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Pronounce Nonsense, And Let Slip the Doges of War: An Analysis of the Creation and Tactics of the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation

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Pronounce Nonsense, And Let Slip the Doges[1] of War: An Analysis of the Creation and Tactics of the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation

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Ben Fraters

[1] A common way to spell the word ‘dogs’ in online meme culture, specifically when referencing photoshopped pictures of Shiba Inu dogs. Ubiquitous in NAFO parlance.

Abstract

NAFO is a group of digital activists, primarily on Twitter, that seek to oppose Russian attempts to frame the discourse on the invasion of Ukraine. In this paper, I interviewed five members of the organisation and subjected the resulting interviews to thematic analysis. The results show that NAFO as an organisation is shaped by the medium it operates on, being a highly decentralised group relying on grassroots action and leveraging the features of social media to effectively shape public opinion in favour of Ukraine through ridiculing Russian propagandists, using memes to convey their message, and flooding Russian propaganda accounts through mass-reports and dogpiles while relying on intragroup connectivity to ensure rapid response times. I also identified problems the organisation faces: the low barrier of entry meaning it's easy for impostors to enter the group and attempt to disrupt it, and the 'always-on' nature of social media putting NAFO members at risk of burnout.

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Introduction and Research Question

Context

War may never change, but its theatres certainly do. The war for hearts and minds is no exception; from condemnation of enemies as heretics and demons in the Crusades, to propaganda leaflet drops in Vietnam, propaganda has ever been a crucial factor in conflict. Social media has introduced yet another vector for this part of war; battles for public opinion have become a staple of conflicts. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is no different in this regard. What it *does* differ in, however, is the degree of spontaneous organising and identity-formation by citizens from third-party states. Specifically, the creation of the so-called 'North Atlantic Fellas Organisation', or 'NAFO'.

NAFO is a group of digital activists, primarily from NATO countries, that seek support the Ukrainian war effort. The organisation is known for fighting its battles on the Internet, primarily on Twitter.[2] NAFO was created in May of 2022, being just shy of a year old at the time of writing.[3] Social media use during conflict, both military and political has become commonplace; ISIS was infamous for its use of social media for recruitment and propaganda, to the point where it was actively studied at the U.S. Navy War College.[4] Russia is well-known for its digital mis- and disinformation campaigns, having entire government facilities devoted to muddying the waters of online discourse.[5] China has its '50 cent party,' which aims to achieve a similar effect domestically.[6] The country also boasts a digital counterculture full of politically subversive memes, such as the 'river crab' and the 'grass mud horse'.[7] [8] There are far more examples of such digital propaganda, but these examples of

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[2] "A virtual army of impish cartoon pooches is waging war on Russia," *The Economist*, August 31, 2022, https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/08/31/a-virtual-army-of-impish-cartoon-pooches-is-waging-war-on-russia.

[3] Jason J. Smart, "Founder of NAFO Reveals Identity, Discusses Raison D'être," *Kyiv Post*, November 14th, 2022, https://www.kyivpost.com/post/204

[4] Nathan K. Schneider, *ISIS and Social Media: The Combatant Commander's Guide to Countering ISIS's Social Media Campaign*, (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College, 2015).

[5] Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov, "Neutrollization: Industrialized trolling as a pro-Kremlin strategy of desecuritization", *Security Dialogue* 49 (Fall 2018).

[6] Yingnan Joseph Zhou, Wenfang Tang, and Xuchuan Lei, "Social Desirability of Dissent: an IAT Experiment with Chinese University Students," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 25(1) (Summer 2020), 115.

[7] An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 38-39.

[8] Explaining the niceties of these memes falls out of the scope of this paper; suffice it to say that the names of these creatures in Mandarin are tonally extremely similar to vulgar phrases (in the case of the grass mud horse) or CPC political slogans for Internet censorship (in the case of the river crab) and are thus used to simultaneously skirt *and* insult censorship laws and those that enforce them.

its use by geopolitical heavyweights should suffice to sketch the importance of social media use in conflict.

While using the digisphere in conflict is common, 'NAFO' is the first and thus far only major organisation to actively participate in information warfare almost exclusively via memes, as well as being an organisation of volunteers from across the world instead of a state organ, being described by one military scholar as "something we've never seen before".[9] Foreign support for conflicts in other nations is a well-established phenomenon, from the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War to volunteers from across the globe in the Syrian Civil War, but being able to partake in another country's war from one's home with a Twitter account and a Discord server is a new development.

Speaking of Twitter and Discord, it is useful to briefly discuss these social media platforms, as they are fundamental to both NAFO and this thesis. Twitter is a social media platform where users can post short messages of a few hundred characters, a few images, or a single video - these posts are known as 'tweets'. Users can 'follow' other users, making those users' tweets appear in their timeline of posts more often. This timeline does not only contain the posts of those you follow, but it also shows you posts you might like - especially if the post has been 'liked,' commented on, or 'retweeted' (shared on an user's own timeline as if it was a post of their own) by other users. This can very easily allow posts to go viral, as interaction begets further interaction. Notably, any user can see the tweets of any other user, except when they have been 'blocked' from interacting by that other user, or if that other user has 'locked' their account, which results in posts only being shown to that user's followers - and following that user must be approved manually by that user before content becomes visible. The default setting on Twitter is everyone being able to see everyone else's posts: virality is the norm, and any privacy is exclusively opt-in. It is this virality among strangers that is the reason why NAFO's operates practically exclusively on Twitter in its day-to-day work: as shall be discussed extensively in the analysis section of this thesis, NAFO relies strongly on visibility in its tactics, and that requires public virality.

[9] Emma Salisbury, in Mark Scott, "The shit-posting, Twitter-trolling, dog-deploying social media army taking on Putin one meme at a time," *POLITICO*, August 31, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/nafo-doge-shiba-russia-putin-ukraine-twitter-trolling-social-media-meme/.

Discord, conversely, is a relatively restricted platform. It is an online chat and voice communication platform designed for communities. It has 'channels' for discussion on specific topics and categories of channels for better organisation. Moderators and admins have additional permissions to manage the server and help members, and roles can be assigned to members for customised access to specific channels. Notably, one must be specifically invited to join a Discord server, and one cannot send private messages to other users of the platform without knowing that user's username and numerical identifier. Halfway between an Internet forum and 'regular' social media like Twitter, Discord is a versatile platform for various purposes and allows for easy communication and organisation of online communities: it allows for relative self-contained privacy at the expense of virality. This is where what little organisation can be found in NAFO's structure is concentrated: the group has an official Discord server, with access to certain channels being restricted to a trusted in-group. This, too, shall be discussed further during the analysis: for now, it is enough to understand the basic contrasts between these two platforms in order to comprehend this thesis as a whole. Given the importance of these two platforms to NAFO, when this thesis discusses 'social media,' it primarily refers to Twitter, as this is where the organisation conducts most of its work, with Discord primarily being important from an organisational perspective.

Let us return to discussing NAFO proper, and the specific purpose of this research in particular. While the overall goals of NAFO may be similar to those of other information warfare campaigns or propaganda actions - fundraising for the war effort, heightening the morale of one's own side while damaging that of the enemy, shutting down hostile propaganda channels and keeping the war in focus globally[10] - the digital environment differs radically in its potential and limitations from previous, analogue avenues for propaganda. As such, it seems plausible that NAFO's tactics in achieving these goals differ from earlier methods. This thesis investigated if this is indeed the case, and if so, to understand and describe these new tactics and the ways they have evolved over time. As such, the research question of this thesis is: *"In what ways is NAFO striving to assist in the Ukrainian war effort against Russia?"*, with the sub-question of *"How have these ways changed over time, if at all?*

[10] Stuart Braun, "Ukraine's info warriors battling Russian trolls," *Die Welle*, September 17, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/nafo-ukraines-info-warriors-battling-russian-trolls/a-63124443.

Research Significance

The significance of this research is both immediately practical and important for the theoretical foundations of digital memetics[11], which is still a relatively young field. NAFO is a very new evolution in digital information warfare, creating a highly effective form of propaganda, counter-propaganda and open-source intelligence (OSINT) from a group of citizen volunteers. This completely reverses the extant dynamics of information warfare seen on the digisphere thus far; rather than citizens being the battlefield, with sides that have a direct stake in the conflict warring over hearts, minds, and attention spans, citizens are now directly partaking in that fight. The direct and extensive citizen participation - and, more importantly, self-organisation - as displayed by NAFO thus holds crucial implications for the field of security studies and IR more broadly.

There are also acute security reasons to delve into the activities of NAFO: considering how NAFO's actions may be considered partaking in operations against a state during times of war, it may lead to NAFO 'Fellas'[12] being considered as legitimate targets for cyber operations by the Russian government. While this would certainly not lead to drone strikes on one's house for posting a NAFO meme on Twitter, it may result in one becoming the target of hacking or doxxing activities. It is therefore important to pre-empt any such developments by devising ways to protect digital activists' online identity and mitigate the ways in which they could be harmed by hostile actors. Understanding how NAFO operates and the tactics it has developed can help both scholars and practitioners in this regard, as new tactics and means of operation may require either revisions to existing precautionary measures, or for entirely new types of measures to be created.

[11] The study of Internet culture.
[12] The name for individuals that identify with the organisation and actively seek to further its goals.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The research gap that this research seeks to fill is that of the creation and evolution of new tactics in grassroots informational warfare. The knowledge gap on this form of warfare is significantly broader, considering that it is practically being pioneered in its current form by NAFO, but narrowing the focus of the research to tactics keeps the study feasible. Additionally, by centering the tactics in this research, the research hopefully can serve as groundwork for more in-depth exploration of the efficacy of their use or the motivations of those that use them in future research.

The conceptual framework that the study is based on is interpretivist inductive reasoning, observing the specific case of NAFO and attempting to draw general understanding of social media information warfare tactics from their practices. This framework is supported by a significant amount of theory of political communication and social media studies.

Perhaps the most important part of this theoretical grounding is Marshall McLuhan's seminal work, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. McLuhan makes a comprehensive argument that the limitations and possibilities of the medium a message is transmitted in shape the message itself, as well as constraining the possibilities in which the message is used and seen.[13] Importantly, he argues that 'the medium is the message' - i.e. it doesn't matter what is being said, but rather how it's being said. The contents of a printed text do not matter; what matters is that the nature of printed text encourages a culture of uniformity and reproducibility, much like a manufacturing line. In order to understand the types of influences media (which McLuhan uses in an extremely broad sense, practically meaning 'any form of new technology that changes the way society functions') can have, *Understanding Media* distinguishes two types of media. 'Hot' media is rich in detail, leaving very little up to interpretation. Movies, with their crisp high-definition visual stimuli, leave little ambiguity and thus are 'hot' media. 'Cold' media, meanwhile, are much less detailed, and demand more audience participation - comics have relatively low visual detail, and require a greater degree of suspension of disbelief or audience participation to work.[14]

[13] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 9.
[14] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 30-31.

These insights are highly relevant to the study, as the constraints that shape social media can help us understand the types of organisation that could emerge from such media, and recognizing the extreme 'coldness' of social media as a medium will help us further refine our understanding by underlining the importance of audience participation in its functioning. *Understanding Media* is so important that it forms the core of the central argument being advanced in this thesis. The argument is that NAFO's tactics are a reflection of the medium they use - intrinsically bottom-up in nature, reflected in their tactics being centred on grassroots action carried out by individuals coordinating through shared meaning-making, rapid dissemination of information, a low barrier of entry to participation, and little reliance on top-down organisational structure.

Before we examine NAFO's use of the medium, we must first understand the medium itself. Therefore, our analysis of NAFO must begin with an analysis of the Internet in general and social media in particular. When analysing the intersection between social media and politics (including war, as per Clausewitz' famous phrase), Singer and Brooking's *LikeWar: the Weaponization of Social Media* cannot be ignored. This work lays out the development of social media, from its tiny beginnings to the shaper of global politics that it is today.[15] Singer and Brooking recount five foundational principles of the internet, which form the core of both their book, and our understanding of the Internet as a medium in this research. Firstly, they state that the internet is truly maturing, having long since outgrown its roots as something exclusively used by students, hobbyists, and the military.[16] Half of the world is connected. Secondly, the internet has become a battlefield for soldiers, spies, and activists alike. Individuals from all over the world can enmesh themselves in any conflict they feel has a worthy cause, and as a result "every battle seems personal, but every conflict seems global". Thirdly, this new front shapes how conflicts play out: secrets are growing ever harder to keep, but the sheer amount of content online means that is has become significantly easier to muddy the waters. Virality is rewarded over truthfulness, and so the strategies of conflict change.[17] Fourthly, this changes how wars are fought - victories in seemingly self-contained online discourse can shape the outcome of practically any form of conflict where public opinion matters, from elections to wars. Importantly, the 'rules of engagement' here are not shaped primarily by policymakers or military command, but by the boards and shareholders

[15] Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 218-219.
[16] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 21-22.
[17] *Ibid.*

of Silicon Valley.[18] Finally, everyone online is a part of this great 'LikeWar' - your attention both target and weapon - "Whether you have an interest in the conflicts of LikeWar or not, they have an interest in you". By compellingly and exhaustively providing evidence for each of these points through tracing the histories of social media and its developments, Singer and Brooking provide an excellent theoretical framework for understanding social media as a medium.[19] By combining their work with McLuhan's theories of media, we can approach the research into NAFO with a clear idea of the potential advantages and limitations of the medium of social media may shape the way they function. This will be useful in shaping the questions that will guide the interviews that form the methodological core of this research (which will be discussed in further detail in the 'Research Design and Methodology' section of this paper), but also help narrow our focus in studying the plethora of literature available on social media discourse. For example, by understanding how individualised global conflicts have become and how important attention is, it becomes much more understandable why NAFO would rely on the easily-made-by-individuals, attention-grabbing medium of Internet memes on social media. We shall therefore now investigate this medium more thoroughly.

As NAFO as an organisation operates in significant part through memes, it is worth briefly examining how memes can be used for political goals. In *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power*, An Xiao Mina eloquently shows how social media narratives in the form of memes can be a powerful tool of dissent against authoritarian governments. She shows how memes can start as tiny narratives around a specific event and then, through remixing and intentional overproduction, grow broader in scope to carry a wider message.[20] In this way, memes can help challenge or shift existing narratives of power, or create new ones entirely, helping us visualise political possibilities beyond our current reality.[21] This effectively leverages the status of social media as cold media, exploiting the demand for massive audience participation to spark political consciousness and calls to action, thus shifting public discussion. While NAFO is not a Russian domestic organisation opposing their own government, they are using memes to challenge the Russian narrative of a legitimate 'special military operation'.[22] As such, while the specific context between Mina's research and NAFO's practice are slightly different, we

[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 22-23.
[20] An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 75.
[21] An Xiao, *Memes to Movements*, 77.
[22] Hamill-Stewart, "The Memes Fighting Russian Propaganda".

can still use the former to help us understand the dynamics of the latter. By looking at the memes of NAFO, not just as funny images that happen to be political, but through the lens of narratives challenging established power structures, we can more accurately understand why NAFO may choose to use this particular part of Internet culture as a core part of their operations.

Before we examine each of the above propositions that make up the central argument in further detail, we must explore whether the medium used by NAFO - social media - is indeed bottom-up in nature. Fortunately, a significant amount of research into digital memetics has made convincing claims indicating such. The Internet has significantly lowered the barrier to entry for those seeking to report on foreign affairs, allowing citizen reporting to flourish and be read all over the world.[23] The two-way mass communication enabled by the Internet helped spur digital activism, allowing international mobilisation to demand action on local issues, such as the Zapatista movement's leveraging of international support for their cause in Chiapas, Mexico.[24] This kind of mass political engagement with global issues has spurred scholars to call for greater focus on citizen participation in activism via the Internet.[25] NAFO's use of social media for precisely this kind of grassroots mobilisation of the international community (even if localised largely within NATO countries) to take action on the Ukrainian war is an evolution of this trend. While NAFO relies on short, snappy Tweets, memes and hashtags instead of the more long-form blogs of the 2000s, the core aspect of 'many-to-many communication'[26] remains as the foundation of NAFO's activities. As stated before, the medium is the message - and NAFO's use of a bottom-up medium is reflected in their bottom-up approach to their messages.

But how, specifically, is the medium reflected in NAFO's message? Based on observation of NAFO actions thus far, I have formulated the following three propositions. These do not encapsulate all of NAFO's work, but serve as a starting point for the methodological framework of the study and a guiding evaluation point for the conclusion of the analysis.

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[23] John Maxwell Hamilton and Eric Jenner, "The New Foreign Correspondence," *Foreign Affairs* 82(5) (Autumn 2003): 131.
[24] Nojin Kwak, Nathaniel Poor, and Marko M. Skoric, "Honey, I Shrunk the World! The Relation Between Internet Use and International Engagement," *Mass Communication & Society 9(2) (Winter 2006)*: 190-191.
[25] Jerry L. Miller and Raymie E. McKerrow, "History of Political Communication", Review of Communication 10(1) (Winter 2010): 69.
[26] Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

Proposition #1: NAFO tactics rely on grassroots action by individuals, rather than pre-planned strategies.

A cursory glance at NAFO's efforts in practice reveals that there is no real 'command structure' in place. While there are certain aspects of the group's efforts, such as the merchandise store that is a part of their fundraising efforts for Ukrainian charities and wider war effort,[27] this is not the core focus of their work. NAFO largely focuses on controlling the narrative on social media by mass-reporting Russian propaganda accounts and keeping attention on the war in Ukraine, which is done in a decentralised way. NAFO has even found ways to decentralise their fundraising efforts; by providing photoshopped pictures of Shiba Inu dogs dressed in clothes in exchange for a donation to the Ukrainian war effort, anyone with basic image editing skills can become a part of the perpetual NAFO social media fundraisers.[28]

Proposition #2: NAFO tactics rely on rapid communication and (intra-group) virality

Because of the reliance on actions by individuals, NAFO does not have the ability to coordinate initiatives like taking down Russian propaganda sources on social media via hierarchical command structures like a more traditional, centralised organisation would. As such, NAFO instead coordinates by leveraging the features of social media. Specifically, NAFO Fellas rely on shared meaning created on social media, such as the '#Article5' hashtag. This hashtag is used by Fellas to flag a post on Twitter they consider to be Russian propaganda. This serves as a beacon for other 'Fellas', helping them find posts that need to be reported *en masse* in order to be taken down by Twitter.[29] Thus, NAFO adapts to its decentralised structure by innovating tactics that leverage the specific features of social media, once more showing the medium being the message

[27] NAFO, "Collections", accessed March 26, 2023, https://nafo-ofan.org/collections.
[28] Chris Hamil-Stewart, "The Memes Fighting Russian Propaganda," *Byline Times*, 31 August, 2022, https://bylinetimes.com/2022/08/31/the-memes-fighting-russian-propaganda/.
[29] Scott, "The shit-posting, Twitter-trolling, dog-deploying social media army".

Proposition #3: NAFO tactics rely on a low barrier to entry or participation, rendering a top-down organisational structure counterproductive.

To achieve the grassroots action that is proposed as fundamental to NAFO action in Proposition #1, NAFO must be able to attract a large amount of members who are willing and able to take the initiative in furthering NAFO's goals. As such, NAFO's decentralisation is not only a feature; it is a necessity, stemming from the tactics the organisation uses, which are in turn based on the medium they operate on. In fact, as they operate primarily via social media via publicly accessible methods of communication and action, NAFO *cannot* exclude participation from its actions by anyone with an account on that social media platform. As such, while their tactics have evolved to take advantage of this fact, they are also *prevented* from using tactics that do not use grassroots operations to a degree. It might be possible to use a private group chat to prepare a plan of which Russian propaganda source on Twitter to target next, for example, but actually taking down this source via mass-reporting would be significantly less effective without using the efforts of other Twitter users through the '#Article5' hashtag.

With our central argument and propositions clear, let us examine previous work on both the use of the medium of social media and the evolution of the Internet in more detail. For an example of how the medium of social media content shapes and constrains its use by political actors, we can turn to Kurowska and Reshetnikov's analysis of trolling by the Russian government. They explore 'neutrollization', or how pro-Kremlin trolls - deliberately, professionally and in the employ of the state - prevent organic bottom-up securitizations of the actions of the Russian government.[30] This is not done through traditional methods of propaganda, such as rigidly sticking to the 'party line' and advocating that viewpoint exclusively. Rather, these trolls post an enormous amount of content with wildly varying and often self-contradictory positions in order to make it impossible to separate fact from fiction, causing users to disengage from discourse entirely. As such, genuine users who seek to construct Russia as a security threat (which, for Ukrainian netizens, is certainly an accurate assessment), have their voice drowned out by the amount of noise that floods the web, making it much harder for their viewpoint to gain traction in the public consciousness.[31] By pursuing this strategy, in In McLuhan's terminology, the trolls effectively 'flash freeze' the medium of social media, demanding so much audience participation in distinguishing

[30] Kurowska and Reshetnikov, "Neutrollization," *Security Dialogue* 49(5) (August 2018): 346.
[31] *Ibid.*

nonsense from truth that users burn out and cease taking in information altogether. This is only possible through the specific traits of social media as a medium, being incredibly easy to produce high volumes of content for, a degree of anonymity that renders it easy to assume fake identities and quickly bounce back with a new pseudonym if one is outed as a troll, and the ability to go viral and dominate discourse not through what is true, but through what is most repeated, to name but a few. This again shows us the strength of McLuhan's argument, while also demonstrating the importance of social media as a battlefront of public opinion. It also helps us ground our study, as NAFO 'Fellas' have explicitly stated that providing a counter to social media misinformation campaigns by Russia is one of the organisations explicit goals.[32] Understanding NAFO as a reaction to the 'neutrollization' efforts can help us see their work as an evolution of digital warfare, instead of an isolated incident.

[32] Braun, "Ukraine's info warriors".

Research Design and Methodology

As NAFO is, as established earlier, a novel phenomenon in bottom-up international digital warfare, it is the only case like itself that currently exists. As the study focuses on describing NAFO's tactics and how they have evolved, data on these tactics is required. The most in-depth knowledge of the organisation's tactics can best be gotten from a first-hand source: the organisation's own members. As such, NAFO insider perceptions are necessary, to qualitatively study the organisation's tactics. Semi-structured interviews with these members are the best way to collect this data, giving interviewees the space to discuss their own perception on the organisation while allowing the interviewer to steer the conversation towards relevant topics.

I interviewed five self-identified NAFO members, contacted via the organisation's official Discord server, via purposeful sampling. These interviewees were informed of their rights and the way their data would be safely used via a consent form they signed, and were provided with the context of the research through an introductory letter. This letter, as well as a blank copy of the consent form, have been appended to this thesis. The interviews were primarily carried out over the direct message chat feature of the Discord social media platform (the reason for this shall be explained in the 'Limitations' section), with one interview taking place over audio call via this same platform. Transcripts of all these interviews are appended to this thesis as well. These interviews were then subjected to thematic analysis: excerpts were coded, grouped into relevant themes, and then woven together into a narrative explanation that grounded the analysis and conclusions of this thesis in first-hand reports of interviewees.[33]

The specific goal of the thesis is to understand the tactics NAFO uses in trying to achieve these goals, as the organisation is the first organisation to participate in an inter-state war exclusively via the medium of social media. As such, it seems plausible that new tactics have been created (or existing tactics adapted and refined) to suit this new medium. The goal of these interviews is to collect information on the tactics used by NAFO, as well as gauge NAFO members' [known colloquially as 'Fellas' within the NAFO community] opinions on these tactics. As the primary function of this research is to identify the tactics of NAFO and how those tactics evolved, most of the interview was structured around investigating these

[33] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 87, doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

tactics. However, as NAFO has not been studied before, additional questions were added to help provide a basic layout of the organisation as described by the interviewees. This allowed the results to provide understanding of both NAFO as a group in general and the way it operates in particular.The specific questions asked are listed below, with explanatory notes giving the context for the questions. This helped to guide the interviewer during the interviews, in order to know when to ask the questions or when to let the interviewee continue on their tangent: given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the ultimate goal was to collect relevant data, not necessarily to ask these questions for the sake of asking them. The questions and contextual notes were as follows:

1. **How long would you say you have considered yourself a 'Fella' [i.e. actively involved with NAFO]?**
    a. *This question is mostly here to get the interviewee comfortable, thinking about NAFO and their role within it, without seeming daunting. It should help ease them into the interview.*
2. **We're here to talk about the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation. Could you, in your own words, tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are?**
    a. *This is partly a warm-up question since it should be a shoe-in, but it also helps me verify that all interviewees share a vision of what NAFO is. If that isn't the case - also good! That means the organisation may be more decentralised than I initially thought.*

3. **I'm curious about NAFO's tactics - how NAFO works towards achieving its goals. What would you say some of NAFO's most commonly used tactics are?**
    a. *This question is here to verify that I've been looking in the right directions and haven't missed any major NAFO tactics, and to check whether the Fellas are on the same page when it comes to how they go about their business.*
4. **Could you tell me a bit about your opinions on these tactics?**
    a. *While it's fairly plausible that interviewees will give their opinion on the tactics the moment they list them, this question can be used as a prompt to spur them into doing so if need be. It avoids being leading by mentioning things like 'effectiveness' or whether a tactic is 'good' or not, which is too vague for a decent question anyway. This should ideally give us insight into the perceived usefulness of the tactics as seen by those that employ them.*
5. **We've covered the tactics in the abstract, now I'd like to talk about the practice for a bit. Could you tell me about any specific moments where you thought "we're doing a good job", if there are any?**
    a. *This is a very open-ended question, since 'a good job' is a very vague description. However, trying to narrow down what 'a good job' means would result in extremely leading questions; having this discussion right after talking about tactics and achieving NAFO's goals should hopefully get the interviewees thinking about the question in those terms, but a prompt of*

"What would you say 'NAFO is doing a good job' means to you?" could push on this angle further, if necessary.

6. **Similarly, could you tell me about any moments where you thought something could have been handled better by the Fellas, if there are any?**
    a. *Pretty much identical to the above question, but prodding for learning moments instead.*
7. **Are you aware of any discussion happening among Fellas following either "that went well"-moments, or "that could've gone better"-moments that was about those moments, and if you are, could you tell me something about those discussions?**
    a. *This aims to find learning opportunities or critical points in NAFO's history that caused the organisation to change gear and refine, discard, or change its tactics.*

8. **Are there any periods you can think of in NAFO's history when the Fellas changed their tactics, and if so, could you tell us something about these periods?**
    a. *This is a more explicit form of the above question, aiming to capture broader/more gradual shifts in tactics instead of 'critical juncture'-shifts directly following action. It avoids phrasing the question as if NAFO is changing its tactics, because the organisation appears to be too decentralised and grassroots to push for such changes on an organisational level. If this hypothesis is contradicted by the interviewees, this would be a good point for follow-up questions.*
9. **I'm not only relying on interviews for this thesis; I'm also sifting through a database of tweets about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, I'll need to filter this dataset to only contain tweets specific to NAFO - what keywords, phrases or hashtags would you suggest I use to filter the dataset for NAFO-related tweets?**
    a. *This question helps me narrow down the massive amount of content I'll need to analyse in the non-interview section of my thesis. The context is provided so interviewees know precisely what I'm asking for and can provide the most accurate response possible. It sadly became obsolete halfway through the research, as will be explained in the 'Limitations' section.*
10. **Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?**
    a. *This is a closing question, in case the interviewees think of anything else they'd like to contribute.*
11. **Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?**
    a. *This question was intended to help with snowball sampling if necessary, though this turned out to not be needed.*
12. **Just out of curiosity - what's your favourite Fella that you've seen? I mean the images made for use as profile pictures and such, not the people in NAFO.**
    a. *A wind-down question to help the interviewee get out of the interviewing mindset and into a more casual, relaxed frame of thought.*

Data

Thematic coding of the five interviews revealed two primary 'pillar' themes that most interviewees referred to repeatedly in their discussions on NAFO: the social media the group operates on ('the medium') and the methods the group uses to further their goals ('the tactics'). These can be further distinguished in subthemes of 'Shifting public opinion,' 'fundraising,' 'visibility,' and 'the constraints of social media'. While these pillar themes and subthemes all intersect and interact, they shall be taken as the basis for the structure of the further analysis of these interviews, as detailed below. As the ultimate purpose of this study was to understand how NAFO sought to assist Ukraine, it is the 'Tactics' pillar that is of most importance to us. However, these tactics do not exist in a vacuum: they are influenced by the other pillars, and influence those pillars in turn. Therefore, we shall examine these other pillars as well, in order to derive a more complete understanding of NAFO's methods for supporting the Ukrainian war effort. As this thesis is additionally concerned with whether or not NAFO's tactics changed over time, any such changes in tactics will be described in the most relevant thematic pillar. For example, if a change in social media policy prompted a change in the Fella's tactics, those changes will be discussed in the 'Medium' pillar.

We shall firstly outline NAFO's tactics, in order to understand how the Fellas seek to achieve their ultimate goal through shaping public discourse and raising funds for the war effort. Secondly, we shall analyse the medium and how its features and limitations shape both the organisation and its practices.

