

AI-Slop and Political Propaganda: The Role of AI-Generated Content in Memes and Influence Campaigns

Article history:

Received: 15.08.2025

Revised: 10.09.2025

Accepted: 25.09.2025

Available online: 21.10.2025

<https://doi.org/10.56177/eon.6.3.2025.art.1>

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the phenomenon of “AI-slop” – a term denoting the mass proliferation of low-quality, AI-generated content – and its role in contemporary digital culture and political propaganda. We trace the conceptual emergence of AI-slop and analyze its epistemic, aesthetic, and socio-political implications, focusing particularly on memes as carriers of ideology. Through a media-theoretical and historical lens, we compare memes with political cartoons, highlighting how both serve as vehicles for persuasion, but noting memes’ capacity for rapid diffusion, anonymity, and heightened polarizing effects. Using the 2024–25 Romanian elections as a case study, we show how candidates strategically deployed AI-generated memes and crude visuals to cultivate authenticity, amplify nationalist narratives, and bypass traditional media scrutiny. We argue that AI-slop not only undermines knowledge infrastructures but also reconfigures political communication, blurring the boundaries between entertainment, misinformation, and propaganda. Ultimately, AI-slop represents a critical frontier for digital literacy, democratic resilience, and information integrity.

KEYWORDS: AI-slop; memes; propaganda; digital literacy; political communication; Romania.

TITLU: „AI-Slop și propaganda politică: rolul conținutului generat de IA în meme și campaniile de propagandă”

REZUMAT: Acest articol examinează fenomenul „AI-slop”, un termen care desemnează răspândirea conținutului de calitate scăzută generat de inteligența artificială, precum și efectele sale asupra culturii digitale contemporane și a comunicării politice. Studiul urmărește apariția și evoluția conceptului de AI-slop și analizează implicațiile sale epistemice, estetice și sociale. Analiza se concentrează asupra memelor, privite ca forme de exprimare ideologică și instrumente de propagandă. Prin raportare la tradiția teoretică și istorică a mass-mediei, articolul compară meme-urile cu caricaturile politice, subliniind atât funcția lor comună de vehicule persuasive, cât și diferențele esențiale legate de ritmul de circulație, anonimatul autorilor și potențialul de polarizare. Ca studiu de caz, sunt analizate alegerile din România din perioada 2024–2025, pentru a evidenția modul în care candidații au utilizat meme și imagini generate de inteligența artificială cu scopul de a construi o imagine autentică, de a promova narațiuni naționaliste și de a evita controlul mass-mediei tradiționale. Articolul argumentează că fenomenul AI-slop afectează mecanismele de validare a cunoașterii și transformă comunicarea politică, estompând limitele dintre divertisment, dezinformare și propagandă. AI-slop reprezintă o provocare esențială pentru alfabetizarea digitală, reziliența democratică și integritatea informațională.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: AI-slop; meme; propagandă; alfabetizare digitală; comunicare politică; România.

Introduction

In the contemporary digital age, we are witnessing an ontological dilution of content, where the abundance of artificially generated matter creates a kind of informational ‘primordial soup’. Primordial soup, or ‘prebiotic soup’, describes the set of conditions which enabled the formation of the Earth, when researchers discovered in 1953 that methane, ammonia and hydrogen are needed to produce the basic organic monomers – amino acids. These are needed for ‘life’. This phrase ‘primordial soup’ in fact refers to the heterotrophic theory, sometimes called the Oparin–Haldane hypothesis of life. But the primordial soup under discussion is more akin to ‘slop’. According to the classical definition of slop by *Cambridge Dictionary* – an amorphous, liquid, indigestible mass – contemporary digital content is in fact being transformed into a fluid, insubstantial entity. Paradoxically the world is witnessing a vast quantitative explosion of creation while simultaneously

witnessing an implosion of meaning. The virtual stereotypes of hardship and unrecognized success are a form of Baudrillardian simulacra - children without originals, representations of ideals that never really existed. The high engagement of this kind of content reveals a collective hunger for validation, transforming social media into a kind of 'digital beehive' where value is no longer measured in authenticity, but in the ability to generate reactions - obtaining 'likes' and more 'followers'. We live in the era of 'being seen', being performative is important to many people. This content is akin to liquid food served to animals - "slops" in its traditional sense as it becomes a degraded form of digital nutrition, consumed more out of necessity than intrinsic value. We are witnessing a new form of alienation, where the artificial abundance of content creates a paradox of spiritual poverty amidst information abundance.

