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Accessible, transparent, progressive: conceptualising the militarisation of digital space through the social media presence of arms manufacturers

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Abstract

Arms sales cause serious harm and the public is – on some level – aware of this, yet their sale continues apace. Militarisation is the engendering of support for war, broadly understood, and this includes the manufacture/sale of weapons. This article examines the Twitter feeds of three large US arms manufacturers: Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman (as part of a larger project where approximately 900 tweets were examined). It argues that productive tensions of exposure (knowing) and revelation (societal acknowledgement) engender militarisation within arms manufacturers' Twitter feeds. It finds that arms manufacturers represent themselves as accessible/transparent through regular updates and high volumes of information. They also distract from the violence of their products by presenting themselves as drivers of human progress, which occurs in social, environmental and technological dimensions. Taken as a whole, the representations of accessibility and distracting content on social media function to facilitate the arms trade in this case.

Introduction

Militarisation is the engendering of support for activities relating to war¹. This work aims to trace the process of militarisation by examining the social media output of arms manufacturers. One of the ways in which militarisation occurs is through public relations (PR) management, which makes use of a variety of techniques to present clients in the most favourable way possible. This can occur through “washing”: among others, greenwashing, pinkwashing, or genderwashing². Here, companies employ the tactic of presenting themselves as progressive in some way (environmentally or socially) as a means of shaping their reputation, to disguise activities that might be perceived negatively. Moloney³ posits that ‘PR’s most influential client has been – and still is – business, which has used it as a specialist management function to defend and advance capitalist interests in public policy-making, and in markets to increase the sale of goods and services’. It is not only privately-owned

¹ Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby, *Militarism and International Relations: Political Economy, Security, Theory* (Routledge, 2012).

² See, for example, Rosie Walters, ‘Varieties of Gender Wash: Towards a Framework for Critiquing Corporate Social Responsibility in Feminist IPE’, *Review of International Political Economy* (2021): online first access <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2021.1935295>.

³ Kevin Moloney, *Rethinking Public Relations: PR Propaganda and Democracy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p7.

companies that make use of PR, however, but a range of actors with varied state involvement, such as militaries and arms manufacturers⁴.

This type of public relations campaign aims to create a positive perception of the organisation through branding, which is the creation of an organisation-specific identity. The relationship between branding and identity is an interesting one, with branding being re/productive of the identity of organisations⁵. As Banet-Weiser⁶ notes, brands operate according to a logic: 'Thinking about brand culture moves us away from thinking about branding as an economic process of commodification, and more towards thinking of branding as a series of scripts or narratives we live by and organize our lives around'. Branding is thus an important way of helping us understand how we 'organize our lives around' particular assumptions about security. Branding works in a variety of ways with respect to security actors such as militaries, arms manufacturers, or private military and security contractors (PMSCs).

Military recruitment campaigns themselves function as a type of branding for institutions⁷ as well as the states. As Strand and Kehl⁸ argue, military recruitment advertisements position Sweden as a progressive place with values worth defending, necessitating a strong military. With the proliferation of digital technologies – to which I return later – it is now possible to reach more people than ever with your branding. As a result, a range of security actors make use of social media spaces as a site for brand development⁹. That this occurs in public-facing spaces renders this branding a sort of recruitment tool for militaries or PMSCs, making it easier to attract employees who might have a positive perception of the organisation¹⁰.

Public relations and brand management supports – in broadest terms – the continuation of the global legal arms trade. A recent example of this is the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia in the context of

⁴ Sebastian Larsson, 'The Civil Paradox: Swedish Arms Production and Export and the Role of Emerging Security Technologies', *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (2020): 26–51.

⁵ Jutta Joachim et al., 'Twittering for Talent: Private Military and Security Companies between Business and Military Branding', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (2018): 298–316.

⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Marita Sturken, 'Reprint Retrospective: "Branding Politics: Shopping for Change?" From AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture', *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2019.0001>.

⁷ Sanna Strand and Joakim Berndtsson, 'Recruiting the "Enterprising Soldier": Military Recruitment Discourses in Sweden and the United Kingdom', *Critical Military Studies* 1, no. 3 (2015): 233–48.

⁸ Sanna Strand and Katharina Kehl, '"A Country to Fall in Love with/in": Gender and Sexuality in Swedish Armed Forces' Marketing Campaigns', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 2 (2019): 295–314.

⁹ Susan T. Jackson, 'Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age: Arms Production, YouTube and Selling "National Security"', in *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2016).

¹⁰ Joachim et al., 'Twittering for Talent'.

the Yemen crisis, which Stavrianakis¹¹ argues is directly facilitated by public relations management¹². Discussing the Swedish context, Larsson¹³ argues that arms manufacturers benefit significantly from the reputation of their host state as “progressive, humanitarian, moral superpower which is somehow still ‘neutral’”. As a result of the desire to project neutrality during the Cold War, Sweden continued to cultivate a home-grown defence industry. Demand for exports had been decreasing, so companies turned efforts towards dual-use technology and products aimed at the civilian market. This makes it easier for arms manufacturers to present themselves positively because their products could – possibly – be designed for civilian activities. The relationship between public relations management, branding activities and militarisation plays out in a variety of spaces, with the digital realm being one such domain.

Der Derian¹⁴ asserts that ‘the informational, technological as well as political networks of global media require new modes of comprehension and instruction’. Digital spaces are – comparatively speaking – under-explored within works on or around militarisation. There are, however, some notable exceptions: the *Militarization 2.0* project and subsequent outputs from the authorial team (Jackson et al.¹⁵ provide a useful explanation of this project in the form of a policy briefing), *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (edited by Caitlin Hamilton and Laura J. Shepherd), and *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age* (edited by Johan Eriksson and Giampiero Giacomello). These are all rich works that make it possible to have discussions such as the one contained in this article. As Eriksson and Giacomello¹⁶ assert, though, there are ‘few constructivist accounts of digital-age security currently available’. I therefore aim to build on this work, to understand the mechanics of the militarisation of the digital domain, unpacking the social production of relevant subjects/objects in order to trace the maintenance of power.

In this article, I argue that we need to pay greater attention to the militarisation of digital space by arms manufacturers specifically. Why? There is much at stake here. Whilst the exact figure is disputed due to difficulties collecting data (as well as establishing who should be included) the loss

¹¹ Anna Stavrianakis, ‘Requiem for Risk: Non-Knowledge and Domination in the Governance of Weapons Circulation’, *International Political Sociology* 14, no. 3 (2020): 233–51.

¹² See also Jackson, ‘Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age’.

¹³ Larsson, ‘The Civil Paradox’ p39.

¹⁴ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network* (Routledge, 2009), p5.

¹⁵ Susan T. Jackson et al., ‘Assessing Meaning Construction On Social Media: A Case Of Normalizing Militarism’ (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19138>.

¹⁶ Johan Eriksson and Giampiero Giacomello, *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2007), p20.

of life each year from arms is in the thousands¹⁷ and this is without considering the many people who are not fatally harmed, numbers even harder to capture¹⁸. Despite the range of risks to life, the conventional arms trade remains highly profitable and continues apace. For example, in 2004, France agreed to sell Libya \$405 million worth of arms; this is only a single deal and the figure for all arms sales of this nature is significantly higher, representing a profit for companies but also tax income for state treasuries¹⁹. This particular case is also interesting because Stohl and Grillot²⁰ point out that this sale was made around the same time as attempts were made to improve diplomatic relations between France and Libya. Seven years later, Gaddafi used the same type of weapons on his own people – killing and injuring many – as he attempted to quash an uprising that would eventually result in his removal.

We should interrogate the occupation of digital space by arms manufacturers because this is a site of militarisation making possible their continued operation, which has a significant impact on many people across the world. Taken together, the above literatures demonstrate that the social understanding of martial institutions impacts their policies, discourses and practices. There are different ways in which martial institutions might come to be socially understood, whether through entertainment materials, news articles, their own promotional materials, or their social media output. I contend that social media spaces – while receiving growing attention – could enjoy a greater focus. This article is part of a wider project seeking to unpack the presence of arms manufacturers – such as Lockheed Martin – on Twitter and begins with a deceptively simple question: what does their manifestation within this space *mean*? I begin by setting out a conceptual framework of 1) the militarisation of digital space and 2) the tension between exposure and revelation. This is followed by a summary of the approach employed in this work, a netnography in which approximately 900 tweets were examined. The analysis begins with an examination of the ways arms producers' presence on Twitter renders them accessible and transparent. This forestalls the need for revelation of harms by exposing, in public space, anodyne elements of company operations. The next section focuses on distraction, exploring what is present within these Twitter feeds. I argue that the arms manufacturers in question position themselves as progressive, representing themselves as drivers of social, environmental, and technological progress. This is achieved through the use of visually appealing images and technical language that draws the reader

¹⁷ David B. Kopel, Paul Gallant, and Joanne D. Eisen, 'Global Deaths from Firearms: Searching for Plausible Estimates', *Texas Review of Law & Politics* 8 (2004/2003): 113.

