

How the Russian Influence Operation on Twitter Weaponized Military Narratives

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Abstract: Since 2016, Russia has engaged in a dedicated influence operation against the United States to exacerbate existing cleavages in American society and to undermine US national security. Although distinctly modern in its use of social media platforms, the current methods align with old Soviet doctrine using information warfare to gain a strategic edge over competitors. We examine Russia's use of military-related content and profiles in their influence operation on Twitter and, in particular, the strategic deployment of military narratives. Using data from Twitter's comprehensive data archive of state-backed information operations, we find that 12.14% of the 1,408,712 tweets in English from 2009 through February 2021 contain military-related content. In addition, of the 2,370 fake accounts on Twitter tied to the IRA and GRU, 148 were from accounts posing as military or military-adjacent, and these accounts posted 12.7% of the influence operation's tweets. Together, tweets containing military-related content or coming from fake military and military-adjacent profiles account for 22.6% of the tweets identified as part of the Russian influence operation on Twitter. The Russians used narratives related to veterans, particularly sacrifice narratives and post-Vietnam government betrayal of sacrifice narratives. Patriotic sacrifice narratives were used to gather and engage an audience and to legitimize and amplify the content and accounts. In contrast, betrayal of sacrifice narratives were weaponized to amplify and escalate divisive social issues by tying them to veterans' sacrifices. We conclude the Russians amplified existing military narratives in American culture and used fake American military profiles to wrap anti-government sentiment in patriotic trappings to exacerbate existing social divisions. Turning Americans against their government achieves Russian strategic goals of removing American influence abroad and allowing Russia to have greater impact on the levers of international power that serve Russian interests.

Keywords: influence operations, Russia, information warfare, military, narrative, veterans

1. Introduction

The American military community remains one of Russia's targets for concerted influence operations. In 2019, the Vietnam Veterans of America reported that significant efforts were being made by Russian-backed social media operations to target veterans and servicemembers from all service components — active duty, National Guard, and Reserves (Goldsmith, 2019b). These operations impersonated veterans and veterans' organizations, posing as trusted sources, to encourage engagement and ultimately to perpetrate espionage and financial exploitation on unsuspecting victims. Russian-backed Facebook pages and accounts used military-related narratives to convince people of their authenticity and to draw them to their fake causes. One page, "Veterans of Vietnam," used the logo and other brand attributes of the Vietnam Veterans of America and gained credibility by "sharing information about the Vietnam War and veterans' benefits" (Goldsmith, 2019a, p. 6). At the same time, the fake accounts promoted highly divisive content, such as anti-immigrant narratives such as "vets before illegals" (Goldsmith, 2019b).

Russia's influence operation was not limited to Facebook, nor was it limited to impersonating veteran service organizations. From 2018-2020, Twitter identified over 5,000 accounts associated with Russia and the Internet Research Agency (IRA) (Twitter Transparency Center, 2020) as part of Twitter's transparency operations. This paper seeks to examine the use of military and military-adjacent content and profiles by the Russian influence operation on Twitter. In particular, we examine the military-related narratives — narratives about the military community or promoted by fake military accounts — embedded in the content of the Russian influence operation tweets. This paper contributes to knowledge about cyber security by illuminating the role of military narratives in social cyber warfare.

2. Background

Since 2016, Russia has engaged in a dedicated influence operation against the United States to sow discord and undermine Americans' trust in their institutions (Department of State, 1987; 116th Congress, 2017). Russia's current influence operations involve "information warfare, psychological operations, and deception campaigns"

