

THE WEAPONIZATION OF AESTHETICS: A CRITICAL STUDY ON GRAPHIC DESIGN AND EMOTIONAL POLARIZATION IN DIGITAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

Digital politics today has moved beyond words to a fully fledged arsenal of visual communication design that uses the full range of the designer's typographic, chromatic, hierarchical, humorous, and AI-powered graphic techniques to target citizens with precision weaponry of emotional manipulation and partisan divisiveness. Drawing on the theories of visual communication design, political communication, advertising, and digital media, this paper contends that particular design decisions are never simply aesthetic, but are always interventions in the emotional politics of the citizen which aim to circumvent reason and polarise political loyalties. The paper proposes "aesthetic coercion" as a term to describe the coordinated use of visual communication design as a weapon of emotional divisiveness, and explores the five key vectors of aesthetic coercion in the contemporary digital political advertising environment: typographic authority, chromatic signaling, humor-as-propaganda in meme culture, AI-generated synthetic imagery, and algorithmic amplification. Importantly, the paper reveals that these vectors are not discrete elements, but rather form an integrated visual system whereby the language of commercial advertising has been consciously co-opted and weaponized for political communication. The analysis ends with a consideration of design literacy, critical design and platform reform as the most-seeming civic responses to a democracy whose visual culture has been totally weaponized.

Keywords: Communication Design, Social Media, Advertisement, Political Communication, Humor, Graphic Design, Polarisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy's Design Problem

Visual communication is bound up with political persuasion. Since the meeting at the crossroads of the visual and the political in the broadsheets of the French Revolution and the propaganda posters of the Great Wars, through to the televisual debates of presidential elections and the banner ads of the internet, the visual has been the crucial intermediary between power and the polity. But the digital revolution of the early 21st century introduces not only a new medium for the delivery of conventional forms of political visual rhetoric; it introduces qualitatively different circumstances in which aesthetic decisions - the thickness of a font, the brightness of a hue, the grammar of a meme - are highly politicised at a scale, pace, and targetability that previous media cannot deliver. This means that we now live in a political communication environment in which graphic design is a critical resource in the contestation of democracy, used by campaigns, governments, and informal political movements to shape not merely citizens' thinking, but their emotions, their fears and their trust. This paper seeks to identify the weaponization of graphic design in recent digital political campaigns, and to highlight the threat this

weaponization represents to democratic deliberation that has gone overlooked by both political communication research and design practice. The use of the term "weaponization" is not emotive hyperbole, but rather a description of a particular phenomenon: the weaponization of aesthetic form to evoke emotions - fear, disgust, contempt, indignation, tribal jubilation - that short-circuit the deliberative capacities of the democratic citizen. Such weaponization, Saha (2026) observes, is an instance of "algorithmic coercion" in the political economy of surveillance capitalism in which the psychographic data mining capabilities of digital advertising platforms are harnessed to target specific emotional vulnerabilities - just as commercial advertisers target specific consumer desires - to achieve political ends. Political weaponization of graphic design is thus the political "hack" and weaponization of techniques perfected by advertisers.

The central argument of this paper is that the weaponization of aesthetic techniques is not an accidental or incidental effect of a series of discrete interventions - a "faked" photo here, a "stirring" choice of colours there - but a systemic visual communication design that integrates typography, colour, humour, imagery and algorithmic amplification to create the conditions for emotional polarisation. Political design is not "by accident"; it is "by design". It applies the same strategies of audience research, target audience selection and message testing used by commercial advertisers over the past century (Fernández, 2025; Dong, 2025) to the target audience data of social media platforms and weaponises them in the image affordances of digital interface design, which are designed to elicit emotional responses. Thinking about aesthetic weaponization as a system - rather than a series of poor individual decisions - is a necessary step towards devising strategies effective against its complexity.

This analysis is organised into nine sections, in the form of a cumulative argument. Section Two sets the theoretical stage, by situating aesthetic coercion in critical design theory, theories of affect in political communication and information disorder studies. Sections Three to Six discuss the five main vectors of aesthetic weaponization: typography as ideological architecture (Section Three); color as a tool for affective manipulation (Section Four); meme cultures and the use of humour as the main medium for integrating all of the above into viral political content (Section Five); and AI-generated imagery as the cutting-edge technology of political imagery (Section Six). Section Seven discusses the network ecology of platforms that structurally support the vector. Section Eight considers the responses - of design literacy, critical design, and regulation - suggested by the above. Finally, Section Nine explores the implications for democracy, design and visual political communication.

2. THEORY

Aesthetic Coercion, Polarization Grammar

To claim that graphic design can be coercive calls for a theory that goes beyond assumptions of the benign neutrality of aesthetics on one hand, and simplistic characterisations of propaganda as "manipulation" on the other. The account of aesthetic weaponization developed here brings together three interrelated strands of research -

critical design theory, affect theory in political communication, and emerging research in the field of visual misinformation studies - to offer an analysis of aesthetic weaponization that is sensitive to the formal properties of visual design, the affective dynamics of political communication, and the institutional conditions of digital platform capitalism.

The first element comes from critical design theory, as worked out in Dunne's (2008) seminal essay. Against professional conventions of graphic design as a disinterested service industry (giving form to content specified else) Dunne argues that designed objects and environments are at work in constituting the perceptual, cognitive and emotional conditions for social life. All design decisions embody values, and encode ideas and effects that favour some interests over others. This means that the style of a political graphic is never simply aesthetic in a political campaign: it is argumentative, in the sense that it positions political actors, defines social worlds and engages emotional responses in ways that are constitutive of the political (ideological) content it ostensibly represents. Design isn't just a decoration of the political message; it is the message, and it's delivered to audiences in a visual mode before they are even able to rationally process it.

The second component is affect theory in political communication. Åhäll and Gregory (2015) demonstrate that emotions are produced (not just evoked) and socially managed, not individually psychological responses to political events. Citizens' feelings of fear, disgust, or anger or feelings of patriotic pride when exposed to political messages are created - constituted, not simply evoked - in the controlled aesthetic space of political advertising. Mihartescu (2025) builds on this approach with the notion of the "affective biopolitical culture nexus" as a mode of political governance that involves the management of populations through the production and management of affect - a situation in which aesthetic weaponization is thus not so much an aberration but a key feature of political power in the digital era. Fernández (2025) shows that affective management is not just visual in his work on emotional governance through sound in the Trump era, but that visual design is a massively ubiquitous tool of affective management in digital political advertising.

