



A Case Study Demonstrating CNA's Social Media Analysis Capabilities: USMC Twitter Activity Relating to the 2021 Extremism Stand-Down

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US government institutions, such as the Department of Defense (DOD) and the US Marine Corps (USMC), have long recognized the importance of maintaining a robust social media presence. The DOD (@DeptofDefense) has been on Twitter since 2009, has posted more than 32,000 tweets, and has 6.3 million followers; the USMC (@USMC) has been on Twitter since 2007, has posted more than 16,000 tweets, and has 1.5 million followers. These robust Twitter accounts are designed to engage with a broad range of interested individuals.

Communication on Twitter, though, comes with significant risk: messages can be misinterpreted, disinformation can spread rapidly, and a single poorly chosen word can result in widespread outrage. Each of these risks is a problem in any circumstance but is particularly troublesome when a Twitter user (such as DOD or the USMC) is genuinely interested in the health of its community of followers (e.g., the quality of information it embraces or the robustness of individual participation). In these cases, where the goal is not merely to have Twitter followers but also to engage productively with a valued community and ensure that the community is neither intentionally nor accidentally misinformed, it is important to communicate accurately. It is also important to know what is happening within the community—which messages are being misinterpreted, which disinformation is spreading, and how a single word might result in a maelstrom of outrage.

This short paper captures the results of a recent proof-of-concept analysis that CNA conducted to assess activity within the USMC community that mentioned the issue of extremism. This particular case was tightly focused, however, this type of analysis can easily be scoped to answer a range of important questions. It can center on a community, topic, geographic region, or timeframe. It can be used narrowly to assess how a specific policy is being received (as in the case study outlined below) or broadly to assess the health of an online community (e.g., identifying sources of disinformation). Additionally, while the case below focuses on Twitter, analysis can be conducted on data from a range of social media platforms. The case described below was designed to illustrate the *type* of analysis that is possible and to demonstrate the value that it can provide to those active on social media.

Background

On February 5, 2021, the Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, called for commanding officers and supervisors to schedule and execute stand-downs, over the next 60 days, to address the problem of extremism in the ranks. To assess how the broader USMC Twitter community¹ received this order, CNA analyzed tweets

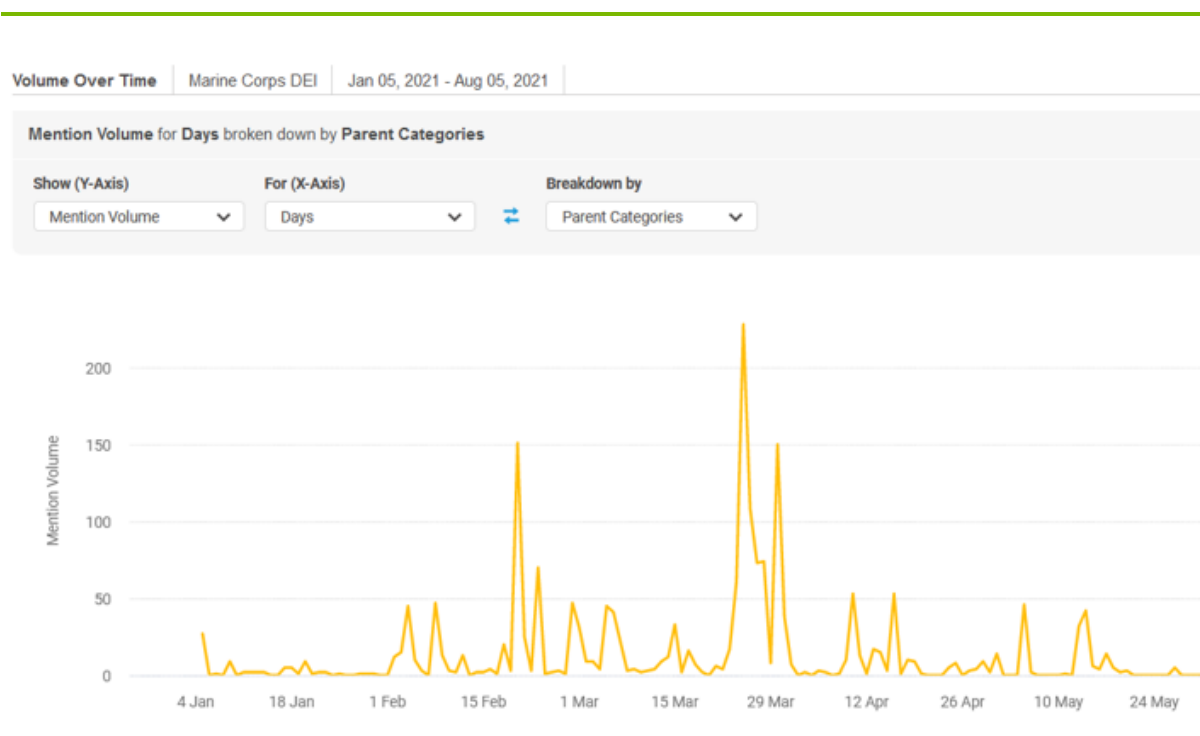
¹ Our team had a number of options in choosing how to define the “USMC Twitter community” and ultimately selected the broadest possible definition. Instead of limiting ourselves to accounts that followed @USMC, or to accounts in which the user explicitly identified themselves as a Marine, we chose to design a query that would capture all Twitter activity that mentioned the USMC.

