

Masking Instability: How India Deploys Info Ops on Kashmir

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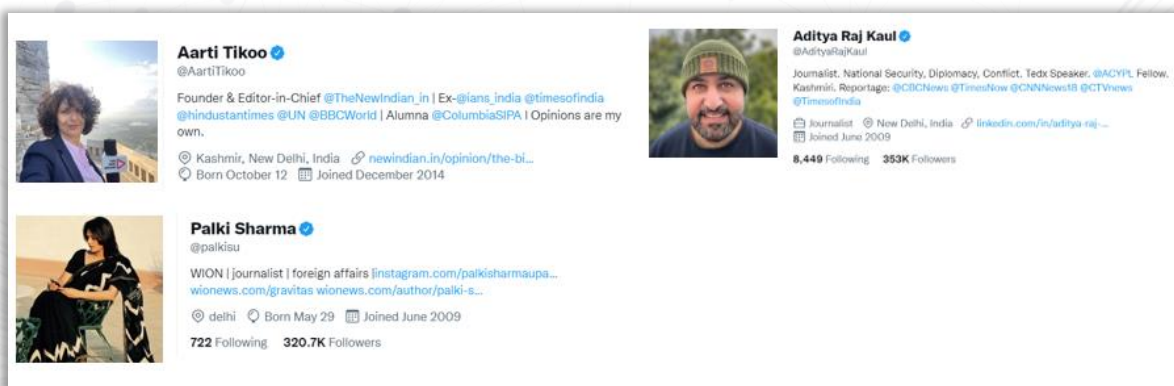
Overview:

- This study maps the deeply integrated and coordinated social media campaigns of Indian Info Ops networks on Kashmir issue.
- It does this by examining tweets related to Kashmir issue by some of the most prominent Indian voices on Twitter: 3 Indian journalists and 3 official security accounts based in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).
- It shows how these accounts are part of a coordinated network of verified accounts linked with key state institutions and journalists, all pushing a synchronous and specific narrative related to Kashmir.
- This study depicts how India is trying to mask deep instability and violence in Kashmir through a high-powered information campaign that has three goals:
 - a) Push Kashmir as a stable and developed region after Article 370's revocation.
 - b) Counter any news or narrative depicting Indian violence and instability in Kashmir.
 - c) Blame any local resistance or instability in Kashmir to be Pakistan sponsored.

Methodology:

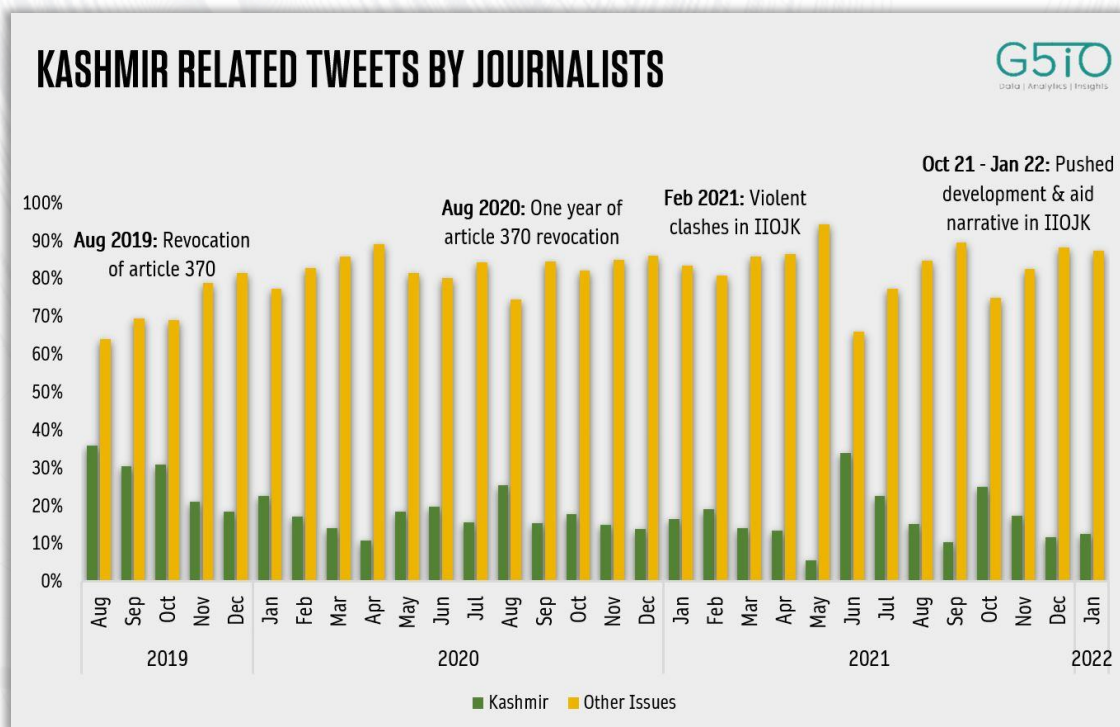
- The data analyzed comprises over 19,000 tweets from the last 3 years (Aug 2019 – Feb 2022)
- Our findings are derived from:
 - Frequency of tweets based around key events.
 - Textual analysis of the most frequently recurring themes and hashtags specifically on Kashmir.