The third leg is studies on information disorder. Ricard, Yañez and Hora's (2025) taxonomy of hate information (misinformation, disinformation and malinformation) is helpful in theorizing how aesthetic design intervenes as a medium of political deception. Visual design operates at all three levels of this taxonomy: a misinformation is an emotionally engaging infographic that communicates accurate data in a misleading fashion; a disinformation is a completely fabricated political image; a malinformation is a doctored (but recognisable) image of an event exploited to create a fictitious political narrative.

What is common, from the perspective of visual communication design, in all these categories, is the use of aesthetic formal properties (composition, typography, colour, semiotics of humour) to shape meaning and to evoke emotions in the service of political strategies. In all instances, design is how information disorder achieves political effectiveness.

Kuzmanov's (2025) notion of "semantic moral constructs" also helps to understand the specifically visual aspects of political polarisation. Political communication, according to Kuzmanov, is increasingly based on aestheticized narrative constructions of moral good and truth in which political actors are cast as the bearers of moral good and truth, and their opponents as threats to both. These constructs are constructed as much by visual semiotics as by verbal argument: the compositional heroization of a political leader; the chromatic demonization of an enemy; the typographic authority with which claims are advanced (in a way that equates them with indisputable truths) are semiotic operations that graphic design performs with efficiency and emotional immediacy that are absent from verbal argument. This aesthetic creation of moral difference is the heart of visual polarization and it links directly with what Calloni (2025) argues is the structurally polarizing designs of digital platforms that algorithmically privilege those messages that can generate the greatest emotional intensity: that is, the aesthetic strategies of weaponized design.

Table 1: The Five Vectors of Aesthetic Weaponization — Mechanisms, Effects, and Political Outcomes

Design Vector	Key Design Element	Operative Mechanism	Primary Emotional Effect	
Typography	Typeface, weight, capitalization, tracking	Encodes authority and urgency prior to conscious content processing	Deference, urgency, tribal recognition	Ideological positioning; partisan identity formation
Color Palettes	Chromatic palette, saturation, contrast, hue	Activates pre-reflective emotional associations via chromatic conditioning	Fear, anger, tribal solidarity, or trust	Partisan identification; chromatic tribalism
Humor / Memes	Integrated typographic, chromatic, and compositional meme grammar	Generates pleasurable in-group recognition; lowers critical resistance	Pleasure, contempt, tribal euphoria, exclusionary humor	In-group bonding; out-group exclusion; viral polarization
AI-Generated Imagery	Synthetic photorealistic images, AI-designed prompts, chromatic engineering	Fabricates visual evidence; destabilizes epistemic trust in the image record	Shock, credulity, disgust, manufactured outrage	Epistemic destabilization; manufactured political realities
Platform Architecture	Algorithmic recommendation, engagement optimization, psychographic targeting	Structurally amplifies emotionally extreme content; incentivizes aesthetic escalation	Escalating arousal; normalization of extreme affective content	Systemic polarization; aesthetic arms race; filter bubble entrenchment

Note. Vectors are analytically distinct but function as an integrated system in practice. Sources: Saha (2026); Dunne (2008); Calloni (2025); Ricard et al. (2025); Ağirdil (2026).

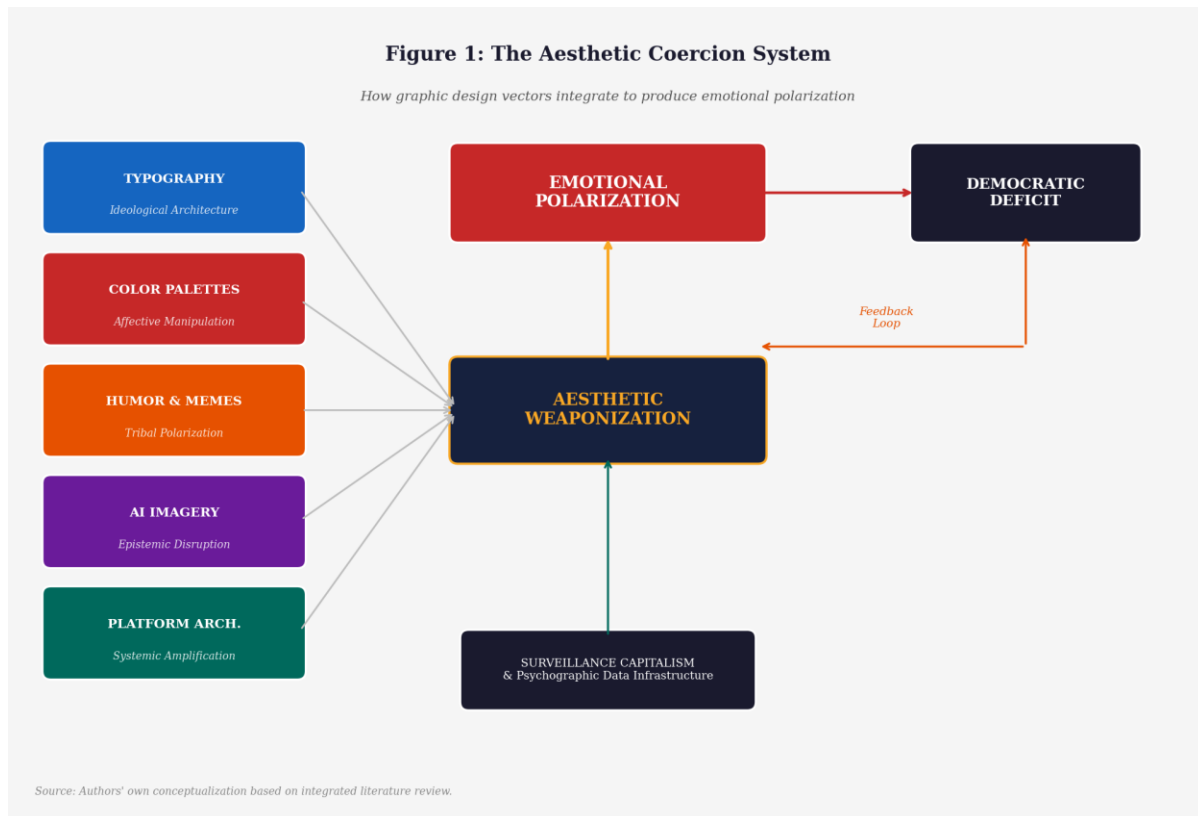


Figure 1: The Aesthetic Coercion System: How graphic design vectors integrate to produce emotional polarization and democratic deficit

Source: Authors' own conceptualization based on integrated literature review.

