

• The Wise Man Will Be Master of the Stars: • The Use of Twitter by the Ukrainian Military Intelligence Service

Description

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is the largest conventional land war in Europe since the end of World War II. Russia's goals: to overthrow and replace Ukraine's elected government through territorial conquest and by [subjugating the entire country's populace to its political and informational influence](#). Consequently, the information environment, [described as](#): "an environment comprised of the information itself, the individuals, organizations, and systems that receive, process, and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual, and physical space in which this occurs," has received significant attention from both Russia and Ukraine.

Ukrainian activities in the information environment have been an integral part of its response to Russia's aggression. This strategy can be connected to John R. Boyd's concept of moral conflict, which he explains in an article titled, "• [Discourse on Winning and Losing](#). • Boyd emphasizes the importance of non-physical factors in modern warfare, which is particularly relevant in the context of asymmetric warfare, where weaker forces do battle with stronger opponents. Granted, Ukraine's conventional forces have steadily gained strength and capability due to western weapon deliveries and training and the commitment and grit of Ukraine's military. However, the country cannot match Russia's ability to mobilize additional manpower. Therefore, Ukraine must rely on psychological operations and other irregular tactics to create confusion, demoralization, and disorientation among its Russian invaders.

To gain deeper insight into the tactics of Ukraine in the information environment, this article analyzes the social media strategy of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, commonly known as the HUR (a transliterated acronym for the original Cyrillic). This service joined the social media platform Twitter in 2021 with [the message](#) "• Sapiens Dominabitur Astri, • Latin for, "the wise man will be master of the stars." • A remarkable aspect of the HUR's social media presence is the service's disclosure on its Twitter feed of raw intelligence, including sensitive communications intelligence (COMINT), as a means for interaction with outside audiences.

The article focuses on the content of the HUR's Twitter feed (@DI_Ukraine), which in June 2023 had over 250,000 followers, and to what extent the HUR's communication strategy aligns with the existing concept of coercive intelligence disclosure.

Intelligence Disclosure as Strategy

Starting in November 2021, American and British policy makers intentionally disclosed sensitive information to international media about the threat of Russia towards Ukraine. Media ran stories on the intelligence disclosures provided by the American and British services in the months and weeks [leading up to the invasion](#). For example, in February 2022 – just days before the actual invasion – the New York Times quoted a senior American official about the possibility of a Russian false flag operation. The source shared intelligence that revealed a Russian plot to manufacture a justification for an invasion of Ukraine by creating [a fake video](#) depicting the Ukrainian military assaulting Russian-speaking individuals in eastern Ukraine. These disclosure policies, observed in the run-up to the Russian invasion, make a compelling case for the use of [intelligence for influence operations](#). Israeli researchers Riemer and Sobelman argue that states can leverage intelligence as a coercive instrument. They describe this coercive intelligence disclosure as the public disclosure of secrets or the signaling of an intention to do so, which can exploit the vulnerabilities of other actors and ultimately [be manipulated to one's advantage](#).

Riemer and Sobelman contend that coercive intelligence disclosure can further [three aims](#). First, it can stop adversaries from achieving their strategic and operational goals by interfering with their operations, forcing them to refocus their resources, and inducing them to adapt to the reality that their secrets have been made public. Second, by influencing domestic communities and eroding political standing, coercive intelligence disclosure might exert indirect pressure on the aggressor's political leadership to stop their malign activities. Third, this disclosure might help the disclosing authority create or support a compelling narrative that persuades other international players to act. This third aim also helps the nation disclosing the information achieve [narrative superiority](#) over the aggressor.

With regard to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, [western researchers](#) have noted that the use of telecommunications infrastructure by the Ukrainian government, specifically through the successful incorporation of smartphones, social media, and messaging apps, provided the Ukrainians with a significant informational advantage over the Russian invaders. However, there has been less in-depth analysis on the strategy behind how Ukrainian intelligence services use social media to achieve effects in the information environment, specifically in the context of coercive intelligence disclosure. [\[HS1\]](#)
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A qualitative content analysis using the web-based tool [Vicinatas](#) to collect real-time and historical tweets provides insight into the recurring themes of the HUR's efforts on Twitter. The dataset consists of all 2,000+ tweets that the HUR has published on Twitter since opening an account in June 2021 through mid-March 2023. From this [database](#), tweets containing COMINT were extracted for further analysis. Achieving absolute certainty about the dependability of intelligence material is a challenging undertaking. Understandably, the HUR only released excerpts of audio material which it deemed suitable. Nevertheless, this study presents an analysis of themes and narratives related to the strategic communication practices of the Ukrainian military intelligence service.

