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**America as a Trendsetter:
Using pop culture and new technologies as a means of
politics**

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Keywords

Pop culture, soft power, surveillance capitalism, digital propaganda, microtargeting

*"In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."
George Orwell*

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the United States became a leading trendsetter through pop culture and new technologies, not only to shape global preferences but also to influence political ideologies and behaviors. Since the advent of social media platforms, the dynamics of political communication and engagement have been transforming since Facebook's rise to popularity. The thesis aims to provide an overview of how the United States leverages digital innovations and popular culture as instruments of "soft power" to extend its influence beyond traditional political and economic means. In investigating this topic, the thesis will also address the interplay between cultural appeal and political influence, as well as the consequences in citizens' political engagement, considering how digital platforms and media have redefined social behavior and power in the 21st century. Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that in a world increasingly dominated by virtual interactions, a country's ability to project influence and shape ideologies is profoundly impacted by its digital and cultural footprint, while the ongoing digital war for influence simultaneously alters the ways in which the public perceives politics in general.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Artificial Intelligence	AI
Cambridge Analytica	CA
Central Intelligence Agency	CIA
Chat Generative Pretrained Transformer	ChatGPT
Computational Propaganda Project	COMPROM
Federal Trade Commission	FTC
Information Commissioner's Office	ICO
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	ISIS
League of Legends	LoL
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	NATO
Oxford Internet Institute	OII
PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds	PUBG
Public Relation	PR
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction	SIGAR
United Fruit Company	UFC
United Kingdom	UK
United States	US

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INTRODUCTION – Why the United States?

Through the centuries, each technological leap brought radical changes to both society and its political/governmental spectrum, one way or another; from the printing press to television, to the development of radio waves and microwaves. The telephone lines being used as transportation methods of electric signals through copper wires, later evolved into light signals transmitted through fiber-optic cables, revolutionizing the speed in which people could exchange information and communicate.

Before that, after the end of the Cold War to be precise, the United States (US) was crowned as the leading superpower on the global political chessboard, after being the spearhead of such technological leaps, which affected the country's sociopolitical structure and contributed to its significant economic growth and its position on the global power rankings (Fukuyama, 1992). The most impressive aspect of globally influencing advancement was that the United States managed to remain the main stage where all these innovations came to fruition; the country upheld the reputation of being the motherland of progress (Nye, 1990). Having the best universities in the world, the most advanced medical equipment, the most renowned scientists and researchers, and consequentially the highest quality of life, upholding the spirit of the American Dream.

After so many years and many scientific leaps later, the outcome of this ever-expanding development seems more like a double-edged sword. The consequences of modern concepts regarding life online have dominated contemporary sociopolitical discussions of philosophical nature. Theoreticians from various social science fields have now come forward to warn the public about the dangers for political stability, human consciousness and intelligence, democracy and the general values that serve as pylons for modern global society.

Considering where we are today, the United States stands as a pivotal force in shaping the global internet landscape and cultural discourse. As the birthplace of many of the world's leading social media platforms and digital technologies, the US not only spearheads the evolution of online trends but also serves as a nexus of convergence for technology, pop culture, and politics. American pop culture exports -ranging from blockbuster films and iconic music to the pervasive reach of digital content- function as

instruments of soft power, extending US influence well beyond its borders (Nye, 2005). Moreover, the dominance of US based platforms in driving internet trends and the strategic role of digital infrastructure, often intertwined with government policies, underscore the nation's unparalleled impact on global communications.

Since most major social media platforms originated or became dominant in the US, it's only natural that American society was the first to experience their full effects. The rapid development of these platforms placed Americans at the epicenter of the social media revolution, making them the first to navigate both its opportunities and its consequences (Gillespie, 2018). The US was the testing ground for algorithm-driven engagement, influencer culture, and the shift from traditional to digital media. Because social media is deeply embedded in American political, cultural, and economic systems, it also became a crucial tool for shaping public opinion, mobilizing movements, and, inevitably, fueling polarization.

By exploring these dynamics, this study aims to illuminate the broader implications of American cultural and technological hegemony, demonstrating why the US remains the quintessential case for understanding the interplay between pop culture, digital innovation, and contemporary political power.

In addition to the above, there are more points which help to justify the focus of the thesis on the US, and these are: historical context and innovation, global cultural resonance and political/economic clout. To break it down, regarding the historical context, the American tradition of innovation and free expression has cultivated an environment conducive to digital experimentation and cultural production, setting standards that are emulated worldwide. As for the American cultural narratives, they have not only dominated the Western world but have also resonated across diverse regions, fostering cross-cultural exchanges. Lastly, the US's established dominance in international relations, combined with its technological and economic power, creates a unique scenario where cultural exports become a strategic asset in the geopolitical arena. More on that will be discussed later, based on the theory of *soft power* (Nye, 2004).

This approach provides a clear and concise rationale for centering this thesis on the US, establishing its importance as a trendsetter in both the digital realm and global cultural

politics. However, as we delve further into the thesis's subject, it becomes evident that the US is not the sole exporter of popular culture and indeed faces significant competition in this domain. The question being posed is not about which nation will be crowned as the top exporter, but how the people caught up in this digital battleground are experiencing the progress of this fight for online cultural dominance. Ultimately, the research aims to combine historical references, foreign policy concepts, social issues, and questions on online life, in an attempt to understand and suggest.

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Chapter I – The Power of Content & Soft Power

The greatest change of our time is that information technology has penetrated people's daily lives and interpersonal communications. Any kind of information (news, videos, opinions, etc.) can easily be accessed at any given time, while mobile data providers and public Wi-Fi access points ensure that the user can always be online and up to date with the latest trending content. If we had to describe the rapid development of the internet combined with its immediacy in one word, that word would probably be “availability” (Popova *et al.*, 2021) and here is an example of it: A Russian study that was conducted in 2018 and published in 2021, showed that 80% of the population was online regularly, while 55% of the population were active users on social online platforms. Additionally, the share of young people being active on social online platforms exceeds 90%, with the total amount of Russian youth using the internet daily reaching 98%, spending about 5 hours a day on various social networks (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2018).

Russia's population serves as a valid sample due to its vast size; however, even an analysis of statistics from smaller countries would yield similar results. In most nations, most people are active online daily, engaging in a diverse array of digital activities that span various fields and interests. Regardless of the nationality, what matters the most is the content consumed by users; what kind of videos do people watch? What genres of music are currently the most popular? What does “pop culture” look like right now?

Social Blade, a platform that provides statistical insights for social media sites like YouTube and Instagram, reveals that the majority of the top 20 YouTube channels are based in the United States. Similarly, the most-followed Instagram accounts, which predominantly feature content catering to a Western audience, also originate from the United States. The dominance of American content creators, artists, and media on platforms like YouTube and other social media is not only a cultural phenomenon but also has political implications, since it amplifies the United States' soft power and global influence in ways that shape perceptions, values, and ideologies worldwide (www.socialblade.com visit 2025).

More specifically, when American content creators and artists dominate global platforms, they export not just entertainment but also American values, lifestyles, and perspectives (Fattor, 2014). This form of cultural diplomacy can subtly shape the political and social values of audiences worldwide, promoting ideals such as individualism, freedom of expression, and consumerism. The broad acceptance of these values can lead to alignment with American political ideologies, fostering a shared cultural base that supports US interests abroad (Nye, 2004).

Additionally, pop culture produced in the US has had a positive impact on the global perception of the country's policies (Nye, 2004). A country's image is a crucial component of its influence in international relations. When American culture permeates global media, it strengthens a positive perception of the US, making it more appealing to foreign populations. This appeal can indirectly influence international relations by creating a sense of familiarity and admiration toward the US, which can support diplomatic initiatives or make other countries more receptive to US policies. The most common example of this case would be blockbuster films which represent American values and are recognized and referenced worldwide (Nye, 2011).

However, the most impactful aspect of US dominance in terms of content is the ability to shape political discourse and social norms. Platforms that host American content, such as YouTube, X (former Twitter), and Instagram, are often the starting points for social and political movements, from awareness campaigns to activism (Tufekci, 2017). These platforms not only propagate American culture but also shape global political discourse, as American creators frequently engage with issues such as human rights, democracy, and social justice. This influence can lead to a situation where American social and political norms become benchmarks or aspirational models for other countries, affecting their own domestic policies and political climates. Online personalities and artists, though often not directly involved in politics, possess a unique ability to influence their fanbases' political choices simply by sharing their personal opinions. A prime example of this occurred when Taylor Swift¹ publicly endorsed Kamala Harris² for the 2024 US elections, resulting in a remarkable 20% surge in support for Harris on the same day. This demonstrates the substantial reach and impact that public figures can have on their followers' political

¹ American pop singer.

² American politician and attorney who served as the 49th vice president of the United States from 2021 to 2025 under President Joe Biden.

decisions, underscoring the power of celebrity influence in shaping voter behavior (Wheeler, 2013).

In recent years, this phenomenon has occurred more than once and it raises critical questions about how people choose their leaders as political decision - arguably among the most consequential choices in a democratic society - are increasingly shaped by celebrity endorsements rather than informed policy discussions. When voters, often lacking a deep understanding of political affairs, cast their ballots based on the preferences of influencers, musicians, or comedians rather than their own critical analysis, it blurs the line between civic responsibility and passive allegiance. This trend not only highlights the power of digital-age soft power but also poses a deeper concern: political engagement might be becoming less about policies and more about personalities (Street, 2019).

To dive deeper into this concept, we ought to take a step back and start over. There can't be no discussion about the influence of digital content and soft power, without referring to the definition of the term as coined by Joseph Nye. In 2004, According to him, soft power refers to a state's capacity to achieve desired outcomes by making itself appealing to others, rather than relying on force or financial incentives (Nye, 2004). Nye contrasts soft power with hard power, which relies on military force or economic pressure. He explains that soft power stems from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies—especially when they are seen as legitimate or morally appealing. He also emphasizes that in an interconnected world, soft power is a crucial tool in shaping international relations and influencing global public opinion.

Right after introducing Nye's definition, it would make sense to contextualize it within the thesis by explaining how it operates in the digital age, particularly through social media and pop culture. We have already set up the dominance of American content online, so now we should bridge the gap between theory and practice. Before that, we again need to take another step back and refer to the origins of *pop culture* as a term. The term "*pop culture*" (short for "*popular culture*") has evolved over time, and while it doesn't have a single inventor, its academic use traces back to cultural theorists of the 20th century. British cultural theorist Raymond Williams is one of the most influential figures in defining and analyzing the concept of pop culture. In his book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, published in 1976, Williams notes that "popular" originally referred to something

belonging to the people but later took on meanings related to mass consumption and commercial entertainment (Williams, 1976). Another key figure in early discussions of pop culture is Theodor Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School, who criticized mass-produced culture. He viewed it as a tool for social control, arguing that it through standardized entertainment, the masses remain indolent (Adorno, 1944). Regardless of how theoreticians viewed the term, Nye emphasized its importance in an interconnected world and our time and age is that of absolute connectivity, making his work more relevant than ever as a fundamental element of understanding today's war on popular culture.

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Chapter II – Soft power in the digital age: From hard power to the social media factor

While Nye's definition of soft power was originally framed in the context of diplomacy, media, and cultural influence, the digital age has significantly reshaped how it operates. Traditional soft power tools (Hollywood films, pop music, global brands) have not disappeared, but they now coexist with a more immediate and interactive force: social media. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have become digital battlegrounds where cultural influence spreads in real time, often driven not by governments but by individual creators, influencers, and viral trends. With algorithms amplifying content based on engagement rather than intent, American culture and political discourse dominate the global online space, shaping perceptions, ideologies, and even voting behavior. This evolution raises an essential question: if soft power is no longer exclusively wielded by states, but also by celebrities, content creators, and corporations, how does this impact global politics and the way societies engage with democracy?

