

The Militarization of Social Media Platforms

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This paper is part of [Consuming War](#), a cultural analysis series.

Takeaways:

- The United States military has long sought to control land, air, sea, and space, and it now competes to influence public opinion through social media platforms owned by tech giants like Google and Meta, shaping public narratives about wars from Ukraine to Palestine to Sudan.
- By embedding itself in the daily digital lives of billions through social media platforms from YouTube to Instagram, the military bypasses traditional media gatekeepers, turning its manufacture of public consent for war into an interactive military-to-civilian affair.
- As of July 2025, the U.S. Army has 12.9 million followers on four platforms (Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube).
- In 2023, the Army spent \$117 million reviving its iconic “Be All You Can Be” recruitment campaign for social media platforms. By 2024, the Army had exceeded its recruiting target, enlisting 55,300 new soldiers.
- The U.S. military also uses social media to wage cyberwarfare, including psychological operations. By law these covert operations cannot target U.S. citizens, however, given the borderless nature of social media, they have surely reached and influenced people both in the U.S. and beyond.

Numerous United States military agencies and hundreds of thousands of active duty, reserve, and civilian employees are logged on to social media platforms, doing everything from waging cyber-warfare to orchestrating public affairs campaigns to sharing selfies with friends and family. By embedding itself, overtly and covertly, in the daily digital lives of billions across multiple social media platforms, the military bypasses traditional media gatekeepers and mobilizes new content creators and online influencers to shape the

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thoughts and minds of U.S. and non-U.S. citizens alike about matters of war and peace and the U.S. military itself.

For centuries, new technologies have been deployed to serve the world's most powerful empires, including the present-day U.S. From the post-WWII era to the present, the U.S. military has played a significant role in researching, developing and using the infrastructure of the "digital age" for its strategic ends. For example, the Pentagon supported major digital technological developments including ARPANET (precursor to the internet), advancements in satellite communications, GPS (Global Positioning System), and early innovations in artificial intelligence (AI).

In the last 25 years, the world's major militaries have all been on the internet, using digital hardware and software – often procured from Silicon Valley – for online surveillance, propaganda, censorship, and cyber-warfare.² In a corporatized digital sphere, social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and X amass billions of users, driving network effects and generating substantial profits for their owners. Such platforms have also become expansive, globally-networked "battlespaces" where militaries wage war and compete for the hearts and minds of users worldwide. The U.S. military and other militaries are now using social media platforms to conduct mass and targeted influence campaigns, leveraging algorithms and deploying information, misinformation, and disinformation to shape how billions perceive them, their adversaries, and the conditions of war. Militaries rely on the algorithmic ad targeting and recommendation systems of social media platforms to reach and potentially influence specific groups of users. These systems deliver content tailored to users' presumed interests, based on their previous interactions with posts, pages, videos, and articles. As a result, users already immersed in topics like war, weapons, and the military are fed even more militarized media material. The likely outcome? A militarized informational feedback loop, an "echo chamber" priming people for war.

The U.S. military began leveraging social media to influence public opinion in the post-September 11, 2001 era. Starting in the early 2000s, the Pentagon used the internet for influence campaigns, later expanding to emerging platforms like Facebook (launching a DoD profile in 2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006). Social media platforms became weapons in the military's information operations arsenal, allowing the Pentagon to attempt to shape global public opinion, counter adversarial propaganda, and amplify messages and imagery favorable to its wars, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The military's current attempt to exercise influence within the world of social media platforms perhaps reflects its internalization of the myth of the media-generated "Vietnam War Syndrome." This is the now discredited notion that news coverage of the U.S. war in Vietnam, including news about U.S. war crimes and injured and dead U.S. soldiers,

² This article builds upon some of my previous work on the militarization of digital media technologies, the Internet and social media platforms. See, for example: Mirrlees, T. (2017). "Ubiquitous Media War," in Daubs, M. & Manzerolle, V. (eds.), *Mobile and Ubiquitous Media: Critical and International Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang), 41–58; Mirrlees, T. (2019). "Weaponizing the Internet and World Wide Web, for Empire: Platforming Capitalism, Data-Veillance, Public Diplomacy and Cyber-Warfare," in Boyd-Barrett, O. & Mirrlees, T. (eds.), *Media Imperialism: Continuity and Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 213–233.

ultimately undermined public support for the war and weakened troop morale, contributing to the U.S. military defeat. After Vietnam, this myth provided the Pentagon with a pretext to try to exert greater control over how its future wars, including the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq during the “Global War on Terror”, were portrayed by the media.