Tweeting on the Russian invasion

Before the Russian invasion in February 2022, the content creators of the HUR disseminated tweets on a wide range of topics, such as Ukrainian commemoration days, excerpts of media interviews with HUR Director Major General Kyrylo Budanov, and the accomplishments and remembrances of personnel. Once Russia invaded, the HUR was silent for several days. It explained this silence on Feb. 28, 2022, saying in a [strong Twitter message](#) that it was due to a focus on targeting Russian personnel and equipment. This tweet set the stage for a new phase in the HUR's social media strategy.

On March 1, 2022, the HUR began publishing [lists with information on Russian and Belarusian military units](#). These records included names, ranks, birthdays, and other personal information of military personnel. According to the HUR, the lists contained the names of military personnel who either participated in or supported the invasion. The intelligence service sought to encourage the surrender of enemy personnel with [doxing](#)—publishing personally identifiable information online—and justified it by claiming those people contributed to Russia's illegal invasion.

Even more remarkable than the doxing of Russian and Belarusian military members is the publication of intercepted Russian military communications. The HUR regularly tweeted voice files containing conversations between Russian military personnel and with Russian soldiers and their family members. It remains unclear how the Ukrainian military intelligence service recorded these conversations, but the decision to withhold sources and methods remains consistent with COMINT [procedures](#). The sensitive nature of COMINT stems from the fact that it entails the interception and analysis of the communications of government officials, military personnel, and other groups or individuals. If it becomes public knowledge that an entity has access to this information, then that tends to mean the end of this access.

Despite concerns over losing access to intelligence sources, the HUR started to release tweets containing audio recordings that fit into three categories: alleged Russian war crimes, Russian disillusionment with the war, and the weakness or corruption of Russian military leadership.

On April 20, 2022, the HUR released an audio intercept that revealed a command to [kill all Ukrainian prisoners](#) of war in the Popasyana area of Luhansk Oblast in eastern Ukraine. Ten days later, the HUR released audio that revealed the “occupiers” stealing solar panels and complaining about [their losses](#). Then on May 23rd, the HUR intercepted the audio of two soldiers from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) discussing [rape and looting](#) by members of their unit. Later in June, an intercept revealed the Russians had captured a Ukrainian tank crew member, interrogated him, and then [shot him](#), “as they did not leave prisoners alive.” On August 2nd, a Russian admitted in a recording to using [phosphorus ammunition](#), which is prohibited by the Geneva Conventions.

The second category of released intercepts by the HUR provides a glimpse into the disillusionment with the war felt by Russian military personnel. On June 21, 2022, a member of the Russian military discussed potential encirclement by Ukrainian forces and the [poor quality](#) of their rear units. Then, on June 27th, a Russian confessed to his mother that many soldiers in his unit had [given up mentally](#) and wished to escape the war. At the end of July, a Russian soldier compared the war in Ukraine with the wars in [Chechnya and Afghanistan](#), expressing his negative attitude towards the Russian government and military command. On August 21st, a Russian military officer reported the [mass refusal](#) of soldiers to fight and voiced his confidence that they would soon be withdrawn from the conflict. On September 4th, Russian soldiers complained about the [poor supply](#) of new units who arrived without clothes, sleeping bags, and other basic supplies. These statements, if true, reveal the depth of deprivation experienced by the Russian invasion forces.

The third and final category of HUR tweets contained examples of weak or corrupt Russian leadership. These audio intercepts released by the HUR provide a window into the attitude of Russian military personnel towards their leadership during the conflict in Ukraine. On September 14th, a Russian military member in the Kharkiv area complained about the disorganization and [incompetence](#) of his superiors. On November 28th, a military officer described his commanding officers as [idiots](#) who were unwilling to fight. On December 26th, a Russian military member near Donetsk talked about the [cowardice](#) of his command’s staff officers and of military deserters, and his seemingly vain hopes of withdrawing from the combat zone.

