



ASSESSING MEANING CONSTRUCTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE OF NORMALIZING MILITARISM

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is a nearly ubiquitous aspect of everyday life, with political and social implications that societies are only now starting to approach. With an estimated 3.8 billion Internet users worldwide, new media in the form of Web 2.0 applications and their user-generated content increasingly rival traditional media as the means of circulating and gathering information. Central to the power and importance of social media is its visuality and the speed with which content can circulate. Researchers and policymakers, however, have primarily focused on the political implications of social media in terms of promoting revolutionary change (e.g. the optimism around the ‘Arab Spring’), as a tool of radicalization (e.g. concerns about recruitment to terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State group) or as a resource for disseminating information and the challenges this poses to states (e.g. Wikileaks).

This Policy Brief builds on the work of the Militarization 2.0

project, a three-country team of researchers working on a four-year study of the militarization of social media. For this brief, the project examined a crucial aspect of everyday social media usage and meaning construction that is almost totally ignored by policymakers: the presence of the military and content that celebrates militarism. It demonstrates the sheer scale of such content, discusses its meaning, shows how it is engaged with and circulated by social media users and discusses the implications for citizens and government.

The conclusions are perhaps counter-intuitive. While the research identifies an extraordinary volume of social media content that celebrates war and militarism, much of which is engaged with by tens of millions of social media users, it is also fair to say that the vast majority of social media users do not see nor engage with online militarism. There is, therefore, a highly effective form of ‘targeted militarism’ through which those who heavily engage with militarized social media become ever more effectively

SUMMARY

● With an estimated 3.8 billion Internet users worldwide, new media in the form of Web 2.0 applications and its user-generated content increasingly rival traditional media as the means of circulating and gathering information. Central to the power and importance of social media is its visuality and the speed with which content can circulate. However, research and policy often focus on the politics of social media in terms of revolutionary change, as a tool of radicalization, or as a resource for disseminating information and the challenges this poses to states.

As a part of the Militarization 2.0 project, this Policy Brief examines the social media content that celebrates militarism as an important aspect of everyday social media usage and the related meaning construction overlooked by policymakers. The research results indicate that while there is an abundance of militaristic content, much of this content reaches targeted audiences.

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targeted by the algorithms within social media itself. This Policy Brief explores the implications this targeting has for policymakers.

The discussion seeks to inform policymakers and their staff, members of civil society organizations (CSOs) and others interested in assessing the political implications of meaning construction related to social media content more generally, and the content of the large-scale producers of conventional weapons (major arms producers), the military video games industry, and private military and security companies (PMSCs) in particular.

The findings are particularly important to ministries of foreign affairs and other parts of government that engage internationally or work with international politics or are concerned with digital diplomacy and other more traditional forms of security and communication. Similarly, it is vital for CSOs working on security issues or for disarmament, which face challenges from the online activities of those who oppose disarmament. Given how fundamental digital information and online communication are for communicating with and connecting people, this Policy Brief outlines how social media can be a political tool in both expected and unexpected ways. It highlights the underlying mechanisms that shape the messaging on social media—specifically in corporate YouTube videos, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and homepages—and how it is crucial at this juncture to develop the skills needed to see how these mechanisms can be manipulated to emphasize particular

understandings of national security associated with militarism.

THE COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION¹

The current global information age is soundly centred on a communications technology revolution that is redefining ‘the relationship between producers and receivers of online information’.² This relationship is a crucial aspect of how policymakers and their constituents interact. In addition, the recognition that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a central part of modern society has prompted policymakers and others to include ICTs in their long-term goals, for example through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, corporate social responsibility strategies and state-level education plans. In this context, however, there are a number of contributors that are often overlooked because they are considered to be non-political in their messaging, such as corporate actors that use social media to sell products and services to general audiences. What does it mean when corporate branding lends itself to national identity construction at the same time as it is geared to wide swathes of the public for general consumption? Crucial in the context of militarized social media is the fact that while some of the social media content is designed to sell products in the conventional sense, such as military video game

¹ The research presented here is based primarily on platforms popular in North America and Europe (YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) and posts primarily in English.

² Carpenter, C. and Drezner, D. W., ‘International relations 2.0: The implications of new media for an old profession’, *International Relations Perspective*, vol. 11 (2010), pp. 255–72.



advertisements that are designed to sell a video game or recruitment advertising for the military or a PMSC, much of it also is designed to sell national security as military security, and to promote the view that the presence of the military in everyday life is natural.

