

# The “Missionaria Protectiva” and the engineering of consensus: from Dune to contemporary politics

di Luca Bonisoli

## Abstract

This article examines the engineering of political consensus through Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, analyzing the Missionaria Protectiva as a model for contemporary narrative manipulation. The Bene Gesserit’s implantation of myths prefigures modern cognitive preconditioning via digital platforms. Drawing on cases from Italy, the US, Brazil, Hungary, and Russia’s troll farms, the article demonstrates how engineered narratives function as “cognitive viruses” – behavioral operating systems shaping collective perception before leaders emerge to harvest prefabricated consensus. Integrating neuroscience on narrative processing with analysis of algorithmic micro-targeting (Cambridge Analytica, computational propaganda), it traces how myth becomes weaponized, producing “transreality”: overlapping, incompatible realities fracturing consensual understanding. The article concludes proposing transparent, horizontal algorithmic governance as counter-strategy – reclaiming the internet’s decentralized ethos to transform citizens from passive manipulation objects into active subjects of collective myth-making.

**Keywords:** Missionaria Protectiva; consensus manufacturing; digital propaganda; transreality; horizontal democracy.

## Narrative sowing and harvesting: the lesson of Dune

In the imagined world of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, the matriarchal order of the Bene Gesserit has perfected the art of sowing myths and legends into interplanetary cultures through an instrument called the Missionaria Protectiva. This “black arm of superstition” is used to implant beliefs and prophecies among primitive peoples, preparing the ground so that, in the future, a Bene Gesserit can exploit those very myths to her own advantage. In other words, the Bene Gesserit practice a true, deliberate religious engineering: they spread “infectious superstitions on primitive worlds,” priming local societies to one day recognize the coming of a predestined figure.

Thus, when Lady Jessica and her son Paul Atreides arrive on the desert planet Arrakis, they find among the Fremen a collective imagination already fertilized with messianic legends. The Fremen await a foreign liberator – the Lisan al-Gaib or Mahdi – according to prophecies instilled generations earlier by the Missionaria Protectiva. Jessica immediately recognizes these narrative “signals” and pushes Paul to embody them, presenting him as the awaited messiah. The result is powerful: the Fremen see in Paul the realization of their ancient legends and immediately grant him trust and loyalty. The young Atreides is thus able to exploit this prefabricated mythological “script” to gain prestige and lead a victorious revolt against the imperial oppressor. His meteoric rise would have been unthinkable without that cognitively engineered groundwork.

Today, outside the fiction of *Dune*, the “sowing” of political myths is no longer entrusted to mystical priestesses, but to a much vaster network of influencers, media, social networks, think tanks, and even viral memes. Every narrative frame – from the myth of the “betrayed people,” to the fear of the “invading migrant,” to the conspiracy of the “corrupt elite” – acts like a modern prophetess preparing the collective mind to welcome its future “chosen one.” When a charismatic leader or anti-establishment movement emerges, they often find a base of preconditioned beliefs: a people convinced they have been betrayed and humiliated, frightened by some external threat, and longing for a saviour. In this sense, the digital Missionaria Protectiva incessantly sows archetypes and resentments, creating the narrative conditions so that, at the right moment, a tailor-made political “messiah” (the strongman, the “national salvation party,” the latest identitarian crusade) appears and instantly garners consensus. The credibility of such a figure does not derive from objective facts, but from their coherence with the mythological script that was sown upstream.

### **Political preconditioning and the engineering of consensus**

What is described in *Dune* is an extreme case of cultural preconditioning, but it also offers an illuminating interpretative key for real-world politics. The Missionaria Protectiva, in fact, represents a sophisticated engineering of prefabricated consensus: it does not simply gather popular support after a leader appears, but rather constructs in advance the mental premises so that this support appears as the only possible reaction. It

works far ahead of time, weaving narratives that make the future “event” – the arrival of the messiah in *Dune*, or in today’s reality the “epochal shift” promised by some politician – into something already foreseen and thus perfectly acceptable to the collective when it occurs.

