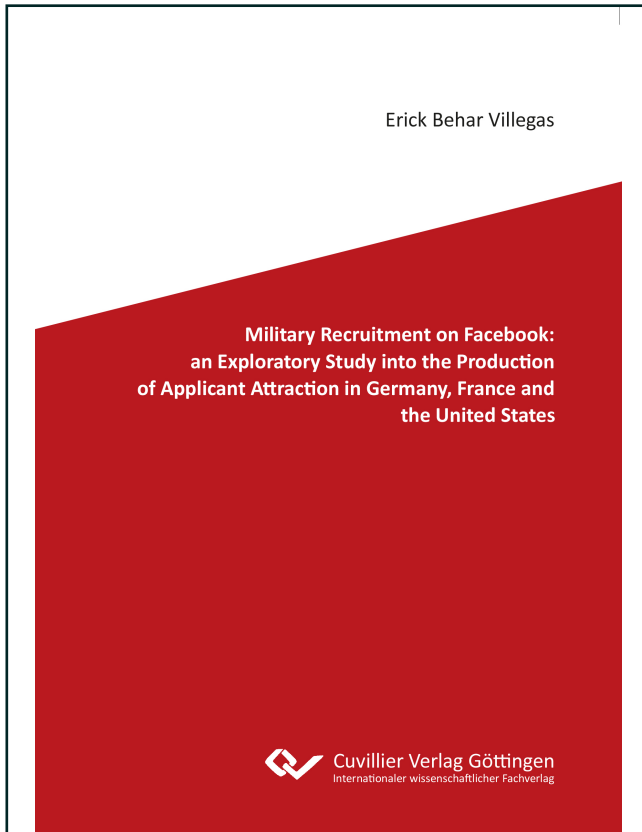




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Military Recruitment on Facebook: an Exploratory Study into the Production of Applicant Attraction in Germany, France and the United States



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Preface

The combination of several disciplines that produces new insights about social phenomena is not only an academic adventure, but also a retrospective process of the author's own existence. The importance of moderating a personal endeavor to academically understand the complexities of the military, with the responsibility of objectively studying a social phenomenon implies a challenge that influences the essence of any academic undertaking. In this case, I allowed personal curiosity about all things military to meld into a scientific inquiry in the field of cyberanthropology. I decided to delve into the blurred complexities of the military and the ways they communicate with their audience at the digital level in different countries. This was not done in the spirit of favoring any institution, military or not, but rather as an initiative to fill gaps in interdisciplinary research.

When I first presented an exposé at the University of Munich, I set out to explore military elites as a combination of anthropological and sociological approaches that could guide me in understanding the intricacies of power among high ranking military members. My own father had served as a General in the Colombian Air Force, creating thus a source of mystery that I could not easily understand in spite of having been often surrounded by the military world for some years. Exploring *The Power Elite* of C. Wright Mills opened the spectrum to many possible areas of inquiry, especially with the will to understand the entangled world of power in my country of origin: Colombia. It felt as the opportunity to dig deeper in a world that was physically present but abstractly distant to my existence as a civilian. I knew for a fact that I had no personal reasons to join the military, but the curiosity of understanding the world of soldiers as an outsider accrued as an intellectual imperative. I was not sure whether in different moments of my life I admired them for their discipline, pitied them for their difficulties or just ignored them. However, the will to understand their world increased as I studied social sciences.

This first approach to a dissertation on military elites developed into dozens of interviews with Generals, Admirals and a Vice Minister of Defense in Colombia. Finding out about the life worlds of these men and women quickly yielded a dense complexity of insights: solitude in power, disputes, politics, denied freedom of expression, frustrations, religion, family and many more aspects surrounded the existence of people who had been serving for decades. A self-reflection as the son of a General quickly became a complex introspective about being an outsider of the military world. I was not keen on accepting or rejecting the military, but on understanding its world of rituals, communications, hierarchy and interpersonal interaction. Anthropology became a powerful tool of understanding that helped me make sense of the interplay or rituals, culture, tradition, artifacts and much more. This path however, was linked to my home country and thus to a potential risk of bias



that could destabilize the above mentioned balance between personal curiosity and academic objectivity.