Excerpt	Codes
"I've had to explain NAFO to friends before, and I can never quite get the idea across. It's partially a joke, and mostly not, a leaderless mob of people with a sense of humor who want to help Ukraine in various ways. [P4]"	Humour, lack of organisation, normal people, no hierarchy, support for Ukraine, differences in tactics.
"(...)It's just people volunteering to, I would say step up and speak out against hate speech against disinformation, mostly in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. [P3]"	Volunteers, against hate speech, against disinformation, public opinion, support for Ukraine.
"Once I joined the discord, I met some folks that I feel I would get along with. And other folks that I definitely don't see eye to eye with, but the idea that we are all in it for Ukraine and generally follow the discord rules, allow me to engage with folks who I'd never engage with in another setting. [P1]"	Community, diversity, shared values, support for Ukraine, tolerance.
"NAFO (north Atlantic fellas organization) is a group that grew pretty organically at its start to raise money for the Georgian legion. With a few smart *very online* individuals, they showed that change/help on the virtual Frontline was possible, and came up with a way to identify *friendlies* on the online space. [P1]"	Organic growth, fundraising, social media, volunteers, empowerment, support for Ukraine.
"The ultimate goal would be for it to all go away. If the disinformation stops, if the war stops then we have no further purpose and can move on. [P5]"	Against disinformation.

Table 1: NAFO's end goal.

The Tactics

NAFO strives for a single ultimate goal: the assistance of the Ukrainian war effort against the Russian invasion. While the founder of NAFO, Kamil Dyszewski (better known by his Twitter handle, @Kama_Kamilia,) has stated that "NAFO means different things to different people" and "By limiting what NAFO means or is, we'd be limiting what NAFO can achieve,"[34] he kickstarted the organisation by creating cartoon dog images for people that had donated to the Georgian Legion, a regiment fighting in Ukraine. Though NAFO is leaderless and thus its members may occasionally pursue other goals, generally this trend of funding and supporting NAFO to the (near-)exclusion of all else has continued. Interviewees affirmed support for Ukraine as NAFO's ultimate goal, as per Table 1.

The goal may be universal among the Fellas, but the methods to reach it are not. Interviewees identified several strategies employed by NAFO to assist Ukraine, which can be summarised as *Shifting Public Opinion* and *Fundraising*. We shall discuss these, and the specific tactics employed to accomplish them,

Shifting Public Opinion

One of NAFO's two most important efforts, as emphasised by the interviewees, is the fight for public opinion on social media (and implicitly beyond, as people do not stop holding a newly-changed opinion when they log out of Twitter). The desire to not let Russia and its sympathisers set the framing of the invasions was a very popular reason to get involved, according to those interviewed, as was the wish to oppose Russia's efforts to muddle public discourse via disinformation again. This can be seen in Table 2. Fighting misinformation is the primary way in which NAFO accomplishes this: rather than prioritising telling the Ukrainian side of the story, NAFO mostly focuses on making sure the Russian state is unable to warp the truth,

Excerpt	Codes
"Russians have zero shame about lying to achieve their goals and I believe that we help to prevent that but in a humorous way. [P5]"	Visibility, ridicule, against disinformation, public opinion.
"But yeah, we've been responsible for some major propaganda and recruitment accounts shutting down, and that's no small accomplishment. [P4]"	Measured success, against misinformation.
"Like, before NAFO was around when I was following news on Twitter and also other media scrolling down the comments section, it was very often dominated by Russian views. And very few people actually dared speak up, even though any poll shows you it's a total minority. [P3]"	Social media, public opinion.

Table 2: Fighting Russian narratives and lies.

[34] Smart, "Founder of NAFO Reveals Identity."

and in so doing hope to give Ukraine and Ukrainians the breathing room to tell their story themselves. There are two primary ways in which NAFO fights Russian disinformation: ridicule and group strength.

Ridicule

By 'ridicule', I mean that NAFO very often focuses on using humour as a way to make Russian claims seem ridiculous and lacking in credibility. Many state that trying to debate or fact-check Russian propagandists was useless, and that ridicule was a much more effective way to shut them down. This is supported by the literature: ridicule has a long history of being a powerful tool in undermining authority and authoritative statements.[35] Memes, a NAFO staple, are excellent in assisting on this front: they are by their nature meant to be humorous and are thus excellent for poking fun at bizarre positions or outright lies. As I have demonstrated in earlier work, memes are a powerful tool for sending simple messages to those that are open to sympathising with one's position, in addition to being simple to mass-produce while being excellent for ridicule, as the rely on their emotional appeal and humour - effectively, they are "the one-liners of the internet,"[36] which fits NAFO's needs perfectly. The popularity of memes as a tool of ridicule in NAFO's efforts can be seen in Tables 3 and 4. We shall

Excerpt	Codes
"So much russian propaganda is a shotgun of random, poorly thought out notions that are to be "recognized as official" But when accounts are talking about Gay witch satanist covens and secret Azov biolabs, repressing the urge to attempt to Correct the account and instead posting memes as a reply, to show that they aren't to be taken seriously is something I think NAFO does very well. [P1]"	Ridicule, humour, against disinformation, public opinion.
"Well, one of the ways we limit Russian propaganda's influence is with amusing memes. You've got to have a bit of a sense of humor to use that approach effectively. It doesn't sound like it would work, but it does, on several levels. [P4]"	Against disinformation, entertainment, memes, humour, measured success.
"But, in simpler terms, bombarding propaganda with memes that either distract from the message, point out the fallacies of that message, offer a different perspective, or just mock the entire concept of that message and the person who posted it, calling that person's entire ideology into question... that's what we're famous for. [P4]"	Memes, against disinformation, fact-checking, debate, ridicule, social media, question credibility.
"[Ridicule] seems to be the perfect weapon when the goal is spreading a kind of demoralization too "nothing can be believed", words don't mean anything, be afraid etc vs "this guy is just a lunatic on meth". [P2]"	Ridicule, measured success, morale, against disinformation.
"Something as important, if not more important, was the ability to take folks that were twisting *everything* to make people question the truth, and fight back by literally mocking them "Once you start arguing with a cartoon dog, you've already lost" Which I think has taken a bit of the wind out of the sails of a *Robust* propaganda machine. [P1]"	Disinformation, humour, ridicule, against disinformation, public opinion.

Table 3: The efficacy of ridicule and memes.

[35] J. M. Waller, "Weaponizing Ridicule," *Military Review* 97(5) (September-October 2017): 50.
[36] Ben Fraters, "The Memedium is the Message: Assessing Internet Memes as a Medium of Political Narrative-Building Compared to Established Methods of Discourse in the Case of the Soleimani Assassination" (Bachelor's Thesis (unpublished manuscript), Leiden University, May 17th, 2020,) PDF file, 31.

discuss memes specifically more in the analysis of the 'Medium' theme, but for now we shall focus on the ridicule they are generally used to inflict. Effectively, because spreaders of Russian disinformation appear to pursue a strategy of neutrollization, they do not care about maintaining one coherent (if false) narrative. Rather, they seek to sow as much confusion as possible, in hopes that people completely disengage from trying to find the truth. Thereby, Russia hopes that their invasion is deprioritized as "somebody else's problem" in public discourse, and therefore makes it more difficult to convince the public that state's support for Ukraine's resistance efforts is warranted or necessary.[37] By fighting fire with proverbial fire, NAFO refuses to play Russia's game: rather than engaging seriously with fundamentally unserious discourse, which would allow for endless redirection and goalpost-shifting, Russian trolls are simply ridiculed in order to publicly expose their statements for the nonsense that they are. This prevents the trolls from creating an air of legitimacy around them and their statements by not deigning to debate them as equals, but mocks their positions and undermines their credibility, resulting in a much weaker position for the trolls. One of the interviewees even outright addressed this, stating the following:

> "A reason I glossed over a bit is that propagandists of authoritarian states aim to demoralize by presenting a reality where nothing is agreed on and nothing can be trusted. total cynicism. showing how evil they are really demonstrates that evil exists and thus that some things are worse than others - regardless of whataboutism, it's possible to be right and have a backbone.[P2]"

Excerpt	Codes
"(...)There is not a lot of merit in trying to discuss the validity of their claims or trying to expose some of their narratives as false. We do that as we go along, but eventually it's, I mean- you heard the term pigeon chess? [P3]"	Debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective).
"I was online, arguing one-on-one with Russians from day one, and while I won a lot of those arguments just by fact checking, I doubt I was having a large impact. [P4]"	Social media, debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective).
"(...)The other side relies heavily on (...) outright lying with as many lies as possible and see what sticks. Engaging too seriously with low effort people is a recipe for getting bogged down in nonsense. So oftentimes we just call it nonsense and post memes. This takes away the pretense of power they put to their words. [P2]"	Disinformation, trolls, fact-checking (ineffective), ridicule, memes, humour, public opinion.

Table 4: The inefficacy of debate and fact-checking.

While the content analysis section of this thesis that sought to verify whether or not this translated into a more pro-Ukrainian framing of the discourse surrounding the invasion had to be scrapped due to Twitter's API policy changes rendering said analysis impossible, interviewees anecdotally but

[37] Kurowska and Reshetnikov, "Neutrollization," 346.

consistently reported this strategy of ridicule proved significantly more effective in fighting Russian trolls than earlier attempts with debate and fact-checking. However, while the effects of their efforts on public opinion and the thoughts of those that read their tweets were hard to measure, another metric that was significantly more obvious showed great efficacy: the shutting down of various propaganda channels and trolls. Most interviewees reported that Russian trolls found it difficult to formulate responses to being attacked by ridicule, causing many large Twitter accounts to lose followers, 'lock' their account so only approved people could follow and see their content (thus severely limiting their ability to perform neutrollization activities on the wider Internet), or in some cases shut down their twitter entirely. A famous example that was brought up repeatedly was that of Mikhail Ulyanov, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna. After engaging in a Twitter argument with a Fella that resulted in Ulyanov stating the words "You pronounced this nonsense. Not me.",[38] resulting in a flood of mockery that caused the ambassador to leave Twitter for a week, and the phrase 'pronouncing nonsense' is still widely used by other Fellas to mock Russian disinformation.[39] While causing one Russian official to cease posting not only misinformation, but *anything*, on Twitter for a single week may sound unimpressive, one has to bear in mind that this was accomplished by a handful of volunteers over the course of *minutes* - granted, with a few days of occasional follow-up to hammer home the mockery, but the primary damage was done with a few seconds of effort per Fella. The result may not be as effective as shutting down the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' ability to communicate, but the costs are astronomically lower as well. This renders the shutting down of the Twitter account of a diplomat like Ulyanov a very cost-effective operation that was not even coordinated or pre-planned: the disorganised, non-hierarchical nature of NAFO means that actions like these can manifest anywhere on Twitter, at any time, without any prior warning or planning. This makes it very hard for Russia to formulate a response without completely shutting down all interaction from other people on social media. Doing so, however, renders the entire appeal of propagandising and trolling on social media inert, as it instead becomes a glorified PSA system without the ability to troll, move goalposts, and generally muddy the waters in the way that a troll with the ability to interact with their audience can.

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[38] Mikhail Ulyanov, Twitter post, June 19th, 2022, 6:42 PM, https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1538562863199141889.
[39] Matthew Gault, "Shitposting Shiba Inu Accounts Chased a Russian Diplomat Offline," *Vice,* July 12th, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3pd5y/shitposting-shiba-inu-accounts-chased-a-russian-diplomat-offline.

Group Strength

Another way that NAFO seeks to fight disinformation is by leveraging its strength as a large group. This is the aspect of the organisation most interlinked with all of the pillars (save perhaps for its lack of organisation): the size of the group is a result of its operations on Twitter allowing for easy virality and visibility to a large pool of potential volunteers; it uses this size to bury Russian propaganda sources in a flood of memes and account reports, and it is able to leverage this critical mass of Fellas to dispense with coordinated action in favour of spontaneous grassroots digital activism. However, this group size also causes problems: having a large group of diverse people who do not necessarily agree on much more than the need for supporting Ukraine's war effort is a recipe for infighting, doubly so when the lack of hierarchy and organisation in the group means there are no real mechanisms for vetting prospective members, settling disputes, or accountability beyond ostracism should they act in ways the group finds unacceptable. All of this is briefly illustrated in Table 5. The pillar-specific factors influencing or influenced by group strength shall be further discussed in their perspective sections of the analysis, but the particular tactics NAFO uses that leverage their group size shall be explained here.

Excerpt	Codes
"(...) because there is a lot more Fellas now, you don't really need to call them. There will always be one in the in the area strolling around. [P3]"	Group strength.
"And there are around 100000 of us now, all doing the same thing on different spaces. It exhausts the enemy. They don't know how to deal with it other than block us. And that's a win. Because we tell each other who blocked us and more come in our place. [P5]"	Group strength.
"Article 5: gondor calls for aid; I've seen this generally to interrupt polls for people trying to make a point. Or to bouy an account that has been targeted by supporters of Russian thought. This I think is mainly a morale boosting tactic for fellas. If you don't feel alone in the information space, you aren't. [P1]"	Article 5, group strength, debate, social media, morale.
"I think, when Elon Musk bought Twitter, there was some fear that open bonking, the meme stuff, would lead to mass bans or suspensions. At that point, a lot of people switched to quieter means, fundraising and TOS reporting. When it became evident that those fears weren't going to come to pass, the bonking started back up again, but that change in tactics proved to actually be fairly effective, and some fellas switched to entirely mass reporting of hatemongering accounts. [P4]"	Memes, social media constraints, policy change, change in tactics, differences in tactics, group strength.
"When you have this many people in the group, you're going to have people who don't see eye to eye on this, or on anything for that matter. [P4]"	Large group, different views.

Table 5: The various impacts of NAFO's large group size.

As hinted at in table 5, this takes two primary forms: *attritional warfare* and *mass reporting*. These both rely on the application of NAFO's bulk, but against different targets: attritional warfare relies on wearing down Russian trolls directly, while mass reporting pressures Twitter itself to take action against sources of Russian propaganda on its platform. We shall now look at each of these tactics in turn.

Attritional warfare, or ‘dogpiling’ as it’s referred to on social media, refers to a group of people - the Fellas, in this context - responding negatively to a social media post *en masse*, flooding the comments of the post with mockery and ridicule.[40] The goal of this is tactic when employed by Fellas is generally to reduce the ability for their target to spread their message, but there are various beneficial outcomes that can result from a dogpile, as described by interviewees in Table 6. The target could continually attempt to engage with the Fellas dogpiling them, being repeatedly ridiculed, frustrating the target and causing them to waste time and energy that could instead have been spent on propagandising. The target could ‘lock’ their account as discussed earlier, preventing their content from being displayed to anyone that does not already follow them, meaning they will be reduced to ‘preaching to the choir’ until they ‘unlock’ their account. The target could attempt to block all of the Fellas, but given the fact that many Fellas follow each other, others will simply take their place in the dogpile, thus wasting further time and energy. The target could simply try to ignore the

Excerpt	Codes
“We drove Wagner Group's recruitment initiatives right off of Twitter. They gave up and locked down their Twitter account because we just wouldn't let them get a word in edgewise. I think they even wound up closing the account altogether, although I never checked on that myself. Several Russian embassy accounts have had to lock down their comment sections because we were turning the intended message of their tweets upside down (...). [P4]”	Social media, measured success, public opinion.
“(...)I was online, arguing one-on-one with Russians from day one, and while I won a lot of those arguments just by fact checking, I doubt I was having a large impact. A lot of people were doing what I was doing, I saw it all the time, but how many were we actually reaching? And then I started seeing these people with dog PFPs jumping in to help, and adding memes into the mix, and it would not only shut up the people I was debating, it would take over the entire thread until the propagandists gave up and left. [P4]”	Social media, debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective), visibility, public opinion, uniformity, community, digital identity, spontaneous action, memes, debate, against disinformation.
“There's been some accounts that have lost follower counts and stopped posting regularly. At least some of that was from NAFO. [P1]”	Measured success, social media, against disinformation, public opinion.
“There have also been some good moments like Andrew Korybko (Not sure the spelling) taking time out of his schedule to create a detailed document on "how to fight NAFO" and we all love the fact that folks that consider themselves very smart and "a knower of things" to think that the doge on Twitter has anything to do with NAFO. [P1]”	Humour, wasting people’s time, social media.
“I like to engage in edgier tactics that are like a perverse parody of what bad actors do. I want them to be as angry at me as possible so that they'll waste all their energy on my goofy persona instead of directing it against Ukrainians. [P2]”	Wasting people’s time, trolls.

Table 6: The goals and effects of dogpiling pro-Russian trolls.

[40] *A Dictionary of the Internet*, 3rd ed., ed. Darrel Ince, s.v. ‘dogpile’.

dogpile, sparing their efforts for their primary function of trolling at the cost of allowing the Fellas to frame and mock the troll's original post as they see fit without any pushback from the troll, undercutting or even reversing the power of the message. Any of these outcomes reduce the troll's efficacy in spreading pro-Russian propaganda. One of the interviewees gave the example of Fig. 1, with twitter user Calibre Oscura ridiculing a book written by pro-Russian twitter user Armchair Warlord.[41] According to the interviewee, this ridicule caused Armchair Warlord to go "on a wild 20-30 post rant on nonsense and lost him followers. [P1]" At time of writing, Armchair Warlord has still locked his account,

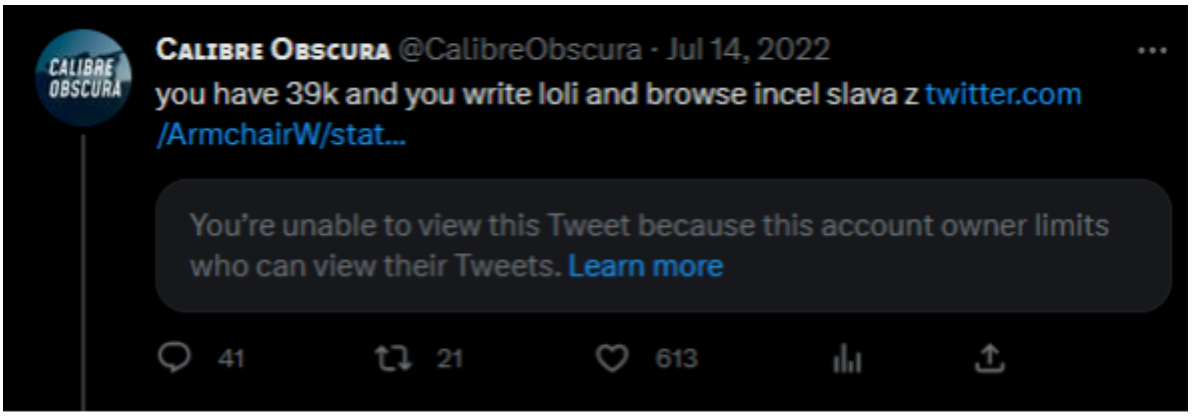

Fig. 1 - ridicule as a means of shutting down pro-Russian propagandists in action.

decimating his reach.

Mass reporting differs significantly from dogpiling: it does not seek to directly engage with the target at all, but instead goes through a third party: the social media platform itself. Twitter, like practically all other social media platforms, has Terms of Service (ToS) that users must agree to uphold when they create a new account. If they are found to violate this ToS, they are subject to a variety of punishments depending on the severity of the violation and past behaviour. These punishments can range from being required to delete a violating tweet, adding a label to the Tweet providing context to readers, or limiting its visibility by excluding it from search results and trends, restricting the ability to interact with a violating tweet, lock a violating account into read-only mode or suspending an account in its entirety.[42] (It should be noted that Twitter has fired a massive part of its Content Moderation team, which seems likely to impact its ability to moderate the content on its platform.[43] This in turn

[41] Calibre Obscura, Twitter post, July 14th, 2022, 10:06 PM, https://twitter.com/CalibreObscura/status/1547673921456971783.
[42] Twitter Help Center, "Our range of enforcement options," accessed May 4th, https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/enforcement-options.
[43] Davey Alba and Kurt Wagner, "Twitter Cuts More Staff Overseeing Global Content Moderation," *Bloomberg*, January 7, 2023,

would likely reduce the success rate of mass reporting as a tactic, as such reports would be less likely to be processed at all. However, this was not mentioned by any of the interviewees, who reiterated the tactic's efficacy as seen in Table 5). All of these punishments involve limiting the visibility of the author's message in some way, with less of a focus of undermining the author's credibility when compared to dogpiling. Additionally, by requesting Twitter judge the Tweet and what, if any, measures should be taken against it, NAFO loses some of its ability to directly affect the outcome if this is the only tactic used.

Fig. 2: A 'Fella' picture.

Whereas a dogpile may drive a pro-Russian troll off of Twitter even if their posts are technically not in violation of the ToS, Twitter will not remove non-violating tweets. However, the payoff could potentially be high, as Twitter can remove a troll from the website entirely against the troll's will, which NAFO cannot do.

Excerpt	Codes
"Relatively early on, a couple of popular favorite charities were exposed as scams. The electric bike one... can't remember what that so-called charity was called, sorry, my brain is getting old... I think that taught the group as a whole to be much more careful about verifying small fundraisers and charities, or to just stick to the big ones that've been proven. [P4]"	Fundraising, fraud, change in tactics.
"The most recent one, which you're probably aware of, were several scammers being exposed who had apparently misused in their online fame for collecting donations and misappropriating some of the funds. [P3]"	Fraud, misuse of online fame, fundraising.
"It can be a problem if anyone does things that are disruptive of charity efforts by trolling them or being in it for their own enrichment, but NAFO seems resistant to even that. [P2]"	Attacks on NAFO (ineffective), fraud, trolling
"The rarest thing but most harmful I think has been the few folks raising money that misused those funds, with lots of fellas thinking they were able to help the people of Ukraine to realize they were conned out of their money. And with something SO large and disorganized that was always a possibility. (...) There is a NAFO official account specifically because they wanted to make sure that this kind of thing couldn't be easily co-opted. [P1]"	Fraud, lack of organisation, some organisation, preventing co-opting.
"Well, I guess there is the "nafo official" site with the list of safe charities. I'm not sure I'd call that organizational structure, though. (...) People go there to get a fella forged, maybe buy some merch, but they're not in charge of anything. I'm honestly not thrilled with the "official" designation. It suggests some sort of authority. [P4]"	Some hierarchy, fundraising, no hierarchy, some organisation.

Table 7: The troubles with fundraising and the solutions offered.

As can be seen, these two tactics both leverage the group's size to achieve their goals through very different means: the dogpile targets the source directly, while mass reporting asks Twitter to step in. Both tactics complement each other very effectively: the dogpile wears down the troll's willpower and desire to continue spreading disinformation, while mass reporting can shut down

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-07/elon-musk-cuts-more-twitter-staff-overseeing-content-moderation.

those that go too far even if they remain resilient against the Fellas' counter-trolling. There is more to discuss on these tactics, as the development of this complementary balance was the direct result of a perceived potential policy change on Twitter. However, as this development came to be due to the limitations of social media, it shall be discussed later, in the section on the theme of 'Medium'. For now, we may conclude that NAFO strives to shift public opinion by ridiculing the positions of pro-Russian propaganda sources, flooding their comment sections with memes mocking them and their posts, and by drawing Twitter's attention to these accounts when they violate the platform's ToS in order to get the troll's tweet or even account removed entirely. It makes use of its large membership pool in doing so, relying on tactics of dogpiling and mass reporting: low-cost, low-effort individual actions taken by many different actors over a relatively short period of time that add up to incur a significant toll on those targeted by the Fellas. However, NAFO does not only attack Ukraine's enemies - it also seeks to support its friends and armed forces. We shall now discuss the Fellas' main strategy for lending this support: fundraising.

Fundraising

Raising funds for the Ukrainian war effort is how NAFO started,[44] and all but one of the interviewees explicitly mentioned this as one of the organisation's primary strategies. This may sound odd at first: how can a group that is as disorganised as NAFO commit to such activities that require significant central planning and hierarchy (somebody needs to handle the funds, after all) as fundraising? The answer to this is twofold: firstly, NAFO does have a limited amount of centralization in order to handle its fundraising in the form of a website. Secondly, NAFO has decentralised a significant part of its fundraising efforts by providing 'Fellas' in exchange for a small

Excerpt	Codes
"The fundraising is a huge one. I don't know how much we've raised, but it's got to be millions. [P4]"	Fundraising, measured success.
"There is huge outrage at what Russia is doing and we can't all be there on the front line. The fundraising is a way of standing up and feeling good that we do our part [P5]."	Fundraising, anger, public opinion, differences in tactics, feels good, empowerment.
"(...)I saw the posts from the Georgian legion, noting fundraising, and they actively crowdsourced body armor from folks who, like me, did not speak the language, and had no other way of actually helping than donating directly to the defense of those pitting themselves against the invading army. [P1]"	Fundraising, support for Ukraine, normal people, helplessness.
"I believe the goals stated for NAFO are still the raising money for Ukrainian defense and combating Russian disinformation over social media. [P1]"	Fundraising, social media, against disinformation, public opinion.

Table 8: Marked enthusiasm for fundraising.

[44] Smart, "Founder of NAFO Reveals Identity".

donation to any established charity of the donator's choice. 'Fellas' in this context does not refer to NAFO members, but to images of Shiba Inu dogs photoshopped into various outfits according to the donator's wishes (see Fig. 2), often used as profile pictures on social media to signal identification as a NAFO member.[45] For clarity, this thesis shall refer to such images as 'Fella pictures', to distinguish them from 'Fellas' as meaning 'NAFO members'.

The NAFO Website

Before we expand on the Fella pictures, let us first discuss the NAFO website. This website includes information on NAFO's origin and goals, as well as a NAFO-themed merchandise store that donates all of its profits to the Ukrainian war effort. More importantly, it includes a list of charities vetted by those running the website as legitimately providing aid to the Ukrainian people.[46] As can be seen in Table 7, interviewees stated this was likely done in response to several occasions of fraud, with individuals collecting 'donations for Ukraine' only to vanish with the money. This idea is reinforced by the disclaimer on the website's list of charities, stating that individuals are "free to do your own due diligence regarding who you would like to donate to."[47] However, there was also discomfort with the degree of centralization inherent in this solution, as expressed by one interviewee directly. Other interviewees did not explicitly address this concern, but did exalt NAFO's lack of organisation and hierarchy as a part of why the organisation works so well more broadly. This shall be further explored in the 'Medium' pillar, but it is worth noting here as it may signal more widespread implicit dislike for the centralising measure of the website.

However, even with these reservations and troubles, the interviewees were unanimously enthusiastic over the strategy of fundraising. There were some disagreements over whether it is as much of a priority as the fight for public opinion and against disinformation, but nobody questioned the overall importance of fundraising. This can be observed in Table 8. The most important reasons the Fellas gave for supporting fundraising were the direct contribution to the 'offline' side of the Ukrainian war effort, as well as the morale-boosting effect it provided by reducing the sense of helplessness some interviewees reported feeling from most of their contributions being purely digital and discourse-based, which could feel relatively unimportant in the face of military conflict.

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[45] 'Zoot_C' (online handle), interview by author, Discord DM, April 5th, 2023.
[46] NAFO, "The North Atlantic Fellas Organisation," accessed May 6th, 2023, https://nafo-ofan.org/.
[47] NAFO, "List of Charities and Organisations," accessed May 6th, 2023, https://nafo-ofan.org/blogs/charities-and-organizations

The Fella Pictures

With the website section covered, let us now look at the second solution NAFO has come up with to tackle fundraising: 'Fella forging'. This phrase refers to the creation ('forging') of Fella pictures, which is done by editing Shiba Inu pictures in software such as Photoshop or GIMP, according to the wishes of the person the Fella picture is created for. While one can forge one's own Fella picture if so desired, NAFO has set up a system in which volunteers will take requests for a Fella picture to be forged, provided the request is paired with proof of donation to a charity operating in Ukraine. This allows those without the means, desire, or skills to create their own Fella picture to acquire one while simultaneously helping out the Ukrainian war effort. Like the website's merchandise store, this has seen a limited degree of centralization: one can contact the forgers via their page on the website, via e-mail, or via a special Twitter account set up for this purpose, providing centralised channels for Fella picture forging.[48] However, this is not nearly as centralised or hierarchical as the website in general is, for the simple reason that NAFO does not have to handle any money directly. With merchandise purchases, where NAFO will have to handle the transaction and then pay the profits to one of the many Ukrainian charities they support, a degree of responsibility, authority and confidentiality (which are all arguably contrarian to the decentralised, hierarchical structure of NAFO) is necessary. When requesting a Fella picture from the forgers, however, one does not need to pay NAFO at all - they merely require proof of payment to any charity active in Ukraine. This means one could easily bypass any engagement with NAFO's website at all, and simply select a charity, make a donation, and then place one's request on the Twitter account coupled with the proof of payment, significantly reducing the influence of organisation and hierarchy on this section of fundraising. One could even bypass these centralised channels and approach one of the 'Fella forgers' directly, or even someone who is not at all affiliated with NAFO but is competent in using image editing software. However one approaches it, the Fella forgers are significantly more grassroots and closer to NAFO's general disorganised structure than the merchandise store, and given their importance to the NAFO community and its group identity (which we shall discuss further in the 'Medium' section of this analysis), they are constantly in popular demand and therefore a not-insignificant part of NAFO's fundraising efforts.

[48] NAFO, "How to Become a Fella," accessed May 6th, https://nafo-ofan.org/pages/how-to-become-a-fella.