¹⁸ Asif Efrat, 'Toward Internationally Regulated Goods: Controlling the Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons', *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010): 97–131.

¹⁹ Rachel Stohl and Suzette Grillot, *The International Arms Trade* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

²⁰ Stohl and Grillot.

in as part of their “club”, for example. I conclude with a summary of findings and finish by asking what we might look at next within this broad research agenda.

Conceptual framework

The militarisation of digital space

Central here is the process of militarisation, which is ‘the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organised political violence’²¹. In its broadest terms, militarisation can be thought of as the discourses and practices that celebrate, normalise and legitimise violence²². Unsurprisingly, a common site of militarisation is the space around militaries themselves, with personnel publicly valorised (Strand²³ discusses the reification of veterans in Sweden, whilst Browning and Haigh²⁴ outline the case of elderly veteran fundraiser Captain Tom Moore). The discourse and practices of war remembrance of these military personnel evoke a sense of strength, moral fortitude and sacrifice, whilst simultaneously obscuring the horrific violence of combat²⁵. Taking this further, active societal engagement with the military is also conceptualised as a force for social good (e.g. Basham²⁶ makes this case with regards to military youth engagement, especially working-class boys, who are seen to benefit from authority and rulesets).

Whilst an exploration of militarisation does demand an interrogation of the military, the process exceeds it, incorporating a range of subjects and objects²⁷. This, therefore, encompasses not only situations of formally-declared warfare but pushes us towards an expansive understanding of how, where and why this process occurs, functioning differently across domains²⁸. It may take place within international legal spaces, such as the Arms Trade Treaty for example, which Stavrianakis²⁹ argues ‘legitimises liberal forms of militarism’. Alternatively, militarisation can occur within the everyday – e.g. through colours or clothing styles – which signals a social normalisation of the

²¹ Stavrianakis and Selby, *Militarism and International Relations*, p3.

²² Chris Rossdale, *Resisting Militarism: Direct Action and the Politics of Subversion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

²³ Sanna Strand, ‘Inventing the Swedish (War) Veteran’, *Critical Military Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 23–41.

²⁴ Christopher S Browning and Joseph Haigh, ‘Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarized Vicarious Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (17 June 2022): ksac026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac026>.

²⁵ Victoria M. Basham, ‘Gender, Race, Militarism and Remembrance: The Everyday Geopolitics of the Poppy’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 6 (2016): 883–96.

²⁶ Victoria M. Basham, ‘Raising an Army: The Geopolitics of Militarizing the Lives of Working-Class Boys in an Age of Austerity’, *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 3 (2016): 258–74.

²⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (University of California Press, 2000).

²⁸ Rossdale, *Resisting Militarism*.

²⁹ Anna Stavrianakis, ‘Legitimising Liberal Militarism: Politics, Law and War in the Arms Trade Treaty’, *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (2016): 840–65, p840.

military³⁰. Its multifaceted nature means that the process of militarisation must be understood as differential, impacting groups differently along many lines. These include sex and gender, race, class and dis/ability³¹. Militarisation then, is not a static event, but a process that also responds to new social and technological advances³². This means that we must constantly ask how and where militarisation takes place.

Receiving significant attention has been the relationship between the military and the entertainment industry. This has been referred to as militainment³³ and is nicely captured by the full title of Der Derian's³⁴ book: *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*.

There is a long history of military use of entertainment spaces as branding exercises and this relationship is cemented across a variety of platforms from cinema to videogames, to television. For example, television programmes featuring military-style training exercises, such as *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, depict the military as elite and brave³⁵. The value of this relationship is highlighted by the fact that military personnel often work in the entertainment industry, whilst military institutions such as the Army provide equipment for use in films and television³⁶. The relationship between security actors and the entertainment industry has changed over time and the contemporary era offers new opportunities to cement these bonds further, through new digital technology³⁷. The positive representations of war and military actors function as a type of branding exercise, lending legitimacy to these individuals and institutions, and positioning violence as pleasurable.

One comparatively new site of attention is the internet. Whilst this now has strong links to the entertainment industry, it has a longer relationship with militaries and security actors, being first designed for military use through projects such as the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET)³⁸. Plans for the framework of the internet as we know it now were set out in the 1970s and operationalised in the 1980s, broadening beyond military borders and into the public domain. The internet has changed significantly since it first became part of public life, operating in a range of ways that make humans more connected than ever before. Referring to social media spaces,

³⁰ Laura Shepherd, 'Militarisation', in *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018), 209–14.

³¹ Basham, 'Gender, Race, Militarism and Remembrance'.

³² Rosedale, *Resisting Militarism*.

³³ Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³⁴ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*.

³⁵ Louise Pears, 'Military Masculinities on Television: Who Dares Wins', *NORMA* 17, no. 1 (2022): 67–82.

³⁶ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*.

³⁷ Sebastian Kaempf, "'A Relationship of Mutual Exploitation': The Evolving Ties between the Pentagon, Hollywood, and the Commercial Gaming Sector", *Social Identities* 25, no. 4 (2019): 542–58.

³⁸ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*.

Williams et al.³⁹ assert that ‘it is now largely accepted that these interactions constitute a socio-technical assemblage that creates a new public sphere where key aspects of civil society are played out.’ Thus, the digital realm is a key space for the enactment of social interaction, global politics, and more⁴⁰.

Central to this article is the militarisation of this digital space, which makes it possible to access new, younger audiences. One especially interesting reflection on the tensions of militarism in digital space is Stengel and Shim⁴¹, who argue in the German context that the concept of “anti-militarism” has itself been militarised. To make this case, they examine a social media series titled *Die Rekruten* showing that the presentation of German society as civil and ordered is a key ingredient in facilitating military violence. As above, however, militaries are not the only ones participating in the militarisation of digital space. Arms manufacturers occupy social media also, making use of inclusive language such as “we” to make viewers feel like part of their team. Noting that the companies rarely refer to death in these spaces, Jackson⁴² argues that this is a representation of “clean war” where evidence of the violence such as tactical language remains, but the violence itself is hidden from visibility. The effect here is that readers can allow themselves to make a connection with these companies whilst retaining a distance from violence. Other actors include private military and security contractors such as CACI and DynCorp. With respect to these companies, Joachim et al.⁴³ find that social media spaces are used as a site of branding. The companies in question aim for diverging brand positioning, as either modern or “home-grown”, in an effort to secure further custom. There are, then, a variety of military and military-adjacent actors located within the social media space.

Further, it is important to look beyond the content itself and examine the ways in which social media formats impact our engagement with militarisation. Jester⁴⁴ argues that the practice of storing videos of army recruitment materials on YouTube engenders the militarisation of digital space. This allows YouTube – and other social media spaces – to act as a repository for militarised content,

³⁹ Matthew L Williams, Pete Burnap, and Luke Sloan, ‘Towards an Ethical Framework for Publishing Twitter Data in Social Research: Taking into Account Users’ Views, Online Context and Algorithmic Estimation’, *Sociology* 51, no. 6 (2017): 1149–68, p1151.

⁴⁰ Works demonstrating this breadth include Kyle Rapp, ‘Social Media and Genocide: The Case for Home State Responsibility’, *Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 4 (2021): 486–502 and Uygur Baspehlivan, ‘Theorising the Memescape: The Spatial Politics of Internet Memes’, *Review of International Studies*, Forthcoming.

⁴¹ Frank A. Stengel and David Shim, ‘Militarizing Antimilitarism? Exploring the Gendered Representation of Military Service in German Recruitment Videos on Social Media’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 24, no. 4 (2021), 608–631.

⁴² Jackson, ‘Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age’.

⁴³ Joachim et al., ‘Twittering for Talent’.

