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Engagement with Inuit People by the Canadian Military via social media

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Canada's 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* emphasized the need for recruiting and retaining underrepresented groups such as Indigenous People in the Canadian Forces. This renewed engagement with Indigenous communities received particular attention in Canada's North:

"As Indigenous communities are at the heart of Canada's North, we will also work to expand and deepen our extensive relationships with these communities¹."

In the digital age, engagement also means engaging meaningfully through social media communication with key constituencies. Messaging via social media in general and Twitter more specifically has to adjust by delivering information differently and building ties on these platforms.

In general, the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence have engaged meaningfully with Inuit communities: the coordination between the Canadian Forces and the Canadian Rangers as well as the current cooperation with Inuit communities to organize annual military exercises are obvious examples of such engagement². Naturally, face-to-face interactions remain the gold standard in communication. However, social media has brought new channels of communication to engage with constituencies; it is an added tool to reach out to partners and build relationships.

By mentioning, relaying or liking messages of allies, advocates or supportive groups, an organization can foster a healthy interaction rather than deliver information in a unidirectional fashion³. These media can also diffuse more widely specific messages reaching the greater public to better raise awareness and promote specific values. Finally, by following partner organizations, mentioning them and forwarding some of their messages, social media can help foster a policy network and connect with like-minded partners⁴.

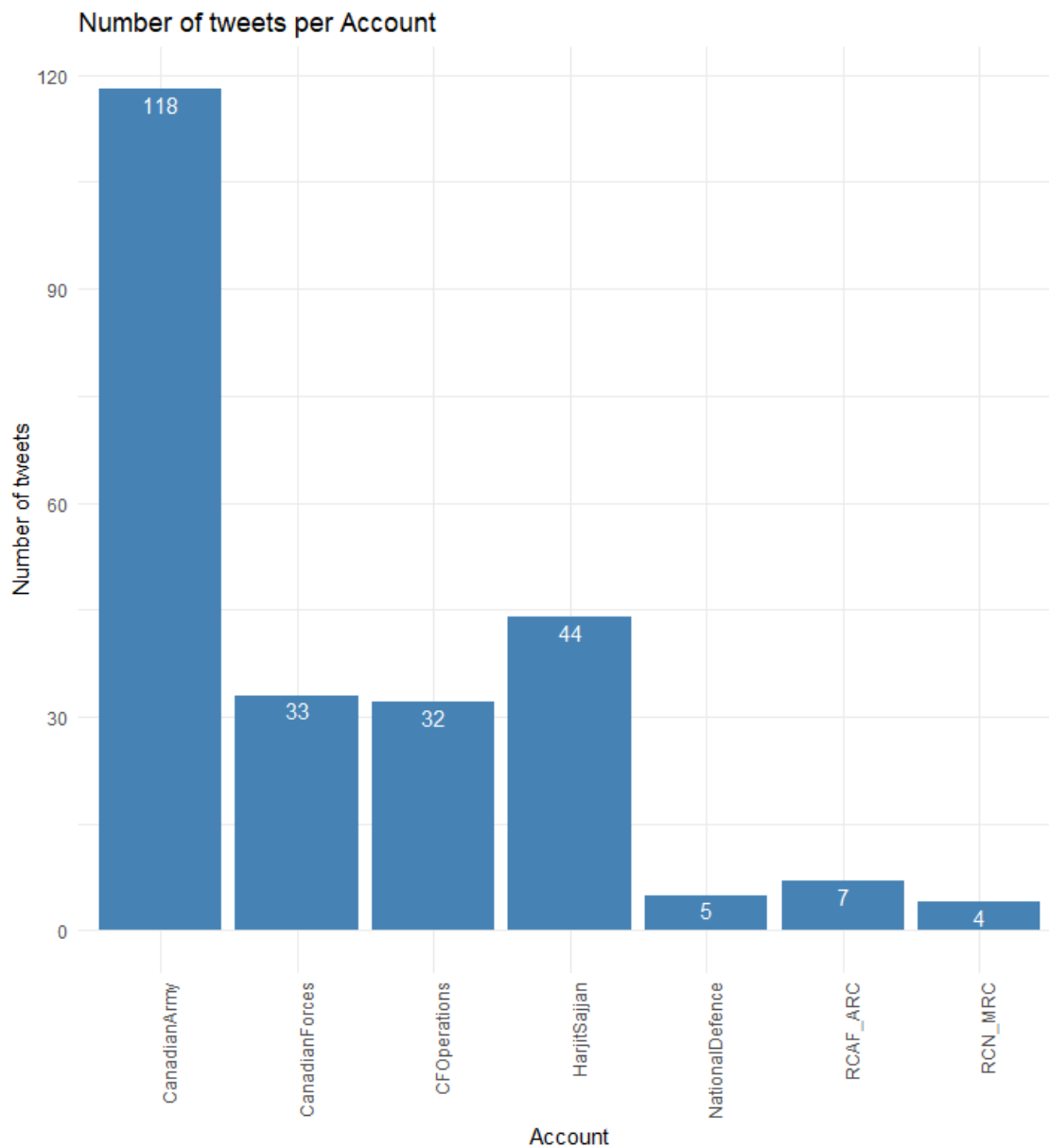
In this policy brief, we want to summarize evidence documenting how the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have mentioned Inuit issues and People on their different Twitter handles. This evidence can help us figure out if Inuit issues and People find its rightful place on the DND and CAF Twitter messaging and identify ways in which these organizations can maximize engagement with this key constituency in Canada's North.

