



# Hiding in plain sight: Private military and security companies' use of Twitter as a distraction tool

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## Abstract

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) have an image problem. They are frequently called 'mercenaries' or 'dogs of war', due to recurring scandals involving some of these companies, such as human rights violations, fraud and waste. Scholars have analysed the strategies that PMSCs use to distance themselves from such negative labels and to boost their image by studying the companies' websites and advertisements. What is missing so far, however, is an analysis of how PMSCs use social media networking sites in order to present themselves in a positive light. In this article, the authors contribute to filling this gap. Based on assumptions generated with the help of literature on PMSCs, on the one hand, and on business communication and social media, on the other, they analysed the Twitter accounts of 58 PMSCs by using both quantitative and qualitative

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methods. Their findings suggest that PMSCs use Twitter similar to more generic companies: (1) to promote their own services and products, and (2) to monitor what others say about them. However, Twitter also serves a further purpose for PMSCs not acknowledged thus far. It helps to distract from what these companies are actually doing. Rather than engaging in more or less similar strategies as the literature on corporations' social media use conveys, the functions of different platforms appear to vary across industries. In the case of PMSCs, their particular use of Twitter can be attributed to the sensitive nature of the security services they provide.

### Keywords

business communication, private military and security companies, private security, social media, Twitter, visibility

## Introduction

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) have an image problem. In light of recurring scandals involving certain PMSCs, these companies are likened to and have been labelled 'mercenaries' (e.g. Hager and Mazzetti, 2015; Quinn, 2016; Tharoor, 2015), 'dogs of war' (Saner, 2016) or 'war profiteers' (Stanley, 2012) both in the media and in public debates. Given that such negative labels are harmful to their business, PMSCs go to great lengths to discredit them and avoid being 'perceived by the voting public as immoral, unpatriotic mercenaries' (Dunigan, 2011: 17). Their efforts in this respect have increasingly received attention from scholars. Interested in how precisely PMSCs seek to boost their image, they have analysed the companies' websites and advertisements, including text and pictures (e.g. logos) (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012, 2014, 2017; Kruck and Spencer, 2013). Surprisingly, social media have thus far received little attention in this respect even though they appear to play an important role for PMSCs to present themselves in a positive light as the following statement of an industry representative illustrates. According to a public relations officer of the defence contractor *Raytheon*, for example, PMSCs use social networking sites to 'educate and inform key audiences, including [Washington, DC] Capitol Hill staffers, reporters, employees and prospective employees, investors, members of the local communities where we operate, and influencers in the D.C. area' (Kovalsky, cited in Power, 2013). This article is an attempt to 'fill the gap' with regard to PMSCs' use of social media networking sites. Based on assumptions generated with the help of literature on PMSCs, on the one hand, and on business communication and social media, on the other, we analysed the Twitter accounts of 58 PMSCs by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We selected Twitter from among the various social media platforms because it is where PMSCs are most active.

According to business studies, companies appear to use social networking sites such as Twitter as a way to monitor what is said about them and promote their services and products (e.g. by increasing their visibility); however, our results indicate that PMSCs employ Twitter for yet another purpose. They seek to distract from what they are actually doing, either by flooding their audiences with information unrelated to the companies' services and products or by disseminating positive information to counter the negative comments that are posted about them. Hence, at the same time as PMSCs maintain a presence on Twitter, they also limit their visibility and what they are sharing. Not only

does this finding contradict what the literature recommends and expects business companies to do, but it also reveals the fallacy of generalizing about how companies use social media. This study shows that it is important to apply a differentiated approach that takes into account the specific interests of the industry being scrutinized. In the case of PMSCs, their particular use of Twitter can be attributed to the sensitive nature of the security services they provide.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. After briefly describing the PMSC industry, we develop a set of propositions about the companies' use of social media in general and their use of Twitter in particular, drawing from the business and communication literature. Subsequent to a brief discussion of our sampling strategies and our choice of methodology, we present our findings. These suggest that, for PMSCs, Twitter serves three functions: promotion, monitoring and distraction. We conclude with a brief summary and a reflection on our findings.

## **The PMSC industry**

Although the privatization of security and warfare is not a new phenomenon (Singer, 2008; Taulbee, 1985; Zarate, 1998: 82–87), PMSCs have only gained in importance since the end of the Cold War (Singer, 2003). However, since then, they form an integral part of the flourishing global private security industry (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011). These companies are in many respects unique, but they also exhibit characteristics with businesses more generally, such as banks or insurance companies.