In the early 2000s, the Pentagon’s dream of informational control proved newly challenging in an emerging global digital battlespace, even within its own ranks. Troops using personal cell phones and computers were recording, editing, and uploading footage from combat zones in Iraq directly to platforms like YouTube.³ Videos of exploded Iraqi bodies, desecrated corpses, and U.S. personnel mocking Iraqi children begging for water shocked viewers at home, offering a grisly contrast to the sanitized depictions of “Operation Iraqi Freedom” engineered by military public affairs officers and perpetuated by mainstream media gatekeepers. By 2007, the Pentagon had barred soldiers from uploading such videos of Iraq to YouTube and instituted a censorship policy requiring all “content” to be reviewed by commanding officers before publication. The Pentagon also launched its own Iraq war channel, *Multi-National Force Iraq*, which promised a “boots-on-the-ground” view of the war. The result was highly sanitized: gun battles without death and acts of goodwill devoid of local resentment and resistance. It was a war story stripped of its terror and violence.

To adapt itself further to the public opinion management challenges of war in the age of social media platforms, the Pentagon researched and developed new online influence techniques via Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) programs like “Social Media in Strategic Communication,” which cost taxpayers around \$50 million from 2011 to 2022.⁴ Between 2021 and 2025, DARPA allocated nearly \$60 million to the “Influence Campaign Awareness and Sensemaking” initiative, which leveraged AI to optimize its influence.⁵ Compared to DARPA’s estimated \$15 billion budget over 2021 to 2024, the project accounted for about 0.4% of DARPA’s spending. But it was just one of many related projects DARPA funded.

Supported by DARPA’s insights, as of July 4, 2025, the Army’s online presence currently extends from Instagram (2.8 million followers)⁶ to Facebook (5.3 million followers)⁷ to X (2.1 million followers)⁸ to YouTube (2.09 million subscribers)⁹ and beyond. Each of the armed forces and numerous other Pentagon agencies and offices and service personnel have a presence across these and other platforms. In sum, the current

³ Andén-Papadopoulos, K. (2009). US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube. *Popular Communication*, 7(1), 17–27; Andén-Papadopoulos, K. (2009). Body horror on the Internet: US soldiers recording the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Media, Culture & Society*, 31(6), 921-938.

⁴ SMISC: Social Media in Strategic Communication. *Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)*. <https://www.darpa.mil/research/programs/social-media-in-strategic-communication>

⁵ INCAS: Influence Campaign Awareness and Sensemaking. *Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)*. <https://www.darpa.mil/research/programs/influence-campaign-awareness-and-sensemaking>

⁶ U.S. Army Official Instagram Page, <https://www.instagram.com/usarmy/?hl=en>

⁷ U.S. Army Official Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/USarmy/>

⁸ U.S. Army Official X Profile, <https://x.com/USArmy>

⁹ U.S. Army Official YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/usarmy>

report calculates that the U.S. Army has 12.9 million followers across these four major social media platforms.

Additionally, large agencies within the Pentagon, such as the Defense Media Activity, handle additional digital content creation and online distribution while regionally focused Combatant Commands run social media “ops” within their respective regions. By embedding themselves within social media platforms, DoD agencies and public affairs influencers are overtly connected to the digital lives of billions worldwide, across many countries and regions.

The Pentagon also uses social media platforms for covert influence campaigns. Established in 2010, the U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) employs thousands of personnel to conduct Military Information Support Operations—commonly known as psychological operations or intentional deception campaigns.¹⁰ Leveraging fake user accounts to mobilize followers and impart messages on social media platforms,¹¹ these operations target foreign audiences with the goal of shaping perceptions and changing behaviors in alignment with the U.S. military’s strategic objectives. For example, starting in 2017, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) personnel operated fake Arabic-language accounts on Twitter/X that posed as ordinary citizen accounts, while a secret arrangement with Twitter exempted them from service abuse detection, boosting their visibility.¹² Targeting civilians across the Middle East, these military-operated accounts aimed to boost public support for U.S. foreign policy, criticizing Iran and justifying “remote killings” by drone strikes.

While U.S. law and Presidential and Pentagon directives prohibit the U.S. government from waging information war against U.S. citizens,¹³ the global reach of the internet makes it nearly impossible to contain the flow of online disinformation and misinformation within one country’s territorial borders. Social media platforms blur the lines between domestic and foreign audiences, eroding boundaries such as “here” and “there” or “national” and “international.” As a result, military psy-ops conducted in theory against only foreign users often flow back into the U.S. information environment.

In recent years, amid its most severe recruiting crisis since the end of the draft in 1973,¹⁴ the military has also turned to social media platforms to recruit young people,

¹⁰ U.S. Cyber Command. (2022, November 1). *Cyber 101: Cyber Mission Force*.

<https://www.cybercom.mil/Media/News/Article/3206393/cyber-101-cyber-mission-force/>.