In much the same way, in contemporary politics the engineering of the electorate anticipates and shapes demand even before any political supply emerges. Mass consensus often does not arise from a free encounter between what citizens want and what leaders propose, but is instead prepared behind the scenes by pre-shaping the cognitive and emotional paradigms of public opinion. If for years media and political actors hammer on the frame of fear of the “other” or nostalgia for a lost golden age, the population will end up reacting according to predictable patterns – just as the Fremen of *Dune* react according to the myths implanted by the Bene Gesserit.

Once certain narrative archetypes have saturated the public space, anyone able to insert themselves into those narratives will immediately reap an advantage. The populist leader or the new identitarian party, in fact, often travel along already-installed narrative tracks: they simply activate the pre-existing script, instantly garnering trust and popular legitimacy as if by design. The public, for its part, recognizes these familiar themes and adheres to them almost automatically, since they confirm the stories that have long been told to them.

A concrete example is offered by recent Italian political experience. In the 2010s, leaders of the populist right deliberately fuelled the myth of a “migrant invasion” and that of the native people betrayed by globalist elites. Matteo Salvini’s Lega, for example, built a scientific communication strategy to exploit these frames: it even developed a software known as *La Bestia* (“The Beast”) that monitored social media reactions in real time, identifying the themes that most agitated users in order to calibrate subsequent messages to reinforce exactly those fears. If a Facebook post attracted many comments like “migrants are taking our jobs,” the next post would seek to amplify that fear, in a targeted circuit of emotional amplification. This constant preconditioning created an electoral base already primed to receive the Lega’s message: immigrants depicted as invaders threatening order and national identity, and the Lega presented as the only legitimate defender of the “native people.” Slogans like “Our People First” cemented this narrative and, in fact, “helped the party gain consensus in the 2018 elections.” In general, micro-targeting and digi-

tal propaganda now make it possible to shape collective beliefs with the same effectiveness as the *Missionaria Protectiva* sowed superstitions on Arrakis. Consensus thus appears prefabricated: the voter believes they are choosing freely, but often merely adheres to emotional and mythological patterns that have been long installed within them.

In every case studied, we see the same pattern: an initial storytelling constructs expectations and enemies, creating the conditions for a figure or movement to be perceived as the inevitable solution. Public demand is thus triggered and guided long before any political supply: as Princess Irulan wrote in *Dune*, “the wisdom of seeding the known universe with a prophetic scheme [...] found complete fulfillment” on Arrakis. In the same way, in the real world the (cynical) “wisdom” of disseminating simple and archetypal narratives lies in the fact that when the suitable character steps onto the stage, their narrative platform and a willing audience are already prepared for them.

### **International cases: from Trump to Orbán-the global engineering of consensus**

The engineering of consensus and narrative preconditioning described above is not an Italian peculiarity, nor is it limited to minor democracies or “young” institutions. On the contrary, some of the most striking contemporary examples are found in advanced democracies and across the spectrum of Western and non-Western regimes.

In the United States, Donald Trump’s political rise exemplifies the harvesting of a narrative terrain long cultivated by decades of talk radio, partisan news, and online echo chambers. The myth of a “stolen America” – betrayed by elites, endangered by immigrants, and besieged by cultural enemies – preceded Trump’s arrival on the political stage. His genius was to personify and amplify these frames, presenting himself not merely as a candidate, but as the embodiment of a narrative already installed in much of the American electorate. Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” activates an archetype of lost grandeur and imminent restoration, a formula as potent as any myth sown by the *Missionaria Protectiva*.

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro rode a wave of anti-establishment anger and nostalgia for order, channeling fears of crime, corruption, and moral decay. Like his counterparts elsewhere, Bolsonaro’s discourse constructed

enemies (the “corrupt elite,” minorities, leftists) and offered a simple, emotionally charged solution: a return to traditional values enforced with strength. His success was the predictable result of a narrative architecture, seeded and reinforced by social media manipulation, disinformation, and an “us vs. them” binary that left little room for nuance.