⁴⁴ Natalie Jester, ‘Army Recruitment Video Advertisements in the US and UK since 2002: Challenging Ideals of Hegemonic Military Masculinity?’, *Media, War & Conflict* 14, no. 1 (2021): 57–74.

making it much easier to access this than it would have done before the Internet became widespread. Homemade videos created by soldiers serving in the “War on Terror” have also appeared on YouTube blurring the lines between official and unofficial output and bringing the war home in a way that civilians would not have previously had access to^{45 46}. These videos can then proliferate across other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and – more recently – TikTok. With respect to the people who view militarised content online, Austin⁴⁷ has an interesting discussion of viewer reactions. This work makes use of the offline method of accidental ethnography, providing an insight into the consumption of this material⁴⁸. What impact does it have for this content to occupy a social media space? As Jackson et al.⁴⁹ explain, the effect of social media use in this context is ‘to promote the view that the presence of the military in everyday life is natural’. In this article, I make use of a different method – netnography – to ask how arms manufacturers’ social media presence might facilitate militarisation ontologically and epistemologically.

Tensions of exposure and revelation

The above section explored the process of militarisation, especially with respect to the arms trade and digital space. Taking the concept of secrecy as a starting point, in this section, I examine the processes through which tensions between the exposure and revelation of violence facilitate militarisation in this social media space. With respect to arms manufacturing specifically, much of the terrain in which arms sales are made is shrouded in secrecy because this is often labelled a “national security” issue. This lack of clear information makes it harder to trace harms and hold relevant parties responsible⁵⁰. In order to keep the secret secret, ‘economies of secrecy’ – the direction of economic capital towards the maintenance of secrecy – can emerge as a means of control⁵¹.

⁴⁵ Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, ‘US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube’, *Popular Communication* 7, no. 1 (2009): 17–27.

⁴⁶ Christina M. Smith and Kelly M. McDonald, ‘The Mundane to the Memorial: Circulating and Deliberating the War in Iraq Through Vernacular Soldier-Produced Videos’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 4 (2011): 292–313.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Seeing All Evil: The Global Cruelty of Digital Visibility’, *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1 April 2022): ksac001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac001>.

⁴⁸ Pears (2016) argues that audience perceptions of security discourses should receive more attention; while this is beyond the scope of this article, it is nonetheless an interesting point.

⁴⁹ Jackson et al., ‘Assessing Meaning Construction On Social Media’, p49.

⁵⁰ Davina Miller and Mark Phythian, ‘Secrecy, Accountability and British Arms Exports: Issues for the Post-Scott Era’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 18, no. 3 (1997): 104–25.

⁵¹ Elspeth Van Veen, ‘Invisibility’, in *Visual Global Politics*, ed. Roland Bleiker (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 196–200, p196.

It has been argued that, ‘To date, the interplay between secrecy and security has been explored within security studies most often through a framing of secrecy and security as a ‘balancing’ act, where secrecy and revelation are binary opposites’⁵². Within some approaches to secrecy, it is assumed that the only missing ingredient is knowledge of the information underpinning the secret: that once people become aware of the nature of a secret, it will automatically be known, recognised and transparent⁵³. However, in practice this binary is rarely as clearly distinct as we might assume, with manifold messy ontological and empirical problems. There are many layers to secrecy, exposure and revelation, and I aim to build upon recent tendencies to question the ‘standard and sometimes clichéd binaries’⁵⁴ that have constrained earlier works within this space.

The relationship between “secret” and “not secret” is not a straightforward one, however, and the distinction between exposure and revelation is helpful in understanding how this state-sanctioned sale of arms is made possible. As Stampnitzky⁵⁵ argues, there is a difference between exposure as the release of information, and revelation which is a public *recognition* of this information and what it means. The conceptual difference between exposure and revelation is that, for the latter perhaps ‘the explosion never comes, and remains instead as tensed possibility’⁵⁶. For the revealed – as opposed simply to the exposed – the problem is not one of information but of a widely agreed acknowledgement and the risk this poses to the ordering and ontological security of the everyday. One such example is the leaks by Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden of US government documents. These did not deliver into the public domain information wholly unknown, but rather ‘[confirmed] politically embarrassing public secrets’⁵⁷ that called into question the US self-image as a force for progress on the global stage. The conceptualisation of exposure and revelation is thus underpinned by an ontology that blurs the line between knowing and not knowing, seeing and unseeing, speaking to the complex layers and practices of secrecy⁵⁸.

⁵² Elspeth Van Veen, ‘Secrecy’s Subjects: Special Operators in the US Shadow War’, *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 3 (2019): 386–414, p386.

⁵³ Mark Fenster, ‘Transparency in Search of a Theory’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 2 (2015): 150–67.

⁵⁴ William Walters and Alex Luscombe, ‘Postsecrecy and Place: Secrecy Research amidst the Ruins of an Atomic Weapons Research Facility’, in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 63–78, p65.

⁵⁵ Lisa Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and Consequences? Reconceptualizing the Politics of Exposure’, *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 6 (2020): 597–613.

⁵⁶ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.

⁵⁷ Graham M. Jones, ‘Secrecy’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 53–69, p56.

⁵⁸ Esmé Bosma, ‘Multi-Sited Ethnography of Digital Security Technologies’, in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 193–212.

As a result of the potentiality, waiting, and constant negotiation of the tension of knowing/not knowing, it is perhaps more useful to conceive of secrecy as an ongoing process⁵⁹. Building upon this, Stampnitzky⁶⁰ highlights the ways in which the tension between exposure and revelation functions in the same way. Revelation is, therefore, not simply a switch that can be flicked on, but a process to be interpreted as it is constantly re/negotiated, maintained, and challenged across a range of layers, including geospatial, technical, cultural, and spectacular⁶¹. Of the work in this space, much explores the positives of transparency, the principle underlying revelation: ‘Transparency and openness, meanwhile, are valorized, with this valuation sometimes traced through a long line of enlightenment philosophical thinking, from Kant, Rousseau and Bentham’⁶². As a result, there is typically a focus on direct accountability (of the kind effected by the aforementioned Manning and Snowden leaks) that results from revelations where the principle of transparency has not been upheld. In contrast, an emphasis upon the process – rather than the specific nature of a given exposure/revelation – takes a different approach, aiming to trace the relevant discourses and practices of power that operate within this space⁶³.

To provide an example, Stampnitzky⁶⁴ theorises the relationship between exposure and revelation in the domain of torture within a “War on Terror” context. She argues that this is a messy process, whereby acts that might constitute torture were made public whilst there were reassurances that these acts did not, in fact, constitute torture. This was a recurring pattern of information release (official or otherwise) and minimisation that took place frequently. Here, it is made clear that it is not simply *what* is exposed that matters, but rather also: what this exposure means for society, how it is acknowledged (if at all), what practices this makes possible, and how power might be re/produced through this process. Indeed, the process that holds exposure and revelation in tension has not yet received as much attention as it deserves⁶⁵ and that is the focus of this article.

The relationship between the discursive and material is co-constitutive⁶⁶. Instances in which lives are lost due to arms could be a driver for revelation and not just exposure. In the case of the arms trade, however, the relationship between exposure and revelation is muddled. The exposed but not revealed makes possible the maintenance of the status quo: if harms are exposed but socially

⁵⁹ Brian Rappert, ‘Leaky Revelations: Commitments in Exposing Militarism’, *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 19 (2019): 148-S157.

⁶⁰ Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and Consequences?’

⁶¹ Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s Subjects’.

⁶² Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and Consequences?’ p599.

⁶³ Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s Subjects’.

⁶⁴ Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and Consequences?’

⁶⁵ Stampnitzky.

⁶⁶ Carsten F. Roennfeldt, ‘Productive War: A Re-Conceptualisation of War’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 39–62.

unacknowledged, there is little reason for powerful actors to effect change. Thus, whilst there is still some public awareness of the harms enacted by these weapons, there is no shared recognition of this information as *revelation*, and no attendant consequences. In this sense, knowledge of the harms inflicted by weapons is much like an inert gas, present but unreactive.

