would spread within a matter of seconds. That fact is mostly made or propagated through misinformation and doubting whether or not the truth is there, which misconstrues political scenarios and fools the audience into believing so. In such an environment, not only people used language to persuade others but also to blindfold people by spreading tongues of lies while keeping society divided. Such a new world of digital war is entering people's lives for using memes and social media, which is hitting hard at how people behave when it comes to using their rights of democracy and politics today. One exciting aspect about these tools is that they opened ways into new avenues for marginal voices to speak, organize, and actually gain respectability. But, on the other hand, it decreased the faith

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people had on traditional political institutions and, most of all, the media. Political actors easily create narratives without the scrutiny of the established media, resulting in a more divided and fractured political landscape. Online communications, fast-paced and emotional, often deny extensive, reflective discussions. The emotional content or modified content is mostly fueling flat responses against careful deliberations in social media. This calls for alarms on the meaningful participation of people in politics. Memes tend to quickly reduce, making intricately complicated political things even tougher for people to think critically and meaningfully. Besides, even making political communication more direct and extensive, it encouraged misinformation and division. Democracy and public opinion need to remain balanced, without veering toward the quirky and sarcastic when dealing with big issues in society.

Case Study 1: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Recent elections in the United States demonstrated that social media has become so essential in politics: instead of only using TV or newspapers, candidates can also use Facebook to talk to people about their plans.

Donald Trump's team was effective in using Facebook; they spurred posts for discussion and made sure people knew their message. Trump used short, simple catchy phrases such as **"Fake News"** and **"Crooked Hillary"** to elicit emotions from people-somehow making it look like the guy was fighting a corrupt system: it worked for many voters. Facebook promoted the viral dissemination of messages. The more people interacted with those posts, be it through likes, shares, or comments, the more others could see them. Funny or emotional memes (pictures with text) formed an extensive part of this. Well understood, quickly shared, and at times made to laugh or feel something. One meme that became really popular was **Pepe the Frog**. Initially, it was a fun cartoon. Later, some political groups used him to support Trump.

These memes found perfect places under simple evocation. Humans are wired to respond in such a manner. The context is funny or powerful, and we memorize it, even if it is taken lightly. Such kept Trump's campaign afloat in people's minds.

Case Study 2. Brexit Referendum

Similarly, massive social media as well as weighty campaign messages were used during the Brexit vote for UK residents: remain or leave the EU.

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The powerful slogan used by the Leave campaign was **"Take back control,"** which made people feel that the UK had lost control to the EU and it must be regained by it. It was simple, emotional, and very easy for a person to repeat to another person.

Like in the USA, with the Leave campaign, it sounded like a **"we"- "us" (the UK)- and "them"- "the EU"** fight. They said the EU dictated what to do in the UK; through leaving, people's freedom would be reclaimed.

They even added social media outreach to their campaign. With a little help of companies like Cambridge Analytica, they enhanced personalized messages against jobs or immigration of people's online data to reach much larger audiences.

Memes were also very much alive during Brexit. These funny or dramatic images helped people understand the message very quickly and simply. Some ironized the EU or joked how much better would everything be if the UK were not in it. These were spread at a large scale, even through people with great followings on the net.

Case Study 3: The July Movement 2024

The July Movement 2024 or Quota Reform Movement 2024 in Bangladesh stands as an extremely unpredictable showcase of political contests that are being carried out more and more across social media platforms in the digital age. It is here that the language or words themselves become weaponized. And so the tale of the movement is largely one of student-led demand for the reform of government job quota, which escalated quite rapidly to become a political contest mediated by the digital sphere, where one could post to almost every site or app, from Facebook to WhatsApp, Tiktok, and everywhere in between.

The July Revolution Movement 2024 in Bangladesh has grown into something larger than just an opposition to quota reformation. It began in 2018 as a setting of 56% quota reservation of government jobs for certain groups. People consider it to be partial and unfair. Highly meritorious candidates were not selected for the job interviews just because of this high amount of reservation. Then they began to raise other demands against the government of Bangladesh. The movement began with greater expression in various online media. Initially, it was a handful of students from Dhaka University. Gradually, it became a nationwide activity.

The July movement has shown the ability of digital-media platforms to seize any kind of powerful agency. The whole of Bangladesh and beyond were broadcast with hashtags, live streaming, and short video clips that allowed rural youth and diasporic Bangladeshi people to symbolically and rhetorically take part. Alterations were proposed and planned. Mostly Dhaka-based but with such

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fast digital proliferation, it became a nationwide concern. The instantaneity of proceedings by digital media made the protest a national spectacle bringing pressure to bear on the political actors.

