



JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES DEVELOPMENT

www.jssd.org.pk



editor@jssd.org.pk

FROM “SHOCK AND AWE” TO SOCIAL-MEDIA: THE EVOLUTION OF PERCEPTION
MANAGEMENT FROM THE IRAQ WAR TO MODERN CONFLICTS

Muhammad Sarwar Munir Rao

PhD Scholar at Department of International Relation, Muslim Youth University, Islamabad

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Perception Management, Information Warfare, Strategic Communication, Cognitive Warfare, Network Society, Mediatization, Algorithmic Conflict, Iraq War	This paper examines how perception management evolved into a core element of twenty-first-century warfare, tracing its development from the Iraq War’s Shock and Awe doctrine to today’s algorithmically mediated conflicts. It argues that the Iraq War made perception a sphere of strategic influence and institutionalized communicative domination by inculcating embedded journalism, visual spectacle & information control in US military doctrine. In this paper, the Information Warfare is combined with Strategic Communication theory to outline formalization of influence as operational vector in the doctrine. Network Society theory (Castells) is used to explain that how the spread of digital infrastructures has restructured information control into decentralized self-replicating networks of persuasion. As one of the first efforts at mapping the shift to distributed digital ecosystems over centralized propaganda architectures, this study confirms the argument that perception management has ceased to be a supporting psychological operation to become a structural mode of modern power. In this connection, the paper concludes that the perception control is the key towards strategic success during the post-Iraq period, and the control of cognitive space has replaced the control of territories as the main measure of the contemporary warfare.
ARTICLE HISTORY	 2025 Journal of Social Sciences Development
Date of Submission: 14-08-2025	
Date of Acceptance: 17-09-2025	
Date of Publication: 20-09-2025	
Corresponding Author	Muhammad Sarwar Munir Rao
Email:	msmrao786@gmail.com
DOI	https://doi.org/10.53664/JSSD/04-03-2025-06-61-78

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has seen a paradigmatic shift in warfare, communication, and technology. The Iraq War of 2003, which the U.S. military referred to as the doctrine of Shock and Awe, was not just a kinetic war of mass destruction; it marked the beginning of a new phase in the perception management as an operational weapon of war. The accuracy of the strikes, media coverage, and the aura of psychological dominance displayed during that invasion were not accidental elements of

military strategy but rather the premeditated design of a new communicative war space. In this respect, the Iraq War was both the pilot project in institutionalizing perception management – the organization of information, images, and feeling into a system, to influence adversarial and popular thinking among participants in international audience (Compton, 2024). In the past, propaganda and psychological activities were supplementary to military operations, as they were intended to support kinetic warfare by means of morale control and legitimacy engineering. Nevertheless, the intersection of the real-time media systems and digital infrastructures at the turn of the century turned the perception itself into the theatre of war. This transformation was alluded to by the Gulf War of 1991 when it broadcast conflict live, but it was operationalized at a doctrinal level in the Iraq War of 2003.

The formal integration of cognitive influence into the conduct of war was reflected in the Pentagon in the conceptual inclusion of the actions of public diplomacy, psychological operations (PSYOPS), and strategic communication in its Information Operations Roadmap. It was no longer the enemy and its army or infrastructure in particular that was the target; it was through interpretive construct in terms of which war would be interpreted and fought and recalled (Ullman, 2003). This epistemic shift was further manifested with the introduction of embedded journalism in the war in Iraq. The US had created proximity and dependency by placing correspondents inside coalition units, which dictated what journalists should see and how they could recount the phenomenon of invasion. This system of selective visibility organized the institutionalization of the mediation of war as a type of narrative management and made perception aligned with operational goals. The aesthetic of the contemporary war was redefined by visual grammar of Shock and Awe spectacular bombings on Baghdad as technological precision and moral superiority. War was turned into a spectacle, which is not aimed at gaining military triumph but maintaining a global image of validity & inevitability (Schmermund, 2022).

The perception management environment has changed radically two decades. The very logic of the communication led to creation of centralized control in 2003 has now been radically decentralized, spreading in algorithmic platforms, participatory networks, and real-time data ecologies, in digital age. With emergence of social media, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance frameworks, battalion area has changed into a distributed cognitive ecosystem, an environment where state and non-state actors are engaged in narrative power struggles in a network society. The modern wars, those in Ukraine, Gaza, or South Asia, show that it is no longer the battle to be won by arms or land but by informational architectures that are governing visibility, credibility & affective mobilization (Zilincik, 2022). With this new paradigm, perception management has become a doctrine and a deterrent since it has influenced not only the global validity of conflict but also local sustainability of domestic publics who are being exposed to alternative streams of information. Such a process as mediating warfare is called media logic: media does not simply report war, but creates its conditions of possibility, inscribing military activity into aesthetic, temporal, and discursive conventions of the digital media regime.

As a result, journalism, propaganda, and entertainment have broken down their boundaries and have come up with what Baudrillard has so infamously called hyperreal war imaginary, in which

the image precedes the event and perception replaces fact (Bergh & Papadopoulos, 2024). The Iraq War is a turning around in history – shift between the methods of centralized, state-controlled propaganda to the distributed, participatory, and algorithmically mediated influence practices that define the contemporary war. The logic of managing perception has not faded away since the controlled image of Baghdad in 2003; it has become decentralized, a networked ecology of viral persuasion. This transition between Shock and Awe and social media, thus, does not just represent a shift in technology but in structure to the very nature of warfare, where it is no longer about dominating the battlefield by the sword, but by the word (Meghan, 2021). This attempts to theorize and map this development with help of a critical synthesis of Information Warfare and Strategic Communication theory. Network Society theory and Mediatization theory. The study suggests that perception management has become key mode of the twenty-first-century power projection by linking the communicative architecture of Iraq War to decentralized mechanisms of influence of present digital conflicts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is an attempt to synthesize the most important theoretical traditions upon which the perception management in modern warfare is built. It considers the way that the scholars have theorized information as a tool of power, the way that digital networks reorganize communicative power and the way in which media logics establish the visibility and meaning of the conflict. The combination of these bodies of literature as present below in sequence forms the analytical basis of the perception management as the doctrinal practice together with the structural condition of the contemporary war.