(Bagge, 2019, p. 23). Russia has long recognized the value in controlling and manipulating information (Soldatov and Borogan, 2017) and it draws from deep Soviet experience with information and influence operations (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 1999; Bagge, 2019; Gioe, Lovering and Pachesny, 2020). Russia-backed active measures in cyberspace have repackaged Soviet techniques for stoking already tense social divisions. Critically, they have rarely, if ever, created new social divisions, instead exacerbating existing gaps and seams in civil society (Pomerantsev, 2019; Jankowicz, 2020). Although distinctly modern in its use of social media platforms, current methods align with Soviet doctrine using information warfare to gain a strategic edge over competitors (Soldatov and Borogan, 2017; Bagge, 2019) and to create a potent fifth column of “useful idiots” (Gioe, 2018; Michael, 2019). Repackaging Soviet disinformation tactics for the Digital Age, Russian influence operations on social media employ *maskirovka* or deception as a strategic tool to “undercut [a population’s] self-preserving mechanisms and behavior” (Bagge, 2019, p. 23). Russia seeks to gain “reflexive control” over large swaths of the American public as witting or unwitting accomplices who act in ways that benefit Russia’s strategic goals.

In this context, the specific targeting of the Vietnam Veterans of America by Russian influence operations on Facebook appears to be highly strategic. The Vietnam War represents not only an historically divisive time in American history — the 1960s — but also a highly controversial conflict that Americans widely believe they were tricked into supporting (Gibson, 1994; Huebner, 2011; Belew, 2018). Narratives of government betrayal of American veterans gained traction in the 1980s in popular culture through anti-establishment, hyper violent novels, television, and movies (Gibson, 1994). They also found expression in political rhetoric, particularly on the American Right (Reagan, 1988; Rodman, 2019) in service of a political agenda to curb government influence.

The Russian influence operation on Facebook sought to exploit and exacerbate these conflicts by emphasizing veterans as victims of government incompetence or neglect, highlighting government betrayal of military heroes. It also used veteran personas and pages to spread divisive social messages. The influence operators claimed greater legitimacy for their fake sources by masquerading as veterans. If successful, these active measures on Facebook would serve Russia’s interests by turning America against itself and undermining the ability of the United States to impact Russia’s strategic goals abroad.

In this paper we examine the extent to which the Russia may have used similar influence operation tactics on Twitter. We consider the tweets and profiles that Twitter attributed to the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and the Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye (GRU) – Russia’s military intelligence agency (Twitter Transparency Center, 2020). We hypothesize that the Russian influence operation on Twitter used military topics as a source of trust to advance and amplify divisive messages. In particular, we explore the Russians’ use of military narratives, especially narratives of sacrifice and betrayal and how they tied these powerful cultural narratives to divisive political issues.

3. The Use of Narrative in Influence Operations

Researchers investigating influence operations have used a wide range of tools and methodologies to understand how content spreads online (Ferrara et al., 2016; Starbird, 2017; Beskow, 2019; Dupuis and Williams, 2020; Goldenberg and Finkelstein, 2020). These efforts have largely focused on keywords or trending topics. Some research has begun to evaluate how social media has enabled individual storytellers to influence outcomes in specific conflicts (Singer and Brooking, 2018), but little work has focused on the weaponization of narratives.

The term “narrative” means different things in different research traditions and disciplines. Drawing from the narrative research tradition in cultural sociology, we define narratives as meaning-laden stories —whether cultural narratives or broad cultural messages, personal narratives or “scripts of self” (Lamont et al., 2017), or narratives as a discursive form of rhetoric (Polletta et al., 2011). In this formulation, narratives are inherently social activities, helping shape the boundaries of identity and also communicating moral meaning.

The meaning of a narrative is socially derived and relates both to the identity of the storyteller and form of storytelling as well as to the audience’s identity. Narrative meaning is allusive and shifts depending upon the sentiment expressed and elicited as the story is shared and the other narrative references with which it is relayed (Polletta et al., 2011; Polletta and Callahan, 2017; Dawson and Weinberg, 2020). Narratives often include or reference other stories that the audience knows to signal the moral or meaning of the story, and they are more powerful when they do so (Polletta, 2009; Polletta et al., 2011; Polletta and Callahan, 2017). Narratives also garner messaging power by striking an emotional chord with the audience. For example, nostalgia narratives often orient the audience to a glorified past or traumatic event as a means of reframing historical events and affirming social identity and group belonging (Maly, Dalmage and Michaels, 2013; Dawson and Weinberg, 2020).

Narratives thus provide a powerful basis for collective action (Ocejo, 2011) when they evoke strong emotions and feelings of identification.