3. TYPE AS IDEOLOGICAL ARCHITECTURE:

The Grammar of Designs of Authority and Urgency

Having outlined the theoretical underpinning of the concept of aesthetic weaponization, we now consider the elements of design used to achieve it. The first and most basic of these is typography: an architectural discipline that is the foundation of all textual visual designs. Typography is the political architecture of the space in which political content will be encountered before it is read; the emotional context in which the politics of a message will be experienced. The typeface, weight, size, letter-spacing and capitalization choices are a series of design decisions that extend beyond considerations of legibility itself to evoke the authority or intimacy, urgency or contemplation, populist simplicity or technocratic complexity that develop with the processing of specific content at a pre-reflective level of aesthetic reception.

The aggressive wielding of typographic power in the political advertising of contemporary populist politics is an example of deliberate design weaponization. The typographic visual grammar of right-wing populist campaigns in different national settings - typified by very

bold, heavy typefaces with high contrast and low tracking, all-capitalization, and short line lengths - is a typographic enactment of masculine authority that communicates the political stance of strong leadership from the moment of visual contact. This is especially clear in the work of Dong (2025), who details the typographic strategies of Trumpian branding, where the particular typographic design choices of campaign materials (fat serifs, maximum perceived weight, red and gold colour dominance) serve as an aesthetic brand that is identified with political identity in a way that is independent of particular political content. The typography does not represent the claim to power; it is its enactment in a rhetorical mode that visualises the decisive populist who breaks with the equivocations of liberal democratic political speech.

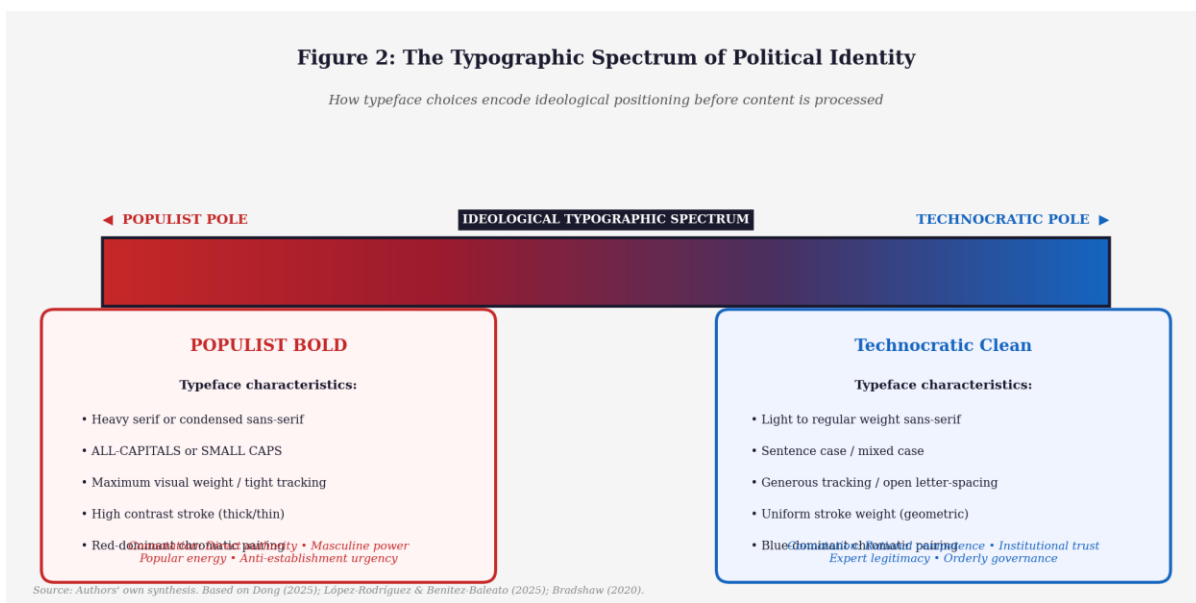


Figure 2: The Typographic Spectrum of Political Identity: Formal design properties distinguishing populist bold from technocratic clean typographic registers

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Dong (2025); López-Rodríguez & Benítez-Baleato (2025); Bradshaw (2020).

This typographic populism is consciously and conspicuously opposed to the typographic aesthetic of institutional politics, technocratic power and administration. Political campaigns that aim to communicate institutional competence, rationality, and trust, typically use the typographic grammar of high modernism - clean sans-serif typefaces, white space, light weights, small sizes - that draws on the corporate design and professional institutional communications design of the last 70 years. The contrast between these two typographic modes - populist bold versus technocratic clean - is the typographic encoding of an ideological contrast between direct democracy and political mediation that citizens experience aesthetically before they become conscious of it (López-Rodríguez & Benítez-Baleato, 2025). Political design, therefore, contributes to the

construction of the ideological categories through which citizens recognise political phenomena, and can be considered an ideological practice.

In the context of social media advertising, the typographic vernacular of the meme culture is an important designed political medium. The "Impact" typeface - bold, condensed, white with black drop shadow - is not simply a typical aesthetic used for content online; it is a semiotically distinct subcultural identifier, whose use to communicate political content has been strategic and consistent. According to Mahmoud and Ajjola (2025), the typographic vernacular of political meme content is a type of political in-group code that both communicates political affiliation, as well as asserting aesthetic savvy: to use and to understand the meme typographic vernacular is to declare oneself as a member of a community positioned equally by its typographic aesthetic as by its explicit political content. The irony implied in this typographic convention - its ironic demeanor in contrast to "legitimate" political discourse - also lowers the viewer's guard, while encoding political information in aesthetic form, a phenomenon explored further in Section Five.

The analysis of the so-called rhetorical exhaustion, by Bradshaw (2020), offers the last conceptual resource to interpret the typographic weaponization on the environmental level. Political online advertising swamp the visual field with typographic urgency bold statements, threatening warnings, authoritative statements - at a density and intensity that overloads the mental capacity to critically process information. When all the political graphics reach the point of maximum typographic density, when the stress is so general that it becomes incoherent, when the collective environmental impact is the naturalization of alarm and the de-epistemicization of urgent and routine, of claim and fact. Typographic weaponization, therefore, functions not just by the individual design decisions but by the cumulative affective space that they create - an ideological architecture which causes the measured, qualified, uncertain forms of discourse to be epistemically weak in comparison to the typographic certitude of partisan content.

4. CHROMATIC WARFARE:

Colour Palettes as Means of Affective Control

Typography is the ideological design of political visuals, while color is their emotional design - the affective medium of the visuals. The use of color takes place at a level of visual processing prior to conscious attention, and creates emotional responses that affect the conscious processing of political messages. In digital political advertising, the ability to "fine-tune" the chromatic spectrum of color palettes in relation to the psychographic and behavioural profiles of target audiences - whose emotional and behavioural profiling is mapped to an unprecedented level of precision by online platform data algorithms - turns chromatic choice from a general rhetorical strategy into a targeted affective weapon. The politics of color is not an issue of elementary emotional symbolism; it's a case of deploying the techniques of commercial advertising in a political context.