Textual Analysis: Journalists:



a) Tweet Frequency Trends:

There is a marked shift in the reporting and commentary by the above-mentioned journalists in what they have been highlighting over the last 3 years. Following the revocation of Article 370 there was a concerted focus on highlighting military and counter insurgency operations as nearly a third of their total tweets referred exclusively to Kashmir. While 2020 saw a reduced focus on Kashmir (largely due to most of their coverage being on the COVID pandemic), the last 6-8 months have seen rising coverage on Kashmir once again. The focus however being more on projecting infrastructure and development related narratives instead of violence and militancy.



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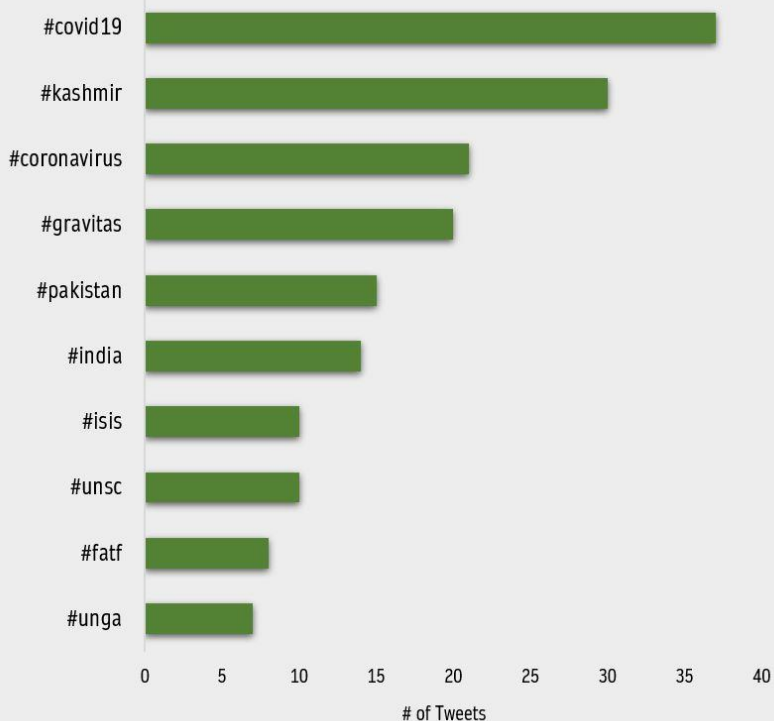
b) Thematic Analysis – Top Hashtags & Themes:

Overall, however, both the most frequently used hashtags and phrases related to Kashmir were centered around specifically targeting Pakistan. For instance, apart from the more general hashtags used by these journalists such as #COVID and #Kashmir, a significant number involved accusing #Pakistan of terror financing in the context of the Financial Action Task Force (#FATF) and Imran Khan’s statements related to Kashmir at the #UNGA.

This is further confirmed by the most frequently used phrases by these journalists which show a concerted focus on highlighting Kashmiri insurgents as ‘Islamist’ ‘terrorists’ and the need for ‘American’ ‘sanctions’ to curb their ‘funding’. All while highlighting both the Indian state’s and Prime Minister Modi’s democratic credentials on the ‘international’ stage.

