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'Unleash the hounds!': NAFO's memetic war narrative on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

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ABSTRACT

Since the Web 2.0 revolution, war and war communication are no longer under the control of states. Rather, the new media ecology entails the possibility that internet users get involved in the info politics of any armed conflict around the world. This article explores the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) as an expression of this emerging mode of participatory warfare that traverses the virtual battlefield of information warfare and the real-life battlefield of military warfare. It argues that NAFO acts as a cross-border war actor that exerts hypermemetic agency through strategic storytelling. To this end, it adapts the strategic narrative approach to the relational agency of hypermemetics. The example of NAFO shows how joint hypermemetic practice can have strategic effects in winning the information war against Russia for Ukraine.

KEYWORDS

Participatory warfare; memes; agency; strategic narratives; Russo-Ukrainian conflict; information war

1. Introduction

'NAFO is the HIMARS¹ of social media' (Ivana Stradner@ivanastradner 2022).² With this claim, Ivana Stradner, a Washington-based think tanker and avowed supporter of the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), established a direct connection between the virtual and physical battlefield of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. On the physical battlefield, the two armies fight a war of attrition that relies on artillery and infantry weapons. In its defence efforts, the Ukrainian army burns ammunition much faster than Western states can deliver, and Ukrainian representatives continuously beg for more military support (Ataman and Sebastian 2023). Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western allies have thus ramped up arms and ammunition production capacities and made joint procurement plans to satisfy Ukraine's desperate demands but also to replenish their own stocks and prepare themselves for defence (European Commission 2023, NATO 2024). On the virtual battlefield, both parties employ latest digital technology – targeting the enemy with geospatial intelligence and striking with automated weapon systems (Fontes and Kamminga 2023). Structurally, advances in digital technology have changed military operations towards decentralised, information-based coordination of command, communications, control, and intelligence based on information technology (Merrin 2019, 62). Apart from effects on the military, 'netwar' extends warfare to "information-related conflict (...) that spans economic, political, and social forms as well as military forms of 'war'" (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1997, 27–28). In this broader notion of information warfare, a multiplicity of actors endeavours to influence – through public diplomacy, propaganda and psychological campaigns, infiltration of computer networks, cultural subversion, and the like – what a target audience thinks.

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As a social media phenomenon, NAFO can be understood as a result of the participatory media ecology that emerged with the increase in access, connectivity and multiplicity of digital technologies including the advent of social media in the wake of the Web 2.0 revolution in 2004–5 (Merrin 2019, 195). This new media ecology enabled not only state actors to circumvent traditional media-gatekeepers in writing and telling ‘their’ war narrative (Kaempf 2013, 595, 598–599). In addition, non-state actors and individuals alike became able to disseminate their perspectives on ongoing conflicts and to challenge ‘state-policed war narratives’ (599). As everybody is now potentially able to wage and narrate war, contemporary wars turn into information wars that are fought through producing (counter-)knowledge about the conflict (Chernobrov 2022, 632, 636). This emerging mode of participatory warfare overrides a clear delimitation of the physical battlefield just as conventional distinctions between combatants and civilians, and ‘magnif[ies] the narrative dimension of war’ (633–34).

NAFO is one such new actor that participates in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since it stepped in to bolster the Ukrainian war effort in May 2022. While it first appeared on the social media platform Twitter,³ NAFO constantly traverses the online and offline battlefield. It counters Russia’s propaganda machinery with the production and circulation of memes, raises donations on charity platforms to supply Ukraine with military and humanitarian equipment, and shows up at street protests and Ukrainian solidarity events (Meis and Johais 2023, Know Your Meme 2022, NAFO 2023a, York 2022). NAFO is thus both a virtual army of meme-based doge⁴ avatars that builds on the collective and unpredictable actions of anonymous social media users *and* a real-world community of NAFO ‘fellas’⁵ that show their affiliation with manifold iconic merchandise products. Its actions are not orchestrated by state agencies or military commands but consist of the unpredictable practices of anonymous social media users. However, its collective action exceeds the subjectivity, intentionality, and embodied positionality of individual users as the defined key components of agency (O’Hagan 2013, 560–561). This article explores NAFO as an expression of the emerging mode of participatory warfare that traverses the virtual battlefield of information warfare and the real-life battlefield of military warfare. We ask how such a cross-border war participant assumes agency in the social media and beyond to make a difference in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and enforce certain political interests. In particular, we focus on the war narrative with which NAFO competes on the ‘site of battle’ in the social media (O’Hagan 2013, 561).