Before we can dwell on this question, it is important not to overlook the legacy and continued relevance of hard power in shaping international relations. The US, throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, heavily relied on military interventions, covert operations, and regime changes to assert dominance. These methods often yielded mixed or destabilizing results. From Vietnam to Iraq, these actions exposed the limitations of coercive force in achieving long-term strategic goals. Scholars like William Blum have detailed how such interventions eroded global trust and prompted a change in the national foreign policy strategy for the country (Blum, 2003). It was within this context of disillusionment with hard power that soft power gained traction. But not as a replacement. It was more of a complement, offering a subtler and often more persuasive form of influence. The shift toward digital platforms and algorithm-driven culture marks not a departure from power politics, but a transformation in its tools and actors.

The meaning of “*soft power*” was initially more simplified. This “attraction” that Nye was referring to came from culture (Hollywood, jazz music, fashion, literature), foreign policy legitimacy (formation of NATO, diplomacy) and political values. So, when people around

the world admired American Universities, loved American movies and music, or believed in the “American Dream,” that was the US exercising soft power, it wasn’t about control but more about being appealing and thus persuasive.

Fast forward to today’s digital era where soft power has a strong data component. The rise of social media, with Facebook as the early protagonist, did more than just transform communication; it reshaped the dynamics of soft power and deeply influenced both domestic sociopolitical realities and foreign policy strategies (Nye, 2011). When Facebook and similar platforms (Twitter, YouTube, later Instagram and TikTok) began dominating digital life, they unintentionally became global arenas for shaping public opinion, exporting values, and setting political and cultural trends (Zuboff, 2019). Classic elements of soft power. While social media actually gave individuals a voice and facilitated global discourse, they also contributed to polarization, misinformation, and algorithm-driven echo chambers³. One thing can be said for sure: these platforms have reshaped human interaction in ways yet to be fully understood.

Before sociopolitical polarization, these platforms first revolutionized the way individuals interacted with their own identities and privacy. In the early days of platforms like Myspace and Facebook, users embraced the novelty of publicly sharing personal details, thoughts, daily activities, even intimate moments that would have been considered private in the past. This shift wasn’t merely about increased transparency; it signaled the beginning of a new digital self, one that could be carefully curated, edited, and even detached from reality. Social media allowed individuals to construct idealized versions of themselves, shaping how they were perceived not only by friends and followers but by society at large (Swigger, 2012). Over time, this phenomenon blurred the boundaries between authenticity and performance, reality and digital reality, and the big question was: how did we go from posting overly edited pictures to make ourselves look better, to shaping political opinions overnight?

It wasn’t exactly overnight but the transition from personal curation to political polarization happened faster than most people realized. The groundwork was already laid the moment social media became a tool for identity shaping. Once people got used to presenting

³ An insular communication space where everyone agrees with the information and no outside input is allowed (definition taken from Urban Dictionary: [Urban Dictionary: echo chamber](#) Date of visit: 12/22/2024).

idealized versions of themselves online, it wasn't a big leap to extend that same mentality to their beliefs. On a societal aspect, there are five factors that contributed to the shaping of the online world we are part of nowadays: algorithmic reinforcement, gamification of opinions, the transition of lifestyle to ideology, the shift of the means of production and the viral nature of political movements. Let's break down each one of these factors:

Algorithmic reinforcement refers to the evolution of social media platforms, from digital diaries to curated spaces where people gravitated toward content that reinforced their existing views. To keep the people/users engaged, the algorithm – which prioritizes engagement in the first place – would validate rather than challenge their perspectives, putting users in self-reinforcing echo chambers instead of diverse discussions. After all, outrage sells and drives engagement better than any other tool (Thompson, 2011).

The “gamification” of opinion refers to the transformation of opinions into a game of numbers. As C. Thi Nguyen mentions in his book, likes, comments, shares, retweets, turned discourse into a contest of visibility (Nguyen, 2020). The more extreme or emotionally charged a post is, the more views it is bound to attract, shifting how. In my opinion, people stopped sharing opinions from some point and onward and instead started performing them. The competition for social validation shifted the way political discourse functioned, making it less about debating and finding a common ground and more about winning an argument in public view.

The transition of lifestyle to ideology refers to the previously mentioned concept of people curating their identities online. The course from presenting an ideal life through overly edited Instagram photos to showcasing political stances was natural, but the escalation of it was that this display of political beliefs was done in a way that reflected the identity they wanted to project. Supporting a candidate or a movement wasn't just about policy, it became an extension of one's personal brand.

What brought up the necessity of what Byung-Chul Han describes as “discipline” was the rapid industrialization that needed the body to adapt to the new means of production, fostering discipline through rules and not state-approved violence. Different means of production would result in new rules that would be engraved to the individual's daily routine, ultimately turning him into a production unit, utilizing methodology and not

oppressive tactics (Han, 2023). In a cause-and-effect analogy, the rapid technological development which I referred to at the beginning of this thesis caused a chain of events that ultimately repositioned the human factor amidst the production process.

Lastly, the concept of “viral” refers to something that gained an immense number of views/clicks on a very short period. Most of the time, viral videos used to resemble fireworks; they would appear, shine temporarily, and after a while they would fade away into the darkness (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). During their time of brightness, people would talk about them, refer to them in daily conversations and then all of a sudden, something else would follow up and replace it with a new trend, a new concept, a new buzzword that would repeat itself in Instagram reels, TikTok videos, X posts, etc.

Political movements faced the same fate as videos. However, despite the risk of being ephemeral or influenced by trends, celebrities, and cultural waves, there are examples of political movements and events like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter showcasing how quickly social media could mobilize people and create devoted supporters (Tufekci, 2017). This can also be listed as a positive aspect, despite that many people miss it when discussing the impact of social media platforms and how they transformed the concept of politics.

The five factors that were just mentioned contributed to the somewhat inevitable development of an online environment that was defined by polarization. The inevitability of this change lies to the fact that social media platforms reward emotional, performative content over nuanced discussion and encouraged the construction of online identities, ultimately leading to ideological entrenchment. Simply put, first came the change of how we present ourselves, then how we think, and finally how we engage with politics.

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Chapter III – The Evolution of Manipulation

While Hollywood and streaming platforms flood the world with entertainment, they also serve as a lens through which audiences revisit the darker chapters of US foreign policy. Documentaries, investigative journalism, and historical analyses have exposed the state's involvement in covert operations. The Netflix documentary *“Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War”* which was premiered in 2024 on the platform, is a prime example of discussing some of America's dark pages in history. The documentary chronicles the events from the usage of the nuclear bomb in World War II, to consequences of nuclear weapons' use in the political sphere for the next decades, leading up to Russia's invasion in Ukraine in 2022. In the series, there are two main events that interest us for the sake of this thesis, and these are the two occasions of interference by the US in Iran and Guatemala.

In both cases, the main protagonists were the Dulles brothers. John Foster Dulles was the US Secretary of State (1953–1959) under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Allen Dulles who was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director (1953-1961) and had played a significant role in American covert operations during the Cold War. Both were key figures in orchestrating the 1953 coup in Iran (Operation Ajax), which overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh to secure Western control over Iranian oil. The operation was mostly a propaganda campaign, with bribing being the main method to turn public sentiment against Mossadegh. The CIA flooded newspapers in Tehran with fake stories of Mossadegh being a communist puppet and a threat to Islam. They also paid fake protestors to stage riots, and fake thugs to attack mullahs and defile mosques, posing as members of the very small communist party of Iran called Tudeh. In the end, there was enough propaganda and money flowing around Tehran, that it led to a small corps of military officers to roll up a tank at Mossadegh's house, blow his wall and make him resign. It was a textbook case of modern regime change, since it wasn't based solely on military intervention, but on information warfare, bribery, and psychological mass manipulation⁴.

⁴ Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War (2024), *Episode 3: Institutional Insanity*.

After seeing that Operation Ajax was deemed successful, the Dulles brothers set their eyes on the Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz because he introduced land reforms that threatened US business interests and more specifically, the United Fruit Company (UFC), which had deep ties to the US government and owned massive amounts of land in Guatemala and paid almost no taxes. The redistribution Árbenz was going for was basically handing out unused land to poor farmers, something that threatened the UFC's interests, since it would push the company to sell said unused land to the Guatemalan government. The Dulles brothers convinced President Eisenhower that the Guatemalan president was a communist threat and had to be removed, and then proceeded to similar tactics with what happened to Iran. The CIA launched radio propaganda broadcasts and fake news reports about a rebel uprising that of course didn't exist, they paid off Guatemalan military officers, and dropped leaflets around the country warning that communists would destroy the country. On top of that, the CIA trained and backed up Carlos Castillo Armas, an anti-communist military officer. He was anointed "the liberator" from the nonexistent communist threat, and led a force of only 480 men across the border. Obviously, he was outnumbered, however, the Guatemalan military panicked that the US would send troops to help Armas and showed absolutely no resistance, offering Armas an easy win. Árbenz resigned and fled to Mexico, Armas became dictator, reversed the land reforms, banned labor unions, closed Congress, gave UFC their land back and a cycle of US-backed military dictatorships followed, leading to a 36-year civil war (1960–1996) and the deaths of over 200,000 people (mostly Indigenous Mayans)⁵.

In addition to state-backed interferences, the Netflix documentary also discusses other means of propaganda, using the time period of the Red Scare as a prime example. The Red Scare, both in its early form after World War I and its more infamous resurgence during the Cold War, was largely a product of state-sponsored propaganda designed to frame the Soviet Union as an existential threat to the American way of life. In the 1950s, McCarthyism fueled mass paranoia, blacklisting intellectuals, artists, and politicians suspected of communist sympathies. This ideological war extended into the 1980s, with Reagan-era⁶ rhetoric reinforcing the notion of the US as the last bastion of freedom against the so-called "Evil Empire", allowing the country to start building upon this notion what would later come to be a perception fitting that of the cultural hegemon of the West.

⁵ Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War (2024), *Episode 3: Institutional Insanity*.

⁶ American politician and actor who served as the 40th President of the United States from 1981 to 1989.

Propaganda played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Films, television, news reports, and even children's cartoons were infused with anti-Soviet messaging. Media served as a tool to not only justify foreign interventions but also to keep the population in a constant state of fear, making them more accepting of aggressive military spending, thinking it was a necessity for the safety of the nation. Documentaries like *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War* highlight how these narratives were constructed, exposing the direct link between pop culture, media, and state power. It wasn't just about fighting communism abroad but about controlling perception at home (Gaddis, 2005).

The point is that today's state of the sociopolitical landscape we navigate through is undeniably shaped by the influence of Big Tech, but to assume that these corporations have reinvented the wheel would be a mistake. The US, as well as other countries historically and today, have conducted their own share of state-sponsored influence operations, but it's the US that interests us now, and its history includes a huge number of covert operations since the early days of the CIA. Rather than leaving the past behind, the rise of social media and Big Tech only shifted the battlefield, but the battle still wages on. Acknowledging history while emphasizing that the methods have changed but the core mechanics remain is enough to establish a pattern. It started with newspapers and coup d'états, now it's social media and data-driven influence, a transition that only proves that manipulation has been perfected. While the tactics have evolved, the fundamental goal remains unchanged: control over public perception and behavior. Unlike the brute-force interventions of the past, with states orchestrating coups, suppressed dissent, and controlled media narratives, Big Tech has refined manipulation into a seamless, almost invisible process. Rather than coercing people through fear or force, today's digital platforms no longer follow the concept of "external discipline" as explained previously (Foucault, 1977 & Zuboff, 2019). On the contrary, a system designed to anticipate desires and reinforce biases is fed, pointing users to different directions, whether it be consumer choices, political leanings, or ideological affiliations. This shift from overt propaganda to algorithmic influence allows power to operate under the guise of personal freedom, making it far more insidious (Pariser, 2011).