Screening then multiple aspects of military life, I opted to delve into a field that would require a mix of perspectives to provide a deeper understanding on what one could term “new” dimensions of the Armed Forces back in 2014; this field was cyberanthropology. The military clearly had a digital dimension expressed through the world of social media. Their massive presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in different languages offered a dynamic field of study that had not received much attention, neither in anthropology nor in sociology. It seemed as if the subject was only scattered in blogs and eventual newspaper articles. At the same time, studying only one military institution implied a hefty opportunity cost, one expressed in possibly losing the potential of a comparative study that would not only shed light on the reality of the military, but also on similarities and differences between military forces of different origins.

Hence, I set out to select countries whose militaries I could compare under similar methodological conditions. One of these was the equal understanding of the country’s language as the author of the dissertation. Also, it was important to find countries whose political system and strategic geopolitical vision had at least a certain degree of similarity. It seemed much more valuable to compare a European democracy with a North American one, instead of comparing a country like North Korea with a South American state. Their differences would be as palpable as they are complex, tilting thus the study towards a systemic structural comparison and not a comparative understanding of nuances between different militaries that operate in relatively similar contexts.

The last criterion of selection was having some personal link to the countries of the study. Given different experiences throughout my life, I had had the opportunity of living in Germany, France, and the United States for some time. Curiously, in spite of coming from a Colombian military family that easily reached a wide network of officers in my home country, I had almost no acquaintances in the military of these three states. Thus, this research was not based on a strong network of contacts, but on what Kozinets (2010) calls a ‘netnography’ of social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Cyberanthropology proved to be a powerful tool for understanding social and cultural phenomena at the digital level. It seemed as if the digital world had many new aspects worth studying that could not be ascribed to a classical participant observation of a military base. The world of digital is massive, dynamic, uncontrollable in many cases and content-absorbing. It appeared as a melting pot of new knowledge that was left in the shadows in military sociology and anthropology.

This project has been above all a process of discovery, even of self-reflection and personal introspection. I would like to thank the faculty members at the Institute of Intercultural



Communication of the Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich for their constant support, especially my thesis Director, Professor Dr. Alois Moosmüller and my second evaluator, Professor Dominic Busch of the University of the *Bundeswehr*. I profoundly appreciate the acceptance of interdisciplinary research as a means to discover our reality through diverse lenses. The most special word of gratitude goes to my family and Viviana for their constant support during this project. I don't believe that I have achieved a full understanding of the complex world of soldiers and their interaction with civilians, but I hope that this work will contribute to expanding the horizon of military sociology and anthropology for those of us curious enough to wander into unknown crossings of diverse social sciences. Perhaps it is impossible to speak of a full understanding of the soldierly world, but interdisciplinary research provides opportunities to approach it and learn more about society through it. Interdisciplinary work is as necessary as it becomes complex; it is a tool of high potential, one that grants us more than one pair of glasses to understand reality in its diverse forms.

Erick Behar Villegas

Bogotá, August of 2017



A Note on pictures & screenshots: disclaimer

This dissertation is solely intended for academic & scientific purposes. It only contains pictures and screenshots of pictures that are publicly available on Facebook and a few military websites. The dissertation has no commercial intention, given that it only seeks to explore new perspectives in cyberanthropology under the philosophy of *fair use*. This dissertation seeks by no means to affect the image of any brand or institution. Its foundation remains purely educational; it does not constitute any political position. Faces of persons that may appear on screenshots were blurred in order to guarantee anonymity. To ensure transparency, a query was posted on the Help Community site of Facebook, reading: *My PHD thesis is about social media. It involves analytics and cyberanthropology. I need to use screenshots from several fan pages, from the US, Germany, and France in the final book. I am concerned whether this poses any problem if the content is public anyway. It is only for scholarly purposes and it is the backbone of my thesis. Contacting facebook has proven to be impossible. I can't even find information on the topic in the community. Thank you for any help.* The only answer from the Community reads: *If you're using it for the purpose you're describing and not financial gains, then I see no harm in doing so.* This work is dedicated to the advancement of social sciences, hoping to create more scholarship about cyberanthropology.