To conceptualise NAFO’s agency, we draw on the notion of a ‘hypermemonic logic’ (Shifman 2014, 4, 18–23). ‘Memetic’ refers to the qualities of the digitally mediated participatory culture that memes represent and generate: Memes are collective products as they travel from person to person and are variously remodelled and imitated. In doing so, memes evolve into intertextual conglomerates that reflect and shape people’s mindsets. Accordingly, memes catch on when they resonate with their sociocultural environment. ‘Hyper’ denotes the velocity and extensive reach of memetic replication, and, importantly, highlights the capacity to permeate digital and nondigital spheres. Both attributes apply to NAFO’s agency in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: it is the outcome of highly energetic collective action and blends online and offline reality

To capture the effect of this hypermemetic agency of NAFO, we combine the notion of strategic narratives with a feminist conception of storytelling (Haraway 1997, 11, 64; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2012, 2018). The article will thus show NAFO as a cross-border war actor that exerts hypermemetic agency through strategic storytelling.

The following section outlines the conceptual framework that adapts the strategic narratives approach to the relational agency of hyper memetics. The third section applies this framework to NAFO’s narrative practices and retells NAFO’s story of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Then, the fourth section demonstrates that NAFO’s hypermemetic agency qualifies as a strategic narrative: its storytelling inheres a future-orientation, performs identity claims, builds on shared understandings and targets internal and external audiences. Lastly, we highlight key effects of NAFO’s hypermemetic storytelling, clarify our contribution to the literature on the social mediatisation of conflict

and point to the need for further research to understand the implications of today's participatory culture for the conduct and experience of war.

2. Agency, strategic narratives, and hypermemetic storytelling

As digital news media have become available to all actors with access to the required basic technological means, the conditions of media broadcasting and interaction have changed significantly. Political communication no longer resides primarily with state and news media institutions, but includes civil actors – the everyday users of media devices and applications – who are potentially put in the position of 24/7 worldwide online broadcasters. This democratisation of media access puts up the question of agency in media and politics anew (O'Hagan 2013, 559–560). In a substantialist' socio-theoretical view, a subject's agency refers to the capacity to do something and has three layers, namely intentionality, social identity, and a 'positioned-place' in which the subject's practices in a specific social context take place at a given point in time (Wight 2006, 212–214). When considering the agency of a social media phenomenon like NAFO, we can either understand media as the infrastructure 'through which actors exercise agency' or a 'form of agency' in its own right (O'Hagan 2013, 560–561). In adopting the latter view, we attribute agency to the collective effect of the creativity and eccentricity of anonymous users of online platforms that form volatile and versatile networks (van Dijck 2013, 11–13; Elsaesser 2009, 181). In other words, agency resides in a relational web that inheres political potentiality rather than being the capacity of a clearly identifiable intentional subject (Baspehlivan 2024, 37, 56). However, this agency is not free-floating but shaped by the algorithmic, extractive, and infrastructural conditions of social media platforms (40). We focus on how NAFO performs this uncontrollable and unpredictable form of agency when it participates in the Russo-Ukrainian war. More specifically, we look at how NAFO exerts agency in propagating a pro-Ukrainian strategic narrative.