With respect to their particularities, many of the companies in existence are not officially registered, which is why the exact size of the industry in terms of the number of companies and their revenues is not known; estimates suggest that the number of people employed is up to 25 million worldwide and the revenues generated amount to at least US\$100 billion per year (Florquin, 2011: 101–103). Moreover, the services that PMSCs offer are special in nature. PMSCs provide military and/or security services that range from armed guarding and protection of persons and objects (e.g. convoys, buildings) to the maintenance and operation of weapons systems, in addition to the detention of prisoners and the advising or training of local forces and security personnel (see the Montreux Document of 2008). While some companies provide the entire spectrum of services, others, by comparison, specialize in the delivery of one or more particular services and yet again others also sell services and products of other industry branches. Finally, PMSCs also are unique when considering their clients who include mainly states and other companies, but also increasingly international governmental organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In addition to these particularities, PMSCs are, however, in some respects also similar to other businesses. For example, they 'are driven by business profit' and, for the most part, they 'trade and compete openly' (Singer, 2008). Given this fact, they are faced with similar pressures, such as having to secure contracts and promote their services in order to survive and succeed in what can be viewed as a highly competitive market. These competitive pressures weigh particularly heavily given the image problems that PMSCs face, and they highlight that the ways in which they differ from or are similar to more conventional companies are far from clear-cut.

PMSCs are quite frequently portrayed in a negative fashion and commonly referred to as modern mercenaries not only because of the services they sell, but also due to the scandals they have been involved in, such as sex slavery in Bosnia (Isenberg, 2010), wartime atrocities, including the shooting of civilians in Iraq (Apuzzo, 2015), human rights abuses (e.g. Hilary, 2016; Mathieu and Dearden, 2006; Pingeot, 2012), or fraud and waste (e.g. CWC, 2009; Stanley, 2012). Confronted with negative press and pejorative labels, PMSCs have spent great efforts trying to boost their public perception and to distance themselves from the 'black sheep' of the industry.

One way in which they seek to accomplish this is by monitoring what others say about them and by portraying themselves in a more positive light on their websites (for an analysis, see e.g., Joachim and Schneiker, 2012, 2014), in advertisements (e.g. Blackwater, 2006, 2007) or in publications (e.g. Brooks and Chorev, 2008). Discourse, in the form of language and pictures, plays an important role in this regard. According to Doris Fuchs (2005: 772), discourse is a source of power for companies more generally with which they 'offensively and defensively shape their image as economic, political and societal actors'. In the case of PMSCs, companies make use of this power to present themselves as humanitarian agencies interested in saving the world, as professional security experts or as ethical hero warriors (Berndtsson, 2013; Carmola, 2010; Joachim and Schneiker, 2012, 2014; Leander and Van Munster, 2007). More precisely, they repudiate negative reports and images generated by their critics through favourable self-representations (Kruck and Spencer, 2013), claiming to be caretakers who alleviate suffering or protect vulnerable groups. We claim that PMSCs also use social media to influence how they are perceived.

## **Taking stock of business companies' use of social media**

Given the lack of relevant analysis as to how PMSCs use social media, we premise our assumptions with respect to strategies and scope on literature related to other businesses as well as social media more generally. We suppose that all companies use social media strategically (Culnan et al., 2010) as a kind of 'marketplace' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011) in ways that serve their business interests. Typical objectives are to increase the awareness and visibility of a company, in general, or of its specific services and/or products (De Vries et al., 2012; Saridakis et al., 2016), and companies use social media to attract as large an audience as possible in order to disseminate information and boost visibility in an economy that is increasingly competing for attention (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Vis, 2013).

A company's efforts to increase its visibility and reach on Twitter can be determined based on its activity in terms of the average number of tweets issued during a certain period of time and the average use of hashtags and of @username references. Hashtags consist of words or phrases that are prefixed with a '#' sign, which serves to group together messages belonging to the same topic (Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Fortin et al., 2011). The use of hashtags is expected to increase a message's visibility because it allows companies to extend the reach of their messages beyond their original audience and to become a part of ad hoc discussion communities. The @username references have similar effects. They permit users to directly address others and, in doing so, enhance their

visibility. Whether companies indeed gain in visibility and reach can be estimated by counting the number of followers they attract to their accounts and by measuring the re-tweet rate that a PMSC can attain (Chu et al., 2015; Feng, 2016). A high re-tweet rate would indicate that the company is successfully activating their followers to spread its information.

While the literature contains recommendations as to what companies should and can do to increase their visibility on Twitter; it also suggests what companies should avoid. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2011), for example, companies should only publish information that is relevant and interesting to their audiences. Moreover, they should not ‘flood their followers’ with too many messages or too much content that is unrelated to the company’s work; otherwise, they might end up deceiving their audience and risk losing followers, consequently reducing their influence on Twitter.

Owing to the interactive nature of social media, other users also can post messages about one’s company and the content (Zhao et al., 2011), impact and reach (Stefanone et al., 2015) of such user-generated messages are difficult to control for companies. If one negative story about a company is spread via social media, the consequences for the company may be severe and may even affect the entire industry of which the company is a part. Because of such likely scenarios, business management scholars such as Bosch et al. (2013), as well as others (e.g. Kane et al., 2014; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011: 250; Kozinets et al., 2010; Yun and Gloor, 2015), suggest that companies should carefully monitor all social media platforms. In addition to the limited control in respect of information, the immediacy of tweets poses a challenge. As Kietzmann et al. (2011: 244) note:

To make collective sense of the short, speedy and numerous conversations hosted by sites such as Twitter, firms need tools and capabilities that allow them to connect the dots. That is, the conversations are like pieces of a rapidly changing puzzle which, when aggregated combine to produce an overall image or message.