In an article published in *The New York Times*, Benjamin Hoffman (2024) explores the concept of "AI-slop", a recent term for content of questionable quality generated by artificial intelligence (AI), a phenomenon has become increasingly visible as AI models such as Google's Gemini are integrated into search engines and social media feeds. While such systems are intended to provide quick and efficient answers, they frequently produce superficial, erroneous or irrelevant results. A notorious example is Google's absurd recommendation that users could use non-toxic glue to make cheese stick better to pizza. This type of misinformation demonstrates that AI does not prioritize accuracy, but merely generates content in an automated fashion without encouraging critical thinking. Digital slop has become the equivalent of spam, but in a more subtle and pervasive form.

Beyond the obvious errors, the major problem that Hoffman points out is that AI presents information as definitive, rather than as a starting point for research. This tendency reduces the active involvement of users and favors a passive acceptance of information, which can have dangerous effects on decision-making. Moreover, the spread of AI-slop in online searches affects not only users but also the digital ecosystem, diminishing the visibility of trusted sources. Hoffman argues that while AI can be a useful tool, its uncontrolled integration into the internet risks turning the digital space into a place dominated by worthless content.

In light of these concerns, it is essential to examine how AI-slop fits within the current epistemic landscape and what implications it holds for knowledge production and digital literacy. As AI-generated content proliferates, it challenges traditional notions of expertise, authority, and trust in information, raising critical questions about the evolving role of automated systems in shaping public understanding. Furthermore, the rise of AI-generated images and videos introduces a new category of misinformation - **visual AI-slop** - which blurs the boundaries between synthetic and authentic media. Analyzing its characteristics and comparing it to traditional forms of visual misinformation can offer insight into how audiences engage with and interpret such content. Lastly, the infiltration of AI-slop into political discourse, particularly in the latest Romanian electoral campaign, underscores the urgency of understanding its role in shaping narratives, influencing public opinion, and potentially altering democratic processes.

To address these issues, this research focuses on the following key questions:

How does AI-slop fit within the current epistemic landscape, and what are its implications for knowledge production and digital literacy?

What are the characteristics of visual AI-slop, and how does it compare to traditional visual misinformation?

What role has AI-slop played in shaping narratives during the latest political campaign in Romania?

Emergence and Definition of "AI Slop"

The term "AI slop" emerged in tech discourse by mid-2024 to describe the torrent of low-value, machine-generated content flooding online platforms. Benjamin Hoffman's June 2024 *New York Times* column popularized the phrase, defining slop as "shoddy or unwanted AI content in social media, art, books and, increasingly, in search results"¹. Tech commentators had been using "slop" informally (analogous to Internet "spam"), but Hoffman's NYT piece brought it to mainstream attention. As Willison (2024) notes, the term was echoed in outlets like *The Guardian* and the NYT by mid-2024, capturing

¹ José Marichal, "AI Isn't Responsible for Slop. We Are Doing It to Ourselves," Tech Policy Press, July 15, 2025, <https://www.techpolicy.press/ai-isnt-responsible-for-slop-we-are-doing-it-to-ourselves/>.

“modern A.I.”’s downsides (e.g. “Ignore that email, it’s spam... ‘Ignore that article, it’s slop’”)¹. Max Read similarly describes slop as “a term of art, akin to spam, for low-rent, scammy garbage generated by artificial intelligence”². In short, AI slop denotes the ephemeral, formulaic, and often pointless content AI can generate at scale – the digital detritus of the online world (Hoffman 2024; Read 2024).

On social platforms, “AI slop” has rapidly become a catchword. Researchers Tang and Wikström (2024) report that TikTok, Facebook and similar platforms are “being flooded with uncanny and bizarre content” generated by AI – what they explicitly call “so-called ‘AI slop’”³. Viral examples include “Shrimp Jesus” and other absurd images that circulate widely on Facebook and Instagram. As one Guardian columnist quips, “Slop is everywhere ... Shrimp Jesus”⁴, illustrating how quickly such bizarre AI images become memes. Analysis of YouTube data shows that roughly 10% of its fastest-growing channels (by summer 2025) consist entirely of surreal, AI-generated videos – “mass-produced content that is surreal, uncanny or simply grotesque,” meeting the technical definition of slop⁵. Even on Reddit and Twitter (X) moderators and users are talking about slop. For instance, Reddit moderators report being “grappling with an influx of generative AI content, which many subreddits deem low-quality or contrary to their mission,” and asking for tools to filter out “AI slop”⁶. In sum, discussions on Twitter and Reddit reflect that AI slop now permeates feeds: users post it deliberately (often either for shock value or monetization), while communities simultaneously lament and debate how to handle the onslaught.