Although the Web 2.0 extended media agency to everyone with 'access to an Internet connection', it takes more than this in order for agency to have a strategic impact (O'Hagan 2013, 560). First, online war narration requires net-savviness, i.e. the capacity to attune to the 'dancing' of social media algorithms to maximise recognition of a certain narrative version of the conflict (Chernobrov 2022, 634). Second, it requires a narrative savviness to strike a balance between credibility and authenticity, content, and affective appeal to 'win over [...] audiences amid competing narratives' (ibid). We draw on the concept of strategic narratives to capture that NAFO has these skills and, hence, the capacity to influence the info-politics of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

(Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2018, 6) define strategic narratives as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors'. Strategic narratives are the instruments with which political actors engage with their discursive field and shape it according to their interests and objectives. It is a communication tool to tell the world "who we [as political actors; EJ and MM] are" and "what kind of order we want" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2012, 3). Thus, promulgating a strategic narrative is key for winning information wars. As an analytical framework, narratives consist of five structural components (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2018, 7): A narrative requires (1) an *agent*, i.e. the character(s) or actor(s) of the story told; (2) a *scene*, i.e. the setting, environment or space in which the story takes place; (3) an *act*, i.e. the line of action or conflict told by the story; (4) an *agency*, i.e. the tools or behaviour of the agent(s) in terms of their capacity to act, exert power and produce effect; and (5) a *purpose*, i.e. a (suggested) resolution or goal for the introduced conflict or action as an expectable (happy) ending. In this suggested plot of strategic narratives, the past (the history), the present (the current state of affairs), and the future (the envisioned state of the political order) are brought together in a storyline of a 'sequence of events and identities' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2012, 4).

The *future-orientation* is decisive to qualify a narrative as strategic (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2012, 4–5). Moreover, strategic narratives entail *identity claims* that articulate a specific

position towards an issue or policy, or within world politics. As for content and meaning, strategic narratives exist within a dynamic system of versatile social interactions of shared knowledge and history that depend on prevailing understandings and expectations. Thus, *contents* of strategic narratives are *changing* but the meaning structures persist. In terms of outreach, strategic narratives both aim to unify one's own group of supporters and address an international public to assert the group's claims and position in world politics. Hence, it is important to consider which *internal and external audience* a strategic narrative targets.

However, strategic narrative approaches have predominantly focused on the textual analysis of the storyline. Thereby, they have missed other qualities of storytelling through social media that 'involves the use of humour, memes, and multiple layers of interpretation and meaning' (Crilly and Chatterje-Doody 2021b, 245). As a specific form of image-focused storytelling, we focus on NAFO's memetic narrative of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Thus, we analyse the complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of textual, visual and audible elements that constitute internet memes (Baspehlivan 2024, 37). Internet memes are a means of expression and method of political communication that is easily accessible, affordable, and entertaining. As artefacts, memes have a highly volatile existence: They occur momentarily, are constantly remodelled and remixed, but at the same time accumulate to vast conglomerates of texts and images on the Internet (Shifman 2014, 7–8, 18–23). To approach these intertextual conglomerates, we complement the conceptual framework of strategic narratives with a feminist's conception of storytelling. (Haraway 1997, 11, 64) introduces storytelling as a knowledge practice that revolves around figurations. Figurations are performative images that bear certain meanings but also enable alternative meanings by figurative displacements. Figurative displacements occur when distinct events and actions in a story interact in a way that produces a recognisable – or: *meaningful* – difference in (empirically) observable phenomena. Following this conception, memes can be understood as material-semiotic figurations in the narrative production of meaning in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. In addition to its semantic content, memetic storytelling inheres a *hypermemonic logic* (Shifman 2014, 4, 23). *Hypermemonic logic* means that memes traverse online and offline media and interact with real-life events and everyday practices by establishing a commonly shared language. Therefore, memetic storytelling is a form of political action that creates its own relational space at the intersection of the virtual and the real. Taking this into account, we analyse not primarily the content of single memetic artefacts but follow the appearances of #NAFO across different media materials to explore NAFO as an example of a cross-border war actor. This means that we traced the figurative displacements of #NAFO from its first occurrence in May 2022 on Twitter, to charity platforms advertised by NAFO, YouTube channels of NAFO fellas, the NAFO website launched in January 2023 and online news media reporting about its activity until July 2023.

In the following analysis, we outline, first, the plot elements of NAFO's storytelling. Afterwards, we demonstrate that NAFO's hypermemetic agency qualifies as a strategic narrative by characterising its position in world politics and by highlighting its future-orientation, shared understandings, and targeted internal and external audiences.