Similarly, Viktor Orbán in Hungary has built his rule on the myth of a Hungarian nation under siege – first by foreign capital, then by migrants, and always by “Brussels.” Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” is less a break from Western norms than a hyper-concentrated version of their narrative engineering: the relentless creation of internal and external scapegoats, and the portrayal of the leader as the sole guarantor of survival and continuity. The same template, with local variations, can be found in Poland, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and beyond.

What unites these cases is not ideology, but the method: the advance planting and systematic watering of emotive frames, the polarization of public discourse, and the tactical use of digital media to bypass traditional filters. The contemporary strongman, like the messiah in *Dune*, does not invent a new reality; he incarnates and activates a myth that was already waiting for him.

### **Russia, the Troll Farm, and the genesis of the new propaganda: pop culture and the shadow war**

If contemporary political engineering has a “kick-starter,” it is arguably Russia’s systematic weaponization of information and narrative – an operation whose outlines have become clear only in the last decade. Well before the 2016 U.S. elections made the phrase “Russian troll farm” a household term, Russian strategists had understood that the digital infosphere could be shaped, hacked, and polluted, just as any other battlefield.

The St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA), known as the original “troll factory,” pioneered the mass production of fake accounts, divisive memes, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Their method was not to invent new myths *ex nihilo*, but to identify and amplify existing fractures – racial, political, cultural – in Western societies, using the very logic of viral social media for strategic effect. By posing as both sides in online debates, flooding comment sections, and propagating con-

spiracies, Russian operatives blurred the boundaries between authentic and synthetic discourse, deepening mistrust and eroding the possibility of a shared reality.

These operations did not aim to convince, but to confuse; not to persuade, but to paralyze. Their genius was to accelerate processes already in motion, providing a catalytic “kick” to the West’s own narratives of decline, conflict, and betrayal.

The cultural resonance of this new form of “hybrid warfare” has not gone unnoticed. TV series such as *Homeland* and the French *Le Bureau des Légendes* (*The Bureau*) have explored, with varying degrees of realism, the mechanics of information warfare and psychological operations. In these dramas, troll farms and online disinformation appear as part of a larger ecosystem of narrative manipulation: invisible actors moving in the shadows, hacking not only computers but also minds and collective expectations. These shows, while dramatized, accurately capture a crucial truth: in today’s politics, the battlefield is cognitive, and the power to define the narrative – often from afar – is the most coveted weapon of all.

### **Myth as a tool of power**

At the heart of these dynamics lies a crucial fact: myth is a tool of power. Herbert, through the *Missionaria Protectiva*, illustrated how politics can become the management of narrative. Whoever controls the narrative, in a sense, controls the future, because they determine in advance the categories through which the masses will interpret events. A myth is not merely a tale about the past: it is a cognitive infrastructure that shapes what a culture considers possible and acceptable. In *Dune*, the legends sown among the Fremen determine their reality: “what we believe determines who we are and how we will react.” Similarly, in the present, the great collective narratives – national decline or rebirth, the threat of the other, a lost golden age to be reclaimed – profoundly influence political choices in societies, regardless of the factual data.

We live in the age of viral media frames, in which myth updates itself in new forms while retaining its power. A well-crafted tweet, an emotional meme, a simplified conspiracy theory becomes vehicles for modern myths that can take root in the minds of millions. Digital platforms function much like ancient squares where legends were recited – except now

dissemination is instantaneous and ubiquitous. Through the gamification of information (likes, shares, trends), certain stories acquire the status of “shared truth” even in the absence of factual evidence. In practice, perceived truth no longer necessarily coincides with objective fact, but with what has been narratively prefigured as credible and expected by the public. If a particular scenario (e.g., “imminent collapse of civilization because of X”) is repeated and illustrated in a thousand variations, it will enter the realm of plausible realities for many – ready to embrace any “saviour” who promises to avert that fate.

Myth thus becomes a kind of cultural operating system: it steers the emotions and cognitive biases of the masses, like invisible software running in the background. Governments and power groups that know how to exploit this can manipulate society from within, without the need for overt coercion. This grants a tremendous political advantage. As the *Dune* encyclopedia itself notes, controlling religious and mythological elements provides the Bene Gesserit with “a manipulative lever over society.” In the real world, controlling the frame of discussion (for example, imposing the idea that the top priority is security from “internal/external enemies”) offers a similar lever to manipulate public opinion.