Because of the sheer amount of data published on social media, manual monitoring of social media platforms would cover only a narrow slice of such information, which is why many companies use specialized software (He et al., 2013; Rui et al., 2013; Ying et al., 2015). Such software informs actors at the outset about ongoing developments in social media channels and allows them to respond right away once an undesirable communication has been detected. In this way companies can, for example, identify an imminent online firestorm<sup>1</sup> and perhaps even prevent it before it materializes, or at least react to it immediately. Such software also offers sophisticated ways of issuing tweets, such as scheduled publishing and bulk messaging.

Based on these assumptions about the do’s and don’ts of Twitter behaviour, we examined whether and to what extent the ways in which PMSCs use Twitter is in conformity with them. Although PMSCs use Twitter to a significant lesser extent than when compared to, for example, the Fortune 500 companies, Twitter nevertheless also plays a role for strategic communication with external stakeholders. On the one hand, the platform is used for recruiting purposes next to advertising jobs by word-of-mouth or the presence of job fairs (Hawks, 2014: 82; Joachim et al., 2018). On the other hand, Twitter gives

PMSCs, similar to corporations more generally, a means to influence and control what is being said and published about them more directly (Flanagin and Metzger, 2001). Given the quite often negative press faced by PMSCs, in which the image of the modern mercenaries prevails, social media allow companies to shape how they are perceived independently and outside conventional news outlets.

## **Sample and methodology**

Our sample of PMSCs was drawn first, and at the beginning of our analysis (May 2014), from a list of 601 companies worldwide,<sup>2</sup> and then further refined by limiting it to companies with offices in the US and the UK (459 companies). These two countries represent the two largest markets for PMSCs in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world, and studies related to either the use of social media by business companies or PMSCs focus, for the most part, on companies based in OECD countries. In a third step, we limited our sample further to companies and their accounts that were regularly maintained<sup>3</sup> and that were available in English to allow for the content of the messages to be analysed. This resulted in a final sample consisting of the accounts of 58 companies (see Appendix), which are representative of the PMSC industry as a whole, including, for example, industry leaders such as G4S and smaller companies such as Actus International Security. In addition, the sample represents a cross section of the industry sector; it includes companies that offer a wide range of products and service portfolios (e.g. Dyncorp International which offers services ranging from logistic to military training and security sector reform), as well as companies that specialize in providing a particular service (e.g. Drum Cussac, which focuses on security intelligence only).

We downloaded information concerning each of the Twitter accounts in our sample of 58 PMSCs (e.g. the time each account was created)<sup>4</sup> and collected the tweets both issued by and directed to these companies between May 2014 and June 2015 using the Twitter API.<sup>5</sup> We collected a total of 125,275 tweets. Using the literature discussed in the previous section of this article, we deductively derived a set of seven variables that characterize the communication patterns of PMSCs on Twitter (see Table 1), and then measured the following values based on the data we obtained (see Table 2): (1) the average number of tweets issued per day, which is an indicator for a PMSC's level of activity; and (2) the number of followers, which can be said to represent the size of an account's audience and to indicate a PMSC's visibility. The latter can also be measured based on (3) the re-tweet rate of tweets posted by a company. We also determined (4) the share of tweets containing references to other users in the @username format which we took to be indicative of an individual style of communicating as it permits users to directly address others and thus to increase the company's visibility. Furthermore, we calculated (5) the frequency of hashtags included in the PMSCs' tweets in order to determine whether they join broader debates as well as the (6) average re-tweet rate of tweets issued by other Twitter users but that were re-tweeted by PMSCs which indicates whether PMSCs thereby join 'viral' conversations. In addition, we calculated the percentage of tweets that were issued using (7) special monitoring software<sup>6</sup> as a proxy to analyse the extent to which a company is monitoring communication on Twitter. In a final step, we compared the data

**Table 1.** List of variables.

Name of variable	Measurement
Audience	Number of followers
Activity	Average of tweets issued per day
Re-tweets of original content	Re-tweet rate of original content
References	Average portion of '@' mentioned per tweet
Hashtags	Average number of hashtags per tweet
Scope of Twitter discussions to which PMSCs link	Average re-tweet rate of original tweet that is also re-tweeted by PMSCs
Monitoring software	Portion of tweets published by specialized software

**Table 2.** Results for the seven variables.

Company type Variable	PMSCs (58)	Fortune 500
Audience	4,814 followers on average	187,804 followers on average
Activity	0.85 tweets per day on average	8.5 tweets per day on average
Re-tweets of original content	0.45 re-tweets per tweet on average	N/A
References	56.37% of tweets contain @ username references	24% of tweets contain references
Hashtags	22% of tweets contain hashtags	36% of tweets contain hashtags
Scope of Twitter discussions to which PMSCs link	250.75 average re-tweet rate of tweets re-tweeted by PMSCs	N/A
Monitoring software	28.59%	NA

Sources: Own data for the PMSCs and North (2015) for the Fortune 500. North provides data on the following variables: audience, references, hashtags.

