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Propaganda Hybridation: PMC Wagner Exploitation of Islamic State Content

FEDERICO BORGONOV, GIULIA PORRINO, SILVANO RIZIERI LUCINI

Federico Borgonovo is an analyst and researcher at the Italian Team for Security Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies – ITSTIME. He has a BA in Political Sciences for International Relations at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) and MA in Security Policies (PoliSi) earned at UCSC in Milan, with a final thesis on “Digital Ethnography on Telegram as a Counter-Terrorism Tool”. He specialized in digital ethnography, social media intelligence, and social network analysis. He focused on monitoring terrorist propaganda and modeling recruitment tactics on digital environment, with particular attention to new communication technologies implemented by terrorist organizations. His research activities are oriented in particular on Islamic terrorism and right-wing extremism.

Giulia Porrino is a research-analyst at the Italian Team for Security Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies - ITSTIME. She is specialized in digital ethnography, social media intelligence, social network analysis, and socio-semantic network analysis. Her research activities are oriented on right-wing extremism, with a focus on PMC Wagner. She has a BA in Linguistic Sciences (Russian and Chinese) for International Relations at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, and a MA in Security Policies earned at UCSC in Milan, with a final thesis on “Between Strategic Communication and Hate-Speech Detection: Social Network Analysis and Socio-Semantic Network Analysis of the PMC Wagner”.

Silvano Rizieri Lucini is a research-analyst at the Italian Team for Security Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies – ITSTIME. He has a BA in Linguistic Expert for International Relations at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) in Brescia, a MA in European and International Politics earned as well at UCSC in Milan a Master in Middle Eastern Studies (MIMES) at ASERI. He specialized in digital HUMINT (Human Intelligence) and OSINT/SOCMINT (Open Source and Social Media Intelligence) oriented on Islamic terrorism, Whitejihadism and right-wing extremism. He focused on monitoring terrorist network (from clear web to dark and deep web), with particular attention to new communication strategies implemented by terrorist organizations.

Abstract

The PMC Wagner is one of the main players that emerged during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The study aims to investigate the presence of communicative hybridisation in the communication of the PMC Wagner on Telegram. The study is based on a case study of a channel exploiting pro-IS propaganda and jihadist visual motifs with more than 100,000 subscribers. The analysis of the content related to the channel shows a good understanding of IS propaganda: those replicate the style of IS propaganda and are used to disseminate pro-Russia materials.

Through the communicative hybridisation, the target audience expands to include extremist Muslims galvanized by jihadist propaganda and PMC Wagner veterans who fought in the civil war in Syria and who came into contact with the violent subculture typical of the Islamic State. The exploitation by PMC Wagner of different forms of communicative extremism is a phenomenon to be monitored as this strategy allows content to be modulated through styles, languages, and visual motifs.

La PMC Wagner è uno dei principali attori emersi durante il conflitto russo-ucraino. Lo studio si propone di indagare la presenza di ibridazione nella comunicazione della PMC Wagner su Telegram. Lo studio si basa sul caso studio di un canale che sfrutta la propaganda pro-IS e la simbologia jihadista con oltre 100.000 iscritti. L'analisi dei contenuti relativi al canale mostra una buona comprensione della propaganda dello Stato Islamico: replicano lo stile e diffondono materiale pro-Russia. Attraverso l'ibridazione comunicativa, il target di riferimento si amplia fino a includere musulmani estremisti galvanizzati dalla propaganda jihadista e veterani della PMC Wagner che hanno combattuto nella guerra civile in Siria e che sono entrati in contatto con la sottocultura violenta tipica dello Stato Islamico. Lo sfruttamento da parte della PMC Wagner di diverse forme di estremismo comunicativo è un fenomeno da monitorare poiché questa strategia consente di modulare i contenuti attraverso stili, linguaggi e simboli.

Keywords

PMC Wagner, Jihad, Propaganda, Telegram, Media House

1. Introduction

The PMC Wagner is one of the main players that emerged during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict¹. The PMC Wagner initially was involved in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region in 2015, but its actions may be traced back to Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014². Outside Russia, the PMC Wagner has conducted operations in Syria since late 2015, facing the Islamic State (IS). With more than a thousand fighters on the ground in Syria, the PMC Wagner was able to capture Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. The PMC Wagner mercenaries carried out the "dirty work" against IS on the ground while being furnished and equipped by the Russian Ministry of Defence and assisted in the air by Russian jet planes. Two Syrian military companies were trained by the PMC Wagner, who later joined operations³.

¹ Marco Lombardi, 'Russia-Ucraina: Oltre La Guerra Ibrida, Verso Il Techno-Cognitive Warfare', *Sicurezza Terrorismo Società*, 2022.

² Christopher Faulkner, 'Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa', *CTC SENTINEL* 15 (June 2022).

³ Andreas Heinemann-Grüder and Stephen Aris, 'Russia's State-Sponsored Killers: The Wagner Group', application/pdf, 22 December 2022, 9 p., <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000588677>.