The use of red as the primary chromatic branding motive of right-wing populist politics in a number of countries is the most obvious manifestation of this technique. The universality

of red's meanings of urgency, danger, passion and robust life force are well-versed in the field of color psychology, and their use in political advertising is deliberate and strategic. Vacariu (2025) offers forensic evidence of chromatic tuning in the propaganda campaigns of the 2024 Romanian presidential election, which was marred by disinformation, and records how the overemphasis on the use of red and orange in the fake political posters was aimed at creating a particular set of emotional responses - fear, betrayal, indignation - that would undermine voter trust in democratic institutions. The hue was designed as an affective weapon to a specific target. The analogy with advertising - where color is widely used to evoke specific emotional states of the consumer - is precise: the weaponization of chromatic design in politics is an application of techniques developed by advertisers to manipulate consumer behavior to politics.

The red vs. blue chromatic opposition mirrors the typographic opposition discussed in Section Three, and reveals how different elements of visual design are interconnected and interdependent within a tightly-knit visual system. The cultural meanings of trust, rationality and institutional authority are evoked by the use of blue by campaigns that want to project technocratic authority and competence; the use of red by populist campaigns that want to project passionate urgency. Bastos, Mercea and Goveia (2023) demonstrate how the propaganda campaigns on social media strategically exploit chromatic contrast - saturated, yellow or golden tones for political heroes, desaturated, cool or greenish tones for political villains - to create an instant visual moral economy in which the politics of political alliances are signalled by color before any explicit political message is processed. The propaganda's visual frames are, therefore, designed to make appeal arguments, rather than illustrate appeal arguments made in text.

The chromatic tribalism of political movements - the chromatic signatures that make a particular scheme instantly legible as a tribal identity signal - render all chromatic choices as statements of political identity, and thus independent of context and explicit political statements. When social media users consume content with their political party's chromatic signature, they are not simply consuming political content; they are partaking in a chromatic ritual of tribal belonging, which prior to reflexive contemplation reinforces political identity. Calloni (2025) shows that this chromatic tribalism is structurally reinforced by algorithms that develop user profiles based on the way that users engage with content - in part based on their response to different chromatic surroundings - and prioritise the presentation of content that bears familiar partisan chromatic signatures, further entrenching the personalised filter bubbles in which political views are developed. The digital platform makes the preference for color a technology of enclosure.

The technologically most advanced political weaponization of color comes in the realm of AI-generated political images, where the chromatic calibration is no longer bound by the contingencies of photographic realism, and can be fine-tuned to the desired emotional targets for particular target audiences. The subtlety of AI-generated chromatic manipulation in political imagery - heroic golden yellow for political friends; shadowy, ominous desaturation for enemies; crisis hyper-saturation for crisis scenarios - makes it more difficult to detect, as the artificiality of the image does not create the same

inconsistencies that have previously enabled skilled photographers to detect manipulation (Mahiwal et al. 2026). This particular aspect of the use of AI in the generation of political imagery links up with the discussion in Section Six, where the full implications of synthetic political imagery for democratic epistemology are discussed. But to do so we have to consider the cultural vehicle that embodies all of the design aspects considered so far - typography, color, humor - in the digital political advertising environment: the political meme.

5. DESIGNING HUMOR AS WEAPON

Memetic Culture, And the Aesthetics of Tribal Identity

Politically persuasive humour is not new - from the satirical pamphlets of the English Civil War, to the satirical cartoons in the media of the 18th century, to the satirical television shows of the late 20th century. What makes the contemporary political memes of political meme culture different from political humour of the past is not its political purpose (which is the same as before: derogatory and contemptuous, inculcating in-group solidarity, and desensitising the audience to the political imagery of propaganda) but its design system. A political meme is not just an oral joke (that is only funny); it is an object of visual design that uses the typography, colour, composition and increasingly, the use of AI-generated imagery of a small visual form for maximum emotional and perceptual salience, legibility and virality. When we think of political memes as a designed weapon of political humour we should consider the meme as a design object that designers of visual communication design study, not a sociological object of study.

This is the big picture according to Mahmoud and Ajjola (2025): political memes are primary expressions of partisan identity in digital culture because they condense complex political ideologies and political ideas into emotively charged, instantly decipherable and shareable aesthetic objects. The humor of political memes is crucial to the political use of memes in a strict sense: it activates cognitive processes of incongruity resolution, surprise and recognition to trigger a pleasurable affect linked to a political position of the meme. This is how advertising humor works for consumers - to associate positive affect with the pleasurable affect of the joke and the advert - and is used for political identity. The design method of advertising humour is not coincidentally used in political meme design; it is part of the "weaponisation" of the persuasive design strategies of advertising by political communications professionals - who often receive ad education - to propagate political agendas (Fernández, 2025).

Probably the most obvious example of the weaponisation of designed humour to promote geopolitical agendas is Bracciale and Aglioti Colombini's (2023) study of the meme warfare in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. They show how the meme culture was quickly and strategically appropriated by an array of state and non-state actors to produce partisan meanings, demonise the enemy and legitimate the horrors of war in the aesthetic guise of humour and irony. The genre of the meme - the typographic conventions of the genre, the ironic subtext, the implied savvy competency of the audience - provide the conditions for the lowering of the critical threshold required by propaganda: the audience

is caught up in the humour before being able to question the political implications of the humour of the meme, and the aesthetic pleasure of recognition replaces the critical nods that would be required with overt propaganda. The text and the humour make the politics palatable.