Initially, students were protesting very peacefully, but later on, instead of accepting the justified demands of students, the government failed to properly respond. Then, violence erupted as students were attacked by some militant political organizations. Upon the attack on them, unarmed students began to receive national support. The government painted them as anti-nationals, foreign agents, and radicals, an image propagated through digital media by the government party. Some of the firms even started to fabricate disinformation with their own propaganda. It happened so egregiously that fabricated screenshots, doctored videos, manipulated quotes, etc., started to circulate abundantly. For purposes of delegitimizing the solidarity and to label the protesters as radical extremists, but legally they had that right because their demands were justified. Most of the people who protested from the very early days of the protest faced high levels of online harassment especially, women faced coordinated harassment campaigns, trolling character assassination and personal attacks. This attack extended into their private life. Much later, as this grew much bigger, memes and satire became major weapons for the protesters to fight back against the government. All of this was done via social media. In fact, curfew had been placed on the entire country, so people had their movements restricted. Everything was done via social media. The government, however, became faster in realizing the potential of social media in articulating dissent. Internet shutdowns enraged the protesters and mobilized thousands for street protests across the country. The significance of the July Movement in 2024 lies in the interplay between digital discourse and physical politics. As the conflict between the police and protesters intensified, so did the social media narrative. With every new act of repression, outrage erupted freely on social media. In contrast, the state and pro-government media launched campaigns to reframe events by attempting to depict state actions as measures to restore law and order.

It only caught sight of how narrative dominance through digital spaces is becoming important for political legitimacy in Bangladesh. Control over hashtags, image virility, framing of slogans was as pertinent as anything in the real world. The digital battlefield has in many ways become an extension of the streets, and with that rhetorical weaponization is deployed. As a result, the government fell and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had to exit.

Comparative Analysis of Three Political Movements: A Simple Look

Politics was that thing you saw on TV or read in a newspaper. On these days, due to social media, nothing is the same anymore. I'm sharing three important political events in which social media

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played a very significant role: the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, the Brexit Referendum, and the July Movement in Bangladesh 2024.

These three movements have one thing in common. They prove clearly that social media is one of the most powerful instruments in politics. Today, through any medium-whether it is Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, or WhatsApp-people use the internet openly to share opinions, protest, spread messages, and sometimes even point a country in a new direction.

Everything has been conveyed mainly through memes, hashtags, videos, and slogans in all these events. Not uncommonly deep or complicated: The simpler and the more emotional, the better.

- Trump campaigned in the U.S. by often using the slogans like "Fake News" and "Crooked Hillary". With each tagline, what the people felt was mostly anger or excitement that could be clearly recalled and shared.

- "Take back control" was the tagline of the Brexit campaign in Britain, which coupled with the feeling that people had something very important snatched away from them-wham!

And Bangladesh was where students started the July Movement to discuss through social media the problem of unequal government job quota distribution. The slogans were so good that they thrilled young minds and kept them engaged in fighting for getting their rights back. The slogans like **"Quota or Merit (Quota na Medha) Merit, Merit (Medha, Medha)"** and **"Who are You and Who am I? (tumi ke ami ke), Traitor, Traitor (Rajakar Rajakar), Who has said this? (ke boleche, ke boleche), Dictator, Dictator (Shoirachar, Shoirachar)** etc. made their voices reach the entire country, and later, even the world.

Even though they all used social media, the goals and outcomes of all three movements were slightly different.

- Whereas the US election and Brexit were about deciding either which leaders would rule a nation or taking a significant decision about national policy, the Bangladesh movement began with a student protest and grew into something much larger.

The Bangladesh movement started as a student protest; it became much bigger. It was about fairness, justice, and standing against a government that many felt did not hear them.

But while U.S. and UK memes and slogans mainly targeted winning votes, in Bangladesh, memes were utilized to hit back, defend the truth, and publicize actual events in the face of government effort to silence the people.

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While the United Kingdom and the United States saw governments remain in power even after elections, Bangladesh accrued protest caused the government to resign and its Prime Minister to flee. That is how powerful a movement can become when it's online and, on the ground, as well.

These three case studies teach something very important with wider reach:

Words matter.

Social media matters.

and people's voices matter.

Today, young people and common citizens are empowered-more so than ever-before facing change and raising their voices without the means or fame of privilege. However, these examples show that social media can be both good and bad. Some spread lies, fake images, and put others down just to win arguments or hold power. If keeping democracy healthy is the goal, then the language we choose to use, what we share, and who we listen to online should be well thought out.

In the end, all these movements evidently show that politics does not live in buildings anymore-all politics happens here on our phones, on our screens, and in our everyday lives.