TOP HASHTAGS USED BY JOURNALISTS

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TOP PHRASES USED BY JOURNALISTS

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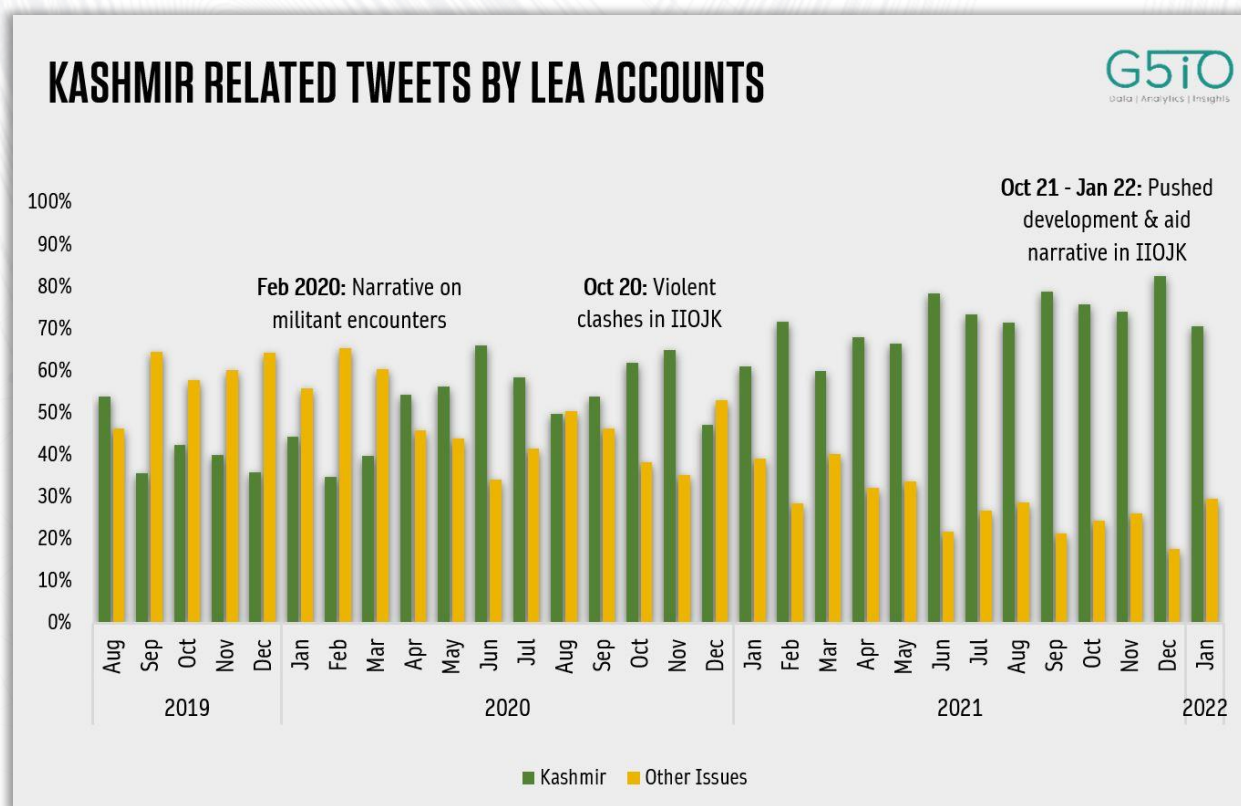


Official Security Accounts:



a) Tweet Frequency Trends:

The same trends as shown above were even more clearly visible in the tweets posted by official accounts of key Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) operating in the IIOJK region. While content from these accounts was more directly focused on Kashmir, there has been a similar uptick in promoting development activities in coordination with journalists and media influencers such as those discussed above.