¹¹ Beskow, D. & M Carley, K. (2019, July 18). Army Must Regain Initiative in Social Cyberwar. *The Association of United States Army (AUSA)*. <https://www.ausea.org/articles/army-must-regain-initiative-social-cyberwar>

¹² Al-Jazeera. (2022, December 21). Twitter secretly boosted US psyops in Middle East, report says.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/12/21/twitter-secretly-boosted-us-military-propaganda-investigation>

¹³ Text - H.R.5736 - 112th Congress (2011-2012): Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012. *Congress.gov*.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/5736>; Executive Order 12333: United States Intelligence Activities. *National Security Agency*. <https://www.nsa.gov/Signals-Intelligence/EO-12333/>;

Department of Defense Directive 3600.01: Information Operations. *National Security Archive*. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22946-department-defense-directive-3600-01-subject>.

¹⁴ Barndollar, G. & Mai, M. C. (2024, September 1). America is not ready for another war—because it doesn't have the troops. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/368528/us-military-army-navy-recruit-numbers>

people of color, and female users, particularly from Generation Z.¹⁵ “Social media and other digital media platforms provide opportunities to engage with young people and their mentors and to inform them about career paths and life in the military,” reads a Government Accountability Office report on military recruitment advertising. “Younger generations view the real world through social media discussions, videos, and memes, which influences their values and beliefs.”¹⁶

In March 2023, for example, the U.S. Army paid advertising firm DDB Chicago \$117 million to revive its iconic “Be All You Can Be” campaign.¹⁷ Spreading promotional videos, behind-the-scenes content, live events, trending posts, and targeted ads across social media, this campaign framed the Army as a meritocratic pathway for the country’s multicultural youth to explore new careers and achieve self-actualization. Unsurprisingly, the campaign ignored the realities of war—combat, injury, killing, and death. By 2024, the Army had not only met but exceeded its recruiting target, enlisting over 55,000 new soldiers.¹⁸

Beyond recruitment, the military is engaged in a perpetual public relations campaign across major social media platforms. Sometimes this involves deploying its public affairs officers and personnel to launch their own “influencer” marketing profiles and channels,¹⁹ and other times, partnering with and sponsoring paid “online creators.” The Pentagon has attempted to formally collaborate with and pay popular online influencers, including a notable but failed effort to partner with YouTube celebrity MrBeast.²⁰ There is now even a “Military Creator Con” event, “celebrating innovation, artistry, and the creative spirit of the military community.”²¹ Additionally, there are many precarious and entrepreneurially minded content creators with no contractual relationship

¹⁵ Rodriguez, C. (2024, August). Making Military Service Relevant to Gen Z. *NCO Journal*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/nco-journal/images/2024/August/Making-Military-Service-Relevant-to-Gen-Z/Making-Military-Service-Relevant-to-Gen-Z.pdf>; Barnhill, J. (2024, November 26). Does the Military Need Social Media Influencers? *Military.com*, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/11/26/does-military-need-social-media-influencers.html>

¹⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). (2024, November 20). *Military Recruiting: Actions Needed to Address Digital Marketing Challenges*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106719>

¹⁷ Winkie, D. (2023, March 8). How Embracing ‘Be All You Can Be’ Resurrected Army Marketing. *Army Times*. <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2023/03/08/how-embracing-be-all-you-can-be-resurrected-army-marketing/>; “Be All You Can Be” - The U.S. Army’s Recruiting Transformation. *Association of the United States Army*. <https://www.ausa.org/publications/be-all-you-can-be-us-armys-recruiting-transformation>; Watson, E. (2023, March 8). Army reboots 1980s “Be All You Can Be” slogan to try to boost recruitment. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/army-rebrands-1980s-be-all-you-can-be-boost-recruitment/>

¹⁸ Baldor, L. C. (2024, September 26). Military recruiting rebounds after several tough years, but challenges remain. *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/military-recruiting-army-shortfalls-enlist-1611ea378b32826cc4615dc3731f3f70>;

U.S. Army Public Affairs. (2024, September 26). Army Exceeds FY 2024 Active-Duty Recruiting Goals. *U.S. Army*. https://www.army.mil/article/280028/army_exceeds_fy_2024_active_duty_recruiting_goals

¹⁹ Barnhill, J. (2024, November 26). Does the Military Need Social Media Influencers? *Military.com*. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/11/26/does-military-need-social-media-influencers.html>

²⁰ Boguslaw, D. (2024, December 21). Pentagon Approved Funds from MrBeast, Kelly Clarkson, Guy Fieri, Last Year. *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/pentagon-support-mrbeast-kelly-clarkson-guy-fieri-1235221946/>

²¹ Military Creator Con. <https://militarycreatorcon.com/>

with or direct connection to the military trying to turn a profit as self-styled experts. They produce, share and try to “monetize” content about military life, military strategy, military history, and other military matters.