according to the following criteria: the tweet occurred in the date range of January 5, 2021–August 5, 2021, the tweet contained CNA-selected keywords linked to USMC, and the tweet contained CNA-selected keywords linked to extremism.²

Analysis

Using these criteria and a proprietary private-industry tool designed to facilitate this type of social media analysis, we generated a chart capturing the volume of tweets meeting our search criteria over the selected date range (see Figure 1).³

Figure 1. Visualization capturing the volume (y-axis) of USMC Twitter mentions discussing extremism over the period of analysis (x-axis)



Source: CNA, generated through Brandwatch Consumer Research.

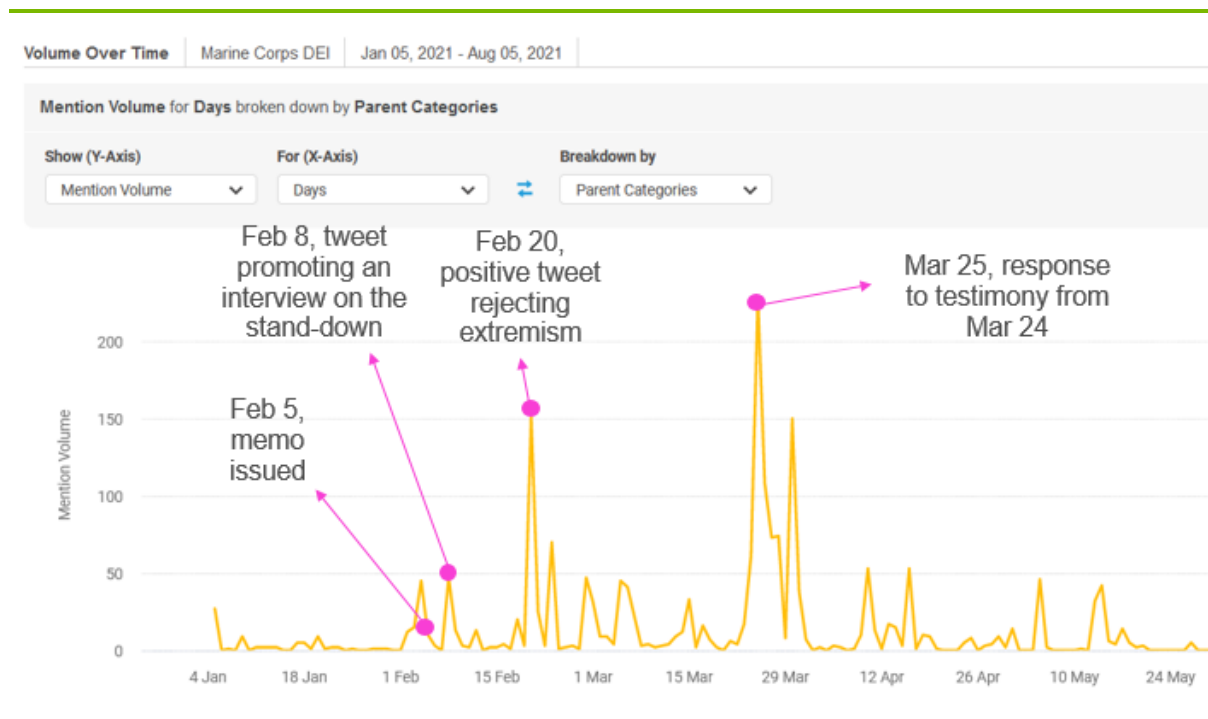
The chart above illustrates the specific dates when the USMC Twitter community was particularly active on this subject. By doing additional research, we superimposed real-world events over the Twitter data to create a contextualized timeline (see Figure 2). The analysis revealed relatively little response to the initial

² A simplified version of the three-part query used to capture activity related to extremism is: (1) extremism; (2) stand-down AND extremism; and (3) working group AND extremism.