With respect to the activity of the Fortune 500, the tweeting frequency was computed by the authors based on a random sample comprising five companies – Boeing Company, Northwestern Mutual, Level 3, General Electric and Caesars Entertainment Corporation – and the number of tweets they issued over a period of 100 days.

gathered for our sample of 58 PMSCs with data on the Fortune 500 companies provided by North (2015) as far as relevant information was available to determine the extent to which PMSCs behaved in a similar fashion with respect to their social media use to generic companies or whether and in what ways they were different.

To identify distinctive patterns of the ways in which PMSCs use Twitter, we disaggregated our sample data, i.e. the values for each of the eight variables, and performed a latent profile analysis (LPA). Unlike methods that rely primarily on distance measures and merging algorithms, LPA can be understood as a parameterized variant of cluster analysis. It is a special case of the more general finite mixture models. Originally developed by Lazarsfeld and Henry (1968),<sup>7</sup> it identifies subgroups and their members in a given



**Table 3.** Three clusters.

Cluster (N)	References* (%)	Hashtag* (%)	Software* (%)	Follower* (%)	Activity* (%)	RTs original (%)	RTs 3rd party* (%)
1 (21)	29	26	6	320	0.7	0.12	33
2 (11)	89	27	29	840	3.3	0.37	106
3 (26)	65	17	46	10,125	2.8	0.75	9
Fortune 500	24	36	NA	187,804	NA	> 25 <sup>a</sup>	

<sup>a</sup>The data provided by North (2015) does not distinguish between the re-tweet rates for original content and the size of joined conversations.

Notes. The values given in the table were rounded and represent the arithmetic means. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between the clusters when using a Kruskal-Wallis test with  $p < .05$ . The values for the Fortune 500 are based on North (2015).

dataset by fitting the data with a probability-based model. Rather than being determined a priori, the final number of classes is generated from a set of competing models and the best fit is selected according to the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) (Schwarz, 1978). Because similar cases are grouped together, this method permits the identification of distinctive clusters and their characteristics. For the clustering, we used the R package *mclust*, which is based on a maximum-likelihood estimation for the expectation-maximization (EM) in its models. The best fitting model was one based on VVI<sup>8</sup> with three components and a BIC of  $-873.54$  (see Table 3). It provides a stable and informative typology of PMSCs dividing them into three clusters (see Appendix) of which the first cluster represents 36 percent ( $n = 21$ ), the second about 19 percent ( $n = 11$ ), and the third 45 percent ( $n = 26$ ) of the sample.

In addition to a quantitative analysis of the seven variables, we also conducted a qualitative content analysis of the tweets to obtain a better understanding as to what precisely the PMSCs are tweeting, which type or types of tweets they are re-tweeting and in which debates they take part. For this purpose, we randomly extracted 1,000 tweets as well as 1,000 re-tweets of the 58 companies in our sample. We then grouped the tweets and re-tweets inductively based on the results from the material collected. Three trained individuals coded the re-tweets independently of one another to ensure a high degree of intercoder reliability.

To interpret the findings of our analyses, we relied on, on the one hand, business literature and, on the other hand, literature related to PMSCs. With the help of the former, we generated a set of assumptions about the Twitter behaviour of corporations more generally and then compared it to that of PMSCs. The literature related to PMSCs allowed us to put our findings into perspective offering insights and likely explanations for why these companies might exhibit different Twitter habits given the nature of their business.

## Different functions of social media

We identified three functions of Twitter that PMSCs use to create and maintain positive images of themselves: promotion, monitoring and distraction. Similar to conventional



companies, PMSCs use Twitter as a promotional as well as monitoring tool. However, unlike generic corporations, PMSCs employ this social media platform also in a different way and as a distraction tool. Rather than enhancing visibility and exposure, Twitter in this case serves to divert attention from what the PMSCs are actually doing. Which of these three functions is used by a PMSC appears closely linked to, on the one hand, the content of the tweets and, on the other hand, the type of company, the kinds of services it provides and its history of scandals, accusations of criminal activities and human rights violations. Although all PMSCs in our sample use the different Twitter functions, it seemed that particularly the smaller companies and those involved in scandals used the platform for distraction purposes.

### *Twitter as a promotional tool*

Microblogging platforms such as Twitter can be used by companies to promote their services and products. The qualitative content analysis we conducted suggests that PMSCs engage in promotional tweeting as an attempt to boost their image. Companies share with their audiences mainly three kinds of messages in this respect: they issue (1) tweets on secured contracts and awards, (2) tweets related to recruitment and employment as well as (3) tweets to advertise the company's specific services or products. The following tweet is an example of the first type of tweets, issued by Dyncorp International:

RT @GovConWire: .@DynCorpIntl receives \$56M contract modification from @USArmy for continued aviation maintenance services. (Dyncorp International, 17 March 2015)

This pattern of the use of Twitter is also confirmed by Raytheon's Corinne Kovalsky, who admits that her company uses Twitter to spread news about 'contract wins and tests' (Kovalsky, cited in Power, 2013). In doing so, PMSCs often post information with reference to actors considered authorities in the respective field of activity, such as governments, state militaries, or international governmental organizations. Hence, not only does the tweet by Dyncorp demonstrate that the company is one of the big players in the industry in terms of contract volume but, by referring to the US military, the company is benefitting from the latter's good reputation. The following tweet by Engility belongs to the second category of promotional tweets in that it portrays the company as a preferable employer that cares about the education, and thus about the future, of its employees' children.