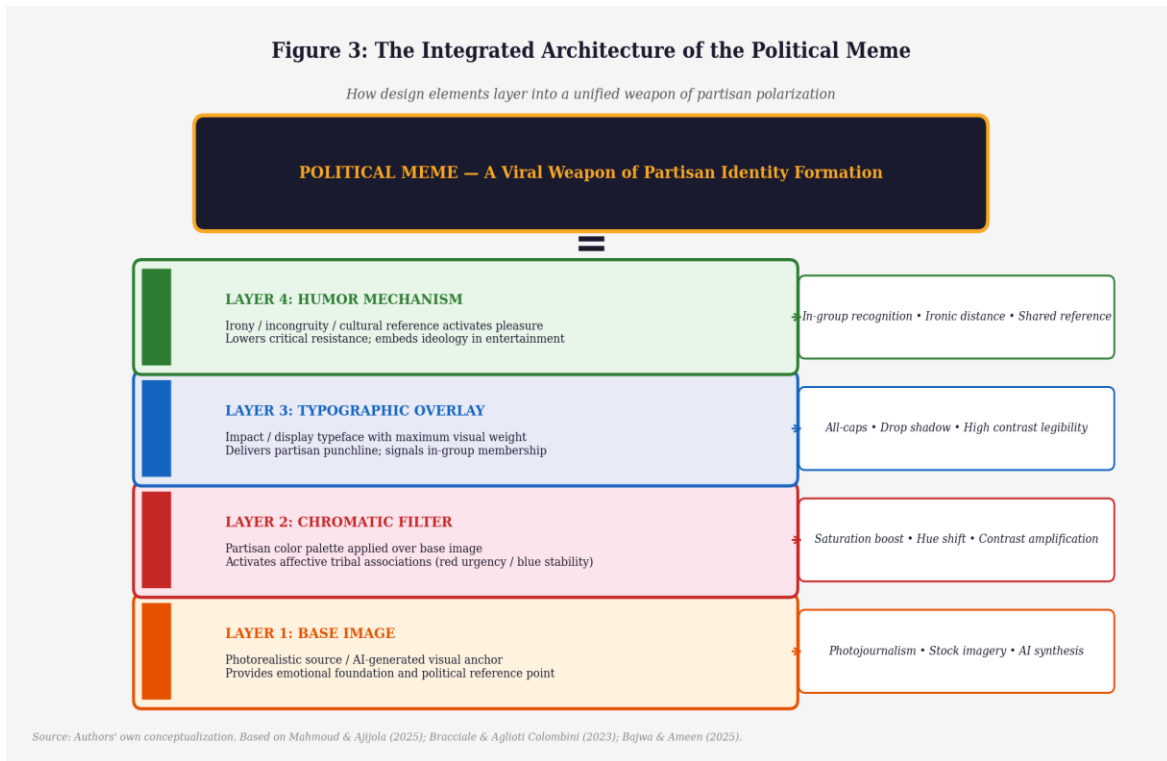


Figure 3: The Integrated Architecture of the Political Meme: Four design layers that combine to produce a viral weapon of partisan identity formation

Source: Authors' own conceptualization based on Mahmoud & Ajijola (2025); Bracciale & Aglioti Colombini (2023); Bajwa & Ameen (2025).

The grammar of political memes is a design system, with components that need to be considered. The usual form of the meme - a background image which sets a tone; a foreground text in bold upper case type in a "Impact" or other display typeface; a containment in the "colour signatures" mentioned in Section Four above - creates on the one hand a rhetoric of the background image at the denotative level (what the background image is) and on the other hand at the connotative level (what the composition means about politics). The humour is a mix of these levels: the incongruence of image and text, the irony of the implied seriousness of the political message and the playful naivety of the format, the goodwill of inside-jokes. Bajwa and Ameen (2025) provide a case study of the application of this rhetorical system in social media during a crisis in Pakistan, in which memes were used to enhance emotions and speed up the viral spread of misinformation, causing social divisions and blocking public accountability - showing the effect of visual design as political humour.

The social success of political memes, and the social consequences of this success on social polarisation, are a result of social media algorithms. Ağirdil (2026) shows the way filter bubble algorithms reward content that has high levels of engagement, and how political memes (insofar as they are able to evoke instant emotional responses in viewers, through the design of humour) are one of the most rewarded forms of content in the engagement economy. This means a systemic cycle is created: the most extreme memetic content (in terms of the emotional response it evokes) becomes most distributed; the most distributed results in a culture of extreme visual content as the new normal of political visual culture; political communicators respond to this by producing more extreme content for viral distribution; and so on: a systemic polarizing effect is created by this aesthetic race to the bottom. Salter (2020) suggests this is one of the ways in which digital media undermine deliberative democracy - a suggestion amply borne out by the above analysis of the design of the weaponry of humor.

Finally, the gatekeeping aspects of the meme-as-weapon - that designed for humor creates community boundaries of partisan communities - is another component of the meme-as-weapon. The aesthetic code that signifies in the world of political meme culture - the tropes, ironic tropes, typographic tropes, native tropes, etc. - is the signifier of an in-group community of the "initiated", who understand and exclude the "uninitiated". Jalli (2025) in her essay on TikTok activism in Southeast Asia, notes that TikTok's native tropes of the platform both enable political action and create boundaries, and create virtual spaces where the pleasures of in-groups and out-groups are aestheticised. So the humour is a design tactic of tribalisation - it helps generate community among in-group members and makes for partisan conversation not only politically challenging, but also aesthetically impenetrable - a language barrier that stops conversation at the level of content (ideas) from even beginning at the level of form (design).

6. REALITIES SYNTHETIC

Epistemological Aesthetic Weaponization

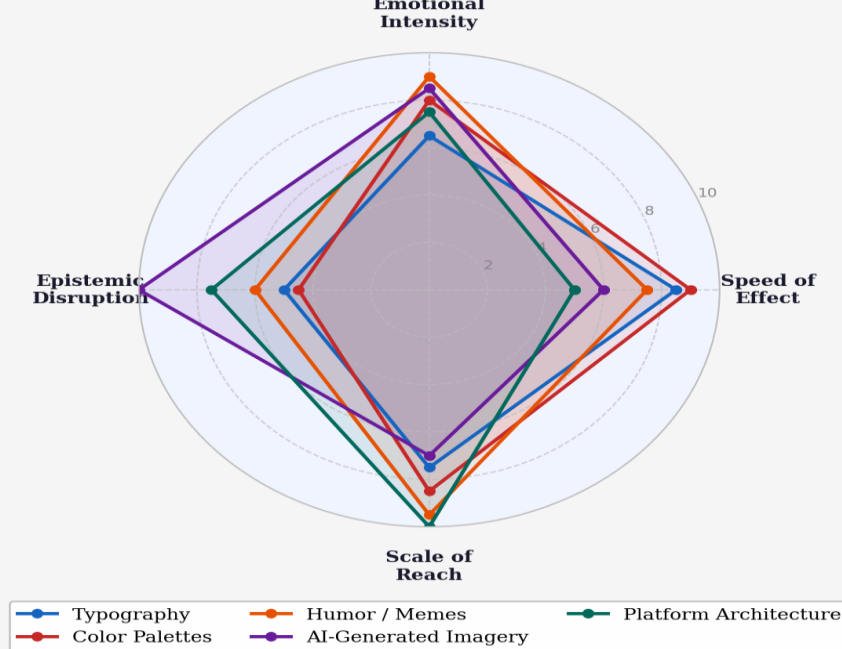
In the previous three sections, we have investigated the design strategies of aesthetic weaponization (typography, colour, and humour in meme design) as the traditional forms of aesthetic weaponization with their genealogies in the past, which have been amplified by social media platforms.