In American civil religious discourse, military narratives, especially patriotic narratives of soldiers' sacrifice, are especially powerful (Marvin and Ingle, 1999; Gorski, 2017). Military narratives tap into nostalgia about national identity and patriotism (Skitka, 2005), as well as sacrifice and heroism. Core stories invoke the binary codes of civil society related to liberty and repression, sacred and profane, or good and evil (Alexander and Smith, 1993; Smith, 2010). As the heroes of these sacrifice narratives, soldiers consecrate the nation through their sacrifice of blood and service. Moreover, through honoring these patriotic American heroes and the cause of their sacrifice — the nation — the audience shares their sacred honor (Dawson and Weinberg, 2020) and affirms its own patriotism.

Following the Vietnam War, Americans sought new national narratives to make sense of the defeat and answer lingering questions about the rightness of the war. One prominent narrative, which Gibson calls the New War narrative, points to government betrayal of the good soldier by constraining military power as the proximate cause for the defeat in Vietnam and the seemingly wasted sacrifice of the American military (Gibson, 1994).

We hypothesize that, using the military as a source of sacred trust, the Russia deployed both traditional sacrifice narratives and government betrayal narratives to promote divisive messages.

4. Methods

4.1 Data and Sample

This paper uses data from Twitter's comprehensive data archive of state-backed information operations. We analyzed the 1,408,712 English tweets from 2,370 accounts in this archive, with dates ranging from 2009 through February 2021. These accounts were identified by Twitter as belonging to the IRA and GRU influence operations (Twitter Transparency Center, 2020).

To detect military content in this archive, we focused on words that would appeal to military and military-adjacent audiences; would signal membership of the user in the military community; or would highlight members of the military as heroes, villains, causes to celebrate, or victims. We created a list of common terms and phrases related to military themes, messages, and hashtags that were particularly prominent on social media. We then crowdsourced a list of military-related terms from members of the military community active on Twitter. After removing common abbreviations, such as "Col" for colonel or "Gen" for general, which frequently appear in other English words and resulted in a high false positive rate, the list contains 571 entries for identifying military content as well as six phrases, such as "New England Patriots," which appeared frequently and are not military-related. The list comprises obvious terminology, for example, "veterans," "military," "green beret" that would be recognized by a wide audience as pertaining to the military as well as terminology recognizable mainly to military insiders, for example, "gunny", "2lt", "snake eater," and names of military bases.

TextQ was used to pre-process and filter the data (Edwards *et al.*, 2021). The TextQ platform performs exploratory data analysis of social media material, emphasizing keyword search. The search is done via a two-step process, the first to eliminate potential false positives (i.e., removing tweets with the term "New England Patriots" so that those tweets would not inadvertently match on a search of "patriot"), and then a second pass to reduce the corpus to tweets that contain the desired terms. TextQ will also provide an inverted filter, which will produce a corpus containing all tweets which are not selected for comparison purposes, although that feature was not used in this analysis. When applied as a filter, our military keyword list resulted in a corpus of 318,843 tweets containing military-related keywords or phrases.

4.2 Analysis

We ranked our sample of military-labelled tweets by the number of retweets, a measure of either message resonance (McDonald, Bail and Tavory, 2017) or of message promotion and dissemination by Russian agents. We selected a sample of the 5,000 most frequently retweeted messages containing military content or tweeted from military profiles respectively (10,000 tweets total).

Focusing on text references to veterans (including derivations on the term as described below), a key indicator of military sacrifice or of government betrayal narratives, we conducted qualitative content analysis of the narratives in this subset of messages. When conducting the content analysis, we considered the target audience

for these narratives as well as the villains, threats, and causes they describe in order to determine the underlying message communicated when used separately or in combination with other narratives (Dawson and Weinberg, 2020). We then investigate how military narratives were deployed strategically to attract, hold, and direct audience attention as well as how they were weaponized against particular groups and issues (Weinberg and Dawson, 2021).