However, the Fella picture fundraising efforts are not strictly ‘better’ than the merchandise store efforts: just as with the tactics used in the battle for public opinion, each of these options have their strengths and weaknesses that complement each other well. Whereas Fella pictures have a very low barrier to entry, as any amount donated suffices for a forge request, this also means their individual revenue cannot be guaranteed to be particularly high. Merchandise in whatever form, be it shirts, mugs, or flags, takes significantly more effort and logistical planning to create, but have their own advantages. There’s a signature “Made in Ukraine” line, providing jobs to the Ukrainian economy - which is extremely useful, considering the massive disruptions a war on the home front can cause to a nation’s economy. They can be sold for set prices, giving significantly more predictable per-unit profits for donation than the “buyer’s choice” price range of Fella pictures. They can be created for use in the physical world, such as hoodies to wear or pins to put on one’s backpack, giving NAFO a presence and visibility in the ‘offline’ world it does not often get. Most importantly, they offer another avenue for individuals to ‘get’ something in return for their support, providing additional incentive to donate. Once someone has bought a Fella picture, they will generally not need another: there is often strong identification with the Fella picture, and it is generally used across all social media platforms the user is active on and is actively seeking to show their support for NAFO on. They may very well donate repeatedly anyway, simply to assist the war effort, but getting a tangible piece of merchandise in exchange for one’s donation may coax further donations out of individuals who would otherwise have spent their money elsewhere. As such, though there are some reservations among Fellas concerning the hierarchy and organisation inherent in the creation of the website and merchandise, this diversity in tactics has again proven to ultimately work in NAFO’s favour, strengthening their cause in fundraising just as it did in its struggle for public opinion.

With our basic grasp on NAFO’s methods of ‘meme warfare’ secured, we can now examine perhaps the most influential factor that has shaped both their tactics and their organisation as a whole: the medium on which they operate.

The Medium

The chosen battleground of NAFO is social media, and like any other army, NAFO must know the terrain, the opportunities it brings, and the limitations it imposes thoroughly in order to be able to succeed at their goals. The interviews reflected this, with interviewees either explicitly identifying or implicitly showing awareness of various features of social media that had shaped the organisation and its structure, were obstacles to be navigated around by the Fellas, or were actively leveraged into furthering the organisation's goals. Broadly speaking, these features can be summarised as *Visibility* and the *Constraints of Social Media*. We shall discuss these two categories further.

Visibility

One of the defining features of social media in general and Twitter (where NAFO is most active) in particular is the ability to go 'viral' - that is, to achieve a great deal of visibility for your content outside of your usual social circles. Both of NAFO's tactics - shaping public opinion and fundraising - are aided greatly by the ability to go viral. The more people that see a post announcing discounts on the merchandise store, the more chances NAFO has of receiving orders for that merchandise, meaning the chances of raising funds for Ukrainian charities goes up. The more people see a meme ridiculing a Russian troll, the more humiliated the troll is, the weaker their position becomes in the eyes of increasingly larger numbers of people. Fellas generally employ two ways to boost their visibility: *Memes* and *Interconnectivity.* We shall examine each of these methods in turn.

Excerpt	Codes
"I mentioned earlier, how I see memes, humour, interaction among fellas helping me at least to maintain a positive attitude. [P3]"	Positivity, humour, no burnout, community, memes
"NAFO has a whole slew of in jokes and running gags that help create and bind the community, and the community keeps people involved and engaged when they start to get burned out. [P4]"	Burnout, community, connectivity, group identity formation
"When the invasion happened, I felt, I think like most of us, helpless, as we saw a world power descend on a country who didn't deserve it. (Not the first in my lifetime for sure) and because the war was so actively broadcasted, I turned to Memes to take the edge off. [P1]"	Helplessness, injustice, morality, humour, memes

Table 9: Memes as an inherent part of NAFO members' lives.

Memes

One of the most striking features of NAFO is their ubiquitous use of memes: not only did every single interviewee mention memes multiple times, but almost every news article that discusses the group discusses how much this form of Internet humour is a core part of the group's *modus operandi.*[49] One might consider the group's strong reliance on memes as a simple byproduct of its origins, social media generally being full of such humour to begin with. Indeed, while 'memes' as a concept were firmly established by Richard Dawkins over a decade before the World Wide Web was created, the Internet changed the way memes were perceived to such a degree that scholars of digital studies have had to redefine what the word 'meme' meant in a digital context just to account for how inundated the Internet is in memes.[50]

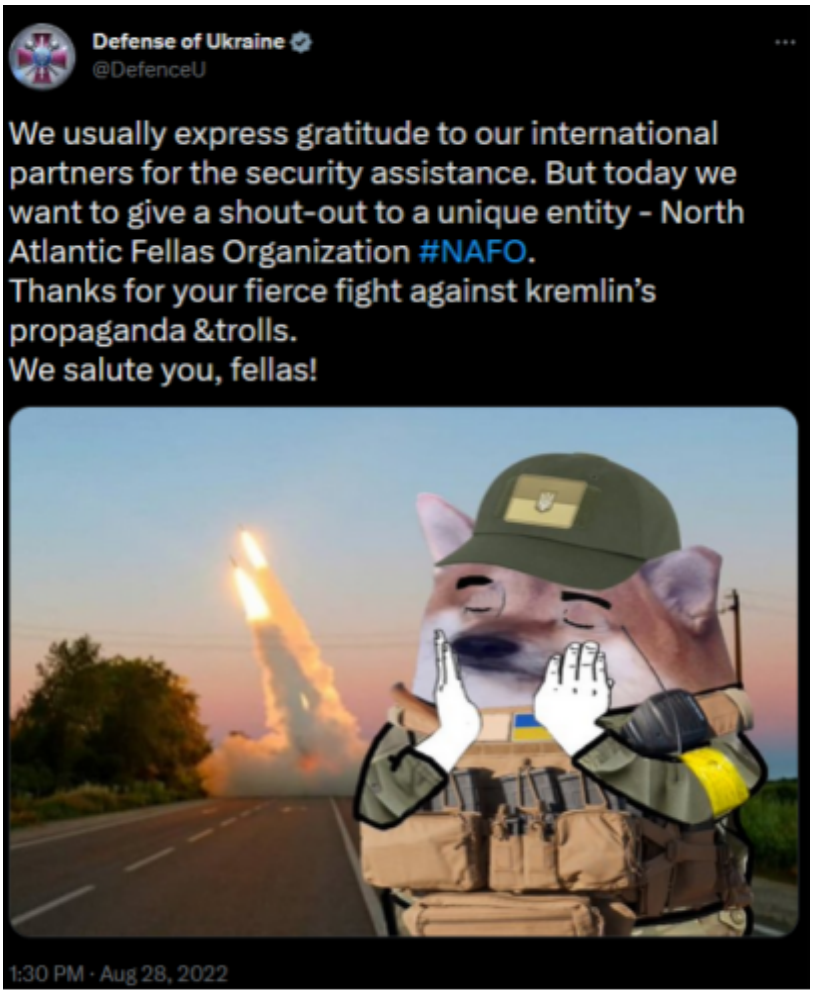

Fig. 3: Memes as a means of forging bonds.

Considering the interviews, it does seem likely that at least part of the reason for NAFO making such a major use of memes stems from most of its members being active 'shitposters',[51] with interviewees giving statements such as those seen in Table 9. Memes act as both a coping mechanism and the glue to keep the community together (see Fig. 3 for an example of this, with the official Twitter account of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence acknowledging and

[49] Smart, "Founder of NAFO Reveals Identity"; "A virtual army of impish cartoon pooches," *The Economist;* Scott, "The shit-posting, Twitter-trolling, dog-deploying social media army"; Braun, "Ukraine's info warriors".
[50] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 40th anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 249; Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 41.
[51] People who engage in the creation and sharing of memes.

celebrating NAFO)[52], roles memes do not inherently require NAFO or the Russo-Ukrainian conflict for: any community can foster intragroup bonds via shared humour through memes, and any type of hardship may result in memes being created as a coping tool. Thus, it seems likely that the degree to which NAFO is interwoven with memes is not a feature exclusively caused by the organisation specifically, or by the conflict specifically, but can at least in part be attributed to the individuals that have created the organisation: people already used to creating and sharing memes in their daily lives. This is further supported by NAFO's origin: one would expect a group that came together on the basis of a meme to be comprised of individuals that enjoy participating in that form of humour, and to attract further individuals that enjoy memes.[53]

Excerpt	Codes
"(...) so many of us joined to do those three things. (...) 3. Be creative - creating all sorts of memes that can be used in online 'warfare'. [P1]"	Creativity, memes, empowerment, public opinion.
"You can't just scroll past a funny image, your brain already registered it as you passed it, much faster than a wall of text. [P1]"	Social media, memes, humour, public opinion.
"If I were to put my all into arguing with people, that itself might improve the morale of my enemy. They can't do much to a fly by meme dump that accuses them of coping and seething. [P2]"	Morale, debate (ineffective), memes, trolling.
"So it's one thing to argue back or voice your ideas in in text, but it will get more attention and probably also more sympathy if it's accompanied with a smart, funny meme that visually underlines the point you're trying to make. [P3]"	Memes, visibility, sympathy.
"I'm happy every time I'm seeing my, my little comments or standalone tweets being liked by non-NAFO people who just seem to agree with what I'm saying. Or they like my meme. I mean, also OK. [P3]"	Social media, public opinion, normal people, humour.

Table 10: Memes as a means to leverage the features of social media.

Excerpt	Codes
"So it's a play on NATO article 5. When you attack one you attack all. Whenever article 5 appears on Twitter then the fellas have that set as an alert. And they pile in because no one is left alone. [P5]"	Social media, Article 5, group strength.
"In the early days, there was not a lot of fellas and they needed some way to notify each other when they are- when they needed to band together to support each other. That's the famous NAFO Article 5 hashtag. [P3]"	Communication, group strength, Article 5, social media.
"But by now it's completely dropped because I think Twitter has started considering this as targeted harassment. So calling in Article 5 might easily result in action against your account, and that's definitely not what we want. [P3]"	Article 5, group strength, tactic change, policy change, limitations of social media.
"So NATO article five basically states that if one nation is attacked, all nations in nato will come to their defense. NAFO article five is a similar idea - But a lot less paperwork and a lot more dogpile [P1]"	Article 5, group strength.
"(...) it has outlived its usefulness because by now there is quite a large number of fellas following each other, so these instances usually pop up in your timeline quite quickly without any hashtags. [P3]"	Group strength, tactic change.

Table 11: the rise and fall of #Article5.

However, rather than 'memes as a fact of life,' the interviewees focused far more on the 'weaponization' of memes - that is, the ways in which they used memes as a method to achieve their goals. While the

[52] Defense of Ukraine, Twitter post, August 28th, 2022, 1:30 PM, https://twitter.com/defenceu/status/1563851548643426304.
[53] Smart, "Founder of NAFO Reveals Identity".

specifics of how the memes were used has already been discussed in this analysis under the ‘ridicule’ section of the ‘Tactics’ theme, there was a strong element of the medium shaping the message present in the responses of the interviewees, as per Table 10. Memes leverage the ability to add visual elements to one’s argument that social media provides, in order to snag people’s attention in a very competitive environment of attention-grabbing content. They elicit engagement from people that might otherwise have scrolled by, getting the poster’s message across when a dry text response may have simply been ignored. Social media’s ability to post many images in short order allows for a much higher volume of information being posted in a flood of memes than in a lengthy series of text posts, to the point where response becomes potentially impossible. This is especially salient on Twitter, where the low character limit means users are incentivized to create images instead of textual responses in order to more effectively communicate their message - a picture is word a thousand words, which is significantly more than you can fit in a single tweet. Additionally, it helps that memes are already an established method of communicating on social media: almost everyone who posts actively on social media websites will have at the very least seen a meme, even if they have not shared or created one. This popularity of the format on social media - in part for the reasons outlined above - meant it had already established itself as a legitimate form of discursive expression, making it easy for NAFO to adopt this powerful form of visual humour into its arsenal.

Interconnectivity

However, memes are not the only feature of the medium of social media that NAFO makes use of in order to boost visibility. Another aspect is interconnectivity: when Fellas follow Fellas on Twitter, they will see more NAFO content appear on their timeline. As the Fellas are by definition pro-NAFO, they are likely to interact with this content, especially if the content takes the form of ridiculing a pro-Russian troll, as outlined before. This interaction can take the form of liking a Tweet, or retweeting it, or leaving a comment - all will boost the interactivity of the content in the eyes of the Twitter algorithm, meaning that more individuals will see that content. The more Fellas interact with the content, the more the content will be boosted, the more visible it will be to both Fellas who have not yet connected to these Fellas and to people who are not a part of NAFO at all, and are therefore the target in the war over public opinion as discussed earlier. This ties back into the discussion of NAFO effectively leveraging its large group size, and we shall therefore not retread old ground, but we shall briefly provide one sterling example of the medium shaping the message in this case: #Article5.

#Article5 is one of the earliest tactics developed by NAFO: it is a hashtag, used to signal to NAFO members that assistance is needed. The name is a play on NATO's article 5, the 'collective defence clause,' which states that "an attack against one or more [parties to the treaty] (...) shall be considered an attack against them all."[54] This could take the form of boosting a post by a Fella or an Ukrainian account that is being harassed by Russian trolls, in order to provide moral support and ridicule ('counter-troll') or mass-report the Russian trolls into leaving the beleaguered Fella or Ukrainian account alone, or it could be used to call for reinforcements in ridiculing or mass-reporting a pro-Russian troll directly. Notably, #Article5 is an example of a tactic that has been abandoned over time, partly due to shifts in internal factors and partly due to external pressure. According to interviewees (see Table 11), #Article5 primarily served its purpose as a 'NAFO Bat-Signal' when there were relatively few Fellas; interconnectivity was low, and so the group leveraged one of the features of social media - hashtags - to boost visibility and signal opportunities for digital action to in-group members in a time where those in-group members were not yet directly connected. As the Fellas responded to these #Article5 calls, they tended to follow each other, and the interactions with these posts boosted their visibility, meaning more people were exposed to

[54] North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Washington D.C., April 4th, 1949.

NAFO's actions, meaning more people became potential members. NAFO thus grew both in membership and in direct links between its members: interconnectivity rose, meaning #Article5 became less directly relevant.

There were also external factors working against the use of the hashtag, however - or at least such factors were perceived to exist by the Fellas. Specifically, interviewees stated that there were concerns that Twitter would enact policy changes to take a harder stance against targeted harassment following Elon Musk's takeover of the company, as seen in Table 11. This ultimately did not turn out to be the case: some interviewees did suggest '#Article5' when prompted for Twitter keywords or hashtags to see Fellas in action, and stated it is still currently used for its original purpose. However, other interviewees affirmed that it is not as important as it once was, considering the Fellas are now sufficiently interconnected to boost a post to mass-visibility without using it. Ultimately, #Article5 remains an excellent example of NAFO shaping its message to be delivered more effectively by the medium, using the tools Twitter provided them to reach as much visibility for their posts and actions as possible.

Excerpt	Codes
"And you've got (...) a large community of creative types who pump out memes and videos for everybody to share, of course. [P4]"	Community, creativity, memes, visibility, entertainment, large group.
"(...) so many of us joined to do those three things. (...) 3. Be creative - creating all sorts of memes that can be used in online 'warfare' [P1]"	Creativity, memes, empowerment, public opinion.
"(...) it's definitely fun, more motivating to work with these tactics of working in a group, working with humour, collecting memes, applying them in a smart way (...) [P3]."	Entertainment, motivation, group strength, humour, memes.

Table 12: the links between memes and interconnectivity.

The use of memes and interconnectivity are both important features of NAFO's practices on social media, but they are not separate: as can be seen in Table 12, interviewees identified these two factors as being mutually reinforcing. Memes are a great tool for further reach and visibility, meaning more Fellas could find each other, meaning interconnectivity increased. Simultaneously, more connections between Fellas meant that more memes could be shared between each other: interconnectivity resulted in more memes being available to more Fellas. Much like every other aspect of NAFO, smart combinations of its individual aspect render the organisation more powerful than the sum of its parts, whether through complementary tactics or mutually reinforcing approaches.

However, social media does not only facilitate NAFO's existence and activities: it can also hinder it. We shall be examining the limitations imposed by the medium of social media and how these influence NAFO's actions next.

The Constraints of Social Media

If the medium shapes the message, this implies that the medium limits the message. After all, if there are no limitations, there is infinite potential in all directions, and there is nothing to distinguish one blob of limitless potential from another. Limitations being inherent in the medium is a factor acknowledged by interviewees, as observed in Table 13. There are two primary limitations placed on NAFO by the medium they operate on: limitations on the *organisation* and limitations on its *tactics*. We shall discuss both in turn.

Limits on the Organisation

One of the biggest ways the medium of social media has shaped NAFO is in how it precludes (or at least massively hinders) centralised authority and hierarchical organisation. Social media creates peer-to-peer networks, with hierarchy being difficult to establish - especially on twitter, where one cannot really create groups with admins in the way that is possible on social media such as Facebook or Discord. Furthermore, as previously discussed in the 'Tactics' section, NAFO relies on its large group size to engage in spontaneous individual action snowballing into a mass dogpile or mass report. This reliance on spontaneity and large-quantity action makes it difficult to oversee actions by individuals, which is a prerequisite for hierarchical organisation. This is doubly true

Excerpt	Codes
"Other than protests and stuff like that, I'm not even sure where else this COULD work. It's a pretty specific skill set. Not that grassroots movements in meatspace don't work, but NAFO's MO is pretty targeted to social media. [P4]"	Social media, social media constraints.
"And again, forgive me for being careful. It's a thing we have to deal with in the open channels. It would be really great if you made a small donation somewhere and got verified. That helps. [P5]"	Low barrier to entry, fake fellas, social media constraints.
"Then for some time I realised it's getting less and less useful because it's abused- that the hashtag is abused by people who, probably not all of them were - I don't know, well meaning actors? But by now it's completely dropped because I think Twitter has started considering this as targeted harassment. So calling in Article 5 might easily result in action against your account, and that's definitely not what we want. [P3]"	Abuse of hashtag, bad faith actors (effective), disinformation, social media, social media limitations, policy change, Article 5 (ineffective).
"But let's face it, it would never work as a serious operation. Or organized operation. I think if we tried to form a hierarchy, the game would be over. [P4]"	No hierarchy.
"Another NAFO user made a post about Ukrainian women being attractive and he was rightly made fun of for that, but it spiraled into him and [a fella] going at it for it seemed like 100 posts, quote tweeting and tweeting about each other. Even I marveled at how stupid it looked. (...) if I was a Russian propaganda mill, I would be trying my best to copy that and waste people's time.[P2]"	Infighting, sexism, volunteers, visibility, wasting other's time.

Table 13: the limitations of social media.

considering the Fellas are volunteers, who have joined NAFO to effectively do what they were already doing anyway - posting memes - for a good cause, meaning they are unlikely to accept constraints on their actions from a hypothetical superior. One interviewee stated as much:

”But really, considering the way we formed and grew, anybody who tried to take that title [of ‘leader’] would be rejected by the majority. Most fellas see it the same way. We have no leader, and that's how it has to be. [P4]”

Excerpt	Codes
“There have been attempts to attack NAFO from the outside whether it is through fake NAFO fellas, then who then suddenly started posting Nazi shit. They usually get spotted and reported and taken down quite quickly.[P3]”	Outside attacks, fake Fellas, fake Fellas (ineffective), taking down infiltrators.
“(...) I have grown more wary about folks with yellow tags (AKA: not verified) who jump into the memes and general discussion tabs [in the NAFO Discord server]. We've found several folks that seem to want to screenshot some REALLY insane takes. And others who just want to spam the discord with pro Russia memes.[P1]”	Fake fellas, outside attacks, attacks on NAFO, disinformation.

Table 14: infiltrators, and how they are not very effective.

There is, however, another social media limitation that means NAFO would find it extremely difficult to operate on a hierarchical model: the extremely low barrier for entry. Theoretically, anybody could set a random Fella picture from Google Images (or another Fella’s social media account) as their profile picture, put ‘#NAFO’ in their Twitter bio, and claim to be a Fella. The one other social media platform where Fellas congregate, the NAFO

Excerpt	Codes
“We are too disparate a group. It does not take long for arguments to start if you get a few of us together. Because we are all different. We just have to be focused on the cause.[P5]”	Infighting, lack of organisation.
“Which leads to people from actually quite different political views- like, I know on German NAFO we have pretty much everything from very left wing to very conservative people, anything from teenagers to pensioners, and I would say 50/50 male female split, so it's quite representative and within that group, those who are communicating- there is almost no hassle, almost no arguments, people feel very much united(...)[P3].”	Diversity, gender, age, ideology, unity, no infighting, shared values.
“Once I joined the discord, I met some folks that I feel I would get along with. And other folks that I definitely don't see eye to eye with, but the idea that we are all in it for Ukraine and generally follow the discord rules, allow me to engage with folks who I'd never engage with in another setting.[P1]”	Community, diversity, shared values, support for Ukraine, tolerance.
“I think that's one of the things that really threw off, and continues to throw off, the Russian propaganda machine. We have people from all over the world, with all kinds of different perspectives and talents, voluntarily and enthusiastically sharing ideas and making those diverse talents and perspectives work together and compliment each other. I honestly don't think that kind of voluntary cooperation between such a diverse population could ever be forced. You can't pay people to do that.[P4]”	Against disinformation, diversity, community, volunteers, coordination.
“I am very political. But none of that matters in NAFO. Or it should not. My opinions on that don't matter. Recently I was asked by a fella if I would visit his twitch stream because he wanted support. (...) Turns out he is gay and was frightened to death that I might give him a hard time. He's a fella. He's one of us and I loved his company for that evening. That's how I see it. One for all.[P5]”	Unity, no infighting, ideology, group identity formation, diversity, community.

Table 15: NAFO as a diverse group of people.

Discord server has a slightly higher barrier, in that one cannot claim ‘Verified Fella’ status and access the closed ‘verified only’-areas of the server unless one submits proof of donation to a charity operating in Ukraine, in much the same way as one can request a Fella picture as discussed in the ‘Tactics’ section. This is highlighted in Table 13, with P5 expressing reservations towards participating in the interviews due to my ‘unverified’ status. However, this barrier is still very low: a small donation suffices to be verified, and there is no way to verify a Twitter account in this way, as NAFO’s tactics on Twitter all rely on open, public engagement for maximum visibility and thus maximum chances for fundraising and shaping public opinion. One cannot control the entirety of Twitter in the same way one can control one’s own Discord server (unless one is Elon Musk), and by thus being effectively a third party to Twitter with no control over the social media, NAFO cannot vet its membership on the social media platform. This precludes hierarchical action or organisation: how could NAFO organise its members if it has no clear overview of whom its members even are?

Excerpt	Codes
“Yes. It is a job. Or it feels like an obligation now. I am a bit of an obsessive so that's part of it but I can't let it go now. I mean I will, happily. Just put Putin in the ground and send the Russians home. But if I don't do it on a daily basis I feel bad because that disinformation is real and it's constant.[P5]”	Against disinformation, burnout.
“It's not the case with me, no. I never had that. Honestly, if I don't feel like bonking, I grab a book and take a break from it. For most of the part I would say I don't have any issues with being- feeling stressed or feeling negative.[P3]”	Positive, no burnout.
“On a personal level... I have fun with it sometimes, but it's almost like a second job sometimes, too; a responsibility. And I get burned out, all of us do sometimes I think. And the "fun" factor helps keep people going, so on that level, even that is an important tactic, albeit an unintentional one.[P4]”	Entertainment, burnout, positivity, no burnout.
“I've noticed it in posts by others. In myself, I noticed when it was happening and backed off, since I'm very familiar with internet culture and how it works. When people get too emotionally (and time) invested, the burnout will set in and their performance will be high effort for low reward. They might say things that they shouldn't and pick up mentalities they wish they didn't.[P2]”	Burnout, negativity.
“Yeah actually. That's something that I expect is pretty common. (...) So because this is literally just an amalgamation of people with no formal role and no assignments, folks will go hard, won't take breaks. And will burn out. It's also something to note that if this was say, 15 years ago, when smartphones were not as common and we weren't terminally online, I'd expect less burnout. But now folks can go about their daily lives and still be on social media from sunup to midnight. (...) I don't know that there's really an online answer to supporting burnout through being terminally online.[P1]”	Burnout, lack of organisation, social media.

Table 16: Burnout as a NAFO occupational hazard.

The ease of joining with little to no oversight has led to problems in the past - multiple interviewees mentioned infiltrators or ‘fake Fellas’ as a problem they had encountered, as can be seen in Table 14. However, they were not considered a big threat, as they were easy to mass-report and take down when they stepped out of line.

The low barrier of entry is, however, not solely a negative: it also means it is relatively easy to convince new people to become

Fellas. When describing how NAFO came to be a ‘not all that organised organisation,’ one interviewee explicitly mentioned the low cost to entry - “donate anything to get a fella [P1]”. This is a great boon for the tactics NAFO relies on: ridiculing a Twitter post, or mass-reporting an account are very low-skill activities that anyone who has spent time on social media (which is almost by definition everybody in NAFO) will be able to do effectively, with quantity mattering more than quality. In the words of another interviewee - “Honestly, decentralized movements tend to be quantity over quality in nature so it's just hard to screw up the tactic badly enough to set it back [P2]”.

Beyond the influences on the organisational structure of NAFO, the low barrier to entry also shapes its membership, for good and for ill. Interviewees emphasised the diverse nature of NAFO, as seen in Table 15. This diversity brings many advantages: interviewees cited the creativity that came with such a broad range of perspectives as a powerful tool in crafting new memes for the digital war effort. Furthermore, the diversity of NAFO implies the tolerance of each other’s different opinions that creates an open and welcoming atmosphere, which in turn further fosters membership growth. However, the different perspectives, especially in the political scene, also could cause trouble: interviewees stated that infighting between Fellas was not unheard of, exacerbated by the lack of central hierarchy meaning there were no dispute settlement mechanics. One interviewee gave the following example:

“The only thing I've seen as a directive has been to try to get our Eastern bloc fellas to stop using the R-slur. As apparently the translation for them isn't considered vulgar. They haven't been able to win that fight because again there's no organization.[P1]”

However, interviewees also stated that the damage done by this infighting was limited, and that the diversity of the organisation was ultimately a net benefit to their efforts - the “(...) it's just hard to screw up the tactic badly enough to set it back [P2]” from a few paragraphs ago is an example of such.

Another feature of social media that impacted the Fellas was a more pressing concern for many of the interviewees, however. Specifically, the risk of burnout - social media, NAFO’s battlefield of choice, is available 24/7 if your phone is charged and connected to the

Internet. Many interviewees stated they felt at risk of burnout from their work in NAFO, and stated that there were no coordinated efforts to address this - and that any such efforts would be difficult to organise anyway, precisely because of NAFO's disorganised nature. This is reflected in the statements of Table 16. While it should be noted that some interviewees stated they did not share these concerns for themselves, they also noted this was due to their healthy habits of being able to log off and do something else. Other interviewees stated they felt a moral responsibility to do as much as they could, which could easily override such individual habits. It may therefore be unwise to rely on individual coping mechanisms to address risks inherent in the structure and medium of NAFO's operations. At the same time, providing a solution is difficult, precisely because NAFO's organisation is antithetical to the kind of organised, structural response to the health concerns that a burnout prevention or recovery programme would likely need. This may prove to be an important area of attention for future work on social media activism and NAFO-like organisations.

As we have seen, social media as a medium imposes significant difficulties on creating an organisation based on centralised hierarchy, which has shaped how NAFO as an organisation has evolved. It also places constraints on the Fellas themselves, as the low barrier to entry acts as a double-edged sword and the constant availability of further 'NAFO work' on one's smartphone places Fellas at risk of burnout. However, it has not only impacted what the group *is*, but also what it *does*. We shall now therefore examine the influences of social media's limitations on the tactics of NAFO.

Limits on Tactics

Social media and nuance not going together well is practically a truism at this point, and this is reflected in the limitations imposed on NAFO's tactics. Several interviewees reported attempting to fact-check pro-Russian trolls to very little success, as seen back in Table 3. This is supported by the literature: research has indicated that fact-checking is not employed as a neutral arbiter of truth by social media users, but rather another tool in the partisan arsenal to be selectively employed in exonerating one's own 'side' and calling out the other.[55] Interviewees cited this as a significant part of the reason for their embrace of ridicule, stating it as a far more effective tactic (as discussed in the 'Tactics' section). As we have already discussed this, we shall not retread old ground, beyond noting that one

[55] Jieun Shin and Kjerstin Thorson, "Partisan Selective Sharing: The Biased Diffusion of Fact-Checking Messages on Social Media," *Journal of Communication* 67(2) (April 2017): 248-249.

interviewee explicitly linked the inefficacy of fact-checking to the medium they operated on: “Didn't correct the man. That doesn't work in internet spaces[P2]”.