Methods and material

Aradau⁶⁷ asks, what is ‘the relation between security, law, and knowledge in a digital world?’. I instead suggest that we might ask *where* the relationship between these occurs: one answer is that this relationship plays out within everyday security spaces. Scholars have called for greater attention to be paid to these everyday spaces⁶⁸ and a small but growing body of literature explores the ways in which the internet impacts our understandings of international relations and security, broadly conceived⁶⁹. This includes the everyday social media platforms that have become such an important part of people’s daily lives⁷⁰. Stavrianakis⁷¹ states that research into the arms trade is constrained by issues of secrecy, on the part of both companies and states. In order to move past this, she suggests beginning by utilising publicly available information, for example policy papers. This article builds on work by Stavrianakis, Jackson, and others, by adding another domain: social media spaces. To do this, I make use of netnography as approach – a portmanteau, combining the terms internet and ethnography – examining the social media of three of the largest arms manufacturers in the world (the mechanics of which are explained below).

The originator of the term netnography, Robert Kozinets, began work in this area in an effort to highlight the ways in which research within digital space is itself a distinct category⁷². That is, the nature of the research questions we might ask, and the ways in which we carry out an ethnographic style exploration within this space, is fundamentally different than those carried out face-to-face⁷³

⁶⁷ Claudia Aradau, ‘Assembling (Non)Knowledge: Security, Law, and Surveillance in a Digital World1’, *International Political Sociology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 327–42, p328.

⁶⁸ Linda Åhäll, ‘The Dance of Militarisation: A Feminist Security Studies Take on “the Political”’, *Critical Studies on Security* 4, no. 2 (2016): 154–68.

⁶⁹ For example: Jackson, ‘Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age’.

⁷⁰ For example, Rhys Crilley and Louise Pears, ‘“No, We Don’t Know Where Tupac Is”: Critical Intelligence Studies and the CIA on Social Media’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 36, no. 4 (2021) 599–614; and Rhys Crilley and Marie Gillespie, ‘What to Do about Social Media? Politics, Populism and Journalism’, *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (2019): 173–76.

⁷¹ Anna Stavrianakis, ‘Searching for the Smoking Gun? Methodology and Modes of Critique in the Arms Trade’, in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 231–47.

⁷² Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined* (London: Sage, 2015).

⁷³ Andrew Bengry-Howell et al., ‘A Review of the Academic Impact of Three Methodological Innovations: Netnography, Child-Led Research and Creative Research Methods’ (ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, 2011), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/230004905.pdf>.

⁷⁴. Perhaps as a result, there is some disagreement as to the extent to which the internet is “real life”, with some arguing that it is not, whilst others argue that it is simply a different part of the “real world”. The position taken within netnography – one that differentiates it from other approaches – is that the distinction between real and not real life is a social construct, and that our explorations of digital space gain their meaning through social interactions. For this reason, a netnography can be a complete work in and of itself, and does not need to rely for fullness upon offline elements⁷⁵.

Costello et al.⁷⁶ argue that an awareness of the social nature of digital space is key in performing a good netnography and, for this reason, it is typically conducted within online communities, for example, forming around online message boards dedicated to particular popular culture phenomena. Netnography has been used across a wide range of disciplines from sociology, to geography, to healthcare, to education and as yet, is not a methodology that has become common within security studies. The nature of the materials being examined necessitates a modified conceptualisation of the social, in order to remain of most use. I therefore take a slightly different approach within this work, centring the social by 1) examining the process through which meaning is made and 2) doing so by examining a “community” of arms manufacturers who operate within a shared normative space, with the discourses and practices of each reinforcing the others.

The starting point of this netnography is three of the largest US legal arms manufacturers as defined by SIPRI ⁷⁷, firstly in terms of overall revenue generated by the company and, secondly, by proportion of overall earnings from weapons sales. The first company examined is Lockheed Martin which, as SIPRI⁷⁸ explains, ‘has occupied the first position in the Top 100 every year since 2009’ generating \$53,762million revenue, 88% of which is derived from arms. Northrop Grumman (\$30,095million, 87% arms) and Raytheon (\$27,058million, 87% from arms) are the remaining two. Boeing is the second largest company by revenue to make money selling arms (\$101,126million) but they can be excluded from analysis on two grounds: firstly, they only make 29% of this revenue from arms, and secondly, because a Boeing-made airplane crashed over the time period examined, which completely changed the nature and pattern of Twitter posts. As a result, Boeing is examined separately elsewhere.

⁷⁴ This contrasts with virtual ethnography approaches, which more commonly seek to replicate face-to-face methods within online spaces, with arguably less recognition that digital space is not identical.

⁷⁵ Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*.

⁷⁶ Leesa Costello, Marie-Louise McDermott, and Ruth Wallace, ‘Netnography: Range of Practices, Misperceptions, and Missed Opportunities’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917700647>.

⁷⁷ Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (SIPRI), ‘The SIPRI Top 100 Arms-producing And Military Services Companies, 2018’ (SIPRI, 2019), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/1912_fs_top_100_2018.pdf.

⁷⁸ Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (SIPRI), p3.

Specifically, I focus on the Twitter presence of these companies in order to explore how social media functions as a space for exposure or revelation (or not) in the case of arms manufacturers. It is, of course, not possible to examine in detail the implications and content of all social media output, of every arms manufacturer. In order to examine this area in detail, I adopt a snapshot approach, focusing on tweets between 1 January 2019 and 31 March 2019. This project began in June 2019 and the initial aim was to examine six months' worth of output, however, by the end of the March material, I had collected just over 900 tweets by hand. While time-consuming, one of the benefits of hand-collecting social media data is that the researcher can fully immerse themselves in the posts, examining every word, image or video. After collecting 900 tweets, I halted collection because I did not see any new representations emerging, with the content remaining similar over this period⁷⁹.

The academy is still grappling with what it means to do research within digital spaces. This is especially the case from an ethical perspective, though a range of professional bodies have tried to address this through deploying guidance⁸⁰. As Williams et al.⁸¹ argue, 'The emerging consensus is that the digital revolution has outpaced parallel developments in research governance and agreed good practice.' Social media users may not realise that they are being covertly observed within platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, and that their tweets might find themselves in a research article. The concept of informed consent is interesting within social media work⁸²; were I concerned with accounts belonging to private citizens, this is indeed an issue that would likely require a more considered approach⁸³.

Overall, there is assumed consent from arms manufacturers to examine their social media feeds for a variety of reasons. A key issue in this domain is the problem of anonymity, for which informed consent processes would typically seek to establish the comfortable boundaries of participants. In this case the subjects in question are corporate entities, with which the public is already familiar, posting under accounts that are verified officially as belonging to those particular companies. As the

⁷⁹ Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (1999): 225–54.

⁸⁰ For example, British Sociological Association, 'Ethics Guidelines and Collated Resources for Digital Research', 2004, https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24309/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice_annexe.pdf.

⁸¹ Williams, Burnap, and Sloan, 'Towards an Ethical Framework for Publishing Twitter Data in Social Research', p1150.

⁸² aine shakti franz et al., 'Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0', 2020, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>.

⁸³ The issue of informed consent within social media research is contested. There are some who argue that, because the data is public, it is fair to employ it within research, even if it belongs to ordinary private citizens. The underlying logic is that the account holders can see that this is a public space and have signed the terms and conditions; they therefore, are consenting. With respect to data belonging to those not companies or public bodies, it is my position that more thought needs to be given to this matter, though it is beyond the scope of this article to consider what this might mean in practice.

accounts in question belong to companies – and not ordinary people – who have hired social media management companies, it is fair to assume that they expect people to see their posts. This is further emphasised through the fact that their account remains public as opposed to private, where an account holder has the option to prevent certain people from seeing the content they post. The apparent seriousness with which social media is taken by corporate bodies suggests that those responsible for the creation and/or maintenance of their accounts will have carefully read the terms and conditions upon registration, too. As a result of the above, this is taken as assumed consent to explore the content posted within this space.

There are a range of different ethical frameworks that can be adopted within digital research, however⁸⁴. Whilst the consent of arms manufacturers is assumed in this case, I also take a normative position. The accounts examined belong to companies whose products are used to cause harm, as established in the introduction, making them worthy of research interest. Kozinets⁸⁵ asserts that, in netnography, different material elements are important, for example the infrastructure of the internet. In this case, there is an important relationship between the material impact of the companies examined and the discursive artefacts located within social media space, and this crystallises around the harms set out previously. As a result, permission was not sought to examine these Twitter feeds.