Digital information is becoming a fundamental part of the everyday lives of many people. More than 98 per cent of stored information is now in digital form. User-generated content and other Web 2.0 applications are now challenging mass media as a central way of gathering news and other information.³ The International Telecommunications Union (ITU)—the UN’s specialized agency for ICTs—issues an annual report on the state of ICTs and ICT use.⁴ According to the most recent of these reports, urban populations have more access to the Internet and younger generations are growing up with social media as an unquestioned part of their everyday lives. While many parts of Africa and South East Asia lag in comparison, 830 million, or 80 per cent of the young people in the 104 countries covered in the UN report, are online. Regardless of region, men are online more than women, and the largest gender gap is observed in the Least Developed Countries. Of the 3.8 billion Internet

users in the world, over 3 billion are on social media platforms at any given time.⁵ Combined, the three major platforms covered for this work have almost 4 billion users worldwide, which indicates multi-platform use and the potential for cross-platform networks. As of mid-2017, Facebook had 2.01 billion monthly-active users, Twitter had 328 million and YouTube had 1.5 billion logged-in visitors.⁶ Across all age groups, people average two hours a day of social media use globally; and one in every three minutes of online time is devoted to some kind of social networking or messaging.⁷

Recent research also indicates that the growing positioning of ICT companies means that online platforms and those who develop them are increasingly part of the divide that separates developers from users, and that the latter are left out of decision-making processes on what the technologies will do.⁸ Part of the

Some military video game advertisements that are designed to sell a video game or recruitment advertising for the military or a PMSC are also designed to sell national security as military security, and to promote the view that the presence of the military in everyday life is natural

³ Cukier, K. N. and Mayer-Schoenberger, V., ‘The rise of big data: how it’s changing the way we think about the world’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2013; and Ghannam, J., *Social Media in the Arab World Electronic Resource: Leading up to the Uprising of 2011* (Center for International Media Assistance and National Endowment for Democracy: Washington, DC, 2011).

⁴ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), ‘ICT facts and figures, 2017’, ICT Data and Statistics Division, Telecommunication Development Bureau, accessed 4 Sep. 2017; and ITU, *ICT Facts and Figures, 2016* (ITU: Geneva, 2016).

⁵ Kemp, S., ‘Three billion people now use social media’, *Wearesocial.com*, 10 Aug. 2017, 4 Sep. 2017.

⁶ Matney, L., ‘YouTube has 1.5 billion logged-in monthly users watching a ton of mobile videos’, *Techcrunch.com*, 4 Sep. 2017; Statista.com, ‘Number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide from first quarter 2010 to second quarter 2017 (in millions)’ 4 Sep. 2017; and Zephoria.com, ‘The top 20 valuable Facebook statistics’, updated Aug. 2017, accessed 4 Sep. 2017.

⁷ GlobalWebIndex.net, ‘GWI social: GlobalWebIndex’s quarterly report on the latest trends in social networking’, 4 Sep. 2017.

⁸ Tufekçi, Z., ‘Engineering the public: big data, surveillance and computational politics’, *First Monday*, vol. 19 (2014), 31 Aug. 2017; McCarthy, D., ‘Technology and “the international”’: or how I learned to stop



power of online platforms is derived from the lack of transparency in the platform algorithms that filter or direct how the Internet and social media are used. For example, the ‘recommendations’ suggested by various platforms, often during searches or while in the process of viewing something, build on the previous searches made by a particular viewer or from a particular ISP (Internet service provider), seeming to indicate what a user should be interested in or what could be seen as popular or trending at any given moment.

These filters can have important impacts on user behaviour because what viewers or users are exposed to online can have an impact on whether and how they participate or respond. In particular, it is important to be aware of self-censorship and echo chambers. Self-censorship occurs when individuals choose not to engage online because of the level of discomfort

or the potential to feel, or actually to be, threatened online—and at times in the physical world. Because of the level of ‘online

trolling’ and other threats to women and girls, self-censorship is a particularly gendered behaviour. In 2015, the UN Broadband Commission for the Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender reported that 73 per cent of women and girls in the world had experienced cyber-violence in some form.⁹

worrying and love determinism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 41 (2013), pp. 470–90.

⁹ United Nations, *Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake Up Call*, Report by the UN Broadband Commission

Online threat at this level influences the widespread withdrawal from contentious, but also often benign, subject areas on social media. Self-censorship also means that the algorithms that filter content have a gendered impact, not least because filtering means that lower levels of participation or responses are likely to translate into different activations of the filter choices.

As a structural feature of online communication, in particular of social media and related functionality such as posting comments on webpages, anonymity facilitates trolling and other kinds of online hate, and also radicalization. Coupled with distance—often both geographic in the physical world and in real time in the virtual world— anonymity empowers social media users to post and comment under fewer social constraints. This type of behaviour strengthens the links between the algorithms and online behaviour.