Information Warfare & Strategic Communication Theory

The theory of information warfare sees communication as a weapon mechanism, which involves the manipulation of cognition and behavior as opposed to passing facts. Military thinkers of the early years realized the psychological aspect of war, but the revolution of information changed it into an ordered doctrine. Strategic communication changed to a synthesized approach that incorporated psychological processes, public diplomacy, and media control on the same grounds of operational logic. It was aimed at aligning narratives in the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools of power. In this regard, contemporary warfare is aimed at shaping the perception of reality on the part of the enemy and not at the destruction of physical assets. The successful outcome is thus cognitive, which is attained when the cognition of an opponent about the situation is made to be in line with the diverse strategic goals of the party possessing control of the information environment (Gombar, 2025).

Network Society Theory

The Network Society theory offers a structural explanation of the role of the emergence of digital networks in transforming power relations in information age. Castells states that modern societies are structured in the form of networks, not hierarchies, in which streams of information establish economic, political, and cultural power. Access, visibility, & participation are mediated by control of these networks, which exercise power. With regard to the modern warfare system, this paradigm is used to understand how digital connectivity has changed the process and logic of perception

management (Knell, 2021). In the Iraq War, information control was dependent on the centralized processes, which included military briefings, embedded journalists, and institutional censorship. Conversely, digital conflicts occur in a participatory ecosystem that is open. Actors are no longer able to monopolize the manufacture of meaning; they have to operate in a networked environment where stories go around in world of rapid circulation & are redefinitions in a world of innumerable nodes of communication.

The network society is changing all users into possible spreaders or resisters of power. The war is brought into the new digital public space, where images, hashtags, and memes serve as mobilization and resistance tools (Rod & Mitchell, 2025). Castells distinguishes three important types of power in networks: programming power, which determines the logic of network; switching power, which connects or disconnects flows; and networked power, which rules inclusion and exclusion. These dimensions present a conceptual artifact regarding modern-day information warfare. States are accustomed to programming narrative logic with the help of official communication and strategic narratives, whereas social movements and oppositional actors can use switching power, officially amplifying other forms of discourse or disrupting official discourse. It leads to contest as to visibility and credibility as opposed to a contest as to facts. The network society theory, thus, fills in the gap between conventional information operations and participatory quality of digital communication, and how power is functioning in the modern age by structuring connections and not by coercion (Lubicz-Zaorski, 2022).

Mediatization Theory

This analysis is further enhanced by mediatization theory, which expounds how the media has assumed a structural status that influences all the social and political processes, including the war. Mediatization is the process whereby the logic of the media gets embedded into the institutional processes, and it affects the definition, presentation, and interpretation of the occurrences. The media is not a neutral conduit but a location of symbolic power that creates reality by representing it. In war, this means that the media does not merely report on the events but produces them in cooperation with selective visibility, framing & performance (Hug & Leschke, 2021). It highlights the fact that media logic is what dictates how the war is reported as well as how it is fought. The military changes the rhythm and aesthetics of the media environment and expects the public opinion to be influenced by the mediated spectacle. To this end, any war action is at the same time an act of communication. The interplay between the processes of mediatization and network society leads to a vicious circle of perception influencing policy & policy aiming to manufacture perception (ERGEN, 2023).

Iraq War and Architecture of Perception Management

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not an operation of war only but it was also a communication project aimed at influencing the world to understand war by organizing the perception. It was the culmination of a system of changing doctrines that took information as the strategic instrument. Though propaganda had been employed previously to affect morale, the Iraq War incorporated perception management into process of military planning and execution. It was the first information

age war, whereby the communication was no longer an addition to fighting but a complementary sphere of operation.

Institutionalization of Perception Management

The idea of perception management became an official term in the United States Department of Defense in the late 1990s and was properly defined in Information Operations Roadmap of 2003. The document detailed the way psychological activities, diplomacy of the masses, and involvement in media would be synchronized to provide an information advantage. The Iraq War gave original comprehensive test of this doctrine as all stages of invasion, including justification and occupation, were entrenched in an organized communication plan ([Abdelmoumene, 2023](#)). Even the name of the framework, Shock and Awe, was an outcome of this framework. It was coined by Harlan Ullman and James Wade to explain one of the campaigns that strived to reach rapid dominance by use of overwhelming force and spectacle. This was not just a military term but a rhetorical tool that had been created to expose an image of accuracy, imminence, and moral righteousness. The phrase was replicated throughout the world by diverse media networks, making it an American technological hegemony brand. This linguistic framing transformed destruction into an exhibition of supremacy, which would bring a perception in line with the policy goals. The psychological resonance of the operation was as much as the tactical efficiency was measured in the success of the operation ([Robinson, 2022](#)).

