Single Lanes: The uni-directionality of military engagement with Indian politicians on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Influencers across the world play a crucial role in shaping public narratives. The role of defence veterans as influencers of the political discourse has not been evaluated systematically for India. Defence veterans are an interesting group to study because their views provide us a potential window into the views of those in the active service, which would have been difficult otherwise since active defence personnel is restricted from making public statements. In this work, we analyze the interaction between defence veterans and political actors on Twitter. We find that the engagement between veterans and political actors on Twitter is highly uni-directional and driven primarily by highly-followed or favorably-polarised influencers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → **Social networks**.

KEYWORDS

politicians, defence veterans, polarization, social media, network analysis, twitter

INTRODUCTION

Indian democracy has successfully avoided a coup by managing the delicate balance of civil-military relations. One major defining factor for this balance is that the defence personnel kept themselves out of politics, and politicians largely limited their participation in the defence service's internal functioning. However, in recent times we have been seen more engagement from both sides, indicative of disruption of the delicate balance. In this paper, we use frequency studies and networks analysis to systematically map the connections and conversations between Indian political leaders and self-described veterans of the Indian military forces on Twitter. We find evidence for networks of polarization on social media around the notion of one party best aligned with the nation's security interests. The findings indicate that the current self-described defence-related accounts make posts that strongly favor the current ruling party at the center (BJP).

RELATED WORK

Social media has been the driving force of elections across the globe [1, 3, 6, 8, 11, 16, 22, 24]. There have been several political events around various parts of the Global South, in which social media and often Twitter specifically have played a precipitating role in political and electoral polarization in various countries [9, 10, 14].

Past work has shown the role that influencers play in politics by shaping narratives [19], deciding election outcomes [18], and amplifying political polarization [5, 20]. In India, too, politicians have moved towards a systematic and extensive use of social media to further the narratives in their favor [2, 7]. In the past, the current ruling party has successfully used sportspersons and celebrities to endorse and further their narratives [4, 15]. However, studies examining the effect of influencers on political discourse in India have overlooked an important group of defence-veterans as influencers who are seen as a positive force in India [12, 13, 23]. This study systematically explores the relationship between defence veterans and politicians, as observed on Twitter.

METHODOLOGY

Data

We built a database of defence-veteran users on Twitter by iteratively snowballing an initial seed list of manually-selected defence accounts. We collect 1000 most recently followed accounts for each seed account and retain only those with descriptions containing defence-related words - 'army,' 'Army,' 'navy,' 'Navy,' 'Command,' 'Defence,' 'Commander,' 'Lieutenant,' 'Cpt,' 'Captain,' and 'Major' resulting
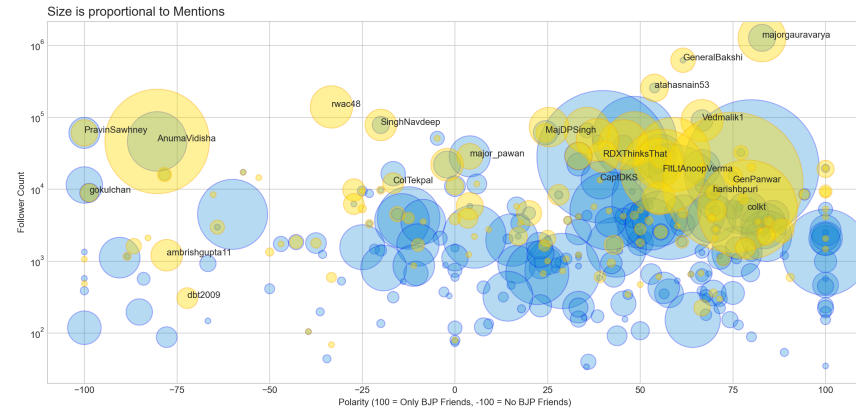
Figure 1: Uni-Directionality of Twitter Mentions. Blue circles represent the number of times a defence-veteran mentioned politicians and yellow circles represent the number of times they were mentioned by politicians

in 266 accounts. We iteratively run this process a second time on all 266 accounts resulting in a final list of 1600 accounts. These 1600 accounts were then manually inspected, and accounts from countries other than India were removed. The final resulting 1300 accounts were manually classified into four categories - (a) official (official defence organisations or offices); (b) self-asserted veterans (individuals claiming to have served in the forces); (c) related to defence (individuals claiming to be related to veterans as spouse or children); (d) others.