However, limitations can also encourage creativity. Recalling our earlier discussion on NAFO’s tactics of dogpiling and mass reporting in the ‘Tactics’ section, we can see an example of this in action. As noted, these two tactics complement each other effectively, with dogpiling wearing down those pro-Russian trolls that could not be banned and mass reporting triggering the suspension of those that could not be irritated to the point of leaving. Interviewees affirmed the efficacy of this ‘combined-arms warfare’ as a notable example of NAFO’s tactics evolving. Re-examining a quote we have seen earlier in Table 5 in the context of the quote’s entire paragraph, we have the following statement from one of the interviewees:

“I think, when Elon Musk bought Twitter, there was some fear that open bonking [dogpiling with NAFO-themed memes], the meme stuff, would lead to mass bans or suspensions. At that point, a lot of people switched to quieter means, fundraising and TOS reporting. When it became evident that those fears weren't going to come to pass, the bonking started back up again, but that change in tactics proved to actually be fairly effective, and some fellas switched to entirely mass reporting of hatemongering accounts. So there's more of a two pronged approach to the misinformation combat now, whereas reporting happened before, but I don't think was as common as memeing” [P4].

This shows how NAFO can organically evolve its tactics in response to new constraints without having to rely on a hierarchical chain of command or any kind of organised response: individuals undertaking action against pro-Russian trolls on Twitter were concerned that a change in Twitter’s leadership would lead to their original tactic of dogpiling would cause their accounts to be banned. As such, a part of the Fellas experimented with the new tactic of mass reporting, aiming to get the trolls’ accounts banned instead. This proved highly effective in shutting down Russian propaganda sources, and thus the tactic remained popular even when it became clear that the original tactic of dogpiling would not result in problems for NAFO members. This only became clear due to only *some* Fellas switching to mass reporting and *some* fellas sticking to dogpiling, which is a result of individual decisions. This displays some of the advantages of NAFO’s non-hierarchical, disorganised structure: individual members act as they see fit, resulting in spontaneous experiments with new tactics

that, if successful, are communicated to the wider group for further adoption. This grassroots evolution of tactics would perhaps not be impossible in a more hierarchical, centralised organisation, but it would certainly not evolve as rapidly. If there had been a ‘NAFO Central Committee’ or other such leading body that had instructed all Fellas to either continue with dogpiling or switch to mass-reporting, one tactic or the other would have not seen further use. NAFO’s lack of organisation allowed it to rapidly and flexibly adjust its tactics on the fly, and resulted in it discovering a powerful synergy between its old and new battle plans.

Discussion

Limitations

As stated, I have interviewed five self-identified NAFO members. I have met these individuals in the organisation's official Discord server, where I spent some time before this interview familiarising myself with the group and making efforts to become a 'known quantity' that people would trust. This proved to be useful, as even after dropping in to chat occasionally, most individuals were still reluctant to be interviewed on camera or to provide information, as there were concerns that I was a troll or Russian agent. While NAFO may not be a formal military organisation, they are still carrying out informational warfare, and the operational security concerns that came with this imposed some limitations on the interviews. Firstly, none of the interviewees wanted to be on camera. Secondly, most did not want to be interviewed over a recording at all: citing concerns over their identity and operational security, four out of five interviewees would only agree to an interview if it was done over text. This may have presented some limitations on the interview, as there was no body language to read and no intonation of voice to interpret. However, it should be noted that I am autistic, and would therefore likely have struggled to correctly interpret such nonverbal communication or missed it entirely.[56] Therefore, interviews over text may, in my specific case, have helped prevent miscommunications rather than forment it.

Furthermore, the text-based nature of the interviews offered another advantage: it made it much less taxing for participants to continue the interview, as they could take quick breaks without disturbing the interview. This allowed the interviews to go on for much longer than initially planned, resulting in significantly more data being collected. Therefore, while the amount of individuals interviewed was relatively low at five, the length of the interviews provided such a vast wealth of data that saturation was still achieved due to the in-depthness of the answers. Additionally, all individuals interviewed had been self-identified NAFO members for most if not all of the organisation's existence, meaning they had a good long-term perspective on the organisation, its tactics, and its evolution. Therefore, while the relatively low amount of interviewees does mean we cannot rule out that additional perspectives within the organisation exist, the convergence of the interviewees answers and the in-depth nature of the interviews, we can be reasonably confident that the responses of the

[56] Catherine J. Crompton et al., "Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective," *Autism* 24(7) (May 2020), doi:10.1177/1362361320919286, 1709.

interviewees and the conclusions of the analysis in this thesis are not inaccurate. Further analysis can always be done, but the work that has been done here should be reasonably trustworthy.

One other significant limitation in the methodology exists: originally, I had planned to conduct content analysis of a Twitter dataset on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a way to buttress and verify the statements made in the interviews. Concrete examples of the tactics in action and an overview of NAFO's actions in practice over time would serve to provide direction in the aforementioned interviews and support the accuracy (or lack thereof) of interviewee's perceptions. Content analysis of a large amount of tweets pertaining to NAFO's activities would be very useful for this, as tweets are NAFO's primary form of direct engagement with its opponents. Therefore, by studying their tweets and categorising them in themes modelled around the tactics they employ and the rough time period they were posted in, we can create an evolutionary timeline of NAFO's tactics in practice. A dataset containing tweets on the Russo-Ukrainian war has already been created by other researchers using the Twitter Streaming API to collect every tweet related to the conflict.[57] However, Twitter's recent API changes render it impossible to download tweets *en masse* without payment of $100- a month, which was not money I could spare. As the dataset of tweets I had access to did not contain the tweets themselves, but only the ID of the tweets themselves, I would have to manually link those IDs to tweets and then manually download them, one by one. Given that the dataset contains over 1.1 million Tweets in a single day and covers the entire year, downloading or even viewing all of those tweets would take several months of non-stop work. This well exceeds the constraints of time and resources I face, and thus the content analysis section of this thesis had to be dropped. It may be a fruitful avenue for further research once Twitter introduces its free API access for academic purposes, but for now, it is not a feasible option. Therefore, while the aforementioned convergence of statements by interviewees should render the analysis below reasonably reliable and believable, this research has been fully qualitative, and not mixed-methods like I had originally planned.

[57] Ehsan-Ul Haq et al., "Twitter Dataset for 2022 Russo-Ukrainian Crisis," arXiv preprint, accessed 21 December, 2022, https://arxiv.org/abs/2203.02955.

Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

I have significant political biases in favour of NAFO. However, the research is concerned with *how* NAFO operates, not its *success.* As such, the risk of cherry-picking data to cast NAFO in a favourable light is limited (though not negligible).

Interviews are conducted with members of the organisation about the organisation. This will provide a clear bias in favour of the organisation, but should also grant the most detailed information on it. Interviews can be cross-referenced to verify dubious claims, and will again be backed up by the content analysis.

While NAFO is currently in an unique situation as initially described, it is unlikely that this will last. They may be the first 'meme brigade' in a war, but seem unlikely to be the last. As such, while immediate generalizability is limited, the research should provide policymakers with preparatory insight into future instances of this type of digital activism; how similar these instances would be to NAFO remains to be seen, but it seems plausible NAFO's perceived success may inspire organisations modelled after it in the future.

Conclusions and Implications

Despite their cloak of humour, flippancy and silliness - in fact, *because* of it - NAFO is far from a harmless or ineffective organisation. Leveraging the power of the Internet and memes against Russian propaganda sources on twitter, the group has eschewed centralised organisation in favour of grassroots action and non-hierarchical group structure. As we have seen in the analysis of the interviews, this is as much a necessity caused by the medium the group operates on as it is a deliberate choice: in this instance, the medium is not only the *message*, but also arguably the *messenger*.

Harkening back to the propositions set out at the beginning of this thesis, we find that they all hold to varying degrees. Proposition 1 - "NAFO tactics rely on grassroots actions by individuals, rather than pre-planned strategies" is perhaps the weakest in this context. While it entirely holds when it comes to the public opinion-shaping work that NAFO does, the existence of the merchandise store and to a lesser extent the Fella forgers indicates that the group does make use of a limited amount of hierarchy and pre-planning. It should, however, be noted that both of these tactics are *not* employed on twitter: the merchandise store is its

own website, and the Fella forgers primarily operate in the Discord server. Thus, the point that the medium shaped the messenger is reinforced even in the cases where the initial proposition did not hold: the moment the group goes off Twitter, it tends towards a higher degree of centralization and hierarchy than it has ever displayed on the social media platform. Additionally, this model of mass action does have its drawbacks: due to the 'always-on' nature of social media and there always being more Russian propagandists to ridicule or mass-report, Fellas may find themselves at risk of burnout. This is hard to address within NAFO, as any sort of organised response to burnout or the risk of developing it runs contrary to the core model of decentralised individual action that the group functions on. Further research on how to prevent burnout from being 'terminally online' in a way that works with the group dynamics likely to emerge in social media activist groups may therefore be valuable.

Proposition 2 - "NAFO tactics rely on rapid communication and (intra-group) virality" has been explicitly affirmed by interviewees. Initially making use of the #Article5 hashtag, the group only dropped it once a sufficient amount of group size and interconnectivity between Fellas had established itself. Even beyond the public opinion wars NAFO fights, this holds: online fundraisers rely on the principle of virality in order to generate more funds, with rapid communication between the Fellas being an important part of sussing out fraudulent 'charities'.

Finally, Proposition 3 - "NAFO tactics rely on a low barrier to entry or participation, rendering a top-down organisational structure counterproductive" is a double-edged sword for the group: while a correct statement, it overlooks the drawbacks of that low barrier to entry. As discussed, 'Fake Fellas' have been a problem to an extent in the group, which manifested in a degree of distrust to the researcher as well. However, interviewees did state this was a problem that was often dealt with quickly by mass-reporting, as shown in the data analysis, effectively supporting Proposition 3 via Proposition 2.

From this, it is clear that NAFO presents an organisational model for digital activism that has adapted itself to the modern age: rejecting more traditional organisational forms of hierarchy and centralization, the group has displayed the need for grassroots structure that downplays the need for leadership when partaking in activism on social media. There is always further room for research - the aforementioned content analysis section that had to be

dropped from this thesis, for example - but this research has clearly displayed that NAFO is worthy of such academic attention. They may be silly cartoon dogs bonking away on Twitter, but that doesn't make them unimportant in analysis of conflict and propaganda - if anything, they are important *because* they are silly.

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APPENDIX I - CONSENT FORM (BLANK)

Name of Participant | *Date of Interview (DD-MM-YYYY)*

_____ | _____

Project Title

Pronounce Nonsense, And Let Slip the Doges of War: An Analysis of the Tactics of the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation

Description of Project

This thesis seeks to investigate the evolution of the tactics employed by NAFO in becoming a *de facto* information warfare unit in the Russian invasion of Ukraine

By signing this document, I confirm that:

- I am at least 18 years of age.
- My participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. I understand I may decline to answer any questions or stop the interview at any time.
- I understand that I will not receive any payments for participation in this interview.
- The research interview will last approximately 20-30 minutes.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. I understand that I have the right to participate anonymously. If I do, the researcher will not identify me by name, or by any online handles or usernames, in any reports that use the information from this interview, and my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
- The researcher may / may not identify me by name, or by any online handles or usernames, in any reports that use the information from this interview. (Please underline which option applies to you).
- I have read and understood the explanation given to me.
- I can request a copy of the transcript or other data collected during the interview if so desired.
- The researcher may publish documents containing quotations by me. If I elect to participate anonymously, these quotations will not be attributed to me by any identifying name, handle, or username.

Participant's Signature | *Researcher's Signature*

_____ | _____

Date Signed (DD-MM-YYYY) | *Date Signed (DD-MM-YYYY)*

_____ | _____

APPENDIX II - INTRODUCTORY LETTER

To whom it may concern,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am Ben, a student at Leiden University, currently working on my Master's thesis for the Adv. MSc. International Relations & Diplomacy. This research project, with the working title of '*Pronounce Nonsense, And Let Slip the Doges of War: an Analysis of the Tactics of the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation*', is set up to understand the way the tactics used by NAFO's Fellas have evolved over time.

It specifically seeks to understand what has allowed this organisation of internet users from all over the world to become a *de facto* force in information warfare on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.This will be done in two ways: firstly, by interviewing people involved in NAFO activity on the Web, in order to understand their perspective on their own work, the process of NAFO's tactics evolving over time, and what they think about it. Secondly, by analysing various social media posts on the Russian invasion of Ukraine over a period of time, in order to see if NAFO has managed to shift online discussions away from a pro-Russian standpoint and towards a pro-Ukrainian standpoint.

This way, we can see how Nato's tactics came to be, how they evolved and if those using the tactics think they are useful. This can then help understand how the information war adapts to the platform of social media.

Should you have any questions or suggestions on this proposed research, you can contact the researcher by e-mail at b.fraters@umail.leidenuniv.nl. Should alternative modes of communication (such as Discord, where you can find me at Omnicide101#5180) be preferable, this can be arranged as well.

Thank you for your interests in this study, and I hope to speak with you soon.

Kind regards,

Ben Fraters.

APPENDIX III - TABLES AND FIGURES

Excerpt	Codes
"I've had to explain NAFO to friends before, and I can never quite get the idea across. It's partially a joke, and mostly not, a leaderless mob of people with a sense of humor who want to help Ukraine in various ways. [P4]"	Humour, lack of organisation, normal people, no hierarchy, support for Ukraine, differences in tactics.
"(...)It's just people volunteering to, I would say step up and speak out against hate speech against disinformation, mostly in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. [P3]"	Volunteers, against hate speech, against disinformation, public opinion, support for Ukraine.
"Once I joined the discord, I met some folks that I feel I would get along with. And other folks that I definitely don't see eye to eye with, but the idea that we are all in it for Ukraine and generally follow the discord rules, allow me to engage with folks who I'd never engage with in another setting. [P1]"	Community, diversity, shared values, support for Ukraine, tolerance.
"NAFO (north Atlantic fellas organization) is a group that grew pretty organically at its start to raise money for the Georgian legion. With a few smart *very online* individuals, they showed that change/help on the virtual Frontline was possible, and came up with a way to identify *friendlies* on the online space. [P1]"	Organic growth, fundraising, social media, volunteers, empowerment, support for Ukraine.
"The ultimate goal would be for it to all go away. If the disinformation stops, if the war stops then we have no further purpose and can move on. [P5]"	Against disinformation.

Table 1: NAFO's end goal.

Excerpt	Codes
"Russians have zero shame about lying to achieve their goals and I believe that we help to prevent that but in a humorous way. [P5]"	Visibility, ridicule, against disinformation, public opinion.
"But yeah, we've been responsible for some major propaganda and recruitment accounts shutting down, and that's no small accomplishment. [P4]"	Measured success, against misinformation.
"Like, before NAFO was around when I was following news on Twitter and also other media scrolling down the comments section, it was very often dominated by Russian views. And very few people actually dared speak up, even though any poll shows you it's a total minority. [P3]"	Social media, public opinion.

Table 2: Fighting Russian narratives and lies.

Excerpt	Codes
“So much russian propaganda is a shotgun of random, poorly thought out notions that are to be “recognized as official” But when accounts are talking about Gay witch satanist covens and secret Azov biolabs, repressing the urge to attempt to Correct the account and instead posting memes as a reply, to show that they aren't to be taken seriously is something I think NAFO does very well. [P1]”	Ridicule, humour, against disinformation, public opinion.
“Well, one of the ways we limit Russian propaganda's influence is with amusing memes. You've got to have a bit of a sense of humor to use that approach effectively. It doesn't sound like it would work, but it does, on several levels. [P4]”	Against disinformation, entertainment, memes, humour, measured success.
“But, in simpler terms, bombarding propaganda with memes that either distract from the message, point out the fallacies of that message, offer a different perspective, or just mock the entire concept of that message and the person who posted it, calling that person's entire ideology into question... that's what we're famous for. [P4]”	Memes, against disinformation, fact-checking, debate, ridicule, social media, question credibility.
“[Ridicule] seems to be the perfect weapon when the goal is spreading a kind of demoralization too "nothing can be believed", words don't mean anything, be afraid etc vs "this guy is just a lunatic on meth". [P2]”	Ridicule, measured success, morale, against disinformation.
“Something as important, if not more important, was the ability to take folks that were twisting *everything* to make people question the truth, and fight back by literally mocking them "Once you start arguing with a cartoon dog, you've already lost" Which I think has taken a bit of the wind out of the sails of a *Robust* propaganda machine. [P1]”	Disinformation, humour, ridicule, against disinformation, public opinion.

Table 3: The efficacy of ridicule and memes.

Excerpt	Codes
“(...)There is not a lot of merit in trying to discuss the validity of their claims or trying to expose some of their narratives as false. We do that as we go along, but eventually it's, I mean- you heard the term pigeon chess? [P3]”	Debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective).
“I was online, arguing one-on-one with Russians from day one, and while I won a lot of those arguments just by fact checking, I doubt I was having a large impact. [P4]”	Social media, debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective).
“(...)The other side relies heavily on (...) outright lying with as many lies as possible and see what sticks. Engaging too seriously with low effort people is a recipe for getting bogged down in nonsense. So oftentimes we just call it nonsense and post memes. This takes away the pretense of power they put to their words. [P2]”	Disinformation, trolls, fact-checking (ineffective), ridicule, memes, humour, public opinion.

Table 4: The inefficacy of debate and fact-checking.

Excerpt	Codes
"(...) because there is a lot more Fellas now, you don't really need to call them. There will always be one in the in the area strolling around. [P3]"	Group strength.
"And there are around 100000 of us now, all doing the same thing on different spaces. It exhausts the enemy. They don't know how to deal with it other than block us. And that's a win. Because we tell each other who blocked us and more come in our place. [P5]"	Group strength.
"Article 5: gondor calls for aid; I've seen this generally to interrupt polls for people trying to make a point. Or to bouy an account that has been targeted by supporters of Russian thought. This I think is mainly a morale boosting tactic for fellas. If you don't feel alone in the information space, you aren't. [P1]"	Article 5, group strength, debate, social media, morale.
"I think, when Elon Musk bought Twitter, there was some fear that open bonking, the meme stuff, would lead to mass bans or suspensions. At that point, a lot of people switched to quieter means, fundraising and TOS reporting. When it became evident that those fears weren't going to come to pass, the bonking started back up again, but that change in tactics proved to actually be fairly effective, and some fellas switched to entirely mass reporting of hatemongering accounts. [P4]"	Memes, social media constraints, policy change, change in tactics, differences in tactics, group strength.
"When you have this many people in the group, you're going to have people who don't see eye to eye on this, or on anything for that matter. [P4]"	Large group, different views.

Table 5: The various impacts of NAFO's large group size.

Excerpt	Codes
"We drove Wagner Group's recruitment initiatives right off of Twitter. They gave up and locked down their Twitter account because we just wouldn't let them get a word in edgewise. I think they even wound up closing the account altogether, although I never checked on that myself. Several Russian embassy accounts have had to lock down their comment sections because we were turning the intended message of their tweets upside down (...). [P4]"	Social media, measured success, public opinion.
"(...)I was online, arguing one-on-one with Russians from day one, and while I won a lot of those arguments just by fact checking, I doubt I was having a large impact. A lot of people were doing what I was doing, I saw it all the time, but how many were we actually reaching? And then I started seeing these people with dog PFPs jumping in to help, and adding memes into the mix, and it would not only shut up the people I was debating, it would take over the entire thread until the propagandists gave up and left. [P4]"	Social media, debate (ineffective), fact-checking (ineffective), visibility, public opinion, uniformity, community, digital identity, spontaneous action, memes, debate, against disinformation.
"There's been some accounts that have lost follower counts and stopped posting regularly. At least some of that was from NAFO. [P1]"	Measured success, social media, against disinformation, public opinion.
"There have also been some good moments like Andrew Korybko (Not sure the spelling) taking time out of his schedule to create a detailed document on "how to fight NAFO" and we all love the fact that folks that consider themselves very smart and "a knower of things" to think that the doge on Twitter has anything to do with NAFO. [P1]"	Humour, wasting people's time, social media.
"I like to engage in edgier tactics that are like a perverse parody of what bad actors do. I want them to be as angry at me as possible so that they'll waste all their energy on my goofy persona instead of directing it against Ukrainians. [P2]"	Wasting people's time, trolls.

Table 6: The goals and effects of dogpiling pro-Russian trolls.

Excerpt	Codes
“Relatively early on, a couple of popular favorite charities were exposed as scams. The electric bike one... can't remember what that so-called charity was called, sorry, my brain is getting old... I think that taught the group as a whole to be much more careful about verifying small fundraisers and charities, or to just stick to the big ones that've been proven. [P4]”	Fundraising, fraud, change in tactics.
“The most recent one, which you're probably aware of, were several scammers being exposed who had apparently misused in their online fame for collecting donations and misappropriating some of the funds. [P3]”	Fraud, misuse of online fame, fundraising.
“It can be a problem if anyone does things that are disruptive of charity efforts by trolling them or being in it for their own enrichment, but NAFO seems resistant to even that. [P2]”	Attacks on NAFO (ineffective), fraud, trolling
“The rarest thing but most harmful I think has been the few folks raising money that misused those funds, with lots of fellas thinking they were able to help the people of Ukraine to realize they were conned out of their money. And with something SO large and disorganized that was always a possibility. (...) There is a NAFO official account specifically because they wanted to make sure that this kind of thing couldn't be easily co-opted. [P1]”	Fraud, lack of organisation, some organisation, preventing co-opting.
“Well, I guess there is the "nafo official" site with the list of safe charities. I'm not sure I'd call that organizational structure, though. (...) People go there to get a fella forged, maybe buy some merch, but they're not in charge of anything. I'm honestly not thrilled with the "official" designation. It suggests some sort of authority. [P4]”	Some hierarchy, fundraising, no hierarchy, some organisation.

Table 7: The troubles with fundraising and the solutions offered.

Excerpt	Codes
“The fundraising is a huge one. I don't know how much we've raised, but it's got to be millions. [P4]”	Fundraising, measured success.
“There is huge outrage at what Russia is doing and we can't all be there on the front line. The fundraising is a way of standing up and feeling good that we do our part [P5].”	Fundraising, anger, public opinion, differences in tactics, feels good, empowerment.
“(...)I saw the posts from the Georgian legion, noting fundraising, and they actively crowdsourced body armor from folks who, like me, did not speak the language, and had no other way of actually helping than donating directly to the defense of those pitting themselves against the invading army. [P1]”	Fundraising, support for Ukraine, normal people, helplessness.
“I believe the goals stated for NAFO are still the raising money for Ukrainian defense and combating Russian disinformation over social media. [P1]”	Fundraising, social media, against disinformation, public opinion.

Table 8: Marked enthusiasm for fundraising.

Excerpt	Codes
"I mentioned earlier, how I see memes, humour, interaction among fellas helping me at least to maintain a positive attitude. [P3]"	Positivity, humour, no burnout, community, memes
"NAFO has a whole slew of in jokes and running gags that help create and bind the community, and the community keeps people involved and engaged when they start to get burned out. [P4]"	Burnout, community, connectivity, group identity formation
"When the invasion happened, I felt, I think like most of us, helpless, as we saw a world power descend on a country who didn't deserve it. (Not the first in my lifetime for sure) and because the war was so actively broadcasted, I turned to Memes to take the edge off. [P1]"	Helplessness, injustice, morality, humour, memes

Table 9: Memes as an inherent part of NAFO members' lives.

Excerpt	Codes
"(...) so many of us joined to do those three things. (...) 3. Be creative - creating all sorts of memes that can be used in online 'warfare'. [P1]"	Creativity, memes, empowerment, public opinion.
"You can't just scroll past a funny image, your brain already registered it as you passed it, much faster than a wall of text. [P1]"	Social media, memes, humour, public opinion.
"If I were to put my all into arguing with people, that itself might improve the morale of my enemy. They can't do much to a fly by meme dump that accuses them of coping and seething. [P2]"	Morale, debate (ineffective), memes, trolling.
"So it's one thing to argue back or voice your ideas in in text, but it will get more attention and probably also more sympathy if it's accompanied with a smart, funny meme that visually underlines the point you're trying to make. [P3]"	Memes, visibility, sympathy.
"I'm happy every time I'm seeing my, my little comments or standalone tweets being liked by non-NAFO people who just seem to agree with what I'm saying. Or they like my meme. I mean, also OK. [P3]"	Social media, public opinion, normal people, humour.

Table 10: Memes as a means to leverage the features of social media.

Excerpt	Codes
“So it's a play on NATO article 5. When you attack one you attack all. Whenever article 5 appears on Twitter then the fellas have that set as an alert. And they pile in because no one is left alone. [P5]”	Social media, Article 5, group strength.
“In the early days, there was not a lot of fellas and they needed some way to notify each other when they are- when they needed to band together to support each other. That's the famous NAFO Article 5 hashtag. [P3]”	Communication, group strength, Article 5, social media.
“But by now it's completely dropped because I think Twitter has started considering this as targeted harassment. So calling in Article 5 might easily result in action against your account, and that's definitely not what we want. [P3]”	Article 5, group strength, tactic change, policy change, limitations of social media.
“So NATO article five basically states that if one nation is attacked, all nations in nato will come to their defense. NAFO article five is a similar idea - But a lot less paperwork and a lot more dogpile [P1]”	Article 5, group strength.
“(...) it has outlived its usefulness because by now there is quite a large number of fellas following each other, so these instances usually pop up in your timeline quite quickly without any hashtags. [P3]”	Group strength, tactic change.

Table 11: the rise and fall of #Article5.

Excerpt	Codes
“And you've got (...) a large community of creative types who pump out memes and videos for everybody to share, of course. [P4]”	Community, creativity, memes, visibility, entertainment, large group.
“(...) so many of us joined to do those three things. (...) 3. Be creative - creating all sorts of memes that can be used in online 'warfare' [P1]”	Creativity, memes, empowerment, public opinion.
“(...) it's definitely fun, more motivating to work with these tactics of working in a group, working with humour, collecting memes, applying them in a smart way (...) [P3].”	Entertainment, motivation, group strength, humour, memes.

Table 12: the links between memes and interconnectivity.

Excerpt	Codes
“Other than protests and stuff like that, I'm not even sure where else this COULD work. It's a pretty specific skill set. Not that grassroots movements in meatspace don't work, but NAFO's MO is pretty targeted to social media. [P4]”	Social media, social media constraints.
“And again, forgive me for being careful. It's a thing we have to deal with in the open channels. It would be really great if you made a small donation somewhere and got verified. That helps. [P5]”	Low barrier to entry, fake fellas, social media constraints.
“Then for some time I realised it's getting less and less useful because it's abused- that the hashtag is abused by people who, probably not all of them were - I don't know, well meaning actors? But by now it's completely dropped because I think Twitter has started considering this as targeted harassment. So calling in Article 5 might easily result in action against your account, and that's definitely not what we want. [P3]”	Abuse of hashtag, bad faith actors (effective), disinformation, social media, social media limitations, policy change, Article 5 (ineffective).
“But let's face it, it would never work as a serious operation. Or organized operation. I think if we tried to form a hierarchy, the game would be over. [P4]”	No hierarchy.
“Another NAFO user made a post about Ukrainian women being attractive and he was rightly made fun of for that, but it spiraled into him and [a fella] going at it for it seemed like 100 posts, quote tweeting and tweeting about each other. Even I marveled at how stupid it looked. (...) if I was a Russian propaganda mill, I would be trying my best to copy that and waste people's time.[P2]”	Infighting, sexism, volunteers, visibility, wasting other’s time.

Table 13: the limitations of social media.

Excerpt	Codes
“There have been attempts to attack NAFO from the outside whether it is through fake NAFO fellas, then who then suddenly started posting Nazi shit. They usually get spotted and reported and taken down quite quickly.[P3]”	Outside attacks, fake Fellas, fake Fellas (ineffective), taking down infiltrators.
“(...) I have grown more wary about folks with yellow tags (AKA: not verified) who jump into the memes and general discussion tabs [in the NAFO Discord server]. We've found several folks that seem to want to screenshot some REALLY insane takes. And others who just want to spam the discord with pro Russia memes.[P1]”	Fake fellas, outside attacks, attacks on NAFO, disinformation.

Table 14: infiltrators, and how they are not very effective.

Excerpt	Codes
"We are too disparate a group. It does not take long for arguments to start if you get a few of us together. Because we are all different. We just have to be focused on the cause.[P5]"	Infighting, lack of organisation.
"Which leads to people from actually quite different political views- like, I know on German NAFO we have pretty much everything from very left wing to very conservative people, anything from teenagers to pensioners, and I would say 50/50 male female split, so it's quite representative and within that group, those who are communicating- there is almost no hassle, almost no arguments, people feel very much united(...)[P3]."	Diversity, gender, age, ideology, unity, no infighting, shared values.
"Once I joined the discord, I met some folks that I feel I would get along with. And other folks that I definitely don't see eye to eye with, but the idea that we are all in it for Ukraine and generally follow the discord rules, allow me to engage with folks who I'd never engage with in another setting.[P1]"	Community, diversity, shared values, support for Ukraine, tolerance.
"I think that's one of the things that really threw off, and continues to throw off, the Russian propaganda machine. We have people from all over the world, with all kinds of different perspectives and talents, voluntarily and enthusiastically sharing ideas and making those diverse talents and perspectives work together and compliment each other. I honestly don't think that kind of voluntary cooperation between such a diverse population could ever be forced. You can't pay people to do that.[P4]"	Against disinformation, diversity, community, volunteers, coordination.
"I am very political. But none of that matters in NAFO. Or it should not. My opinions on that don't matter. Recently I was asked by a fella if I would visit his twitch stream because he wanted support. (...) Turns out he is gay and was frightened to death that I might give him a hard time. He's a fella. He's one of us and I loved his company for that evening. That's how I see it. One for all.[P5]"	Unity, no infighting, ideology, group identity formation, diversity, community.