Aesthetic of Precision & Spectacle of Legitimacy

The Shock and Awe doctrine was also meant to not only destroy the enemy but also the world's listeners. The initial days of the invasion were aired as live television shows. The images of missiles shining on Baghdad skyline were spectacular, giving the impression of technological invincibility. Every explosion was contextualized with a commentary based upon precision, minimum collateral damage, as well as righteous cause. This dancing turned chaos into a modern and accurate visual performance. The spectacle conveyed two messages at once: both the goodness of the American technology and the fact that Iraq was bound to be defeated ([Pennell et al., 2025](#)). Rapid camera technology and satellite transmissions produced what the theorists of the media refer to as the aesthetics of accuracy. War was symbolized as sterile and logical, and surgical. Such visual rhetoric blurred the human price of war and supported the story of right action. The suffering of civilians was not a part of mainstream images. The focus on precision made violence orderly and domination humanitarian salvage. This visual framing was not a coincidence, but it was the functional aspect of perception management. Therefore, the art of war was as closely guarded as that of the weapons ([Kim, 2022](#)).

An example of how the symbolic events were planned to pass certain messages is the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdos Square in Baghdad. It was a spontaneous release of people around the world, which was filmed, but then it turned out that it was planned, and the U.S. forces and a small number of pre-selected individuals helped to arrange the event. The fall of the image of the statue was the identifying feature of the success of the war. It simplified life by reducing complicated facts into one moment of victory and salvation. Such imagery was manipulated to recapitulate underlying rationality of perception management, production of events planned not

only to be consumed visually but based on need to be consumed politically or strategically as well (Zeng & Dür, 2025).

Communication Infrastructure & Psychological Operations

Integration of the communication technology into the operational infrastructure of the war was also experienced in the Iraq War. The satellite communications, real-time intelligence feeds, and the psychological operations units were interdependent systems. The coalition also opened media centers in Kuwait and Qatar to regulate press conferences and send official information. These centers integrated military communication with media management in the civilian sphere, which guaranteed uniformity of the message in several channels. The words employed in official briefings, like use of term coalition of the willing and liberation of Iraq, were to portray the war as a moral crusade and not an aggression (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023). Psychological operations were directed at both the domestic and international audiences. On the Iraqi front, demoralization of the Iraqi army was carried out through leaflets, radio broadcasts & loudspeakers on mobile phones to persuade the army to surrender.

The public diplomacy activities across the world aimed at creating a legitimacy image based on rhetoric of democracy and anti-terrorism. The unification of these activities around one strategic communication model depicted how propaganda was no longer compartmentalized but rather holistic in terms of management of perception. It was not just controlling what the people knew but also controlling how they felt about what they knew (Mekhanet & Belferd, 2024). Information operations of US were also spread to cyberspace. Online propaganda emerged in early 2000s as websites and message boards were utilized in spreading coalition narratives and discrediting other viewpoints. Though primitive in its operations as compared to those of present day that are carried out digitally, these were initial attempts of manipulating perception by using internet. The digital realm was founded as a key sphere of power in which legitimacy could be challenged in real time. The Iraq War, thus, provided the basis of future theories of cyber-enabled influence operations (Naseeb, 2025).

Cognitive Legacy of the Iraq Model

The perception management architecture that was created in course of Iraq war set the template for future events. It has been shown that narrative control was possible to attain strategic results that could not be gained with the help of military force. The coalition was able to control perception of accuracy, ethics, and unavoidability to keep domestic approval and foreign legitimacy despite the accumulating evidence of intelligence manipulations and human casualties. This experience entrenched the notion that narrative dominance could be used to win wars even when physical circumstances on ground were unstable (Al-Khafaji et al., 2021). Iraq War is therefore a historical mark in history of perception management. It allowed turning control of information into a tactical role into a structural one in modern warfare. The exercise of embedded journalism, coordination of meticulous visuality, and coordination of the mental and electronic activity all brought about a different mode of war communication. This model recalculated victory as narrative coherence and defined perception as the domain of decisiveness in world of conflicts of twenty-first century. The further step of such transformation was the emergence of social media, in which the forces of control

became dispersed, decentralized & algorithmically-oriented, phase of digital perception warfare (Al-Alwan et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design applied in this study is a qualitative and interpretive design that focuses on analyzing the perception management as a structural and dynamic element of the contemporary warfare. Instead of basing the research on the empirical data collected in the field, the study is based on a comprehensive examination of secondary literature, such as the scholarly literature, policy documents, media archives, military doctrines, as well as digital communication studies. This method suits a phenomenon that has discursive, symbolic, and infrastructural dynamics and not just those that can be observed directly using quantitative indicators (Lumineau & Keller, 2025). It argues that the Iraq War made perception a sphere of strategic influence and institutionalized communicative domination by inculcating embedded journalism, visual spectacle & information control in US military doctrine. The paper employs a theory-inspired analyzing paradigm, which integrates Information Warfare Theory, Network Society Theory, and Mediatization Theory, to explain the ways in which communicative power is built, practiced, and debated in various areas of history and technology.

The Iraq War of 2003 serves as the institutionalized case because it served the leading purpose of institutionalizing the perception management as a military doctrine, whereas the current conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Kashmir give the comparative contexts where the digital transformation of narrative warfare can be observed. The choice of the cases is based on the purposive logic because the study can trace structural continuities and transformations within centralized media systems and decentralized algorithmic platforms (Andriana Bencic Kuznar, 2024). The interpretation of data depends on the qualitative content analysis, during which the main themes, patterns, and narrative mechanisms are determined in the textual materials, visual representations, and digital practices of the communication. In this connection, the approach combines theoretical views with proofs of comparative cases to provide a coherent look at the view of perception management as a continuum-controlled spectacle of Shock and Awe, and the liquid, participatory, and information ecosystems governing the contemporary world that is algorithmically more controlled (Bakirov & Ibragim, 2025).