In terms of user behaviour, however, research has shown that people do not become more polarized but rather polarized people tend to rely more on the Internet for information and tend to rely on sites that confirm what they already believe—a key contributory factor to so-called echo chambers.¹⁰ These echo chambers also act as a type of filter by indicating to the algorithms what people in a given network or friend group like. Networks or groups of people then coalesce around liked-minded understandings of the information

for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender (UN Women, UNDP and UNESCO: New York, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁰ Nie, N. H et al., ‘The World Wide Web and the US political news market’, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 54 (2010), pp. 428–39.

Filters can have important impacts on user behaviour since what users are exposed to online can influence whether and how they participate or respond



they share, thereby reinforcing users' perceptions that what they are seeing is more widespread and socially acceptable than it generally is, because people often think that what they are seeing is what others are seeing and approve of too.

Living in such echo chambers can have a spiralling effect that essentially limits the types of online information to which people are exposed. Thus, seeing only what your one's network does and being exposed to like-minded comments by like-minded people reinforces existing views. Recent research also suggests that the type of device used to access online information can matter, and these differences in devices will have an impact on research findings going forward. For instance, in terms of mobile Internet use, people tend to watch more videos on tablets than on smart phones, although social media of all types are accessed more on smart phones than on tablets.¹¹ This difference in mobile access according to device type might mean that the audiences looked to for an understanding of the militarization of content are different depending on the type of access.

This polarization effect becomes important in a variety of ways that have broader implications for how the politics of social media are researched (including further studies on militarism and militarization) and how policy is formulated. These aspects are discussed below.

THE MILITARIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Social media and the three industries

It is in the context of the global information age and the revolution in communications technology that the staggering array of militarized content has grown on social media. The Militarization 2.0 project focused on the social media content of the top global arms producers, the military video games industry and PMSCs—three industries that have an official corporate social media presence (see box 1). All of the major arms-producing companies, such as Saab, BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin, have a social media presence across YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. In the popular cultural sphere, military video games such as *Call of Duty* and the Swedish developed *Battlefield* series sell many millions of copies per annum and the associated promotional videos produced for the military games analysed have been watched over 1 billion times on YouTube. In the case of PMSCs, their activity on Twitter and YouTube is integral to their recruitment objectives.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Because social media and online communications more broadly are a vital part of international relations at the everyday level and contribute to how people perceive and respond to the world around them, policymakers and CSOs need the skill sets to be able to critically assess the social media content of international relations, in particular the content produced by actors often thought to produce neutral political

¹¹ Kemp (note 5).

Box 1. Key facts about the social media presence of arms and military video games industries and private military and security companies

Arms producers

According to the most recent figures available from SIPRI, the sales of arms and military services by the SIPRI Top 100 largest arms producers and military services companies totalled \$370.7 billion in 2015.^a SIPRI's 2012 Top 100 Arms-producing and Military Services Companies were used as the basis for mapping the arms industry's social media presence. At that time, these arms producers had 88 official corporate YouTube channels; 69 on Facebook; and 75 on Twitter, not including those channels/accounts for company divisions and for individual weapon systems such as those for the F-35 and related programmes.^b

The military video games industry

Video games are the archetypal example of the digitized society. The sector is projected to grow to \$93.2 billion per annum by 2019 at an annual growth rate of 5.7 per cent.^c Women in key markets such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan now make up nearly half of all players, and players are spending ever longer hours at play.^d One of the key industry sub-sectors is that of military combat games. The *Call of Duty* series (the industry leader in sales terms) has combined sales of over 250 million copies and total revenues of over US\$ 15 billion, making it globally one of the largest popular entertainment franchises in terms of revenues generated.^e Yet the importance of military video games is also explicitly political. Highly controversially, the military is increasingly moving into video game-based recruitment, through the production of military games such as *America's Army* in the USA (2002–ongoing) and *Glorious Mission* in China (2011–ongoing), and devising recruitment campaigns based on video game-based iconography, such as the 2009 'Start Thinking Soldier' campaign in the UK.^f There are also wider concerns and military games are frequently accused of 'racial othering' and promoting 'recreational violence'.^g

Private military and security companies

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) have been defined as 'private business entities that provide military and/or security services . . . in particular, armed guarding and the protection of persons and objects, such as convoys, buildings and other places; maintenance and operation of weapons systems; prisoner detention; and advice to or training of local forces and security personnel'.^h Governments, or rather their militaries, such as US and British governments, have increasingly relied on PMSCs, particularly when engaged in missions in conflict zones, for example, in Afghanistan or Iraq. While it is quite common to define PMSCs in functional terms with respect to their services, a number of scholars have criticized this approach. They argue that focusing on functionality masks the ideational and political aspects of the work—aspects that form an increasingly important part of their commercial transactions and competition. Sharing these concerns—and based on the assumption that it is not just their often claimed efficiency and effectiveness, but rather that PMSCs themselves shape and influence how they are perceived—the project examined their social media use. In 2014, of the 584 PMSCs surveyed by the project, 252 had at least one social media account. Approximately 40 per cent were on Facebook and Twitter and over 10 per cent were on YouTube.