³ CNA used Brandwatch to conduct this analysis, but this use should not be interpreted as an endorsement of this particular company and/or suite of analytic tools.

announcement of the stand-down, and the first two peaks were similarly unremarkable (with one linked to an interview about the stand-down, and another being a positive tweet rejecting extremism).

Figure 2. Annotated visualization of the volume (y-axis) of USMC Twitter mentions discussing extremism over the period of analysis (x-axis)



Source: CNA, generated through Brandwatch Consumer Research.

The most significant peak, though, merited further analysis. It occurred on March 25, 2021, and was a response to testimony given during a March 24, 2021, House Armed Services Committee hearing called “Extremism in the Armed Forces.” It quickly became clear that much of that content came from a single site, *The Epoch Times* (see Figure 3):

Figure 3. Chart showing URLs and websites most frequently shared by USMC community discussing extremism during the period of analysis

Top Shared Sites	▼ Volume
www.theepochtimes.com	314
justfor.fans	123
valor.militarytimes.com	70
www.youtube.com	66
twitter.com	40
www.washingtonexaminer.com	34
www.marinecorpstimes.com	24
www.military.com	20
www.thedrive.com	15
navy.mil	12

Source: CNA, generated through Brandwatch Consumer Research.

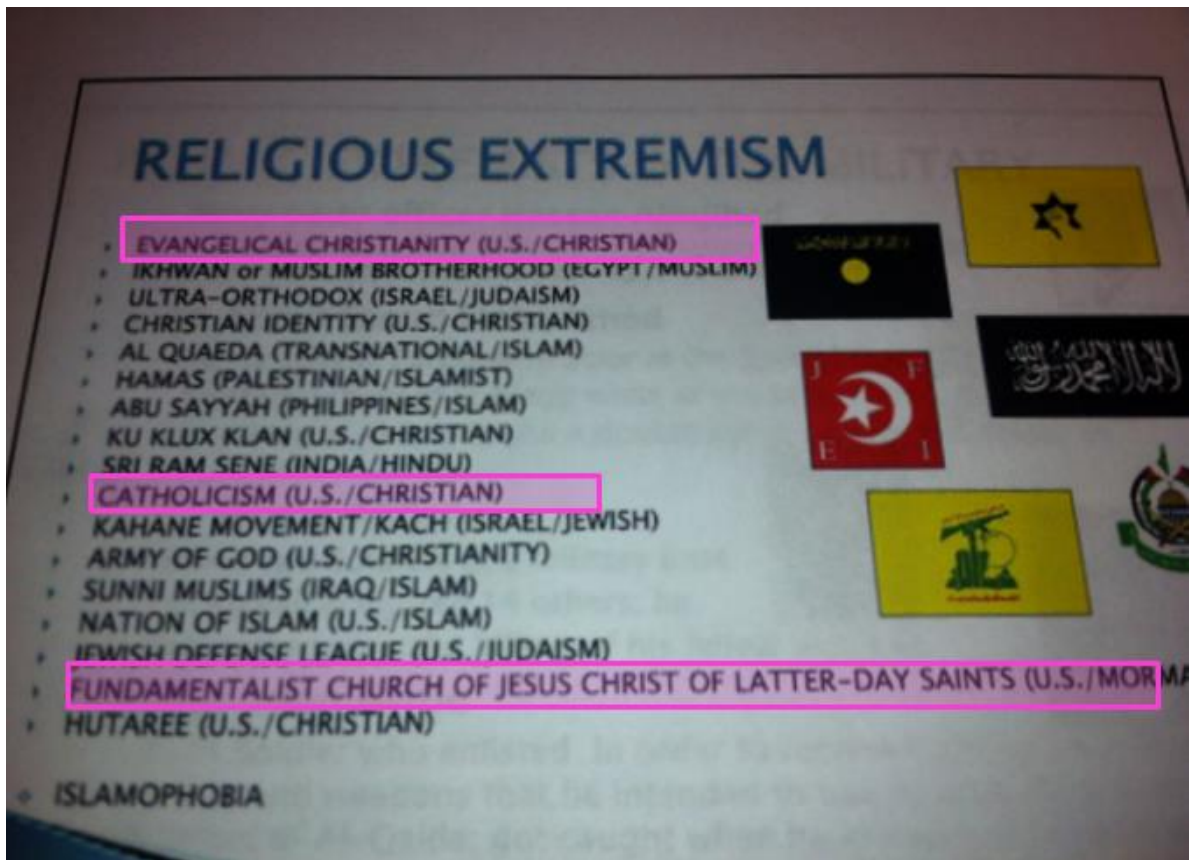
Additional research revealed that, according to the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University, *The Epoch Times* is a “conspiracy-theory-pushing, pro-Trump news site with shadowy origins and ownership” that regularly shares disinformation.⁴