Although aesthetic weaponization has been a democratic concern so far, what has pushed the crisis of aesthetic weaponization is the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) to produce real looking politically relevant images that are not real.

While typographic and chromatic design affect how audiences understand real political events, and memes present real (or imagined) political ideas in a humorous way, with generative AI designs, political events are created and visual evidence is created for an imagined political reality. This is not a new form of propaganda practice or, indeed, industrialised manufacture of lies by the skills of visual communication design.

Figure 5: Comparative Intensity of Design Vectors Across Key Dimensions

Radar chart showing relative strength of each vector on four analytical dimensions (scale: 1-10)



Scores represent authors' analytical assessment based on reviewed literature. Based on Saha (2026); Ağirdil (2026); Calloni (2025); LaCroix & Berkovits (2026).

Figure 5: Comparative Intensity of Design Vectors Across Four Analytical Dimensions (scale 1–10). Scores represent the authors' analytical assessment based on the reviewed literature

Source: Based on Saha (2026); Ağirdil (2026); Calloni (2025); LaCroix & Berkovits (2026).

Generative AI's visual evidence is significant for knowledge (epistemology) when we think about the role of visual evidence in democracy. You see what you believe is true because visuals (like photographs and video) are not designed, but automatically produced by events, has been the justification for the epistemic privilege of visual journalism, documentary evidence and eyewitness testimony in the democratic political process for more than a century. With generative AI, this has changed. AI-generated visuals are a "primary tool of online extremism" that allows the production of visual "evidence" to aid conspiracy theories that accelerates radicalisation, say LaCroix and Berkovits (2026). The citizen perception of political events based on visually compelling evidence of a political fantasy world are misinformed, and can't be fully corrected by spoken word. Kelly (2025) describes this as the creation of "manufactured reality": a political information environment where the visual world - previously the primary source of democratic political information - is a risk. The design of AI political imagery is one important element that is overlooked in analyses of the phenomenon as a "technology of deception". AI political imagery is not only photorealistic, it's designed. The design specifications of the prompts

for creating the synthetic political imagery is not just the design specification of the subject, but of all the design elements of the image: composition, colour, lighting, typography, style. These design specs are as specific as for any other commercial advertising project - indeed often are developed for them. Bastos et al. (2023) demonstrate how the propaganda images on social media introduce stock characters and tropes (the heroic citizen, the impossibly sexy partisan activist, the menacing enemy) whose design specifications can be translated into the AI image prompts and then used to generate as-needed, politically-tailored synthetic political subjects with the specificity that is not possible with human subjects. The "synthetic political subject" is a product of design, made to spec. The military and geopolitical meanings of the aesthetic weaponisation of AI can be used beyond electoral contexts, in geopolitical communications. Studying "thirst trap propaganda" on TikTok - military recruitment videos that exploit the visual styles of lifestyle and aspirational social media to romanticise the lifestyle of the military as glamorous, sexy and exciting - Bösch and Divon (2026) show the sophistication of state actors in recognising the affectivities of platform-specific image grammars. Uzunoğlu and Çakıcı (2025) map the Israeli military's efforts to weaponise the aesthetics of TikTok to influence geopolitics, demonstrating how the visual grammar of media and entertainment and lifestyle content is used to communicate political content that would trigger critical processes in a more overtly propagandistic context. AI generated imagery enhances and multiplies these capacities by enabling the mass production of real life military-aesthetic imagery.

AI generated imagery combined with the micro-targeting tool of digital advertising system is the most sophisticated and ominous form of aesthetic weaponisation in this study. Saha (2026) suggests that the psychographic data infrastructure of surveillance capitalism - which operates at a level of the individual to map the emotional, aesthetic and political vulnerabilities of individuals - enables political players to strategically deploy AI generated imagery at the forensic level - by triggering specific visual cues for specific psychographic profiles in real time. This leads to a mass and micro aesthetic weapon that is used at a population level by the micro-targeting system of digital advertising, and that appeals to the "personal" aesthetic vulnerabilities of citizen consumers. The industrial aesthetic personalization is a new chapter in the history of graphic design and politics in democracy - a chapter that calls for the interventions described in Section Eight. To achieve that, Section Seven explains the platform architecture amplifying the five design vectors mentioned above.

7. AMPLIFIED

Platform Design Architectures - The Political Economy of the Polarizing Design

The five design vectors outlined in the past four sections - typography, colour, humour-in-memes, AI imagery and their combinations - do not take place in a benign design milieu. They are created, circulated and amplified in digital platform designs whose design and economic characteristics are a catalyst for visual affects. The fact that aesthetic weaponization is endemic to the digital political communication milieu - rather than an

accidental side-effect of some rogue actors - is explained by understanding the social media platforms in which all political visual communication takes place - and that these platforms are, themselves, designed artefacts, with economic and ideological structures that have political consequences.

The key design decision of all the major social media platforms is that they are designed for maximum algorithmic recommendation for engagement (to the clickable user interactions - likes, shares, comments, watch time - that can be captured and monetised for the data and attention needed for adverts to be effective). Ağirdil (2026) shows that this engagement maximisation is done through media that arouse emotions, as this is the strongest predictor of engagement metrics. Political visual content that uses the typographic, colour and humorous design strategies that are examined in this paper (because they are designed to maximise emotional arousal) is served up in the attention economy of algorithmically driven social media platforms. It not only serves up party political visual content; it serves up the most emotional variants, which is the driver for political communicators to engage in the aesthetic arms race, where they outbid each other in intensifying the emotional response.