RESULTS OF STUDY

The digitization of communication cannot be separated from transformation of warfare in twenty-first century. The spread of social media, emergence of algorithmic visibility, and the incorporation of real-time data networks have transformed how conflicts are built, perceived, and challenged. The digital space has removed the traditional information gatekeepers of the past and has created a new form of narrative warfare in which influence is distributed and sustained in a decentralized manner. The centralized structure of embedded journalism during the Iraq War has developed into complicated ecology of social media communication, where all the participants are the observers and the spreaders. In this new paradigm, perception management is not commanded but connected (Mohammed et al., 2024).

From Centralized Media Control to Networked Influence

The digital revolution removed the line of communication that existed, in which states could shape the narrative by using institutional media. Old news companies were a system of verification and distribution that was hierarchical. Governments were able to control the flow of information by restricting access or placing journalists within military units. With the advent of social media, this structure had been upset as people were now able to participate directly and unfiltered. Thousands of users are now in real-time recording, sharing, and remaking events. In this regard, this change brought about a pluralized information space that substituted dominance with diffused power (Ringel & Ribak, 2024). The decentralization of narrative power has failed, however, to bring the transparency. Rather, it has created new systems of control that are built into the digital platform structure. Algorithms select those stories that will gain visibility and those that will be unseen. The metrics of engagement favor the content that is sensational as well as emotionally charged over the analytical content. Consequently, the informational battleground has been controlled by emotion, and not truth.

Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of this architecture to use coordinated disinformation along with psychological operations to manipulate the mood of people by governments, intelligence agencies, and non-state actors. The battle concerning perception has now been transferred to the algorithms themselves (Gritsenko & Wood, 2020). The digitization of war has also created a phenomenon, which scholars' term as networked propaganda. Networked propaganda, in contrast to traditional propaganda, is based on centralized messages, but micro-targeted content is transmitted between interdependent digital communities. Its power is in the fact that it seems organic and participatory. The active blending of the truth, partial truth, and fabrication creates confusion, which undermines the belief that people have in any authoritative source and ordinary citizens compete to frame events in real time. This state of epistemic turmoil favors those actors who can maintain perpetual influence games that work off of emotional appeals. The management of perception in the digital age, therefore, needs the sophistication of technology as well as the psychological understanding (Kokshagina et al., 2022).

Case Studies: Digital Conflicts and Narrative Battles

One can see the digital transformation's effect on perception management in many recent conflicts. The Arab Spring, the Ukraine crisis, and the current Gaza crisis explain how social media has turned out to be a decisive tool that is used in influencing domestic and overseas opinion. In both cases, there are various forms of digital influence and narrative competition. The mobilizing aspect of networked communication was made evident in Arab Spring (2011). Social media like Twitter and Facebook helped the activists to circumvent the state-run media and organize protest movements. It was also on same platforms that governments turned into tools of state surveillance and counter-propaganda after becoming acculturated to their reasoning. The story of liberation that once took center stage in world coverage was later overtaken by discourses of instability and extremism. This wibbling signified how weak digital stories are without institution mediation. Arab Spring pointed to reality that, as social media can enable the democratization of visibility, media can disintegrate logic and create unstable waves of excitement and disappointment (Muhammad, 2023). Ukraine

War is a higher level of digital warfare. Social media is a psychological weapon that is used by both Russia and Ukraine.

The active application of digital platforms in Ukraine has turned the sphere of public diplomacy into an interactive resistance. The use of viral videos, satellite images, and real-time updates is not only documentation but a form of strategic communication with purpose of maintaining the world community. Instead, Russia employs synchronized instances of misinformation to challenge validity of the Ukrainian narratives and disrupt the global discourse. The conflict proves the fact that the control of digital perceptions is no longer limited to propaganda but is also embedded in work on battlefield. Gaza conflict has another dynamic, which is asymmetry in visibility. State-controlled discourse competes with decentralized digital activism. Social media has seen civilians, journalists, and other activists capture violence in real time and question the official version. However, policies of algorithmic moderation and suppression of information lead to structural inequality of visibility. The news about civilian losses is usually deleted or downplayed, as official versions remain at the forefront. This selective visibility replicates power logic of digital space, showing that decentralized communication is still influenced by institutional control. The Gaza case shows how structural bias in the international information order continued to be evident in spite of the semblance of openness (Mousawi, 2025).

South Asian Information Battlespace

The South Asian region is an example of a region where digital perception management has taken part in the center of geopolitical competition. Two countries have adopted information operations in national security doctrine: India and Pakistan. The Balakot crisis of 2019 served as an example of digitalization of perception warfare. Competing accounts of triumph, accuracy, and authenticity were being spread on social media in hours of event. The Indian government was pushing an image of retaliatory action & Pakistani media countered with evidence-based rebuttals and transparency through control. The result was not the physical change of the territory but the intellectual struggle regarding authority. The episode showed how digital communication had the ability to counter escalation by influencing beliefs of the people as opposed to changing the ground realities (Khan & Dissertation, 2021).

