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Online military influencers in a social media age

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The invention of social media is one of the most significant technological developments of the last decades. It has transformed the way our society works by facilitating methods of communication that allow broader participation in public debate. This has given rise to the phenomenon of online influencers who establish themselves as authoritative voices within a specific field outside of existing media structures or traditional societal institutions.

This development is also visible in the media ecology covering military operations, and it forces military organizations to change their approach to public relations. Indeed, to some extent, military organizations must embrace social media themselves and mimic the behavior of social media influencers to get their message across in a fierce competition for public attention.

The paper explores the phenomenon of 'military influencers' through a mapping of the different types of social media accounts that have gained influence during the war in Ukraine. The starting point is an analysis of the references from the daily reports from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), which has become one of the most quoted sources in mainstream reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Being referenced by ISW is, therefore, a good indicator that a particular online voice has an impact on public discourse. ISW has referenced many thousands of sources, most of which come from different social media platforms. Digital methods are leveraged in the study to categorize these sources based on military affiliation, level of independence, nationality, social media platform, etc.

The paper gives a unique overview of the different types of military influencers using data from an ongoing war. In doing so, the study adds to our understanding of the impact of social media on military organizations and provides insights of value to practitioners engaged in military cyber and media operations.

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

Digital methods, military leadership, media studies

If you are submitting an Open Panel proposal, have you included all four abstracts in attachment?

No, I am submitting a Closed Panel abstract

Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?

Yes

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