

## **Pop Wars. Popular Culture, Online Platforms, and the Representation of International Issues: The IDF Case\***

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This contribution reflects on the results of an exploratory qualitative analysis investigating how pop elements are used in the international communication of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), considering the English-language Twitter account. According to the narrative and aesthetic turns in international relations, security and military affairs can be conveyed even by popular entertainment. So then, digital militarism transfers military affairs to the terrains of social media. The qualitative content analysis results show how IDF employs pop elements to perform different kinds of militarism, namely essential militarism, contentious militarism, and normalizing militarism. Moreover, the peculiar tone of voice set by the recurrence of pop elements helps to dialogue with other international actors, crystalizing traditional polarizations. However, not all events can be conveyed by pop narratives: while confrontations and self-representation are frequently displayed through pop culture elements, reports on traditional security issues remain anchored to a narrative based on emergency alerts or emotional features.

**Keywords:** popular culture, online platforms, digital militarism, international communication, Twitter

### **A serious matter. Popular culture in international security issues**

This contribution reflects on the role of pop elements conveyed by the posts produced by military institutions on social network sites and online platforms in disseminating security issues. After describing the role of popular culture in narrating military and security affairs, the results of an exploratory qualitative analysis aimed at investigating pop elements in the international communication of the Israel Defense Forces (hereafter IDF) spread through the English-language Twitter account (@IDF), will be exposed.

Over the past few years, state representatives have taken advantage of online platforms to spread content to display positioning and expertise related to security issues (Anzera et al., 2019). Moreover, online presence has contributed to popularizing themes and actors

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otherwise far from public opinion. Indeed, the exponential growth in the global distribution of cultural products “makes world politics what it currently is” (Grayson et al., 2009, p. 157).

In an interdependent world (Keohane & Nye, 1977), the representation of world politics is a tool to exercise the power of defining the situation. “Hard” topics related to international issues, such as those involving the definition and explication of geopolitical space, can be conveyed by popular entertainment (Hughes, 2007).

Imaginaries contribute to defining matters of international relations (IR). The display of political power may be surreptitious and disguised: political processes, taken for granted, are the vehicle of a dominant reading of the international order, especially facing the traditional geography of the media industries. Consequently, it is essential to analyze popular geopolitics by understanding the practices attributing meaning to political space that does not end in practical or formal geopolitics but instead occurs in individuals’ everyday discourses and interactions (Dittmer & Bos, 2019).

At present, political events in world politics are explicitly configured as media events, determining an *aesthetic turn* (Bleiker, 2001). Hence, the representation of international affairs is an aesthetic construction, not a mimetic one. It is in the selection or exclusion of events from the public space, according to visibility strategies (Callahan, 2020), that power is exercised. This approach stems from the post-modernists questioning the adherence of the discipline of IR to factual principles; even popular and entertainment content can disseminate an idea of politics. Consequently, political reality can only exist when represented through the abstraction of events and their narrative organization.

As traditionally argued by scholars of international political communication, policymakers believe that the media help write the fates of conflicts, and their decisions are taken accordingly (Taylor, 1997). So, strategic narratives indicate that international political actors position themselves narratively in political space, affecting public perceptions about IR and acting on storytelling to place their actions and other actors in a narrative frame (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Pamment, 2014). Moreover, the effort in orienting narratives does not occur exclusively in institutional spaces but takes place in even unexpected arenas and involves actors who, traditionally, are not associated with politics (Hamilton, 2016).

The fields of popular culture and world politics are configured as a continuum: Grayson et al. (2009, p. 158) argue that popular culture and world politics are intertwined worlds in which “each is implicated in the practices and understandings of the other”.

## **The *pop* revolution in military affairs. Digital militarism and online platforms**

The visibility of international issues has affected military affairs: technological innovations play a substantial role in defining the relevance of conflicts and managing public attention (Livingston & Eachus, 1995; Robinson, 2005). Military confrontations become less visible due to increased military apparatus expertise in media management (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2015). Entertainment culture permeates representations of media wars. The link between

industrialization and the media and entertainment industry lead to the so-called *virtuous wars* (Der Derian, 2009). The sanitization of violence hides victims and direct military intervention, emphasizing the technological capabilities and the dematerialization of conflicts.

As suggested by the *securitization* idea, the inclusion of an issue among security matters, presenting it as an existential threat, allows for the shaping of emergency solutions outside the usual constraints of formal politics. The definitions and criteria that lead to the indexing of security issues result from an intersubjective process. Security issues are configured as *speech acts* since it is only through dialogical objectification that they can produce and justify actions (Buzan et al., 1998).