3. NAFO's memetic storytelling

The story's *scenery* is the social media battleground in which different war participants compete with alternative narratives of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Chernobrov 2022, 632, 636; O'Hagan 2013, 561). The *plotline* is a fight between good and evil that features NAFO as the *hero* and Russia as the *villain*. The design of the NAFO logo conveys its political position and the hero's character: it combines the NATO compass with a doge avatar (Know Your Meme 2022). The former identifies NAFO as a Western and pro-Ukrainian military alliance. The latter dramatises the plot as it depicts the fight as an unfair competition in which an underdog faces an all-powerful opponent. More precisely, the doge avatar is modelled after the Japanese dog breed *Shiba Inu*. According to a pet magazine (Zooplus 2023), the Shiba Inu has its own mind and does not want to be subordinated.

Furthermore, it shows strong territorial behaviour and is untrusting of strangers. Thus, the members of the doge avatar army muster the character of strength to resist a hostile invader. The figure of the underdog – from the biblical David to the 1988 Jamaican bobsleigh team – generates sympathy and emotional support because underdogs are perceived and remembered as heroic and morally superior (O’Keeffe 2019).

The term NAFO fellas commonly use to denote the *villain* is ‘vatnik’ which literally means ‘wadded jacket’ (Know Your Meme 2023). During the Soviet era, the wadded jacket used to be worn by the poorer strata of society. In its memetic impersonation, the vatnik is frequently depicted as a grotesque, battered character wearing this kind of jacket. Designed as a cartoon character back in 2011, the vatnik symbolises Russians who believe the Kremlin’s propaganda and always agree with the government, including holding imperialistic or nationalistic views as well as protecting the idea that Putin is the leader who should rule Russia. By mocking the opponent now as vatnik, the story gets another twist: Although the Ukrainian side seems to be at a disadvantage, Russia is not invincible because its war effort suffers from mental and moral weakness as well as the inefficiency of its military machinery. This plot twist opens the possibility for a happy ending in which the underdog ultimately prevails. But apart from ridiculing the enemy, some posts openly reveal aggression and demonise the adversary, for instance, by saying that ‘the enemies are ontologically evil and there is no act against them which is wrong’ (USERGORE@usergore 2022). Thus, NAFO narrates the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as the righteous struggle of an underdog hero determined to resist an enemy who is not as unassailable as claimed.

Yet, NAFO rewrites the underdog plot by reference to its special *agency*. While Ukraine is at a disadvantage in terms of military strength on the physical battlefield, NAFO enhances its chances on the virtual battlefield. In the already cited Twitter post ‘NAFO is the HIMARS of social media’ (see Figure 1), NAFO declares itself to be a highly mobile defence system that ‘wins the info war’ against Russian trolls. This self-representation conveys that NAFO clearly acts in a combatant role except that its weapons are memes and online messages, and its military skills are the ability to attune to algorithmic logics and promulgate an appealing narrative on the social media (Chernobrov 2022, 634). The NAFO lingua for attacking the enemy is ‘bonking vatniks’; meaning whenever NAFO fellas spot a Russian official or sympathiser posting a pro-Kremlin take on Twitter, they bombard these accounts with postings that either signal support for Ukraine or mock Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin’s war effort (Scott 2022). For instance, they use the #Article5 alluding to the part of the NATO treaty that calls for collective defence or produce a music video that celebrates the explosion on the Crimean Bridge on 8 October 2022 to the tune of the Eurodance hit ‘Freed from desire’ (Wujekdobrarada 2023).

NAFO’s actions on the social media battlefield resemble the tactics of a guerilla force that is decentralised and quick at repartee (Schneider and Toyka-Seid 2023): Mostly anonymous cyber-warriors localise the enemy, hit, and run. In contrast, Russia’s propaganda is centrally orchestrated. Narratives must meet the approval of the Kremlin, which makes it comparatively sluggish and less innovative. Therefore, NAFO fellas highlight the simple and uncoordinated approach as a strength and refuse to establish an organisational structure (BabushkaBonkious@QuackersN Cheese 2023). If successful, NAFO’s memetic guerilla warfare would do to Russian propaganda what Ukrainian military operations are supposed to do to the Russian army: ‘showing what was thought to be a formidable juggernaut to actually be an incompetent mess’ (York 2022).