Scholars and critics have begun analyzing slop and its consequences. Cognitive scientists warn that AI-generated drivel can “pollute the scientific knowledge infrastructure”. Iris van Rooij (2025) documents how even Google-linked definitions on academic sites can be entirely AI-fabricated “slop” – plausibly worded but false content with no regard for truth. Experts characterize this as an epistemic crisis, with one colleague coining the term “*epistemicide*” to describe AI slop’s erosion of knowledge⁷. In science publishing, David Crotty (2025) of *The Scholarly Kitchen* notes a “flood of AI-generated slop” overwhelming systems (e.g. the NIH limited grant submissions due to many AI-penned proposals)⁸. Social science researchers also document slop’s socio-technical ecosystem: Tang and Wikström (2024) show that AI slop has become a “lucrative venture” – an AI “gold rush” where anyone (often outside the West) can churn out thousands of videos or posts to game platform algorithms⁹. These analyses highlight slop not just as a novelty but as a phenomenon with real impacts on information integrity, creativity, and online economies.

¹ Simon Willison, “First Came ‘spam.’ Now, with A.I., We’ve Got ‘Slop,’” Simon Willison’s Weblog, 2025, <https://simonwillison.net/2024/Jun/11/nytimes-slop/>.

² Max Read, “Drowning in Slop,” *Intelligencer*, September 25, 2024, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/ai-generated-content-internet-online-slop-spam.html>.

³ Jiaru Tang and Patrik Wikström, “‘Side Job, Self-Employed, High-Paid’: Behind the AI Slop Flooding TikTok and Facebook,” *The Conversation*, September 23, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/side-job-self-employed-high-paid-behind-the-ai-slop-flooding-tiktok-and-facebook-237638>.

⁴ Arwa Mahdawi, “Ai-Generated ‘slop’ Is Slowly Killing the Internet, so Why Is Nobody Trying to Stop It?” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/2025/jan/08/ai-generated-slop-slowly-killing-internet-nobody-trying-to-stop-it>.

⁵ Priya Bharadia, “Cat Soap Operas and Babies Trapped in Space: The ‘ai Slop’ Taking over YouTube,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/11/cat-soap-operas-and-babies-trapped-in-space-the-ai-slop-taking-over-youtube>.

⁶ Scharon Harding, “Reddit Mods Are Fighting to Keep AI Slop off Subreddits. They Could Use Help,” *Ars Technica*, February 17, 2025, <https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2025/02/reddit-mods-are-fighting-to-keep-ai-slop-off-subreddits-they-could-use-help/>.

⁷ Iris van Rooij, *AI Slop and the Destruction of Knowledge* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16905560>

⁸ David Crotty, “The AI Slop Overload Does Not Taste Good,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, August 8, 2025, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2025/08/08/the-ai-slop-overload-does-not-taste-good/>.

⁹ Tang and Wikström, “‘Side Job, Self-Employed, High-Paid.’”

AI vs. Human Content: Creativity, Originality, Coherence

Comparisons of AI- versus human-generated content show mixed results. In controlled studies of creative tasks, AI can produce novel ideas and even outperform average humans on routine measures. For example, a 2023 *Scientific Reports* study found that AI chatbots' answers scored higher on average for creativity in a divergent-thinking test – though the single best human answers still matched or exceeded the bots' best ideas¹. In practice, however, slop content often lacks genuine originality and coherence. Critics note that AI models tend to repeat clichés and hallucinate factual details (Bender et al. 2021). As van Rooij (2025) summarizes, LLMs “have no concern for truth” – they mimic scholarship but create “convincing-sounding ‘information’” that is generally unsubstantiated or wrong². While AI can generate grammatically polished text or images, expert evaluators often find it semantically shallow. In comparison, humans bring depth, intention and critical understanding. In art and writing, AI slop is sometimes openly embraced as “stupid” or absurdist art, but that very label underscores its deficit in genuine aesthetic or narrative coherence (Gioia 2024). In short, AI can match human performance on some average creativity metrics, but human authors still outshine AI on the finest-quality ideas – and human content retains semantic grounding that slop often lacks.