1. Introduction

*With no opportunity for interaction there
can be no opportunity for attraction*

Byrne & Neuman (1992)

The scenery opens in a cold forest clad in fog and adventure-inspiring music. Two female teenagers are being led to an abandoned school by a group of men in what seems to be a kidnapping. In the next scenes, German Special Forces or *Kampfschwimmer*, i.e. a force similar to the famous U.S. Navy SEALs, are shown in preparation of a rescue operation, using aircraft, boats, night-vision technology, and sophisticated artifacts. At the opening of every scene, letters pop-up displaying the key information of the mission, resembling the typical military scene of Hollywood movies. The Elite Forces advance on the school, secure it, take down the illegal militia who fire back, liberate the two young German hostages, and flee under the protection of awaiting rescue boats that wave the German flag.

This seven minute video, launched in July, 2017, could have easily been associated with an action movie regardless of the country of origin. But it has a completely different background. It stems from the German military as a motivational video that portrays the institution on social media, generating debate, more than 400.000 views, thousands of comments and interactions with Facebook users, and ultimately, visibility for a controversial institution that competes with the private sector in its search for personnel¹. The video is one of many examples of how the military in different countries is using social media in its attempt to represent itself as an 'attractive' institution before an (online) audience whose members could become part of its ranks.

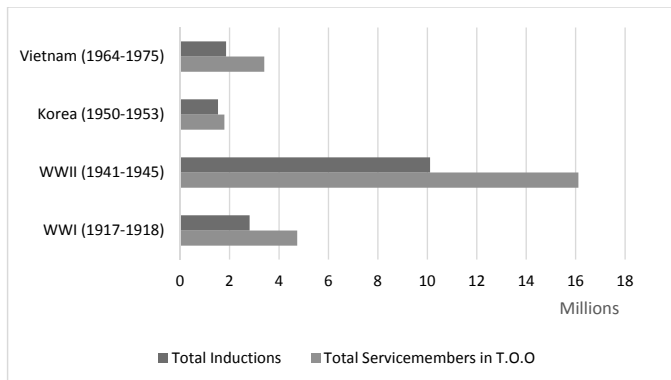
The military in the United States and France also portray their institutional arrangements, competencies, ideal visions, attributes, opinions, and more on social media. They interact with thousands of users using different pages and profiles, while delivering messages that seek to motivate users to become soldiers or join the military as civilians. After the end of conscription in the United States, Germany, and France, their militaries started operating as All-Volunteer Forces that could not derive their personnel from mandatory military service any more. Conscription was abolished in the United States in 1973, then in France in 1997 and later on in Germany in 2011 (Eikenberry, 2013; Fleckenstein, 2011; Crépin & Boulanger, 2001) . Now that the draft was over, having an All-Volunteer Force implied a change in scope in terms of recruitment tactics, goals, and methods. Recruitment became competitive, not compulsory, implying that the military was now

¹ The video can be accessed under the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr/videos/1583941911670395/>

another actor in the labor market, one that had to brand itself as an ‘attractive’ employer if it meant to survive and achieve its recruitment-related goals.

The end of the draft in the three countries did not mean that the military had never promoted voluntary service nor that it had never been active in the labor market. Conscription was only one of the sources of recruiting personnel, as the service branches also promoted their career offers in order to recruit more personnel via different communication channels. Social media however, only became relevant after hubs like Facebook gained strength after the turn of the millennium. One way to exemplify that that military did not only rely on draftees during the time of conscription is contrasting the number of inductions with the total number of service members through time. The next figure portrays this information for the U.S. American case in four historical moments. The total number of service members in the theater of operations appears in green, whereas the total number of inductions for the particular period is plotted in blue. The graph shows that millions of servicemembers who participated in these conflicts were not drafted.