^a Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Global arms industry: USA remains dominant despite decline, sales rise in Western Europe and Russia, says SIPRI', Press release, 5 Dec. 2016,.

^b Militarization 2.0 Project Data on the Top 100 Arms Producers in 2012 (collected Oct. and Nov. 2014).

^c PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), 'Video games: Key insights at a glance', Global entertainment and media outlook, 2015–19, *PWC Outlook Insights*, 4 Sep. 2017.

^d Interactive Software Federation of Europe, *Video Games in Europe: Consumer Study*, European summary report (London: IPSOS Media CT, November 2012); and Entertainment Software Association, 'Essential facts about the computer and video game industry: 2017 sales, demographic and usage data', 4 Sep. 2017.

^e Activision, 'Activision Blizzard announces fourth quarter and full year 2015 financial results', Press release, 11 Feb. 2016, 4 Sep. 2017.

^f British Army, Start thinking soldier, 'Mission training: SA80 rifle'; Power, M., 'Digitized virtuosity: Video war games and post-9/11 cyber-deterrence', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2007), pp. 271–88; Chan, D., 'Dead-in-Iraq: the spatial politics of digital game art activism and in-game protest', eds N. Huntemann and M. Payne, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (Routledge: London, 2010); and Robinson, N., 'Videogames, persuasion and the war on terror: escaping or embedding the military-entertainment complex?', *Political Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2012), pp. 504–22.

^g Šisler, V., 'Digital Arabs: Representation in video games', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2008), pp. 203–20.

^h Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *The Montreux Document: On Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States Related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies During Armed Conflict* (ICRC: Geneva, Aug. 2009), 4 Sep. 2017.



messaging. Understanding the political importance of social media rests on understanding social media content, meaning construction in social media posts and comments, and how users engage with social media.

Militarized social media content

The social media content of the arms industry, the military video games industry and PMSCs represents a mix of material: the blatantly militaristic alongside more banal images and text that can in effect be more powerful than the militaristic in normalizing the military as the natural provider of state security. The research presented here focused on the content of the official corporate YouTube channels of the three industries and the Twitter content of PMSCs.

The arms producers' corporate presence on social media—especially on YouTube and the videos these corporations upload to other online platforms such as Facebook and corporate websites—is blended in an entertainment mindset that results in short films and other outputs that seek to capture the viewers' attention in much the same way as Hollywood's output. The research analysed over 200 arms-related videos, produced by both industry users and 'fans', that have been watched over 570 million times.

Using elements identified in the tropes or rhetorical devices described below, the arms industry uses combinations of images, sounds and texts to draw or build on existing stories that evoke certain understandings about security. These are often complicated

by assumptions around gender, race, class and ethnicity. Such combinations often mirror those found in the military video games industry, and the messaging from each industry supports the other. Furthermore, because the context in which the viewer receives a message matters, it is telling that arms producers' YouTube videos are often tagged as 'entertainment' or 'science', which can further obfuscate the types of meaning that are being constructed.

Military video games in popular culture were subjected to a detailed analysis. The more than 500 videos produced by the video games industry and hosted on its official YouTube channels have cumulatively been watched over 660 million times. The analysis focused on the most popular military video games, such as those in the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series. A qualitatively informed coding process was used that explicitly set out to capture what is seen in these videos. The variables focused on: spatial geography (e.g. urban and rural spaces, deserts and jungles); indicators of gender (e.g. male and female combatants and civilians); the type of military equipment represented (e.g. drones, tanks or aircraft); how violence is depicted (e.g. terrorism, violence against civilians); and, which countries were depicted in the conflict. This allowed reflection on the 'militarization tropes' of a 'clean war', 'supporting the troops', 'technofetishism' and 'good, natural

Many of the social media messages related to the arms and video games industries are frequently part of a complex branding process that is connected to a form of state branding



and necessary', which are set out below.¹²

In the case of the PMSCs, YouTube videos often are addressed to veterans for recruitment purposes, but so are Twitter messages. The PMSCs claim to understand veterans and promise them jobs that allow them to apply their unique expertise but that are also sensitive to their specific needs. Companies also convey the message that veterans are irreplaceable and essential to enabling PMSCs to do their work properly—they help them to support their mission of defending the state in a similar vein to the supporting the troops trope found in the arms producers' and military video games industry's corporate videos.