Arms manufacturers, exposure, and the militarisation of digital space

Accessibility and transparency

I have demonstrated in the introduction that these companies sell arms that are employed to cause serious harm, a practice that is typically considered secret, at least to some degree. Stampnitzky⁸⁶ argues that states and other actors employ the practice of secrecy when violating international norms to neutralise their actions. Contrastingly, transparency has been conceptualised as a virtue, ‘a goal to be politically pursued – a task: something which still needs to be enforced on recalcitrant reality, having first been carefully designed with the help of specialist expertise’⁸⁷. Here, I argue that arms manufacturers place themselves “in plain sight”⁸⁸. In the 21st century it is commonplace for

⁸⁴ Franz et al., ‘Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0’.

⁸⁵ Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*.

⁸⁶ Stampnitzky, ‘Truth and Consequences?’

⁸⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1998), p33.

⁸⁸ Andrea Schneiker et al., ‘Hiding in Plain Sight: Private Military and Security Companies’ Use of Twitter as a Distraction Tool’, *Media, War & Conflict* 12, no. 4 (2019): 483–503.

large brands to have social media accounts. These arms manufacturers – through virtue of having their own accounts – can then position themselves alongside companies such as McDonalds or Nike as “simply another brand”, even though the nature of their products makes them qualitatively different⁸⁹. The perception that social media can ‘enhance transparency’ is common among public relations professionals⁹⁰, which perhaps explains how arms manufacturers have come to have social media accounts.

These accounts have a great many followers: Lockheed Martin has 439,000 followers, Raytheon 184,000 and Northrop Grumman 218,500. All of these companies joined Twitter between 2008 and 200, and are present on Facebook as well, though the latter is beyond the scope of this article. Their high follower counts demonstrate they have a level of public engagement – at minimum, enough for hundreds of thousands of people to follow them – and the tweets of these arms manufacturers will appear in their followers’ feeds when issued. That their accounts are visible to so many people positions the companies as “having nothing to hide”. One does not need to interact (e.g. like, re-tweet, reply) with posts to consume them, however. Their accounts are also visible to non-followers who may see this material as re-tweets or likes from other people, unless they otherwise have them blocked. If curious, non-followers might see their Twitter output whilst browsing their feed, being able to scroll back through the past several months’ worth of material. This material can be accessed on laptops, desktops or mobile telephones, at any time of day, whilst taking the bus to work or browsing over lunch, for example. Openness and accessibility have long been represented as a positive and positioning arms manufacturers as transparent makes it harder to question their practices. This is especially the case because states reassure the public that there are strict controls on what arms manufacturers are allowed to produce and sell, through the deployment of restrictive arms export licences⁹¹. As Larsson⁹² finds, transparency is perceived as a positive by key actors in the (Swedish) arms trade; again, the cultivation of a high follower count makes possible the perception that arms manufacturers are just like any other company whose products we might consume in an ordinary day.

The image of transparency and openness is enhanced by the frequency and volume of tweets. On average, these companies tweeted 3.12 times per day over the course of the period examined. This is more than many other accounts tweet per day (@McDonalds – the fast-food company – for

⁸⁹ Jackson, ‘Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age’.

⁹⁰ Marcia W. DiStaso and Denise Seveck Bortree, ‘Multi-Method Analysis of Transparency in Social Media Practices: Survey, Interviews and Content Analysis’, *Public Relations Review*, Public Relations History, 38, no. 3 (2012): 511–14, p511.

⁹¹ Stavrianakis, ‘Searching for the Smoking Gun? Methodology and Modes of Critique in the Arms Trade’.

⁹² Larsson, ‘The Civil Paradox’.

example, sometimes goes days or even weeks without tweeting), presenting these arms-selling companies as transparent and accessible. This article is not so much concerned with intent than it is what these representations make possible: on a more direct level, higher frequency tweeting from popular accounts may influence the content of searches. If there are, for example, a large number of tweets by Lockheed Martin then these will take up greater space in searches, making it harder to find tweets that tag (or “@”) these companies in order to criticise them. Schneiker et al.⁹³ find that private military and security companies “flood” their feeds with large amounts of irrelevant information, with some accounts tweeting over seven times per day. Instead, the number of daily tweets by the arms manufacturers in question is significantly lower, balancing output with a sense of transparency.

The accessible nature of these practices provides us with a link to literatures on everyday militarism. Other brands may have social media accounts and, for them, one of the primary purposes of occupying this space may be to drive sales of their products. Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon are not reliant upon social media to drive sales; bluntly, it is unlikely that any of their followers will decide that they have need for an unmanned aerial vehicle or a missile. Instead, it is their occupation of this site that functions to re/militarise this digital space, re/locating it as a site of the martial⁹⁴. The nature of social media provides an ideal petri dish for militarisation for a variety of reasons; aside from the large userbase, the everyday, ordinary nature of social media makes possible a form of passive militarism, where we like, share, and follow accounts that sell products for the purposes of war and conflict. This argument has also been made by Crilley and Pears⁹⁵ within their analysis of the CIA Twitter account. They assert that the CIA occupation of this space is an important tool within the intelligence community, because it offers the opportunity to ‘narrate themselves and their actions in positive ways, representing themselves and their actions as legitimate’ because they are presenting them in the public eye. As Basham⁹⁶ has pointed out, everyday militarism is not a new phenomenon, but the space in which it occurs in this case makes it notable. This troubles the exposure/revelation binary because it reinforces exposure of negative events – by reminding us that arms manufacturers exist – whilst failing to offer a shared acknowledgement of said events.

These companies project an image of accessibility and transparency through the provision of ‘managed information under the guise of transparency’⁹⁷. Here, this occurs through the use of social media management. All of the arms manufacturers discussed in this article use a company named

⁹³ Schneiker et al., ‘Hiding in Plain Sight’, p495.

⁹⁴ Jackson, ‘Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age’.

⁹⁵ Crilley and Pears, “‘No, We Don’t Know Where Tupac Is’”, p2.

⁹⁶ Basham, ‘Gender, Race, Militarism and Remembrance’.

⁹⁷ Stavrianakis, ‘Searching for the Smoking Gun? Methodology and Modes of Critique in the Arms Trade’, p233.

Sprinklr to manage their social media presence, including to produce and/or post tweets on their behalf. Sprinklr is a paid-for service that companies can contract to support them in projecting positive public-facing representations. This is made clear by information contained within their tweets, which state the time and the platform used to create the post, for example: ‘10:00 PM · Jan 23, 2019 · Sprinklr Publishing’. Companies such as Sprinklr are likely to handle any social media controversies or campaigns directed towards their clients. In this case, I argue that these ‘subjects [social media management firms] protect the secret while also signalling its existence ... as well as gaining financially or otherwise as a result’⁹⁸. In addition, Durand and Vergne⁹⁹ note that companies in “stigmatised” industries seek to avoid negative coverage in the first place; reputation management firms such as Sprinklr, therefore, aid in maintaining the delicate balance between exposure and revelation. Companies like Sprinklr are used in the social media management of private military and security companies, too¹⁰⁰.

Sprinklr¹⁰¹ promise that they can ‘protect your brand’s reputation’ and ‘Mitigate the risk of PR crises by restricting content for confidentiality, red-flag keyword monitoring, and the ability to automatically stop publishing across all channels, when required.’ It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full, detailed analysis of Sprinklr’s website, though it is interesting to note its own representations of accessibility and transparency. Their website contains, for example, statements positioning the brand as friendly: ‘Our Vision: To be the world’s most loved enterprise software company, ever’. Further, the website itself is well-populated across many pages including Products, Services and About Us, with a story about the origins of the company, mimicking the same representations as the arms manufacturers’ Twitter feeds.

The companies in question undertake paid Twitter advertising, extending the properties of accessibility and transparency described above: not only are these companies open and here for you to discover, they are *coming to you* to show you about their aims and activities. Having been targeted by this advertising myself during the course of this research, I am aware that it is being utilised by these companies (though am not able to obtain information as to the full extent of this). Whilst work has been done on the relationship between security actors and advertising within a digital context¹⁰², it has been harder to understand how this advertising is designed to operate.

⁹⁸ Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s Subjects’, p409.

⁹⁹ Rodolphe Durand and Jean-Philippe Vergne, ‘Asset Divestment as a Response to Media Attacks in Stigmatized Industries’, *Strategic Management Journal* 36, no. 8 (2015): 1205–23.

¹⁰⁰ Schneiker et al., ‘Hiding in Plain Sight’.