The PMC Wagner engages in a variety of tasks, including organizing training exercises, combating opposition groups, and forcefully dispersing protesters. It also has business interests in the mining and extractive sectors⁴. PMC Wagner has been instrumental in reinforcing Russia's troops worldwide, but as its deaths increase, it needs more mercenaries to fight. The PMC Wagner spent months recruiting among Russia's prisoners, but it stopped in February 2023. As a result, online propaganda's significance for the recruiting process has increased. Given its nature, it is becoming more important to investigate how PMC Wagner uses online propaganda in the digital sphere.

The study aims to investigate the presence of hybridization in PMC Wagner's communication on Telegram. Since 2014, PMC Wagner has fought on various battlefields and has met numerous actors who communicate and spread propaganda via social media. For this reason, the research question is the following:

2. RQ: Is there evidence of communicative hybridization in the PMC Wagner Telegram ecosystem?

To answer the RQ, digital ethnography is the best method for analysing and recreating digital communities and the processes that take place within them. In this way, by studying and analyzing communication processes the authors can decode the organisation's interpretative keys.

The first part of the paper will consider a case study of a PMC Wagner Telegram channel⁵. The authors will proceed by conducting a linguistic, brand and video analysis of the channel. Subsequently, the possible effects of this hybridization on the digital ecosystem will be discussed.

3. Case study

Through digital ethnography (covert non-participant observation) within the PMC Wagner Telegram ecosystem, a channel exploiting pro-IS propaganda and jihadist visual motifs⁶ with more than 100,000 subscribers was

⁴ Kimberly Marten, 'Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (4 May 2019): 181–204; Emmet Foley and Christian Kaunert, 'Russian Private Military and Ukraine: Hybrid Surrogate Warfare and Russian State Policy by Other Means', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (30 July 2022): 172–92; Raphael Parens, 'The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali' (Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2022).

⁵ The name of the channel is not mentioned to not further spread PMC Wagner propaganda.

⁶ Jonathan Matusitz and James Olufowote, 'Visual Motifs in Islamist Terrorism: Applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory', *Journal of Applied Security Research* 11, no. 1 (2 January 2016):

identified. The channel is part of the bottom-up ecosystem, which is mainly «characterized by actors who have some connection to the combat field, either directly or indirectly»⁷.

The channel, created on 7 January 2016, was first identified through a post forwarded by a bottom-up channel openly affiliated with PMC Wagner whose main activity is the production and spread of propaganda material dedicated to the mercenary company. Through the “export chat history” function integrated into Telegram, it is possible to identify numerous other connections to the PMC Wagner bottom-up ecosystem: of about 13000 posts, about 900 were forwards, with many of them coming from pro-Russian or PMC Wagner channels. Another relevant link is identifiably analysing the videos, where is present Vladlen Tatarsky, whose real name was Maxim Fomin, a pro-Wagner blogger, and influencer. Vladlen Tatarsky was extremely influential in the PMC Wagner Telegram ecosystem and, before his death, was one of the main propaganda spreaders⁸.

At a starting point the channel, considering the profile pictures and the *t.me* link, and the use of logos, symbols, and visual motifs, reminds an IS Nashir channel⁹. Despite its appearance, the focus is the publication of PMC Wagner material and propaganda, with a strong use of memetic warfare¹⁰.

However, the main element of interest regarding communicative hybridisation in the PMC Wagner Telegram ecosystem is found in the videos produced and the communicative posture of the channel. Through those it becomes a sort of media house as a jihadist propaganda producer but with pro-Wagner content. This hybridisation is strengthened by the use of the Arabic language within the videos.

4. Exploiting Jihadism

A jihadist media house is an actor who, in addition to having a logo and a defined name, contributes to propaganda through its own (branded) production and not only through the relaunch of third-party materials. The similarity with the jihadist Nashir channels is purely aesthetic and not technical or

18–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610.2016.1104276>.

⁷ Giulia Porrino, ‘Pro-Wagner Gaming Subculture: How the PMC Gamified Recruitment and Propaganda Processes’, *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* 17 (2023).

⁸ Giulia Porrino, ‘Tatarsky: implosione della rete?’, *ITSTIME* (blog), 2 April 2023, <https://www.itstime.it/w/tatarsky-implosione-della-rete-by-giulia-porrino/>.

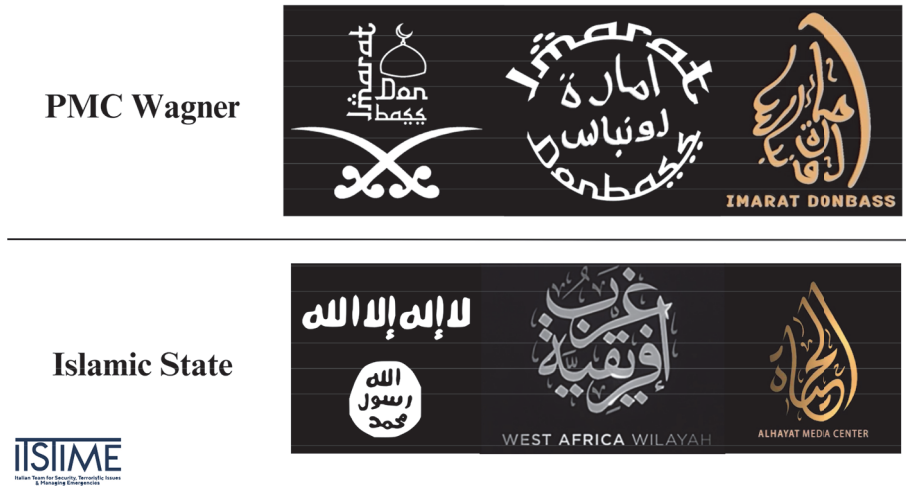
⁹ Michael Krona, ‘Mediating Islamic State| Collaborative Media Practices and Interconnected Digital Strategies of Islamic State (IS) and Pro-IS Supporter Networks on Telegram’, *International Journal of Communication* 14, no. 0 (8 March 2020): 23.

