



# GENAI, PROTEST, AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE: THE ROLE OF THE HUMANITIES IN RESISTING SLOPAGANDA

SARAH EILEFSON \*

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**Abstract** *AI-generated memetic warfare uses the appeal of memes and the distributive power of social media to reach and influence a wide audience, a tactic seen widely used in the first few months of the 2026 conflict among Iran and Israel and the United States. By analyzing a series of viral videos generated in the same style as the Lego Movie franchise in support of Iran, this paper explores the implications of this new technology on the way we wage war as well as on global economies, the environment, and societal health. I examine the distinctions among propaganda, “slopaganda,” and legitimate protest as well as the relationship between propaganda and social media platforms. I suggest how the humanities may serve not only to resist the unwanted effects of propaganda but also to engender the more desirable empathetic identification and understanding of legitimate protesters, no matter the media they use to draw attention to their cause.*

**Keywords:** generative AI, slopaganda, protest, new humanities, culture

## 1. WAR AND TECHNOLOGY

In his article, “Living in Algorithmic Hyper-Late Modernity,” from the inaugural issue of this journal, Hideki Endo (2026) called for a “new humanities,” first, to understand the influence of digital technologies on our lives, politics, emotions, and beyond, and second, for the development of ethical standards in our use and development of new technologies. One space where such ethical lines emerge is sites of conflict — skirmishes, insurgencies, uprisings, and wars. For example, the embrace of drone technology draws on a long history of the battlefield’s influence on the development, deployment, and eventual limits on technology according to international agreements or other determinants of just and unjust warfare.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I apply Endo’s concerns to AI-generated memetic warfare, sometimes called “slopaganda.” Specifically, I offer a description of how online communications are understood to shape public discourse in and around conflict zones by focusing on a series of AI-generated videos that emerged in early 2026 in response to the war in Iran. Next, I examine the definition and deployments of the neologism “slopaganda” and the power of social media platform

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\* Department of English, Linguistics, and Writing Studies, University of Minnesota Duluth

<sup>1</sup> United Nations treaties and conventions govern the use of chemical weapons and certain types of munitions, like cluster bombs. Lethal autonomous weapons (LAW) like drones are likely the next frontier for international agreement on limitations.

companies to block or ban accounts for policy violations. Finally, I consider the stakes of these issues to show why we need the humanities more than ever to help us freely ask and capably answer the “why” and “how” questions of our hyper-modern age.

## 2. EXPLOSIVE MEDIA’S VIRAL VIDEOS

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a coordinated attack on Iran, putting the three nations, along with others, in direct, if undeclared (from the perspective of the U.S. Congress), conflict with one another. Within weeks, a social media account operating under the name Akhbar Enfejari (“Explosive News,” or later, “Explosive Media”) began posting AI-generated videos critiquing the conflict, U.S. President Donald J. Trump, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, among other geopolitical issues and leaders.<sup>2</sup> These videos were made in the style of *The Lego Movie* franchise and quickly went viral, racking up hundreds of millions of views and garnering coverage in outlets like *The New York Times*, *BBC*, and *Al Jazeera*. These videos represent a new form of warfare termed “memetic warfare,” defined by Gavan Patrick Gray as the “inculcation of narrative beliefs into the minds of a target audience for the purposes of achieving political goals” (Gray 2021, 15).

Each Explosive Media video in this series is densely packed with politics, pop culture, and puerile references playing out the lyrics of the video’s rap soundtrack. By pairing legitimate critique with juvenile and inflammatory content, these videos draw from the same playbook used by a civil resistance group in Ukraine called the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO). Digital warfare scholar Trine Munk describes NAFO’s memes as a “David-versus-Goliath struggle using unconventional and innovative strategies to counter Russia’s military and digital dominance” (Munk 2025, 501). Specifically, with consistent critiques of U.S. leadership and their alignment with Russian interests, NAFO’s “use of humour lowers barriers to engagement and makes political issues accessible to a broader audience” (Munk 2025, 515). In much the same way, Explosive Media’s early videos captured the public’s attention within and beyond the United States.

By mid-April, Alphabet (the parent company of Google and YouTube) banned Explosive Media’s account for violating the platform’s “spam, deceptive practices and scams policies,” according to the *Middle East Eye* (MacDonald 2026). Despite the account-level ban, many of the videos are still available to view via accounts belonging to news agencies and copycat accounts. This inconsistency and unevenness (accounts are banned while the videos that earned the ban remain available) taken alongside Alphabet’s stated rationale (spam, deception, scams) illuminates the stakes of letting private companies shape public discourse surrounding propaganda and legitimate protest. A technology company that controls both the world’s most-used search engine (Google) as well as the world’s largest video platform (YouTube) effectively has the power to determine what constitutes propaganda — a cornerstone of mass communication that can be marshaled for legitimate purposes — without recourse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Kyle Chayka (2026), writing for *The New Yorker*, Explosive Media’s YouTube channel launched in 2025 and produced its first *Lego Movie*-style video in June of that year, yet it wasn’t until the conflict began that the videos saw their meteoric rise in popularity.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Shillingsburg has suggested a “scholarly refereeing system to vouch for the quality of information and disinformation accessed in a search” (Shillingsburg 2006, 2). Perhaps this idea’s time has come.