Analysis

Our analysis relies on Tweets collected from self-asserted defence-veterans and politicians using the Twitter API from January 2021 to October 2021. We obtain a list of politicians from previous work [17] containing about 30,000 political actors in Indian Twitter. We primarily use user-mentions as a measure of directional engagement. To visualise our findings, we generously use scatter-plots and network diagrams created using Gephi.

Table 1: Top-10 defence-veterans most mentioned by politicians during the period of study

Twitter Username	Mention Count
GenPanwar	3073
AnumaVidisha	1545
FltLtAnoopVerma	542
PravinSawhney	398
majorgauravarya	346
colkt	335
kayjay34350	284
gokulchan	264
RDXThinksThat	262
LtGenGurmit	206

Table 2: Top-10 politicians most mentioned by defence-veterans during the period of study

Twitter Username	Mention Count
narendramodi	769
rajnathsingh	406
AjaybhattBJP4UK	323
AmitShah	247
BJP4India	246
rashtrapatibhvn	245
INCIndia	181
myogiadityanath	146
DrSJaishankar	134
RahulGandhi	127

VISUALISING MENTION VOLUMES

In Figure 1, the blue circles represent the number of times a defence-veteran has tagged a politician. The yellow circles represent the number of times a politician has tagged the veteran. Qualitatively, we define *bi-directional engagement* as an overlap of similarly-sized yellow and blue circles. The polarity of a defence-veteran is inferred from the party affiliations of the politicians followed by the veteran. We make the following claims:

(1) Politicians' engagement with a defence-veteran is highly influenced by the follower count of the veteran ($\beta = 4.797 * 10^{-4}$). This influence is, in generally, greater than the influence of the polarity of the account ($\beta = 5.545^{-3}$). A key example here is that of Anuma Vidisha (a veteran strongly polarized against BJP) who receives significant engagement from politicians of all parties. We list the top-10 most mentioned defence-veterans in Table 1.

(2) Follower count and polarisation compensate each other. In clearer terms, as the polarity of a veteran account increases, the effect of its follower count on engagement decreases and vice-versa ($\beta = -4.039 * 10^{-6**}$).

(3) Qualitatively, we observe far more (and larger) blue circles in Figure 1 than yellow circles. This points to a certain uni-directionality in the nature of engagement between politicians and veterans, which we explore further in the following section.

NETWORK OF MENTIONS ON TWITTER

While Figure 1 establishes our position from a purely frequentist perspective, we explore these mentions further by visualising the entire network of mentions spanning politicians and defence-veterans. Figure 2 shows the directional connections between defence-veterans and politicians. We use the Fruchterman-Reingold [21] force-directed algorithm in Gephi to generate this visualization. The yellow nodes represent politicians mentioned by defence-veterans, whereas the blue nodes represent defence-veterans mentioned by politicians. The size of a node is scaled proportionally to its out-degree. Edges are colored according to their source. In other words, a blue-colored edge represents a tweet from a defence-veteran mentioning a politician and a yellow-colored edge represents a tweet from a politician mentioning a defence-veteran. Please note that the edge weights have been re-scaled to aid legibility.