It should be added that contemporary political myths are often re-packaged ancient archetypes: the myth of the moral decay of a society and the need for a purifier recalls the rhetoric of many twentieth-century authoritarian movements; the figure of the “scapegoat” (a minority blamed for all ills) has roots stretching back to tribal rituals; the dream of national “rebirth” recovers messianic and palingenetic images present in millennial religions. Nothing is new except the means of dissemination. The viral logic of social media has accelerated and amplified these dynamics, but the core remains unchanged: telling people who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, what apocalypse threatens them, and what hero will save them. It is a powerful narrative formula because it strikes deep emotional chords, beyond any rational argument. And when narrative prevails, fact-checking takes a back seat.

### **The cognitive virus: myths as behavioural operating systems**

It becomes evident, upon closer inspection, that the Missionaria Protectiva does not simply implant a set of stories; it introduces what can

best be described as a cognitive virus. This “virus” is not a random meme or superstition, but a carefully engineered construct designed to bypass rational scrutiny and lodge itself in the deeper layers of collective psyche. Just as biological viruses exploit the vulnerabilities of a host’s immune system, these mythic narratives seek out and lower the rational defences of a social group, often during moments of crisis, uncertainty, or transition. Once internalized, the myth begins to operate as a behavioural operating system: it offers ready-made scripts for interpreting the world, dictating not only what is believed, but also how individuals react to events and, crucially, to each other. In this way, the myth is perpetuated not by constant propaganda from above, but by the ordinary actions, conversations, and choices of those who have come to embody it. The power of such a narrative virus lies in its invisibility and its ability to become self-sustaining – governing behaviour from within, long after the original sowers have vanished from the scene. The effectiveness of the *Missionaria Protectiva*, both in fiction and in contemporary analogues, rests precisely on this: the transformation of belief into habit, and of habit into destiny.

Herbert’s *Dune* offers rich textual and conceptual links to this idea of the myth as a “cognitive virus” and behavioural operating system. The *Missionaria Protectiva* is described in the novel (and in the appendices) precisely as a tool for seeding belief systems that will take root and operate long after their original source is forgotten, transforming belief into habit, and habit into destiny.

Herbert describes the *Missionaria Protectiva* as “the black arm of superstition,” whose purpose is to “infect” primitive cultures with “pathogens” of prophecy and belief:

“*Missionaria Protectiva*: the arm of the Bene Gesserit order charged with sowing infectious superstitions on primitive worlds, thus opening those regions to exploitation by the Bene Gesserit.”  
(*Dune*, TERMINOLOGY OF THE IMPERIUM)

This language directly mirrors the metaphor of a virus – superstition is not spread randomly, but “implanted” for later use.

The Bene Gesserit strategy involves planting legends that lie dormant for generations, only to “blossom” when needed. The effect is exactly that of a latent virus becoming active under the right conditions. Jessica and Paul, on arriving among the *Fremen*, recognize “signals” left by the *Mis-*

sionaria Protectiva and immediately adopt the role the myth requires – proving that the myth acts as an operating system for collective behaviour:

“My father – the Padishah Emperor himself – could not have lived without the prophecies and the legends the Missionaria Protectiva had sown.”  
(Dune, In My Father’s House, epigraph by Princess Irulan)

Paul’s acceptance as the Mahdi is only possible because the Fremmen already “know their lines” – they have been given a behavioural script by myth:

The Missionaria Protectiva planted that legend here! This is their doing!  
(Dune, paraphrased from Jessica’s observations)

Once the myth is adopted, it propagates itself through the ordinary speech and action of the community:

“The prophecy – he is the Mahdi. He is the Lisan al-Gaib!”  
“The prophecy said a mother and son would come. They would be tested by the desert, but they would survive.”  
(Dune, Fremmen conversations)

Here, Herbert shows that myth becomes self-sustaining – protection and enslavement, freedom and programming, all in one.