As an example of an effective strike, NAFO fellas won a sparring with Russia’s Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, on Twitter. Ulyanov had justified the 2022 Russian invasion by claiming that Ukraine allegedly shelled civilians in the Donbas since 2014. A NAFO fella exposed the logic of this justification by tweeting ‘You: “We have to bomb all of Ukraine’s civilians because Ukraine was fighting an internal war and some civilians got shelled”.’ (Gault 2022). Ulyanov’s response read ‘You pronounced this nonsense. Not me’ (Mikhail Ulyanov @Amb_Ulyanov 2022). However, his attempted repartee turned against him: The phrase was seized as a shorthand to mock pro-Russian accounts and



Figure 1. NAFO is the HIMARS of social media. Source: Ivana Stradner@ivanastradner(2022).

appeared on NAFO merchandise articles like cups and t-shirts soon after (Scott 2022; Shosirobe 2022). On the one hand, this incident demonstrates NAFO's agency at disturbing Russia's war narrative and rebuts the assumption that political-communicative 'firepower' on the virtual battlefield requires command and control. On the other hand, it points to the material effects of narrative practices, namely exploiting them for the fundraising effort in support of Ukraine's military defence. This demonstrates that NAFO's agency also goes beyond the virtual battlefield as its online actions feed into the on-the-ground military equipping and, thus, make a difference on the physical battlefield.⁶

Taken together, NAFO's agency does not arise from the intentionality of socially positioned individuals but is *relational*, *volatile*, and *border-crossing*. First, it lies in a versatile net of relations between many anonymous social media users that act on the grounds of a shared mindset. However, their political participation is not organised. Instead, NAFO's agency is volatile, as collective action occurs instantaneously – in response to the virtual or real world 'troop movements' of allied or enemy forces – and consists of the unpredictable and playful appreciation, creation and sharing of memes via social media platforms. Third, it is an agency that interconnects online storytelling with offline war preparation and conduct. In short, NAFO's agency results from joint hypermemetic practice. In fact, this form of agency that is not attributable to one clearly identifiable actor is the formula for success in the Russo-Ukrainian information war as counterattacks are hard to direct and easily repelled. For example, Russia's state-governed media outlet RT claimed NAFO to be a mere bot army instead of a network of real people and criticised Western politicians of hypocrisy who praised NAFO while at the same time condemning Russia's use of notorious troll farms and similar online-battle tactics. But this accusation was immediately turned against Russia and framed as a desperate act of discreditation in the face of a 'super-weapon' that Ukraine has

access to but ‘Russia has no hope of ever recreating – a thriving and highly effective domestic and global civil society’ (York 2022).

Finally, the *purpose* of NAFO’s memetic narrative is the vision that Ukraine defeats the enemy and regains sovereignty of all territories that Russia occupies. One way to write the future victory into present history was the advertisement of an Early-Bird-Ticket for the NAFO-Fella-Summer-Beach-Party 2023 in Crimea on the platform Saint Javelin⁷ (Saint Javelin 2023a). The offer for an event to celebrate Ukraine’s expected – and hence certain, however not yet achieved – victory suggests military steadfastness and envisions a near, glorious post-war era. Thereby it completes the underdog narrative with the happy ending that the initially outgunned party eventually emerges victorious. Furthermore, it provides the NAFO community with a political perspective (Bodyagina 2023) and puts the plot together into a chronicle timeline in which the past of Russian annexation proceeds from the current state of Russian aggression towards the rightful recovery of Ukraine state territory. This future-orientation is one key element that qualifies NAFO’s storytelling as strategic narrative. In the next section, we will focus on the aspects that qualify NAFO’s hypermemetic agency as performing practices of strategic storytelling.