At the same time, the question of militarism in contemporary societies arises. Militarism is linked to the development of industrial societies, and it defines the centrality of armies in managing issues related to the security of states. Militarism intervenes in the legitimacy of violence in the codified forms of military practices. Hence, the armies become guarantors of collective objectives, while militarism helps clarify the behavioral, attitudinal or ideological, and structural dimensions (Skjelsbaek, 1979).

With the rise of digital communication, militarism moves to online platforms. Kuntsman and Stein (2015) define *digital militarism* as how militarization of spaces of everyday interaction, such as online platforms, has taken place. In this way, military culture is transferred to the terrains of social media,

and in the process, state violence is being practiced through other means - through acts of “liking” or “sharing”, through the visual syntax of the selfie, through the structures of feeling that social networking make uniquely possible (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015, pp. 7-8).

A game about visibility is undertaken: the military presence is visible and invisible simultaneously. On the one hand, violence and the army enter spaces otherwise dedicated to consultation or personal expression, such as online platforms, and break into everyday life, thanks to the perpetual connectivity provided by mobile devices. On the other hand, “the patina of the digital everyday can minimize and trivialize this violence, obscuring its visibility and mitigating its impact” (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015, p. 8).

*Militainment* (Stahl, 2009) suggests that the boundary between the military and entertainment has always been porous and negotiable. Military apparatuses aim at constituting citizens’ identities in relation to war by encouraging the interactivity of the latter with military contents, which increasingly respond to canons proper to a video-ludic aesthetic. Militainment is a threefold process (id.). First, it proposes a *clean war*, a presentation strategy that minimizes losses while making it possible to enjoy military affairs just like any other media product. Secondly, *technofeticism* exalts the technological potential of modern weapons, accelerating the process of gamification of the war. Finally, public opinion is channeled towards *support for the troops*. This strategy distances the public debate from the issues that concern the legitimacy of conflicts, shifting it towards gratitude towards the troops, implying consensus on the official management policies of military affairs.

## Case study selection and research methods

To assess the role of popularization in communicating military affairs, we will review the work of the IDF on Twitter<sup>1</sup>. We will analyze the English-language account (@IDF), which is more easily accessible to international public opinions.

The choice of the Israeli case is due to the peculiarity of the representation of conflicts involving the IDF. Traditionally, Israeli and Palestinian militaries are characterized by the asymmetry in regular forces and representation efforts. However, Israeli military and political forces have learned that efforts at coordinating traditional media do not always have the desired effect on public representation and perceptions. As summarized by the idea of #ParticipativeWars (Merrin, 2018), such tools are bypassed by the affective engagement of international audiences and the ability to impose a digital frame on events. In this way, weaker actors in terms of resources or consonance with traditional representations of conflicts manage to win the communicative wars. For this reason, part of the IDF's attention is turning towards a professional use of online platforms.

Previous investigations have focused on analyzing conflict communication, exploring soldiers' private communication on public platforms, and managing legitimate narratives by professionals employed in military communication (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015; Kohn, 2017; Golan & Eyal, 2018; Stern & Shalom, 2019).

This contribution investigates how ordinary content construction is hybridized with pop elements adopting the *platformativity* (Hands, 2013) perspective: online platforms and social media, with their logic (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), affect content production.

All posts published between October 1, 2018, and March 30, 2019, were analyzed (N=647). This timespan was considered significant enough to identify different events: international tensions, domestic crises, festivities, and the routine management of military affairs. The posts were collected using Twimemachine, a free tool that allows archiving old tweets.

The first step of the research involved conducting a thematic content analysis. An experienced coder analyzed the content produced by the IDF in a month using open coding. This sample of content allowed for the saturation of themes. In this way, mutually exclusive categories were identified, through which posted content was analyzed.

A single theme was attributed to each post, determined by textual content analysis. In the case of conflicts of attribution, non-textual elements were analyzed to determine the dominant description. In addition, residual uncertainties have been resolved through discussion with another experienced researcher familiar with the research themes. After theme identification and content classification (see Table 1), a qualitative analysis of the posts was conducted to answer the following research questions:

- *RQ1: How do pop elements materialize in the ordinary flow of IDF communication concerning the intents of digital militarism?*
- *RQ2: What functions do they serve in strategic and narrative terms?*

Themes	Total Tweets
Military and security issues	185
Conflicts and violence	147
Interactions with other actors	134
Army self-representation	90
Conflict alerts	59
Culture	18
Events	14
Tot.:	647

Table 1. *Thematic analysis: October 1, 2018 – March 30, 2019*

## A toolbox for identifying pop elements

This analysis aims to identify pop elements in the IDF's ordinary communication flow. The content subjected to thematic analysis was qualitatively inspected to identify and recompose the elements of the pop narrative present.