The evidence

We extracted all tweets from November 8 2017 to April 1 2019 from seven Twitter handles related to the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence¹. In total, 16 280 tweets were posted on these accounts; only 243 tweets (1.4% of the entire sample) mentioned Inuit People or initiatives mostly led by Inuit (Rangers for example).

Out of these 243 tweets, 47% were published by one account (@CanadianForces) while DND itself (@NationalDefence) and specific branches of the CAF barely mentioned Inuit People (see figure 1).

¹ These handles were the following: @CanadianArmy, @CanadianForces, @CFOperations, @HarjitSajjan, @NationalDefence, @RCAF_ARC and @RCN_MRC.



Source: Authors

Figure 1: number of tweets published by different accounts from CAF and DND.

The proportion of tweets mentioning Inuit People is relatively low. However, Inuit mentions were posted at different times throughout the year rather than only at specific times (for example, National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21 or National Aboriginal Veterans Day on November 7).

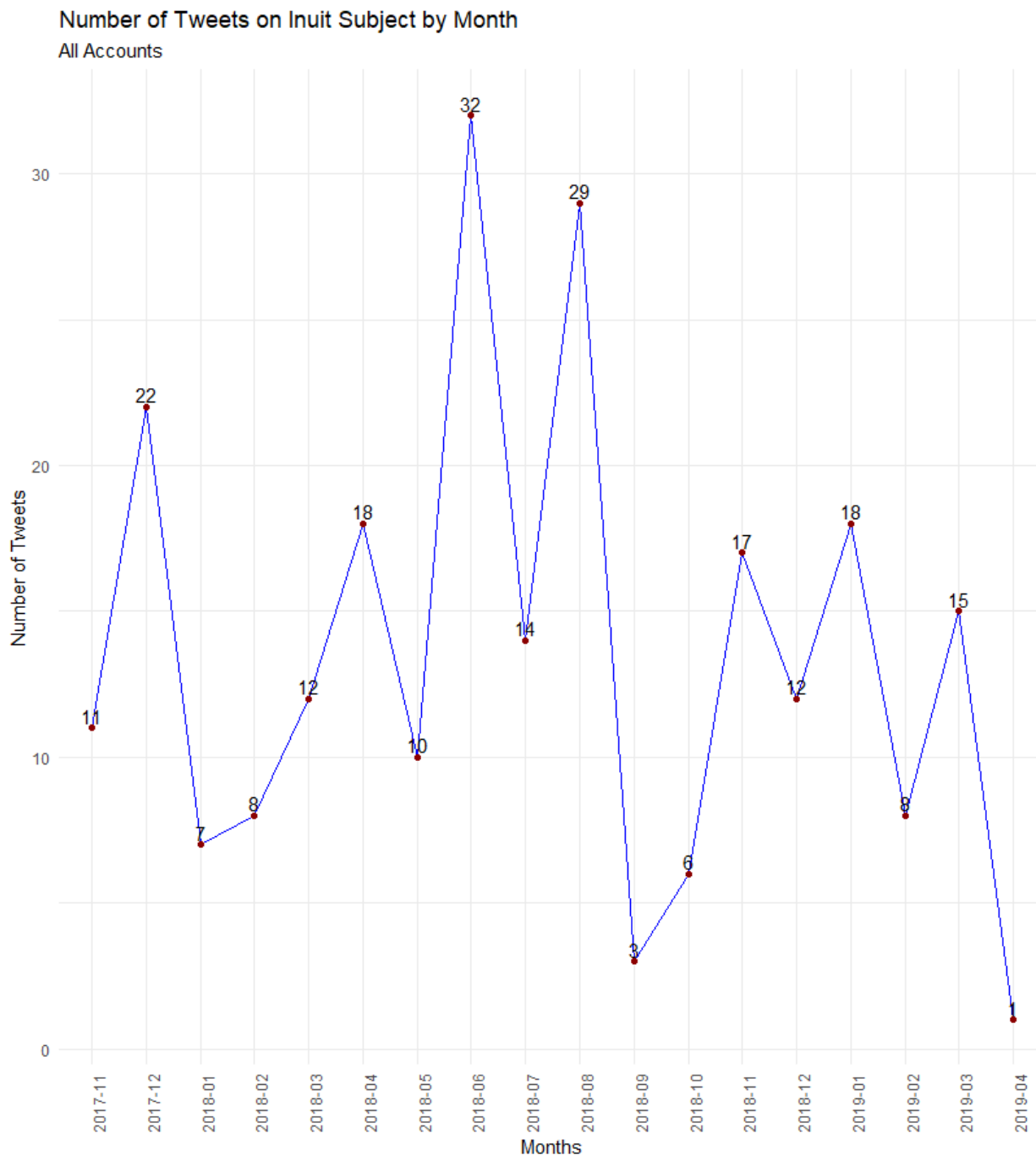


Figure 2: tweets posted by month

National Indigenous Peoples' Day can explain the peak observed in June 2018 but these accounts also published messages during times of increased activism such as in August 2018 during operation Nanook 2018. Reasonably sustained attention was also maintained during winter 2017 and 2018.

The potential to reach out to a wider audience is also evidenced through the number of times these tweets were retweeted by other accounts. The account of minister Harjit Sajjin is particularly strategic on this regard: tweets mentioning Inuit People published by the minister were retweeted as many times as tweets posted by the official Twitter handle of the Canadian Army (@CanadianArmy).