The key observation from Figure 2 is the wide and pervasive presence of blue edges signaling an indiscriminate and far more frequent directional engagement from defence-veterans to politicians. This engagement is not reciprocated as implied by the dwarfed presence of yellow edges emerging majorly out of a few prominent politicians such as Mandeep Bajwa and Harbir Singh Suri. This pattern of engagement may imply the following:
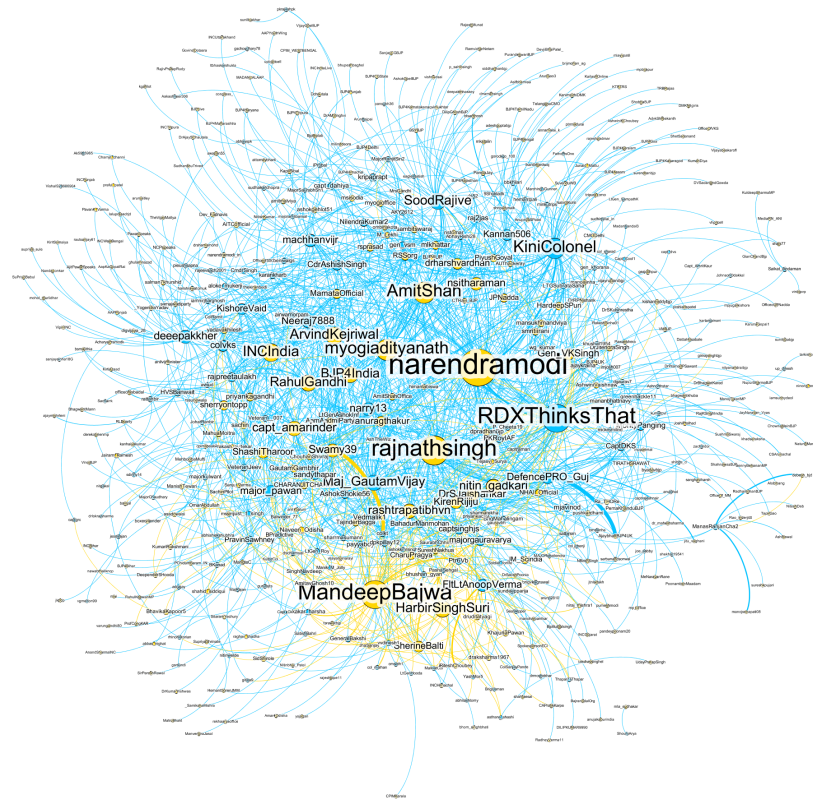
Figure 2: Twitter Mentions Network. Blue nodes represent defence-veterans while yellow nodes represent politicians. A blue edge represents a veteran mentioning a politician and vice-versa.

(1) Defence-veterans accounts often tweet as general *citizens* reaching out to elected representatives with problems and greetings. This behaviour may have been artificially inflated due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during which the study was conducted, where calls for oxygen and hospital beds were widespread. Table 2 lists the top-10 politicians mentioned by veterans during the period of study. We note that of these top 10, only 2 accounts are non-BJP.

(2) Politicians are highly selective when it comes to the defence-veterans they engage with. This careful selectivity hints at the value of this cachet of social media influencers for a politicians' online presence.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

Politicians derive support and influence from various influencers on Twitter, notably journalists, political commentators, defence veterans, and actors [4, 15]. Apart from tapping into these networks, a politician must also tweet for the general public. Hence on the directionality of engagement, the non-reciprocating nature of a politicians' engagement isn't surprising. The fact that the most mentioned politicians are affiliated to BJP (the ruling party) isn't surprising either, but what is interesting is that there are a select few defence accounts they choose to engage with heavily. We establish that these accounts are either highly followed accounts or highly polarized.

We find that highly networked influencers drive the relationship between politics and defence. The highest engagements between politicians and defence-related accounts are centered on a few highly influential accounts that are vocal on social media. We see from the data that any tweet from a politician that is defence-related gets much more attention on social media than a politician's average messages, implying that for a politician, the appearance of being military-leaning is of practical value in terms of the Twitter attention economy.

The military, as an institution, demands respect as the country's first line of defense. In India, defence services have generally been regarded as credible organizations that enjoy civil society's goodwill. The analysis of the communication between accounts of defence-veterans and politicians allows for a reasonable proxy to assess how politicians choose to shape their relations with the defence services. If not an immediate institutional capture, the analysis does reveal a favourable alignment of the defence services with the political vision of the current government at the Centre.

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