By pop elements within the narrative of the military institution, we mean all those clues that go beyond the rigid and bureaucratic military communication but conform to narrative and stylistic canons traditionally considered entertainment and leisure. However, such a dichotomous distinction is reductive and presents some gray areas. Indeed, Dittmer (2015, p. 47) sums up the difficulty of looking for pop elements in the production of content about international affairs:

(t)he problem lies in our conceptualisation of popular culture as a thing: an object that can be grasped, considered and analysed. [...] Rather, popular culture is a doing. It is what we do, in common, with others.

Pop culture can only be rendered by a prism of definitions built through abstraction and emphasis on specific relevant aspects. Such definitions dialogue with several interrelated phenomena. The relationship to Western society's peculiar conception of high culture; the quantitative dimension affecting circulation and distribution; the complex display of power, oppositions, ideologies, and hegemonies are just a few of the explanations that classical research has allocated to the recognition of popular culture as a social phenomenon (Storey, 2018). Popular culture is an intricate relationship involving dominant power structures, to which publics may respond by resorting to resistance or evasion (Fiske, 1989). In this milieu, production dynamics, cultural capital, diffusion, and circulation meet. Production efforts are not necessarily trivial - sometimes they are extensive and involve highly professionalized individuals, or they affect the *power-bloc* versus *people* relation

(Hall, 1981) - but the cultural capital used to enjoy and decode these products is accessible to most (Parker, 2011). Platforms contribute to the acceleration of these aspects: they broaden the audience of producers of meanings and users and they are configured as powerful subjects whose mechanisms (including *commodification*) (Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal 2018) constitute new asymmetries while they contribute to the uniformity that distinguishes communicative flows between ordinary users, institutions, and centers of power (Jenkins, 2006).

If it was already challenging to analyze the popular culture/world politics continuum in traditional media, it is still methodologically complicated to understand how each producer and receiver of information experiences a representation of reality based on aesthetic and affective reception and inscrutable technological logic (Crilley, 2021). Moreover, there are much more frequent contributions in which world politics is sought in popular culture (Caso & Hamilton, 2015) than the opposite.

Definitions can marginally restore the complexity of popular culture: in this contribution, we will consider popular culture in the production of military content as that of *an aesthetic perspective that attempts to respond to social media logic* (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) *by remediating* (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) *and remixing* (Castells, 2009) *practices, products and content traditionally associated with civilian expressions*.

The analysis was guided by the need to identify how popularization is combined, as, in the blend of different clues, one can understand how military institutions communicate. Following Rose (2016), the analysis focused on the combination of sites (particularly considering production and object) and modalities (technological, compositional, and social). The characteristics of pop elements are based on the following aspects:

- *formal*, such as the non-didactic use of emoticons,
- *content-based*, by including content in posts that refer to media, entertainment, popular culture,
- *experiential*, by including references to forms of civic lifestyle that draw from consumer culture,
- *practical*, using activities that insist on community-building and the engagement capabilities of the platforms' audiences, such as challenges or memes,
- *platformed*, strategically inserting hashtags, mentions, or other forms of dialogue facilitated by the platforms' features.

The use of these kinds of tools signals a high level of literacy on the part of those involved in curating the military institutions' accounts: in fact, it is assumed that those capable of handling such tools can create engaging texts, predicting their many possible public developments (Silvestri, 2016). This expertise is consonant with military actors' progressive specialization and professionalization in online platforms (Crilley, 2016). Our qualitative research focused on identifying these elements in the posts: we classified 119 out of 647 tweets containing a pop element (see Table 2). Each post was analyzed to detect the elements that met popularization. Content analysis was directed toward recognizing narrative strategies and regularities in production. The analysis included deep participation in the research and interpretation of the results since it was built on connotative codes based on the overall or symbolic meaning of content passages (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).



## What can (not) be memefied. Themes and formats of militarized pop communication

This section will assess the distribution and nature of pop elements in IDF posts. As seen in Table 1, posts that deal with topics explicitly related to military affairs and the public display of IDF intervention are numerous and significant. For example, the posts about military and security issues are 185; 147 are dedicated to crises and violent confrontations, while security alerts are recorded in 59 Tweets.