In addition to being a business asset, much in the same way as the arms producers often showcase veterans in their workforces, veterans are a means for PMSCs to assert their superiority as security actors. In contrast to states, which often are accused of abandoning those who have fought for them, PMSCs pride themselves in compensating for veterans' disabilities while at the same time restoring their manhood and integrating them into society as civilians. Further, the competition with states' militaries in the case of recruitment is apparent in the PMSCs' Twitter recruitment messages, in which companies brand themselves in an ambivalent

way and like the military as 'enterprising soldiers'.¹³

Meaning construction

Social media content is composed of combinations of images, sounds and/or texts that come together in meaningful ways. The messages of the social media covered in this Policy Brief are most often part of a complex branding process that is usually thought of in terms of public relations and can be considered a form of state branding, especially for the arms and video games industries. Intertextuality is a fundamental aspect of analysing meaning construction on social media. This means that what is seen, heard and read have meanings for people because of how images, sounds and texts overlap with one another. Texts, broadly speaking, are not independent and only take on meaning because other texts exist. In addition, the power of social media is that much of it is about images—whether moving or still. In part because of social media and the amount of time spent on it, more and more of everyday life contains visual elements.

Images are a specific kind of text that, because of their nature, make meaning construction more complicated. They strike in the viewer a sense of immediacy of response, are easily circulated and are often ambiguous in their intended meaning.¹⁴ In videos in particular, images are coupled with

¹² Robinson, N., 'Militarism and opposition in the living room: the case of military videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2016), pp. 255–75; and Robinson, N. and Schulzke, M., 'Visualising war? Towards a visual analysis of videogames and social media', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2016), pp. 995–1010.

¹³ Strand, S. and Berndtsson, J., 'Recruiting the "enterprising soldier": Military recruitment discourses in Sweden and the United Kingdom', *Critical Military Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2015), pp. 233–48.

¹⁴ Hansen, L., 'Theorizing the image for security studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad cartoons', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 17 (2011), pp. 51–74.



sounds that further convey meaning by aiming to influence, among other things, whether users feel that a message is authentic. Because these industry actors often are considered authorities on representing conflict and security, and their messaging is linked to official discourses on what national security means, how viewers construct meaning from their social media messaging can reinforce the idea that a strong state using military methods is the natural security provider. Thus, the underlying mechanisms that influence meaning construction in these messages can be used both consciously and unconsciously in part to evoke emotions tied to identifying national security as military security.¹⁵

In the case of the videos promoting video games, there are two key trends. First, there is the search for authenticity, which is normally invoked by videos that promote a game through the use of ‘real actors’ or ‘veterans’ who are legitimized as ‘advisers’ to the developers. That said, there is also a very strong entertainment strand within video games videos, which also can be found in a great many of the military equipment videos. Here, infographics, rapid images, bombastic music and so on are combined in visually and sonically arresting short videos that emphasize excitement and exhilaration. There is thus an important secondary type of intertextual synergy between the respective industries, in which authenticity is suppressed for excitement.

Systematic examination of online content—including of institutional posts by corporations and user-generated content as either a (re)post or a comment—makes it possible to identify the mechanisms that support intended and unintended meaning constructions. Corporate advertising and branding are typical uses of online communication and social media—particularly corporate presence on social media—that lend themselves to political messaging that can be disentangled from traditional notions of advertising. User reposts of and comments on this messaging can contribute to meaning construction.

PMSCs usually are viewed as either service providers or mercenaries. The research shows that they are also political actors; they make use of their discursive power to shape how they are perceived, increase their sales and establish themselves as acceptable and superior security actors. Like a chameleon, and depending on their clients’ needs, they assume the identity of a generic business, a military actor or a humanitarian actor.

PMSCs use social media to shape their image, but in somewhat different ways than more conventional businesses: they ‘hide in plain sight’. While posting very little about themselves, companies frequently join in viral debates posting positive content to distract from the security matters they are concerned with, such as when they post news related to charitable activities. PMSCs are not just a service provider for the military; they are increasingly competing with it for recruits, using Twitter as

PMSCs use social media to both shape their image and ‘hide in plain sight’

¹⁵ Jackson, S. T., “‘Selling’ national security: Saab, YouTube and the militarized neutrality of Swedish citizen identity”, *Critical Military Studies* (Forthcoming).



hides the industry's contribution to war. Advertisements for video games similarly emphasize clean war with an absence of collateral damage and civilian casualties.