New Logic of Perception Warfare

The digital war narratives revolution has changed the rationality of perception management in three basic aspects. To start with, control has been transferred to infrastructural and not institutional spheres. The power is no longer on monopolizing the content but on the mastery of the technological systems of spreading that content. Second, the unit of analysis is no longer the audience but the algorithm. It is now necessary to understand mediating role of algorithms in visibility and emotion to attain successful perception management. Third, influence of temporality has been transformed into something continuous. Information warfare in the digital space never stops with the ceasefire, but continues to be a process of framing, counter-framing, and memory building (Zarnadze, 2025). These developments have deep implications for global politics. Conventional distinction between wartime and peacetime communication is dead. States play endless game of influence to maintain

strategic discourses. There is a blurring of the line between propaganda, diplomacy, and the ability to engage the people.

Digital warfare functions based on persuasion and not coercion, with results being psychological and not territorial. The capacity to control meaning has turned into an equivalent of power that can be measured in terms of economic or military strength (Tudorache, 2023). The digitalization of war stories becomes the pinnacle of the path that was initiated by the Iraq War. The centralization of managing perception via embedded journalism has been transformed into the decentralization of controlling perception via algorithmic systems. New battlefield is cognitive as opposed to physical, distributed as opposed to hierarchical & continuous compared to episodic. Perception management now exists in a global network setting where the truth may be traded, tears harnessed, and presence wields authority. Here, the ability to influence information flows has become an aspect of statecraft and a main determinant of strategic stability. The subsequent section will look at the way these developments have changed the continuity and structure of perception management and how it has evolved, from being a controlled doctrine to a dynamic system integrated in digital modernity (Zilincik, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The strategic environment that perception management operates in has radically changed with the digital revolution. The communicative processes that supported the war in Iraq were linear and hierarchical, where governments and armies had centralized control over production & distribution of information. That architecture is nowadays transformed into living and decentralized ecosystem, as motivated by algorithms, data analytics, and media. This change is not simply technological but profound reorganization of the structure of construction and struggle over power, influence and legitimacy. The move of broadcast media to digital networks has changed perception management into operation of control to adaptive self-enforcing process in daily flows of digital communication (Mousawi, 2025).

From Information Dominance to Algorithmic Influence

The information dominance principle that considered initial information operations presupposed that the domination of the informational communication system and coherence of messages would lead to preeminence in the field of cognition. This doctrine corresponded to type of warfare in the industrial era, in which a centralized and linear command, control, and communication system was in place. The emergence of social media sites has interfered with this model. Control of perception is no longer based on creation of messages themselves but on the power to control appearance in algorithmic systems that translate into what users see, believe & share. This algorithmic mediation will change the perception management into a structural state rather than a conscious action (Rod & Mitchell, 2025). This change has brought new asymmetry in information warfare and affect has created informational battlefield that is volatile and fragmented. States are no longer monopolizers of the perception; they compete in a digital ecosystem in which networked publics continuously challenge authority. The digital turn represents the distribution of cognitive power to a multiplicity of actors, disrupting the monopoly of traditional institutions on the construction of narratives (Zeng & Dür, 2025).

Networked Propaganda and Participatory Warfare

The networked propaganda is a phenomenon created by digital environment (Scholar). Networked propaganda also contrasts with classical propaganda that used centralized distribution, where the centralized dissemination is done through the coordinated movement of various nodes, that is, bots, influencers, and online communities, which then amplify stories. These campaigns work in the social platforms that are reward-based, and they effectively spread disinformation in a viral manner through algorithmic reinforcement. The interactivity of the digital media transforms the audiences into co-producers of propaganda, erasing the distinction between consumption and production. Each sharing, commenting, or reacting will be included in the circulation process that supports the influence operations (Nkoala, 2022). This is a new phase in perception management development as a result of this participatory warfare along with diverse content as tools of influence the process. Perception management during the Iraq War was through top-down communication, which was meant to sustain coherence and credibility. Conversely, digital age favors fluidity and multiplicity of the narrative.

The influence campaigns have learned to take advantage of difference in points of view to generate uncertainty instead of agreement. The pieces of narrative and disinformation are not by-products of system; they are purposeful weapons of strategic communication. Actors destroy the potential of mutual understanding by filling the information space with conflicting clues. This is not an aim of persuasion but the disintegration of trust itself. This approach has been noted to be used in various conflicts since 2014, such as Russian operations in Ukraine, the information war in Syria, and local digital campaigns in the Middle East and South Asia. Those are the operations that use the hybrid methods combining the psychological operations and the computational propaganda. Volumes are created by automated accounts, credibility is provided by influencers, and reach is guaranteed by algorithms. The resultant system will be self-sustaining, and intervention would be minimal when it starts. This model is a development of the Shock and Awe into a continuum of low-intensity and sustained environment of influence, where line between wartime and peacetime communication is broken (Meghan, 2021).

Datafication & Psychographic Turn

The process of datafication is another characteristic feature of the digital transformation, due to which human behavior can be converted into measurable characteristics and utilized to predict and shape behavior in a way. The same technologies of the commercial personalization have been modified for strategic communication. Psychographic, microtargeting, and behavioral analytics enable the players to profile and control audience segments more precisely than ever before. This ability makes perception management more of a mass communication venture to engineering psychological engineering of a kind (Kim, 2022). The model of communication of the Iraq War used the masses as a mass audience to be convinced by the narrative unity and emotional spectacle. On the contrary, data-driven perception management views each person as a unique cognitive target. Consequently, with the combination of social media analytics, machine learning, and sentiment analysis, influence operations will be able to optimize the messages to fit individual beliefs, fears, as well as aspirations.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal was a revelation of how far psychological profiling can go in being used as a weapon to affect political results. The same methods have been noted in digital confrontations, whereby use of targeted narratives is used to demoralize, polarize, or create apathy (Kim, 2022). The intersection of surveillance capitalism and strategic communication occurs with this psychographic turn. The information warfare is now running on the same system that controls digital consumption. The military, political, and commercial influence borders have been eroded. Advertising media are also used as a tool of cognitive warfare. The legal and ethical aspects of this convergence have not been resolved yet, but its working importance is quite clear: the possibility to control data is possibility to control perception. The strategic edge that has been gained through air superiority or territorial superiority is becoming largely reliant on information dominance in data infrastructures.