Whereas past regimes silenced opposition through censorship and repression, today's information landscape isolates it and neutralizes it without any display of force. While the term for *echo chambers* is widely known, I strongly believe that as a global society, we

have moved past this concept and have entered a stage of more “hardcore” approaches for both different opinions and politics in a broader sense. Think of it as this categorization of opinions by today’s information economy. Every online voiced opinion is categorized and put in the same “chamber” with other similar opinions, of a similar nature and political direction. In the end, what once was an “echo chamber” with people agreeing with one another, has now become entire gated communities of thought, where users feel like they’re part of something bigger, yet remain completely detached from conflicting perspectives. Since the concept of a *chamber* is used metaphorically, to expand the metaphor, we could think of multiple “chambers” that ultimately form a “house”. This so called “house” is on the same “neighborhood” with other “houses”. Today, violence as a form of suppression is unnecessary because the very structure of digital platforms ensures that people remain confined within their own ideological bubbles, regardless of the metaphor that could be used to define them – in this case, that of a house. When every algorithmic interaction reinforces existing beliefs and emotional engagement keeps users locked into their specific “neighborhood”, there’s little incentive - or even opportunity - to cross ideological lines. Instead of a free marketplace of ideas, we have a fragmented landscape where different groups develop entirely separate realities, each convinced of their own absolute truth. This also makes people more susceptible to manipulation (Chitra & Musco, 2020). When individuals only interact with like-minded groups, they become more radicalized, more emotionally invested, and more distrustful of those outside their “neighborhood”. Instead of discourse, we get digital tribalism, where persuasion is replaced by antagonism and where the idea of compromise is seen as a form of ideological betrayal (Pariser, 2011). We no longer want to agree upon disagreement.

Despite its ominous nature, this concept of polarization is real, and it’s been around for years, as explained in Eli Pariser’s book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* where algorithmic personalization in platforms like Google or Facebook creates information bubbles around users. These bubbles show you what you already like, filter out what you don’t like, reinforcing existing beliefs, narrowing users’ worldview (Pariser, 2011). It basically discusses how the structure of the internet curate’s reality and even though Pariser wrote the book in 2011, the concepts described within were too big to be entirely controlled. Concepts such as algorithmic manipulation, data collection and personalization have evolved beyond expectations, and the book remains relevant to this day. But still, online life is multifaceted, and these critical issues continue to evoke debates

and doubts from various fields for decades and will continue to do so, as we can tell by the ever-evolving nature of digital tools.

The force behind this categorization isn't a single entity or a conscious decision by a single person, it's a structural outcome of the digital ecosystem itself and it can have many names, depending on the point of view upon which we examine it: It can be called *algorithmic mechanism* (Zuboff, 2019), since this ecosystem is based on how recommendation systems and engagement-driven algorithms naturally sort people into ideological communities without any direct human intervention. It can also be called *digital architecture* (Gillespie, 2010) referring to the way these platforms are structured.

Shoshana Zuboff calls it the *Big Other* in her book, referring to the medium between surveillance capitalism and users (Zuboff, 2019). Previously, it was referred to as the *information economy*, a type of economic structure where segregation of ideologies is a byproduct of business models built on attracting and maximizing engagement, and now Eli Pariser calls it *information bubbles*. Each term carries a slightly different connotation, depending on whether someone wants to emphasize structure, economics, technology, or psychology. The digital sorting machines? The cognitive sorting machines? The systemic logic of the Big Tech, going hand in hand with state-sponsored tactics undermining democracy? Regardless of the name anyone would choose to talk about "it", the digital ecosystem that defines our daily lives, it all comes down to the three main concepts of this thesis being interconnected: soft power, pop culture, and the role of the individual. Social media platforms are what ties these three concepts together, while they function as the primary medium of influence today.

The first approach of this interconnectivity emphasizes public perception and influence. Manipulation – in a vague sense – has long been a tool of power, with governments orchestrating propaganda campaigns, media control, and psychological operations to shape narratives in their favor. From the CIA-backed coups in Iran and Guatemala, where disinformation and media infiltration were instrumental in destabilizing governments, to the Red Scare⁷, which weaponized fear to suppress dissent, the tactics of control have

⁷ Red Scare period of public fear and anxiety over the supposed rise of communist or socialist ideologies in a noncommunist state. The term is generally used to describe two such periods in the US. The first occurred from 1917 to 1920, amid an increase in organized labour movements, immigration, urbanization, and industrialization. The second period, also called McCarthyism after U. Sen. Joseph McCarthy, took place from roughly 1947 to 1954, Britannica.

evolved alongside technology. Today, we have already discussed about manipulation no longer requiring overt state-sponsored coercion and how it operates subtly through the algorithmic mechanisms of Big Tech. The same principles of narrative control persist in digital form, automated by engagement-driven platforms that determine which voices are amplified and which are buried, while cultural exports are used as “pacifiers” in the process, keeping users busy.

Speaking of cultural exports, the second approach highlights the relevance of the US being a trend setter, and still fits within the broader discussion of soft power. The US remains the dominant force in global pop culture exports, and even though digitalization has decentralized some aspects of cultural influence, the foundational structures (Hollywood, Silicon Valley, the English language as the default of the internet) ensure that American narratives still shape global discourse. We could position the US as the “architect” of the digital pop culture landscape, meaning that while influence is now more interactive and multi-directional, the framework within which soft power operates is still largely American-made (Curtin, Holt & Sanson, 2014). Conclusively, we could say that the US maintains its dominance not just by producing content but by controlling the platforms through which content circulates.

Interestingly enough, despite its unmatched cultural dominance, the US has faced significant strategic failures in almost every major conflict it has engaged in since the mid-20th century. In fear of oversimplifying it and sounding rhetorically charged, I avoided calling every single engagement a “loss”, therefore it would be better to approach it in a more nuanced and factually accurate way. Starting off with the Vietnam War (1955 – 1975), indeed, it is widely regarded as a military and political defeat for the US. The US forces were withdrawn without achieving their objective and the South Vietnam fell to the communist North in 1975, ultimately leaving a deep scar on American society, policy, and military doctrine. The Iraq War (2003–2011) resulted in Saddam Hussein’s⁸ overthrow, however the power vacuum and lack of a post-war strategy, led to civil war and the rise of ISIS⁹. So, while technically a military success, politically it’s considered a loss. The Afghanistan War (2001–2021) is also considered a failure, with even government reports

⁸ Was an Iraqi politician and revolutionary who served as the president of Iraq from 1979 until he was overthrown in 2003 during the US invasion of Iraq.

⁹ Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) pointing out crucial flaws of the operation, and chaotic evacuation scenes marking the withdrawal of US forces from the country and its takeover by the Taliban¹⁰ right after their departure. Syria (2011–present) is a complicated case, since the US never fully committed to regime change. Russia and Iran have gained more strategic influence in the area, so it is more of a geopolitical stalemate but definitely not a victory. Whether or not the development of soft power through online tools was an attempt to counter the failures of the country's hard power, it's up for debate.

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¹⁰ Is an Afghan political and militant movement with an ideology comprising elements of the Deobandi movement of Islamic fundamentalism and Pashtun nationalism.

Chapter IV – The War for Digital Hegemony

Political influence through digital platforms isn't just about misinformation or election interference, it's also about cultural influence. Pop culture itself has evolved from what Nye described it to be; nowadays it has become a vehicle for political and ideological messaging. For example, Hollywood, the music industry, and influencers shape narratives just as much as news media or cyber propaganda. The blurred line between entertainment and political discourse is what bridges the weaponization we just discussed with cultural exporting. We already discussed how the dominance of American content creators shapes contemporary trends in various social contexts including politics, but it's also important to note that social media has accelerated the globalization of pop culture, making it easier for American entertainment (and later, entertainment from other countries) to dominate international markets (Jin, 2021). This way, we tie the manipulation of digital spaces to the broader discussion of soft power.

With that being said, we naturally transition to the question: which country could stand against the digital hegemony of the US? Yes, Japan. While the US is often seen as the leader in global soft power due to its pervasive cultural exports, Japan has carved out a unique and incredibly impactful space in the realm of soft power. Japan's influence showcases how a country with a completely different historical, cultural, and geopolitical context can successfully challenge the dominance of US soft power by redefining pop culture and leveraging its uniqueness. Japan introduced forms of entertainment that resonate deeply across different age groups, demographics, and cultures. Anime¹¹, manga¹², and video games have become global phenomena, captivating millions of fans worldwide. Franchises like Pokémon¹³ and Studio Ghibli films have transcended their origins to become beloved icons beyond Japanese borders. Unlike Hollywood blockbusters or Western pop music, Japanese pop culture is rooted in a distinct aesthetic and storytelling approach. It often explores universal themes (e.g., identity, morality,

¹¹ Anime derived from a shortening of the English word *animation*, is animation originating from Japan.

¹² Manga are comics or graphic novels originating from Japan

¹³ Pokémon is a Japanese media franchise consisting of video games, animated series and films, a trading card game and other related media and, and other related media.

resilience) while incorporating distinctly cultural motifs, such as nature, Shintoism¹⁴, and collectivism. This balance of the local and the universal makes Japanese pop culture uniquely appealing and impactful on a global scale, without being limited to manga, video games and anime. It encompasses many forms of content including fashion, commercial products, eco-friendly approaches in technology, Japanese cuisine, and high-tech products (Watanabe, 2008).

Starting in 1980, with the emergence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan recognized its cultural power seeing as the country was stripped of the right to use hard power due to its aggressive imperialistic history and its involvement in World War II. The country was forced to figure out a way to rebuild its image and change its approach in diplomacy through soft power alone. Japan institutionalized its soft power strategy through the government-backed *Cool Japan Initiative* (Daliot-Bul, 2014). This program actively promoted all these previously mentioned aspects of the country's culture, as a means to strengthen its global influence¹⁵. Unlike the US, where soft power arises more organically through market forces, Japan's approach blends organic cultural appeal with deliberate state-sponsored efforts to expand its cultural footprint. A remarkable aspect of this is how it has inspired active engagement from people worldwide, with language learning being the most common example: millions of fans learn Japanese to better understand anime and manga in its original form, or simply out of admiration for the culture and the wish to travel there, making the Japanese language a gateway to cultural appreciation. Speaking of wishing to travel there, Japan's success in branding itself as an "exotic" and "must-visit" destination is a textbook example of using culture to enhance a nation's appeal. Through films, anime settings, and travel marketing campaigns, Japan has built a compelling image that combines its modern technological advancements (like high-speed trains and futuristic cities) with its deeply traditional side (temples, samurai culture, and tea ceremonies), (Close, 2018). This duality makes it one of the most attractive destinations, adding it to everyone's travel bucket list.

Japan's cultural exports serve the same purpose as American cultural exports: admiration and goodwill for the country. While Japan does not project hard power on the scale of the US, its soft power has allowed it to shape global perceptions and relationships. For

¹⁴ Shinto, also called Shintoism, is a religion originating in Japan.

¹⁵ Cool Japan Strategy, Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, September 2019.

example, Japanese pop culture is very popular to its neighboring countries, creating a shared regional sphere. Also, by hosting cultural events (e.g. the Olympics) and further strengthening its cultural diplomacy, the country solidified its position as a nation of great cultural significance. It is important to note that Japan's soft power is often seen as less intrusive compared to the US model, therefore more "approachable". The American model is often criticized for being overly commercialized or tied to the country's geopolitical agendas, with a textbook example being Hollywood movies which often portray slightly altered versions of historical truths or make specific ideologies embodied by movie characters seem as rightful, just, or cool. On the other hand, Japanese culture tends to position itself as a source of enrichment and enjoyment rather than as a tool for promoting specific political ideologies (Watanabe, 2008). This perceived form of neutrality has allowed Japan to spread its influence in regions where US cultural hegemony might face resistance.