4. Nafos hypermemetic agency as strategic narrative

NAFO’s memetic storytelling envisions a future in which Ukraine will have defeated Russia and reconquered all territories including Crimea. This *future orientation* includes a political order in which Russia is kept in check on the territory of the Russian Federation and Ukraine has become a full NATO member state. The latter is indicated by NAFO’s often iterated slogan ‘NAFO expansion is non-negotiable’, which pre-empts an equally unequivocal attitude of the ‘real-world’ Western military alliance. Indeed, it is this obvious and constant reference to and critique of NATO that constitutes NAFO’s *identity claim* and with which it articulates its position in world politics and vision of the future order. The imitation of NATO’s iconography and tweets by NAFO fellas convey that it understands itself as a complement of, or even ‘the better’ NATO; implying that NAFO is a military alliance whose members identify with democratic values and clearly take sides with Ukraine. With the slogan ‘NAFO expansion is non-negotiable’ it proclaims that it is a more inclusive alliance than NATO (Goczal 2022; Master Commander 2022): NAFO would be open to every democrat and explicitly includes Ukraine, whereas NATO still hesitates to offer Ukraine a concrete membership prospect in the short term (Wintour 2023). Its unnegotiable inclusiveness is also reflected in the alliance’s multinational composition that can be inferred from the country flags that users attach to their tweets (see e.g. kingrat ? EU UA@TheRealSquiff 2022).

Apart from its transnational identity and pro-Ukrainian stance, NAFO evades the distinction between civil and military war participation. Its memes clearly reflect the military character of the NAFO alliance, as the doge avatar frequently wears military outfits, poses with military equipment, performs military practices, or appears in war situations (see e.g. Ivana Stradner@ivanastradner 2022). Moreover, the profile of the official NAFO Twitter account shows a collage of the doge avatar and the NATO symbol as profile picture against the backdrop of soldiers with a rocket launcher (NAFO 2022). Furthermore, NAFO makes its position and lines of solidarity clear when responding to the latest political developments. For instance, it offered t-shirts under the slogan ‘Leopards are freed’ after the German government announced their readiness to deliver Leopard tanks to Ukraine. Appreciating Germany’s decision, the meme showed a doge avatar in military outfit in front of a tank under the headline ‘Tanke schön’ – a wordplay building on the German phrasing for ‘thank you’ (NAFO 2023b). This example shows that NAFO’s versatile net of anonymous social media users is highly effective in producing *constantly changing content* in response to events in world politics and latest developments at the (information) warfront.

In their interactions, NAFO ‘fellas’ not only make use of context-specific terminology in terms of a shared memetic everyday language as demonstrated in the example above. They also concur with the *prevailing expectation* that Russia’s propaganda builds only on misinformation, lies and the so-

called whataboutism,⁸ and *share the understanding* that this does not ‘deserve’ any refuting but may be best answered to with ‘superior memes’ and ‘shitposting vatniks’ (Mia@mia_alessio 2022). These common self and enemy conceptions are also reflected in an image video available on YouTube in which NAFO doge avatars overrun a Russian outpost:

The Russian soldiers run out of ‘ammunition’ and have no adequate ‘weapons’ to counter NAFO’s concerted meme and shitposting attack effectively. Out of despair, all that remains is to fire back with a ‘whataboutism round’ (Cabritinha Productions 2022).