In this particular case, *The Epoch Times* had written a report based on the March 24, 2021, testimony of Michael Berry, an officer in the Marine Corps Reserves who serves as general counsel for First Liberty Institute, a legal institution whose sole mission is that of “defending religious liberty for all Americans.”⁵ In his testimony, Berry spoke of a US Army training slide that listed evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism as types of religious extremism. He went on to express concern that, in addressing extremism in the ranks, the DOD had made no guarantees that it would not target these populations. Berry’s testimony presumably was accurate, and he included a copy of the slide in his written remarks.

⁴ Laura Hazard Owen, “The dark side of translation: *The Epoch Times* reportedly spreads disinformation through new brands,” *The Nieman Lab*, Feb. 12, 2021, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/02/the-dark-side-of-translation-the-epoch-times-is-now-spreading-disinformation-through-new-brands/>.

⁵ First Liberty Institute, “About Us,” <https://firstliberty.org/about-us/>.

Figure 4. The slide mentioned in Michael Berry's congressional testimony



Source: Michael Berry, "Extremism in the Armed Forces: Submitted to the House Armed Services Committee, Mar. 24, 2021," <https://firstliberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HASC-Written-Statement-w-Attachments-First-Liberty.032421.pdf>.

The Epoch Times, however, distorted this testimony in an article provocatively titled "Marine Corps Officer Warns Congress Against Classifying Christians in Military as 'Religious Extremists.'" As noted earlier, Berry is an officer in the Marine Corps Reserves, though in this case he was testifying as a civilian, which the article did make clear. The article also argued, however, that, "The training manual that Berry referred to is used in Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's recently ordered 'stand-down' to identify and root out extremists in the U.S. military." Berry made no such allegation in his testimony, and *The Epoch Times* provided no evidence to support this claim. The article, however, gained traction in the USMC Twitter community (though it is not entirely clear if those retweeting this content had read the article or were merely incensed at the headline's implications).

In short, our analysis indicates that the extremism-related issue that gained the most traction within the USMC Twitter community was the circulation of an article that is likely either misinformation or disinformation. Berry's testimony was measured and careful on this point, and he did not imply that the slide was part of the recently mandated extremism stand-down. *The Epoch Times* article either distorted or misrepresented his testimony by explicitly linking the slide to the stand-down. And it was this article, and not Berry's actual testimony, that circulated in the USMC Twitter community.

Conclusion

The case explored in this paper was carefully scoped. CNA did not target or conduct a search of any specific individuals in completing this analysis.⁶ Instead, the analytic team looked at Twitter content related to the USMC, with a specific focus on tweets regarding the extremism stand-down.

This case was a modest one—a proof-of-concept designed to demonstrate the value that this type of analysis can have not only in shedding light on the health of a Twitter community but also in assessing how a specific policy is being received. Despite being modest, though, CNA's analysis was able to establish that the extremism-related content that circulated most widely within the USMC Twitter community was inaccurate. As such, it provides actionable information to the DOD and USMC by identifying: (1) a specific source of outrage regarding the announced extremism stand-down, (2) a piece of disinformation circulating within the USMC Twitter community, and (3) an untrustworthy publication that is being treated as reputable by at least a sub-section of the USMC Twitter community.

This type of information makes it possible for the DOD and USMC to improve the health of their broader communities not by telling individual users what information to believe, but by providing accurate information to counter disinformation that is already circulating.

The value of this type of analysis is clear, but it could be expanded upon. Analysis can focus on a community (e.g., the USMC Twitter community), on a topic (e.g., the DOD extremism stand-down), on a geographic region (e.g., the US), or on a timeframe (e.g., the period following the announcement of the extremism stand-down). Moreover, although this particular case study was limited to Twitter, analysis could also explore activity on other social media platforms.

⁶ We followed all of CNA's Human Subjects Research (HSR) approvals for this study. This case received an exemption determination, but each study using Brandwatch data will be reviewed by CNA for HSR implications on a case-by-case basis.