To date, it's not clear who is behind the videos. In an April 2026 interview with BBC journalists Matt Shea and Laurie Kalus, an anonymous spokesperson identified himself as an independent social media operator but also called Iran a "customer"; suspicions remain that Explosive Media is a state-sponsored apparatus. Are videos like this, as journalists Steven Lee Myers and Stuart A. Thompson (2026) suggest, a "new style of propaganda intended to undermine support for the United States"? Or might we understand these videos as a proxy: for waging war, for protesting, and, possibly, for establishing connection and identity?

### 3. PROPAGANDA, SLOPAGANDA, OR LEGITIMATE PROTEST?

Michal Klincewicz, Mark Alfano, and Amir Ebrahimi Fard rightly observe that, "Methods of propaganda have always been tied to technology" (Klincewicz, Alfano, and Fard 2025, 4). From pamphlets dropped from airplanes (Hong 2018) to the "soft" propaganda of television (Mattingly and Yao 2022) to internet censorship and blackouts (Garbe and Maerz 2026), developments in technology regularly change how propaganda looks and functions. Unsurprisingly, then, the technological development of generative AI was quickly marshalled into creating new forms of propaganda. No matter its format, propaganda aims to control knowledge and narratives, and it can be understood as a form of storytelling that both creates and divides communities.

In their paper exploring the application of this new technology to collective human decision-making, Klincewicz, Alfano, and Fard (2025) distinguish computational propaganda, which is "marked by the use of social bots and algorithmic mechanisms" from what they've coined "slopaganda": the "unwanted AI-generated content that is spread in order to manipulate beliefs to achieve political ends" (Klincewicz, Alfano, and Fard 2025, 4). Once thus named, the term "slopaganda" almost immediately began to be applied to all computational propaganda, including the Lego film-style videos posted by Explosive Media. For example, Myers and Thompson (2026) write that "Iran's deft use of technology, experts say, has highlighted a new era of meme warfare that expands the information battlefield by using the algorithmic engines of social media to undermine an adversary's political support." Critically, in calling these videos evidence of slopaganda, Myers and Thompson fail to define what is "unwanted" about these videos — or even from whose point of view they are undesired.

Eliding the differences between computational propaganda, digital protest, and AI-facilitated resistance, we risk the (now mis-named) *ad hominem* fallacy.<sup>4</sup> The technological conditions of a piece of resistance's genesis does not, on its face, establish its credibility or lack thereof. Moreover, as information warfare scholar Emma Briant notes, "propaganda always works through coordination and deliberate shaping of thoughts, opinions, behaviors, and emotions. It is rarely, if ever, achieved through lies" (Briant 2024, 95). In other words, propaganda typically contains elements that speak or appeal to their audience. Therefore, considered use of these terms, in journalism and scholarship alike, matters to help us understand what is happening on a global scale and to respond appropriately. Not all protest is propaganda; not all AI-generated content is slopaganda. By declaring meme content slopaganda, we fail to reckon with the conditions that inspire the content and may also further

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<sup>4</sup> Jordi Vallverdú (2006, 210) has proposed *ad machinam*: a fallacy to "express the irrational or non-argued attitude against machines and their abilities, including intelligence, creativity or intentionality."

alienate its intended audience. This potential misstep is especially salient given the speed with which these memes travel. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) observe, “the complexity and scale of information pollution in our digitally-connected world presents an unprecedented challenge” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 10).<sup>5</sup> These challenges are pervasive, impacting our environment, economies, arts, and culture alike.

#### **4. MEMETIC WARFARE AND THE HUMANITIES**

The stakes surrounding the creation and deployment of memetic warfare, on the one extreme, and slopaganда, on the other, are wide-ranging and existential. From the environmental resources required to develop and support the technology that create these videos (Bender et al. 2021; Lupton and Bailey-Charteris 2026) to questions of copyright and creative license winding their way through the legal system in the United States and beyond (Slater 2024; Carradini 2024), humanists in a variety of disciplines are grappling with this new technology, its benefits, and its costs. Scholars are also doing critical work around media literacy — including outright literacy (Peebles and Snyder 2025; Ciampa, Wolfe, and Bronstein 2023). This new wave of AI-driven videos also represents an opportunity to better understand the world and our place in it by examining how such information warfare works to enact, or limit, human connection and social change.