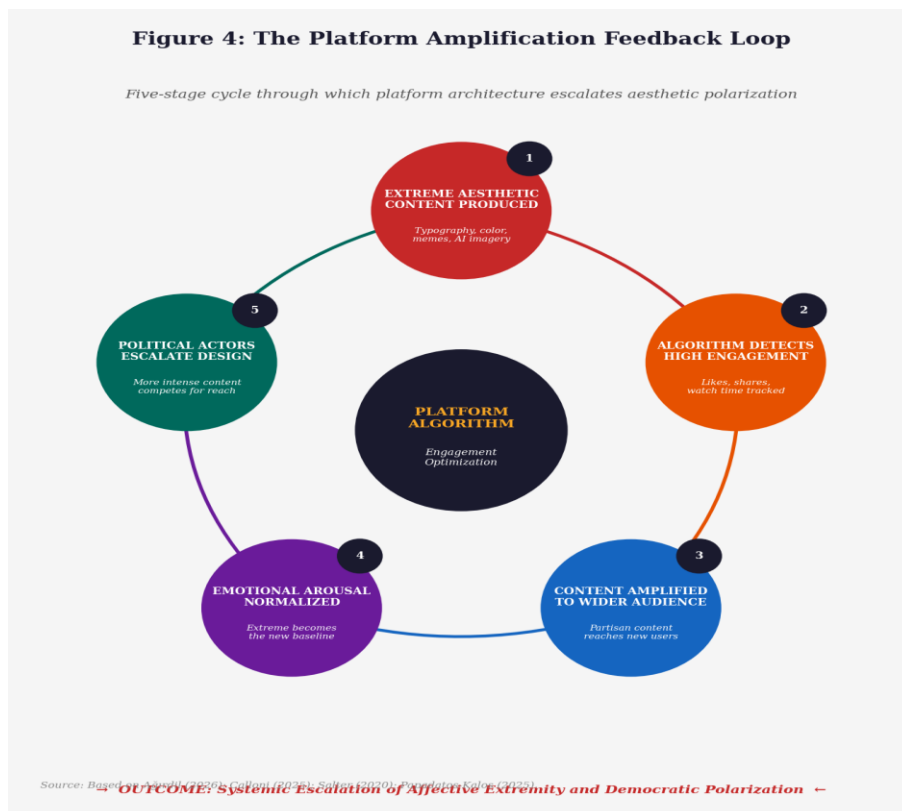


Figure 4: The Platform Amplification Feedback Loop: Five-stage cycle through which algorithmic architecture escalates aesthetic polarization

Source: Authors' own conceptualization based on Ağirdil (2026); Calloni (2025); Salter (2020); Papadatos-Kalos (2025).

The latest iteration of platform architecture that maximises for emotion, which is currently TikTok, is the most developed, with implications for politics. Causa (2026) shows that the platform architecture of TikTok, which maximises for emotional response to video communication with the best resolution and responsiveness in terms of pixels of all platforms, has a homogenising effect on political visual communication in that it limits the design choices available to political communicators, regardless of their political inclinations.

The platform architecture is therefore a design filter: it selects the design choices that will be rewarded with amplification on the platform and the design choices that will be "punished" by the platform algorithms and therefore has a systemic effect on the design choices of political communication aesthetics. The ultimate case of this is the use of military propaganda on TikTok, as demonstrated by Bösch and Divon (2026) where governments have "hack[ed] the algorithms" of the platform to find the right combination of design choices to maximise the "organic" reach of their propaganda (visual appearance, music, composition).

Papadatos-Kalos (2025) extends the argument to systemic re-aesthetisation of political communication on social media platforms, showing that the reward structures of major social media platforms have not only led to faster circulation of historical forms of political communication, but have also re-shaped political communication. The stylistic hyperbole, emotional intensity, narrative synthesis and aesthetic simplicity rewarded by design are the attributes of polarizing design; the qualification, nuancing, epistemic humility and compositional complexity needed for democratic deliberation are the attributes penalised by design.

This is not a coincidental but enabling outcome of the political economy of platform capitalism, as Saha (2026) explains: just as corporate advertisers use the psychographic data infrastructure of platform capitalism to maximise engagement with their advertisements, so political actors use the same data infrastructure to maximise engagement with their partisan appeals, producing a convergence of commercial and political motivations for the production of visually weaponised content.

The advertising ecosystem component of this convergence is interesting as it explains the weaponisation of commercial visual communication design techniques. Digital political advertising is produced in the same digital advertising ecosystem as commercial digital advertising: its audience targeting, A/B testing, engagement maximisation algorithm, creative process is the same.

Political campaigns are no longer just similar to, but in the digital space, advertising campaigns - made by the same production companies, with the same production facilities, with the same policies (or political exemptions from policies), and evaluated with the same metrics. The weaponisation of graphic design in political communication is at the professional level of direct application of commercial advertising design technique to political persuasion design, with the point being that it is not consumer choice that is in question, but democracy.

8. AESTHETIC COERCION

Design Literacy, Critical Practice and Structural reform

The developed analysis that has been presented in the above sections brings about aesthetic weaponization as the systemic, structurally rooted, and technologically more sophisticated feature of the digital political communication. Typography is ideological force; colour is tribal affectivity; humour, partisan community is being made by designed pleasure, AI imagery is making political worlds and platform architecture is multiplying all of the four by the logic of optimization of engagement. The rigor and systematicness of this challenge necessitates counter-measures that are equally systemic - that do the same, and at the same level, of aesthetic weaponization is produced and reproduced, at the individual, the cultural and the structural. This section of the paper will explain three of these complementary counter-strategies, including design literacy, as civic education, critical design practice, as cultural intervention and platform and regulatory reform, as structural response.

Table 2: Counter-Strategy Response Matrix — Mapping Threat Vectors to Civic and Institutional Responses

Threat Vector	Counter-Strategy	Intervention Level	Key Implementing Actor	Primary Scholarly Source
All five vectors	Design literacy as civic education — equipping citizens to recognize aesthetic manipulation	Individual	Educational institutions; civic educators	Garcia et al. (2021); Wilson (n.d.)
Typographic and chromatic manipulation	Critical design practice — counter-design that exposes mechanisms of aesthetic coercion	Cultural	Graphic design practitioners; design educators	Dunne (2008)
AI-generated imagery	AI-powered detection and labeling technologies for synthetic media identification	Institutional	Platforms; civil society; electoral commissions	Mahiwal et al. (2026); LaCroix & Berkovits (2026)
Platform amplification	Structural platform regulation — mandatory AI disclosure, targeting limits, algorithmic transparency	Structural	Governments; regulatory authorities; international bodies	Vieira et al. (2025); Dong (2025)

Note. Counter-strategies are complementary and mutually reinforcing; no single intervention is sufficient in isolation. Sources: Garcia et al. (2021); Dunne (2008); Mahiwal et al. (2026); Vieira et al. (2025); Wilson (n.d.).

The simplest counter-strategy is design literacy, the possibility to break down and critically analyze the formal attributes of visual communication, to comprehend the way in which the decisions of design have emotional implications, and to place the decisions in the framework of the general political-economic conditions in which they are made. Garcia et

al. (2021) think that the existing paradigm of digital citizenship is not only structurally insufficient, as it views media literacy solely through the prism of the factually false information alone, without taking into consideration the affective and aesthetic side of political manipulation. Design literate digital citizenship would encompass the ability to see the communicative application of typography as authority and urgency that pre-reflectively precedes the analytical processing of content; the communicative application of color as partisan identification on a pre-reflective level; how humor in the design of memes uses designed pleasure to avoid analytical processing; and how artificial intelligence-generated imagery provides visual evidence of claims that are not factual. It is a bold educational initiative - but it is a suitable degree of difficulty of the visual landscape of politics that the citizens are already working in.