¹⁰¹ Sprinklr, ‘Modern Marketing’, accessed 24 October 2021, <https://www.sprinklr.com/modern-marketing/>.

¹⁰² For example, Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneiker, ‘Public or Private? Blurring the Lines through YouTube Recruitment of Military Veterans by Private Security Companies’, *New Media & Society*, (2021), online first <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211047951>.

Twitter is secretive about the ways in which its platforms work¹⁰³, and it has been reluctant to allow for research purposes access to its algorithms. Further work around the maintenance and management of the tension of exposure/revelation in digital spaces would therefore be useful.

Whilst the arms manufacturers in question have positioned themselves as accessible and transparent, there are contradictions within this representation. They do not discuss every aspect of their business within their social media feeds: what is *not* located within arms manufacturers' social media discourse? What is missing and why does this matter? Or as Rappert and Bauchspies¹⁰⁴ ask "Why attend to absence at all?" With respect to the arms trade, it is this tension between what is said and unsaid in this space that makes it possible to "look away" from violence. Perhaps most obviously, what was not present in the tweets examined was a discussion of violence, suffering or death¹⁰⁵. I have argued above that these companies present themselves as open and transparent and, as a result, they can be read as omitting or hiding nothing. It is this veneer of openness that makes it possible to ignore the violence that their Twitter accounts invisibilise (e.g. suffering, death). In an interesting contrast, Shim and Stengel¹⁰⁶ find that militaries do on occasion share images of death on their social media, arguing that this positions military life as grievable. In the case of arms manufacturers, however, those who lose their lives are arguably not seen as grievable¹⁰⁷ and are not depicted¹⁰⁸. It is not hugely surprising that these companies do not highlight the suffering visited by their products. In-depth discussions of violence are prohibited by Twitter's terms of use, though, given their continued presence on the platform, these do not preclude companies from existing within this digital space even when their products might cause demonstrable human suffering. What, then, does the presence of legal arms manufacturers "do" in this space? I argue that this relationship between the absent and the present renders arms trade violence exposed but not revealed, neutralising critique within this social media space.

Rappert and Bauchspies¹⁰⁹ highlight the relationship between absence and presence, arguing that absence 'can provide a remedy to misperception about the solidity of what is deemed present'. The role of the absent is best understood with reference to the present, and below I sketch some of

¹⁰³ Jackson et al., 'Assessing Meaning Construction On Social Media'.

¹⁰⁴ Brian Rappert and Wenda K. Bauchspies, 'Introducing Absence', *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1–3, p1.

¹⁰⁵ One exception to this, which resulted in Boeing being removed from the dataset was their discussion of the aftermath of one of their planes crashing, which resulted in full loss of life. This is discussed separately in another paper, in order to allow for a more typical comparison.

¹⁰⁶ Shim and Stengel, 'Social Media, Gender and the Mediatization of War: Exploring the German Armed Forces' Visual Representation of the Afghanistan Operation on Facebook', *Global Discourse* 7, no. 2 (2017): 330–47.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso Books, 2016).

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, 'Marketing Militarism in the Digital Age'.

¹⁰⁹ Rappert and Bauchspies, 'Introducing Absence', p1.

what *is* contained within this discourse. This can be conceptualised as “selective disclosure”¹¹⁰ or “managed openness”¹¹¹, whereby actors or organisations consider carefully what they want to share and share only a limited range of information, whilst invisibilising other details. These companies – unsurprisingly – present themselves positively within their social media space, distracting from the aforementioned harms caused by their products.

Distraction and progress

Arms manufacturers invisibilise violence and omit discussion of this within their social media feeds. Instead, they construct themselves positively, which distracts from any suffering caused by their products. This distraction operates in three ways to present these companies as drivers of progress, benefitting the world in a range of different areas: socially, environmentally, and technologically. The first area I examine is social progress, beginning with the companies’ relationship with women¹¹². There are a variety of ways in which women are represented within these feeds and often the women emphasised are staff. This is the case for Lockheed Martin’s re-tweet of Bloomberg Quicktake¹¹³ which showcases female staff members: ‘[flying saucer emoji] Meet the women of @LockheedMartin who are in charge of these space projects:- GPS III- InSight Mars Lander- OSIRIS-REx asteroid mission ...’. Here, the women in question are named specifically as women; in contrast, all-male groups of employees are – within the tweets examined – never referred to as “the men of Lockheed Martin”. In addition to being named as women specifically, women are also portrayed pictorially within these tweets, mirroring other research finding that images are a key component of brands’ social media posts¹¹⁴. The depiction of women in this case highlights their identity as women as part of the construction of a progressive workspace¹¹⁵.

The companies are represented as progressive within broader society, through tweets exploring the relationship of these companies with women outside their employee pool. For example, Raytheon¹¹⁶ employees ‘give back’ by offering support to ‘men and women who have served in the armed

¹¹⁰ Oliver Belcher and Lauren Martin, ‘Site Visits, Selective Disclosure, and Freedom of Information in Qualitative Security Research’, in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (London: Routledge, 2019), 33–47.

¹¹¹ Stavrianakis, ‘Requiem for Risk’.

¹¹² As explained previously, this point is the main focus of another article, currently in revision.

¹¹³ Bloomberg Quicktake, ‘Meet the Women ...’, Twitter, 8 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/Quicktake/status/1103981233099411456>.

¹¹⁴ Phillip Ross, ‘Photos Are Still King on Facebook’, Socialbakers.com, 2014, <https://www.socialbakers.com/blog/2149-photos-are-still-king-on-facebook>.

¹¹⁵ For example, Northrop Grumman, ‘Women at #NorthropGrumman ...’, Twitter, 8 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1104027495727357953>; and Northrop Grumman, ‘Employees at Our ...’, Twitter, 7 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1093607847278063616>.

¹¹⁶ Raytheon, ‘Returning to Civilian ...’, Twitter, 18 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1086246837865115648>.

forces'. Here, the women in question are being presented on equal terms with men, as part of military institutions. Elsewhere, Jester¹¹⁷ argues that militaries are increasingly using women as part of their recruitment campaigns and the discussion of women in this context is similarly a military one in which women are not typically constructed as "normal". The representations within these feeds take this further than simply normalising women, however. Not only are women *present* in these Twitter feeds, they are represented as an important element of these companies' corporate mission to advance social progress¹¹⁸. For example, Lockheed Martin¹¹⁹ tweets 'We support the #WGDP [Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative] and efforts to promote #STEM education and workforce training that empowers women around the world to reach their full potential.' This extends beyond women, however, with an emphasis placed upon engagement with girls, too (again, named as girls or pictured in images) through "women in science" days¹²⁰, mentoring sessions/careers tips¹²¹, or schools events¹²². Women and girls, then, are seen as a resource that arms manufacturers can "unlock" and deploy for the betterment of society¹²³.

Representations of the people of colour on their staff further enhance the portrayal of arms manufacturers as progressive. Most senior here is Raytheon CEO John Harris, a Black man. He is portrayed or named in several tweets^{124 125 126}. A range of other employees of colour are discussed or pictured by manufacturers, from Shawn Purvis, 'named one of the Most Powerful Women in

¹¹⁷ Jester, 'Army Recruitment Video Advertisements in the US and UK since 2002'.

¹¹⁸ Walters, 'Varieties of Gender Wash'.

¹¹⁹ Lockheed Martin, 'We Support the ...', Twitter, 7 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1093601412347498496>.

¹²⁰ Northrop Grumman, '80 High School ...', Twitter, 14 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1096152107164553217>.

¹²¹ Raytheon, 'In Honor of ...', Twitter, 21 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1098583121757388801>.

¹²² Raytheon, 'Middle School Students ...', Twitter, 21 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1098688818805440512>.

¹²³ Interestingly, one group not considered an asset is LGBT people. Within other communications, these companies do reference LGBT staff (e.g. Lockheed Martin 2016) and there is extensive discussion of "pinkwashing" within security-related organisations (e.g. Rosedale 2019). In this case, I argue that women are acceptable for public-facing communications like social media posts because they can be rendered "appropriately masculine", softening the company image *just enough* (Melissa S. Herbert, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (NYU Press, 1998)). In contrast, LGBT people are perhaps more likely to be referred to simply as men or women, especially given that these tweets are highly public and arms manufacturers increasingly work with states hostile to LGBT rights (e.g. Saudi Arabia).