AI slop can be understood through several theoretical lenses. In media theory terms, it represents a new wave in the “enshittification” of the Internet: platforms increasingly prioritize cheap, automated content because it boosts engagement and ad revenue. As one commentator observes, “low-quality AI-generated slop floods online platforms and crowds out genuine humans”³. This dynamic echoes older notions of media saturation and spam but scaled up by generative AI. Aesthetic theory also finds echoes of past concepts: some call slop the Internet's latest anti-aesthetic – akin to Steyerl's “poor images” of degraded media, or the postmodern kitsch of memetic art. Ted Gioia (2024) even coined a “Slop Manifesto,” describing slop art as “flat, awkward, stale...and celebrated for its stupidity and clumsiness”⁴. This frames slop as a cynical aesthetic: its value lies in its cheap spectacle and the absurdity of high-tech producing junk.

Epistemologically, slop poses a challenge: it blurs lines between information and noise. The new term “*slopaganda*” has been proposed for how AI slop can amplify propaganda and misinformation. Scholars warn that a deluge of slop will make “truth [increasingly] difficult to discern”⁵. In sum, AI slop is theorized as both symptom and driver of a degraded media environment – an overflow of synthetic content that complicates knowledge, erodes trust in online media, and reconfigures our aesthetic expectations.

Memes as carriers of ideology and political messaging

Almost fifty years ago, Berger (1973) argued that humans see things before they express ideas as words. Human beings must see things before they use words to describe them as Berger wrote,

“Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”⁶

¹ Mika Koivisto and Simone Grassini, “Best Humans Still Outperform Artificial Intelligence in a Creative Divergent Thinking Task,” *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (September 14, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-40858-3>.

² van Rooij, *AI Slop and the Destruction of Knowledge*.

³ Bruce Berls, “Ai Slop and the Enshittification of Everything,” Arrgle Books - Better Living Through Augmented Reality, May 15, 2025, <https://arrgle.com/ai-slop-and-the-enshittification-of-everything/>.

⁴ Ted Gioia, “The New Aesthetics of Slop,” *The New Aesthetics of Slop* - by Ted Gioia, February 25, 2025, <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-new-aesthetics-of-slop>.

⁵ Michał Kłincewicz, Mark Alfano, and Amir Fard, *Slopaganda: The Interaction between Propaganda and Generative AI* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2503.01560>.

⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1973), 1.

The fact that humans see things before they express them in words, he argued¹, enables us, as humans, to find our place in the world and to describe and delineate the world in words. He continued his line of argument, asserting that words “can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it”² So, what we see and what we know is “never settled”. Berger asserted that the way that humans see things is affected by what humans know and what humans believe, and that all images are man-made. An image, Berger asserts, is a “sight which has been recreated or reproduced” and “every image embodies a way of seeing”³.

The first images that we know of today are those which archaeologists and art historians label as ‘rock paintings’, or what some call ‘rock art’, on rock walls and inside caves in many parts of the globe. But whatever these labels, no certainty exists today as to the meaning of these images, just lots of theories. What is clear is that humans do use self-replicating chunks of information, and images, because humans tend to share and repeat information. Images are carriers of information which are read by humans to understand them. But whether or not their intention is understood is another question. Gombrich (1972), one of the most well known art historians of the 20th century, wrote,

“The chance of a correct reading of the image is governed by three variables: the code, the caption and the context.”⁴

Gombrich continued his line of argument that the context of an image, being read, must be remembered otherwise difficulties in ‘reading’ and understanding the image in question. He asserted that,

“Where these links break, communication also breaks down.”⁵

This is a key point as images were carriers of ideology and political messaging way before the invention of the web and widespread use of the internet, in 1983, by Tim Berners-Lee, via cartoons. Little information exists about the first cartoonists but those who create them depend on the readership of the cartoon to understand the context of the cartoon.⁶ Gombrich reminds us political cartoons are a “special type of symbolic imagery”⁷ and their impact is lost or forgotten when the circumstances which caused them to exist and which was known by their viewers is lost. Cartoons played an important role in the dissemination of images⁸. The political cartoon since the 18th century has been a means of speaking truth to power and historians consider cartoons important to examine, as a source of information as additional information is used to query them. Sherman (1992) states based on archival information that the first cartoons are what he calls “figural painting” undertaken using stencils which were repeated for decorative paintings around 1450 either in Florence or artists trained in Florence⁹. Sherman argues that a set of documents in Rome indicate that this repeated use of stencils was used, one hundred years earlier. Scully argues that the origins of the political cartoon are European¹⁰. Coupe¹¹,

¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1.

² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1.

³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2.

⁴ E. H. Gombrich, “The Visual Image,” *Scientific American* 227, no. 3 (September 1972), 86

⁵ Gombrich, “The Visual Image”, 87.

⁶ Thomas Milton Kemnitz, “The Cartoon as a Historical Source,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1973), 87

⁷ Gombrich, “The Visual Image”, 92.

⁸ Kemnitz, “The Cartoon as a Historical Source”, 85.

⁹ John Shearman, “A Note on the Early History of Cartoons,” *Master Drawings* 30, no. 1 (1992): 5–8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1554069>, 25.

¹⁰ Richard Scully, “The Political Cartoon: History and Historiography,” in *Cartoon Conflicts*, ed. Paulo Jorge Fernandes and Ritu Gairola Khanduri, Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), chap. 2, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-69762-3>, 29.

¹¹ W. A. Coupe, *German Political Satires from the Reformation to the Second World War. Part 1: Commentary* (Millwood, NY: Kraus International, 1993).

Scully claimed, that Germany was the source of the European tradition of graphic satire” as he had established what he called “the birth of the cartoon” around the time of the invention of the printing press and the emergence of Protestantism during the late 15th and the 16th centuries. Scully states that “the “Germany” which Coupe references was its “geographical expression” not as a nation¹.

Memes use images and memes are different from cartoons. All three use images, but differently. It appears that memes, and internet memes are replacing political cartoons. But both memes and cartoons both behave and can criticize or praise a person or a leader and influence public opinion—they have some key differences. A meme is a unit of information, spread by imitation. A meme can be an idea, style or behaviour which is copied, transmitted from person to person within a culture. The image(s) carries symbolic meaning and tends to represent a specific theme or phenomenon. Memes transmit information through images and sometimes text to convey information to the person viewing the meme, so that its understood. Gordon (2002) draws on Dawkins’ (1976) proposition that memes are the cultural equivalent of a gene because they self-reproduce and propagate information² structure which is physically inherited in biology.³ Laurent (1999) argued that Dawkins (1976) shortened the word ‘mimeme’ derived from the Greek word ‘mimeisthai’ which means ‘to imitate’⁴.

Hence memes, unlike cartoons, tend to spread rapidly to large audiences and, most of the time, the originator of the meme is unknown. It in turn means that no one can be held accountable if the meme turns out to be promoting false information and misinformation, rather than satire being spread quickly. Memes generally utilise a shared set of rules and provide a (shared) voice ideally creating a sense of togetherness and political identities. But they can increase the polarization of groups and people. But memes, like cartoons, utilise images and a bit of text to convey information. Gallager (2020) argues that memes are not satire but propaganda and have replaced cartoons. Social media platforms and the internet (the web) have reshaped both political communication and participation enabling groups previously known as grassroots with little to no voice on the local, national or global scene to express themselves, to have a voice⁵. AlAfnan (2025) asserts that memes in conjunction with platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram have caused “new forms of political expression” to exist. These digital platforms via the web have empowered many as people were and who felt disenfranchised so that they can actively participate and interact in a country’s, region’s or a community’s political discourse. Physical boundaries, and large media agencies or wealthy newspaper bosses (such as Murdoch) have ceased to be impediments to accessing and using information.

Niebuurt (2020) assert that “internet memes”, memes, are not just the equivalent to “leaflet propaganda of the digital age” but the latest evolution of leaflet propaganda. Leaflet propaganda meant that a wide range of people and groups could not only challenge political traditional elites but also influence media agendas. Niebuurt (2020) labels memes on the net “an effective tool in the arsenal of digital persuasion” in an “effective propaganda based information dissemination”⁶ The US airforce, he argued, dropped millions of leaflets from the air, by plane, as propaganda in the invasion of Okinawa, Japan during World War II and the Korea War targeting different audiences, during the 20th century. The purpose of these leaflets was to reach different groups of people within Japan and Korea. Four key areas were exploited, Niebuurt (2020) maintained, as they were key to the audiences being targeted: ideology appeal, personal gratification appeal, communal values-focused appeal, and information dissemination

¹ Scully, “The Political Cartoon,” 30.

² Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 189.

³ Graham Gordon, *Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2002), 86–87.

⁴ Laurent, “A Note on the Origin of ‘Memes’/‘Mnemes’,” *Journal of Memetics* 3, no. 1 (1999): 20.

⁵ Mohammad Awad AlAfnan, “The Role of Memes in Shaping Political Discourse on Social Media,” *Studies in Media and Communication* 13, no. 2 (January 22, 2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i2.7482>, 2.

⁶ Joshua Troy Niebuurt, “Internet Memes: Leaflet Propaganda of the Digital Age,” *Frontiers in Communication* 5 (2021): 547065, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.547065>

using rhetoric and visual images¹. Political memes utilise satire to be amusing and funny². The word 'edutainment' comes to mind. Mihăilescu (2024) develops this notion that memes appeal to specific groups who generally had little to no role in the political scene – the “grassroots” of the political scene enabling them to have political expression. She argues that memes enable those who were never part of the global world to be active, rather than passive, participants in politics and democracy via media and technology. Memes are in essence vehicles for influencing public opinion, empowering disenfranchised groups, conveying political ideologies, and challenging authorities of various types.

Nieuburt (2020) argues that the memes on the internet are far more powerful than millions of leaflets being dropped from the sky in terms of their value as propaganda. He maintained those who develop memes as forms of propaganda are only hindered by (a) the degree to which a given population has internet access and (b) the imagination of those behind the creation of these memes. These factors, he maintained are different since their predecessors in the creation and use of this mass propaganda were limited by the physical range of these aircraft could fly and the cost of production for the leaflets (ibid.). But, for Nieuburt (2020), the failure and the success of these memes depends on the linguistic and cultural limits of the intended audience as they are “a product generally created for a specific [sub]culture[.]”. AlAfnan (2025) supports Nieuburt's point arguing that one of the defining features of political memes is their ability to involve and appeal to people who lack formal education³. The ability of the creator of memes to utilise both humour and brevity enables memes to become readily accessible to vast audiences because the reader/user feels that they have been informed both informally and easily.

Slop Propaganda in the 2024–25 Romanian Elections

During Romania's 2024–25 electoral cycle, fringe candidates weaponized purposefully crude and amateurish media to reach voters. In the surprise first round of the 2024 presidential election, far-right independent Călin Georgescu – virtually unknown a year earlier – used TikTok to great effect. His team flooded the platform with low-budget videos, memes, and AI-generated images. For example, one analysis notes that “AI-generated images and deepfakes depicting Georgescu as a patriotic hero were circulated widely”. These often featured Georgescu in stylized, grainy settings or patriotic poses, bolstering his nationalist image. Similarly, AUR leader George Simion's campaign leaned heavily on internet memes. Simion “embraced memes not just as part of his communication strategy, but as a central pillar of his campaign”. His team promulgated a simple “finger-gun” portrait meme (evoking Lord Kitchener/Uncle Sam) that supporters filled with slogans (“The man Romania needs,” “A true patriot”) and opponents mocked with sarcastic captions[3]. Whether uplifting or deriding Simion, these quick-and-dirty images kept his face and name continually in view, blurring lines between endorsement and critique.

These propaganda materials spread almost exclusively via new media platforms. TikTok was the epicenter: Georgescu's tens of thousands of video followers on TikTok dwarfed his presence on traditional media. In practice, content was often cross-posted on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube, but the tactics were native to short-form social video. Journalists and analysts also flagged Telegram and other channels as vector. Coordinated Telegram groups (e.g. the so-called “Pyl N3” channel with ~342K followers) repeatedly reposted pro-Georgescu content and anti-EU narratives. One study found that over 25,000 TikTok accounts and 5,000 Telegram channels were mobilized in support of the far-right candidate. On these platforms, volunteers and bot-controlled accounts shared Gen-Z–style clips: for instance so Global Witness observed TikTok “memes designed for engagement” asking viewers “where are you supporting Georgescu from?” in order to encourage users to tag their location and repost.

