

US Military Spends Millions to Study “Manipulation of Social Media”

Part of a Long-Term Effort to Spread Propaganda Through the Internet

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The Guardian [reports](#):

The activities of users of Twitter and other social media services were recorded and analysed as part of a major project funded by the US military, in a program that covers ground similar to [Facebook's controversial experiment](#) into how to control emotions by [manipulating news feeds](#).

Research funded directly or indirectly by the US Department of Defense's military research department, known as Darpa, has involved users of some of the internet's largest destinations, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Kickstarter, for studies of social connections and how messages spread.

Several of the DoD-funded studies went further than merely monitoring what users were communicating on their own, instead messaging unwitting participants in order to track and study how they responded.

The project list includes a study of how activists with the Occupy movement used Twitter as well as a range of research on tracking internet memes and some about understanding how influence behaviour (liking, following, retweeting) happens on a range of popular social media platforms like Pinterest, Twitter, Kickstarter, Digg and Reddit.

Unveiled in 2011, the SMISC [Social Media in Strategic Communication] program [was regarded](#) as a bid by the US military to become better at both detecting and conducting propaganda campaigns on social media.

“Through the program, Darpa seeks to develop tools to support the efforts of human operators to counter misinformation or deception campaigns with truthful information.” [“Truthful” as in government-approved?]

Studies which received military funding channeled through IBM included one called “Modeling User Attitude toward Controversial Topics in Online Social Media”, which analysed Twitter users' opinions on fracking.

“As another example, when anti-government messages are spread in social media, government would want to spread counter messages to balance that effort and hence identify people who are more likely to spread such counter messages based on their opinions.”

A study at Georgia Tech ... concluded: “Breaking news stories and world events – for example, the Arab Spring – are heavily represented in social media, making them susceptible topics for influence attempts via deception.” [We can’t tell if the researchers were pro or anti-deception; but given that the [U.S. and Britain have used Twitter to intentionally spread falsehoods](#) in other countries, we can take a wild guess.]

One of multiple studies looking into how to spread messages on the networks, titled “Who Will Retweet This? Automatically Identifying and Engaging Strangers on Twitter to Spread Information” did just this.

The researchers explained: “Since everyone is potentially an influencer on social media and is capable of spreading information, our work aims to identify and engage the right people at the right time on social media to help propagate information when needed.”

This story can only really be understood with a little context:

- We [noted 6 years ago](#) that the Pentagon is using artificial intelligence programs to try to predict how people will react to propaganda
- We’ve [documented for 5 years](#) that the Defense Department uses [disinformation](#) and [disruption](#) (and [here](#)) on the web to discredit activists and manipulate public opinion, just like it [smears traditional television and print reporters](#) who question the government too acutely
- We’ve long reported that the government [censors and manipulates social media](#). More proof [here](#)
- Edward Snowden revealed NSA documents showing that the U.S. government is attempting to [control, infiltrate, manipulate, and warp online discourse](#), and that spy agencies manipulate and disrupt web discussions to promote propaganda and discredit government critics

Postscript: We [explained](#) one aspect of this story – the importance of controlling which stories “go viral” – in February:

The government spends a great deal of manpower and money to monitor which stories, memes and social movements are developing the momentum to actually pose a threat to the status quo. For example, the [Federal Reserve](#), [Pentagon](#), [Department of Homeland Security](#), and other agencies all monitor social media for stories critical of their agencies ... or the [government in general](#). Other governments – and private corporations – do the same thing.

Why?

Because a story gaining momentum ranks high on social media sites. So it has a high probability of bursting into popular awareness, destroying the secrecy which allows corruption, and becoming a real challenge to the powers-that-be.

“Social proof” is a related concept. Social proof is the well-known principle stating that people will believe something if [most other people believe it](#). And see [this](#). In other words, most people have a herd instinct, so if a story ranks highly, more people are likely to believe it and be influenced by it.

That is why vested interests go to great lengths – using computer power and human resources – to monitor social media momentum. If a story critical of one of these powerful entities is gaining momentum, they will go to great lengths to kill its momentum, and destroy the social proof which comes with a lot of upvotes, likes or recommendations in social media.

They may choose to flood social media with comments supporting the entities, using [armies of sock puppets](#), i.e. [fake social media identities](#). See [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#).

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