FINDINGS

There are politics all around us these days, from our television news to our mobile devices. In fact, it would be right to say that most aspects of our lives have been invaded by politics-from tweets to TikToks, memes to hashtags. The internet has really pushed the boundaries of conversation on what used to be hot political topics, making those conversations move much faster, feel a hundred decibels louder, and hit ten times harder than before.

The use of metaphorical bombs has changed significantly, increasing suicide and collateral damage in combat. Words are carefully selected and used as weapons in the online battlefields where politicians, influencers, and even normal users hope that a favorable or unfavorable result is got from the story they have forged. The use of catchy slogans hastens one to believe them, and resonating emotionally gets them to pass through even if they oversimplify a very complicated issue. Online people have their stories formatted to fit their side of the understood reality because the way something is said can, in fact, change the way it is understood.

Memes have also developed into a tool of politics that is not just a good funny joke anymore. A meme condenses a broad view into a concise, funny, or dramatic catchphrase that will spread really fast, and sharing one may seem like claiming a side or revealing who you're with. That builds a community, but it also makes it easier to lessen other points of view.

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Just as the internet makes them more divided so too does social media. Such formats can compact big debates because they weren't designed for thoughtful debates but to showcase more of what the viewer already agrees with. This gradually creates echo chambers, in which ironically only the same thinking - but then crazy or wrong - is found among those that do not agree. Political memes make that divide even sharper by framing issues as "us versus them," which makes honest conversations harder to have.

Then again, there is the difficult issue of misinformation. Memes often don't tell the truth-and, honestly, a lot of them don't even try. They're built to get a reaction, not deliver facts. Shorter sentences with intense emotional cues and visual impressions go fast. In addition, once false rumors are accepted in bubbles created online, they start shaking things, and people are brought away from being exposed to other viewpoints.

All of that does put real implications on democracy. And talking politics with more people than ever should be good; however, when this talking is done from memes, half-truths, and screaming contests, it actually does the opposite: weakens democracy. The issue about an instant reaction rather than deep thought-an awful thing when making such important decisions as casting a vote-is what social media encourages. Further, if voters choose on lies or fear-induced memes, then this is definitely a serious threat against fair elections.

Finally, the accountability question comes. Who should be answerable for the proliferation of damaging political content in cyberspace? The challenge comes when regulation of this space is concerned because a fine line separates free expression from manipulation. Political parties and social media firms must take responsibility for how they shape public opinion. In the absence of such principles, the problems will continue worsening.

Recommended Steps

The July 2024 protest clearly illustrates the liberating and destructive powers of digital platforms. To further enrich democratic discourse and mitigate weaponized rhetoric, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Digital literacy and critical consciousness should be imparted. The general populace and students should have acquired skills to identify falsehoods, how algorithms magnified them, and how to resist manipulative framing (Islam & Jahan, 2021). Since universities and civil society can partner in workshops and online campaigns on media literacy, the effort will take off.
2. Counter-media systemic. Independent fact-checking organizations shall collaborate with journalists and tech platforms during politically charged moments. Improve detection of

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manipulative content in Bangla for global sites like Facebook and TikTok, as it is still under-moderated (Dhaka Tribune, 2024).

3. Protect activists against digital violence. Women are singled out for disproportionate online violence; hence there have to be stronger legal protection and gender-sensitive reporting measures, but these safeguards must be constructed carefully so that they may not be whisked into silencing legitimate dissent (Uddin, 2024).

4. Promote constructive political dialogue. The state and political classes should address grievances and enter into mediation dialogue with protesters rather than labeling them as "anti-national." Demonization heightens polarization, whereas inclusivity can de-escalate conflict (Sajjad, 2024).

5. Build civic resilience and wider coalition. Various students' organizations may establish ties with professional member associations and labor organizations to strengthen legitimacy, thereby reducing vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

Since then, this paper has further pointed out that the digital language and the memes powered by social media present new forms of political conflict. Instead of traditional campaigning, politics has transformed into a form that goes through viral posts, symbolic battles, and sharp ideological framing. While the humidity of fun seems to shroud this calculated play of language, it has become a sharp weapon for reshaping democracy, redefining political identities, and influencing how people look at truth itself.

Memes once deemed trivial entertainments have now become cultural "envoys" that reinforce belief systems, polarize socio-political discourse, and shape electoral outcomes. Usage of digital rhetoric in the United States, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, Ukraine, and beyond has brought to light the empowering yet destabilizing aspect of deliberate networked communication.

Difficult though it may be, in this terrain, the challenge is to create a public empowered digitally in a democratic space that keeps from being hollowed out by the very new digital modalities created to amplify their voice. Stronger public discourse and within deep democracies calls for a robust and responsible digital ecosystem, supported by careful regulation, focused education, and ethical political engagement.

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