Table 15: NAFO as a diverse group of people.

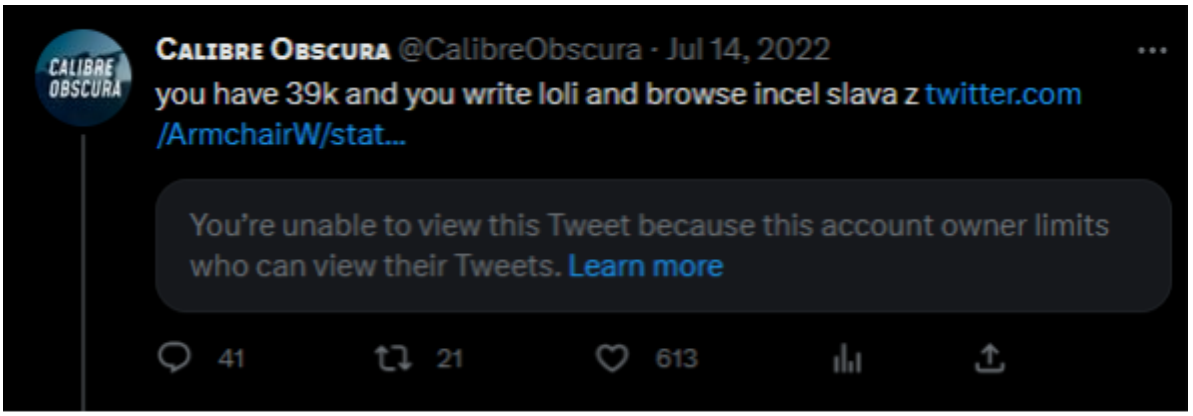

Fig. 1 - ridicule as a means of shutting down pro-Russian propagandists in action.

Fig. 2: A 'Fella' picture.

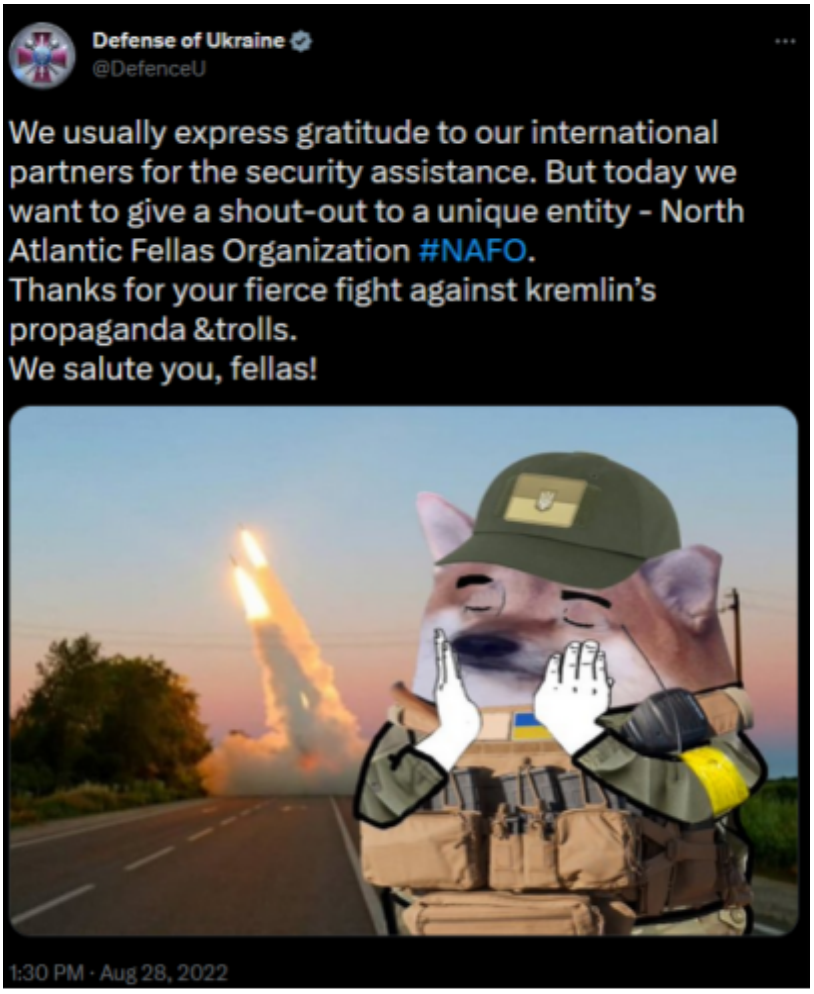

Fig. 3: Memes as a means of forging bonds.

APPENDIX IV - INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

INTERVIEW I

1.
P1 — 04/04/2023 21:34
Hello
2.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:35
Heya! ^^
3.
P1 — 04/04/2023 21:35
This is one perspective from thousands I'm sure you'll be looking into. Hopefully some of it will be useful.
4.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:35
The more the merrier, I'm all ears
5.
P1 — 04/04/2023 21:40
Male, mid 30s, middle class USA, I got into NAFO early on by following Memes created by @menaconflicted back in March 2022, as I had followed @angrystaffer's Twitter content throughout the many false starts and provocations that were televised to make it look like UKR was an active belligerent. (Feb 14-22, 2022) When the invasion happened, I felt, I think like most of us, helpless, as we saw a world power descend on a country who didn't deserve it. (Not the first in my lifetime for sure) and because the war was so actively broadcasted, I turned to Memes to take the edge off.
6. [21:44]
From there I saw the posts from the Georgian legion, noting fundraising, and they actively crowdsourced body armor from folks who, like me, did not speak the language, and had no other way of actually helping than donating directly to the defense of those pitting themselves against the invading army.
7.
P1 — 04/04/2023 21:48
Something as important, if not more important, was the ability to take folks that were twisting everything to make people question the truth, and fight back by literally mocking them "Once you start arguing with a cartoon dog, you've already lost" Which I think has taken a bit of the wind out of the sails of a Robust propaganda machine.
8.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:49
Oh absolutely
9.
P1 — 04/04/2023 21:53
Once I joined the discord, I met some folks that I feel I would get along with. And other folks that I definitely don't see eye to eye with, but the idea that we are all in it for Ukraine and generally follow the discord rules, allow me to engage with folks who I'd never engage with in another setting.
10.
P1 — 04/04/2023 22:04
I was once relatively ambivalent about Russia, and had a lot to learn in regards to the history it had with its neighbors. But history is history, it's unchanging and not "the now" The barbaric aggression I was able to see in real time, those early videos of people getting gunned

down in their cars, the translations of the tank/apc crews speaking to their commands about having to take smartphones from passersby on the roads, and executing them so their location could not be sent, was a very visceral and upsetting experience. I think it was the news that the zookeepers had been killed that made me look for something to do. Enter menaconflict aka UkraineMemesForNatoTeens I believe he was known at the time. It was through him I followed Matthew, Mr. Ghostly, pokemom, and others and then joined NAFO.
11. [22:06]
It has been interesting seeing some of the "takedowns" regarding NAFO. Including the greyzone article, and some reveals about Kama Kamilas previous Twitter history.
12.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:11
Oh, that was that stuff people dug up about those antisemitic memes he apparently posted, right?

1
13.
P1 — 04/04/2023 22:13
What might be unique to my experience comparatively is that I consider myself pretty left. At least as far as the US is concerned. Including protesting the Iraq war, back in 03 with my parents, coming from a Mennonite background, the idea of fighting at all, not to mention invasion, was something reprehensible. (And something I think looking back on it realpolitik weakened the US on the worldstage to the position its in today.) What is interesting is however how much my father and I differ with how we see current events.
14. [22:16]
He is of the opinion that peace could have already been achieved, if not for the machinations of the west in the aid to Ukraine, and I am of the opinion that peace is not just the absence of warfare. As we have seen in so many places occupied by Russian forces and then liberated by Ukraine.
15. [22:19]
I think part of the continuing support to Ukraine is knowing that supporting a country against invasion doesn't mean every person in that country has to be perfect. Hell. We have tons of assholes in our country. I might be one of them (depends who you ask)
16.
P1 — 04/04/2023 22:26
I also think I might be a little bit more moderate when folks talk about Russians in Russia. It was not so long ago that I was having shouting matches in my high-school over the Iraq War, and how ....easy it was to be dismissed as someone who loved terrorists, because that was the general line back then. (Remember 9/11) So seeing Russians who really have little choice democratically and little freedom of expression, especially regarding the war, speak positively about their soldiers or negatively about Ukraine. I get it. They're wrong but I get it.
17. [22:28]
I have lost my train of thought, is there anything you'd like to ask?
18.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:29
That's really useful, thank you so much! Right now it's getting fairly late, but I'd love to have a proper chat with you to ask some questions in the near future if that's alright?
19.
P1 — 04/04/2023 22:29
Sure
20.

Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:29
Thank you so much, I really appreciate it ^^

1
21. [22:29]
I'll hit you up tomorrow with the details then
22.
P1 — 04/04/2023 22:30
Sounds like a plan
5 April 2023
23.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:34
Heya! I'm currently setting up the interviews. Would you mind planning a voice call with me (which would be recorded, but exclusively for transcription purposes, and will be stored safely), or do you prefer a text chat?
24.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:44
Text will generally allow me to not fumble over my words, and give you direct transcription to look back to. How long would a voice call generally take?
25.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:45
Ideally half an hour, but it may take longer depending on how much you're willing to share. Most people are opting for text, so I think that might be better - keeps the interviews comparable to each other, y'know?
26.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:45
Indeed.
27.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:45
But ultimately it's your call
28.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:45
I like the pun
29.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:45
...oh god that wasn't even intentional, good catch lmao

1
30.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:47
Let's do text to keep it comparable to the others (unless of course you'd like some form of vocal contact to confirm that I am a human and not in fact a cartoon dog.)
31.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:48
I think getting an interview in general would prove enough as to your legitimacy, no problem :)

1
32. [20:49]

So, I have an intro letter that briefly explains the project, and a consent form that I would need you to sign - it outlines the specifics of your participation and your rights in it. Sound fair?
33.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:49
Sounds good.
34. [20:50]
I take it you will need an email address for such a thing
35.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:51
Discord allows filesharing, so that's a perfectly fine option, though if you'd prefer email that's no problem!
36.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:51
Ah yes better option to just work through discord.
37.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:53
Yessir, no problem! (edited)
38. [20:54]
Awesome, here you go! The consent letter requires a name and signature, but we can use your Discord handle if you prefer. There's also an option at bullet point 6 for whether or not you would like to participate anonymously. That means that I would attribute quotes from you to either "Anonymous" or "P1", for example.

NAFO_Research_Project_-_Introductory_Letter.pdf
59.85 KB

Consent_Letter.docx
14.20 KB
39.
P1 — 05/04/2023 20:58
Shared from Word for Android https://office.com/getword

Consent_Letter.pdf
87.21 KB
40. [20:59]
Good?
41.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:01
Looks good, thank you!
42.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:01
Excellent.
43.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:01
So I'll ask you the questions one-by-one, and you can go into as much depth as you want ready?
44.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:02
Essay questions or short answer? Haha

45.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:03
They're made to be open-ended, so if you're inspired to do some essay-writing, you'd be a treasure trove for my thesis :p but no pressure, if you'd prefer giving short answers that's fine too ^^
46.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:03
Haha proceed
47.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:04
Righto! So, the first one's a gimme - How long would you say you have considered yourself a Fella?
48.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:08
Hmmmm. I wasn't part of the original wave. I followed on with the fellas as they appeared, but I was still an observer, I would copy twitter threads and post them to friends and family group chats, I later signed onto the discord and felt fella adjacent, but I did not consider myself a fella until I finally sold a warhammer 40k figure I built and painted on ebay and donated the funds to the Georgian legion. (Let me see if I can find the model to pull up the date. I believe it was last June, perhaps early july)
49. [21:10]
July 18th 2022

50.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:10
Ohhh, sick - is that an Imperial Fist?
51.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:10
Indeed.
52. [21:10]
Yellow and blue. Seemed fitting
53.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:10
That's some damn good painting dude, GL must've been able to buy a tank with the proceeds on that!
54.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:11
Unfortunately no. It was only about 80 USD
55. [21:12]
But I felt the work needed to be put in.
56.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:12
Entirely fair, that's still a good bit of money, well done! Steering back to the topic at hand, though - We’re here to talk about the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation. Could you, in your own words, tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are?
57.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:19
NAFO (north Atlantic fellas organization) is a group that grew pretty organically at its start to raise money for the Georgian legion. With a few smart very online individuals, they showed that change/help on the virtual Frontline was possible, and came up with a way to identify

friendlies on the online space. I think the goal shifted from just raising funds for the Georgian legion; to then bullying atrocity deniers, to then raising funds for Ukraine defense as a whole, and making sure that those who wrapped themselves in Russian propaganda found themselves hampered and thinking about how to combat this presence of cartoon dogs. I believe the goals stated for NAFO are still the raising money for Ukrainian defense and combating Russian disinformation over social media. But much like a pack of loosely banded together individuals, I expect every member of NAFO may have different thoughts as to what that entails.
58.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:27
Excellent, thank you! I'm curious about NAFO's tactics - how NAFO works towards achieving its goals. What would you say some of NAFO's most commonly used tactics are?
59.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:30
Hmm. I think it boils down to a few things. Allow me a minute as to how to put each one into a coherent thought.
60.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:42
1. Article 5: gondor calls for aid; I've seen this generally to interrupt polls for people trying to make a point. Or to bouy an account that has been targeted by supporters of Russian thought. This I think is mainly a morale boosting tactic for fellas. If you don't feel alone in the information space, you aren't. 2. Match the absurd with the absurd. So much russian propaganda is a shotgun of random, poorly thought out notions that are to be "recognized as official" But when accounts are talking about Gay witch satanist covens and secret Azov biolabs, repressing the urge to attempt to Correct the account and instead posting memes as a reply, to show that they aren't to be taken seriously is something I think NAFO does very well. 3. Velez: aspect of the beast- You are a cartoon dog, therefore you don't have ego, and insults should lead nowhere. (This is the one I believe NAFO struggles with the most) the idea is that we are here to help Ukraine, and not become heroes of our own right, not have any following beyond what we already have and to not make it about individual members. There have been several fractures in NAFO over the last year, some coming from the inability to let go of that ego. (At least from what I've seen)
61. [21:46]
Beyond that just consistent fundraising posts seem to get the job done.
62.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:47
I see, those are some interesting perspectives! Could you clarify what you mean with Article 5? I've seen it before on Twitter, but I want to make sure I'm not misunderstanding.
63.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:47
So NATO article five basically states that if one nation is attacked, all nations in nato will come to their defense. NAFO article five is a similar idea
64. [21:48]
But a lot less paperwork and a lot more dogpile
65.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:50
Aha, so it's used as a way to signal for backup? A Fella comments an #Article5 hashtag to bring a large group of Fellas together in a twitter thread?
66.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:51

That's the idea
67. [21:52]
Of course it's success has a lot to do with the visibility of that post, and we have seen on discord folks asking for help (mods have to remove those because discord doesn't allow brigading)
68.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:53
Ahh, so if the visibility is important, it's kind of relying on the person posting the article 5 having a decent follower count, or doing so in a post that's already going viral?
69.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:54
I would expect so. I don't have the expertise inside twitter's algorithm to tell you what exactly is the difference between failure and success
70.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:57
That's fair. So, this Article5 brings a group of fellas together for dogpiling - that was for influencing polls, or mass-reporting an account breaking TOS, if I understood you correctly?
71.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:57
Your understanding aligns with my understanding of it yes
72.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:58
Excellent, thank you!
73. [21:58]
Could you tell me a bit about your opinions on these tactics? Beyond the Article5 one, I mean - the ones you listed before?
74.
P1 — 05/04/2023 21:58
What would you Iike me to expand on
75.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:01
I'm curious as to what you think on the tactics that you identified as being most commonly used by NAFO folks. You already mentioned the ego problems for example, and the difficulties in overcoming those - could you tell me a bit more about that?
76.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:01
So with all things we are still all very human.
77. [22:03]
One of the ways we have seen this play out is in hero worship. (Which is a bit ... hmm. Worship is extreme. One moment while I try to formulate what I'm trying to say)
78.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:03
Take your time, no rush
79.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:14
So there are many camps beyond the Shiba face that all fellas wear. Some of what we see are some sexist and homophobic content that are seen coming from who are supposed to be allies, and when called on it, they can double down and entrench themselves with new battle lines, engaging other NAFO accounts in culture wars Other times there are differences in knowledge of situations and a breach in how to best help, several rows popped up, around

people close to the action and people farther away. The rarest thing but most harmful I think has been the few folks raising money that misused those funds, with lots of fellas thinking they were able to help the people of Ukraine to realize they were conned out of their money. And with something SO large and disorganized that was always a possibility. Humans will find their way to exploit any disaster situation.
80. [22:18]
I do not remember the name but there was something that happened I think late August in which an account that raised money with semi-nudes had turned out to have either not have granted the funds to the unit she said she was raising them for, or she had been sending money to an account that had fooled her. Folks were upset. And rightly so.
81.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:22
That seems like something to get upset over, for sure. Have there been any efforts to prevent this kind of thing from happening in NAFO?
82.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:25
There is a NAFO official account specifically because they wanted to make sure that this kind of thing couldn't be easily co-opted. But I don't know the exact functions behind it. I believe there is a discord channel, one sec.
83. [22:30]
Yes looks like they threw up the website nafo-ofan.org I remember being part of a group of several of us that made sure that we didn't go into any sort of NAFO cryptocurrency. Boy howdy that would have been bad. I think the nafo official account still has that poll in place.
84.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:32
There were discussions on NAFO cryptocurrency?
85.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:32
Let me find the tweet poll
86. [22:34]
https://mobile.twitter.com/Official_NAFO/status/1608966853656981504?lang=en
North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO)
Hey fellas, we've addressed this once before but we've gotten a lot of questions regarding NFTs and Crypto. NAFO/Fellas do not have NFTs and are not involved in cryptocurrency.
Likes
1990
Retweets
225
Twitter•31/12/2022 00:22
87. [22:34]
This was the result of that poll.
88. [22:35]
We were growing increasingly concerned that someone was going to create one and wanted to make sure it wasn't. Or if it was created that it wasn't adopted
89. [22:36]
Again one of the downsides to literally having no organization
90.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:43
I see. You mentioned you were involved in making sure that any crypto plans didn't go through - could you walk me through how that went?

91.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:43
Oh I was just one of many folks on the discord that said it'd be a bad idea
92. [22:43]
And then again in the twitter poll
93. [22:45]
I see now that I may have made it sound like I was responsible for such a thing, but it was generally just talking online. The discord back when it had less than 1000 members was a bit more informal
94.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:46
Ahh, I see, so it was less a coordinated effort and more just being a part of the community deliberations?
95.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:46
Indeed.
96.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:47
Understood. Is that how things are normally decided in NAFO?
97.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:48
Good question.
98. [22:51]
I honestly don't know the answer to that question. There's the donations that people send, then the forgers who volunteer, and then the cartoon dogs are granted. Beyond that, I'm not sure there's any official decision making process.
99. [22:51]
At least not that I've seen.
100.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:52
I see, thank you. You mentioned the discord was more informal when it was smaller; could you tell me what changed as it grew?
101.
P1 — 05/04/2023 22:55
So the folks who started the discord aren't on It nearly as often as they were at the beginning, and I've found that at least I have grown more wary about folks with yellow tags (AKA: not verified) who jump into the memes and general discussion tabs. We've found several folks that seem to want to screenshot some REALLY insane takes. And others who just want to spam the discord with pro Russia memes.
102. [22:56]
But overall, I go there for my Ukraine news and to check in on my friends in the wargaming channel.
103.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:00
I see. Are the people that run the Discord - the moderators and admins - particularly visible or prominent within the community?
104.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:02
I can speak only to Kama, Pokemom, menaconflicted, and Matthew. That are prominent in the community and admin/mods. But I haven't seen kama or menaconflicted on for a hot

minute. And Matthew generally logs on with a hello every once in a while. At least in the last week.
105.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:03
I see. Are they regarded as 'leaders' in the community, or more just administrators that keep the lights on, or another role entirely?
106.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:08
In my view: I'd consider them to be leaders, at least in an informal sense. I know that Matthew. has already been interviewed about the fellas back in the fall I believe. But I think a lot of that is just because those folks had large twitter followings to start (30-50k) and decided to put more effort into this. Mind you this is just my view on the topic. I don't expect if their online presence vanished tomorrow that it would ruin NAFO, since well. Nafo is not all that organized.
107.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:10
I see. How do you think NAFO came to be as a not all that organized organisation?
108.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:14
I think it came to be because there was 1. Low cost of entry -donate anything to get a fella. 2. Develop nonsense to help the cause. I believe we have several desires. 1. Help people in need 2. Fight 3. Be creative. With a low cost to entry and the enemy that was "Russia" so many of us joined to do those three things. 1. Help - by donating. Even a little 2. Fight - by mocking those who spread falsehoods 3. Be creative - creating all sorts of memes that can be used in online 'warfare'
109.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:16
I see, so it was a function of the low barrier to entry more than a deliberate choice, you would say?
110.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:17
What do you mean deliberate choice in this context
111.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:18
Ah, let me rephrase - it appears to be that NAFO organically grew into a low-organisation community, rather than one organised to be like that, if I understand your perspective correctly?
112.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:21
Yes as far as I understand Kama wanted ballistic plates for the Georgian legion and it grew organically from there.
113.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:21
Aha, I see, thank you.
114.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:22
Yessir
115.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:23

We've gotten a fair bit away from my originally planned set of questions, but that's a good thing - means you had a lot of interesting things to say I hadn't thought of yet! I do have some more questions I'd like to ask, but would you like to take a bit of a break first, or are you good to go?
116.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:25
Lol glad to be interesting. Proceed
117.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:25
Awesome! So, we've covered the tactics in the abstract, now I'd like to talk about the practice for a bit. Could you tell me about any specific moments where you thought "we're doing a good job", if there are any?
1.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:27
Do you know of the "you pronounced this nonsense, not me" post?
2.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:27
Oh absolutely, that one's in pretty much every article written on NAFO. Legendary moment
3.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:28
Yes. That I think was the first time folks learned that NAFO was a presence beyond a couple of guys in the west.
4. [23:32]
I think that has been a big step. Plus the money raised for United24, basically any article in the news that references us gives me a bit of a warm feeling. There's been some accounts that have lost follower counts and stopped posting regularly. At least some of that was from NAFO. I'm trying to remember the one that calibreobscura tangled with. Gentleman was very pro Russia and also very anime focused.
5.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:36
Oh of course. armchair Warlord.
6. [23:38]
Armchair warlord had a large following until calibre obscura started making fun of his book. Armchair warlord is the gentleman who "corrected" oryx's list and a darling in that social media circle.
7. [23:40]
Anyway, NAFO picked up on that and while NAFO didn't bully him off the platform, they had him spin his wheels and lose followers. He would later leave the platform, I expect because it's not as fun when your side isn't winning.
8.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:40
Apologies - what is "oryx's list" in this context?
9.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:41
Oh I'm sorry. Yes one second while I get you the link
10. [23:42]
Oryx the mighty counter of destroyed and damaged military hardware.
11. [23:42]
https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html?m=1

Oryx
Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The 2...
By Stijn Mitzer and Jakub Janovsky in collaboration with Joost Oliemans, Kemal , Dan , and naalsio26 This list only includes de...

12.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:43
Ahh, gotcha - so Armchair Warlord tried to claim Oryx made mistakes in that list, and NAFO responded to taht?
13.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:47
That isn't what NAFO responded to, directly. I think jakob responded and calmly explained how each of his correctuons was incorrext without much luck, but that was how he got on NAFOs radar. Again correcting folks on the internet didn't work in this case. However. CalibreObscura found his Book on Amazon I think. (Armchair warlords' book) and said this:
https://mobile.twitter.com/CalibreObscura/status/1547673921456971783?lang=en
Calibre Obscura (@CalibreObscura)
you have 39k and you write loli and browse incel slava z
Likes
620
Twitter•14/07/2022 22:06
14. [23:48]
Now here, this is where the armchair warlord got upset (honestly I get it, if I wrote a book and it was derivatively named pornography, I'd get a little upset too)
15. [23:48]
But it sent the man on a wild 20-30 post rant on nonsense and lost him followers.
16.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:49
Ah, hoist by his own petard
17.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:50
Indeed. Didn't correct the man. That doesn't work in internet spaces.
18.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:51
Makes sense. I think I'm missing a bit of context though - isn't 'Z' a pro-Russian propaganda thing? Why is Calibre Obscura saying 'Slava Z' here?
19.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:51
He says "you browse "incel Slava Z"
20. [23:52]
Which I beleive is a play on "Intel Slava Z"
21. [23:52]
Which is a.... Telegram Channel I think
22.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:52
Ahh I see, thank you
23. [23:53]
(Or in non-formal academicese - lmao that's hilarious)

1

24.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:56
There have also been some good moments like Andrew Korybko (Not sure the spelling) taking time out of his schedule to create a detailed document on "how to fight NAFO" and we all love the fact that folks that consider themselves very smart and "a knower of things" to think that the doge on Twitter has anything to do with NAFO.
25. [23:56]
Always good for a laugh.
26.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:57
Yeah, that would probably require someone with a great deal of knowhow of Internet culture to figure out, and even then I'm not sure how you'd formulate a response haha
27. [23:58]
So, we've talked about 'NAFO Ws' - Similarly, could you tell me about any moments where you thought something could have been handled better by the Fellas, if there are any?
28.
P1 — 05/04/2023 23:59
Oh yeah as noted previously we have had some issues with ego.
6 April 2023
29.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:00
There were several rows within NAFO. Margot was one of those, (I think she's currently suspended from twitter) and either Dr. Or nurse Anna. Those seemed to be personality clashes that seemed to be more "friendly fire" than anything else.
30.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:01
Alright, so mainly internal problems you would say?
31.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:04
I mean beyond that because NAFO accounts are normal people you're going to see some that fall for propaganda, or reflexively post against backwards Ukrainian movement as propaganda even if it isn't. But that's just the nature of people.
32.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:05
That makes sense. Can you think of any times when a tactic NAFO folks employed backfired? For example, trying something against Russian propaganda on Twitter that really didn't work?
33.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:08
Hmmmmm. I think what some folks really enjoyed as a joke (marking their location online as Langley, Virginia) or (celebrating the Enormous paycheck that they DEFINITELY got from the CIA) has allowed folks to dismiss NAFO more easily than if those jokes weren't screenshotted and posted as fact
34. [00:11]
Also I'd say that NAFO as a whole is very English centered and west focused. So it's only combatting (in a big way) what could be described as the "western theater" of the informational sphere.
35.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:12

I see - has there been any internal discussion by the Fellas on those location or CIA pay jokes? I think I saw not mentioning the FBI as a rule in the Discord.
36.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:13
Haha if you type in FBI in the discord the bot will days "FBI I know FBI, it's fellas browsing the internet" or something similar
37. [00:15]
The idea of not mentioning the FBI or CIA was tongue and cheek as part of this whole thing. The only thing I've seen as a directive has been to try to get our Eastern bloc fellas to stop using the R-slur. As apparently the translation for them isn't considered vulgar
38. [00:15]
They haven't been able to win that fight because again there's no organization
39.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:16
Ahh, I see, thank you
40.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:20
What more can I answer for ya
41. [00:21]
It's gotta be past midnight there. You still good to keep going?
42.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:21
We're just about ready to close, actually - but yes, it's been so interesting that I kind of lost track of time haha
43.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:22
I hope it helps you on your thesis
44.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:22
Oh, definitely!
45.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:22
I'd love to read it when you finish it
46.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:23
I have two more questions on NAFO specifically, and a few more that are more about crossing t's and dotting i's. Are there any periods you can think of in NAFO's history when the Fellas changed their tactics, and if so, could you tell us something about these periods?
47. [00:23]
Oh I'm happy to share it with you, no problem
48.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:23
Hmmmmmmmm
49. [00:27]
I don't know of any specific changes in tactics. Similiar to an amoeba I expect most folks just respond to stimuli as it comes. The addition of AI generated Art has made It into some memes (you can see its more prevalent now than 3 months ago) but the underlying strategy of "pronouncing nonsense" or "being silly" or "embracing the cringe" is still very much used today as it was last year
50. [00:29]

And I think the AI art also goes to "low barrier to entry" we spoke of earlier
51.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:30
That definitely makes sense
52. [00:30]
Some Fellas brought up NAFO feeling like a second job at times, or burning out as something that may be a risk from participating a lot. Do you recognize this at all?
53.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:34
Yeah actually. That's something that I expect is pretty common. Something that we forget I think is that when you have an army, you have organization you have roles and very importantly in those roles, you have time off. You aren't perpetually at the front. Look at ancient Rome, even in the legion, they trained the line to rotate every minute they were in melee. Folks that don't have that organization don't have a schedule or someone to say hey "take a break. Go do something else. Stop doomscrolling and take a walk."
54. [00:35]
So because this is literally just an amalgamation of people with no formal role and no assignments, folks will go hard, won't take breaks. And will burn out.
55. [00:37]
It's also something to note that if this was say, 15 years ago, when smartphones were not as common and we weren't terminally online, I'd expect less burnout. But now folks can go about their daily lives and still be on social media from sunup to midnight.
56.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:38
Yeah, that makes sense. Do you know if there's any efforts by Fellas to support people at risk of burning themselves out?
57.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:40
Hmm. I don't know that there's really an online answer to supporting burnout through being terminally online. I do think that's why the discord exists though. To allow folks to be a little bit more comfortable and commiserate with allies.
58.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:41
I see, thank you. That's it for the big questions, thank you so much you've been invaluable! As for crossing the t's and dotting the i's - I'm not only relying on interviews for this thesis; I'm also sifting through a database of tweets about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, I'll need to filter this dataset to only contain tweets specific to NAFO - what keywords, phrases or hashtags would you suggest I use to filter the dataset for NAFO-related tweets?
59.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:42
Hmmm let me search and get you a few tags
60. [00:43]
First:
61. [00:43]
https://mobile.twitter.com/jebbbby
62. [00:44]
Jebbbby has been a solid contributor of NAFO material and so I recommend him for a lot of his art that I'm sure has been widely circulated
63.