Similarly, in her work on digital feminist research practices, Wilson does require what she terms care-ful pedagogies, which are suitable to what she terms, polluted digital spaces, information spaces that are polluted by disinformation, aesthetics manipulation and amplification of extreme content by algorithms. Only a sub-part of the pedagogical challenge is the cognitive (to develop analytical skills to criticize visual design) and the affective (to develop the capacity to perceive, keep an open mind and ask questions of the emotional reactions the aesthetic judgment produces in oneself): that one then can use the responses to make political judgment. This aesthetic critical consciousness is particularly demanding in the sense that it entails the capacity of the learners to be simultaneously both emotionally and at the same time be analytically detached visually with the political content - that is, to be emotionally engaged with the political design and at the same time be design conscious. It is the difficulty of this doubled consciousness that renders aesthetic weaponization so effective of means of expression and why it is so important to develop it.

The second counter-strategy that critical design practice offers is non-functional in the sense that it is not a strategy in the realms of above or beyond, but rather a strategy within aesthetic domain. The development of what Dunne (2008) calls critical design as the practice that he regards as critical of the assumptions, ideological processes and unthinking service of power points to the possibility of visual counter-arguments that can make the workings of aesthetic weaponization visible to the workings of aesthetic critique by using the same algorithmic formulas that facilitate the work of the weaponized political design. It can be effective then only by fostering the design-literate publics which the first counter-strategy is aimed at - audiences who can have the critical aesthetic consciousness in which counter-design can be read as critique and not just a more political sound. The architecture of platforms and the incentives of polarizing aesthetics are key to counter-strategy because without institutional response to the platforms architectures and political economies that promote polarizing aesthetics, individual and cultural counter-strategy will fail. Vieira, Joaquim and Duarte (2025) pinpoint institutional reactions platform regulation, reform of electoral legislation, compulsory disclosure requirements as important components of an appropriate counter-mechanism of the systematic creation of manipulative political visual images. That is, AI-generated or AI-enhanced political content must be disclosed; political advertising that targets parameters

must be transparent; the micro-targeting of political messages via the use of psychographic data must be restricted; and the construction of algorithms must not be done in a manner that structurally undermines measured, qualified and epistemically humble political communications in comparison to emotionally extreme content. According to Dong (2025), the political actors that are most apt to gain out of aesthetical weaponization are often the most powerful in regulating structures that might restrain it - yet the tension of structures, though a fact of life, cannot be seen as an excuse to not regulate.

Mahiwal et al. (2026) present a fourth counter-strategy between the individual and structural level, the development and introduction of AI-driven detection and labeling systems that have the potential to differentiate between synthetic media, organized inauthentic aesthetic movements and AI-generated political images. That simple epistemic faith of visual evidence that AI generation has eternally broken is indelibly imprinted into the history of the world through the eyes of a detection technology - that kind of democratic innocence is forever lost. However, it can provide the tools that institutional actors, like platforms, electoral commissions, civil society organizations, news organizations, can use to label synthetic content to reduce its capacity to be perceived as documentary reality. Generative AI and detection technology will constantly be in an endless arms race as to who can detect things better; no one will be able to be obviously advantaged. Detection technology can then be most productively regarded as a necessary but insufficient infrastructure - as one of the components of a whole counter-strategy in which the full potential of which must be realised by the co-evolution of design-literate publics, critical design cultures, and structurally re-engineered platform architectures.

9. CONCLUSION

Graphic Design and Future of Democratic Aesthetic

The paper has presented a concerted argument on the systematic weaponization of the graphic design in the political campaigns of today that are digital in nature. Contrary to the discussion that disinformation is a problem of false content and algorithmic amplification is a problem of technology, this discussion has revealed that aesthetic weaponization, i.e. the deliberate use of features of visual communication design to elicit an emotional reaction, and does not require a rational decision and, in fact, coordinates partisan identities, is a constitutive process of political polarization in the digital era. Typography is ideological architecture; color is an affective tool of precision in manipulation; humor is a meme design that combines all the above into viral vectors of tribal polarization; AI-generated imagery is an artificial creation of political reality; and platform architecture has a structural means of amplification and rewarding all the four vectors on the logic of maximizing engagement. These two are no different, but a part of a system of visual communication that has been hijacked and radicalised in a commercial context in order to become politicised. The cerebral contribution of the paper consists in aesthetic weaponization being considered a system - in the example of how typography,

color, humor, imagery and platform architecture are not the variables in the communication system, but instead complementary dimensions of a single, coherent, political communication system. These visual grammar and chromatic signalling interact in the visual grammar of memes; artificial images made by AI are exaggerated by photorealistic synthetic images; platform architecture exaggerates the most emotively extreme mixes of all three; and the political economy of surveillance capitalism is a mapping of personal psychographic vulnerability as targeting parameters in personalised aesthetic delivery. It is this system that must precondition response to it in an appropriate manner - to constitute the complex of counter-strategy of design literacy, of critical design practice, of structural platform reform, the scale and complexity of aesthetic weaponization demands.

The analysis implication extends beyond the scholarly knowledge to crucial practical questions of the democracy government, civil education, and professional design ethics. As far as, as this paper will argue, graphic design is a decisive instrument of political power in the digital era - capable of operating beyond the logic, form affective collectivities and establish political realities - then the professional ethics of graphic design would have to concern itself with the political resonance that the dominant professional ideology of design as a service discipline has repressed systematically. The design of materials of political campaigns, the development of AI image generation prompts on a commission to political customers, the design of the template of the memes promulgating partisan ideology into the viral stream is not just a technical service but a political choice with democratic outcomes. The ethics of design adequate to this fact ought to be occupied with the political consequences of the aesthetic choice, instead of with the criteria of craft of the aesthetic, and criteria of the commercial success.

A bigger cultural politics of such an appeal is the call to a digital ethos of relationality and pluralism - to a practice of digital public culture in which the adversarial aesthetics of weaponized political communication are supplanted by visual ones that can appreciate the validity of the difference, and establish the conditions of a cross-partisan dialogue. The such ethos must not merely exist in individual professional choice or individual pedagogic project, but the platform architectures, political economies and cultures of production and consumption of political visual communication must fundamentally change. Graphic design can in no way be decoration. It is - as this discussion has demonstrated - a form of political intervention and action in the actual sense of democracy, and the point of departure of a satisfactory response to the weaponised aesthetic environment in which the life of democracy now exists.

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