NAFO’s memetic storytelling has both an *inward and outward reach*: On the one hand, it addresses its own group of supporters, i.e. its *internal audience* of NAFO fellas. On the other hand, it targets the international public – in particular the NATO member states – to attract moral, humanitarian and military support for the Ukrainian war effort and potentially recruit new NAFO fellas. The distinctive mark of the NAFO community is the personalised doge avatar that users can earn once they ‘donate to a charity that supports the Ukrainian defence effort or make a purchase from a store that directs its profits to Ukraine’ (NAFO 2023a). NAFO memes often adopt a ‘playfully serious’ mode and draw on elements of popular culture (Laineste and Voolaid 2016, 44).⁹ References range from a doge avatar modelled after Miss Marple, an imitation of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* cover with the slogan ‘Smells Like Meme Spirit’ to adaptations from the Star Wars Saga that advertise the ‘Return of the Fellas’ in the ‘Meme Wars’ (Evael@alaylagw 2023; CAESAR ? HIMARS NAFO@caesarXhimars 2022; Fellaraktar@fellaraktar 2023). To further strengthen group cohesion, NAFO memes address feelings of fear and anger and emphasise that solidarity can work as a remedy against them. For instance, a doge-Joda-avatar dressed in Ukraine’s national colours tries to calm the concerns of a new fella by proclaiming that NAFO fellas can end all fear when they stand together (Tim@CeRuLeaNBluMaN 2022). But the doge avatar is not only an identity mark with which NAFO fellows recognise each other. In addition, the underdog character serves the strategic purpose to attract international military, financial and moral backing against Russia as Ukraine’s geographical and militarily superior opponent (Landsberg 2022; O’Keeffe 2019). One outstanding example of NAFO’s outreach activities was the organisation of its first summit in Vilnius on 8 July 2023 - just three days before the NATO summit took place there too. The event’s style mirrored the ‘playfully serious’ mode of NAFO’s online practices (Laineste and Voolaid 2016, 44): NAFO doge avatars in military outfits were displayed onstage (Meduza 2023) and a painting of a prominent version of the avatar – the one used by Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, an avowed NAFO fella – was auctioned for donating the proceeds to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Sonko 2023). Some commentators criticised the dehumanising tendencies of jokes against Russians but this was outshone by the widespread endorsement by the targeted external audience: Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis inaugurated the event and honoured NAFO with the Star of Lithuanian Diplomacy, one of the highest honours the Baltic state can confer on foreign citizens, whereas Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas expressed her appreciation for NAFO in a video message (Mark Adam Harold 2023). NAFO killed here two birds with one stone: it distracted Russian politicians ‘away from their focus on Ukraine’ (Meduza 2023) and attracted the attention of the public and political elites in NATO states.

In sum, making use of the collective hypermemetic practice that constitute its agency, NAFO produces a *future-oriented* strategic narrative and claims the *identity* of a military alliance that is more determined in its support of Ukraine than NATO. Its hypermemetic storytelling forms a community around *shared understandings and expectations* as well as it reaches an *external audience*.

5. Conclusion

NAFO acts as a cross-border war actor that traverses the virtual and the physical battlefield and uses its hypermemetic agency to win the information war against Russia for Ukraine. Its main combat strategy is memetic storytelling. This storytelling relies on the

dissemination logics of memes on social media and actively engages users in sharing, remaking, remixing, and imitating meme contents that feed into narrations about the war and its desired outcomes. The first effect of memetic storytelling is to turn a loose net of Internet users into a community with a shared language, which is united in its opposition against Russia. The figuration of the doge meme plays the key role in this group formation process because it weaves the very varied memes and storylines of NAFO fellas – from innocuous and playful to openly aggressive and demonising – into a joint strategic narrative. Through this collective practice, NAFO gains the ‘firepower’ to counter Russia’s centrally orchestrated propaganda machinery with the polyphone voices of the many. The second strategic effect of NAFO’s memetic storytelling is to improve the supply of the Ukrainian military with weapons and other military and medical equipment. On the one hand, funds for the Ukrainian war effort are raised through donations of new fellas and the sale of merchandise products. On the other hand, the underdog narrative, which the doge meme embodies, influences the public opinion and decision-makers in NATO member states towards adopting a pro-Ukrainian stance and delivering much-needed weapons systems. By revealing these strategic effects, the example of NAFO adds a critical perspective on the role of humour in world politics. While it probably taps into existing political views, humour here lures users to join the virtual army and fight the war on the side of Ukraine. Just as humour strengthens group cohesion in the military (Nilsson 2018; Sløk-Andersen 2019), the entertaining character of collective memetic storytelling creates a community of like-minded people. The ‘unfunny’ side is that the humorous style conveys serious content: Your laughter may stick in the throat upon realising that NAFO memes entail a dichotomic conception of itself and the enemy that ridicules, demonises, and dehumanises the adversary. NAFO is not a funny and innocuous social media phenomenon but a war actor that strategically uses humour as a weapon in war.