Finally, Herbert is explicit about the transformation of belief into collective destiny:

They have myths here – legends handed down by the Missionaria Protectiva.  
(Dune, thematically across Paul’s rise)

Herbert’s *Dune* is essentially a manual on narrative contagion: the Missionaria Protectiva manufactures collective operating systems in the form of myth, which propagate like viruses – quiet, invisible, and, once embedded, virtually impossible to eradicate. The Fremmen’s destiny is shaped not by direct coercion, but by the internal logic of stories they have come to embody, just as your cognitive virus metaphor describes.

Unlike the grand propagandas of the twentieth century, today’s cogni-

tive contagion is almost never broadcast from a single, identifiable source. It is quiet, ambient, and everywhere, spreading organically through the ordinary channels of digital life. Social networks, with their vast reach and algorithmic logic, function as global vectors: a meme, a half-true anecdote, or a suggestive image can cross borders in seconds, infiltrating the attention of millions. Influencers – both genuine and artificial – play the role of “superspreaders,” amplifying certain myths and frames, often without awareness of their origins or intent. Mainstream media, too, sometimes unwittingly participates by echoing viral content or giving visibility to “trending” narratives already engineered for maximal contagion.

The genius of this new contagion is its invisibility. Unlike traditional propaganda, which announces itself with banners, slogans, and manifestos, the modern narrative virus travels covertly, embedded in everyday communication and entertainment. It is quietly perpetuated in comment sections, WhatsApp groups, influencer stories, TikTok challenges, and algorithmic recommendations, slipping past conscious defences precisely because it wears the costume of the ordinary and the familiar.

In this sense, the digital *Missionaria Protectiva* is not a single organization, but a distributed process: an ecology of accounts, algorithms, trends, and personalities that continuously recode reality, subtly nudging perceptions, emotions, and ultimately, behaviour. This daily, diffuse, and nearly invisible contagion is what makes the modern cognitive virus so resilient – and so difficult to confront. Like the myths of *Dune*, these engineered stories and frames become embedded in the routine fabric of social existence, perpetuated not just by shadowy trolls or foreign states, but by ordinary people, acting as unwitting hosts and multipliers.

### **Transreality: a symptom of the cognitive viral disease**

In a previous article (Bonisoli, 2020), I proposed that the phenomenon I call “transreality” – the creeping replacement of objective reality with a seamless blend of misinformation, speculation, and disinformation – is in fact a prime symptom of the cognitive viral disease unleashed by the digital *Missionaria Protectiva*. The fusion of pandemic and “infodemic” during COVID-19, which accelerated this shift, didn’t just flatten facts; it fractured consensual understanding and created a schizoid social

psychosis, in which multiple overlapping yet incompatible realities coexisted within the same public sphere.

Transreality emerges when everyday social media routines – shares, likes, retweets, influencer videos – serve as vectors for microscopic narrative snippets that infect the public mind. These fragments mutate across platforms, merging conspiracy, fear, and hope into hybrid storylines that feel personally meaningful yet resist verification. In this environment, reality becomes layered, not replaced: official data and lived experience coexist with equally felt but false narratives, such that a single individual, group, or network can hold multiple, contradictory realities simultaneously.

This state of transreality is not a glitch, but a logical endpoint of the cognitive virus: once rational defences are lowered and belief systems weaponized, the distinction between the real and the manufactured collapses. Instead of an overt narrative from a central authority, truth is now negotiated in real time – through algorithmically prioritized content, influencer endorsements, and whispered rumours. The result is a social condition where reality itself is expropriated by the contagion: silent, invisible, and irreversible once internalized.

In *Dune*, the Fremen are not merely the passive recipients of myth; they are inhabitants of a transreality meticulously constructed by centuries of narrative engineering. The legends and prophecies seeded by the Missionaria Protectiva have not only shaped their religious beliefs but have woven an alternate cognitive environment – a parallel layer of meaning overlaying everyday existence. This “Fremen Transreality” is so pervasive that it becomes indistinguishable from material reality: every event, every anomaly, every newcomer is immediately filtered through the mesh of prophecy, destiny, and collective expectation.