The 'technofetishism' trope is when weapons are presented in a way that glorifies the technological aspects of war, based on the assumption that technology is desirable in and of itself, and consequently obfuscates the effects of using the weapons. The arms and video games industries rely on technofetishism as a way to make the equipment they showcase interesting to the layperson while hiding behind the technical aspects of the weapon as a deflection, for example when referencing forward-looking infrared (FLIR) technology but not the implications of using it.¹⁸ When a YouTube video refers to a weapon by name, most social media users are unlikely to know what it is or what it does.

As with technofetishism, the 'support the troops' trope arises when discussion of a war is removed from those who made the decision to go to war to the people who are fighting it 'on your side', which makes questioning the legitimacy of that war difficult. The support the troops trope manifests itself in references to soldiers on the battlefield as 'people in harm's way' or in a 'danger zone', so that questioning the war becomes a questioning of something or somebody else. In this way, the troops are treated more as victims of the war than as having chosen to embroil themselves in a conflict. This trope is further emphasized in military video games by framing most of the games around the

USA, which is typically attacked or invaded by an enemy, making a military response essential and morally unproblematic.

The 'good, natural and necessary' trope—either singularly or together—arises when the military is presented in a way that makes it unquestionably something good for the public, and natural and/or necessary for providing security for the state. One way in which companies use this trope is to construct an 'Us' who belongs and is protected and two kinds of 'Them': those who cannot protect themselves so 'we' should; and those from whom 'we' and the weak must be protected. The military—and the companies' weapons—are painted as good, natural and necessary ways to achieve this protection.

The research related to PMSCs in this project also addressed the normalization of military values in everyday life. PMSCs take on multiple identities (military, business and humanitarian) in an eclectic way with which their clients can identify and with the help of which they establish themselves as acceptable, legitimate and normal security actors.¹⁹ In addition, corporate videos and branding on the Internet

Tropes in social media messaging are combined to convey the acceptance of military security as natural or 'common sense'

¹⁹ Joachim, J. and Schneiker, A., *Private Security and Identity Politics: Ethical Hero Warriors, Professional Managers and New Humanitarians* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming); Joachim, J. and Schneiker, A., 'All for one and one in all: PMSCs as soldiers, business managers and humanitarians', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2014), pp. 246–67; and Joachim, J. and Schneiker, A., 'Private Sicherheits- und Militärfirmen: ein Chamäleon der Internationalen Politik' [Private security and military companies: a chameleon of international politics], *Zeitschrift*

¹⁸ Forward-looking infrared is a type of thermal imaging that enables people to 'see' at night.

**Table 1.** Overview of engagement with militaristic social media content

Type of content	Total number of videos ^a	Total number of views	Total number of comments
Video game trailers	583	1 654 807 787	4 617 992
Video game walkthroughs ^b	155	134 584 741	377 398
Video game reviews	37	26 857 482	167 002
Video game fan material	56	183 371 498	307 350
Subtotal video game	831	1 999 621 508	5 469 742
Mainstream pop videos	19	1 854 404 185	848 387
Military music memes	20	9 260 005	90 074
Subtotal music	39	1 863 664 190	938 461
Industry videos	157	218 042 333	158 882
Industry fan videos	57	354 866 904	182 108
Subtotal military industry	214	572 909 237	340 990
Total all categories	1 084	4 436 194 935	6 749 193

^a Views of and comments on 1,084 YouTube videos of military video games, rock and pop music, and the arms industry.

^b A video game walkthrough is video that is recorded by a player of a game in which the person plays through the game with the specific aim of demonstrating how to complete it. The walkthroughs in this dataset are complete walkthroughs which are subdivided into multiple videos (typically 15–20 per game). In total, the dataset contains walkthroughs for a total of 3 mainstream military shooters (*Battlefield 1*, *Call of Duty Advanced Warfare*, *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3*), and 5 other video games in which militarism is engaged with, albeit sometimes in a critical way. Where possible the walkthroughs were all taken from the channel of the Rad Brad <<https://www.youtube.com/user/theRadBrad>>, one of the most popular walkthrough people on YouTube with 7.7 million subscribers and 2.9 billion views.