HUR fig

Figure 1: A screenshot of a social media post on the Twitter account of the HUR, which contains an intercepted phone call in which a Russian military member complains about his

“cowardly commanders” and “deserters”.

Further audio intercepts obtained by the HUR highlighted the challenges faced by Russian soldiers on the front lines. On January 4, 2023, a Russian soldier talked to his mother about the problem of alcoholism in the ranks and how Russian commands [falsified](#) soldiers’ places of death. The recent [verbal attacks](#) by Wagner CEO Yevgeny Prigozhin on Twitter of Russian military incompetence also lend credence to what the HUR Twitter account claims.

Applying the concept of coercive disclosure

One motive behind the HUR’s sensitive intelligence disclosures may be to compel Russia to modify its operations. Naturally, the HUR is vested in the cessation of Russian operations in Ukraine and the termination of violence against civilians and Ukrainian prisoners of war. However, Russian leadership in Moscow has yet to issue orders to the armed forces to alter their behavior or tactics, despite the HUR’s dissemination of evidence on social media relating to Russian war crimes, ineffectiveness, and declining morale.

A second possible motive for the HUR’s disclosure of intelligence on Twitter is to sway Russian public opinion and make its citizens demand better conduct of the Russian military in Ukraine. Although the use of Twitter [is restricted](#) in Russia, its citizens can still approach the platform through Virtual Private Network (VPN) connections. Further, the HUR posts similar content on YouTube and Telegram, the latter of which is widely used in Russia. However, it is unlikely the HUR sees its release of social media content as a viable approach to change public opinion in Russia, given the [outright denial of and disinterest](#) in widely documented Russian military acts of violence against the Ukrainian population.

The main reason for the ongoing intelligence disclosures by the HUR is likely that it helps to support a compelling narrative that persuades other states and international organizations to act. This is the third option Riemer and Sobelman researched: the belief that the controlled release of intelligence can help to achieve “[narrative superiority](#).” The consistent messaging by the HUR about Russian [misbehavior](#) against civilians and military personnel; low morale of Russian soldiers; and weak leadership, supports a wider Ukrainian government communication strategy in which narratives like this are regularly stressed, both to international and domestic audiences. Time and time again, Ukraine asks for [international attention](#) and action and tries to mobilize actors to take action against alleged Russian war crimes. The HUR’s release of raw intelligence, containing testimonies of Russian misconduct, adds an extra layer of credibility to strategic communications to western audiences and its

own population. Ukraine no doubt assesses there is a huge public relations benefit in releasing intercepted material that embarrasses the Russian military and reveals details of Russian atrocities on the battlefield.

Concluding Remarks and Reflection

The HUR's release of COMINT, traditionally considered highly classified and sensitive, can be seen as a modern development in a world where very few secrets are likely to remain secret forever, and in which carefully selected intelligence can be used to inform the public and seize the moral high ground. Then again, the HUR deliberately chooses what COMINT-related material it releases. The intercepted conversations selected by the HUR for publication on Twitter purposefully portray a negative picture of the Russian armed forces. Corruption, incompetence, criminal activity, and civilian mistreatment solidify a narrative meant as much to inspire the Ukrainian population and its military as to influence the international community.

As such, the Ukrainians have employed an approach that draws upon the concept of moral conflict described by John Boyd. The HUR's emphasis on execrable Russian behavior aims to maintain public opinion against the invasion in both western countries and Ukraine. By maintaining strong international opinion opposing the Russian invaders, Ukraine sustains essential support of training and weapons from western governments while preserving the loyalty of the Ukrainian populace in wartime. Both are critical for Ukraine's survival and reflect Boyd's concept of moral conflict in which the successful integration of material and moral imperatives are prerequisites for victory.

Bio: Major Peter Schrijver is a PhD researcher affiliated with the Netherlands Defence Academy. In his professional capacity, he serves as an officer within the Royal Netherlands Army and has operational experience across multiple postings in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Lead Image: Screenshot of a June 19, 2023 post from the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine's Twitter account.

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