¹⁰ Tom De Smedt et al., ‘Handbook of Hate Memes’ (European Union, June 2022).

strategic. The channel is a media house that transposes PMC Wagner propaganda with the symbols of jihad, especially of IS. Pro-IS media houses employ resources and skills to maintain their online presence¹¹, therefore they need to have a clear image to spread. The territorial media units (linked to the Wilayat) the institutional media houses and the supporter's media houses rarely change their logos. By contrast, the pro-Wagner channel changed its logo three times in one year (2022-2023). The features of the logos rely on typical jihadist communication techniques:

- territorial affiliation similar to Wilayah¹²;
- the font resembles the Arabic language;
- mainstream jihadist symbology (shahada, black and white colours, scimitars).

Figure 1



The use of the term *Имарата Донбасс* (trasl. “*Imirata Donbas*”, trad. “*Emirate of Donbas*”) is an element intended to reflect the geographical and symbolic dimension of the disputed territory (the Donbas) in this case, which is not defined as a province.

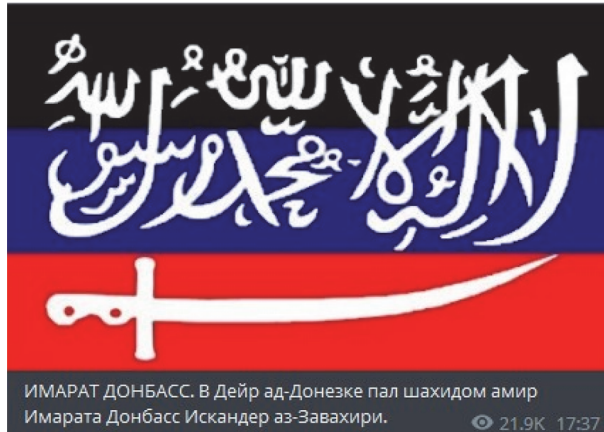
In Telegram, it is possible to search for specific words inside one single chat or channel. On 31 August 2018, “Emirate of Donbas” was mentioned

¹¹ Ahmad Shehabat et al., ‘Encrypted Jihad: Investigating the Role of Telegram App in Lone Wolf Attacks in the West’, *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 3 (October 2017): 27–53, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.3.1604>.

¹² Jacob Zenn, ‘The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries’ 13, no. 1 (2021): 19.

for the first time and it accompanied a picture of the flag of Donetsk People's Republic, with a shahada and a scimitar (figure 2).

Figure 2



The analysis of the content related to “Emirate of Donbas”, especially video materials, shows a good understanding of IS propaganda: those replicate the style of IS propaganda but are used to push PMC Wagner and pro-Russia content.

The videos can be divided into two categories:

- The first category is composed of short videos showing military operations, usually from an aerial view. They start immediately on the action, with Nasheed as a background, and are identifiable by the logo on the upper right angle of the video.
- The second type of video highlights knowledge of IS propaganda. Music, symbology, and video structure are used to emphasize PMC Wagner propaganda.

5. Conclusion

The channel exploits several jihadist stylistic elements but avoids jihadist content per se. The hybrid use of propaganda is functional to the recruitment process as it expands the possible targets that PMC Wagner addresses. In fact, PMC Wagner aims to recruit far-right and pro-violence users. Through this channel, the target audience expands to include extremist Muslims galvanized by jihadist propaganda and PMC Wagner veterans who fought in the civil war in Syria and who came into contact with the violent subculture typical of the Islamic State.

The adoption and exploitation by PMC Wagner of various forms of extremism is a phenomenon to be monitored as this strategy allows content to be modulated through styles, languages, and visual motifs relating to various types of extremism, based on the target audience that wants to achieve.

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Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società si avvale dei contributi di studiosi, policy maker, analisti, operatori della sicurezza e dei media interessati all'ambito della sicurezza, del terrorismo e del crisis management. Essa si rivolge a tutti coloro che operano in tali settori, volendo rappresentare un momento di confronto partecipativo e aperto al dibattito.

La rivista ospita contributi in più lingue, preferendo l'italiano e l'inglese, per ciascuno dei quali è pubblicato un Executive Summary in entrambe le lingue. La redazione sollecita particolarmente contributi interdisciplinari, commenti, analisi e ricerche attenti alle principali tendenze provenienti dal mondo delle pratiche.

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