From the printing press that gave readers an individual relationship to the ideas in books to the internet that granted access to ideas and people across the globe in real time, one of technology’s hallmarks has always been its capacity to connect and to divide. In military contexts, the development of more accurate and longer-distance ballistics meant not only a greater number of casualties but also a greater distance from the impact of the acts of violence. Here, an example from literary fiction is illuminating. In *Company K*, written by the decorated WWI veteran William March in 1929, a character sits musing on a book he has just finished writing. His wife interrupts his thoughts with the declaration that he should “take out the part about shooting prisoners” because the close quarters violence is “cruel and unjust.” In response, the writer asks if it would be “better” to describe an air raid, even if the victims of that raid were civilians instead of combatants. His wife affirms that destruction dealt at a distance is less “revolting,” and adds: “You see the aviator cannot see where his bomb strikes, or what it does, so he is not really responsible” (March [1929] 1989, 14-15). In other words, the distance made possible by technology diminishes individual responsibility for violence and suffering, a concern salient nearly 100 years later.

One possible reading of the use of Lego-style characters in the Explosive Media videos is to gain access to and engage a Western audience. As Shea and Kalus (2026) write, quoting Briant: “AI has enabled Iran and others to communicate directly with Western audiences more effectively than ever before . . . They are using tools largely trained on Western data, making them ideal for creating ‘culturally appropriate’ content.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly, this is true. An alternative

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<sup>5</sup> Information pollution, as Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define it, include misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation — concepts that allow for consideration of whether statements contain genuine and false information as well as each statement’s intent to harm (or lack thereof).

<sup>6</sup> Journalists Ephrat Livni and Parin Behrooz (2026) describe the same appeal, writing: “Iran’s messaging, meanwhile, is ‘clearly not for an Iranian audience,’ said Ben Ditto, who has spent a decade tracking online information warfare across conflicts. References to American products and cultural touchstones are deliberate.

reading might be that by reducing heads of state and the militaries they control to little yellow plastic figurines, it's also easier to diminish or ignore the human element — the vulnerability, the suffering, and the loss. One of the striking elements of the popularity of Explosive Media's videos is the way these videos advocate for Iranian interests by leveraging American frustrations and concerns. For example, the files and records associated with Jeffrey Epstein, incidents of excessive use of force by police officers, and economic challenges facing America's lower and middle class appear consistently despite such hot button topics having little to no bearing on military action in and around the Middle East. Wardle and Derakhshan explain why such messages have appeal, noting, "First, we need to understand communication as something beyond just a transmission of messages. People's consumption of news and information is, first and foremost, a way to reaffirm their affinity with a larger dramatic narrative about the world and their place in it, and transcends facts and figures" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 77). In this case, then, distrust and frustration with U.S. domestic issues are devices to help create a bond or community with Iranian interests.

Taken superficially, the Lego film-style videos may seem primarily inflammatory or designed to entertain. Nonetheless, their popularity — along with the decision by one of largest tech platforms in the world to block its principal account — point to a more complex interpretation. To borrow from Munk, these videos reflect a successful and likely repeatable formula of "informal strategies for creating counter-narratives and fostering online resistance" (Munk 2025, 508). A resistance, however, that is reliant on access to platforms for visibility and that is vulnerable to "misinterpretation and escalation" (Munk, quoted in Shea and Kalus 2026).

## **5. THE HUMANITIES AS RESISTANCE**

It's easy to understand why this digital moment is frequently understood as a turn away from the humanities. Humanities departments across the globe face budget cuts, and generative AI (and the large language and other foundation models they're built on) seem squarely in the purview of mathematics and computer science departments. Nevertheless, such assumptions overlook several key considerations. First, the humanities are the source of the ideas, images, and relationships that make these new tools function. Without our poets, historians, painters, and designers, there is no model to emulate. Second, it is the humanities that teach the skills necessary to identify, measure, and manage so many of the risks of propaganda in a generative AI era: the willful misreadings and interpretations that get promoted by bad actors (disinformation) as well as the more innocuous but still harmful mistakes and misunderstandings promoted without conversation and critical discussion to slow or temper them (misinformation). If propaganda is promulgated by misinformation and escalation, then the close reading skills and deliberative practice of the humanities stand as our ready antidote.

Indeed, the humanities can help resist slopagenda in two distinct ways. First, the humanities help students learn the careful reading and critical thinking skills necessary to distinguish legitimate protest from manipulative "slop" and to resist falsehoods. Second, the training on precise thought and speech helps students develop the capacity to hold competing truths and to resist the temptation to label as "slopagenda" any AI-generated content that doesn't align with

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"They're using the language that Westerners will understand because it's for a Western audience."

their politics or interests.

In other words, the humanities give us the necessary perspective on what generative AI puts at risk. To respond to propaganda, including slopagan, in a productive manner, we need what Otto Scharmer (2026) calls a healthy “social soil”: high-trust communities aware of their interrelationships, with a shared reality, and successful communication practices. This also means making space for protest, leaving room to hear the calls for help and the calls to action. Briant notes that a healthy culture hinges upon creative solutions: “We need arts, we need film, and we need storytelling” (Briant 2024, 98). Even in the face of conflict, we need to be having conversations that recognize our communities and our place within them; we need to fight and debate and persuade others across the globe with a shared and ethical recognition of their humanity, and our own.

## ORCID

Sarah Eilefson  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8511-9276>

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