Source: Militarization 2.0 military video games industry database.

can be embedded in news articles, adding a certain kind of authenticity or legitimacy to the corporate messaging by framing the branding as news and therefore more likely to be a credible—rather than corporate biased—representation. For instance, these kinds of situations arise when news outlets post stories about weapon systems and corresponding videos of journalists flying in combat aircraft trainers in much the same way as one might test-drive a car—a kind of human-

interest news story rather than one about a weapon. The language in these kinds of stories tends to centre on the entertainment value of the experience for the journalist and to obfuscate the fighting purpose of the aircraft behind its technical aspects. In addition, arms industry communications personnel claim that their YouTube videos are aimed at those in government who will make decisions on weapons funding and purchases, as well as at the broader communities in which the weapons systems are built. This makes questioning policy decisions on weapons procurement more difficult because of the common sense notions on which the meaning construction relies.²⁰

Similarly, in the case of popular culture and in particular video games, complex geopolitical social problems such as humanitarian catastrophe are always ‘solved’ militarily—there is no place for diplomacy or negotiation in such games. Cumulatively, militarized social media serves to make the presence of the military, war and war fighting seem ubiquitous and ‘normal’.

Analysis: militarized social media engagement

The research analysed approximately 7 million YouTube comments made by social media users on a combination of video games and pop videos with a military theme, as well as military equipment videos, both official industry videos and those produced by military enthusiasts (see table 1). The research sought to track and map *what* people are saying in their social media



comments and to explore whether what is said is similar or different if they are commenting on a video game advertisement or a military equipment video. At the time of writing, the results are preliminary but strong trends have been identified for explicit endorsements of technologically superior weaponry. This shows that the clean war and technofetishism tropes are being reaffirmed by social media users. Importantly, there are also frequent examples of conversations on social media in which posters ascribe credibility to themselves by identifying as soldiers or former soldiers, which gives them authority to comment on the authenticity of a video game or a video's content. This affirms the importance of the support the troops trope, as responses that fail to value such comments are frequently 'dealt with' in a very aggressive manner. Finally, there are important inter-textual comments in a significant minority of cases in which comments on military equipment videos will, for example, mention that the writer has used the equipment in a military video game.

Preliminary research on mapping social networks across Facebook and the sharing of militarized content from arms producers suggests that arms producers' 'Facebook friends' are a fairly isolated group of users. The network of shared information from official corporate pages to other, non-militarized locations on Facebook seems to be unstructured and inefficient in terms of how broadly this information is shared. The networks through which the information is shared are more like 'fan clubs' than a targeted spread of militarized messaging. In

addition, from the sample selected for the network analysis, media outlets seemed to be the biggest content providers in sharing militarized messaging about arms production, thus dominating any mainstream conversation about arms production. These initial findings suggest that social media users who share arms industry Facebook posts directly from arms producers remain in fragmented groups, which supports the polarization claims made elsewhere, and the theories on how echo chambers work. This Facebook research is a work in progress and will be continued beyond the Militarization 2.0 project to include the remediation of corporate posts that are hosted by and shared through fan or enthusiast channels, as these channels often have a wider viewership and larger comments sections.

Tweets and YouTube videos from PMSCs were collected and analysed to examine how these companies conceive of themselves and construct their identities. A focus on the identities of the PMSCs rather than the services they offer sheds light on the discursive power of companies, through which they position themselves in an increasingly competitive market by telling their clients who they are, which group or groups they belong to and what makes them distinctive. Identities also can mean influence: through them, actors can shape how they are perceived by other actors, reinforce and reproduce the meaning of the particular identities they appropriate, or even completely change how they are constituted.

Cumulatively, militarized social media serves to make the presence of the military, war and war fighting seem ubiquitous and 'normal'



From a gender perspective, PMSCs draw on civilized and accepted forms of masculinity and femininity, presenting themselves as ‘highly skilled professional’ military strategists and ordinary businesses akin to banks or insurance companies. However, PMSCs also engage in strategies of (hyper)masculinization and pathologization to set themselves apart from mercenaries, their private sector competitors and state security forces. In this respect, companies appear to view themselves as ‘ethical hero warriors’ and claim to differ from their predecessors and black sheep in the industry on the grounds that they are not only committed to ethical and moral conduct, but also truly concerned about peace and order around the globe.

The consequences of militarized social media

In addition, there are a number of structural issues regarding social media and the meaning construction that centres on common sense assumptions about military security. As noted above, the algorithms behind the social media platforms can lead to an echo chamber effect in which like-minded people gather together, causing divisions in the virtual world. These echo chambers might mean that only those who are predisposed to the pro-militarism messaging are likely to be exposed to it.²¹ Algorithms can contribute to this exposure by continuing to recommend content that is

similar to that already viewed, compounding the echo chamber effect.