¹²⁴ Raytheon, 'The Patriot #missiledefense ...', Twitter, 16 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1096811698969870336>.

¹²⁵ Raytheon, 'Strengthening Our ...', Twitter, 17 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1097058072026058752>.

¹²⁶ Raytheon, 'Raytheon International CEO ...', Twitter, 18 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1097601274718109696>.

Corporate America’ by Black Enterprise¹²⁷, to those of Asian heritage facilitating an event for the Korea Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology¹²⁸, to Black staff talking with those of Asian heritage on video¹²⁹. This once again draws out similarities with discussions around military personnel, where people of colour are an important feature of recruitment campaigns in the US and UK, widening the recruitment pool available to the institution¹³⁰.

People of colour – non-employees – are positioned as holding relationships with the companies, reinforcing the representation of progressiveness. The companies represent themselves as working with people of colour outside of their organisation, from Black mayors¹³¹ to radio hosts¹³², to the 1944 Tuskegee airmen who flew their planes¹³³. Northrop Grumman¹³⁴ tweets also about their activities on ‘#MLKDayofService’, in reference to civil rights leader Martin Luther King jr. King, described by Bruyneel¹³⁵ as ‘haloed’ in the public memory, is regularly invoked within discourses of social progress and civility. His use by Northrop Grumman in this case positions the company as possessing the same values as he did. The use of the hashtag here also connects Northrop Grumman to wider discussions on the subject of service and volunteering¹³⁶. More systematically, all companies emphasise their ongoing relationship with the organisation Black Engineer and Black Enterprise. This is especially the case around the Black Engineering Awards and Black Enterprise

¹²⁷ Northrop Grumman, ‘Congratulations to Shawn ...’, Twitter, 6 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1103355441508245504>.

¹²⁸ Northrop Grumman, ‘80 High School ...’.

¹²⁹ Northrop Grumman, ‘Talk about Advanced ...’, Twitter, 25 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1100080103793541120>.

¹³⁰ Jester, ‘Army Recruitment Video Advertisements in the US and UK since 2002’.

¹³¹ Lockheed Martin, ‘Thanks for Coming ...’, Twitter, 13 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1095790149798105091>.

¹³² Lockheed Martin, ‘We Joined @Nanaakua1 ...’, Twitter, 19 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1097873376490733568>.

¹³³ Lockheed Martin, ‘In 1944, the ...’, Twitter, 21 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1098658616691879936>.

¹³⁴ Northrop Grumman, ‘This #MLKDayofService We’ve ...’, Twitter, 21 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1087469894659203072>.

¹³⁵ Kevin Bruyneel, ‘The King’s Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory’, *History and Memory* 26, no. 1 (2014): 75–108, p75.

¹³⁶ Schneiker et al., ‘Hiding in Plain Sight’.

achievement lists^{137 138 139}, which invoke ideas of “Black excellence” in a space where this has not always been welcome¹⁴⁰, and presenting these companies as driving forward Black success.

Building on ideas of social progress, companies are additionally constructed as environmentally progressive. Positioning yourself as an environmental expert and ally is all the more important in an age where people are increasingly concerned about climate change¹⁴¹. This is congruent with aforementioned discourses of greenwashing, whereby companies use superficial representations of environmentally-friendly action in order to position themselves as positive for society. The first way in which this occurs here is through text, with all three arms manufacturers discussing their positive impact on the natural world. Raytheon¹⁴², for example, discusses its ‘Common Ground System’ which is designed for weather observation. In this case, the name “common ground” indicates that this is an issue for everyone, that bridges divides. Northrop Grumman¹⁴³ takes a slightly different approach, making an intertextual reference to the world of fiction: ‘Although weather manipulation on a personal level exists only in fiction, weather machine technology on a bigger scale is already on the horizon ...’. Emojis are, arguably, a modern form of “text”. These are also employed within tweets about the environment, making use of a communication format that is particular to contemporary times and makes content more eye-catching¹⁴⁴. They also make the content appear more child-like or ‘cute’ in its method of delivery, which ‘can project a favourable social image to consumers’¹⁴⁵.

Images showcasing the beauty of the natural world are also impactful within these social media feeds. These reinforce the textual relationship between the companies and the environment by repeating the representations in another format. Indeed, the natural world provides a particularly

¹³⁷ Lockheed Martin, ‘We Are Honored ...’, Twitter, 6 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1093185405447479299>.

¹³⁸ Lockheed Martin, ‘This #TBT We’re ...’, Twitter, 14 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1096106750850334720>.

¹³⁹ Lockheed Martin, ‘Thank You @blackenterprise ...’, Twitter, 6 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1103346911107530758>.

¹⁴⁰ Tara Nkrumah, ‘Problems of Portrayal: Hidden Figures in the Development of Science Educators’, *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 16 (2021): 1335–1352.

¹⁴¹ Alec Tyson and Brian Kennedy, ‘Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate’, *Pew Research Center: Science & Society* (blog), 23 June 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate/>.

¹⁴² Raytheon, ‘Our Common Ground ...’, Twitter, 7 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1082336065007034371>.

¹⁴³ Northrop Grumman, ‘Have You Ever ...’, Twitter, 8 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1082758855820525568>.

¹⁴⁴ Lockheed Martin, ‘Winter Storms and ...’, Tweet, Twitter, 20 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1098280886901059584>.

¹⁴⁵ Crystal T. Lee and Sara H. Hsieh, ‘Engaging Consumers in Mobile Instant Messaging: The Role of Cute Branded Emoticons’, *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 28, no. 7 (2019): 849–63, p849.

good opportunity for the deployment of visual material. Northrop Grumman¹⁴⁶, for example portray a high-contrast stormy sky, whilst Raytheon¹⁴⁷ takes a slightly different approach that makes clearer the relationship between the environment and technology by depicting clouds on a radar-like screen¹⁴⁸. Images demand attention because there is a specificity to them, especially through the generation of emotional response^{149 150}. In this case, the present obscures the absent – suffering and death – through the use of attractive or interesting environmental imagery.

The relationship between text and image is especially interesting with respect to an internet-specific element: alternative text (“alt text”). The use of alt text is common across the companies examined. Alt text is read by screen-readers used by visually impaired people, in order for them to understand what is contained within an image. It must be inputted manually, generating extra-workload. The use of alt text here, then, positions the companies as allies of visually impaired people. Chiarella et al.¹⁵¹ argue that tweets relating to “natural sciences” make use of extensive visual imagery and, as a result, more people and organisations should use alt text. One example in our case refers in the text to Raytheon’s ‘global system of ground antennas’¹⁵². It is illustrated with a photograph of three large spheres resembling golf balls, in a pastel-coloured sunrise haze. Interestingly, the alt text provides a purely factual description of the image, rather than attempting to explain it as visually attractive: ‘Receiving stations for the Joint Polar Satellite System's Common Ground System’. Without this alt text, many people would likely not know what the image showed, they would simply assess its beauty.

These companies are also represented as scientifically advanced drivers of technological progress beyond environmental monitoring. As one of the images shared by Raytheon¹⁵³ states, they deliver ‘innovation without limitation’. There is a strong focus upon space exploration, for example

¹⁴⁶ Northrop Grumman, ‘#DYK to Enhance ...’, Twitter, 8 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1082758850523136002>.

¹⁴⁷ Raytheon, ‘Our Advanced #Weather ...’, Twitter, 7 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1082381363876122625>.

¹⁴⁸ See also Lockheed Martin, ‘GOES-West - a Weather ...’, Twitter, 12 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1095361440347758593>.

¹⁴⁹ Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 511–31.

¹⁵⁰ Jackson et al., ‘Assessing Meaning Construction On Social Media’.

¹⁵¹ Domenico Chiarella, Justin Yarbrough, and Christopher A.-L. Jackson, ‘Using Alt Text to Make Science Twitter More Accessible for People with Visual Impairments’, *Nature Communications* 11, no. 1 (2020): 5803.

¹⁵² Raytheon, ‘Because More #weather ...’, Twitter, 9 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1083007991941685248>.

¹⁵³ Raytheon, ‘Raytheon Is at ...’, Twitter, 8 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1082766400161308673>.