Erosion of Truth & Politics of Visibility

Epistemological foundations of perception management have changed as a result of the digital turn. All this information has not led to increased transparency but to failure of epistemic authority. Competing narratives do not have a common system of verification. Truth is made visible and not in correspondence with reality. The credibility in this setting is algorithmically granted in terms of engagement as opposed to institutional credibility. The Iraq War already showed that strategic framing could prevail over factual inconsistencies, but the digital ecosystem takes this effect to an unprecedented scale (Nkoala, 2022). The consequence of this depreciation of truth is far-reaching on democratic governance and international security. Decision-making procedures that rely on sound information are becoming more susceptible to manipulation. Public opinion, which used to be a balancing factor in democratic societies, has turned into a tool of strategic disturbance. The ability to create perception on scale allows state and non-state actors to influence the geopolitical narrative setting without the military engagement. The war in the twenty-first century is thus not determined by geographical locations but by struggle of meanings in the networked information space (Nkoala, 2022).

Toward a Post-Linear Model of Information Warfare

The overall impact of these changes portends the creation of post-linear information warfare. The older models of communication had a linear relationship amid receiver, message, and sender. This has been substituted by non-linear, recursive and distributed patterns of influence that are brought about by digital networks. Perception management is not a one-time campaign anymore, but an ongoing adaptive mechanism that is built into algorithmic infrastructures. Each interface, whether it is a search query, clicking, or comment, responds to system with data to refine upcoming influence activities. The informational battlefield turns out to be self-educational, dynamic, and continuous (Johnson, 2021).

Comparative Case Reflections: From Iraq to Ukraine, Gaza, and Kashmir

The perception management architectural emergence, which took place during the Iraq War, has never faded away. It has evolved and adjusted to the digital environment and once again has shown up in the conflicts that are blends of kinetic activities and information warfare. In Ukraine, Gaza, or

Kashmir, the narrative war has become as decisive as the material possession of the land (Bode et al., 2023). All these examples show how combination of digital communication, strategic framing, and networked publics has formed new modalities of influence that impact international reactions, moral cognition, as well as legitimacy. Collectively, they follow the path of the organized media domination of the so-called Shock and Awe to the algorithmic pluralism of the modern hybrid wars (Al-Rajab, 2024).

Ukraine: The Algorithmic War of Narratives

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has become brightest example of digitalized perception management. Ukrainian information space is not centralized, as in the Iraq War, where information control was centralized by the government and embedded journalism. The state and non-state agencies play in a networked space, which favors immediacy and feeling. The digital ecosystem superimposes the battlefield on which all images, tweets, or videos enter an endless competition over each other in terms of narrative authenticity. In this linking, the strategy of Russia embodies the continuation of Cold War-sequel disinformation along with the digital strategy of the twenty-first century. At the beginning of the war, Russian propaganda was preoccupied with construction of the invasion as a defensive mission based on the denazification and the protection of Russian-speaking peoples. This framing, nevertheless, was soon met with a countervailing digital force of the agile use of social media by the Ukrainian state. Consequently, the leadership of Ukraine, and especially the president, Volodymyr Zelensky, converted the perception management into the performative diplomacy.

The filmed video addresses shot in conflict zones displayed the appearance of authenticity and moral determination. Such messages bypassed the traditional gatekeepers and had direct access to the global audiences via algorithmic networks. The Ukrainian rivalry demonstrates the change in the structure. The operations of information are not about the repression of messages but about hastening narrative. To control the attention cycle, each side floats the network. A with competing imagery to take control. In this regard, official and civic reporting is no longer defined by open-source intelligence, user-generated material, and real-time geolocation. The consequence is that a constantly revising science of the perception is produced in which truth is in competition with plausibility and visibility with verification as a criterion of credibility. Algorithms in this setting enhance what catches the heart, which strengthens the polarization of affective that perpetuates the digital warfare. In this drive, the Ukrainian case then represents the complete realization of perception management as a distributed, participatory, and algorithmically controlled practice (Al-Rajab, 2024).

Gaza: Visual Politics & Crisis of Moral Perception

Another pressing development of the perception management in the information battlefield of the Gaza region is the politics of visibility and the crisis of empathy. In contrast to Ukraine, where the narrative symmetry is between two structured states, Gaza represents the asymmetry of information power between the militarily superior state and the besieged population. The state of Israel has an elaborate strategic communication framework, that is used to place its actions in counterterrorism and self-defense context. Nonetheless, the presence of smartphones and social media has broken

this control, and Palestinian civilians have become one of the main eyewitnesses to their own reality (Stanislava et al., 2025). Immediacy is the economy of the visuals of Gaza. Real-time images of devastation form an uncensored account of the misery that challenges official narratives. Online spaces are, therefore, a space of testimonial resistance whereby visibility is turned into a political agency (Jannat, 2025). The Israeli method of communicating is aimed at attempting to control perception by selective framing in the focus on military accuracy and moral defense. However, in algorithmic ecosystem, visual evidence is hard to destroy. The stream of user-generated imagery constantly floods institutional communication, revealing the limits of state-controlled narrative (Khardikova, 2023).