This layered perception acts as both a lens and a behavioural code. When Paul Atreides arrives, the Fremen see not simply a foreign noble but the literal fulfilment of a long-awaited messianic script. Their social and psychological defences have been gradually lowered by generations of mythic narrative, so that Paul’s actions – no matter how ambiguous or unprecedented – are absorbed seamlessly into the prophecy. The Fremen do not need to be persuaded; they need only to recognize the signs already encoded into their worldview. In this sense, their “transreality” is not a confusion or malfunction, but an adaptive cultural operating system: it provides certainty, cohesion, and, ultimately, a collective purpose.

Crucially, this mythic transreality does not just shape belief, but mobilizes action on a planetary and then galactic scale. The Fremen are able to follow Paul into a jihad of apocalyptic proportions because their sense of reality, destiny, and communal identity has been wholly absorbed by the viral myth. The boundary between vision and fact, future and present, legend and law, collapses. The engineered narrative becomes not only their truth, but their fate.

### **Neuroscientific anchor: how narratives hijack the brain**

Recent neuroscience research demonstrates that narratives – and especially those constructed as emotionally charged myths – have a unique power to “hijack” the brain’s social, emotional, and memory networks. Storytelling activates not just language centers but synchronizes regions involved in empathy, imagination, and emotional processing, such as the medial prefrontal cortex, the posterior cingulate cortex, and the limbic system. This phenomenon of neural synchrony means that audiences literally “get on the same wavelength” while absorbing a story, fostering both shared identity and susceptibility to collective myth. Emotional engagement further strengthens these effects: dopamine and other neurotransmitters consolidate memories linked to intense feelings, making certain narratives “sticky” and hard to dislodge (Berns et al., 2013). Repeated exposure and social reinforcement create entrenched neural pathways – a phenomenon known as Hebbian learning – transforming stories into default interpretive frameworks for future experience. Once these narrative scripts are tied to group belonging or existential fears, they become highly resistant to change, as counter-evidence provokes cognitive dissonance and defensive rationalization. This explains how engineered myths, seeded in moments of crisis, become not only believable but neurologically self-reinforcing and behaviourally directive – paralleling Herbert’s depiction of myth as a self-sustaining cognitive virus.

The impact of these neuroscientific mechanisms is amplified – and weaponized – by the architecture of contemporary digital media. The Cambridge Analytica scandal provided a watershed case: through harvesting and analysing millions of Facebook profiles, the company was able to micro-target users with tailored emotional content designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities and nudge political behaviour. By leveraging

psychographic profiling and A/B testing, they optimized messages that would resonate most strongly with particular groups, reinforcing identity and polarizing attitudes – essentially running narrative “experiments” on a mass scale. This approach drew on findings from the Oxford Internet Institute, whose studies have mapped the proliferation of bots, trolls, and computational propaganda across platforms. Research showed that, during critical political events such as the 2016 US election and Brexit, up to a quarter of social media traffic was generated by automated accounts spreading emotionally charged or misleading narratives (Howard et al., 2018). These digital interventions did not simply “inform” but sought to reshape users’ perceptions and even their sense of reality – capitalizing on the brain’s narrative susceptibilities to sow division, create echo chambers, and manufacture consensus in ways eerily reminiscent of the Missionaria Protectiva’s engineered myths.

Given the demonstrated power of engineered narratives – both biologically and digitally – to shape belief, perception, and collective action, there is an urgent need for robust countermeasures. Society must prioritize digital literacy, the teaching of critical thinking, and the cultivation of “cognitive antibodies” that enable individuals to recognize manipulative patterns and resist viral myths. Institutional reforms are equally essential: transparent algorithms, real-time fact-checking, and accountability for social media platforms can help disrupt the viral spread of misinformation. Academic research and cross-disciplinary collaboration should continue to investigate both the vulnerabilities and the resilience factors within the brain’s narrative systems. Ultimately, as Herbert’s fiction warns and contemporary science confirms, the battle for reality is not only political but neurocognitive. Only by acting swiftly – at the level of education, media, and policy – can we hope to inoculate ourselves against the next wave of cognitive contagion and preserve the foundations of a shared, democratic reality.