Lockheed Martin¹⁵⁴ positions itself as an authority on space, explaining that they are ‘thrilled’ to be one of the five companies working with NASA to develop a prototype of a lunar habitat. Northrop Grumman¹⁵⁵ also positions itself as an authority on space by making use of an intertextual reference to the entertainment industry¹⁵⁶: ‘Hollywood loves adventure, & most of all it loves a spectacle. So it's no surprise that space travel movies are a big draw. But as space travel is evolving in real life, are Hollywood movies getting it right or is realism a moving target? ...’. Here, Northrop Grumman positions itself as a company who can “correct” common errors in public understanding as a result of their technological expertise. This tweet is accompanied by an image of Earth, taken from space with a sunburst emerging over the top, drawing the viewer’s attention. The wider context of space as a site of security¹⁵⁷ – with attendant potential for further militarisation – makes the distracting use of imagery all the more important in this case.

These tweets feature numerous, technical examinations of aircraft sold by these companies, presenting them as the cutting edge of technological progress. The technologies are, on occasion, also weapons, e.g. drones or “unmanned aerial vehicles”/UAVs but as Larsson¹⁵⁸ notes, the deployment of dual-use technology engenders plausible deniability about their use. Text – a minimal amount – is a common way of conveying the sense of technological expertise, e.g. ‘The F-21 is different, inside and out, delivering unmatched Make in India opportunities and strengthening@IAF_MCC. Meet the #F21’¹⁵⁹. Alternatively, this text is contained within a linked URL, as is the case for a Raytheon tweet¹⁶⁰. This links to an article on a website¹⁶¹ which discusses ‘Skyler low-power radar, the RF-based MESMER (from Raytheon Technologies and Department 13) and the multi-detecting Black Sage UASX.’ As in the Lockheed Martin example, technological expertise is emphasised through acronyms and terminology specific to the industry. The process of militarisation often results in the consumption of content that the public finds enjoyable in some way¹⁶².

¹⁵⁴ Lockheed Martin, ‘Thrilled to Be ...’, Twitter, 29 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1111726427932639233>.

¹⁵⁵ Northrop Grumman, ‘Hollywood Loves Adventure ...’, Twitter, 23 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/northropgrumman/status/1088194673913577472>.

¹⁵⁶ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*.

¹⁵⁷ For example, Cameron Hunter, ‘The Forgotten First Iteration of the “Chinese Space Threat” to US National Security’, *Space Policy* 47 (2019): 158–65.

¹⁵⁸ Larsson, ‘The Civil Paradox’.

¹⁵⁹ Lockheed Martin, ‘The F-21 Is...’, Twitter, 20 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/LockheedMartin/status/1098122460124377088>.

¹⁶⁰ Raytheon, ‘See How Our ...’, Twitter, 5 February 2019, <https://twitter.com/RaytheonTech/status/1092905711401619456>.

¹⁶¹ Raytheon, ‘Bad to the Drone’, 24 February 2019, <http://www.raytheonmissilesanddefense.com/news/2019/01/24/bad-drone>.

¹⁶² Nick Robinson, ‘Militarism and Opposition in the Living Room: The Case of Military Videogames’, *Critical Studies on Security* 4, no. 3 (2016): 255–75.

Examining those who work with nuclear weapons, Cohn¹⁶³ argues that language – especially acronyms and highly specific terminology – functions to construct a “club” of those who understand it, drawn against those who do not. In this case, the use of technical specifications functions in much the same way. This type of content is effective because people enjoy consuming it, being interpolated into the position of intelligent, technologically-informed citizens. The utilisation of technical terminology further functions to blur the boundaries with respect to any equipment that could reasonably be considered a dual-use technology¹⁶⁴. These might simply be interesting air or spacecraft with a range of technical specifications. There is thus a plausible reason for their creation beyond violence.

Overall, what is contained in these feeds is very positive, suggesting that these companies build rather than destroy, help rather than hurt, and improve rather than hold back. As Schneiker et al.¹⁶⁵ argue in another context of digital militarisation (in their case, private military and security companies’ Twitter feeds), the use of Twitter by arms companies ‘helps to distract from what these companies are actually doing’. Let us return, then, to the subject of absence. What is not in these feeds are materials that make us think of war. The representation of weapons and the aircraft used to deliver them is sanitised to contain only attractive or technical elements. The present, therefore, functions as a pretty distraction in this case. It is known that these weapons do *something*, otherwise what is the point of having them: either they kill or threaten to kill. This is not only absent in these feeds, but what is present here is an active distraction from these practices. Thus, we can ask: which actors bear responsibility for this suffering? These feeds do not pose this question and yet they do offer a clear answer: not us. They occasionally showcase the weapons they sell but present themselves as unrelated to the violence these cause. It is a representation, then, of anti-martial politics whereby these companies are involved in almost everything else *but war*. Where they may make planes and weapons (that others may or may not deploy) and drive forward social progress, space exploration, or environmental protection, but most definitely not war, violence, or harm.

Conclusion

Within this space, I have sought, in the most general terms, to highlight that the internet and social media spaces are interesting and important sites for the practice of “doing security”. More specifically, I have aimed to show that arms manufacturers’ social media presence is re/productive

¹⁶³ Carol Cohn, ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals’, *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718.

¹⁶⁴ Larsson, ‘The Civil Paradox’.

¹⁶⁵ Schneiker et al., ‘Hiding in Plain Sight’, p484.

of a tension between exposure and revelation that distracts from the harms their products cause ¹⁶⁶. As a result, we can say that this digital space is a militarised one, where two central elements support the continuation of the arms trade. Firstly, arms companies' presence within this space projects an image of accessibility and transparency. It is first of interest, therefore, that companies like this should even have social media profiles, alongside other large corporations such as McDonalds or Nike. Not only are they present, but they send a large volume of tweets – an average of 3.12 per day – enhancing their representation as open and available for scrutiny. As a personal reflection, these companies tweeted much more than I thought they would before I began this project. All of the social media feeds examined for this article are managed by a company called Sprinklr, whilst most of them appear to use paid-for Twitter advertisements to enhance their presentation as accessible and transparent. This, as Stavrianakis¹⁶⁷ has argued, can be called managed disclosure or selective openness. Secondly, I argue that it is the projection of this very openness that makes it possible to invisibilise the violence inflicted by these companies' products as they are presented as transparent entities with nothing to hide.

This tension of exposure and revelation is reinforced by what *is* present. Here, I made three observations: firstly, that these companies are portrayed as socially progressive. The companies emphasise the importance to their workforce especially of women and people of colour, showing that they uplift marginalised groups. Further, the arms manufacturers are shown to be champions of the environment, producing a range of monitoring equipment. Especially important in this case is the use of attractive imagery, which depicts storms and sunsets. Interestingly, the companies also make use of alt text to discuss these environmental images (and others), which implicitly represents them as allies to visually-impaired people. Finally, the companies are constructed as technological experts through their work on a variety of equipment, including space satellites. Here, the technical language deployed makes it pleasurable to consume this content because only those who are members of a linguistic "club" can understand the terminology used^{168 169}. Whilst these companies are presented as accessible and transparent, the content of their social media feeds functions as a distraction from the aforementioned harms caused by their products by presenting them as progressive.

Building on the work in this article, there are a range of other areas that are worthy of further consideration. More broadly, this article functions as a call for more work to be undertaken with

¹⁶⁶ Stampnitzky, 'Truth and Consequences?'

¹⁶⁷ Stavrianakis, 'Searching for the Smoking Gun? Methodology and Modes of Critique in the Arms Trade'.

¹⁶⁸ Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals'.

¹⁶⁹ Robinson, 'Militarism and Opposition in the Living Room'.

respect to the internet in a security studies context. Whilst there has been some stellar work done already, it is such a large arena developing at such a rapid pace, that considerably more attention needs to be paid to this area before we can claim to understand it as fully as we might. Interestingly, one group that is not commonly discussed within the context of arms manufacturers' progressive ideals is LGBT people. This would be worthy of further examination. It would also be interesting to more robustly unpack the advertising on Twitter – and other social media outlets – including the companies making use of this service and the audiences targeted. Are the aforementioned arms manufacturers making extensive use of advertising on this platform? What are the key themes showcased by these advertisements? Is it the same themes as their Twitter feeds or not? It would also be interesting – though beyond the scope of the approach in this article – to ask audiences about their perceptions of this advertising but, without a significant opening up of information, this is not likely to be a possibility in the near future.