In addition, the strategic thrust of NAFO’s memetic storytelling highlights the importance to expand the study of militarisation 2.0 to transnational dynamics and beyond the purview of state and military actors (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021a; Crilley and Manor 2021; Manor 2021). Theoretically, it addresses the challenge that social media does not merely open possibilities to participate in warfare to new types of non-state actors. As we have argued, NAFO’s agency exceeds the intentionality of clearly identifiable subjects but results from a cumulative effect of dispersed action. Therefore, we adopt the notion ‘hypermemonic’ to counter a substantialist notion of agency and an instrumentalist understanding of media that treats media merely as a means of communication. The state-centrism of previous studies on the use of social media in war communication missed the qualities of participatory propaganda compared to centrally controlled narratives. The positive attributes of such bottom-up political communication are its agility, creativity, and inclusiveness. At the same time, an anonymous user collective faces the risk that its agency vanishes as quickly as it appeared. Even worse, the qualities of memetic communication may turn against it when the opponent side infiltrates the participative memetic storytelling and thwarts its strategic effects.¹⁰

In this context, the concept of participatory warfare captures how the new media ecology transforms the conduct and info politics of armed conflict. War and war communication are no longer a state-controlled operation but an inclusive bottom-up project that blurs the lines between combatants and civilians and interlinks pop-culture, and politics in unexpected ways (Shifman 2014, 6). Our analysis of NAFO’s memetic storytelling only covers parts of its agency and reveals some of the implications of participatory warfare. As a next step, it is important to supplement our media analysis with interviews of avowed NAFO fellas and observations at offline events to explore emotions and experiences, understand motivations and objectives, and better grasp the interdependence between the virtual and the real-world battlefield. Apart from the specific example of NAFO, we should be attentive to the possibility that any armed conflict becomes a participatory project through turning internet users around the world into war participants. We are still at the

beginning of fully apprehending a form of warfare that extends the conflict to everybody, everywhere and anytime.

Notes

1. HIMARS is a multiple rocket launcher manufactured by the company Lockheed Martin that the United States provide Ukraine with as part of their military assistance (BBC 2022).
2. Ivana Stradner also posted the metaphorical call to arms cited in the article's title.
3. Since July 24, 2023, Twitter operates under the name of X (Jones 2023).
4. The doge meme originally spread in 2013 and became so popular that it was even used as the eponym for a new cryptocurrency called 'Dogecoin' that Elon Musk promoted (Scott 2022).
5. In NAFO colloquial language, 'fella' designates supporters. We will thus use it from now on as an established term.
6. The described skirmish pitted cyber guerilla fighters against a Russian official. Instead, an inter-state 'meme war' was the exchange of blows between the Iranian General Soleimani and US president Donald Trump in the summer of 2018. Both used US-produced film aesthetics for their menacing messages that reinforced the thorny situation short after the US had abandoned the nuclear deal with Iran and planned to tighten sanctions. Here, memetic and kinetic warfare likewise interlinked as the US president ordered the drone strike who killed his adversary in Iraq in January 2020 (Malmvig 2022, 14–16).
7. Before NAFO launched its own website in January 2023, it used the platform Saint-Javelin to distribute its merchandise projects (Saint Javelin 2023b).
8. *Whataboutism*, i.e. the strategy of directing public attention to another issue, is one of the main targets of NAFO's doge combat units (Braun 2022; van Vooren 2022).
9. The humorous quality of NAFO's memetic production exemplifies the advantages of 'strategic humour' (Chernobrov 2022). This shows that para-diplomatic actors can employ humour as a means of political communication at least as effective as state agents (Manor 2021; Crilley and Manor 2021; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021). More generally, it underscores the productive effects of humour in world politics (Wedderburn 2021; Browning and Brassett 2023; Brassett and Browning 2024; Brassett, Browning, and Wedderburn 2021). However, not all #NAFO postings are funny, but some are unambiguously aggressive, seriously demand political actions or simply call for donations to pro-Ukrainian charities (e.g. USERGORE@usergore 2022).
10. The NAFO collective discusses the potential co-optation through pro-Russian trolls that the unrestricted access for using #NAFO allows for – which includes fake accounts – as a real danger. This came out of a conversation with a confessing NAFO fella that one of the authors met for preparing an event on memetic warfare.

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