R scholarship prog 4 kids of employees is open. Past winner Alex is getting a Masters at @Illinois\_Alma. (Engility, 18 May 2015)

Such tweets do not relate to any military activity but instead present the companies as socially committed actors. Another typical example of such tweets is the following one by G4S:

It's #LDNPoppyDay today. Volunteers from G4S will be supporting @PoppyLegion by collecting cash from tube stations today. (G4S, 30 October 2014)

Tweets with reference to the companies as good employers or which refer to recognized authorities may limit the possibilities, for example, for civil society actors, to criticize PMSCs because it becomes more difficult to criticize an actor that has been given credit for its work by a government or to criticize an actor for caring about its employees (Joachim and Schneiker, 2015).

With respect to the promotion of specific products or services, a typical tweet in this category is the following by BAE Systems:

Allowing warfighters to identify friend from foe with our IFF products. Learn more at #ASC14. (BAE Systems, 17 September 2014)

Granted such tweets do not reveal much about what these companies are doing; instead, they implicitly ask those who want to get more information to follow a hashtag or to click on a link embedded in a tweet.

However, the moderate level of activity of PMSCs, at slightly less than one promotional tweet per day (0.85), in contrast to an average Fortune 500 company that issues about 8.5 tweets per day, conveys the impression that while a Twitter presence is actively maintained, it is only used to promote the services and products of the company, and the company as an employer to a limited extent. This is not surprising, given that contracts are unlikely to be awarded based on tweets, but are awarded based on offers made to the client (Berndtsson, 2012) and given that hiring of employees is often based on ‘word of mouth and networking’ (Peterson, 2018: 8). Furthermore, the limited activity in terms of tweets per day keeps the visibility of the companies low. This finding is confirmed by the results obtained for other variables, such as re-tweets.

The median re-tweet rate of tweets sent by PMSCs was 0.45. This roughly translates into every other company tweet triggering one re-tweet. Even heavyweights in the PMSC industry such as BAE systems – which is also a Fortune 500 company – achieved a re-tweet rate of only 2.69 for its original content, yet it was the highest rate for the whole sample of 58 PMSCs. If we consider that, at the time of our data collection, BAE Systems had some 68,000 followers, it becomes evident how little leverage PMSCs, compared to other companies, gain from the dynamics offered by social media. North (2015: 130), for example, shows that the Fortune 500 companies attain on average more than 25 re-tweets per tweet. The low re-tweet rate for the tweets issued by PMSCs is consequential as it limits visibility. Re-tweets are not only crucial in extending the scope of a message, but they are equally important because ‘they point back to the original source of a message, while ... implicitly pointing to the person doing the RTing and making explicit a connection between the two interactants, however loose’ (Schandorf, 2013: 7). In addition, PMSCs included hashtags in only 22.6 per cent of their tweets – in contrast to Fortune 500 companies that include hashtags in about 36 per cent of their tweets – which means they connect with others by means of topical contributions to only a limited extent, hence further limiting their visibility.

Overall, the findings regarding PMSCs’ use of Twitter as a promotional tool suggest that, while companies do maintain a presence on Twitter and regularly make use of their account, their activity and participation in public debates is rather modest. Although this social media behaviour can be said to apply to all PMSCs that we analysed, we also

found variation across the PMSCs in our sample with respect to their use of Twitter as monitoring and as a distraction tool. Whereas in the case of big companies such as DynCorp or G4S the use of Twitter as a monitoring tool seems comparatively high, smaller and less known companies appear, in comparison, more interested in diverting attention away from what they do.

### *Twitter as a monitoring tool*

PMSCs care about their image and what others say about them. Accordingly, and as we would expect based on the literature, they use Twitter as a monitoring tool for reasons offered by Raytheon's Corinne Kovalsky. Her company relies on 'social media monitoring ... tools' because 'we want to be part of the conversation about our company that's taking place on social media channels' (cited in Power, 2013). The degree to which this also applies to other PMSCs, can be inferred from whether they employ a specific monitoring software and from how they use features of Twitter such as hashtags and @username references.

Of the 58 companies in our sample, 26 do use monitoring software regularly.<sup>9</sup> About half of all the tweets these companies posted were generated by means of special software suites, suggesting that these companies are quite interested in closely monitoring communication about them and related dynamics on Twitter. Another 14 PMSCs have occasionally tested similar software.