The key differences between Japanese and US soft power lie to cultural origins and the mediums of influence. American soft power often stems from its emphasis on certain moral codes or aspects, like individualism, freedom, and innovation, whereas Japan's soft power emphasizes in more universal concepts like harmony and tradition, blending elements of history with modernity. As for the mediums of influence, Japan excels in niche cultural products, like anime, manga, and its cuisine, while the US have a shaped a more pervasive form of cultural exports: Hollywood movies, social media platforms, and music, and while it achieves global penetration due to its sheer scale and market dominance, Japan's strategy relies on building niche but passionate global communities. Japanese culture festivals, anime/manga conventions, video game tournaments, sushi, ramen, none of this is considered "exotic" anymore but they've all become staples in many countries.

Japan's pop culture revolution stands as a compelling example of how a nation can rival even the US in cultural influence. Its ability to create cultural products that inspire engagement and attract tourism demonstrates the potency of pop culture as a tool for shaping global perceptions. Japan's rise as a cultural powerhouse illustrates that while the US may hold the crown in soft power dominance, there are other nations out there, equally capable of shaping the global cultural landscape in profound and lasting ways.

In addition to Japan, there have been other notable examples of cultural exporting in an attempt to counterbalance American cultural influence. They too have exported their pop culture products on a global scale and, to some extent, challenged the leading powerhouse. The first most notable example after Japan would definitely be South Korea, a country that not only popularized its music and TV shows (K-Pop & K-Dramas), but is also the most well-known country in terms of dominating the gaming industry. The top players of some of the most renowned gaming franchises are from South Korea (League of Legends (LoL), PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), Tekken¹⁶), while TV shows like *Squid Game*¹⁷ and music groups like BTS¹⁸ and Blackpink¹⁹ enhance South Korea's global cultural presence.

However, there are more countries who have exported their share of pop culture and the most notable are Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Mexico, Nigeria, and the UK, each with its own distinct offer to the global pop culture landscape. Brazil was initially put on the map through its football culture, since it exports its sports culture like no other, with legends like Pele²⁰, Ronaldinho²¹ and Neymar²² shaping global football fandom and being inspirational figures for athletes of all ages. Additionally, Brazil's music (bossa nova, samba, and modern funk) has worldwide presence (Cavalcanti, 2019). France is the birthplace of cinema and by maintaining this legacy through continuous contact with the cinema industry (e.g. Cannes Film Festival), it has enhanced admiration for additional aspects of French culture, with French cuisine being the most distinct element (Looselay, 2003). Germany is an art powerhouse, which pioneered electronic music subgenres with bands like Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream, while its historical impact on arts and philosophy (Bach, Beethoven, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche) has permanently left a mark on the cultural sphere worldwide (Merritt, 2017). India's most well-known contribution on cultural exports is Bollywood, as well as cultural aspects related to Vedic philosophy²³, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Mexican soap operas are extremely popular in Latin America and Spanish-speaking communities worldwide, while Mexican music has shaped music

¹⁶ Is a Japanese media franchise centered on a series of fighting games.

¹⁷ Is a South Korean dystopian survival thriller drama television series.

¹⁸ Also known as the Bangtan Boys, is a South Korean boy band formed in 2010.

¹⁹ Is a South Korean girl group formed by YG Entertainment.

²⁰ Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known by his nickname Pele, was a Brazilian professional footballer (1940-2022).

²¹ Ronaldo de Assis Moreira, commonly known as Ronaldinho Gaucho or simply Ronaldinho, is a Brazilian former professional footballer.

²² Neymar da Silva Santos Junior, simply known as Neymar, is a Brazilian professional footballer.

²³ Vedic philosophy is the foundational spiritual and philosophical system of India, stemming from the ancient Vedas.

globally, especially through reggaeton which today remains one of the most popular genres. Nigeria's film industry, named Nollywood, is the second largest in the world by output, with films reaching African countries and African diaspora worldwide, while Afrobeat's was the music genre that brought African elements in music to the mainstream.

China and the UK are distinct cultural powerhouses due to their history and contribution to pop culture. Starting off with China, some of its most well-known animated films compete with Hollywood and its newest wave of symbolism in cinema (e.g. Jia Zhang-ke's *Ash is Purest White*) has shaped the entirety of the genre, as well as contemporary cinema. When it comes to internet culture, China is known for having banned websites like Facebook, Google, Instagram, Reddit, Bing and other major domain names. A majority of these bans is a result of the companies owning the domain names refusing to follow the Chinese regulations on data policy and data collection, while China itself has imposed an internet censorship policy. Despite the country's overly strict policies regarding web usage, China is the mother of TikTok – called Douyin there – which has undoubtedly reshaped internet culture globally, in ways yet to be fully understood. Meanwhile, China's largest video game company called Tencent owns stakes in major companies (Riot Games, Epic Games) giving China control over global gaming trends. The country's regime is viewed as authoritarian by most, but this hasn't prevented people from the Western world to uphold an admiration for the culture and the language. Just like Japanese, Chinese language learning is very popular on various platforms, as well as on YouTube which ironically is included in the list of banned websites in the mainland.

The UK is a cultural powerhouse which almost matches the US in terms of impact. Most of its modern cultural representatives (Ozzy Osbourne²⁴, Queen²⁵, Adele²⁶) remain hugely influential and the country is credited for being the birthplace of the punk movement²⁷ (e.g. *Sex Pistols*) and later of heavy metal music, with Black Sabbath being the pioneers of the genre and contributing in the creation of various subgenres of the extreme sound. Some of the most well-known TV shows and film franchises are British, with the most notable

²⁴ Also known as the "Prince of Darkness", was an English singer, songwriter, and media personality.

²⁵ British rock band formed in London in 1970 by Freddie Mercury.

²⁶ Adele Laurie Blue Adkins is an English singer-songwriter.

²⁷ Aggressive form of rock music that coalesced into an international (though predominantly Anglo-American) movement in 1975–80. Often politicized and full of vital energy beneath a sarcastic, hostile facade, punk spread as an ideology and an aesthetic approach, becoming an archetype of teen rebellion and alienation (Britannica).

ones being *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of The Rings*. The impact these two had – and continue to have – on pop culture and the fantasy genre is beyond any description. Other global phenomena of pop culture include the stories of Sherlock Holmes and the TV show *Doctor Who*. Some of the most famous actors and directors are British, including Christopher Nolan and Ridley Scott, who both continue to shape Hollywood. Moreover, just like Germany, the UK also has a rich history in literature and philosophy, with William Shakespeare being the most prominent figure of classical literature and theater.

As we see, several countries have established their own entertainment industries, however few have rivaled the global pop culture influence of Japan and South Korea. Unlike other major media exporters such as India, Nigeria, or France, Japan and South Korea have successfully transformed their cultural products into full-fledged global phenomena, shaping international fashion, language learning, tourism, and online subcultures, ultimately transforming their exports into actual lifestyles. A key factor behind their success is accessibility; anime, manga, K-pop, and K-dramas are highly adaptable to digital platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Webtoon, and TikTok, ensuring a steady international reach. Japan's strategic mixture of media, where franchises extend across anime, manga, video games, and merchandise, keeps audiences engaged beyond the initial content, fostering dedicated fandoms (Otmazgin, 2008). Similarly, South Korea has mastered the monetization of K-pop through exclusive albums, meticulous music crafting, paid fan clubs, and global concert tours. Unlike Bollywood or Nollywood, which primarily cater to regional audiences, Japanese and Korean entertainment strikes a balance between cultural uniqueness and broad global appeal, making it easier for Western and non-Western audiences alike to engage with it. Furthermore, both countries' governments have actively supported these industries: Japan has *Cool Japan*, which we referred to earlier, while South Korea has strategically subsidized its entertainment sector, ensuring K-pop and K-dramas gain international traction (McGray, 2002). The result is an unprecedented dominance in the global entertainment space, where Japanese and Korean pop culture have not only thrived but have actively influenced global youth culture in ways that few other nations have achieved.

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Chapter V – The Weaponization of Social Media

After having laid a strong foundation by establishing the impact of social media on identity, a logical next step would be to explore the consequences of this transformation, essentially answering to the question of why it matters so much. Now that we have discussed the power of social media and how it reshaped political engagement, it would be fitting to talk about how it became a tool for political campaigns, state propaganda, and foreign interference.

Starting off with an example, the incident of Cambridge Analytica (CA) is a distinctive case of the usage of social media to manipulate polls. CA was a British political consulting firm that illegally harvested data from millions of users on Facebook to build psychological profiles. The company used this data to micro-target individuals with highly personalized political ads designed to influence their opinions and voting behavior. Access to this massive amount of Facebook data was gained through a third-party app called "thisisyourdigitallife," created by Aleksandr Kogan, a researcher at the University of Cambridge. The app, disguised as a personality quiz, collected data from users and their Facebook friends, resulting in an amount of data gathered from almost 87 million users without their explicit consent, due to Facebook's lax privacy policies at that time. The CA scandal came to light in 2018, though its activities dated back to earlier elections, including the 2016 Brexit referendum. Regarding the referendum, the firm allegedly worked with the Leave campaign, using psychological targeting to push pro-Brexit messaging to specific voter groups. Though the exact impact remains debated, the firm reportedly used data-driven techniques to sway undecided voters.

CA was also involved in the US presidential elections of 2016 using the same tactics, tailoring ads based on voters' psychological profiles to either mobilize support or suppress opposition, in favor of Donald Trump's campaign. Obviously, this was a huge scandal back then. User data was obtained without consent, violating privacy laws, and brought massive backlash for both CA and Facebook. The firm filed for insolvency in the UK and bankruptcy in the US, stating that the negative press had made it impossible to continue operating, ultimately shutting down completely in May 2018. Facebook (now Meta) was fined \$5 billion by the US. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and £500,000 by the UK's Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in 2019. The scandal became a turning point in discussions

about surveillance, digital privacy, the ethical use of data in politics, and revealed how social media could be weaponized to manipulate political choices. CA's practices exposed how political campaigns and corporations could exploit social media data to influence public opinion, a legacy that continues to shape discussions about data ethics and regulation today. Of course, CA wasn't the only case of information manipulation; examples of political movements or other scandals have been topics of discussion for years now, including cases long before Britain, like the Russian disinformation campaign for the 2016 US elections, the influence of social media on the 2008 US presidential elections, the ongoing attempts to regulate or ban TikTok and various other examples that should raise concerns about the integrity and credibility of democratic constitutions when taken online (Mueller, 2019).