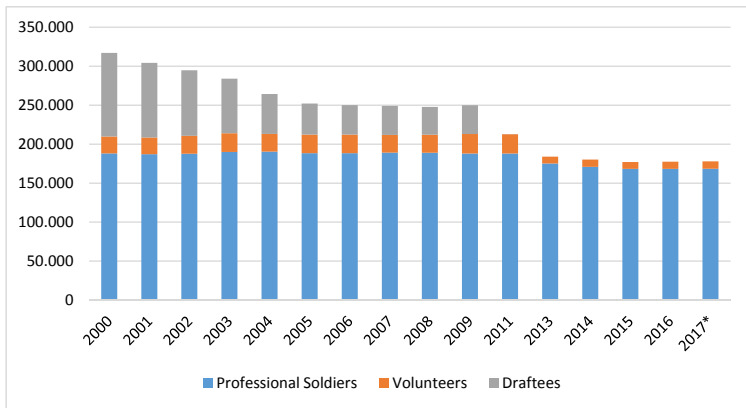
Figure 1: Draftees vs. Total Servicemembers in U.S. Conflicts



Source: own construction from U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf) & Selective Service System: Induction Statistics: <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Induction-Statistics>

In the German case, the Defense Commission’s report to the Bundestag differentiates between professional soldiers, volunteers, and draftees. After 2011, draftee figures sank to 0, yet the number of volunteers also declined considerably. The next graph portrays the evolution of the three categories since 2000. Despite the fluctuation of draftees and volunteers, the core of the military, i.e. professional and temporary servicemembers, remained relatively stable. Recruiting them also implied efforts for the Bundeswehr, implying that the production of attraction had already started before the end of conscription.

Figure 2: Bundeswehr Servicemembers, Volunteers & Draftees



Source: Jahresbericht des Wehrbeauftragten (2000-2016). Deutscher Bundestag.
 (cf. <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/wehrbeauftragter/jahresberichte/247006>)

After the end of conscription however, the military inevitably underwent a redefinition of its identity as an institution, and especially, as an employer. Not only did it have to consider the need of investment to attract new applicants; it also had to design its own strategies to become salient of the labor market as an employer that had no means to force young people into its lines. In the United States, for example, competing on the labor market led to reductions in personnel, pay-raises not only for new members of the military but also for those already serving, and the selection of personnel among disadvantaged population that had low chances of finding a well-paid job on the labor market (Korb & Segal, 2011, p.77). Hence, an All-Volunteer Force seems to push both a new identity for applicant attraction on the market and a range of reforms that impact the military's budget if it aims to compete with compensation offered by the private sector.

Within the military, the different service branches (Navy, Air-Force, Army, etc) were responsible for this redefinition process as the basic structures that imprint content on the new identity of the Armed Forces. The Army, Navy, and the Air Force, beyond other smaller branches (e.g. Coast Guard in the U.S or Military Basis in Germany) bring together the identity of the military in the representation of the soldier, sailor, and aviator. Within the redefinition process of the All-Volunteer Force, they had to face competition within the Forces, because potential recruits could opt, e.g. for the Navy instead of the Army. Even if the services face different markets (Boene, 2009), they can still compete against each other for recruits who are not sure about one service or the other.

The classical cordial competition between service branches strengthened a market-based dimension that now feeds on new channels of communication such as social media. Facebook, one of the most



massive social media hubs of the beginning of the 21st century (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), offers the military the possibility of representing itself, interacting with potential users, and positioning itself among users as a digital brand or as a set of subbrands that users can permanently access. This visibility also fosters controversies, as the military's recruitment initiatives are digitally available to civil society and their scrutiny. The image itself of the military is subject to controversy, especially when using marketing techniques that are usually associated with private firms. The following chart shows some of the metrics that reflect the massive scale of Facebook:

Figure 3: Facebook Statistics

Item	Figure
Number of daily active users (March, 2017)*	1.28 billion
Number of monthly active users (March, 2017)*	1.94 billion
Facebook Users in Europe (June, 2016)**	328 million
Facebook Users in North America (June, 2016)**	223.1 million

Source: *Facebook Newsroom (2017) Retrieved July 20, 2017 from <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>; **Internetworldstats (2017). Retrieved July 20, 2017, from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm>

The shift to the All-Volunteer Force paves the road to new questions that can bring together interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies. If the Armed Forces are now actors within different labor markets, they are forced to produce attraction in order to fill their lines and attain recruitment goals that have been imposed by a higher chain of command. Yet how is this attraction of potential applicants produced on social media, especially on Facebook, by the militaries of the United States, Germany, and France? How visible is the military on Facebook? Do they employ similar tactics throughout the three countries and among their different service branches? Is their content similar? Can one speak of culture-related patterns in the display of military content on Facebook? What does the military's interaction with users suggest in the context of digital employer branding? Is there a bond between the classic perspectives of civil-military relations with new interaction patterns visible on social media?