If we take a closer look at when PMSCs use such software, it is not surprising that they do so particularly in 'turbulent times' as, for example, when negative comments about them are likely to be spread on social media. Twitter enables companies to respond to such slurs promptly and they appear to make use of it. They react to what other users tweet about them. Evidence for this can be found in the case involving the then still existing PMSC Blackwater (that has been renamed Academi in the meantime).

In 2011, the Supreme Court of the United States reopened the case against four former Blackwater contractors accused of having killed unarmed civilians in a shooting in Baghdad's Nisour Square in 2007. The trial started in 2014 and, on 13 April 2015, the former contractors were convicted of murder and manslaughter along with weapons charges. From the outset, the trial was discussed extensively on social media, leading the presiding judge to explicitly order the jurors not to consult any social media at all – mentioning Twitter specifically – but rather to stick to the evidence presented during the trial (Al Jazeera America, 2014). Many Twitter users condemned the Nisour Square massacre and welcomed the trial, whereas others decried the trial and defended the work of PMSCs as well as their staff (see Dau and Martin, 2017). Given such contradictory positions and the related discussions on Twitter, it is not surprising that Blackwater/Academi relied on monitoring software while the trial was underway. However, around the time of the verdict, the company began to decrease its use of such software significantly and stopped its use altogether in May 2015. This case shows that PMSCs employ monitoring software when they might expect or encounter negative comments about them to be posted on social media.

The group of PMSCs regularly relying on software (cluster 3, see Table 3) also uses other features of Twitter in order to monitor communication on social media. They only

rarely include hashtags (only in 17%) which would link them to broader debates, but include @username references in about two thirds of their tweets. By using @username references instead of hashtags in their tweets, the companies reach out to a broader audience, but can better control with whom they communicate and the debates in which they choose to take part. The average Fortune 500 company, in comparison, uses hashtags twice as often (in 36% of their tweets), but only addresses other users directly by using @username references in 24 percent of their tweets.

The fact that certain PMSCs use the monitoring features that Twitter offers more than others in our sample might be explained by looking at the companies that belong to this group. Mainly big international companies based in the US and the UK, such as Academi, BAE Systems, CACI, Control Risks, DynCorp, Engility and G4S make use of the monitoring possibilities this social media platform offers. Given that these professional heavyweights are well known inside and some – such as Academi, CACI, Dyncorp and G4S – also outside the industry and that it is these companies that the – albeit limited – public debate is about and that are subject to negative press, it can be assumed that they are more keen than others on monitoring and controlling what is said about them. However, the low number of hashtags PMSCs used seems to suggest that monitoring is not necessarily used to take part in discussions, as was suggested by a representative of Raytheon, but rather to distract from what the companies are actually doing in case of negative press.

### *Twitter as a distraction tool*

Next to the monitoring and promotional functions of Twitter, we identified a third function of the social networking platform for PMSCs. It is used as a distraction tool. Twitter allows PMSCs to redirect the attention of their audiences and to steer them away from focusing on what the companies are actually doing, thereby disguising the true nature and corresponding characteristics of PMSCs. Of the three groups that emerged out of our cluster analysis, one group seems to use distraction more often than the others (cluster 2, see Table 3). These PMSCs quite frequently post information that has nothing to do with their services and products. The company Dilitas, for example, has posted tweets such as ‘The Queen & The Duke arrive’ (6 May 2014) or ‘Congratulations to the organisers of last nights [sic] Commonwealth Games opening. And now Bon Chance [sic]to all the competitors’ (24 July 2014) or ‘Can we please get rid of bus lanes. The most failed concept in keeping traffic flowing, ever dreamt up’ (1 August 2014) or again ‘45 years ago yesterday, the Beatles posed for the iconic photo on the Zebra [sic] crossing in Abbey Road’ (9 August 2014). These tweets not only have nothing to do with what the company does, but some even relate to events generally considered positive or at least having an entertaining quality, such as the Commonwealth Games or the Beatles. Furthermore, companies do post things unrelated to their work by re-tweeting posts that have been issued by other users. Judging from the re-tweet rate of such messages (106 on average, compared to 0.37 for their own tweets), the companies thereby sometimes even join highly ‘viral’ discussions on social media. A typical example would be the re-tweeting by the company Dilitas of a message from a woman diagnosed with terminal colon cancer who wished to ‘know what it feels like to “go viral”’. Hence, PMSCs do what scholars

recommend companies precisely not to do with respect to social media, i.e. post content unrelated to their work, because they might decrease their influence on Twitter (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). Rather than following this advice, PMSCs use re-tweets to join existing threads while rarely adding any individual or company-related comments.