The role of CA in the prementioned scandals exposed the extent of social media manipulation and the effects of microtargeting. Right after these events had shaken the political landscape and had accelerated the need for deeper academic research into social media propaganda, Computational Propaganda Project (COMPROP) was launched by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at the University of Oxford in 2017. It was a research initiative that focused on analyzing the use of automated technology, algorithms, and AI-driven tools (botnets, fake accounts, troll farms) in political communication and propaganda efforts worldwide. The project aimed to study social media weaponization during elections or periods of crises and presented an investigation conducted initially in 28 countries in 2017 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). The report presented the political economy and organizational behavior of "cyber troops" these countries, which include: Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brazil, China, Czechia, Ecuador, Germany, India, Iran, Mexico, North Korea, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, South Korea, Syria, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Venezuela, and Vietnam. Many actors in all these different regimes use disinformation campaigns and state-sponsored interest groups, as well as political parties and government agencies, use social media manipulation tactics. In addition to disinformation campaigns, these tools include automated accounts, algorithms that shape certain political narratives reinforcing polarization and echo chambers, and the amplification of certain political messages. The project's research was expanded in 2019 to 70+ countries, showcasing that computational propaganda is officially a global phenomenon. Their 2020 report found that China, Russia and the US were the leaders of information manipulation tactics and social media

platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok, were widely used for such campaigns (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

The term “cyber troops” which was mentioned earlier, refers to state-backed online actors who spread disinformation, propaganda, or narratives approved by their governments on digital platforms. They can be government employees, paid influencers, bots, or even volunteers and often engage in censorship or harassment against dissenting voices. Examples include China’s 50 Cent Army (paid commentators) and Russia’s Internet Research Agency (government employees). In authoritarian regimes, the modal actors are government ministries, as proven by most authoritarian countries in the 2017 report’s sample (Bahrain, China, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Vietnam). The term “modal actors”, in the context of COMPROP, refers to different types of key players in computational propaganda, various groups that engage in such activities, using different methods and approaches. Unlike cyber troops which refer specifically to state-sponsored actors, modal actors can include: governments, political parties, private Public Relation (PR) firms (e.g. Cambridge Analytica), activist groups, and influencers or celebrities (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

In summary, the CA revelations fueled global interest in social media’s political impact, and COMPROP was among the academic efforts that emerged as a response. They didn’t focus only on CA, but the scandal proved their point: computational propaganda was a real, growing threat to democracy. The relevancy to this thesis is obvious; it all points to the fact that digital platforms have blurred the lines between organic discourse and manipulation, supporting theories which claim that social media shifted from being a “democratic space” to tools for information control. Moreover, the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and bots in shaping political narratives is also highlighted, as well as the enabling of both domestic and foreign actors to influence public opinion.

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Chapter VI – From Soft Power to... Power

Having examined the cultural exports of nations beyond the US, it becomes evident that pop culture is not merely a form of entertainment but a vehicle for influence on a global scale. While countries like Japan, South Korea, and France have successfully shaped international media landscapes, the question remains: *how does cultural influence evolve into something greater than mere popularity?* The ability to shape narratives, dictate trends, and embed values into entertainment extends beyond creative expression, ultimately becoming a tool of power. From the decades-long global dominance of Hollywood to the rise of digital platforms that amplify cultural reach, the intersection of culture and influence is an undeniable force in international relations. To fully grasp the weight of cultural exports, it is essential to explore how they reinforce economic interests, shape ideological frameworks, and even serve as instruments of diplomacy and soft power.

Beyond its cultural significance and its impact as a political tool, pop culture has proven to be a powerful economic force, driving substantial revenue streams for the countries that successfully export it. Nations like the US, Japan, and South Korea have leveraged their cultural products, not only to shape global tastes but also to boost their economies. These industries generate billions through music, film, television, fashion, and digital media, creating jobs and fostering international trade. The global appeal of pop culture strengthens tourism, merchandise sales, and of course diplomatic relations, demonstrating that cultural exports are not just entertainment, but a strategic asset with tangible economic benefits.

International studies experts have displayed a strange kind of “love” for a world characterized by balance of power, just like Metternich and Bismarck wanted it to be, with the latter’s work being influential for many that followed. A world in which five – or almost five – great powers control their neighbors, while also remaining elusive in order to gain anything they can. In the end, what defines power is having the ability or the inability respectively to resolve conflicts between others. However, according to Kenneth N. Waltz, the way the countries possessing this ability are subcategorized is based on their economic, military and political capabilities (Waltz, 2011). Waltz proceeds to give an

example of when Henry Kissinger was a foreign affairs minister; he noticed that in terms of military power there were two superpowers, but in terms of economic growth there were five, furthermore claiming that economic, military and political power have always been interconnected throughout history (Kissinger, 1994). For a nation to be considered powerful, there needed to be a combination of all three, however in today's global political stage, this doesn't seem to apply to any country. There are examples of countries which possess militaristic strength without it reflecting a developing economy, or countries with intense economic might, yet not enough political influence. Waltz's argument about the shifting balance of power connects to this discussion, particularly in the realm of cultural exports as soft power. In the past, global power was typically measured by a country's ability to project military and economic dominance, but today, cultural influence plays an increasingly significant role in shaping international relations. The US, for example, remains a military superpower, but its dominance in global culture has arguably been just as, if not more, influential in maintaining its global standing. Likewise, countries like South Korea and Japan may not be military giants, but their cultural exports (K-pop, anime, cinema) have given them substantial soft power and global influence.

While the economic success of cultural exports is undeniable, the mechanisms behind this success raise significant ethical concerns. In today's era of total digitalization, trends do not emerge organically, they are meticulously engineered through vast amounts of consumer data, harvested without full transparency. Social media platforms, streaming services, and search engines collect and analyze user behavior to predict preferences and push content that maximizes engagement. This approach fuels economic growth, but it also blurs the line between market research and mass surveillance. As Shoshana Zuboff explores in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, the commodification of personal data operates largely without informed consent, turning users into products rather than participants in the cultural economy. This highlights the ambiguity of growth and morality within digital capitalism and poses the question of whether the power of cultural influence is now inseparable from the exploitation of privacy (Zuboff, 2019).

Zuboff's main concept of her book is tied into this thesis with a crucial aspect of today's economic warfare: data-driven market domination as a form of power. Basically, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* discusses how tech companies and entertainment platforms don't just passively distribute culture; they actively shape it, creating feedback loops that

reinforce certain political ideologies through algorithmic curation, which in turn raises concerns about how digital platforms manipulate public opinion and how data-driven systems reinforce ideological influences which eventually lead to polarization. While most of the countries mentioned in the previous chapter relied on the organic appeal of their cultural exports, with Japan and South Korea being prime examples, there are also those who weaponized consumer data to strategically boost their influence. These countries are China and the US, whose online state-driven activities are the main topic of discussions around concepts of data-driven economic strategies. The most notable example of our time I can think of, regarding the concept of collecting consumer data is Temu. It's not just an e-commerce platform, it's a mass operation of data harvesting, disguised as a shopping app. By offering ridiculously cheap products, it gathers consumer behavior data at an unprecedented scale. What people want, what they're willing to spend, and even their impulsive buying habits. Of course. B this data doesn't just help optimize sales; it gives China deep insights into Western consumer culture, manufacturing demands, and even economic vulnerabilities. Basically, Temu gave people the option to buy everything, and its government just sat back and started taking notes on what types of items were the most popular over this list of "everything". For a country like China, to know what items production should be focusing on is a huge asset which allows it to further establish its economic dominance, so whether we discuss the morality in data-driven markets or not, the result is that whoever has the intel, also has the power²⁸.

While Temu is on the same track with Facebook, Google, and Amazon, it differs in terms of intent, scope and who ultimately benefits from the collection of data. Facebook and the rest collect user data primarily for advertising, personalization, and profit maximization. Their goal is to refine algorithms to better target consumers with ads and recommendations, keeping them engaged and spending more. Temu on the other hand isn't just optimizing sales, it also provides information that shape China's economic and manufacturing strategies. As for the scope of data collection, while Facebook and the rest track user behavior across apps, search history, and purchases, their primarily focus is on digital engagement. Temu on the other hand collects consumer behavior at a product level, tracking not just clicks but specific purchasing patterns, price sensitivity, and demand shifts. Temu's data collection benefits the Chinese government as far as we

²⁸ CICC Research & CICC Global Institute, *The Rise of China's Innovation Economy*, Springer, 2024

know, while the other companies enrich their own ecosystems while boosting US tech dominance (Ologunbe, Ebenezer & Kazeem, 2024). However, Temu is just one example; many other apps – both Chinese and Western – operate similarly, collecting data not just for profit but for strategic purposes. The cases of TikTok and Shein are the other two main examples of Chinese consumer surveillance, but that doesn't exclude Western tech giants like the ones mentioned before. Amazon tracks user behavior and market trends that allow the company to change item pricing accordingly, affecting both the American and the global economy, while Meta's immense chunks of data that have been harvested over the years from all users have been leveraged by national interests. Let us not forget that Meta has already been caught red handed in the CA scandal, with accusations of microtargeting.

While both Western tech giants and Chinese platforms collect vast amounts of user data, often leveraged in the interests of their respective governments, Western societies tend to perceive China's practices as more alarming. This perception isn't necessarily due to any fundamental difference in how user data is collected or used, but rather because Westerners aren't accustomed to state surveillance being openly acknowledged and normalized. In China, platforms like TikTok, Temu, and WeChat operate under a system where data collection is explicitly aligned with national interests, and this transparency makes the process feel more "wrong" to outsiders. China is portrayed as this totalitarian regime that spies on people's daily lives through street cameras, bans websites that Western societies access all the time, and suppresses freedom of speech. In contrast, in the West, companies like Google, Meta, and Amazon engage in their own form of surveillance, yet the public is conditioned to see this as a byproduct of the free market rather than a state-coordinated effort. The difference is largely one of narrative rather than practice. China doesn't hide its approach, while the West operates under the illusion that such data collection is purely a way to boost corporate sales. As a result, China is often framed as the boogeyman of digital surveillance, while Western governments benefit from the same mechanisms without explicitly taking responsibility for them. This contrast fuels the moral panic around Chinese platforms, even as Western nations engage in similar, if not equally, extensive data-driven strategies.

In short, the appeal of cultural exports is undeniable, yet the true power of digital influence lies in the collected data that shapes trends. Pop culture exporting gives countries more

than just soft power, it provides intelligence on global consumer behavior. Some countries leverage it to enhance their national economy, others weaponize it as a means of strategic control. Basically, everybody collects behavioral data but cases like China's tend to be presented in a more sinister way due to Western propaganda, yet both sides rely on practices that can be considered "anti-democratic", whether it's for the benefit of privately-owned ecosystems or state-sponsored marketing strategies. Scandals like the one of CA revealed the darker side of algorithmic manipulation and this leads us to the question: *when does cultural influence shift from soft power to straight-up surveillance?* It looks like the global battle for digital hegemony is no longer just about whose content dominates screens, it's about who owns the data shaping the future of digital consumerism and political influence.

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Chapter VII – In the Middle of the Battlefield

The topics that have been covered so far revolve around understanding the concepts of soft power, state surveillance, digital influence, and pop culture. Over the years, there have been many attempts from theoreticians to either propose solutions or talk about the emerging dangers of digitalization, but nothing slowed down the process; on the contrary, the future looks more dystopian than ever. But the purpose of this thesis isn't abstract systemic critiques, it aims to explore the lived reality of the individual. Earlier, there was an analogy that was used between the countries that export pop culture and their battle for digital hegemony. That makes digital life a battlefield, but what about the people? The modern citizen is no longer just a consumer of information; he is a target, a soldier, and a casualty, all at once. In the battlefield of digital warfare, he does not wield weapons, nor does he wear a uniform, yet he is constantly bombarded. The bullets that fly past him take the form of microtargeted ads, algorithmic manipulations, political propaganda, and misinformation campaigns. The enemy is everywhere, yet nowhere. As technology advances, the battlefield expands instead of shrinking, creeping into every aspect of daily life, reshaping not only what we consume but how we think, vote, and interact with the world. How does this bombardment shape the citizen's mental state and decision-making? In what ways do algorithms influence the citizen's perception of reality, political responses and therefore, political thinking?

Firstly, we need to accept that the average citizen isn't just a bystander in this digital battleground, but a target of influence. The sheer volume of information that the average citizen is exposed to ranges from real-time news to algorithmically tailored content that creates an environment of many side effects. The constant shift of both narrative and imagery affects the user, ultimately leading to political disengagement (Bakir, 2020). For example, when scrolling through Instagram reels, within a timespan of a minute, a user can watch small duration content ranging from cat videos to news reports about ongoing wars to memes to fatal accidents caught on camera to cooking tutorials, bombarding the viewer with a multitude of different emotions. This is where the problems start. Or at least some of them.

