

< TWITTER FILES >

#8 HOW TWITTER QUIETLY AIDED THE PENTAGON'S COVERT ONLINE PSYOP

1. TWITTER FILES PART 8

@UNGATHEGREAT

How Twitter Quietly Aided the Pentagon's Covert Online PsyOp Campaign

Despite promises to shut down covert state-run propaganda networks, Twitter docs show that the social media giant directly assisted the U.S. military's influence operations.

2. Twitter has claimed for years that they make concerted efforts to detect & thwart gov-backed platform manipulation. Here is Twitter testifying to Congress about its pledge to rapidly identify and shut down all state-backed covert information operations & deceptive propaganda.

C. State-Backed Information Operations

Combatting attempts to interfere in conversations on Twitter remains a top priority for the company, and we continue to invest heavily in our detection, disruption, and transparency efforts related to state-backed information operations. Our goal is to remove bad faith actors and to advance public understanding of these critical topics.

Twitter defines state-backed information operations as coordinated platform manipulation efforts that can be attributed with a high degree of confidence to state-affiliated actors. State-backed information operations are typically associated with misleading, deceptive, and spammy behavior. These behaviors differentiate coordinated manipulative behavior from legitimate speech on behalf of individuals and political parties.

Whenever we identify inauthentic activity on Twitter that meets our definition of an information operation, and which we are able to confidently attribute to actors associated with a government, we share comprehensive data about this activity.

3. But behind the scenes, Twitter gave approval & special protection to the U.S. military's online psychological influence ops. Despite knowledge that Pentagon propaganda accounts used covert identities, Twitter did not suspend many for around 2 years or more. Some remain active.

4. In 2017, a U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) official sent Twitter a list of 52 Arab language accounts "we use to amplify certain messages." The official asked for priority service for six accounts, verification for one & "whitelist" abilities for the others.

----- Forwarded message -----
From: Kahler, Nathaniel B CTR CENTCOM CGJ3 (US) @mail.mil-
Date: Wed, Jul 26, 2017 at 1:39 PM
Subject: RE: [Non-DoD Source] Re: Twitter at SOCOM
To: twitter.com>

Thanks sure is tough to do web ops when you can't Tweet!

I've attached a list; the first 6 on the list are our priority accounts. Ideally, we could have them verified (blue check mark) and "whitelisted" (if there is such a thing?) – one of them, @yemencurrent, is currently not indexing. @Justice_AR currently has a request in for Verification but haven't heard anything.

The rest are accounts we use to amplify certain messages – ideally, they could be "whitelisted" as well. Again, if it's too big an ask, the first 6 are the priority. If you need any sort of paperwork or verification from our office or SOCOM, please just let me know.

Also, our SOCOM guys mentioned that they'd love to be able to come and meet up for a face-to-face to talk if you think the right Twitter folks would be in for it?

5. The same day CENTCOM sent the list, Twitter officials used a tool to grant a special "whitelist" tag that essentially provides verification status to the accounts w/o the blue check, meaning they are exempt from spam/abuse flags, more visible/likely to trend on hashtags.

6. The CENTCOM accounts on the list tweeted frequently about U.S. military priorities in the Middle East, including promoting anti-Iran messages, promotion of the Saudi Arabia-U.S. backed war in Yemen, and "accurate" U.S. drone strikes that claimed to only hit terrorists.

7. CENTCOM then shifted strategies & deleted disclosures of ties to the Twitter accounts. The bios of the accounts changed to seemingly organic profiles. One bio read: "Euphrates pulse." Another used an apparent deep fake profile pic & claimed to be a source of Iraqi opinion.

8. One Twitter official who spoke to me said he feels deceived by the covert shift. Still, many emails from throughout 2020 show that high-level Twitter executives were well aware of DoD's vast network of fake accounts & covert propaganda and did not suspend the accounts.

9. For example, Twitter lawyer Jim Baker mused in a July 2020 email, about an upcoming DoD meeting, that the Pentagon used "poor tradecraft" in setting up its network, and were seeking strategies for not exposing the accounts that are "to each other or to DoD or the USG."

10. Stacia Cardille, another Twitter attorney, replied that the Pentagon wanted a SCIF & may want to retroactively classify its social media activities "to obfuscate their activity in this space, and that this may represent an overclassification to avoid embarrassment."