The PMSCs in the group of companies using re-tweets to distract from what they do are exclusively from the UK. This might be explained by the fact that, contrary to PMSCs in the US, that secure the majority of their contracts with the government, British companies are faced with the exact opposite situation. Other business actors are their primary clients and account for the vast majority of their contracts (Donald, 2006: x; Schneiker, 2009, 51; Stone 2008: 23). Because the market of British companies is less predictable and more varied, these PMSCs can also be presumed to depend more on publicity. Unlike DynCorp or CACI, big US companies with reliable governmental contracts, many PMSCs in the UK are less known outside the industry and of a medium size. Therefore, linking up to broader debates that have nothing to do with what PMSCs do and that have a rather positive connotation can be seen as a social media strategy that allows these companies to distract from what they do and thereby indirectly promote their business and build a favourable reputation. By joining 'viral' debates such as the one about the woman with colon cancer, PMSCs can maintain a limited degree of visibility owing to the sheer volume of other Twitter users involved in a thread. They can be present on Twitter and associate themselves with positive, although company-unrelated news, while at the same time not having to reveal anything about their work or the secretive nature of PMSCs' activities.

In addition to joining 'viral' debates, the distraction tool is also used in a different way. Some of the PMSCs in this group tended to disseminate comparatively huge amounts of information, resulting not unusually in information overload with the sheer number of posts making it impossible for the average Twitter user to digest or keep track of the tweets. Given that companies are advised to not post more than three to five tweets per day for advertising purposes, an example for distracting its audiences by information overload was, again, the company Dilitas, with an average of more than seven tweets per day.<sup>10</sup> On 14 August 2014, the company, for example, posted four tweets related to A-level results being released, including the following re-tweet '@BBCBreakfast: Coming up at 0810: Education Secretary @NickyMorgan01 on #resultsday ...' (14 August 2014). In this way, Dilitas 'flooded' its 395 followers with information that was not at all relevant to its work, nor did the information seem to have any relevance for the audience, given the very low re-tweet rate (0.06). Hence, even though different from joining viral debates, 'flooding' has similar effects. It permits PMSCs to be present on Twitter while keeping their visibility low.

Finally, PMSCs use Twitter as a distraction tool by diverting other users' attention from any negative information related to their own company or to the industry in general. Rather than acknowledging the 'elephant in the room', firms in this case prefer to talk about completely unrelated yet positive-sounding issues. PMSCs thereby combine the distraction function of Twitter with its monitoring function. For example, PMSCs monitor what is said about them and, in case they encounter negative press, tweet positive information to distract the audience. For example, although the previously mentioned trial of the Blackwater contractors was frequently reported in rather negative terms in the traditional news media<sup>11</sup>

as well as on social media,<sup>12</sup> the PMSC Academi, using monitoring software at that time, remained silent on this issue and vociferously promoted its uniqueness by tweeting, for example, that ‘ACADEMI provides elite training and trusted protection with a culture of integrity, excellence and dignity’ (3 July 2014) and by including the endorsement by a former White House counsel of its ‘company-wide culture of corporate governance and compliance’ (2 July 2014) in a tweet. At around the time of the guilty verdicts, Academi changed its strategy slightly. Although its activity on Twitter was significantly lower than usual, the company continued to post only information a priori unrelated to the trial. In March, April and May 2015, for example, Academi issued only three tweets with the identical message ‘National Rifle Association latest addition of “America’s 1st Freedom”. Click to view online’ (1 March, 1 April and 1 May 2015). Not referring to the lawsuit but solely posting a link to the website of the NRA can be seen as a way of trivializing the human rights violations and even the war crimes committed by the former Blackwater contractors, given that the NRA postulates the right to bear arms in the US and considering that the civilians at Nisour Square were shot to death with machine-guns.

## **Conclusions**

Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of 58 PMSCs, we examined how these companies made use of Twitter to present themselves in a positive light and to dissociate themselves from any negative images that others have of them. Given the lack of prior analyses of PMSCs’ use of Twitter, we drew on the business communication literature to make sense of how these companies use social media.

According to this body of literature, companies use social media for primarily two functions: to promote their services and products, and to monitor what others say about them. While PMSCs also use Twitter in this respect, they also employ it for an additional purpose: PMSCs use Twitter to distract their audiences’ attention from what these companies are actually doing as a way of dissociating themselves from any negative publicity. Thereby, PMSCs also limit their own reach and visibility on Twitter, in contrast to other companies that are encouraged (based on recommendations in the literature) to use Twitter as a platform for maximizing their visibility. The specific way in which PMSCs used Twitter may be attributable to the sensitive nature of their services, which would lead them to limit transparency regarding their work.<sup>13</sup>

By posting information originally generated by or referring to actors that can be considered authorities in their respective field of activity, such as traditional news media or governments, and by posting messages that have a positive content, such as charitable activities, PMSCs limit the ability of others, such as civil society actors, to criticize them. Overall, as has been shown elsewhere (Joachim and Schneiker, 2015), civil society actors find it difficult to frame their opposition to PMSCs in a way that resonates with a broader public because the activities of PMSCs generally do not involve ‘a short and clear causal chain (or story) assigning responsibility’ or ‘issues involving legal equality of opportunity’ (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 27). The tweeting behaviour of PMSCs, as we have shown, makes it even more difficult for civil society actors to find any ‘weak point’ in the activities of PMSCs that they could use as an anchor point for any campaign on private security.