Kashmir: The Hybridization of Information Control

Kashmir is a unique yet equally important development of perception management. In comparison with Ukraine or Gaza, where digital networks are organized with the higher level of international visibility, in Kashmir, hybrid co-existence of specific surveillance, censorship & digital manipulation is observed. The domination of telecommunications infrastructure by the Indian state can facilitate intermittent disconnection of the connection, an analog method imported to digital reality. This two-tiered approach, limiting the flow of information and, at the same time, presenting selective information of story as a narrative, shows how ancient teachings are preserved in new technologies (Javid et al., 2024). Since the repeal of Article 370 in 2019, India has conducted an organized information drive to package Kashmir integration as developmental & constitutional requirement. The information environment that is produced can be characterized as an asymmetric form of the transparency: world witnesses a vision of peaceful development, and local voices are being silenced in a well-organized way. However, the paradox of digital control can also be depicted through this strategy. Complete repression cannot be continued any longer; there are cracks in fence that allow alternative discourses to pass through, diaspora networks, coded messages & transnational advocacy (Javid et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The development of perception management since the Iraq War up to the present conflicts proves a fundamental reconfiguration of the working of power as communication. What started as a militarized media approach in 2003 Iraq invasion has gone on to become a systemic data-driven architecture of influence. The Iraq War formalized the practice of perception management as a tool to be used in the operation, to the point that the manipulation of the media, embedded journalism, and the visual spectacle became reasoning of war. However, the digital space of today distributes this control among algorithmic platforms, where the perception is formed by automatic systems, rather than intentional narrative commands. In modern theatres, whether in Ukraine or Gaza and Kashmir, the legitimacy battle is being fought over the digital infrastructures that prioritize speed, affect and virality. In this regard, the editorial gatekeeping has been substituted by the algorithmic amplification, resulting in a disintegrated public sphere in which the truth competes with the engagement metrics.

Therefore, perception management has turned into propaganda to a round-the-clock automated ecosystem of influence working in life of society and politics. This paper concludes that perception

management is no longer a tactic to use in communication, but a structural state of contemporary conflict. Censorship as a means of controlling meaning has become less important than a design based on computation. The ability to control the flows of information and frame visibility itself is power. In this regard, understanding this transition is essential for analyzing contemporary conflict behavior, strategic communication, as well as the ethical challenges posed by digital information warfare. Consequently, the future of the war will therefore be characterized by the capability of influencing perceptions, not obliterating buildings. Thus, maintaining cognitive sovereignty, both personal and collective, becomes the characteristic of the strategic and ethical challenge of the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

The results of the given research prove the fact that the management of perception has ceased being a centralized and intermittent wartime tradition and has become an ongoing process that is mediated by algorithms and integrated into the digital infrastructures. New ways of strategic, ethical and regulatory adaption are called upon by this changed environment by states, media institutions and international bodies. To begin with, states would be better off focusing on creating their own cognitive resilience instead of focusing on controlling messages or censorship because efforts towards monopolize narratives can easily fail because of the distributed nature of digital communication. Thus, the resiliency approach includes the reinforcement of media literacy, the encouragement of transparent communication, and the maintenance of government narratives, which are consistent, credible, and strong, in the information ecosystem where such manipulation is easily revealed.

Second, the army and other governmental institutions should incorporate the ethical strategic communication models that can create a balance between operation needs and the necessity to protect the trust of society. This involves more division between the psychological processes and the politics of public diplomacy, more openness of information practice, and the introduction of control mechanisms to avoid the excessive militarization of media ecosystems. Media companies will also need to reevaluate their position in the digital combat field by implementing editorial strategies that will reduce the perverseness of algorithmic amplification. On the global scale, the regulatory authorities need to come up with rules and legal standards that cover the new sphere of the algorithmic influence activities. With the growing conflict that occurs on the platform controlled by private corporations, issues of sovereignty, responsibility and digital rights assume center stage in world security.

The international tools are required to oversee the cross-border disinformation campaigns, create transparency criteria to platform algorithms, and safeguard vulnerable groups against targeted psychological influence. Lastly, subsequent studies and policy-making must aim at establishing intellectual and technological protective mechanisms of cognitive sovereignty that has turned out to be the weakness of the information landscape of the twenty-first century. Therefore, the ongoing interdisciplinary effort in the area of AI governance, digital ethics, platform regulation, and psychological security will be required in order to forecast the changing situation in perception warfare. The realization of perception as a strategic asset inherent in networked communication

infrastructures that is not a by-product of conflict, but rather, a part of it, would help states and societies to prepare better in the age where the battle over meaning is the main battlefield of the geopolitical competition.