Among Pentagon-friendly influencers, Sam Eckholm, a former Air Force public affairs officer turned independent content creator, stands out. His YouTube channel has 1.26 million subscribers (as of July 2025), and his “Surviving A Week In Air Force Special Operations” video has been viewed 3.9 million times and “liked” 68,000 times.²² Eckholm’s channel functions as a visually immersive promotional platform for the Pentagon and its contractors. With video titles like “Flying The World’s Most Feared Nuclear Bomber | THE B-52,” “Press This Button and the World Ends,” and “Inside the Navy’s \$500M Littoral Combat Ship,” Eckholm conveys awe and admiration for military agencies, personnel, and weapons systems. His videos offer insider access—virtual cockpit tours, base walkthroughs, and behind-the-scenes looks at military training exercises and advanced technologies—designed to excite viewers and perhaps tacitly, recruit them as well. But Eckholm avoids critical reflection on the human, ethical, or political consequences of warfare—or the imperial interests it serves.

There are many other “influencers” and “online creators” boosting the military. Kellie Hall Sbrocchi, an active-duty Navy officer, is exemplary. She describes herself on her Instagram profile as “Active-Duty Navy, Retired Pageant Queen. Lifestyle & Chicago Fun | Either in uniform, full glam, or both!”²³ With 169,000 followers and 938 posts, her page features a mix of selfies in Navy uniform, sometimes in camouflage gear, alongside photos of her in bikinis, nightwear, and business casual attire. David Goggins, a retired Navy SEAL followed by 988,200 users on X, 1.9 million on Facebook, and 13 million on Instagram,²⁴ monetizes reflections on his experience of military service through motivational books, brand collaborations, and speaking tours “JodywithaWhy”—another YouTuber with 79,000 subscribers—monetizes “Air Force & Lifestyle Benefits” content through ad revenue, sponsorships, and merchandise sales.²⁵

Mat Best, a former Army Ranger, pairs “culture war” rhetoric with the glamorization of weapons to market his company, Black Rifle Coffee, on a YouTube channel subscribed to by 1.52 million people.²⁶ Best presents himself as a freedom-loving and liberal-antagonizing conservative, using crude jokes, cliched and toxic masculinity, and shock value to promote violence as patriotism. In the video “Because America, That’s Why,” Best is shown firing handguns and oversized rifles while talking up his channel and coffee company as a celebration of America. At one point, he declares: “A lot of people call my videos offensive. Well, fuck you. People ask us why we have so many guns. I just tell them: how bout just over 200 years of freedom. Bitch.”

Accompanying this torrent of military creator and influencer content across social media platforms is a vast ecosystem of military memes, likely generated by a combination

²² Sam Eckholm YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@SamEckholm>

²³ Kellie Brocchi Instagram Profile. <https://www.instagram.com/kellie.sbrocchi/?hl=en>

²⁴ David Goggins Website. <https://davidgoggins.com/>

²⁵ JodywithaWhy YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/c/jodywithwhy>

²⁶ Mat Best YouTube Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@MBest11x>

of military personnel and civilians, targeting service members, veterans, armchair enthusiasts, and the broader public. Popular meme slogans like “Embrace the Suck” put a comedic spin on the grind and misery of military labor, while “Hurry Up and Wait” mocks the bureaucratic delays in military schedules. Memes offering easily re-postable prayers and thanks to military personnel and variations on “God Bless Our Troops” are a popular genre across social media.

Overall, the militarization of social media platforms is extensive and multi-faceted. It is driven significantly by the Pentagon’s cyber-warriors, recruiters, and public affairs officers, but also by online creators and marketing influencers—whether directly employed by the military, covertly contracted, or operating independently—who transform all things military into an individual opportunity for personal branding and money. The militarization of social media is shaping how people around the world see war and marshalling and sustaining support for wars that have injured, displaced, and killed millions, and wasted trillions.

Data Points

- 71% of Gen Z and Millennials get news from social media platforms daily, and 91% do so at least weekly.²⁷
- 3,600: Total videos on the U.S. Army YouTube Channel (as of July 2025)
- \$117 million: Cost of the U.S. Army’s 2023 “Be All You Can Be” recruitment campaign
- 6.6 million: Number of followers of the Department of Defense’s account on X (as of July 2025)²⁸
- 5.4 million: Number of followers of the U.S. Army’s Facebook page (as of July 2025)
- 3.9 million: Number of views of Air Force YouTuber officer Sam Eckholm’s video “Surviving A Week In Air Force Special Operations” (as of July 2025)

²⁷ The Media Insight Project. (2022, August 31). The News Consumption Habits of 16- to 40-Year-Olds. American Press Institute. <https://americanpressinstitute.org/the-news-consumption-habits-of-16-to-40-year-olds/>.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense Official X Page. <https://x.com/deptofdefense>