These categories, however, present the lowest number of pop items (see Table 2). Representation, in most cases, is tied to the canonical imaginaries of conflict and military affairs. The focus is on the military's actions, and it helps to affirm a form of *essential militarism*. The need for the armed forces is related to the security and survival of the state and interventions of a humanitarian nature (e.g., support for other states during natural disasters). Elements of an affective nature elicit an emotional and empathic reaction, based mostly on empathy and shared suffering, as demonstrated by longstanding trends (Heemsbergen & Lindgren, 2014; Manor & Crilley, 2018).

The pop dimension is also made explicit in a peculiar tone of voice, in which irony and argumentative wit take center stage. This new expressive punctuation is very frequent in the dimension that hosts the most significant number of pop elements, namely the one involving interactions with other actors (54 posts out of 134). The practices of the platforms, such as ironic memes or challenges, are flanked by an emphasis on the use of a particular communicative style based on irony. Dialogical forms aim to generate engagement in which, calling into question several actors (often by *naming and shaming*), the soft language of diplomacy is abandoned to adopt a more popular one. The practices of transformative diplomacy (Duncombe, 2017) objectify and crystallize international disputes (e.g., with "rogue" actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah) through the adoption of expressive formulas closer to the users of online platforms. In *contentious militarism*, the armed forces are entitled to enter political disputes, deal with territories' defense and identify legitimate actors. In addition, part of the actions of objectification of disputes has as a polemical objective the broadcast media, reporting to the public what is considered incorrect information, denouncing inaccuracies, and exposing their truth of facts, even mentioning the accounts of international media. These interventions confirm the ongoing process of securitization of information, meaning the ability of information to act on security issues and the tendency of governments to transform the issues (and dangers) surrounding information and disinformation into security issues (Anzera & Massa, 2021).

The self-representation of the armed forces also responds to canons of socialization and familiarization with army routines: In fact, there is a thematic lightening of the topics covered. Pop elements are present in 31 posts out of 90. The armed forces are shown in their most human traits, especially concerning media events (participating, for example, in the communicative buzz around events of global importance) and festivities. Furthermore, the

affective practices are directed towards the personalization of the soldiers, emphasizing individual stories, especially those capable of provoking an emotional reaction (an example of this is the filming of family reunions, but also those stories in which the journey of soldiers of Arab origin is told). Then, *normalizing militarism* intends to portray the armed forces as security professionals who play family roles and have peculiar and “modern” interests outside of their work and loyalty to the army.

Theme	Pop Elements
Interactions with other actors	54
Army self-representation	31
Culture	11
Military and security issues	10
Conflicts and violence	9
Events	4
Conflict alerts	0
Tot.:	119

Table 2. *Pop elements: distribution*

## Just for fun? The militarization of pop communication in international confrontations

This section will explore pop communication elements in presenting international disagreements. Here, the simplification of themes and languages follows a clear popularization intent while sharpening the polemical tone of confrontational interventions with other actors (political, military, or civilian) in the international system.

First, witty language is often used to dialogue with the international media, correct representations, and question major broadcast media. This intent is demonstrated by the tone with which the IDF apostrophizes the broadcaster Sky News: “Hey @SkyNews, we don’t mean to do your job, but we have some news you should have covered” (March 25, 2019), followed by a graphic explanation.

The aim is to correct international framing by establishing a direct dialogue with the information producers.

In other cases, the logic of appropriation of typical platform formats, such as *memes*, is wielded from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the insertion of memes into users’ conversations through the embodiment of their practices makes it possible to reach audiences who tend not to be interested in IR, showing them a version of the facts oriented towards achieving a political result. Platform logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) serves to amplify a message while presenting a simplified version of the facts, sometimes conveyed by irony. But, on the other hand, the use of expedients such as memes outlines creating a community.



The specificity of the format lies not only in the audiences' remixing practices (Castells, 2009) but also in the ability of such content to foster a community whose members understand the many underlying layers of meaning (Shifman, 2014).