¹ AlAfnan, “The Role of Memes in Shaping Political Discourse,”

² Mette Mortensen and Christina Neumayer, “The Playful Politics of Memes,” *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (2021): 2367–2377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1979622>

³ AlAfnan, “The Role of Memes in Shaping Political Discourse,” 2.

The strategic value of low-quality aesthetics was widely noted. By using humorous, unpolished visuals, these campaigns cultivated a sense of authenticity and relatability. Simion's memes in particular were intentionally conversational and folksy: "humorous elements... appeal to voters who might not otherwise engage with traditional political discourse," making Simion seem to "speak the language of the people". His TikTok speeches likewise featured raw, direct-to-camera footage. Georgescu's clips used similar vernacular tone. As the content looked "homemade" (grainy filters, cheesy overlays, meme humor), it underplayed overt advertising and bypassed journalistic scrutiny. These artifacts were highly shareable: the same study notes that such memes "spread rapidly across social networks, reaching far beyond [the candidates'] immediate supporters". Crucially, the ambiguous, user-generated feel of the content sowed confusion; for example, the Simion meme template was equally used by supporters and critics, yet "both serve to amplify Simion's presence". In short, the ugly, lo-fi look made the campaign seem grassroots and entertaining, boosting virality even when factually baseless.

Reports and investigations also documented extensive AI-assisted creation of this media. Intelligence and press accounts explicitly claim that generative AI tools were used to fabricate propaganda imagery. As one expert noted, networks of trolls churned out "AI-generated images and deepfakes depicting Georgescu as a patriotic hero," reinforcing his far-right persona. (A related OECD report later estimated some tens of thousands of AI-generated TikTok videos promoting Simion and Georgescu, though the raw data remains opaque.) Even mainstream outlets reported on bot farms: Romania's telecom regulator observed that volunteer content "often looked coordinated," leading to a request that TikTok be suspended pending an investigation. The international research community compared the campaign to Russian-style influence ops, with networks of fake accounts amplifying both memes and "narratives" (e.g. anti-LGBT or anti-Ukraine tropes) on Telegram. In short, both direct and circumstantial evidence exists that campaigners leveraged AI and automation to generate swarms of low-quality propaganda.

Conclusion

The widespread creation of low-quality AI content represents a significant shift in how information, media, and politics interact. This AI-generated material is not merely poor-quality filler content. Instead, it represents a deeper problem that damages trust in information sources, weakens established authorities, and changes how knowledge spreads through society. When AI systems produce content that appears credible but lacks depth or accuracy, they contribute to what researchers call the gradual destruction of knowledge systems and critical thinking skills. This creates a paradox: while we have access to more content than ever before, much of it lacks meaningful substance, leading to a new kind of disconnection from reliable information.

Visual AI content, especially internet memes, makes these problems worse by combining entertainment with political messaging. Traditional political cartoons had clear authors and contexts, but memes spread anonymously and quickly, often with unclear meanings. They mix humor with propaganda and criticism with support, while appearing to come from ordinary people rather than organized campaigns. This makes them particularly effective at spreading ideological messages online. The Romanian elections of 2024-25 provide a clear example: far-right candidates deliberately used crude TikTok videos, AI-generated images, and meme formats to create false impressions of grassroots support and community engagement. These tools helped spread nationalist messages while avoiding traditional media oversight. Even when people criticized these memes, the criticism often increased the candidates' visibility, blurring the line between opposition and promotion.

By examining both theoretical frameworks and real-world examples, this research demonstrates that AI-generated low-quality content serves as more than digital waste, it functions as a deliberate tool in propaganda operations. It works by taking advantage of social media algorithms that promote viral content, using intentionally crude aesthetics to appear authentic and trustworthy, and overwhelming audiences with large volumes of synthetic material.

The consequences affect multiple areas. First, knowledge production suffers not only from factual

errors but from training people to accept superficial information without question. Second, digital literacy education must adapt to help citizens identify AI-generated content, question its authority, and distinguish between entertainment, satire, and propaganda. Third, democratic processes face threats when synthetic media strategically influences electoral communication, increases political polarization, and shapes how people understand their political identities.

AI-generated low-quality content both reflects and accelerates the decline of our media environment. Addressing this problem requires multiple approaches: regulations that make platforms responsible for content quality, educational programs that develop critical media evaluation skills, and ongoing academic research into new forms and effects of synthetic content. The goal is not only to reduce information pollution but also to restore the importance of authenticity, consistency, and truth in digital communication.

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