### **Connecting the Emperor-God’s “Golden Path” and algorithmic swarm governance**

Leto II Atreides, son of Paul Atreides, becomes the God-Emperor of the known universe in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* saga. After merging his body with the sandtrout – the larval form of the sandworms – he transforms

into a nearly immortal, physically invulnerable being, half-human and half-sandworm. He rules as an absolute monarch for over 3,500 years.

Leto's reign is marked by a harsh, seemingly tyrannical control over humanity. He suppresses rebellion, monopolizes the spice melange, and enforces peace through overwhelming power. The purpose behind his rule is the Golden Path, a long-term plan to ensure the survival and evolution of humanity. Leto foresees that, without drastic intervention, humanity is doomed to extinction by stagnation, predictability, or external threats.

Through his absolute rule, Leto deliberately creates centuries of oppression, boredom, and enforced stability. He intends to prevent any single group, religion, or ideology from ever gaining unchecked power again. When he is finally assassinated, Leto's death releases humanity from his grip, triggering a period called the Scattering – a massive dispersal of humans across the universe. This event forces humanity to diversify, adapt, and become unpredictable, making it impossible for any future tyrant or catastrophic event to threaten the species as a whole.

In essence, Leto II becomes a monster so that humanity can be free, sacrificing his own humanity and enduring universal hatred to ensure a future in which freedom, diversity, and resilience are built into the very fabric of civilization.

At first glance, Leto II's reign as the Emperor-God of Dune and his imposition of the "Golden Path" might seem like the antithesis of democratic transparency and participatory governance. Leto governs through secrecy, myth, and overwhelming power, sculpting humanity's behaviour and future through millennia-long manipulation. His methods – opaque, coercive, even brutally paternalistic – are justified (in his logic) by a vision of survival: he alone sees the "extinction traps" facing humanity and believes that only a supra-human authority can steer civilization safely through the coming ages.

Yet, the paradox at the core of the Golden Path is that Leto's apparent despotism is, ultimately, an anti-despotic act: he sacrifices his own humanity and becomes the object of myth so that, after his death, no authority – religious, technological, or political – can ever again dominate the collective destiny of the species. He instils a deep, generational wariness of manipulation, a collective reflex against easy answers and charismatic saviours. The "scattering" that follows his death is both a trauma and a liberation: humanity becomes ungovernable by any single hand, as Leto intended.

Now, transpose this logic to the contemporary “swarm society.” Our legacy participatory forms – debates, assemblies, top-down campaigns – are overtaken by the velocity, fragmentation, and affective volatility of networked masses. Attempts at rational deliberation falter in the face of “attention economy” dynamics and the perception of vertical communication as paternalistic and alien. The populist and big-tech response is to use the same machinery as the Missionaria Protectiva: pervasive myth, micro-targeted influence, and opaque behavioural engineering.

Our proposal is to turn this logic inside out. Rather than conceal the architecture of influence, we make it radically transparent. The tools of digital micro-targeting – previously the preserve of Cambridge Analytica and algorithmic populists – are redeployed as open, ethical, community-serving infrastructure. Nano-bots and distributed networks do not “decide for” the citizens, but continuously signal, nudge, and inform them, always in a way that is declared, traceable, and under public scrutiny.

Where Leto II imposed a myth and secret intention, this model proposes an open “mythopoesis” in which all participants know they are inside a process of collective persuasion. The “swarm” is not herded blindly, but is made aware, even invited to critically engage with the nudges and narratives that shape its behaviour. The power of myth and the mechanisms of influence are neither suppressed nor denied; instead, they are illuminated and repurposed as instruments of collective agency and innovation.

Thus, the “Golden Path” becomes not the imposition of a hidden design, but the conscious, reflexive co-design of the collective future. The electorate, knowing it is the subject of algorithmic governance, can resist manipulation, collaborate in innovation, and become immune to new forms of autocracy precisely because it has internalized the logic of Leto’s lesson – never again surrender destiny to the shadows.