5. Results

Military-related terms occur in 12.14% of the 1,408,712 tweets in English from 2009 through February 2021. Of the 2,370 fake accounts on Twitter tied to the IRA and GRU, 148 were from accounts whose profiles contained military-related terms, and these accounts posted 12.7% of the influence operation's tweets. Together, tweets containing military and military-adjacent content or coming from fake military and military-adjacent profiles account for 22.6% of the tweets identified as part of the Russian influence operation on Twitter. Figure 1 shows the density curves for the military-related content and profile tweets compared to others over time. There were few military-related tweets from 2009 through April 2014, and then a steady rise through 2015 and 2016, at the height of the operation. In 2018, prior to the mid-term elections, there was a peak in Russia-directed tweet activity, with a proportionately larger spike in military-related tweets. There was a marked drop in tweet activity in November 2018 when Twitter published its first transparency report and deplatformed a number of suspect accounts.

Despite the depth of the list that we used for identifying military-related tweets and profiles, the most basic terms related to the military were the most prominent in the tweet texts in our sample (see Table 1). In contrast, the insider-based terms, such as those that referenced a specific unit or deployment did not appear, suggesting that while the Russians impersonated military personnel, they did not do so with any depth of military insider knowledge or insight. Variations on the word veteran were common—for example, “veterans” (3,081), “veteran” (1,348), “vets” (1,056), “deptvetaffairs” (258), “vet” (221), and “usarmyvet” (177). The term “veteran” and its variations appeared more than 6,141 times (using variations that appeared at least 100 times), making it the second most frequently used term next to “military” which appeared 8,903 times. In addition, there were multiple additional variations related to veterans, for example, “gulfwarvet123” (71), “codeofvets” (54), “brothervet” (31), “disabledvetspcsx” (30), “trump4vets” (28), “usmccmbtvvet” (20), “navyvets4trump” (14), and “avetwithptsd” (14), along with numerous other permutations that appeared less frequently.

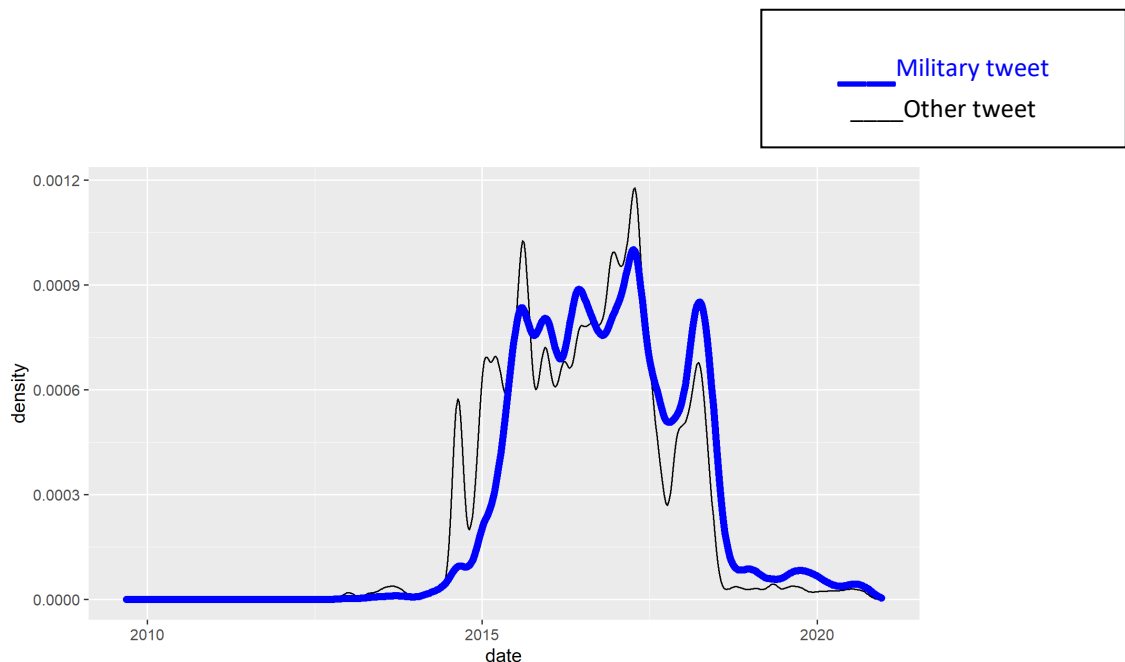


Figure 1: Density plot of military-related tweets in the Russian influence operation on Twitter, 2009-2020