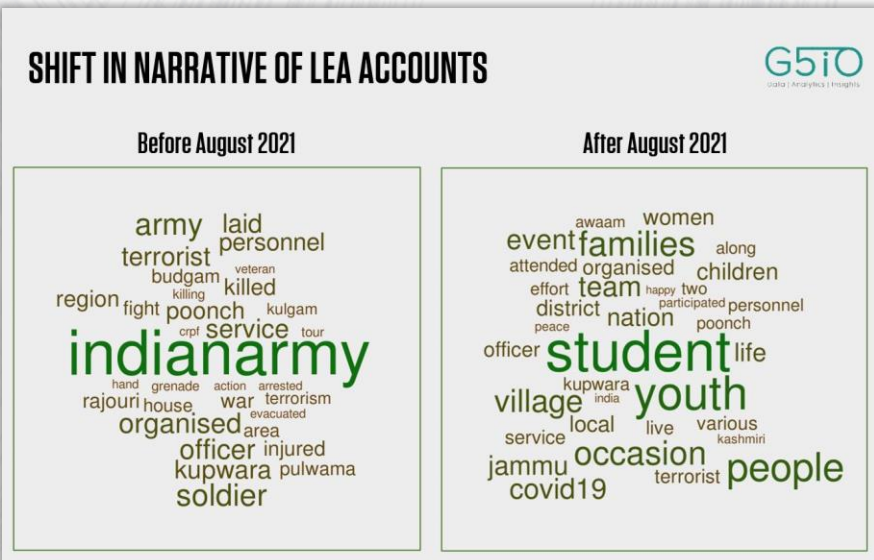
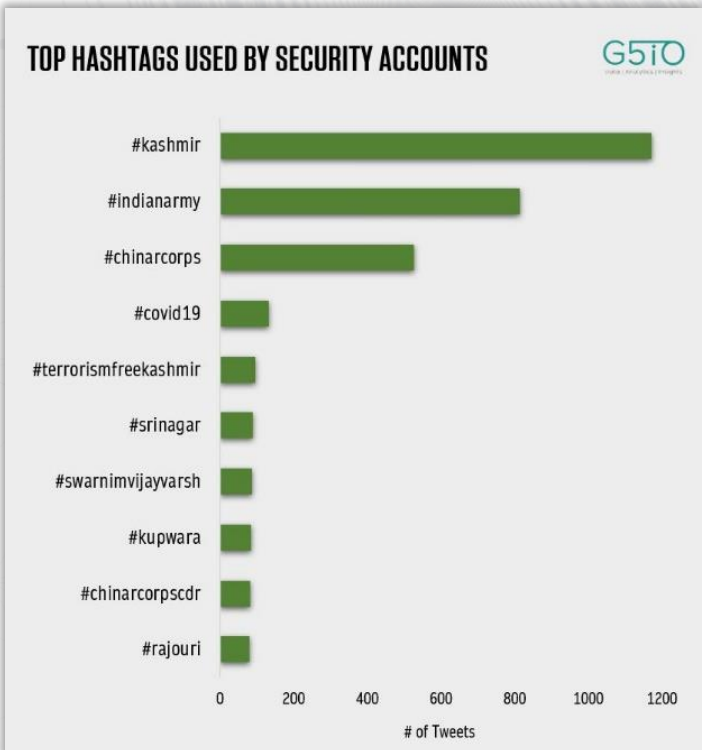
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For instance, since Feb 2020 these accounts were focused primarily on promoting military operations against insurgents such as ‘successful’ encounter videos and related press briefings. However, the narrative employed by these accounts has changed in the last few months where the focus has now shifted more towards highlighting development activities and a softer image of LEAs as part of improved local governance.

b) Thematic Analysis – Top Hashtags & Themes:

These aspects were clearly evident in both the top hashtags and phrases used by these accounts. For instance, before August 2021 the content of these accounts’ tweets was overwhelmingly focused on projecting military operations highlighting the number of ‘terrorists killed’ and/or ‘soldiers’ ‘laid’ to rest as part of longstanding and highly securitized discourses. However, since August 2021 the discourse instead focused more on public relations and image building of the Indian army and local LEAs primarily from a counterinsurgency/CVE perspective. This includes for instance a greater emphasis being given now to ‘youth’, ‘students’, ‘people and ‘families.’