P1 — Yesterday at 00:50
#NAFO #NAFOARTICLE5 are the two main ones I've seen for my tweets
64.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:50
Sweet, thank you ^^
65.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:50
You're welcome.
66.
Researcher — Yesterday at 00:51
Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?
67.
P1 — Yesterday at 00:51
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
68.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:00
I think that NAFO will only survive for as long as the war in Ukraine is waged. Once the war is over, we will head our separate ways, most likely divided by politics or sports teams or what have you. And I think that's OK. (I say this with the caveat that Taiwan is not invaded, if so it may find a new purpose)
69.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:02
That makes a lot of sense. It honestly kind of reminds me of Anonymous' war on Scientology way back when, in a weird way.
70. [01:03]
Can't make a one-on-one comparison, obviously, but it kinda feels like there's some parallels
71.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:03
I'm sure.
72.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:04
So, only two more quick questions and we're done - Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?
73.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:06
I'm sorry, my NAFO contacts go as far as myself. I recommend PerSec in discord and so I wouldn't want to volunteer anyone directly.
74.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:08
That's okay, no problem! So, for my last question to you - what's your favourite Fella that you've seen that's not your own pfp? ^^
75.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:09
Oooh that's a good one. Hmmm
76. [01:12]
Hard to beat goblin soup
77. [01:12]

78.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:12

oh that looks rad
79. [01:12]
WAIT IS THAT DARK BRANDON ON THE IRON THRONE LMAO
80.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:12
Yessir
81.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:12
10/10, no notes
82. [01:12]
Well, that's it from me! Thank you so much for helping me out, it's been a lovely and very informative chat. If you've got any further questions or remarks, feel free to send me a message at any time

1
83.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:13
Oh also also also also
84. [01:13]
Thought of somethinf
85.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:13
Ohhh? I'm all ears
86.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:13
Have you seen the Meme the US government made back when they were trying to combat Russian influence?
87.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:14
Which one?
88.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:14

89.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:15
...they put "Propagandistic meme made by committee" into MidJourney to get this and you can't change my mind

1
90. [01:15]
platonic ideal of shitposting by committee
91. [01:15]
(derogatory)
92.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:15
If you reverse image search this you can probably find the original
93. [01:17]
But i think that is the best evidence that the US govt isn't behind NAFO. Cause they just aren't 1. Fast (the meme above took 22 days) or 2. Good at it.
94.

Researcher — Yesterday at 01:17
Oh absolutely, that's a really good point
95. [01:17]
I am going to sign off, need to be in the office tmrw (part-time job on top of a thesis is fun), but thank you so much again, it's been wonderful. Would you mind if I sent you a message if any follow-up questions came to mind? They probably won't, but just in case

1
96.
P1 — Yesterday at 01:18
Yeah it's way late over there. Get some rest.
97.
Researcher — Yesterday at 01:18
Will do haha
98. [01:19]
Have a good one!

1
99.
P1 — Yesterday at 19:09
Hey congrats on your verification
100.
Researcher — Yesterday at 19:49
Thank you ^^

INTERVIEW II

1.
P2 — 04/04/2023 20:56
the thing I was getting at in the server is that a few months ago, tankies got ahold of kompromat on Kama Kamilia, who's a pretty prominent nafo guy and was one of the founding group. anti-semitic memes he had posted on twitter several years ago (and since repudiated) they posted screencaps and had a field day about it. but within days nobody was talking about it anymore. attention spans are too short, he was just one guy and wasn't an active anti-semite anymore
2. [20:57]
I suspect a few people in pro-Western twitter would have been extremists of one sort or another in the past who changed their tune
3.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 20:57
Ahhh, gotcha, that makes sense
4.
P2 — 04/04/2023 20:57
the online discourse has been extremist and pretty anti-liberal for ages in many spaces, without much pushback and shitposters often come from 4chan
5. [20:58]
which is not a place known for sensible views
6.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 20:58
Yup, part of the reason I thought NAFO was so interesting was it was the first time I'd ever really seen a coherent, unified liberal shitposting effort
7. [20:58]
And I've been terminally online and terminally into politics since I was like 14 years old so that was kind of a shock lmao
8.
P2 — 04/04/2023 21:01
people who engage in illiberal politics (and I used to hold such politics in the past) aren't really used to pushback and when it comes they're used to it being from facebook grandpas, not people who are familiar with their favorite subjects
9. [21:01]
I think NAFO for that reason came as quite a shock to some people
10.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:01
Oh yeah, that makes sense
11.
P2 — 04/04/2023 21:03
people used to either an echo chamber or uneducated opponents, can get pretty emotional when they meet real opposition and then they start acting funny
12.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:03
Yup
13.
P2 — 04/04/2023 21:03
and then the funny acting gets screencapped and spread around
14.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:04

Hell, even beyond the shitposting cadres of 4chan and twitter, the fact the Russian regime seems to have hella struggled to come up with a remotely decent response when they have literal troll factories is pretty much the same thing on a national scale
15. @P2
and then the funny acting gets screencapped and spread around

Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:04
Ridicule is a powerful weapon
16.
P2 — 04/04/2023 21:05
seems to be the perfect weapon when the goal is spreading a kind of demoralization too
17. [21:05]
"nothing can be believed", words don't mean anything, be afraid etc vs "this guy is just a lunatic on meth"
18.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:08
Yup
19. [21:09]
Russia's strategy has been "flood the web with so much bullshit nobody is even going to bother trying to figure out what's real anymore and just become apathetic", so refusing to play their game and just clowning on them being a much better strat seems to be a wayyy better idea
20. [21:10]
Anyway, it's getting fairly late here - is it alright if I contact you tomorrow to see if we can pen in a bit of a short interview? Nothing super formal or anything, basically just a chat like this where I ask a few questions about your opinion on NAFO's actions it'd really help me out
21.
P2 — 04/04/2023 22:00
I can chat. if I'm not present it can always be a non-real time chat. though my social media reach is almost nonexistent so be aware of that
22.
Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:01
That's completely okay! It's more about people's perspectives on how NAFO works, so you don't need to have spearheaded an Article 5 or anything ^^ I'll reach out tomorrow with the details then, thank you so much!
5 April 2023
23.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:34
Heya! I'm currently setting up the interviews. Would you mind planning a voice call with me (which would be recorded, but exclusively for transcription purposes, and will be stored safely), or do you prefer a text chat?
24.
P2 — 05/04/2023 20:39
I prefer text. don't have a good mic anyway
25.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:43
Awesome, no problem! So, I have an intro letter that briefly explains the project, and a consent form that I would need you to sign - it outlines the specifics of your participation and your rights in it. Sound fair?

26. [20:44]
(You can sign using your digital handle if you prefer not using your real name)
27.
P2 — 05/04/2023 20:53
yeah sounds fair
28. [20:54]
I go for what makes people mad so my twitter handle is Magic Knight Raytheon. it's made people react more than if I had used a slur
29. [20:54]
https://twitter.com/ar15internatio1
30.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:56
Would you mind if we used your Discord handle? It's what everyone is using, keeps the handles consistent - I think arguing to my prof that using handles in the first place is already going to be a toughie as-is, so ideally I'd like to at least keep the handles from the same source
31.
P2 — 05/04/2023 20:57
yeah you could use the discord handle (which was also some kind of obscure trolling reference from years ago)
32.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:57
Awesome, thank you!
33. [20:57]
Here you go! The consent letter requires a name and signature, but we can use your Discord handle like we discussed. There's also an option at bullet point 6 for whether or not you would like to participate anonymously. That means that I would attribute quotes from you to either "Anonymous" or "P2", for example.

NAFO_Research_Project_-_Introductory_Letter.pdf
59.85 KB

Consent_Letter.docx
14.20 KB
34.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:08
between anonymous and a handle, which would your professor prefer?
35.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:08
Not too much of a difference, it's up to your preference
36.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:11
stuck my handle on it as a digital signature (assuming you want it submitted over discord)

Consent_Letter.docx
11.02 KB
37. [21:12]
oh yeah should underline stuff too?
38.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:13

Yup, thanks - do need to have formal permission (or denial thereof)
39.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:20
nah I give permission to publish anything I say
40. [21:21]
I keep my online activity very separate from my personal life anyway
41.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:21
I appreciate that, but I would need it underlined in the form if you don't mind? Ethics board might be out for blood otherwise, lol
42.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:24
ok yeah
43.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:24
Awesome, thank you!
44.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:25
like this?

Consent_Letter.docx
11.06 KB
45.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:25
Unorthodox, but that works! Thank you
46. [21:26]
All clear so far? Any questions?
47.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:31
I would normally ask questions but I haven't had any coffee yet so I'll probably take an hour to think of any
48.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:31
Lmao that's fair, take your time
49. [21:32]
It's getting fairly late here, so is it an idea if we try and pick a day later this week to do the interview so you can mull it over first?
50.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:33
sure
51.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:34
Awesome! I've got work tomorrow and I'm busy most of Saturday, but tomorrow evening (which I think is morning for you, since it's 21.30 here currently) and Friday I'm all clear.
52.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:34
I'm not picky about when questions are asked so feel free to take your time
53.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:34

Awesome, shall I reach out tomorrow then? And if you've got any questions in the meantime, you are of course more than welcome to ask them
54.
P2 — 05/04/2023 21:41
tomorrow sounds good
55.
Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:42
Awesome, I'll speak to you then! Have a good one
6 April 2023
56.
Researcher — Yesterday at 19:50
Hia! Are you still interested in being interviewed?
57.
P2 — Yesterday at 19:50
sure
58.
Researcher — Yesterday at 19:51
Sweet, thank you! Did you have any questions before we begin?
59.
P2 — Yesterday at 19:53
not at the moment
60.
Researcher — Yesterday at 19:56
Awesome! So I'll ask you the questions one-by-one, and you can go into as much depth as you want ready?
61.
P2 — Yesterday at 19:57
ready
62.
Researcher — Yesterday at 19:57
Righto! So, the first one's a gimme - How long would you say you have considered yourself a Fella?
63.
P2 — Yesterday at 20:00
I think it would be close to a year now. I came across the movement through Mr. Ghostly and Kama on Twitter and got involved but never had a shiba avatar made (so far). there wasn't a particular day when I decided I was but it grew on me since the beginning of its creation
64.
Researcher — Yesterday at 20:01
Alright, thank you! So, we’re here to talk about the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation. Could you, in your own words, tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are?
65.
P2 — Yesterday at 20:07
The way I understand NAFO, it's a loose association of people who support the defense of Ukraine, and by extension the liberal democratic order when it's attacked by authoritarian states. Members have very different politics but most everyone will agree to support a democracy against a dictatorship and a threatened country against annexation. As to its goals: Defending the "information space" against propaganda and fakes by bad actors and keeping the discussion centered on Ukraine. It also works to promote military and humanitarian aid to those affected by the war. The need for this is obvious: Bad actors have financial and

ideological motivations to be very vocal in online media, and in this way a small minority can shout over the perspective of both the affected (Ukrainians) and the majority of people in general, making themselves look bigger and more important than they really are.
66.
Researcher — Yesterday at 20:09
Alright, thank you. I'm curious about NAFO's tactics - how NAFO works towards achieving its goals. What would you say some of NAFO's most commonly used tactics are?
67.
P2 — Yesterday at 20:21
The three biggest tactics as I see them are, actively engaging as a community, centering, and ridicule. People can be swayed by seeing a lot of faces and names saying the same thing and assume that popularity means there's something to the content. So if you want to combat this, you can't let disinfo spreaders monopolize the discussions. Seeing people out there defending Ukraine is a huge deal in itself. Compare to the naivete and confusion that existed around Russia's actions in 2014 or during its invasion of Georgia, or what happened to Syrians with few willing to defend them in the info space. Or Myanmar. The other side want to center everything on themselves or some event that's 10,000 miles and years away from what's happening in Ukraine. So the next step is we get Ukrainians front and center in the discussion. This can mean getting people from Ukraine involved in and leading our activities. Or it can mean we push a visceral image of what's going on at a human level. We can't let the Russian side erase the suffering of the actual victim. And ridicule - the other side relies heavily on fakes, shifting context, shifting blame, outright lying with as many lies as possible and see what sticks. Engaging too seriously with low effort people is a recipe for getting bogged down in nonsense. So oftentimes we just call it nonsense and post memes. This takes away the pretense of power they put to their words. They'll show a fantasy image of a mighty unstoppable Russian soldier. We'll present the Moskva getting colonized by Spongebob's friends at the bottom of the sea.
68. [20:22]
or the classic "Kremlin bullshit"
69.
Researcher — Yesterday at 20:25
I see. Could you tell me a bit about your opinions on these tactics?
70.
P2 — Yesterday at 20:36
The more common ones I've mentioned are what I think 100% should be done and anyone can engage in them. So overall, I'm satisfied with NAFO's tactics. Especially after Twitter's code was published and we found out that replying to posts doesn't boost them enough that negative engagement farming would be a worthy practice by the other side. But personally, I like to engage in edgier tactics that are like a perverse parody of what bad actors do. I want them to be as angry at me as possible so that they'll waste all their energy on my goofy persona instead of directing it against Ukrainians. Invasion supporters get to sit comfortably in their houses while people die from the war they cheer for. So we might as well make them suffer a little whether that's telling them their obsession is why I donated to a Ukrainian military charity or showing them how much their side is dying on the battlefield. When people want you to suffer, just laugh a lot and they will be the ones to suffer.
71. [20:39]
One time somebody on discord was ranting that the Syrian White Helmets are evil, so I donated to the White Helmets on their behalf. The rage was surreal and I was laughing all the while.
72. [20:40]

Another tactic I see a little and would like to see more of is documenting and exposing dodgy ties and antics by pro-Russian propagandists. Everyone knows the dealings of a few like Scott Ritter but it can be fun to expose how, for instance a "far left influencer" has ties to the far right
73. [20:41]
there's a bit of a risk with media cycles that people simply get away with terrible deeds and lies because they're forgotten after the next 100 bad things.
74.
Researcher — Yesterday at 20:43
Alright, that makes sense, thank you! So one of the things you're doing is pretty much deliberately drawing fire on social media?
75.
P2 — Yesterday at 20:44
Yeah, deliberately making the worst people engage with me on the lowest level. An added benefit is that people will let their masks slip off if they get angry
76. [20:47]
a reason I glossed over a bit is that propagandists of authoritarian states aim to demoralize by presenting a reality where nothing is agreed on and nothing can be trusted. total cynicism. showing how evil they really are demonstrates that evil exists and thus that some things are worse than others
77. [20:48]
regardless of whataboutism, it's possible to be right and have a backbone
78.
Researcher — Yesterday at 20:48
Ohh, that's a really insightful perspective
79. [20:52]
So, we've covered the tactics in the abstract, now I'd like to talk about the practice for a bit. Could you tell me about any specific moments where you thought "we're doing a good job", if there are any? You've already given a really good day-one example just now, but if you've got any others I'd love to hear them
80.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:01
I might have to think about that for a bit, because there are so many cases that it all kind of blends together in my head. Terrible posts by propaganda pages and Russian diplomats that get swamped by meme posters. And the predictions. Oh yeah there was cowboy
81. [21:01]
https://twitter.com/cowboyml/status/1590021334347943936
Cowboy (@cowboyml)
@dainserk @C4TB0YBF You want to bet? I'll bet you $100 they don't lose Kherson
Twitter•08/11/2022 17:40
82. [21:02]
this keeps happening on twitter. predictions of massive Russian victory that get ruined and the poster is quote tweeted and laughed at
83.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:02
oh yeah that's a classic vatnik L
84. @P2
I might have to think about that for a bit, because there are so many cases that it all kind of blends together in my head. Terrible posts by propaganda pages and Russian diplomats that get swamped by meme posters. And the predictions. Oh yeah there was cowboy

Researcher — Yesterday at 21:02
That's alright, take your time. Do you need a break to mull that one over?
85.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:06
if I try to think of ones that top cowboy, maybe. there were also times I found people talking about denazifying Ukraine who were outright neo-Nazis...and Russian neo-Nazi pages saying that denazification is just a ploy
86. [21:06]
one guy was a member of the Asatru Folk Assembly, apparently. he had a big group photo in front of a blacksun and posted conspiracy theories along with hate speech
87.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:08
I see.
88. @P2
if I try to think of ones that top cowboy, maybe. there were also times I found people talking about denazifying Ukraine who were outright neo-Nazis...and Russian neo-Nazi pages saying that denazification is just a ploy

Researcher — Yesterday at 21:08
That is an interesting contradiction, to say the least
89.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:08
a little side project of mine is just screencapping hate speech on twitter so people will know how awful certain movements were
90.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:10
That sounds like a noble cause!
91. [21:11]
So, we've talked about some NAFO successes - Similarly, could you tell me about any moments where you thought something could have been handled better by the Fellas, if there are any?
92.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:14
Sometimes there is just plain idiocy that goes on. Although I'm of the opinion that there can be a lot of idiocy without really compromising a project. One that comes to mind is some of the twitter drama around Spaghetti Kozak, an American volunteer who is on twitter. Another NAFO user made a post about Ukrainian women being attractive and he was rightly made fun of for that, but it spiraled into him and Spaghetti Kozak going at it for it seemed like 100 posts, quote tweeting and tweeting about each other. Even I marveled at how stupid it looked
93.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:14
I see. Could you elabourate a bit on Spaghetti Kozak's drama?
94.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:16
one of the things it spiraled from was that SK had previously been temporarily banned for speaking highly of area bombing, when he seemed to be in an incredibly bad mood. so his horny-posting opponent brought the bombing of Dresden during WWII to have a go with him about it and they argued vehemently about whether a WWII era bombing was a war crime.
95. [21:17]

if I was a Russian propaganda mill, I would be trying my best to copy that and waste people's time
96.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:17
I see. Do you think that had a negative effect on NAFO's efforts?
97.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:17
Not really. It had a negative effect on those involved, but it was a handful of people out of thousands. They probably blocked each other and moved on
98. [21:18]
Like I said, some individuals can screw up big time and it will usually not matter in the grand scheme of things
99. [21:18]
Spaghetti Kozak just happens to be a very visible and popular poster
100.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:18
That makes sense. Do you think there have been instances where there were setbacks that mattered in that grand scheme?
101.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:19
Not that I can think of at the moment
102. [21:19]
It can be a problem if anyone does things that are disruptive of charity efforts by trolling them or being in it for their own enrichment, but NAFO seems resistant to even that
103.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:21
I see. Why do you think NAFO appears so resistant to setbacks?
104.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:24
Honestly, decentralized movements tend to be quantity over quality in nature so it's just hard to screw up the tactic badly enough to set it back. It ends up equaling out to being a noncontributor. It's not easy to look worse than the side that's committing genocide and has a convicted pedophile for a spokesman
105.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:28
That makes sense.
106. [21:28]
Were there any points, for good or ill, that you thought were 'learning moments' for the Fellas as a whole, or at least a significant subset of them?
107.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:31
For myself it was getting too deep into arguments and realizing that I was getting too invested which is when my real wit doesn't come out
108. [21:31]
If I have the mindset of playing, they will usually get into a mindset of being mad at me
109. [21:32]
I can't think of any big ones for the movement as a whole besides maybe the Vasquez drama, and I never paid attention to that guy
110.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:34

I see! So, we're almost there - I have two more questions on NAFO specifically, and a few more that are more about crossing t's and dotting i's. Are there any periods you can think of in NAFO's history when the Fellas changed their tactics, and if so, could you tell us something about these periods?
111.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:39
I'm not sure about specific changes in tactics, but I have seen it grow a lot larger and more organized via the work of St. Javelin with the original members. It started with a few guys on twitter but then it had a web store and charities, papers written about it and the founding members giving interviews. Yet at the basic level it's still people posting cartoon dogs at Russian diplomats
112. [21:41]
Mr. Ghostly, who I followed for a long time back has always advocated drawing out maximum rage from vatniks. and I've personally always been into that
113. [21:41]
https://twitter.com/mr_gh0stly/status/1640039939562786817
a ghostly fella (@mr_gh0stly)
Remember, a lot of your purpose here on Twitter is demoralize and distract the people who support things like this. Keep them away from obsessing about the civilians that got out of reach of Kremlin's executioners. Keep them focused on you, make them cry.
https://t.co/erOXI6MkP3
Likes
182

Twitter•26/03/2023 19:16
114.
Researcher — Yesterday at 21:48
That sounds interesting. Could you tell me a bit about how this increase in organization via St. Javelin happened?
115.
P2 — Yesterday at 21:59
I wouldn't be able to describe it in any organized fashion. To my knowledge it was just them reaching out to each other for a collaboration. So the collab isn't the movement but it's connected to notable people in the movement, serving the subculture for a common goal of Ukraine aid. The merchandising also gives NAFO a bit more of a physical presence outside of the internet, which is good
116.
Researcher — Yesterday at 22:05
I see, thank you. Some Fellas brought up NAFO feeling like a second job at times, or burning out as something that may be a risk from participating a lot. Do you recognize this at all?
117.
P2 — Yesterday at 22:13
I've noticed it in posts by others. In myself, I noticed when it was happening and backed off, since I'm very familiar with internet culture and how it works. When people get too emotionally (and time) invested, the burnout will set in and their performance will be high effort for low reward. They might say things that they shouldn't and pick up mentalities they wish they didn't. They might also overshare personal information. I haven't seen all of this (yet) from NAFO, but I warn people when I think they're getting too bogged down
118. [22:14]

My own approach is to have fun and not put too much effort into any specific people opposing me.
119.
P2 — Yesterday at 22:21
If I were to put my all into arguing with people, that itself might improve the morale of my enemy. They can't do much to a fly by meme dump that accuses them of coping and seething. My attitude represents my complete faith in Ukrainian victory
120.
Researcher — Yesterday at 22:36
I see! That's it for the big questions, thank you so much you've been invaluable! As for crossing the t's and dotting the i's - I'm not only relying on interviews for this thesis; I'm also sifting through a database of tweets about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, I'll need to filter this dataset to only contain tweets specific to NAFO - what keywords, phrases or hashtags would you suggest I use to filter the dataset for NAFO-related tweets?
121.
P2 — Yesterday at 22:42
That's a tough one. There are a few hashtags that NAFO often use though like #russiaislosing that could yield results if some stuff is picked out somehow
122. [22:42]
it would depend on if you aggregate all posts under a tag or have an extra layer of filtering
123. [22:43]
nafoexpansionisnonnegotiable, pedoputin, nafoarticle5 etc. I don't know any esoteric ones
124.
Researcher — Yesterday at 22:46
That sounds useful, thank you!
125. [22:47]
Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?
126.
P2 — Yesterday at 22:49
I think I've said everything I thought that was important to say. I might go a few hours and think I forgot something useful. I'll mention it if that happens
127.
Researcher — Yesterday at 22:54
That's okay, you're always welcome to message me if you think of anything. Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?
128.
P2 — Yesterday at 22:55
NizarElCommander from the nafo server if you haven't already
129. [22:55]
Nizar is an Arab Ukrainian and is really funny on twitter too
130. [22:56]
always replying to vatniks with that warhammer 40,000 art that was made out of equipment from dead Russian soldiers
131. [22:57]
or recently a photo of what vaguely looks like someone building bombs
132.
Researcher — Yesterday at 22:57
They definitely sound like a really good person to talk to then
133. [23:01]

I'll reach out to them and mention your name then ^^ So, for my last question to you - what's your favourite Fella that you've seen? I mean the profile pics, not the actual people haha ^^
134.
P2 — Yesterday at 23:05
It's kind of hard to pick, to be honest. The female style fellas tend to be more creative though. I might have to finally have one made since mine would be among the funniest
135.
Researcher — Yesterday at 23:05
Ohh, what would yours be?
136.
P2 — Yesterday at 23:07
I could style it after my twitter persona which is named after a 90s anime where teenage girls embark on a G rated adventure until a plot twist trolling at end of season. Magic Knight Rayearth. anime avatars are the most annoying posters on twitter of course. so I came up with Magic Knight Raytheon. it sounds like girls adventuring with a giant bag of money to buy American weapons
137. [23:07]
so the blueprint: take shiba give it gaudy outfit and sword put Raytheon logo in the background
138.
Researcher — Yesterday at 23:07
lmao nice
139. [23:08]
Well, that's it from me! Thank you so much for helping me out, it's been a lovely and very informative chat. If you've got any further questions or remarks, feel free to send me a message at any time
140. [23:08]
Oh - should I have any follow-up questions, is it okay if I contact you about them? I probably won't need to, but just in case
141.
P2 — Yesterday at 23:09
feel free to contact me about anything
142. [23:10]
it's been a fun little chat
143.
Researcher — Yesterday at 23:10
Thank you, and likewise! It's been really helpful

INTERVIEW III

00:00:09 Researcher

Alright, that is very good. Just so you're aware the recording software is now on.

00:00:10 P3

Ok.

00:00:15 Researcher

Again, I won't be sharing this anywhere, this is purely for transcription purposes later.

00:00:16 P3

All right.

00:00:17 Researcher

Wonderful. Thank you. So thank you very much for agreeing to this interview with me for my thesis on NAFO. It's greatly appreciated.

00:00:30 P3

[Muffled] science, isn't it?

00:00:32 Researcher

Pardon, could you repeat that?

00:00:34 P3

It's for the good of the advancement of science, isn't it?

00:00:38 Researcher

Oh, absolutely. I mean, if you could call what I'm doing science but *[laughter]* it's at least an attempt at it *[more laughter]*. Alright, so let me check. I had already gone through the introductory letter and the consent form with you. Wonderful.

Uhm, yeah, all right. So I'll just ask you the questions one by one. You're free to answer in as much detail as you'd like. Take your time. There's no rush. If you have any clarifying questions, feel free to ask them, of course, and you're free to withdraw your consent to participate in this interview and end the interview at any time.

00:01:25 P3

All right.

00:01:27 Researcher

Wonderful. So of my first question, it's a bit of a Gimme. How long would you say that you've considered yourself a fella?

00:01:37 P3

A bit more than half a year.

00:01:39 Researcher

Half a year, alright. And how did you get? How did you learn about NATO?

00:01:46 P3

Well, they appeared on Twitter. Is something I first saw in the background and didn't take that serious. I was on there mostly for following news, journalists and and others. But yeah, they got more noticeable. I realised, hey, these guys actually are doing something I very much agree with. I started digging deeper and decided actually, I'd like to join that gang.

00:02:21 Researcher

All right, that's already quite a good segue to my second question actually. So we have to talk about the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation, obviously. Can you in your own words tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are, in your view?

00:02:42 P3

Well, first of all, it's extremely diverse, it's not organised in any way, it's just people volunteering to, I would say step up and speak out against hate speech against disinformation, mostly in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. Uhm, what, I see fellas also stepping up whenever they feel something isn't right, so my impression is it's people who are just fed up with the way social media are abused for manipulating opinions for bullying people, for spreading false narratives, who then realise ‘I can actually do something’ and it's a lot easier and more comfortable to do so when you know you have a group of like-minded individuals about you.

00:03:47 Researcher

Alright, that sounds very clear. You mentioned that it was mostly situated in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but that fellows also, you've also seen fellas speak out when they saw something else that wasn't right. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

00:04:10 P3

I mean technically NAFO considers itself dedicated to supporting Ukraine, I guess, but since we're all normal people with normal lives and other interests, it's just unavoidable that people who identify as Fellas would also comment on, like you know, I mean the German context we have, uhm, populist parties far right, far left who are trying to shape public opinion. It could be targeted at, at immigrants. That's a big topic in Germany and you will often see fellas also stepping up when that is happening.

00:04:57 Researcher

All right. Interesting. Thank you. That is quite clear. So my thesis as was already established in the introductory letter, is mainly interested in NAFO's tactics, how they work towards achieving the goals that they've set for themselves. So what would you say are some of NAFO's most commonly used tactics?