Table 1: Top 5 Military Terms

Term	Number of Times Term Appears	Number of Documents Containing Term
military	8,933	8,606
army	4,812	4,727
veterans	3,081	2,990
troops	2,395	2,345
soldiers	1,996	1,962

The two most commonly identified narratives in our sample of retweeted posts were “veterans’ sacrifice” and “betrayal of that sacrifice.”

5.1 Sacrifice Narratives and Audience Gathering

The Russian tweets were consistent in their messaging about the military, emphasizing the heroic honor of soldiers and veterans, in line with the traditional military sacrifice narratives (Dawson and Weinberg, 2020), for example:

Let’s not forget that our peace and freedom are achieved by our veterans and protected by our soldiers.
<https://t.co/NBAQxk0zqA>¹

The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is whether they use human shields or make themselves human shields. #VeteransFirst <https://t.co/fhPfaLxRI>

We are eternally grateful to #Veterans. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten. Thank you!
 #BeingPatriotic <https://t.co/vV1dMUJLyq>

A significant portion of the military themed tweets served as audience building and highlighted feel-good stories about veterans that were used to elicit audience engagement in the form of likes and shares:

Marine who lost leg in Afghanistan runs Boston Marathon with American flag. Give this PROUD PATRIOT some love!

This guy was deployed in Afghanistan when he met a loving stray dog, and knew he had to find a way to get him back home. Touching. <https://t.co/XByzFPVOTT>

For the audience, liking and sharing these stories were presented as ways to show patriotism and support for American troops. Moreover, the audience was encouraged to give greater visibility to the account by retweeting its messages, thereby increasing organic reach and also building credibility and an audience for the fake accounts.

5.2 Government Betrayal Narratives and Weaponization

Many of the Russian military-content tweets informed audiences about specific veteran-related issues, including homelessness, healthcare, and PTSD and suicide. These tweets emphasized government’s failure to honor the sacrifice that these issues represent.

50,000 US #veterans are homeless. Those heroes deserve better. #BeingPatriotic #VeteransDay #patriots <https://t.co/YBEuY6A28s>

If we really want to pay tribute to our soldiers, we’d fix the military healthcare system
<https://t.co/QBzaqfnsiZ>

Focusing on the shoddy treatment and suffering of the military heroes who sacrificed for the country, these tweets draw upon post-Vietnam narratives of government betrayal.

Going a step further, the tweets used narratives of government betrayal to spotlight divisive non-military issues, contrasting worthy veterans with those perceived as “less deserving”. For example, tweets frequently

¹ We left the hyperlinks, though mostly defunct, to show where tweets referenced additional material.

contrasted narratives about the poor treatment of veterans with the services of dangerous or undeserving illegal aliens and refugees:

Only in America rapefugees receive healthcare and 'housing' while Vets can't get anything!!!
#AmericaFirst <https://t.co/II2JY7NfXO>

Our vets deserve free education not illegal aliens who hate America and just want to get everything for free! <https://t.co/8xtqyZVA2P>

In this way, these accounts gained legitimacy with their target audience by showing support for the military while simultaneously associating the military with divisive, partisan political issues.

While most of the tweets we analyzed tied support for the military to right-leaning positions, a few linked military narratives to the interests of a left-leaning audience. For example, in the most-often-retweeted post with military content, the author took aim at Trump in order to appeal to left leaning audiences:

Don't ever tell me kneeling for the flag is disrespectful to our troops when Trump calls a sitting Senator Pocahontas, in front of Native American war heroes.