Stacia Cardille July 8, 2020 at 11:30 AM
 Re: PRIVILEGED & CONFIDENTIAL - DOD next steps
 To: Angela Sherrer, Jim Baker

Jim, Angela and I discussed attendance at this classified briefing. I heard from Facebook that they are securing SCIFs in DC and San Francisco for a meeting, possibly on Friday. I have some significant concerns that the motivations for classifications are slightly different than the ones you outlined in the email below. I think it is possible DOD is using retroactive classification to obfuscate their activity in this space, and that this may represent an overclassification to avoid embarrassment.

Angela and I think you would be more effective in this meeting than me, as the officials will view you more seriously.

Thoughts on this?

(Separate and apart from the merits, I have some concerns with attending due to Covid exposure and my two immune-compromised family members.)

11. In several other 2020 emails, high-level Twitter executives/lawyers discussed the covert network and even recirculated the 2017 list from CENTCOM and shared another list of 157 undisclosed Pentagon accounts, again mostly focused on Middle East military issues.

12. In a May 2020 email, Twitter's Lisa Roman emailed the DoD w/two lists. One list was accounts "previously provided to us" & another list Twitter detected. The accounts tweeted in Russian & Arabic on US military issues in Syria/ISIS & many also did not disclose Pentagon ties.

Lisa Roman May 14, 2020 at 12:07 PM
 Transmission S TWITTER ACCOUNT INFORMATION
 To: William S SES OSD OGC (USA), Bcc: twitter.com

Bill,

Thank you again for your time yesterday. As discussed, attached is a spreadsheet with the accounts we described on our call. The first tab lists those accounts previously provided to us and the second, associated accounts that Twitter has discovered. Please note that the second tab is not intended to be an exhaustive list and if DOD is aware of additional associated accounts which may violate our Rules, those should be included in the scope of our request.

I would be grateful if you would confirm receipt and that you are able to access this spreadsheet without issue. Please let me know if you have any questions regarding this information.

Best,
 Lisa

13. Many of these secretive U.S. military propaganda accounts, despite detection by Twitter as late as 2020 (but potentially earlier) continued tweeting through this year, some not suspended until May 2022 or later, according to records I reviewed.

14. In August 2022, a Stanford Internet Observatory report exposed a U.S. military covert propaganda network on Facebook, Telegram, Twitter & other apps using fake news portals and deep fake images and memes against U.S. foreign adversaries. public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphi...

15. The U.S. propaganda network relentlessly pushed narratives against Russia, China, and other foreign countries. They accused Iran of "threatening Iraq's water security and flooding the country with crystal meth," and of harvesting the organs of Afghan refugees.

16. The Stanford report did not identify all of the accounts in the network but one they did name was the exact same Twitter account CENTCOM asked for whitelist privileges in its 2017 email. I verified via Twitter's internal tools. The account used an AI-created deep fake image.

Figure 46: The profile picture used by the Facebook page Discoverer and two other assets in the Middle East group. Issues with the left ear and the central alignment of the eyes suggest it was generated using artificial intelligence techniques.

Figure 47: Left: Archived version of the Discoverer Twitter account with an Arabic-language bio claiming an affiliation with CENTCOM. Right: The same account shortly before it was suspended by Twitter.

17. In subsequent reporting, Twitter was cast as an unbiased hero for removing "a network of fake user accounts promoting pro-Western policy positions." Media covering the story described Twitter as evenly applying its policies & proactive in suspending the DoD network.

18. The reality is much more murky. Twitter actively assisted CENTCOM's network going back to 2017 and as late as 2020 knew these accounts were designed to deceive to manipulate the discourse, a violation of Twitter's policies & promises. They waited years to suspend.

19. Twitter's comms team was closely in touch with reporters, working to minimize Twitter's role. When the WashPost reported on the scandal, Twitter officials congratulated each other because the story didn't mention any Twitter employees & focused largely on the Pentagon.

20. The conduct with the U.S. military's covert network stands in stark contrast with how Twitter has boasted about rapidly identifying and taking down covert accounts tied to state-backed influence operations, including Thailand, Russia, Venezuela, and others since 2016.

21. Here is my reported piece w/more detail. I was given access to Twitter for a few days. I signed/agreed to nothing, Twitter had no input into anything I did or wrote. The searches were carried out by a Twitter attorney, so what I saw could be limited.

Twitter Aided the Pentagon in Its Covert Online Propaganda Campaign
 Internal documents show Twitter whitelisted CENTCOM accounts that were then used to run its online influence campaign abroad.
<https://theintercept.com/2022/12/20/twitter-dod-us-military-accounts/>

If you want details about how I go about my reporting, a little more about myself, and further documentation & discussion, I just started a Substack. Sign up here:

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<https://leefang.substack.com/p/creating-a-substack>