In 2020, Netflix aired a documentary titled *“The Social Dilemma”* which explored the dangers and impact of social networking, with tech experts who previously worked on some of today’s dominant platforms present the many risks of their own creations, sounding the alarm on critical issues surrounding the topic of social media, social networking and interconnectivity in general. In this documentary, these people – whose fields of expertise cover both a theoretical and a development background – refer to studies that have been conducted, as well as personal experiences from working at these big tech projects. To stay within the broader discussion of power and influence but still highlight concepts on social psychology, it is important to expand on this concept, without completely changing the direction of the thesis to a purely psychological study. *“The Social Dilemma”* presents some interesting and helpful theories on the matter, with the most important being that the constant bombardment with different emotions creates a sense of either cynicism or apathy to the viewer, which is a major topic in media psychology on its own. Constant exposure to an endless stream of emotionally charged content – ranging from lighthearted memes and cat videos to tragic news – leads to a gradual decline in emotional responsiveness. This occurs through several psychological mechanisms, the main two being desensitization and emotional fatigue. The brain, in an effort to avoid emotional exhaustion, dulls its response to repeated intense stimuli, making events that initially seemed disturbing feel ordinary. Simultaneously, this is where emotional fatigue sets in, as rapid changes between extreme emotions leave no time for proper emotional processing. The brain is forced to disengage rather than be overwhelmed. When serious events are placed next to content for entertainment, they are trivialized, reduced to less important news. Global tragedies become mere content, and cognitive overload gives its place to the collapse of meaning. The result is apathy, which is a coping mechanism that makes the viewer care and feel less. The documentary also discusses how this shift has profound societal consequences, as the normalization of crisis consumption leads to a disengaged, passive public that views real-world suffering as just another fleeting piece of content.

Additionally, it refers to specific psychological mechanisms that make engagement with these platforms an addictive activity, with the most common one being that of dopamine loops. The deliberate design of social media includes the concept of the user expecting to hear that sweet notification sound which will make them grab their phone in a flash and check back on where they left off. It is scientifically proven that when we listen to a

notification sound calling us back to our devices creates a small burst of dopamine in our brains and this dopamine-driven reward system trains users to seek these quick bursts of engagement rather than meaningful emotional experiences. The documentary's references to algorithmic manipulation, consequences on mental health, and polarization ties directly with aforementioned concepts such as that of surveillance capitalism as mentioned in Shoshana Zuboff's "*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*". The testimonies from ex-tech employees add credibility to the arguments and an insider perspective, solidifying the overall idea that we are no longer dealing with possible dangers that might appear in the future, but with contemporary social issues that impact both the members of society and its democratic values.

In his book *Psychopolitics*, Byung-Chul Han explores a similar fundamental issue with the Netflix documentary, that of individuals' manipulation through social media, however he approaches it from a different angle. While *The Social Dilemma* argues that social media companies exploit user data to keep them engaged, control their attention, and influence their behavior, Byung-Chul Han puts neoliberalism in the epicenter, discussing how this contemporary political and moral philosophy shifted from external discipline to internalized control. By "external discipline" we refer to traditional forms of power that rely on visible authority, rules, and punishments to control individuals. Notebook examples are historical authoritarian regimes, totalitarian states, or even strict bureaucratic systems where people are controlled through fear, coercion, and physical enforcement (e.g., police, military, censorship, prison, etc.). In contrast, Byung-Chul Han argues that modern power has shifted to this state of internalized control, an internal self-discipline, which has proven to be far more effective. Instead of a government or institution forcing people to behave in a certain way, digital capitalism and social media platforms subtly influence them into compliance by making them feel like they're acting out of their own free will, meaning that people willingly submit to be monitored under the illusion of choice (Han, 2023).

Psychopolitics goes beyond user data and control, discussing algorithmic manipulation and emotional engineering as means of power, arguing that power no longer relies on repression but on seduction. In a broader sense, the book describes a system based on people's self-exploitation, meaning that they voluntarily engage in their own control (Han, 2023). In the list of political and social consequences, Han includes the previously mentioned concept of emotional exhaustion caused by the constant bombardment of

digital stimuli. Similarly, to *The Social Dilemma*, Han describes how data-driven politics (psychopolitics) transform democracy. The documentary focuses more on repeating issues and dangers that have already been explored to a fair extent, such as the shaping of political behavior, intensified polarization, echo chambers, alienation, and shortage of attention span, however, Han talks about the shifting of power toward those who control the digital infrastructure (Han, 2023).

Both *The Social Dilemma* and *Psychopolitics* argue that modern power is no longer about forcing people into obedience, it's about making them love their servitude, an ironic reference to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*²⁹. Social media doesn't need to physically control us but come to think of it, it's a disturbing and uncomfortable reality we are heading at. If power increasingly shifts toward those who control digital infrastructure, data flows, and algorithmic decision-making, then the democratic process, especially elections, becomes more of a symbolic ritual than an actual mechanism of power transfer or a tool for citizens to decide upon their own future. Elections are built on the assumption that citizens make informed choices based on public debate, free access to information, and rational decision-making. But what happens when the most powerful entities in the world are not governments but tech giants that control information flows? What happens when political campaigns rely on microtargeting to push tailored messages that manipulate individuals, rather than engaging in meaningful public discourse? When surveillance capitalism dictates the information we see, the candidates we support, and the issues we care about, then elections turn into a spectacle rather than a fair fight over political ideology (Zuboff, 2019).

This ties back to the concept of pop culture, which is one of the main topics of this research to begin with. Pop culture has always been a vehicle for soft power, shaping public perceptions, values, and ideologies across borders. But in an era where algorithmic control trumps democratic decision-making, pop culture is no longer just about entertainment but becomes a mechanism of influence, a tool for shaping political consciousness, and a means of manufacturing consent. After all, pop culture is a data-harvesting tool: every time a user engages with music, movies, memes, or viral trends, they generate data in the form of preferences, emotions, political leanings. This data fuels

²⁹ *Brave New World* is a dystopian novel by English author Aldous Huxley, written in 1931, and published in 1932.

predictive analytics, allowing governments and corporations to anticipate voter behavior and consumer patterns, turning pop culture into a behavioral surveillance system that maps societal moods.

In Byung-Chul Han's view, pop culture functions as a pacifier. It keeps people emotionally engaged but politically disengaged (Han, 2023). While real power shifts from democratic institutions to digital platforms, the public is consumed by entertainment cycles, celebrity scandals, and viral culture wars, making it the "*panem et circenses*"³⁰ of today's world. Since digital capitalism thrives on monetizing engagement, and one of the most profitable forms of engagement is outrage, pop culture is weaponized to create identity-based affiliations. Political movements and ideologies are reduced to memes, merchandise, and branded aesthetics, while elections seem more like wars between fanbases rather than deliberation, since political figures are marketed more as celebrities than as policymakers. If we merge pop culture, algorithmic manipulation, and digital surveillance, we end up with a reality where people consume politics as entertainment but have no real power over governance, the impact of elections minimizes, and pop culture – once a tool for cultural expression and soft power – becomes a tool for shaping political consciousness.

It all comes down to the shift of power toward non-political institutions that ties the concept of pop culture to international relations. Traditionally, cultural exports (like Hollywood, K-Pop, anime, etc.) served as soft power assets, shaping global perceptions of a nation. But with Big Tech in control, cultural influence no longer belongs to the state alone, it's governed by corporations that use algorithmic curation to push content for engagement, not diplomacy. The more engaging pop culture is, the more data is collected on users' preferences, behaviors, and emotions, and as we have already mentioned, this data-driven approach allows platforms to understand and even guess how users vote. Tech companies, unlike traditional governments, operate beyond national borders (Giovani De Gregorio, 2022). Their economic and cultural dominance means they dictate global narratives, whether through news distribution, censorship, or amplifying specific political ideologies. Pop culture has shifted from a one-way export (e.g., Hollywood influencing global audiences) to a feedback loop where users' reactions determine what gets produced next. But more importantly, the data harvested is used to predict and shape

³⁰ "bread and circuses" (trans. from Latin)

future behaviors, not just entertain, therefore pop culture is no longer a soft power asset, but an instrument of surveillance (Gillespie, 2018).

But what is fascinating even though the tools of influence have changed, is the fact that the U.S. still dominates the game. The shift from state-driven soft power to corporate-driven influence hasn't dethroned the US it just changed the battlefield. The American entertainment industry still sets global trends in TV, movies, and music, despite the rise of other cultural exports, like Japan's or Korea's. The visual language of global entertainment is dictated by Hollywood and American content, such as blockbuster franchises, along with the content providers (e.g. Netflix, Disney+) still keep the country's cultural narratives at the forefront. Meanwhile, social media platforms like Facebook, X, TikTok, and YouTube are the main distribution channels for pop culture. Since these platforms are predominantly American (TikTok which is Chinese operates under US market logic), the country gains indirect control of pop culture trends.

An equally fascinating fact is that the narrative of the "West" still favors the US, because even nowadays when soft power is more data-driven than ever, the Western cultural ecosystem revolves around the US, it's "America-centric". The US brands itself as the global leader of "freedom," "innovation," and "progress." This self-reinforcing myth persists because the platforms spreading culture are rooted in the US media landscape. Part of this self-proclaimed grandiose is that America is the "defender of the West" (Mearsheimer, 2001). This is a key concept; the US remains the face of the Western world, even if Europe's cultural weight is significant. Even when people criticize America, they do so within the framework of American cultural exports; think about how anti-capitalist critiques or even anti-Western rhetorics go viral on American-owned platforms. Conclusively, the game may have changed, but the United States still controls the playing field, since it controls the most powerful instruments of influence: the platforms, the industries, and the global perception of West itself (Brzezinski, 1997).

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Chapter VIII – Extracts

This chapter is entirely dedicated to displaying extracts from responses generated by the AI language model Ghat Generative Pretrained Transformer (ChatGPT). The reason I chose to include something as controversial as AI-generated prompt answers lies in both the nature of the thesis and the core elements that define today's digital age. Using AI itself as both a source and an example of the very phenomenon I have been criticizing, emphasizes that even an AI, trained on vast amounts of human-generated data, can recognize the structural issues of digital warfare, manipulation, and soft power. It might come as ironic, but it is a form of undeniable validation of my argument: that AI, a product of the same technological race I have been discussing, reflects the concerns of digital influence and control. The format will be as follows: I will write a question to ChatGPT, copy and paste it below, and then paste its response without changing absolutely anything. This "experiment" will be conducted for three questions:

Question 1: *Do you believe that today's digital architecture has shifted power dynamics and has altered basic political concepts, such as that of democracy, political engagement, debating, and decision-making? Has this change affected the way politicians approach their audiences or has it affected the individuals, the average citizens as well? If so, how?*

Response 1: Yes, today's digital architecture has fundamentally shifted power dynamics and altered core political concepts, including democracy, political engagement, debating, and decision-making. The rise of social media platforms, data-driven political campaigns, and algorithmic content distribution has restructured the way information flows, who controls it, and how political discourse unfolds.

1. **Shift in Power Dynamics:** Traditional political power was concentrated in state institutions, political parties, and media outlets. However, the digital era has decentralized and, at the same time, concentrated power in new ways. Big Tech companies, through platform design and algorithmic control, influence public discourse, shaping what information is seen, prioritized, or suppressed. This means that political influence is no longer solely in the hands of elected representatives or traditional media but also in the hands of private entities that control digital infrastructure.
2. **Impact on Democracy:** The internet was once seen as a tool to enhance democracy by increasing participation, but in practice, it has introduced new

- vulnerabilities. Targeted disinformation campaigns, the spread of deepfakes, and the monetization of outrage-driven content have made political engagement more fragmented and volatile. Elections, once a contest of policies and leadership, are now influenced by microtargeted advertisements, AI-generated propaganda, and manipulated narratives.
3. **Transformation of Political Engagement and Debating:** Political discourse has shifted from structured debates to rapid, emotionally charged interactions online. The nature of debate has changed due to the attention economy, where controversy and polarization are more profitable than nuanced discussions. As a result, meaningful political engagement often gives way to performative activism, misinformation, and ideological echo chambers.
 4. **Effects on Politicians and Citizens:** Politicians now approach their audiences differently, often bypassing traditional media and communicating directly through social platforms, where brevity and virality matter more than depth. This has led to the rise of populist rhetoric, as simple, emotionally resonant messages are more effective in the digital landscape than complex policy discussions. For individuals, the shift has led to an overload of information, making it harder to discern truth from manipulation. Many citizens experience "participation fatigue," feeling overwhelmed and disillusioned by the rapid, chaotic nature of online political discourse.