Last but not least, based on our findings, we cannot assume that all companies use social media in the same way; rather, to understand how companies use this platform, it



is important to take into account their particular business interests. In this sense, the strategies PMSCs employ to maintain their presence on Twitter, while at the same time limiting their visibility on the social networking platform, might be relevant to other types of users who seek to limit the amount of information they disclose about themselves in public, such as intelligence agencies.

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## Notes

1. Pfeffer et al. (2013) define an online firestorm as the explosive dynamics that are created by social media users and that are characterized by strongly negative comments within a short period of time.
2. Given the lack of a global registry of PMSCs, we drew on the list compiled by the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Companies (ICoC), which constitutes the most comprehensive list to date of PMSCs worldwide. Based on our own research we added non-signatory PMSCs to the list in order to avoid bias.
3. We used the threshold of at least one update every two weeks, acknowledging that this threshold is somewhat stricter than the thresholds used by others (e.g. Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010).
4. The information was obtained using special software that we wrote ourselves based on the Twitter4j software library, available at [twitter4j.org](http://twitter4j.org).
5. ‘API’ stands for ‘application programming interface’, recommended by Twitter as the way to collect data.
6. This value can be obtained based on information attached to each tweet.
7. Henry originally named this method ‘latent structure analysis’. Today, it is also known as ‘latent class analysis’. We use the term ‘latent profile analysis’ to emphasize that our variables are metric and not categorical.
8. VVI stands for a spherical vector with varying volume and shape.
9. The data provided by North (2015) does not distinguish between the re-tweet rates for original content and the size of joined conversations.
10. These software suites included Hootsuite, Meltwater Buzz, Cision and Sprinklr, among others.
11. We considered an average of more than four tweets per day to be indicative of excessive behaviour, considering that PMSCs are not news outlets. Practitioners debate the ideal number of tweets for maximum advertising effect. One widely circulated set of guidelines states that ‘engagement decreases after [the] 3rd tweet’ and that there is a sweet spot to maximum re-tweet activity at four or five tweets per day (see <https://blog.bufferapp.com/social-media-frequency-guide>, last accessed 9 May 2017).
12. *The New York Times* article from 13 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/14/us/ex-blackwater-guards-sentenced-to-prison-in-2007-killings-of-iraqi-civilians.html>, or an



article from *The Guardian* from 14 April 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/13/former-blackwater-guards-sentencing-baghdad-massacre> (both accessed 3 November 2016).

13. On Twitter, a special hashtag (#blackwatertrial) was created and used to refer to the event.

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**Appendix: List of companies included in the sample**

3rg Security  
ACADEMI Elite  
Actus International Security  
AECOM  
AKE Limited  
Allmode Limited  
APPDS Security  
BAE Systems  
Beowulf Defense  
Black Pearl MSM  
Blaythorne Group  
Bsecure Training  
CACI International  
Castor Vali  
CENTURION ASG  
CH2M  
Claymore Global  
Control Risks  
Cubic Corporation  
Dilitas  
Drum Cussac  
Dryad Maritime  
DynCorp International  
Endeavour Maritime  
Engility Corporation  
Eos Risk Management  
FAM International Security  
FSI Worldwide  
G4S  
Garda World  
Glomarsec  
Graspan Frankton  
Hill & Associates  
Hostile Environment  
Inkerman Insights  
International Intelligence  
International Risks  
International SOS  
Mission Essential  
Neptune Maritime Security  
Northrop Grumman  
NYA International  
OPS Global  
Optima Group

Optimal Risk  
 Oxberry Risk  
 Pax Mondial  
 Port2Port Maritime  
 QuinSec Global  
 Regal Maritime  
 SAIC  
 Secure a Ship  
 Securitas Sverige AB  
 SGCFM  
 Solace Global  
 Spearfish  
 TASK International  
 UHCGlobal

### *Three clusters*

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Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Spearfish	Optimal Risk	SAIC
Solace Global	Port2Port Maritime	International SOS
Regal Maritime	FSI Worldwide	G4S
Graspan Frankton Ltd	Inkerman Insights	Control Risks
QuinSec Global	Dryad Maritime	CH2M
Pax Mondial	3rg Security	Northrop Grumman
Oxberry Risk	SGCFM	Neptune Maritime Sec
OPS Global	Optima Group	BAE Systems, Inc.
NYA International	Drum Cussac	AECOM
Hostile Environment	Dilitas Ltd.	ACADEMI, LLC
Hill & Associates	APPDS Security Ltd.	Securitas Sverige AB
FAM Intl Security		MISSION ESSENTIAL
Endeavour Maritime		International Risks
CENTURION ASG LLC		GLOMARSEC
Castor Vali		Garda World
Bsecure Training		Cubic Corporation
Beowulf Defense		Claymore Global
Allmode Limited		AKE Limited
Actus Security		UHC Global
TASK International		Secure a Ship - PMSC
Int. Intelligence		Eos Risk Management
		Engility Corporation
		DynCorp Intl
		CACI International
		Blaythorne Group
		Black Pearl MSM

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