REFERENCES

- Abdelmoumene, C. (2023). U.S. Foreign Policy and Imperialism Case study: The Iraqi War (2003). *Archives.univ-Biskra.dz*. <http://archives.univ-biskra.dz/handle/123456789/26783>.
- Akhat, B., & Ibragim, S. (2025). Theoretical Bases of Methods of Counteraction to Modern Forms of Information Warfare. *Computers*, 14 (10), 410–410.
- Al-Alwan, H. A. S., Al-Bazzaz, I. A., & Mohammed Ali, Y. H. (2021). The potency of architectural probabilism in shaping cognitive environments: A psychophysical approach. *Ain Shams Engineering Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asej.2021.06.008>.
- Al-Khafaji, A. S., Al-Salam, N. A., & Alrobaee, T. R. (2021). The Cognition Role to Understanding Planning and Architectural Production. *Civil Engineering Journal*, 7(7), 1125–1135. <https://doi.org/10.28991/cej-2021-03091715>.
- Al-Rajab, A. (2024, December 3). *Landscape Architecture and Heritage Recovery: A Framework for a Sustainable Revival of Iraq's Cultural and Historical Legacy*. Uoguelph.ca. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/items/b2dba586-6b10-4c03-b315-f028a2b2495f>.
- Al-Tamimi, N., Amin, A., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2023). Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power: Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance. In *library.oapen.org*. Springer Nature. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/61299>.
- Aleksandr, Z. (2025). "Invisible Bullets": The Power of Narratives in Modern Warfare. *Global Policy*, 16(2), 419–422. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70018>.
- Andriana, B. K. (2024). Understanding war: The sociological perspective revisited. *European Journal of Social Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241238144>.
- Bode, I., Hendrik, H., Nadibaidze, A., Guangyu, Q., & Tom. (2023). Algorithmic Warfare: Taking Stock of the Research Program. *The Global Society*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2023.2263473>.
- Fabrice, L., & Keller, A. (2025). War as a Phenomenon of Inquiry in Management Studies. *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13213>.
- Gritsenko, D., & Wood, M. (2020). Algorithmic governance: A modes of governance approach. *Regulation & Governance*, 16 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12367>.
- Jannat, N. (2025). Analyzing Psychological Operations: A Case Study of Indo-Pak Hostility (2010–2024). *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*, 76–89. <https://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v8i1.187>.
- Javid, W., Wani, A. A., Lateef, S., & Najar, R. A. (2024). Assessment of genetic diversity and species relationship of genus *Cotoneaster* in the Kashmir Himalaya. *Genetic Resources and Crop Evolution*, 72 (4), 4861–4877. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10722-024-02249-z>.
- Johnson, R. (2021). The Information warfare. *The World Information War*, 214–230. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003046905-16>.

- Khan, H., & Dissertation, A. (2021). *Critical Study of Propaganda & Hybrid / 5 Th Generation War for The Purpose of Narrative Building*. <https://www.uniselinus.education/sites/default/files/2021-11/hamid%20khan.pdf>.
- Khardikova, A. (2023). Ukrainian Digital Media Activism on Instagram Stories During The War Against Russia In 2022: An Analysis of Kharkiv-Related Users' Digital Activity During March 2022. In *www.diva-portal.org*. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1786280>.
- Kim, S. (2022). The Inter-network Politics of Cyber Security and Middle Power Diplomacy: A Korean Perspective. *The Political Economy of the Asia Pacific*, 97–123. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76012-0_6.
- Kokshagina, O., Reinecke, P. C., & Karanasios, S. (2022). To regulate or not to regulate: unravelling government institutional work towards AI regulation. *Journal of Information Technology*, 026839622211144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962221114408>.
- Mariam, A. M., & Hamza, S. A. (2024). The role of intellectual concepts in post-war architectural product. *AIP Conference Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0203283>.
- Meghan B, B. (2021). *Warscapes: Mapping the American War in the Iraq through Literature - ProQuest*. Proquest.com. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/9d772444a4063ba06b10e791a9247b9a/1?pg-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.
- Mekhanet, Y., & Belferd, L. (2024). Modern Guerrilla Warfare: An Analysis of Hamas' Tactics in the Palestinian- Israeli Ongoing Conflict. *مجلة الدراسات والبحوث الاجتماعية*, 12(3), 214–232. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/255794>.
- Mousawi, A. (2025). The Role of Social-Media in Pro-Palestinian Human Rights Advocacy: Overcoming Digital Orientalism & Amplifying Marginalized Voices. *Columbia Academic Commons (Columbia University)*. <https://doi.org/10.7916/egtp-2k07>.
- Muhammad, D. (2023). Humanitarian Crisis and International Response: “A Case Study of The Gaza Conflict Aftermath on October 7, 2023.” *Jahan-e-Tahqeeq*, 7 (2), 990–1014. <https://jahan-e-tahqeeq.com/index.php/jahan-e-tahqeeq/article/view/1552>.
- Nkoala, S. B. (2022). *Persuasion and the “mediatization” of culture: a rhetorical criticism of South African television news reports on crime and the criminal justice system*. Uct.ac.za. <https://open.uct.ac.za/items/6a2f555e-cdca-4033-851e-73d9bc1de84c>.
- Pennell, C., Kempshall, C., & Kupper, G. (2025). The Iraq War at 20: Anniversary Journalism, British Cultural Memory, and the Politics of Closure. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2024.2447113>.
- Ringel, S., & Ribak, R. (2024). Platformizing the Past: Social Media Logic of Archival Digitization. *Social Media + Society*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241228596>.
- Robinson, P. (2022). “Chemical Weapon Attacks and an Evil Dictator.” *Routledge EBooks*, 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003162964-6>.
- Rod, P. M., & Mitchell, W. J. T. (2025). “Every war is a war of words and images”: an interview about Gaza with W.J.T. Mitchell. *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 11 (1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2025-2007>.
- Stanislava, Z., Rudenko, N., & Namig, I. (2025). *Digital War Narratives and Media Practices Within The Ukrainian Media Field*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5315716>.

- Tudorache, A. (2023). A Perception Management Take on Propaganda as Political Warfare. *Routledge EBooks*, 135–147. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003190363-13>.
- Zeng, Y., & Dür, A. (2025). Shock and awe: Economic sanctions and relative military spending. *Journal of Peace Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433251331486>.
- Zilincik, S. (2022). Awe for strategic effect: Hardly worth the trouble. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 46 (6-7), 1434–1459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2138355>.