Overall, the transformation of the digital landscape has created a paradox: while more people have access to political discourse, the quality of engagement has declined, and power has shifted in ways that challenge traditional democratic structures.

Question 2: *Do you believe that humans will rely more and more on AI tools in order to simplify their tasks, yet risking to lose other aspects of their humanity in the process? From help with academia projects, to advice about relationships, to tutorials on how to perform actions that would otherwise require thorough research, study, and practice; if humans keep seeking the simple and quick solution from AI tools, are they becoming more acceptive towards their manipulation by both "the machine" and the so-called system?*

Response 2: Yes, as AI tools become more advanced and integrated into daily life, humans are increasingly relying on them to simplify tasks—ranging from academic research and professional decision-making to personal relationships and creative

endeavors. This shift offers undeniable benefits in efficiency and accessibility but also raises critical concerns about the erosion of certain human capacities, including critical thinking, self-reliance, and autonomy.

1. **The Convenience Trap:** AI provides quick and often reliable solutions, eliminating the need for deep research, long-term skill development, or personal reflection. While this streamlines many processes, it also conditions individuals to expect instant answers rather than engaging in the intellectual or emotional labor required to develop expertise, resilience, and independent judgment.
2. **Diminished Critical Thinking:** Relying on AI for decision-making—whether in academia, relationships, or daily problem-solving—risks diminishing humans' ability to think critically. When complex questions are met with prepackaged answers, there is less incentive to question assumptions, explore alternative viewpoints, or develop original thoughts. Over time, this could lead to intellectual complacency, where individuals passively accept information without deeper scrutiny.
3. **Manipulation and Influence:** The more people depend on AI for guidance, the more they expose themselves to potential manipulation—both from "the machine" itself and from the entities that control it. AI does not operate in a vacuum; it is shaped by the biases of its developers, the data it is trained on, and the interests of the corporations or governments that oversee its deployment. This makes AI not just a tool of convenience but also a potential vector for subtle ideological conditioning and behavioral nudging.
4. **Erosion of Human Experience:** Beyond the intellectual risks, excessive reliance on AI can erode aspects of human experience that require struggle, patience, and organic growth. Relationships, for example, are built on trial and error, emotional depth, and personal intuition—none of which can be authentically replicated by AI-generated advice. Similarly, creative endeavors and personal achievements lose meaning when shortcuts replace effort and mastery.
5. **A More Accepting Population:** The gradual dependence on AI normalizes external control over human choices, making societies more accepting of systemic influence. If AI consistently provides "optimal" solutions, people may stop questioning whether these solutions serve their best interests or align with their deeper values. This could lead to a future where individuals defer not just to AI tools but to the larger systems governing them, fostering a passive, compliant

society that is more susceptible to digital manipulation and authoritarian tendencies.

Ultimately, while AI is a powerful tool, its unchecked influence risks reshaping human cognition and social behavior in ways that prioritize efficiency over depth, conformity over curiosity, and convenience over true understanding.

Question 3: *There are tons of media exposing the dangers of social media platforms, digital propaganda, the dangers of AI, political instability, social inequity. From TV shows to books, from documentaries to YouTube videos, there is a huge amount of content that sounds the alarm, and not only content originating from today's digital age. There are also many examples of past forms of media that had discussed the dangers of losing our humanity: John Carpenter's film "They Live", Harlan Ellison's "I Have no Mouth and I Must Scream", Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon", Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey", Alex Garland's "Ex Machina", the Wachowski sisters' "The Matrix", Andrew Stanton's "Wall-E" are some of the finest examples of art sounding the alarm for dangers that people considered decades ago, some of these films are from the previous century. Yet so many decades later and humans seem more "asleep" than ever. After all this rebellious wave of films against dehumanization, how are we standing on thin ice today? Where did the spirit of rebellion go?*

Response 3: The paradox of our time is that despite the overwhelming amount of media warning us about dehumanization, mass control, and digital enslavement, society seems more complacent than ever. The rebellious spirit that once challenged authority, questioned the system, and fought against manipulation now appears fragmented, co-opted, or drowned in an endless sea of distractions. So how did we get here?

1. **From Dystopian Warnings to Normalization** – Many of the stories that once served as cautionary tales have become mainstream entertainment rather than calls to action. Films like *The Matrix* or *They Live* were originally meant to awaken people to systemic control, but their messages have been diluted, meme-ified, and repackaged as pop culture aesthetics rather than revolutionary ideas. What was once radical is now just another marketable brand.

1. **The Illusion of Awareness** – The sheer volume of critical media creates a false sense of security. Because we see so many books, movies, and documentaries discussing digital manipulation and social control, we

assume the problem is being addressed. But awareness alone is not action. Simply consuming these ideas doesn't translate into meaningful resistance—if anything, it pacifies people into thinking they're informed while leaving the power structures intact.

2. **The Algorithmic Cage** – Unlike past generations, today's rebellion is filtered through social media algorithms that decide which voices are amplified and which are buried. The digital landscape offers the illusion of free speech, but in reality, engagement-driven platforms prioritize outrage, division, and superficial activism over meaningful change. Protests trend for a moment and disappear, while carefully engineered content keeps users scrolling instead of organizing.
3. **Comfort and Convenience Over Struggle** – Modern technology has made life easier in countless ways, but at a cost: resistance requires discomfort. Past revolutionary movements demanded real-world action, sacrifice, and risk. Today, people are conditioned to prioritize personal convenience, entertainment, and escapism over collective struggle. The "bread and circuses" of ancient Rome have evolved into Netflix, TikTok, and AI assistants—endlessly stimulating, but ultimately numbing.
4. **Fragmentation of Rebellion** – Unlike past movements that had clear, unified causes (civil rights, labor rights, anti-war movements), today's dissident voices are scattered across countless ideological battlegrounds. Social media has created micro-communities of dissent, but instead of joining forces against systemic control, these groups often turn against each other—left vs. right, woke vs. anti-woke, skeptic vs. believer—preventing a larger, organized resistance.
5. **The Absorption of Dissent** – The system has learned to *incorporate* rebellion rather than fight it. Anti-establishment narratives are now repackaged as marketable identities—cyberpunk aesthetics, dystopian merchandise, even political movements that exist more as brands than forces of change. As soon as something revolutionary gains traction, it is either co-opted, commercialized, or labeled as a conspiracy theory to delegitimize it.

Ultimately, the warnings have been loud and clear for decades, but their impact has been blunted by a culture that prioritizes passive consumption over action, division over unity, and digital spectacle over real-world change. The spirit of rebellion hasn't disappeared—it's just been redirected, contained, and repurposed into something manageable, something profitable. The question is: can it be reclaimed? [end]

Ironically, ChatGPT's response to the final question ends with a crucial question about the future. Even this, a trained machine, a byproduct of technological advancement that created new battlegrounds for nations to fight over who can make this quicker and faster, even this data-trained model that operates on sheer logic, can validate the dangers of this treacherous path on which societies collectively tread. But still, since AI language models like ChatGPT are trained on human-based data, we notice that the closing question in its third response is somehow emotional. This question brings a form of doubt that invites discussion and leaves open the idea of a silver lining. Doubting the terrible present in hopes of transformation to a better future, as well as introspection on how to progress towards change, are parts of human nature. What's ironic about it is that an AI tool like ChatGPT isn't supposed to have "hope" or doubt in the way humans do, yet it naturally framed the response in a way that aligns with human thought patterns. This creates a paradox on its own, showing that even when discussing technology or the dehumanization as a result of technology's takeover, we can't escape the human lens through which we perceive the subject and consequently the world itself. Maybe that, is proof that human nature isn't so easily overwritten, despite digital manipulation, despite polarization, despite everything.

This part of the thesis probably seems provocative in a way. AI has been the center of discussion in almost every field of our daily life; its adaptation in education, medicine, finance, security, automation of processes, is considered more and more every day in both the public and private sector. Yet, along with adaptation, people consider some red flags that it could pose and one of them is that AI threatens to "kill" creativity. So why would anyone use direct extracts from ChatGPT in an academic manner? To answer that, we firstly need to understand the way in which AI language models like ChatGPT are trained. Simply put, these models are trained with data input into the machine, slowly teaching the machine how to respond. These AI tools can indeed make mistakes, there's even a disclaimer in the ChatGPT website that clarifies that this is an AI tool, not a lawyer, not a

doctor, and can't replace actual professionals. However, a language model of that scale operates on sheer logic and information processing. The three responses generated by it are strictly a display of data being processed. It only serves to further highlight the crucial points of this thesis so far and confirm the theory that as a global society, we are well aware that we collectively walk a strange path never walked before. So, despite AI threatening to ruin people's creativity since everyone can use it as an easy and fast solution, it can also raise questions and open new discussions about the overall loss of humanity through AI, the difference between realizing the problem and acting against it, as well as the realization of the current state of things. If there is a takeaway from this chapter, I would want it to be the realization that we – collectively speaking – stand at a turning point and the rest of the ride is going to be bumpy and full of obstacles. But at least we can learn so much from it.

Chapter IX – The Legacy

The world currently faces significant challenges and changes every day. What we experience, read, and hear, is all a result of an evolving world. The legacy of an era isn't defined by a single event or actor. Instead, what reshapes the world over time is ambitions, unexpected consequences, and ideas. In the wake of decades marked by rapid technological advances, political experiments, and shifting balances of power, today's global landscape reflects a tapestry of instability, fear, and individualism. What started as a story of dominance and direction has become a more fragmented narrative. Way too complicated, unpredictable, and still unfolding.

In short, while the US practices almost created a system that controlled the global story to its favor, the digital era rewrote the rules. This does not imply a win or loss for the US, despite the coups, the wars, the unfolding pages of history that talk of state propaganda and military interventions, the US finds itself still powerful, but increasingly fragmented; still culturally influential, but no longer singular; still pushing ideas, but often failing to uphold them. We have reached a point where even the most powerful state can't control the narrative anymore the rise of social media platforms undermined the idea of a single global truth, turning influence into something viral, memetic, and sometimes even chaotic. Conclusively, the legacy isn't a clear win or loss, but rather an empire in decline, struggling to adapt to a world it helped create but can no longer control (Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

The initial purpose of this thesis was to examine the individual's, the average citizen's position amidst the chaos and as mentioned previously, this newly formed digital battlefield has affected the global social structure along with all citizens-users, regardless of nationality, social status, or political orientation. Therefore, these consequences inflicted upon the individual are also part of this legacy and they can be broken down into several pieces. Cognitive fatigue, manufactured outrage, disinformation, conflicting narratives, culture wars, have all turned mistrust into the default approach. Institutions, media, government are all met with suspicion, and since people don't know what to believe, they believe nothing and everything, both of which is dangerous.