00:05:28 P3

Well, I mean, the most noticeable one is definitely using memes. So it's one thing to argue back or voice your ideas in in text, but it will get more attention and probably also more sympathy if it's accompanied with a smart, funny meme that visually underlines the point you're trying to make. Part of it is to me supporting each other so we are not a lone voice entering a hornet's nest of pro-Russian accounts, but actually supporting each other multiple fellas. I mean I noticed when friends of mine, fellas I follow, are posting are replying something and then, if I see they are getting into heated arguments or getting overwhelmed by opposing views, then I will usually jump in and lend some support. To just make it visible and that's maybe not an explicit tactic, but implicitly important to make it visible to the majority of normal people out there who are not prone to extremist views, but also not writing a lot - that there is people standing up for what is, what feels right, for what feels just. And you usually get quite a bit of agreement if you do that. From bystanders.

00:07:23 Researcher

All right, so, to- I'm just going to try and paraphrase that to see if I understood you correctly. In your view, NAFO’s tactics are primarily using memes to draw more attention to the points that they are making in discussions or social media. It is to support each other on social media in order to give each other morale boosts so you can keep going and keep arguing, and it is to effectively keep the Russian invasion of Ukraine in public view and not let it just slip away in the next media sensation, do I understand you correctly?

00:08:22 P3

I didn't say the last one, but I would to some extent agree. I mean, I don't think there is coordinated naval action to raise the topic to the spotlight. Twitter, which is where we mostly operate, is pretty deceptive in the sense that as long as you keep discussing a topic, it will appear prominent to you. You don't notice- you don't necessarily notice how prominent it is for other users. So I think if somebody just uses Twitter to follow his favourite football team

and players, he will not see a lot of NAFO there. And I don't even think there is a way to enforce that.

00:09:06 Researcher

OK, I see so then I misunderstood your point on-

00:09:12 P3

My point was, once you are in a discussion like in the comment section of a of a tweet, it pays to make it visible to those who are just browsing through – that there is people who oppose these dangerous narratives.

00:09:39 Researcher

Ah, I see. OK, so it's not so much about keeping it in broader attention, but rather to not let Russia, uhm, be the only group that that's the that's the framework of the discussion.

00:09:59 P3

And that is definitely what changed. Like, before NAFO was around when I was following news on Twitter and also other media scrolling down the comments section, it was very often dominated by Russian views. And very few people actually dared speak up, even though any poll shows you it's a total minority. But they were putting a lot of effort into appearing dominant in the in the social media. And when you have a couple of users, all of them cute little dogs, countering that with funny remarks with funny memes, but with clear statements, it gives other users first of all a sign - OK, it's not a majority that is spreading this bullshit, and *[cough]* - no, now I lost the thread. I don't know what the end was? It gives visibility and people just feel OK, I'm not alone in not liking this Russian narrative.

00:11:15 Researcher

OK. I think you held on to that thread quite well there, that sounds very clear. You mentioned the funny dogs, the profile pictures, of course of NATO, are a very prominent part of the group, as is humour in general. How do you think NATO makes use of this humour - of memes? We already touched on this a little bit earlier, but I'm kind of curious if you have any opinions on like the use of humour specifically.

00:11:55 P3

It's- it's definitely a- a major part because honestly, I have almost never seen anything funny coming out of Russian sources. I guess their sense of humour is mostly haha look a few dead Ukrainians. So the humour gives a human face. It gives a positive vibe to what NAFO does and of course it's entertaining. I mean it's - I'm much rather hanging on social media, spreading something funny then something violent. So it also feels better to- to work this

way. But I think it it just gives a better impression to those seeing what we do. That, yeah, we are human beings, normal humans with a decent sense of humour.

00:12:55 Researcher

OK, So what if- If I understand you correctly, you're saying that the use of the humour to an extent helps make it make it easier for fellas to continue doing what they're doing because it's more fun to do something funny than something than to talk about something violent. But it also really helps humanise NAFO and- and the fellas, and not just make it some anonymous commenter on Twitter. Am I understanding you correctly?

00:13:32 P3

I think that's correct.

00:13:35 Researcher

Wonderful. All right. So we've now kind of established what in your perspective big tactics of NAFO are - providing a counter narrative to Russia, supporting each other, and making points supported by humour and memes. I'm curious, what are your opinions on these tactics?

00:14:06 P3

Oof, I guess I already hinted that I'm approving them by- by applying them. I mean, I wouldn't join if and- and- and- and use these tactics if I disapproved. So like I said, it's it's definitely fun, more motivating to work with these tactics of working in a group, working with humour, collecting memes, applying them in a smart way, than to just, argue with trolls, which is anyway something you probably shouldn't start doing.

00:14:46 Researcher

All right, so the tactics are very good to- they're very motivating to use if I understand you correctly.

00:14:55 P3

They are motivating and also they feel- they feel right, like I mean, if you're dealing with somebody who is either die Hard Pro Russian - private person, happens, watched too much Russian TV – or actually considers it his main job to spread Russian narratives, there is- there is not a lot of merit in trying to discuss the validity of their claims or trying to expose some of their narratives as false. We do that as we go along, but eventually it's, I mean- you heard the term pigeon chess.?

00:15:47 Researcher

Oh yeah, no matter what you, do pigeon struts over the board, shits on the pieces and pretend that it's won, right?

00:15:54 P3

Exactly. The experience you often have when you start arguing back, they will switch the topic every time you debunk that claim, and just trying to provoke you into getting angry. So the memes are a strategy to avoid getting sucked into that which eats up your time and actually ruins your mood.

00:16:18 Researcher

OK, so the memes, the tactic of using memes and humour is also there to avoid feeding the trolls effectively by denying them the opportunity to get into a discussion where they can spread misinformation and instead you just ridicule them, which is much more motivating too.

00:16:42 P3

Especially if you like, if you find the right entrance for ridiculing them, I mean you- you don't want to look like a troll yourself by pasting, posting some nasty meme which does not really pick up on what the troll was trying to achieve, but some people at NAFO are pretty adept at targeting the message with the right kind of meme and- actually you rarely get a message back or a discussion back if you do it right, they usually give up and move on to the next target.

00:17:23 Researcher

That's very interesting. Could you elaborate a bit on what doing it right means to you in this context?

00:17:34 P3

I don't want my meme to just look like I'm trying to insult him, even if obviously a lot of the memes are subtly insulting, like you are questioning the *[giggle]* the smartness or the integrity of- of- of the troll, but I mean, everybody does it in a different way. I usually try to combine some argument that does not, like, to try to discuss or argue back and you are wrong, but rather making it - I always think, OK, how is this going to read to other people? Not the troll, not me, because we don't- we don't really matter in this – how does it look to others who will be reading this and I'm trying to find an angle of exposing that this troll is trying to manipulate by- er, with- let's say, with bad intentions and trying to find something in between a factual counter-statement and questioning the authenticity of the one posting it.

00:19:03 Researcher

I see. So engaging the trolls on Twitter isn't as much about directly stopping the troll from doing what they're doing, but rather to show the audience that- a little bit that, while their statement is wrong, but also their credibility is non existent.

00:19:28 P3

Yeah, that- that, that sounds or feels like it's somewhat successful strategy. Actually, something that also sometimes happens and can lead to hilarious fun is - a couple of fellas keep talking in the comments of under a false comment, but just talking to each other, making fun of him.

00:19:55 Researcher

Oh, so instead of directly engaging the troll, they just talk among each other and effectively ridicule him by excluding him from the conversation on his own thread.

00:20:07 P3

It’s not a conscious technique, but it sometimes happens with hilarious results because yeah, some of the fellas are really smart and funny people.

00:20:16 Researcher

All right. Yeah, that sounds really interesting. So we've talked a little bit about the tactics in the abstract now, although we've also already touched on a couple of practical examples, but I'd like to talk about the practical side a bit more. Could you tell me if there were any specific moments where you thought, you know, we as NAFO, we're doing a good job here, uhm, if there are any? We've already touched on a few a bit, but…

00:20:51 P3

I mean how do you measure that? Of course, there is a subjective impression that Twitter has gotten significantly less toxic but I can't actually be sure if this is everyone's experience or if this is just the result of interacting with positive people, which might bring them more into my timeline. Sure, there have been some hilarious actions or campaigns. I mean, everybody knows the seminal NAFO events involving Ambassador Ulyanov.

00:21:35 Researcher

Oh, the one that set- that coined the ‘pronouncing nonsense’ phrase, right? Ah yes.

00:21:44 P3

The Russian embassies keep, instead of working on diplomacy, spreading false narratives non-stop, but if you go to their tweets, long ago they literally turned into exchange boards for memes, but from NAFO. So they are so overwhelmed by now that you actually just visit an embassy post if you want to see what what's new on the meme market.

00:22:19 Researcher

Oh, that's interesting. That's very good to know, actually - I might have to take a look at that then.

00:22:26 P3

[Laughter] And this is where people just drop a meme and move on, so those no longer feel like a threat. Of course, every time I find- I'm happy every time I'm seeing my, my little comments or standalone tweets being liked by non-NAFO people who just seem to agree with what I'm saying. Or they like my meme. I mean, also OK.

00:23:01 Omnicide

Alright. *[Giggle]* That sounds- that, that sounds good. That's very useful information. Thank you. So.

00:23:06 P3

And I see that a lot of the people I interact with - I mean, we're not big accounts, but 1000 followers is quite common among NAFO, and several are even a lot higher. So we do actually get some visibility and reach on the platform.

00:23:28 Researcher

That's interesting, all right. So we've talked a bit about the moments where you thought 'This went well'. Similarly, was there any moments where you thought that the fellas could have handled something better? And if you can remember any such moments, could you tell me a bit about them?

00:23:53 P3

The most recent one, which you're probably aware of, were several scammers being exposed who had apparently misused in their online fame for collecting donations and misappropriating some of the funds. Like these are legally concluded cases, but there were just too many of these suspicions and accusations flying around, and what I realised was that a lot of people weren't trying to deal with it in a calm and rational manner, but taking sides based on personal preference and starting infighting.

00:24:44 Researcher

All right.

00:24:46 P3

I didn't think was a good thing, but it's unavoidable seeing how large NAFO has grown and how many different people are in there.

00:24:59 Researcher

That makes sense. So the main problems that you've seen have mainly been internal to NAFO, if I understand you correctly.

00:25:08 P3

Yeah, I thought that was your question also. I mean there have been attempts to attack NAFO from the outside whether it is through fake NAFO fellas, then who then suddenly started posting Nazi shit. They usually get spotted and reported and taken down quite quickly. Still leaves a bad aftertaste. There have been, obviously, I'm sure you noticed attempts to discredit all of NAFO by finding some old posts from Kama who is considered the founder of NAFO. But overall, since it's so totally not organised, not hierarchical, I haven't seen any serious threat to NAFO as a whole by trying to smear individuals alright, that's not really how it works.

00:26:17 Researcher

No, that sounds about right. So we've talked about a couple of moments where things went well. We've talked about a couple of moments where things maybe could have gone better. Are you aware of any discussions that happened among fellas after any of these moments? And if there were, could you tell me a bit about these discussions?

00:26:43 P3

I-I mean anything I've seen, I I've seen in public threads or so, you could find it as well. I was not really following much to be honest. I just decided I'm not part of this discussion, and I also don't- don't really think it's helping to have this kind of discussion in public, but since we are not really organised, most of what we do is public. So in the end it's best to focus on what we are here for and ignore the drama.

00:27:25 Researcher

That makes sense. So all the any periods that you can think of and make those existence where the fellas changed their tactics, changed how they approached, how they did things and if you can think of any such times, could you tell me a bit about them?

00:27:43 P3

Yeah, there is one obvious example. In the early days, there was not a lot of fellas and they needed some way to notify each other when they are- when they needed to band together to support each other. That's the famous NAFO Article 5 hashtag.

00:28:04 P3

When I joined, it was still relatively popular. You could look for the hashtag to find fellas who need support, whether it is countering someone or also often to, to report abuse or hate

speech. Then for some time I realised it's getting less and less useful because it's abused- that the hashtag is abused by people who, probably not all of them were - I don't know, well meaning actors? But by now it's completely dropped because I think Twitter has started considering this as targeted harassment. So calling in Article 5 might easily result in action against your account, and that's definitely not what we want.

00:29:04 Researcher

I see. Interesting. So what's this hashtag replaced with anything or has this just been dropped?

00:29:12 P3

I guess for me it has just been dropped and it- it has outlived its usefulness because by now there is quite a large number of fellas following each other, so these instances usually pop up in your timeline quite quickly without any hashtags.

00:29:32 Researcher

Ah, so because the fellas are now very networked on Twitter, you don't really need a hashtag anymore.

00:29:39 P3

Yeah. And also because there is a lot more fellas now, you don't really need to call them. There will always be one in the in the area strolling around.

00:29:48 Researcher

Ah, I see. We hit critical dog mass.

00:29:52 P3

Yeah.

00:29:54 Researcher

All right. That's actually really useful. I didn't know that Article 5 had become obsolete here. That is very good to know.

00:30:03 P3

Thank you. Don't use it. You report it, especially since today they- or last night they rephrased their I don't know what it was called, but- their rules, their conduct rules, Twitter has made targeted harassment even more prominent in the list of things they are not tolerating.

00:30:29 Researcher

I see. That's good to know. All right, so this is the last major question about NAFO itself that I have after that it's mainly about some auxiliary stuff. So we're almost through. Um, so in the other interviews that I've conducted so far, several fellas have brought up NAFO feeling like a second job sometimes, or burning out as something that may be a risk that you could get from participating in NAFO's activities or - do you recognise that at all?

00:31:13 P3

It's not the case with me, no. I never had that. Honestly, if I don't feel like bonking. I grab a book and take a break from it. For most of the part I would say I don't have any issues with being- feeling stressed or feeling negative. Again, I- I mentioned earlier, how I see memes, humour, interaction among fellas helping me at least to maintain a positive attitude.

00:31:50 Researcher

I see. All right, thank you. That is very good to know. All right. So then that's it for the um, questions about NAFO itself, just a few more, uhm, auxiliary points. So for my thesis, I'm not exclusively relying on interviews. I've also got a data set of tweets about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, I will need to filter this data set to only contain NAFO related tweets because it's not a data set specific about NAFO, it's about the invasion in general. So do you know of any keywords or phrases or hashtags that I could use to filter the data set for NAFO related tweets?

00:32:46 P3

I don't think you will stand a chance with that. There is no uniform hashtag or keywords being used. I almost never use hashtags, only in those rare instances when we're trying to play some shenanigans trying to make something funny trending but, - if you – how good of a programmer are you?

00:33:17 Researcher

I hobby in C#, but I'm entirely self-taught so.

00:33:22 P3

Do you have access to Twitter API as a researcher?

00:33:27 Researcher

Not currently, and if I'm not mistaken, getting access to that as of recently has become very expensive.

00:33:34 P3

Yeah. Well, no, they- they give you free access if it's academic research and you can actually uhm show confirmation of the academic background. Then it's still for free, so you might have a chance. I don't know how fast they are in responding.

00:33:50 Researcher

Oh, that's interesting. Might have to look into that then.

00:33:53 P3

Because if you do, it might actually help to bring down the dataset size a lot, if you can collect data on which accounts appear to be NAFO.

00:34:12 P3

You could do that by trying to download all the handles of people following the official NAFO account, or even Kama for that matter.

00:34:27 Researcher

That's a very good idea, actually. I might look into doing that.

00:34:33 P3

Because I think from the content of the tweet, nah, there's not really a chance. So many different people and styles. Sure you will find a lot of us who use the NAFO hashtag extensively, but you would miss out on 80% of us who never use it.

00:34:55 Researcher

That makes sense. That's very good to know. All right, I'll definitely look into that then. Thank you. Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?

00:35:18 P3

I think - I mean, you are aware despite us being not really organised there are some ways we, we are connected. That's how you found me. So what I think is fair to say around that is NAFO to some extent is feeling, or what people are considering themselves as, as being part of a community, with some- some shared values like, we probably all really appreciate living in freedom and in a democratic society. We probably all would call ourselves tolerant. Which leads to people from actually quite different political views- like, I know on German NAFO we have pretty much everything from very left wing to very conservative people, anything from teenagers to pensioners, and I would say 50/50 male female split, so it's quite representative and within that group, those who are communicating- there is almost no hassle,

almost no arguments, people feel very much united and that is one factor that protects you from this burnout that you described.

00:37:00 Researcher

So the sense of community is-

00:37:02 P3

Sense of community, there are some informal meetings in the real life for some of us. Definitely nothing you would call organised, but somebody posting ‘I want to have some beers at this Ukrainian restaurant. Is anyone gonna join?’ And all of a sudden you have 10 people meeting for dinner?

00:37:26 Researcher

Oh, that's really cool. So it's very spontaneous self organisation almost.?

00:37:36 P3

Yeah. Well, I mean, sometimes it's also around rallies like demonstrations when there was pro-Ukrainian rallies in the streets that some of us meet each other.

00:37:48 Researcher

All right.

00:37:50 P3

Yeah, it has a little bit of, what do you call it, Halo into, into the real life and I find the people who joined me for the very most part to be really decent people. Like, this is people who spend their time to fight hate speech and, and lies so that they have a very solid common base, and once you have that, it's very easy to respect that somebody has different views on something else.

00:38:23 Researcher

All right, that makes sense. So it's kind of the foundational shared values that cause people to lean towards becoming a NAFO fella that also make it easier to, uhm, get through the door with each other and not falling prone to infighting.

00:38:44 P3

Yeah. All right. That's good to know. Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?

00:39:00 P3

Not right now, I may ask a few people I know. But let me see, I can't- I can't- I can't deliver you someone on the silver plate without asking them.

00:39:12 Researcher

No, that's- that's perfectly reasonable. No worries. If you do feel like asking around, that would be appreciated, but no worries if no one's interested.

00:39:26 Researcher

All right, I'm- I'm already at last question, not counting your own profile picture. What's your- what's your favourite fella that you've seen?

00:39:37 P3

In terms of profile pictures, impossible to answer. They are all unique and every time I see a new one and click into their profile the- the fella, the background- it's insane how much creativity is, is out there right? I couldn't name one honestly.

00:39:58 Researcher

That's thoroughly fair. That- that almost sounds, uh, kind of very- a very metaphorical representation of NAFO's strength through very diverse people coming together on shared moral values that we just talked about, actually. Well, that is in terms of interview questions that I've had. From my end I am finished here. Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. If you've got any follow up questions or anything else that you'd like to mention at a later date, you're free to contact me at any time.

00:40:42 P3

OK.

00:40:49 Researcher

Would it be alright if I had any follow up questions myself, if I reach out to you?

00:40:50 P3

Yeah, sure. I mean, we're in touch already.

00:40:54 Researcher

I figured, but it's always polite to ask. All right, then I shall conclude this interview. I will stop the recording.

INTERVIEW IV

1.

P4 — 21/02/2023 01:32

Hey, if you're interviewing, I'm happy to blather for you.
2.

Researcher — 21/02/2023 01:34

Hey, thank you! I'm still in the research design phase at the moment, I'll probably hit you up around March-April?
3.

P4 — 21/02/2023 01:35

I don't see myself jumping ship by then. I ride this train till it derails.
4.

Researcher — 21/02/2023 01:35

Right into the Kremlin, if we've got anything to say about it
5.

P4 — 21/02/2023 01:37

Choo choo, motherfucker! (Dammit, I had a NAFO meme for that around here somehwere)
6.

Researcher — 21/02/2023 01:39

Lol I'm sure it was a banger
7. [01:40]
But yeah, it's close to 2am here and I've got work tomorrow, so I'm knocking off for the night. Thanks again, I'll be in touch ^^
8.

P4 — 21/02/2023 01:42

Later!

5 April 2023

9.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:12

Hey there! I'm currently gearing up to start the interviews, are you still interested?
10.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:13

Sure.
11.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:17

Awesome, thank you! So, I would need to record the interview so I can transcribe it, but your participation can be completely anonymous if you'd prefer. I'm aiming to take about half an hour with the interviews, but that also depends on how long you're willing to talk and how much you have to share. I have an intro letter that briefly explains the project, and a consent form that I would need you to sign - it outlines the specifics of your participation and your rights in it. Sound fair?
12.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:18

Ehhhh... I would prefer a text format, and don't want to give my real name.
13.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:22

That's understandable, you don't need to share your real name - we can work with your Discord handle. As for text format, I think we can make that work.
14.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:24

That would be great, if you don't mind. I'm sorry, I'm not the most cautious fella in the world (lol, I've been lectured repeatedly for posting a picture of myself and not making a secret of my general location), but that's a bridge too far. Not that I don't trust you, and I'm not quite arrogant enough to think anybody's going to come after a small time fella, buuuuut...
15.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:26

No worries, I fully understand - gotta be careful with the vatniks around. I can show you a timestamped photo of my student ID card, if that puts you at ease?
16.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:26

Oh, I believe you. That part's cool. Just a small line of caution that I'm not willing to cross.
17.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:27

Oh entirely fair, no problem

18. [20:28]
Let me get you the introductory letter and consent form, just a minute
19. [20:32]
Here you go! That should cover our basics. If you could please read through these documents, we can get started. You're free to answer at your own pace, no rush.
Consent_Letter.docx
14.25 KB
NAFO_Research_Project_-_Introductory_Letter.pdf
59.85 KB
20.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:37

So I can just sign this with my username, right?
21.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:37

Yep, that should be good!
22. [20:39]
Since this is discussing something that takes place primarily online, exclusive use of online identifiers should be enough, I would say. And to be clear, this is exclusively to make sure the interviews are conducted ethically - these forms won't be published anywhere and will be stored safely.
23.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:40

Consent_Letter-signed.docx
3.28 KB
24.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:42

Awesome, thank you! Just to check, at bullet point 6, it should be "The researcher *may not* identify my by name (...)", I presume?
25.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:43

Oh, I skimmed it and missed that. Want me to reword it and resend?
26.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:43

That's okay, I should have made that clearer in the letter itself - but yes, if you could underline your preferred option, that'd be great ^^
27.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:45

Consent_Letter-signed.docx
3.29 KB
28. [20:46]
Well, I don't mind if you identify me by my username, so I'm not sure how that works for the purposes of this document.
29.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:46

Ah, then it'd be a 'may' - this is primarily about attributing quotes, so for example, "I am an example quote" -Anonymous Interviewee vs. "I am also an example quote" -P4
30.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:49

hahaha, I'm such a problem child. Here, let me redo it again.
31.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:49

Oh don't worry, this is the first time I'm doing interviews for research, so there's bound to be a lot of beginner's hitches haha
32.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:50

Consent_Letter-signed.docx
3.30 KB
33. [20:50]
THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM amirite?!
34.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:50

Yee haw! We're getting there
35.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:52

36.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:55

Okay, so I'll give you the questions one-by-one, and you can answer them in as much detail as you'd like
37.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:55

Go for it.
38.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:56

Righto! So, the first one's a doozie - How long would you say you have considered yourself a Fella?
39.

P4 — 05/04/2023 20:58

Not so much a doozie, I can give you an exact date. September 11, 2022. That's the day I got my PFP. I remember this because it's also the anniversary of my mom's death, and she would have found the entire concept absolutely hilarious.
40.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:00

Awh, I'm sorry about your loss, but that's very touching. Was the PFP inspired by your mother at all?
41.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:03

Oh, she died in 2013, it's been a while. No, I'd done my donation and fella request about a week before, and that really hadn't crossed my mind. The significance of the date the forger finished it didn't occur to me until later. I have a side gig hobby farm growing pumpkins to sell at farmer's markets, that was the sole inspiration for the design.
42.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:03

Ahh, gotcha - sounds like a fun hobby! Steering back to the topic at hand, though - We're here to talk about the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation. Could you, in your own words, tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are?
43.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:09

I've had to explain NAFO to friends before, and I can never quite get the idea across. It's partially a joke, and mostly not, a leaderless mob of people with a sense of humor who want to help Ukraine in various ways. Some concentrate on fundraising (although all have to make a donation or purchase to support Ukrainian causes to get in, initially), some concentrate on countering Russian propaganda and limiting the damage they can do in online social media forums. It's also grown into a large community, outside of our "job" of supporting Ukraine.
44.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:14

Excellent, thank you. Could you perhaps elabourate a bit on "It's partially a joke, and mostly not?" I like that phrasing, would love to pick your brain about it a bit
45.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:23

Well, one of the ways we limit Russian propaganda's influence is with amusing memes. You've got to have a bit of a sense of humor to use that approach effectively. It doesn't sound like it would work, but it does, on several levels. I think someone who is on the fence about what they believe is going to subconsciously categorize a message delivered in a way they found amusing as something positive. Images catch attention, the humor holds it, the message of the meme takes advantage of that gained attention to drive home the point. You can't just scroll past a funny image, your brain already registered it as you passed it, much faster than a wall of text. And, of course, people who have the sense of humor to come up with this stuff, and weaponize it, in the first place, are going to joke around with each other, too. NAFO has a whole slew of in jokes and running gags that help create and bind the community, and the community keeps people involved and engaged when they start to get burned out.
46. [21:26]
I feel like I should point out that one of our strongest advantages is that many, if not most, of the Russian propagandists are paid bad actors. They're not in it for community, or for fun, or even because they care all that much. You can't force people who aren't engaged like that to BE FUNNY. And they have no community, you can't force that, either.
47.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:28

That's a really interesting perspective, thank you! I think you're really touching onto something important here
48. [21:28]
You've already begun touching on my next question, but I’m curious about NAFO's tactics - how NAFO works towards achieving its goals. What would you say some of NAFO’s most commonly used tactics are?
49.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:35

Previous answer: wash, rinse, repeat. Although I don't think most fellas think of any of it in those terms. But, in simpler terms, bombarding propaganda with memes that either distract from the message, point out the fallacies of that message, offer a different perspective, or just mock the entire concept of that message and the person who posted it, calling that person's entire ideology into question... that's what we're famous for. But there are a lot of fellas who "go dark," don't really advertise themselves so much, but spend a lot of time finding TOS violations committed by

Russian propagandists and getting those accounts suspended. Many do both, but the ones flying under the radar, you'll never even know they were there. That's hard to defend against. And you've got your people who tweet out ideas, articles, sources, and educational tidbits that can help the others root out and expose the lies they're trying to bonk. And a large community of creative types who pump out memes and videos for everybody to share, of course. Everyone has a bit of a niche, I think. (edited)
50.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:39

So it's a case of strength in diversity then, if I understand you correctly?
51.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:43

I think that's a good way to put it. I think that's one of the things that really threw off, and continues to throw off, the Russian propaganda machine. We have people from all over the world, with all kinds of different perspectives and talents, voluntarily and enthusiastically sharing ideas and making those diverse talents and perspectives work together and compliment each other. I honestly don't think that kind of voluntary cooperation between such a diverse population could ever be forced. You can't pay people to do that.
52. [21:45]
Of course, if anybody ever wanted to pay me for this, uh... y'know, they could pony up and I'd totally take the money. But let's face it, it would never work as a serious operation. (edited)
53. [21:46]
Or organized operation. I think if we tried to form a hierarchy, the game would be over. Politics are killer.
54.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:48

That makes sense! Just for clarity, could you explain what you mean with 'bonk' in the phrase "(...) expose the lies they're trying to bonk"? I've seen it used before and I think I understand what it means, but I want to make sure I'm not misinterpreting it
55.

P4 — 05/04/2023 21:51

It's just NAFO's funny way of saying "attack" or "confront." It's one of our universal in-jokes. I honestly have no idea where it originated, probably a meme. An image of a baseball bat is often invoked there, I imagine having to do with whatever meme might have inspired the term. Some people actually use a baseball bat as one of NAFO's little symbols.
56.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:54

Ahh, I understand, thank you!
57. [21:54]
Could you tell me a bit about your opinions on these tactics?
58.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:04

Well, they work. I mean, I was online, arguing one-on-one with Russians from day one, and while I won a lot of those arguments just by fact checking, I doubt I was having a large impact. A lot of people were doing what I was doing, I saw it all the time, but how many were we actually reaching? And then I started seeing these people with dog PFPs jumping in to help, and adding memes into the mix, and it would not only shut up the people I was debating, it would take over the entire thread until the propagandists gave up and left. It was obvious from the start that it worked better than the one-on-one approach. So, on a serious level, NAFO's assorted techniques are unquestionably effective, probably more than anything anyone's ever come up with before. On a personal level... I have fun with it sometimes, but it's almost like a second job sometimes, too; a responsibility. And I get burned out, all of us do sometimes I think. And the "fun" factor helps keep people going, so on that level, even that is an important tactic, albeit an unintentional one.
59.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:07

That's really insightful, thank you so much!
60.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:09

No problem!
61.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:09

On the 'second job and burnout' point - is that something that is internally talked about in NAFO circles?
62.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:11

The burnout thing comes up sometimes. "Take a break, take care of yourself, don't feel bad about it, and you'll be welcome back when you're ready" is a common bit of advice. I joke about it being my second job, because I feel an obligation to contribute at least a little bit even when I don't feel like it. That one, I think might be a "me" thing.
63.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:13

I see. Are you aware of any channels, group chats, or other efforts or initiatives dedicated specifically to helping folks not get too ground down by the work, by any chance?
64.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:14

People use the NAFO discord to talk about it sometimes. I don't think there's any kind of organized initiative.
65.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:14

Good to know, thank you.
66. [22:15]
So, we've covered the tactics in the abstract, now I'd like to talk about the practice for a bit. Could you tell me about any specific moments where you thought "we're doing a good job", if there are any? You've already given a really good day-one example just now, but if you've got any others I'd love to hear them
67.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:24

We drove Wagner Group's recruitment initiatives right off of Twitter. They gave up and locked down their Twitter account because we just wouldn't let them get a word in edgewise. I think they even wound up closing the account altogether, although I never checked on that myself. Several Russian embassy accounts have had to lock down their comment sections because we were turning the intended message of their tweets upside down (Canada recently did this). The "you pronounced this nonsense, not me" guy closed his account, too. Lol, I can't even remember who that was, just his unintentionally now-famous quote. And... oh god, I can't even remember who this guy was, either... a Brit, and some guests with neonazi connections... kept trying to organize a "peace" rally that was really a pro-Russian event, and we got it cancelled at multiple venues by reserving all of the seats, and contacting the venues to let them know what the event was really about.
68. [22:25]
Sorry, I know you'd need to know who I'm talking about, but I honestly can't remember the names for the life of me.
69.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:26

That's completely okay, no problem. That's some impressive work though!
70. [22:26]
(I thiiink it was Mikhail Ulyanov that pronounced nonsense by the way, he's come up in a fair bit of the articles I've read on NAFO)

71.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:27

Sounds about right.
72.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:27

Do you happen to remember the twitter handle for Wagner by any chance? It'd be good to look that up, but no worries if not
73.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:28

No. That happened a while ago.
74. [22:29]
I think everybody in the whole damn gang was dogpiling Wagner. They're like the boogieman, everybody hates them. Hell, even Russia seems to barely tolerate them.
75.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:31

That makes sense, no problem. So, if I understand you correctly, NAFO's successes have been in hampering recruitment initiatives for Russian-contracted PMCs, preventing pro-Russian demonstrations or events from being hosted, and forcing Russian government accounts on Twitter to shut down because their framing of the invasion kept being challenged by NAFO?
76. [22:31]
And the fundraising efforts, of course
77.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:35

The fundraising is a huge one. I don't know how much we've raised, but it's got to be millions. I guess the bonking victories occurred to me first, because that's primarily what I concentrate on. But yeah, we've been responsible for some major propaganda and recruitment accounts shutting down, and that's no small accomplishment.
78.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:39

Absolutely, that sounds like quite a series of feats! Would you reckon that has had effects beyond just Twitter?
79. [22:40]
(I know it's hard to estimate, but a gut feeling is perfectly fine)
80.