Herbert’s Emperor-God imposed a myth to save humanity from passivity and enslavement to hidden power, at the cost of freedom and transparency. Today’s proposal – algorithmic, transparent governance of the “swarm” – accepts the inevitability of influence but turns it into a participatory, self-aware process. Where Leto led humanity through darkness so that it could eventually govern itself, the new architecture aspires to build a society where collective agency, not manipulation, is the operative principle, and where everyone knows they are part of the “narrative operating system.” This is the inversion of the Golden Path: not salvation through imposed myth, but liberation through transparent, collective myth-making.

## **Horizontal transparency as collective resistance – and a return to the Internet’s original spirit**

The model of transparent, algorithmic governance we propose is not another top-down apparatus disguised in the language of openness; it is, fundamentally, a project of horizontal, participatory empowerment. In this sense, it does not reproduce the logic of paternalistic control exemplified by Leto II or the shadowy manipulations of the digital *Missionaria Protectiva*. Rather, it is analogous to the *resistance of a revolting people*: a conscious, organized refusal to be ruled by invisible powers – whether mythic, technological, or institutional. Like a society that rises up against its would-be masters, the “swarm” of citizens, equipped with radical transparency and genuine agency, transforms from a passive object of manipulation into an active, creative subject of governance.

In this model, transparency is only the first step; the real revolution is horizontality. The architecture of persuasion – algorithms, bots, and feedback loops – becomes the collective property of the community, shaped, audited, and directed by diverse, participatory bodies. Every citizen has not only the right to know how influence operates, but the power to challenge, revise, and co-create its mechanisms. This distributed ownership ensures that no new elite, algorithmic or otherwise, can consolidate power or dictate the narrative unilaterally.

This vision is not an unprecedented utopia, but a return to the *primeval will* that animated the founders of many internet revolutions. The architects of the early web – pioneers like Tim Berners-Lee, Vint Cerf, and the cypherpunks – envisioned the internet as a radically decentralized, open space where knowledge, innovation, and power would circulate horizontally. Their aim was to enable self-organization, mutual aid, and freedom from centralized control – whether by states, corporations, or hidden technocracies. The dream was always a digital common, governed by transparency, collective stewardship, and the perpetual resistance to domination.

Thus, transparent, horizontal governance is not just a form of present-day resistance: it is a recovery of the founding impulse of the internet itself. It is the revolt of a society that, fully aware of the inevitability of influence, claims for itself the right to see, question, and steer the very processes that shape its collective destiny. In this ongoing act of resistance and restoration, democracy is not defended by hiding from the power of

narrative, but by seizing it – together, and in the spirit of those who first dreamed the web.

### **Final considerations: navigating the real challenges of horizontal governance**

It must be explicitly acknowledged – however briefly – that the transition from vertical systems of power to genuinely horizontal models is neither neutral nor linear. Profound cultural, technical, economic, and psychological inertias persist, making the realization of such ideals a slow and often contested process. There remains a very real risk that the rhetoric of participation and transparency could be co-opted by the very platforms or dominant actors it seeks to displace, thus replicating old hierarchies under the guise of novelty.

At the same time, it is important to note that the “revolt” toward horizontal, participatory governance is not a mere theoretical projection but an ongoing phenomenon. Across the digital landscape, we already witness the emergence of counter-narratives and spontaneous forms of resistance – open-source communities, alternative social media platforms, decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs), whistleblowing initiatives – that collectively experiment with new models of agency, accountability, and collective ownership. These bottom-up efforts signal that the desire for distributed power and genuine participation is active and resilient, even in the face of systemic obstacles.

Nevertheless, horizontal governance is not immune to its own risks. “Participatory fatigue” and the tendency toward fragmentation are real and persistent dangers: the effectiveness of a distributed system depends on robust mechanisms for synthesis, inclusion, and the ongoing maintenance of community bonds. Without tools and cultures that foster cohesion, horizontal models can devolve into isolated micro-bubbles or paralyzing tribalism, undermining their promise of collective agency.

In short, the path toward transparent, horizontal governance must be navigated with a critical awareness of these complexities. Its realization will require not only technical and institutional innovation, but also a sustained cultural commitment to synthesis, inclusion, and vigilance against the ever-present dangers of co-optation and division.

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