The same tools used for cultural expansion have also left behind a legacy of shorter attention spans, increased social comparison, created echo chambers where polarization thrived so it could create engagement. The legacy here is a generation shaped by uncertainty, likes, views, retweets, and filtered realities. The digital sphere was indeed liberating, as promised initially, but transformed into performative anger and surveillance. There is a paradox: On the one hand, a teenager from Egypt can watch a Marvel movie, wear Nike, listen to K-pop, and make tea using a boiler made in China. Culture is globalized. On the other hand, said globalization creates a flattened worldview (Featherstone, 2009). Cultures are reduced to content, traditions are branded for virality and algorithmic manipulation covers local voices. Yet, there is a positive twist: the same systems that homogenize can also empower. Platforms have given a space for people to speak, tools of soft power have been used in activism movements, and people around the world are more aware than ever of injustices. People's beliefs might collide, but the legacy of it all is that everyone realizes that something is off, something doesn't function well, regardless of what it is for each and every one. Access, awareness and the need for truth are the positive aspects of this legacy. A misconception would be to think that everything was good until global dominance was segregated to different superpowers and the US lost control (Bina, 2024). This is not true. If this was the case, understanding the current global state would be easier, but apparently, what seemed controlled and stable during America's peak global influence (especially post-WWII and post-Cold War) was already built on foundations that proved to be fragile. In a sense, we can say that the tools outgrew their creators. The same tools that exported American ideals through soft power, created a borderless digital landscape where influence no longer belongs to one state. The world that was created was too complex to control and while this new world was expanding and setting roots, the US spent 20+ years in unwinnable wars (Iraq, Afghanistan), foreign policy blunders (Libya, Syria), and political chaos at home (Capitol riots, mass disinformation). With that being said, nobody owns the narrative anymore, the tools became democratized and therefore less controllable, proving Walt's theory related to Kissinger's, that a nation can't succeed and exceed in every aspect.

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Chapter X – Concepts of Hope in an Everchanging World

- Epilogue -

The historical events that have been discussed so far, raise questions that have been common among political scientists, philosophers, and historians about the efficacy of hard power in achieving long-term geopolitical stability and the emphasis to the development of soft power as an alternative. The research I conducted to prepare this thesis pointed to various directions of theories and arguments regarding where all this led to. By *this*, I refer to all these years of military interventions, state-sponsored campaigns of propaganda, the rise of algorithmic manipulation, basically a mashup of every issue highlighted so far in addition with the legacy it left behind, as discussed in the previous chapter. The common ground between various scholarly arguments I encountered is the doubt of how an empire is built. If it's built upon manipulation and military intervention, does it ultimately secure long-term influence and growth or is its decay an inevitable end?

From the Cold War to the War on Terror, the US pursued dominance – or at least, strategic advantage, through both hard and soft power. These efforts were justified under labels like promoting democracy, defending human rights, and protecting national security, but beneath these justifications was the need – or wish – for geopolitical control, influence over trade routes, natural resources, alliances that would later result to military bases, and ideological supremacy. But here is the kicker: control doesn't guarantee stability. The consequences of this intervention were blowback, cultural resistance, and loss of credibility. The US spent trillions shaping narratives and outcomes but currently China dominates the digital world with TikTok and Temu, Russia reasserts itself through cyberwarfare and with alliances of anti-Western nature, countries like India and Pakistan operate independently with nuclear capabilities and the overall image of the US soft power took a massive hit with Donald Trump's³¹ reelection, post-Afghanistan withdrawal and other incidents that were labeled as failures.

³¹ President of the United States of America (2017-2021, 2025-present).

Initially, stability was based on the fact that, for decades, American cultural exports shaped global narratives, setting trends that the rest of the world followed. Its dominance in soft power was once unquestioned, solidified through Hollywood, consumer culture, and later, the rise of Silicon Valley's digital empire³². In a world where soft power is becoming as contested as military or economic influence, we reach a crossroads where either a nation is, or will be, able to control the flow of ideas or cultural influence has become too fragmented, too decentralized, to belong to a single trendsetter. Regardless of which of these two options is correct, today, as information flows are dictated by algorithms, as online communities barricade themselves in isolated *echo chambers*, and as digital influence shifts toward decentralized and unpredictable forces, we are left with only concerns and questions for what's coming next.

One could say that so far, the whole discussion about technology, algorithms, data being exploited by tech giants, and everything else internet-related that was mentioned just outlines an evil tool that has only brought malicious outcomes. As a matter of fact, it's not as if only bad things have emerged from advancements in online communications. Yes, they were used as digital battlegrounds that gave birth to new economic models. Yes, their dominance established trends and changed global perspectives. Yes, it's indeed proven that in an age where interconnectivity thrives, people feel more isolated than ever (Turkle, 2011). Despite the current conditions, we need to remind ourselves that when it all started, people were more optimistic about the future of communication, commerce, and overall prosperity. Social media platforms did indeed help in mobilizations against state injustice, helped suppressed voices be expressed, connected people, reduced distances, and helped in transforming knowledge into a borderless institution. At the beginning of the thesis, it was stated that the keyword that defines the internet as a tool is *availability*. By using my mobile phone, a device so small that can fit in my palm, I can access the sum of human knowledge, from the deepest scientific discoveries to the most obscure cultural histories. Yet this very convenience has dulled my sense of awe. The extraordinary has become ordinary; the incredible achievements of our species now feel routine. But perhaps, if we chose to use this power deliberately, to seek out knowledge, to ask questions, to cultivate curiosity, then the same technologies often blamed for isolation and manipulation could rekindle a spark of hope and remind us that progress can still be a

³² Silicon Valley is a region in Northern California that is a global center for high technology and innovation.

force for good. The abundance of knowledge has paradoxically diminished our capacity for wonder, and maybe that is why we choose to scroll through memes instead of wanting to expand our knowledge, because this plethora of information has numbed us.

Ethan Zuckerman (Zuckerman, 2013) considers the internet as the key factor that helped in combatting the SARS³³ pandemic in China between 2002 – 2003. In the context of networking, information spreading, and the “global sphere”, despite social media not being around yet, doctors and scientists could exchange information through email lists, forums, news portals, and online scientific forums. *“Global cooperation and communication stopped SARS, and the ability of doctors around the world to connect and collaborate online made the Internet the front line for stopping the disease”* (Zuckerman, 2013). Zeynep Tufekci published in 2017 *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, one of the most definitive works on how social media empowered the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Gezi Park protests, etc. (Tufekci, 2017).

There have been several examples of the internet’s capacity for positive transformation, especially during YouTube’s early days. Researchers and media theorists have studied how the website’s early era fostered a unique sense of community and authenticity, a participatory culture that differs from today’s market-driven content. In this context, one of these examples that stands out for me is the story of Ted Williams, a once homeless man whose remarkable “golden voice” became an online sensation in 2011. After a video showcasing his radio-perfect delivery was uploaded on YouTube and rapidly shared across social media platforms, Williams received an outpouring of public support and multiple job offers, ultimately enabling him to rebuild his life. His case underscores how, despite the many negative consequences of digital platforms, the same networks can also amplify empathy, mobilize collective goodwill, and offer second chances to individuals who might otherwise remain invisible³⁴.

We can’t just throw it all away and denounce it to nothing just because we collectively lost control. Surely, the damage is done and will continue to expand, but we can’t deny the positive parts of Internet history, whether that is social mobility, connectivity, or viral videos that accompanied an entire generation during their childhood years during a time where

³³ The virus that causes a respiratory disease called coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19).

³⁴ [Raw Video: Homeless Man's Voice Gets Natl Buzz](#)

we started learning how to coexist with the Internet. People formed real-life friendships that started out as online encounters, they found old classmates, a job opportunity, a YouTuber that helped them get through tough times, kept contact with their loved ones despite being apart in terms of distance, and some even found love online. In the end, everybody picks their own poison but before we set our eyes on the problem, I strongly recommend recognizing the good that has been done in the long run.

An important topic that is being discussed in Shoshana Zuboff's book "*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*" is how major tech companies have created a new economic system that thrives on the mass collection and exploitation of personal data. Zuboff argues that these companies don't just collect data to improve services, but rather to predict and manipulate human behavior for profit (Zuboff, 2019). The entire book analyzes these themes in detail, making it seem as we – as a society – are trapped within this kind of loop where this new age digital architecture feeds off of our data and a small group of people profits financially from our information being handed to them. Despite the eerie content, the book's final chapter gives off a message of hope: despite the overwhelming power of surveillance capitalism, resistance is not futile. She emphasizes that society has faced and overcome exploitative systems before and can do it again. Just like her, I wanted to put a closure that would reflect these fragments of hope I gathered by reading the books that helped me shape this thesis, because admitting defeat in this context would be unbearable. As mentioned before, doubt, hope, and introspection are ingrained in human nature and to find a means of resistance, we firstly have to believe in these traits collectively.

Even in the face of overwhelming systemic control, manipulation, and technological overreach, people still question their position: "Can we resist? Can we change?". This questioning is at the core of philosophy, activism, and even the rebellious artistic expressions that were referenced in the third question posed to ChatGPT in the previous chapter. These rapid changes that are byproducts of this so called "technological advancement" have caused doubt and fear for the future and it's natural. After all, the current state of global political instability has partially – if not totally – validated these concerns. Although the course of this thesis has reached a point where it demands that I propose a possible solution or talk about a "what would happen if" scenario, I find myself

unable to fully comprehend the way the world is shifting and what could be a fitting ending for this piece of work.

The only message of hope that I could think of, in an attempt to match Zuboff's, is again taken from the Netflix documentary series *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War* which I have already mentioned multiple times. The 5th episode tells the story of an engineer scientist by the name of Stanislav Petrov, who was called on duty at the National Missile Defense Centre, on the night of September 26, 1983. That night, Petrov noticed a signal from the Soviets' missile warning satellites that five nuclear missiles were deployed by the Americans and were heading towards Russia. Normally, he was supposed to alert his president and every other member of the leadership, but there was something inside him that made him say "this can't be real, this must be a mistake" and so Petrov decides to listen to his gut and informs his superiors about a false alarm. It was later discovered that there were indeed no missiles deployed but the almost untested Soviet satellites had caught reflections off clouds that made it look like missiles. That night, Stanislav Petrov could have pressed a button that would start an all-out nuclear war, with morbid consequences for the entire planet. Instead, he was credited for saving the world from what would eventually turn into World War III.

The moral of the story is that history has shown us that it's individuals who make the right call at the right moment that prevent crises, when the system supposedly works just fine. Courage and faith to oneself are the only tools the modern man has in his arsenal that can always prove useful in a world that is rapidly changing with every passing moment. Apart from that, there is no room for further conclusions. After all, the concept of how trends, pop culture, and surveillance capitalism affect the individual is an underexplored theme so far, since we can't get the full picture just yet. I think leaving the thesis on a question would be a powerful move, especially one that invites reflection rather than one that provides a definitive answer. It aligns well with the themes that have been discussed so far: digitalization, manipulation, and the human spirit's resilience. By ending with a question, I'm not aiming for a cliffhanger but rather an open-ended conclusion that would invite critical thinking beyond the final page.

I am well aware that in academic writing, conclusions usually summarize key arguments and offer a final takeaway. However, when dealing with philosophical, societal, or

technological dilemmas, a thought-provoking question can serve as a call to action, an intellectual one if you will. It reinforces the idea that the conversation isn't over and that we have a role in shaping the future, and this is truly hopeful by itself. Acknowledging uncertainty while leaving a sense of agency feels better than a passive ending. So, the question is: Do you think that as long as people keep questioning, there's still hope for breaking out of these cycles, or is questioning itself being commodified and redirected into controlled spaces?

Regardless of the answer, public awareness, demand for policy change, and hopes for collective action are the main weapons we can bet on. Even if we fail in the process or even if we lose against our own creations, even if we are to be consumed by the so called "machine" and lose our humanity, we have to at least try. To be honest, I don't believe we will lose our humanity entirely as a species; at least that's what ChatGPT tells us so, since it operates on human data and provides output based on logic, it must know something.

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