The use of memes and challenges to spread irony, insults, and verbal brawl-like dialogues (especially when publicly apostrophizing actors such as Hamas or Hezbollah) helps to objectify and crystallize longstanding conflicts. Such tools legitimize heated confrontations and polarizing public opinions (see Fig. 1). Irony is a way to enact the public display of ethics by conveying dominant values: humor minimizes international criticism, mainly when due to lack of recognition (Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2019). Irony allows the debate to move from questions concerning the *truth* of what is being told to questions concerning fairness (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2021). Public opinions may focus on the opportunity of using such popular devices to deal with serious issues such as international security while neglecting to verify the correctness of what has been asserted. So, turning into memes the protagonists of the political and military life of neighboring countries, as in the case of Iranian political leaders, contributes to shift the debate in the frame of the insult, objectifying and crystallizing longstanding controversies and contributing to set the conversational standards within the chrisms of *incivility*. The transmission of deliberately aggressive and simplifying messages allows audiences to be targeted and their reactions to being polarized.

At the same time, international audiences are called into question when references to global consumer cultures (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013) are used as a hook to illustrate the dangerousness of international actors. Consider the following tweet:

Iran annually funnels \$1 billion to Hezbollah in Lebanon for terror - including attack tunnels into #Israel. This money is equivalent to: 333,333,333 @McDonalds Happy Meals. Let that sink in. #CondemnTheTunnels.

The pattern is repeated several times, drawing monetary equivalences with consumer products, such as Coke, with digital services, such as the subscription to the dating app Tinder, news services (Wall Street Journal), or monetary donations to associations such as Amnesty or Human Rights Watch.

A similar scheme uses irony to denounce the perceived hypocrisy of international institutions. For example, the tweet "Saying a violent riot is a 'peaceful protest' is like saying @shakira's hips lie...They just don't. #StopHamas" is inserted in a thread in which a series of witty metaphors aim to generate awareness in the account's public (e.g., "Using knives at a 'protest' is like using sandpaper as toilet paper... You just don't. #StopHamas").

Platforms are configured as "third places" (Papacharissi, 2015): on the one hand, they allow interactions and engagement on issues far from everyday contexts; on the other hand, the networks supported by platforms erase traditional geographies and constitute a new space, in which cultural references, practices, languages draw borderless but ephemeral communities.



Fig. 1. A meme published by the IDF Twitter account

## Discussions and conclusions

The use of pop elements by the IDF appears to be a strategic choice aimed at delineating peculiar forms of militarism destined to intertwine with the practices of online platforms. We can hypothesize that such recourse to pop elements serves to minimize the contrast between the desired homogeneity of actors perceived as powerful, in a potentially asymmetrical relationship to platform users, so that they can exert control over the meanings of symbolic elements (Hall, 1981; Fiske, 1987) and the fragmentation that characterizes contemporary *mediascapes*, in which imaginative processes configure new social practices (Appadurai, 1996). Pop elements are inserted within the normal flows of communication. However, not all events can be the object of ironic or soft narratives: the episodes of canonical violence remain anchored to a narrative based on emergency alerts or emotional features. At the same time, the practices of pop communication are founded on a peculiar tone of voice. New forms of militarism emerge (RQ1): alongside the more traditional one, there is a militarization of international controversies, which the army is entitled to enter by creating its frame and adopting its canons of representation, and a form of individualizing militarization, aimed at normalizing the members of the army, working on the creation of empathy.

These elements are intended to serve several functions (RQ2): they aim to make conflicts more interactive and participatory, as described by the insights of militainment (Stahl, 2009) in the age of digital wars (Merrin, 2018). Moreover, this participation results in a willingness to exacerbate the fractures of public opinion. The invitation to emotionally process contentious and conflicts, as well as the fragmentation induced by forms of representation that, far from the canonical practices of diplomacy (Duncombe, 2017), take the form of non-politically correct content, is aimed at amplifying conflicts, rather than recomposing them.

This study has limitations: first, it does not consider, at this stage, the reactions of the public (Pears, 2016). Moreover, focusing on only one account for a limited period and using only qualitative research techniques allows for identifying some recurring traits, but not

patterns of using pop elements in IR. Future research should focus on broadening the range of actors in the digital ecosystem while comparing the practices and outputs of different official actors.

## Biographical note

Alessandra Massa holds a PhD in Communication, Research, Innovation from Sapienza University of Rome. She works mainly on international political communication, popular geopolitics, digital diplomacy and international implications of platform use. She has collaborated on several research projects, working with multidisciplinary teams on the following topics: new generations and radicalization, online platforms and international relations, public sector communication and politics, and gender and identity. Among his most recent publications: (with G. Anzera) *Media digitali e relazioni internazionali (Digital media and international relations)*, Guerini, Milan.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/idf>