Pentagon's secret social media influencing campaign exposed

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The *Washington Post* reported on Monday that the Pentagon has ordered a "sweeping audit of how it conducts clandestine information warfare," after news broke that Facebook parent Meta and Twitter had removed numerous fake accounts that were run by the US military.

The *Post* report said that Colin Kahl, the undersecretary of defense for policy, had instructed "the military commands that engage in psychological operations online" to provide an accounting of their activities after the White House and federal agencies "expressed mounting concerns over the Defense Department's attempted manipulation of audiences overseas."

After the internet research companies Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) published a detailed report on September 24 about more than 150 bogus personas and media sites created in the US that had been taken down by the social media platforms, the *Post* published details showing that some of these accounts were connected to US Central Command (Centcom).

The *Post* report, which is based on interviews with "several defense and administration officials familiar with the matter" who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the social media accounts were shut down "within the past two to three years."

Some of the accounts were recent and involved "posts from the summer that advanced anti-Russia narratives citing the Kremlin's 'imperialist' war in Ukraine and warning of the conflict's direct impact on Central Asian countries."

When asked about the report, a representative of Centcom—headquartered in Tampa and overseeing the operations of the US military in 21 countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Central and South Asia—declined to comment.

Air Force Brigadier General Patrick Ryder, who is the Pentagon press secretary, did not confirm or deny the *Post* report and said the military's information operations "support our national security priorities" and are compliant with US laws and regulations. "We are committed to enforcing those safeguards," Ryder said.

A review of the Graphika and SIO report entitled "Unheard Voices: evaluating five years of pro-Western covert influence campaigns" shows that a series of interconnected accounts on eight different social media platforms used "deceptive tactics to promote pro-Western narratives in the Middle East and Central Asia."

The report's executive summary says the propaganda campaigns "consistently advanced narratives promoting the interests of the United States and its allies while opposing countries including Russia, China, and Iran."

In particular, the accounts mounted a campaign that criticized Russia "for the deaths of innocent civilians and other atrocities its soldiers committed in pursuit of the Kremlin's 'imperial ambitions' following its invasion of Ukraine in February this year." To promote the pro-US narrative, the social media accounts shared news articles from US government-funded media sources, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, and linked to websites run by the US military.

Although the social media companies did not attribute the propaganda activity known as online influence operations (IO) to any specific organization or entity, Twitter listed the "presumptive countries of origin" as the US and Britain, while Meta said the "country of origin" was the US.

Twitter provided a data set to Graphika and ISO that included 299,556 tweets from 146 accounts between March 2012 and February 2022. The Graphika/ISO

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analysis said that the tweets were broken down into two different sets: One was an overt US government campaign called the Trans-Regional Web Initiative, and the second was a “series of covert campaigns of unclear origin.”

The covert campaigns were also represented in the Meta dataset by “39 Facebook profiles, 16 pages, two groups, and 26 Instagram accounts” that were active between 2017 and July 2022.

The report further states that the assets identified by Twitter and Meta “created fake personas with GAN-generated faces, posed as independent media outlets, leveraged memes and short-form videos, attempted to start hashtag campaigns, and launched online petitions: all tactics observed in past operations by other actors.”

The dates and details of the activities of the fake social media accounts run by the US military-intelligence are significant. On the one hand, the recent anti-Russian propaganda specifically cited “Russia’s ‘imperialist wars’ in Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa,” promoted “pro-Ukrainian protests in Central Asian countries” and focused on claims of evidence of “atrocities committed by Russian troops” in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, since the fake accounts go back to 2012, it is evident that these US military-sponsored influence operations were ongoing during the year-and-a half-Mueller probe into purported but never proven “Russian interference” in the 2016 US presidential election that resulted in an Electoral College victory for Republican Donald Trump against Democrat Hillary Clinton, who won the popular vote.

As analyzed by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time, the empowering of Special Counsel Robert Mueller to investigate claims of “Russia collusion” by Donald Trump in the 2016 election campaign was rooted in the political warfare raging within the American ruling establishment over foreign policy priorities.

The fact that unidentified Defense and White House officials are now disclosing to the press that the Pentagon is and has been operating the very same kind of social media disinformation campaigns that the Democrats and Republicans along with the corporate media have accused Russia of conducting for years indicates that sharp conflicts continue to rage within the American military-intelligence establishment.

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