Written by **Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.** on July 10, 2014

U.S. Military Funds Studies on How to Influence Social Media Use

The military is turning social media into a laboratory for its thought and emotion control experiments — experiments forcibly funded by the American taxpayer.

In an article published July 8, 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.

For years, this reporter has covered the various projects carried out by DARPA, including a $30 million program to [implant veterans](link) suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with small electronic sensors that will map their brains.

As part of its investigation of how to manipulate the behavior — online and off — of social media users, the military is collecting innumerable tweets, Facebook status updates, and other messages posted on various platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, etc.

The Pentagon's plan to convert the Internet into its own personal workshop is ironic given the fact that it actually created Arpanet, the precursor to the platform known today as the Internet.

On the page of the DARPA website devoted to presenting papers and studies related to its "[Social Media in Strategic Communication](link)" program, the research and development group claims that the purpose of the project is "to develop tools to support the efforts of human operators to counter misinformation or deception campaigns with truthful information."

Truthful information? The *Guardian* cities recent reports countering that claim:

> Papers leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden indicate that US and British intelligence agencies have been deeply engaged in planning ways to covertly use social media for purposes of propaganda and deception.

> Documents prepared by NSA and Britain's GCHQ (and previously published by the Intercept as well as NBC News) revealed aspects of some of these programs. They included a unit engaged in "discrediting" the agency's enemies with false information spread online.

Earlier this year, the Associated Press also revealed the clandestine creation by USAid of a Twitter-like, Cuban communications network to undermine the Havana government.

The network, built with secret shell companies and financed through a foreign bank, lasted more than two years and drew tens of thousands of subscribers. It sought to evade Cuba's stranglehold on the internet with a primitive social media platform.

Just days ago, *The New American* reported on the Defense Department's role in providing funding for a Facebook study aimed at measuring the ability to affect the emotions of users by controlling the stories that appear on their news feed.

The *Guardian*, in its exposé of the U.S. military's role as financier of secret social media manipulation experiments, lists several such grants, including those awarded to the University of Michigan, the University of Southern California, and Georgia Tech.

Although the academics and scientists running the laboratories conducting the military-funded experiments claim that their purpose is simply to observe and report online activity, the *Guardian* lays out a more sinister goal of the government's generous grant giving:

Several of the DoD-funded projects went further than simple observation, instead engaging directly with social media users and analysing their responses.

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."

In the paper, which included data gathered through actively engaging 3,761 people on Twitter around the topics of public safety and bird flu, the researchers added: "Unlike existing work, which often uses only social network properties, our feature set includes personality traits that may influence one's retweeting behaviour." [British standard spelling retained in the quotations from the Guardian]

The relevant question is whether the Pentagon is measuring behavior or manipulating it. If the latter, then it seems likely that the ultimate aim could be the identification of those social media users whose online activity marks them as potential muckrakers.

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