In order to understand how militarized social media are experienced by social media users, and the importance of this echo chamber effect, a number of focus groups were conducted with social media users. The findings were perhaps counter-intuitive. Many of the respondents reported little or no experience of militaristic social media. There are three competing explanations for this: a failure to recall, algorithms within social media that filter what is seen, and self-regulation of social media content. While, on the surface, the capacity of the respondents to avoid militaristic social media may provide some comfort to those concerned about technological determinism and the vulnerability of the public to militarization, this leads to a deeper cause for concern. While the majority do not experience militarism in this sphere, the algorithms within social media and social media practice suggest more effective targeting of those predisposed to militaristic content and perhaps most susceptible to pro-military messages. User exposure and reaction will be examined further following the Militarization 2.0 project to explore whether different segments of the online population—such as members of the military, arms producers’ employees, gamers and others—experience higher levels of militaristic content due to—or perhaps in spite of—the algorithms.

Understanding the power of algorithms is fundamental to understanding social media and online behaviour. It requires additional attention from academic,

²¹ Pears, L. and Robinson, N., ‘Seeing not seeing: the lived experiences of militarization of/on social media’, Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Baltimore, USA, 22–25 Feb. 2017.



technology and policy circles, ideally through people from each of these fields working together to untangle the very real effects that the backend of technology has on social and political lives. This research on algorithms shows that while militarism might be widely circulating in more isolated corners of the Internet, there are potentially militarizing effects on social media users that could have implications for how extremism-promoting online materials are studied and treated elsewhere. Algorithms are an important structural component of ‘targeted militarism’, not least if society is concerned about the potential for radicalization of social media users by material posted for recruitment reasons. The militarism research indicates that a broader view of what might qualify as radicalizing material is required, which covers both who it is aimed at and who is providing it. The current preoccupation with radicalization by terrorist organizations when reconsidered as a question of recruitment by all violent social actors suggests the need to think seriously about the overlap between how the role of social media in military recruitment and recruitment to extremist and terrorist organizations is understood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policymakers and their staff, members of CSOs and others who engage with the public need training on critical assessment of social media.

The research shows that people and agencies that engage with the public need to gain the skills necessary to understand visual social media and to identify the key tropes in

the social media messaging used by a variety of actors. These skills include the ability to identify how social media messages often are inserted into non-military spaces and people’s everyday lives, and therefore have the potential to normalize military security as the common sense default security. The Militarization 2.0 project is developing a short course on learning how to dissect social media content. This course is geared to policymakers and members of CSOs to enable them to understand the messaging in the social media content discussed here.

2. Diversification of staff skill sets can facilitate integration of critical assessments of social media content into international relations work.

Social media messaging and related online behaviour are challenging what is known about how people communicate. The interactive structure of social media and the algorithms that prompt some kinds of behaviour mean that a variety of people are needed to work together to understand what is happening on social media. This challenge means that communications and analysis staff need to be interdisciplinary and from a variety of backgrounds. Government agencies and CSOs need to bring in staff with backgrounds in critical media studies and political communication alongside experts in technology use rather than assuming that organizational communication and analysis should be conducted only by those people who are trained in public relations and communications, or marketing and branding. It is also important to work with academics who specialize in related fields.

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3. These staff should grow social media interaction beyond traditional communications to be able to critically analyse what is happening in everyday social media communication beyond the institutional channels.

Research findings on polarization suggest that policymakers and members of CSOs should look beyond their established networks to understand online behaviour. In addition to the militaristic material covered in the research, behaviour around other types of online content would be better understood if analysis included ways of targeting how algorithms contribute to echo chambers and the potential effects of targeted messaging.

4. National debates on whether militarized social media content should be more effectively restricted for minors.

Given that so much Internet use is by minors, and given the ubiquitous growth of mobile social media usage by this age group, there are important ethical and normative questions to be posed about the responsibility of the state, arms and entertainment industries, and how

they target militarism to vulnerable age groups. At present, much of the concern in the 'West' has centred on how to restrict access to content that might contribute to 'radicalization' and attract vulnerable people to pro-terrorist messaging. The conclusions of this research, however, suggest the need for a broader public debate about the ways in which content that promotes militarism also should be considered harmful. The targeted militarism found suggests that audience demographics are central to an understanding of who receives cross-platform messaging and whether young people's online activities need closer monitoring.

5. Better understanding is needed regarding the ways in which algorithms are used in social media to effectively target specific audiences for social media content.

Algorithms drive targeted messaging. Policymakers, members of CSOs and academics need a fuller grasp of how algorithms work and their political implications. Policymakers must consider whether militarized social media should be seen in equivalent terms as 'radicalized social media content'.