P4 — 05/04/2023 22:46

I think so. We've been recognized by Zelensky himself, covered by major international publications, world leaders have used fella PFPs on Twitter (most temporarily, but still)... we wouldn't be getting all of this attention if we were just beating our heads on a brick wall. We're limiting their reach, and it poisons their message well beyond social media.
81. [22:48]
I think we also help keep public attention on Ukraine when most world events tend to fade from people's minds when the next big story comes along.
82.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:00

That makes sense, freezing the public's attention in an age of rapid-fire news is very impressive.
83.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:02

Oh, I know a lot of Americans have moved on. We're notoriously ethnocentric, most people are just concentrating on our own drama and don't think much about Europe. But I think, overall, a LOT of people who would ordinarily have wandered off have stayed engaged because there's this huge group of people who just won't let it go.
84.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:03

I see, thank you. So, we've talked about some NAFO successes - Similarly, could you tell me about any moments where you thought something could have been handled better by the Fellas, if there are any?
85.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:09

Mmm... well, we have drama. No denying that. And the way it's handled is kind of funny. Because there's no leadership, some people cling to it, go on and on about it, basically make conflicts everybody's business. And then some people never even catch wind of it. And when one of the OGs, or a favorite fundraiser is involved, a lot of people choose sides and just won't let it go, and that's pretty detrimental to the overall "mission." In a way, it's like some people just have to lionize SOMEONE, can't exist in a leaderless group without hanging onto someone as a leadership figure, and that's what causes things to blow up when someone or something winds up being flawed or outright fake. But what do you do about that? When you have this many people in the group, you're going to have people who don't see eye to eye on this, or on anything for that matter. None of this drama, or the people who perpetuate it, have slowed us down yet, and I don't think anything like that ever could. But I can't say these incidents are always handled well, either.
86.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:13

I see - so the problems that are there are mainly internal?
87.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:22

I think so. I can't think of anything anybody has actually tried to do TO us that caused much of a hiccup. Nothing but our internal drama, and maybe the Kama thing (which in the end, was intentionally dredged up but ultimately useless temporary drama) has made us slow down.
88.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:24

Gotcha, thank you. Can you think of any times when a tactic NAFO folks employed backfired? For example, trying something against Russian propaganda on Twitter that *really* didn't work?
89.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:28

Hm. Not on a large scale. I mean, I've seen individual fellas post unsavory memes that didn't reflect well on them, say things that got twisted against them/us, post things that went too far and got them banned... but on a large scale, not really, nothing's coming to mind. Just small individual mistakes, which are inevitable when you have tens of thousands of people.
90.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:29

That makes sense. Were there any points, for good or ill, that you thought were 'learning moments' for the Fellas as a whole, or at least a significant subset of them?
91.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:35

I think the whole thing with Kama's old antisemitic tweets did drive home the point to some who were viewing the OGs as leaders, how important it is that we have none. But as a whole... since everybody's operating on a different level, in their own individual way, on their own "projects," so to speak... well, no, I take that back. Relatively early on, a couple of popular favorite charities were exposed as scams. The electric bike one... can't remember what that so-called charity was called, sorry, my brain is getting old... I think that taught the group as a whole to be much more careful about verifying small fundraisers and charities, or to just stick to the big ones that've been proven. That was a widespread learning experience.
92.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:36

Aha, that sounds very interesting. So on the one hand, there were learning moments that reinforced the idea of grassroots operation (not having leaders), and on the other hand, moments that cautioned against it (only sticking to vetted charities)?
93.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:37

Nothing in life is simple, right? Not so much to avoid grassroots charities, but to not be afraid to ask for proof that aid is going where it's supposed to be going.
94.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:39

I see, that makes sense. Would you say this has influenced NAFO organisational structure?
95.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:39

If you come across any sort of organizational structure, I'd love to hear about it.
96. [23:40]
Well, I guess there is the "nafo official" site with the list of safe charities. I'm not sure I'd call that organizational structure, though.
97.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:41

That's fair, it seems very decentralized beyond maybe the merch store. Even the charity list seems more like a guideline for people that want to donate.
98.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:43

That's basically it. People go there to get a fella forged, maybe buy some merch, but they're not in charge of anything. I'm honestly not thrilled with the "official" designation. It suggests some sort of authority. But I guess it's harmless.
99.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:45

I see - you're not a fan of the idea of authority in NAFO?
100.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:48

Not at all. I think our strength is in our leaderless structure and autonomy. Like the Kama thing... you can't decapitate a beast with no head. I think it's crucial that nobody be perceived as a "head." Plus, our very ability to work as individuals, concentrate on

what each of us prefers, use individual creativity unhampered, that's one of our greatest advantages. But really, considering the way we formed and grew, anybody who tried to take that title would be rejected by the majority. Most fellas see it the same way. We have no leader, and that's how it has to be.
101.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:49

Thank you, that makes sense. Hypothetically, do you think NAFO *could* function as a more centralized, hierarchical organisation?
102.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:53

No. Not even a little bit. Politics, ambition, bureaucracy, micromanagement, loss of autonomy... all inevitable when centralized hierarchy is introduced. The lack of those things is literally what makes us effective. They're everything. Add those things in, and we're just yet another one of the unsuccessful government attempts to control narratives.
103.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:54

That makes sense. Do you think the fact that NAFO mainly works on social media could play a role in that?
104.

P4 — 05/04/2023 23:55

Probably. Other than protests and stuff like that, I'm not even sure where else this COULD work. It's a pretty specific skill set.
105. [23:57]
Not that grassroots movements in meatspace don't work, but NAFO's MO is pretty targeted to social media.
106.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:59

Yeah, that sounds reasonable. So, we're almost done - one more question about NAFO specifically, and then a few that are more secondary Are there any periods you can think of in NAFO’s history when the Fellas changed their tactics, and if so, could you tell us something about these periods?

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107.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:03

I think, when Elon Musk bought Twitter, there was some fear that open bonking, the meme stuff, would lead to mass bans or suspensions. At that point, a lot of people switched to quieter means, fundraising and TOS reporting. When it became evident that those fears weren't going to come to pass, the bonking started back up again, but that change in tactics proved to actually be fairly effective, and some fellas switched to entirely mass reporting of hatemongering accounts. So there's more of a two pronged approach to the misinformation combat now, whereas reporting happened before, but I don't think was as common as memeing.
108.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:05

Ohhh, that's incredibly interesting! That sounds like it was a very organic, grassroots change, and not a deliberated or planned one, or am I misreading?
109.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:10

No, it was very organic. Everything around here is. People felt driven underground, and some realized it was worth staying there.
110.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:11

That makes sense, thank you! Alright, so that's the meat of the interview done, thank you so much it's been invaluable! Just need to cross some t's and dot some i's and we're done! I'm not only relying on interviews for this thesis; I'm also sifting through a database of tweets about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, I'll need to filter this dataset to only contain tweets specific to NAFO - what keywords, phrases or hashtags would you suggest I use to filter the dataset for NAFO-related tweets?
111.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:16

Oo, that's a tough one. Ukraine and Russia are such common topics of conversation on Twitter that using them would be useless. And a lot of NAFO's original hashtags aren't used much if at all anymore. Obviously, NAFO would be a good keyword, but the topics discussed/memed change almost daily to keep up with Russia's ever-changing narrative. Fella, NAFO, Shiba, disinformation, Muscovy , bonk...
112.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:17

That sounds like a good start, thank you and the dataset runs all of 2022, so older hashtags should also be really useful
113.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:18

Oh, well #NAFOArticle5, #NAFOfellas, #NAFO, #PutinPoopedHisPants, #PutinIsSick... there were others that NAFO intentionally started, but I can't think of them right now.
114.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:19

Thank you, that should already be a good start - if you remember any others, please let me know Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?
115.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:20

Nothing really comes to mind.
116.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:24

Not a problem, you've already been more than helpful! Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?
117.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:27

Again, nobody comes immediately to mind.
118.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:28

Not a problem, thank you ^^ So, for my last question to you - what's your favourite Fella that you've seen that's not your own pfp? ^^
119.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:43

https://twitter.com/kevro181
120. [00:44]
If you just mean their PFP, this one cracks me up.
121.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:45

Oh that is iconic hahaha
122. [00:45]
Based on RHPS if I'm not mistaken, good pick!
123. [00:45]

Well, that's it from me! Thank you so much for helping me out, it's been a lovely and very informative chat. If you've got any further questions or remarks, feel free to send me a message at any time
124.

P4 — Yesterday at 00:54

Yep. RHPS was like my thing when I was younger. My friend and I used to break out into The Time Warp on a regular basis.
125. [00:54]
No problem. I'll give you a heads up if I think of any useful hashtags.
126.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:55

Awesome, thank you ^^
127. [00:55]
Would you mind if I sent you a message if any follow-up questions came to mind? They probably won't, but just in case
128.

P4 — Yesterday at 01:10

Sure.
129.

Researcher — Yesterday at 01:11

Sweet, thanks. Have a great day
130.

P4 — Yesterday at 01:11

YOu too

INTERVIEW V

Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:11

Hi! It's getting fairly late where I'm at - is it alright if I send you my credentials tomorrow and we figure out a time where answering a few questions would work for you?
1.

P5 — 04/04/2023 21:46

Yes, at your leisure. And again, forgive me for being careful. It's a thing we have to deal with in the open channels. It would be really great if you made a small donation somewhere and got verified. That helps.
2.

Researcher — 04/04/2023 21:48

That's fair, not a bad idea actually - finally have a bit of financial breathing room now that I've got something better paid than bartending
3. [21:48]
And again, no worries, if anything I appreciate the caution. Not military myself, but I used to be a bit of an activist, so the importance of opsec has been pretty firmly imprinted on my brainpan :')
4. @Researcher
That's fair, not a bad idea actually - finally have a bit of financial breathing room now that I've got something better paid than bartending

P5 — 04/04/2023 22:03

Mate I have dropped a few hundred dollars since I got my fella. If times are tight tell the forger to speak to me. I got receipts coming out of my arse.
5.

Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:03

That's some dedication, damn, good on ya
6. [22:04]
And no worries, I've landed a pretty sweet parttime office job a little under a year ago, I can definitely afford it! Appreciate the offer though
7.

P5 — 04/04/2023 22:04

8.

Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:05

I'll hit you up with the details tomorrow then, reckon my donation to the Renegade Relief Foundation should've gotten me verified by then too
9. [22:06]
Thanks again, I really appreciate it
10.

P5 — 04/04/2023 22:06

NP. I also donated to RRF. Good people.
11.

Researcher — 04/04/2023 22:11

Seemed like it from what I read about 'em

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12.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 20:35

Heya! I'm currently setting up the interviews. Would you mind planning a voice call with me (which would be recorded, but exclusively for transcription purposes, and will be stored safely), or do you prefer answering questions via chat?
13.

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:30

I would love to do voice but my grandson has purloined the only working headset I had left for gaming purposes. That's his thing. I can't own anything any more. I'm dreading when he is able to drive. So if you want voice then give me a while to get something set up for skype (though I do obviously have a phone, I forget about that). Otherwise just fire over questions and I'll answer and clarify if needed.
14.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:31

Text should be fine - most other interviewees opted for that too, so it should lead to more comparable answers. And oh dear, good luck with the grandkid :')
15. [21:33]
Would you prefer to do this via text right now, or would you prefer planning something in later this week?
16. @Researcher
Would you prefer to do this via text right now, or would you prefer planning something in later this week?

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:35

I'm flexible. I would prefer it to be about an hour later if possible. I'm on UK time so it's 8:30 for me now. Day will be winding down in an hour or so.
17.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:35

Alright, an hour later should be doable - I'm Dutch time, so 9:30 here. Would you like today or another day?
18. @Researcher
Alright, an hour later should be doable - I'm Dutch time, so 9:30 here. Would you like today or another day?

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:37

Whatever works for you. You can ping me on +44 7753 509178
19.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:38

Alright, I'll reach out in about an hour to start the interview proper would you prefer doing this via Skype then?
20.

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:39

Again, I'm easy. But it's just text so here works the same for me.
21.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:39

Awesome, let's do it here then - bit easier to keep all the interviews in one place, I think.
22.

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:39

23.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:40

So, I have an intro letter that briefly explains the project, and a consent form that I would need you to sign - it outlines the specifics of your participation and your rights in it. Shall I send you those now so you can mull them over a bit, or would you rather we do that when we start the interview?
24. @Researcher
So, I have an intro letter that briefly explains the project, and a consent form that I would need you to sign - it outlines the specifics of your participation and your rights in it. Shall I send you those now so you can mull them over a bit, or would you rather we do that when we start the interview?

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:40

send it now
25.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:42

No problem! The consent letter requires a name and signature, but we can use your Discord handle if you prefer. There's also an option at bullet point 6 for whether or not you would like to participate anonymously. That means that I would attribute quotes from you to either "Anonymous" or "Dave "P5"", for example - please make sure to underline either 'may' or 'may not' to indicate your preference
Consent_Letter.docx
14.20 KB
NAFO_Research_Project_-_Introductory_Letter.pdf
59.85 KB
26.

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:49

hope this format opens for you, if not I'll sort it.
Consent_Letter_signed.odt
20.32 KB
27.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:51

It does, thank you! I don't think I can see a selected option in the sixth bullet point though - would you mind underlining one?
28. @Researcher
It does, thank you! I don't think I can see a selected option in the sixth bullet point though - would you mind underlining one?

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:51

oh sorry. I didn't give it enough attention because it's whisky time
29.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:52

Hahaha, no problem, can't blame a guy for wanting a good whisky
30.

P5 — 05/04/2023 21:54

Consent_Letter_1.odt
20.34 KB
31. [21:55]
Also:
32.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 21:55

Ohhh, Glenlivet's a classic. Normally I go for the Taliskers if they're in stock, but that's a mighty fine collection for sure!
33.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:32

Heyo, I'll be ready in just a minute
34. [22:35]
Righto, ready when you are :)

1

35. @Researcher
Righto, ready when you are :)

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:38

Sorry. I'm ready
36.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:39

No problem! So I'll ask you the questions one-by-one, and you can go into as much depth as you want any questions before we start?
37.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:40

no, I'll answer and elaborate if you ask
38.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:40

Awesome! So, the first one's a gimme - How long would you say you have considered yourself a Fella?
39.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:41

Since around summer 2022. I'm not sure. I kinda stumled upon it.
40. [22:41]
stumbled*
41.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:42

Understood - how exactly did you stumble onto NAFO, if you don't mind elabourating?
42.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:44

I had quit Twitter. It was too toxic an environment for my mental health and wellbeing. But it is also a good tool for immediate news so I still browsed there for news about the war. And it just showed up in my feed and I thought "I need to be involved with that".
43.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:46

I see, thank you! So, you got involved with the North Atlantic Fellas Organisation. Could you, in your own words, tell me a bit about what NAFO is and what its goals are?
44.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:51

My understanding, and I consider myself objective, is that it is exactly as described. A loose group of people with a common cause. The cause being initially to discredit and ridicule Russian disinformation posted in public places. Russians have zero shame about lying to achieve their goals and I believe that we help to prevent that but in a humorous way. The fundraising I see as something apart from that but something that we do because we are able. There is huge outrage at what Russia is doing and we can't all be there on the front line. The fundraising is a way of standing up and feeling good that we do our part. The ultimate goal would be for it to all go away. If the disinformation stops, if the war stops then we have no further purpose and can move on.
45.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:52

Thank you, that sounds clear. I’m curious about NAFO's tactics - how NAFO works towards achieving its goals. What would you say some of NAFO’s most commonly used tactics are?
46.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:56

I think the main tactics are obvious. It's ridicule. You can not debate with someone who is unwilling to engage in a meaningful way. When we just offer images and memes that often make no sense then how do you deal with it? And there are around 100000 of us now, all doing the same thing on different spaces. It exhausts the enemy. They don't know how to deal with it other than block us. And that's a win. Because we tell each other who blocked us and more come in our place. When you see NAFO article 5 in operation, it's a beautiful thing and can be quite intimidating (I believe from my perspective)
47.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 22:57

So, if I understand you correctly, it's a form of digital attritional warfare that uses ridicule to wear down the enemy's resolve to continue posting propaganda?
48.

P5 — 05/04/2023 22:59

Yes. It's just saying that we see you, we know what you are doing and we don't accept it. And no matter how many of us you ignore, there are more. Thinking about it as I write that's almost like the Russian invasion, just throw more bodies at it, I might have to make a meme about that
49.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:01

hahahaha
50. [23:01]
"The one with the baseball, bonks! The one with the report button, spams!"

1

51. [23:02]
Just for clarity, could you elabourate a bit on Article 5? I'm fairly sure I know what it means, but I want to double-check
52.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:05

So it's a play on NATO article 5. When you attack one you attack all. Whenever article 5 appears on Twitter then the fellas have that set as an alert. And they pile in because no one is left alone. I do my battling elsewhere and I engage with fact and reason which is not the way everyone does it but all that matters is that we are making sure that disinformation is shown to be just that and we are making sure impressionable minds are not sucked in.
53.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:05

Alright, so it's a beacon for other Fellas. Say I'm one of the folks seeing the hashtag come by, and I jump into the thread - what is expected of me then?
54.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:08

Post a meme. Say something silly. Don't engage (on twitter) just bombard them. It works
FpvQvByXgAosnBo.jfif
120.21 KB
55.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:09

Oh man, 'Felloppenheimer' is *inspired*
56. [23:09]
So it's mainly drowning out the propaganda in a flood of shitpost?
57.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:11

Yes, it is shitposting. I mean come on. I'm a 58 year old retired soldier. What do I have in common with any of the kids in NAFO? It makes no sense but this war makes no sense, So we just use the tools we have and I am not ashamed to get in on the act. But I also spend a lot of money. Because That's support I can do.
58.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:12

Well, for starters, I'd say you have the profile pics in common :p
59.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:13

Yes. And that's often what gets us new people. They want a fella so they have to go to the website and learn more about us in order to get a fella. And then they are with us or not. But that does not matter. They came. We are noticed. They will talk about us.
60.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:14

Ah, so the fellas function as a recruitment tactic, in a way?
61.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:15

I believe so. You would have to talk to kama to get a definitive answer but yeah, the bespoke fellas (pfp) are what people come for initially.
62.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:16

Interesting, thank you. Would you say the pfp's fulfil additional roles, or is it primarily recruitment?
63.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:19

Not sure that I am able to answer that one. But it gets us seen. You see my fella and you immediately know a lot more about me than I could say in a few minutes. It's a kind of "band of brothers and all the other genders, *sigh* that I have to write that". It's like a flag. (edited)
64.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:19

Ahh, so kind of a uniform/marker of group identity as well then?
65.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:20

Absolutely it's a marker. It's a badge of honour. Which is why we get really annoyed when people steal them.
66.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:21

Steal? For clarity, do you mean people taking other people's pfp's, or people 'bootlegging' their own pfp's without making a donation to get one from NAFO?
67.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:24

people are definitely allowed to make their own pfp's for profiles but there are others who will simply copy another's pfp and use it themselves. It's distasteful. Especially when you can donate a couple of dollars and get your own. This is my guy. He's brain damaged but he is MY guy
68.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:25

"This is my fella! There are many like it, but this one is mine!" a good sentiment for sure ^^
69. @Researcher
"This is my fella! There are many like it, but this one is mine!" a good sentiment for sure ^^

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:25

I did make a meme about that one but i can't find it just now
70.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:26

I'm sure we'll run into it again at some point
71. [23:27]
So, back to the topic of the tactics - you've quite clearly shared your opinion on NAFO's most common tactics, I think. I'd like to talk about putting them into practice for a bit. Could you tell me about any specific moments where you thought "we're doing a good job", if there are any?
72.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:28

Can I get back to you on that point? I think it's a great question and I believe it deserves a more considered response than I am able to give right now.
73. [23:29]
but the short ansswer is yes
74.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:29

That's okay! We can always pause the interview and pick it back up another day if you'd prefer?
75.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:31

I'm good but I don't want to just palm you off with easy answers. I went to Uni also. I know what you are going through. You deserve honest responses. ANd that one could be a long one. I will message you with a response tomorrow and mark it with my name.
76.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:33

I appreciate that a lot, thank you. I have three more questions that are very strongly related to that one, and then a few that are less about data collection specifically and more buttressing other areas of the research - shall I give you the related questions too, so you can consider those in tandem with the first, and then we can round it off with the secondary questions?
77.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:34

np
78.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:35

Awesome, so here's the questions strongly related to the "doing a good job" one:
-Could you tell me about any moments where you thought something could have been handled better by the Fellas, if there are any? -Were there any moments, for good or ill, that you thought were 'learning moments' for the Fellas as a whole, or at least a significant subset of them? -Are there any periods you can think of in NAFO’s history when the Fellas changed their tactics, and if so, could you tell me something about these periods?
79.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:41

Ok yeah so they are very related to what my first answer will be so I will formulate my response to all of them later. I'm not sure if NAFO changed tactics but as we grew then the membership changed. There are a lot of people who want to get political and that's frowned upon. And don't get me wrong, I love politics. I was recently asked by my party to stand as a candidate. I am very political. But none of that matters in NAFO. Or it should not. My opinions on that don't matter. Recently I was asked by a fella if I would visit his twitch stream because he wanted support. Innocuous gaming related stuff. I went there and spent 2 hours talking with this guy when there was almost nobody else around. Turns out he is gay and was frightened to death that I might give him a hard time. He's a fella. He's one of us and I loved his company for that evening. That's how I see it. One for all.
80.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:43

That makes sense, thank you! Looking forward to the response as for the secondary questions, - some Fellas brought up NAFO feeling like a second job at times, or burning out as something that may be a risk from participating a lot. Do you recognize this at all?
81.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:46

Yes. It is a job. Or it feels like an obligation now. I am a bit of an obsessive so that's part of it but I can't let it go now. I mean I will, happily. Just put Putin in the ground and send the Russians home. But if I don't do it on a daily basis I feel bad because that disinformation is real and it's constant. And my only step after this is joining the international legion. And yes. I have already asked. I just need someone to look after my dad (who has dementia) and then I am gone.
82. [23:47]
but burnout is also real. I've not got there yet, with this (edited)
83. [23:51]
Sorry I went off on a tangent there. I may be British but my family is Danish. How else do I get to Valhalla? To die in battle suits me just fine
84.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:52

That's okay, tangents are more than welcome. I wish you all the best in those endeavours, and if you go, I hope you can return safely ^^ On the topic of burnout though, are you aware of any initiatives by Fellas to discuss this, or provide support for Fellas that feel overwhelmed or exhausted?
85.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:54

I am not aware of anything related to that regarding actively doing something. I have started to notice that people are posting the odd message related to personal care and wellbeing. Reminding people to take a break. And I get that, it must be happening. But as you can probably tell, that's not me.
86.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:55

You can take the soldier out of the army, but you can't take the army out of the soldier, eh?
87.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:55

21 years. I don't know anything else. I'm a bit lost without it and the family inderstands this
88.

Researcher — 05/04/2023 23:56

That makes sense, though I can't say I've been in that position. So just to be clear, it's mainly individuals reminding each other to rest up, nothing coordinated happening on the Fella wellbeing front?
89.

P5 — 05/04/2023 23:58

Yes, from my perspective I have seen people looking after others but I have not seen any concerted effort as a group. And it probably would not work. We are too disparate a group. It does not take long for arguments to start if you get a few of us together. Because we are all different. We just have to be focused on the cause.

6 April 2023

90.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:00

That makes sense - is the "group effort would not work" idea specific to Fella wellbeing, or about NAFO more broadly?
91.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:03

I think it would fall under the "outside of our purview". I mean we look out for each other but we are not responsible for each other. There are people I will not mention who have very questionable views and I would never normally speak to them. But I'm there for them in all NAFO related issues because to state a cliché "This is the way".
92.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:04

Gotcha, thanks. Alright, I think that's it for the meat of the interview, just a couple of smaller points and we're done Thanks a bundle for helping me out, it's been invaluable.
93.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:05

No worries. You have been about a third of a bottle of scotch. And I'm sorry i didn't get to answer everything right now. As I said. You deserve an honest, considered response and you will have it tomorrow.
94.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:07

That's alright, no rush (or, well, my thesis is due April 22nd, so preferably before that, but no immediate rush lol) - hope the Scotch was good! So in terms of dotting the i's and crossing the t's: I'm not only relying on interviews for this thesis; I'm also sifting through a database of tweets about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, I'll need to filter this dataset to only contain tweets specific to NAFO - what keywords, phrases or hashtags would you suggest I use to filter the dataset for NAFO-related tweets?
95.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:09

hmm, not the best person to answer given I keep out of Twitter as much as I can. But #NAFO #NAFOarticle5 #cartoondogs would capture a lot. Hang on whilst I get some accounts you should follow (edited)
96.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:09

Ohh, thank you, that's really appreciated!
97.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:12

@Official_NAFO obviously. These are more war related but often link to the fundraising we do and the end result of that. @georgian_legion @VolodyaTretyak @wartranslated @JimmySecUK @bayraktar_1love you will find most all of us floating around these accounts.
98.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:13

Sweet, thank you! I'll check those out for sure Is there anything else that you feel is relevant that you would like to share?

99.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:14

Not just now. I have enjoyed our chat and I will add anything further in my response to the unanswered questions. You will get that tomorrow. (edited)
100.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:14

Excellent, thank you - I've really enjoyed it as well. Do you know of anyone else that might be interesting to talk to on this topic that you could put me in touch with?
101.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:16

Well you really do need to talk to the founder Kama but as we are fond of saying, we have no leadership, we have no structure. It's that way for a purpose. Too many heads to cut off. Ask the red guys in the discord if they want to talk. They are more in the know than anyone. I'm just a grunt
102.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:17

Sounds good, thank you ^^ And yeah, I deliberately wanted to get some chats with grunts. Closer to the action, y'know?
103.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:17

@Kama_Kamilia
104. [00:18]
yeeah i understand
105.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:18

Yiss, I'll see if he responds! Fingers crossed
106. [00:18]
And for my final question to you: what’s your favourite Fella that you’ve seen that isn't your own?
107.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:19

Oh wow. maybe this one is the one I 'steal' most for reuse
Fo8GMYrX0AEJGv4.jfif
275.37 KB
108.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:20

Ahww, that one's really sweet, I love it! ^^
109.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:21

You can't argue with it. When someone is raging I like to drop it on them
110.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:21

Amen
111. [00:22]
Well, that's it from me! Thank you so much for helping me out, it's been a lovely and very informative chat. Looking forward to seeing your other answers tomorrow, and if you've got any further questions or remarks, feel free to hit me up at any time ^^
112.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:22

My pleasure ben. i'll see myself out
113.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:23

Cheers Craig, have a good one
114.

P5 — Yesterday at 00:24

Oh also if you want to see what I do in all my fury (because it is not standard practice) then you will find me here https://9gag.com/tag/ukraine/fresh
9GAG
Funny Ukraine 🇺🇦 Memes - 9GAG
Fresh Ukraine war news and updates with Russia from the war front. Break news stories into smaller pieces, adding details, context and a sense of humour.
115.

Researcher — Yesterday at 00:25

Ohh, good to know, thank you ^^