The tweet invokes outrage over Trump's derogatory remarks pertaining to the scandal surrounding Senator Elizabeth Warren's Native American heritage (Kaplan, 2019) in the context of a visit honoring the Navajo Code Talkers, who were widely credited with salvaging WWII efforts by using their native language as an unbreakable encryption (Bush, 2017). Moreover, with the reference to kneeling for the flag in protest of police brutality, the tweet emphasizes a narrative of sacrifice for a nation that has not lived up to its promises. This tweet was "liked" over 150,000 times and shared more than 50,000 times.

The Russia-based operation used betrayal narratives to turn sentiment against actors and institutions identified as unpatriotic. Beyond using veterans issues as a means of signaling supporting for or denigrating presidential candidates, the operation also used betrayal narratives to target the legitimacy of the American government and institutions:

Govt has forgotten sacrifices of American heroes in #Vietnam. What could be worse for America?
#BeingPatriotic <https://t.co/YIPEilGDLi>

A LIVING NIGHTMARE! POLICE TAUNTED PARALYZED BLACK VETERAN AS HE LAY BEGGING FOR HELP
AND DYING <https://t.co/R7f5xfJGqz>

The government that doesn't respect its veterans should be overthrown! <https://t.co/yGkl3CmtqA>

The operation used government betrayal narratives to amplify negative sentiment toward various actors identified as unpatriotic and therefore illegitimate villains.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the use of military content and profiles in the Russian influence operation on Twitter. We focused on the Russia's use of military narratives related to soldiers' sacrifice for the nation and post-Vietnam narratives of government betrayal (Gibson, 1994). We analyzed the strategic deployment of narrative to increase audience engagement and manipulate response.

We find that 22.6% of the approximately 1.47 million tweets from Russian-backed Twitter accounts either came from military profiles or included military-related content. The evidence suggests that the use of military narratives and profiles was a strategic maneuver, consistent with the goal of undermining trust in institutions, interfering with elections, and fomenting greater conflict around existing schisms in American society. The Russian influence operation used sacrifice narratives to gain and engage a patriotic audience and used government betrayal of sacrifice narratives to smear a variety of political actors, escalate the urgency of various social causes, and identify enemies, including the United States government.

6.1 Limitations

One limitation to this study is the use of exploratory NLP and the possibility both of false positives and false negatives. The use of abbreviations that commonly appear in other terms required the exclusion of abbreviated titles like “COL,” “GEN,” or “MAJ”; thus, the terms used to develop our filter for identifying military tweets was limited. As a result, we may be missing tweets that referenced a specific person with a military title, but no other military terms, but we believe the impact is negligible. It is not possible to identify all false positives or account for misspellings in a large corpus; thus, we may have missed tweets (false negatives) or inadvertently kept tweets (false positives). The almost limitless variety of approaches to conveying a concept in English make it impossible to eliminate these errors on large datasets. Given the emphasis on repetition and simplicity that seem to be hallmarks of the Russian influence operation, as well as the size of the corpus, we are confident that the false positives and false negatives do not substantially change the pattern of findings.

An additional limitation of this study involves assessing the impact of the Russian influence operation on individuals. Measuring influence requires a holistic view of the overall social media ecosystem as well as an understanding of how exposure to online content contributes to individuals’ attitudes and action. Developing measures to understand the effect of trending topics or repeated narrative exposure on social segments and individuals is an important area for further research.

6.2 Implications

Through the use of military sacrifice narratives and post-Vietnam narratives of government betrayal, Russia has leveraged existing sentiment of government betrayal of the troops to help drive deeper wedges between the republic and its citizens. We conclude that Russia used military narratives and profiles to wrap anti-government sentiment in patriotic trappings. Turning Americans against their government achieves Russia’s strategic goal to remove American influence abroad, allowing Russia to have greater impact on the levers of international power that serve Russian interests.

References to military narratives provide a means of narrative inflation, increasing the persuasiveness and mobilizing capabilities of narratives that utilize them. Creating the appearance of the military’s association with divisive partisan political issues further erodes Americans’ trust of the military as apolitical, while preserving support for the military as a marker of patriotism. As such, narratives that reference the military or that appear to be told by members of the military are a potent weapon in information warfare.

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