This study will approach these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together cyber anthropology, military sociology, branding and recruitment literature with both qualitative and quantitative methods including content analysis and semi-structured interviewing. Instead of focusing on the context and reality of one country and its national Armed Forces, this project seeks to explore possible differences and similarities that arise when studying the digital recruiting approach of the militaries of three different countries, i.e Germany, the United States, and France.



Within this comparison, questions on possible cultural influences will be raised in order to aliment the discussion about applicant attraction and a new dimension of military recruiting at the digital level. As explained in the preface, the choice of these three countries is linked to their having an All-Volunteer force, a similar geo-strategic orientation under NATO, and also to the personal approach in the life experience of the author in the three countries that yields the use of the three languages.



1.1. Recruitment realities

During the past years, reports about military recruitment crises in several countries have been circulating through the press. They are usually framed in the economy's "boom and bust contexts" (CNA, 2015) that depend on labor market fluctuations, political decisions, and new operational intentions. The *Guardian* announced heavy recruitment difficulties for the United States in 2005, while *Le Monde* reported France's inability to recruit personnel and maintain their loyalty in 2012 and Germany's popular newspaper *Bild* criticized the Armed Forces for recruiting minors as a last resort in 2014². The complex debates about military-recruitment transcend the bare achievement of numeric recruiting goals. They touch upon identities, institutional self-representation and a set of tactics used to find more personnel.

The military has had to adapt to new contexts and adopt new marketing strategies to attract, in some cases, skeptical young citizens that could easily decide to work in the private sector. At the same time, these citizens could apply to a position in another military branch, setting them in an institutional competition that forces the Armed Forces, throughout different branches, to define themselves as an employer brand in the market. An example of this is the British Army's campaign to promote friendship and the possibility to travel abroad as soldiers as a message of attraction (BBC, 2017). As will be shown later in this text, this exemplifies how the military, within a context of competition due to the end of conscription, seeks to position values, traditions, future perspectives, adventure and many more nodes of attraction to recruit new soldiers.

While the different branches of the U.S Armed Forces have been able to reach most of their recruitment goals in the last years (Maze, 2013; CNA, 2015) and at the same time, changes in government priorities have led to redefining endstrength goals, recruitment remains a fundamental issue for the military (McClain, 2008; Tilghman, 2014). While the military in France, Germany and the U.S invests in reaching a possibly uninterested youth, voices from civil society criticize the military for their approaches to young people. An example of this in Germany is the use of the youth magazine *Bravo* to offer adventure camps with "action, adrenaline, adventures (...) cool beach parties" (Galaktionow, 2012). The recruitment debate thus goes beyond the military's statistical goals; it touches upon new methods that displease certain members of civil society and hinges recruitment on the eye of public debate.

² For the **United States**, see: The Guardian (2005) *US lowers standards in army numbers crisis*. By Wilson, J., 04.06.2005. retrieved July 20, 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/04/usa.jamiewilson>; For **France**, see: Le Monde (2012) *L'armée française a des difficultés à recruter et à fidéliser ses troupes*. By Guibert, Nathalie. Retrieved November 23, 2014 from http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2012/10/23/l-armee-francaise-peine-a-recruter-et-fideliser-ses-troupes_1779430_3210.html; For **Germany**, see Bild Zeitung (2014) *Zu wenig Freiwillige! Bundeswehr rekrutiert auch Minderjährige*. By Kautz, Hanno. Retrieved June 20, 2014 from <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bundeswehr/rekrutiert-minderjaehrige-34377616.bild.html>