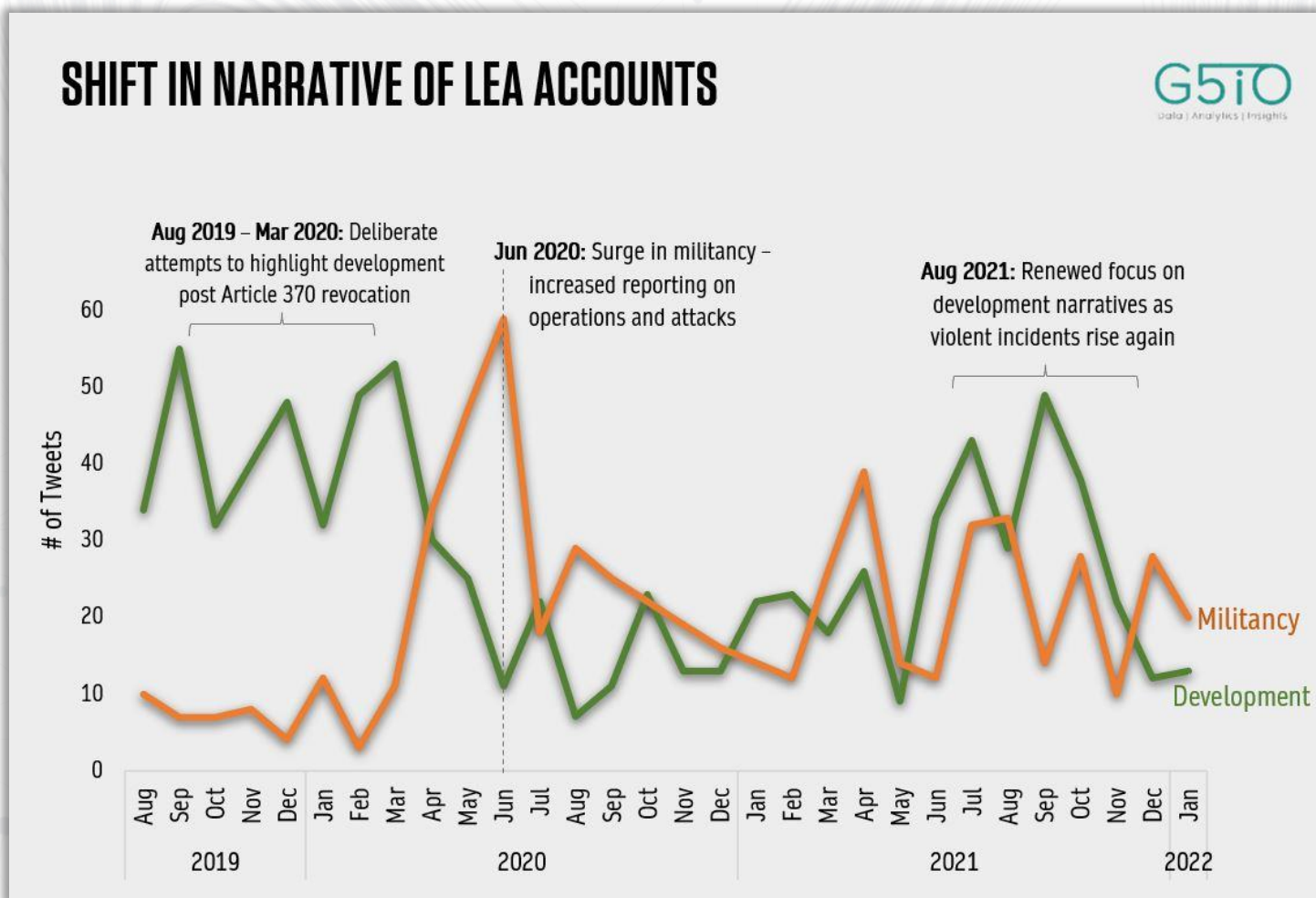
This shift still doesn’t cover the fact that despite the recent focus on highlighting ‘progress and development’ narratives, the top hashtags used by these accounts still represent an overwhelmingly security centric approach towards Kashmir.



c) Changing Patterns in Discourse

By isolating tweets based on the above thematic differences, we thus wanted to see how official LEA accounts have employed development related narratives from a soft power approach, in relation to more hard power focused narratives highlighting kinetic ops across the last 2 ½ years.

For instance, immediately after the revocation of article 370, these accounts pushed mostly development and infrastructure related narratives as a means of deflecting and diverting attention away from militant crackdowns up until the state elections held in early 2020. In contrast, the spike in militancy related narratives during the summer of 2020 reigned throughout the height of the COVID pandemic. As militancy once again surged in mid-2021 there has been a marked increase in narratives focused on development and CVE approaches that have not only been accordingly timed, but also coordinated with what the Indian media and journalists have been reporting on Kashmir.



Conclusion:

- On the whole, there has been a marked surge in Indian information warfare on the Kashmir issue related to Pakistan since the revocation of article 370 in Aug 2019.
- Much of this conversation is coordinated between different sets of networks and actors used to amplify the Indian state's official narrative to push development related narrative regarding Kashmir and to blame Pakistan for unrest in IIOJK
- The narratives being pushed are centered on framing Pakistan as a state sponsor of terror and present Kashmir as a developing and prosperous region in which Pakistan is playing a spoiler role.
- Most importantly, narratives being pushed by official LEA channels and mainstream journalists are closely coordinated and correlated not only in terms of their focus and timing, but also in terms of when to employ hard power vs soft power narratives

Authors



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