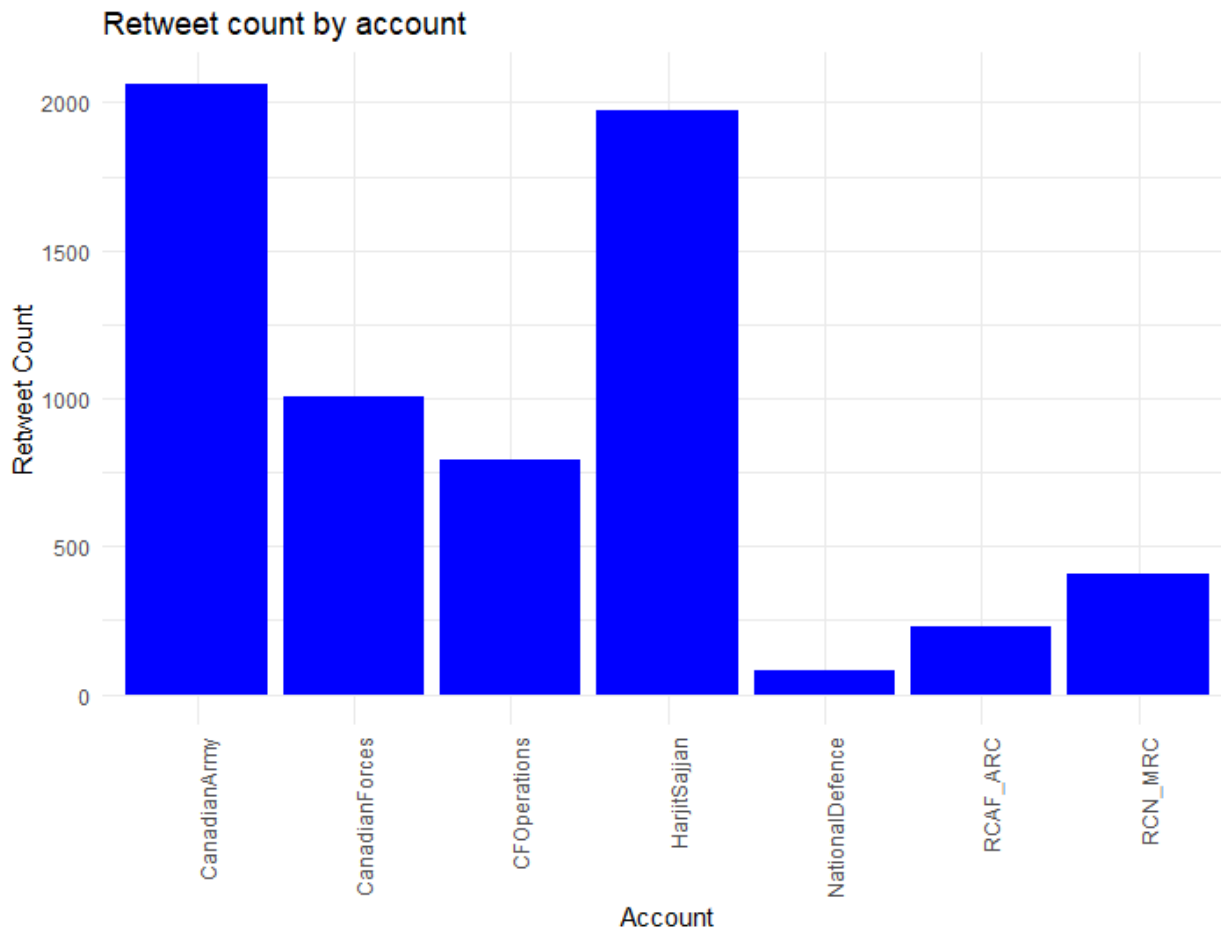


Figure 3: number of retweets of tweets mentioning Inuit people by account

Beyond the low frequency of tweets referring to Inuit People, a concern arises when we look at mentions in these tweets. Mentioning another account in a tweet is usually a signal made to share a piece of information with this other account or to acknowledge another account as a partner or ally (in the non-military sense of the word). Adding mentions to tweets can strengthen policy networks and acts as a recognition that an individual or an organization is valued by the account holder. As can be deduced from observing Figure 3, these accounts mostly mentioned other governmental departments, elected representatives or branches of the CAF. As such, mentions were used to solidify already existing policy networks and rarely reached out to external stakeholders such as Inuit organizations or administrations. The Canadian Army account (@CanadianArmy) is the only one that relayed or mentioned Northern views, through a mention of Nunatsiaq News; the effort remained timid as no Inuit organizations was mentioned by any accounts in the sample selected.

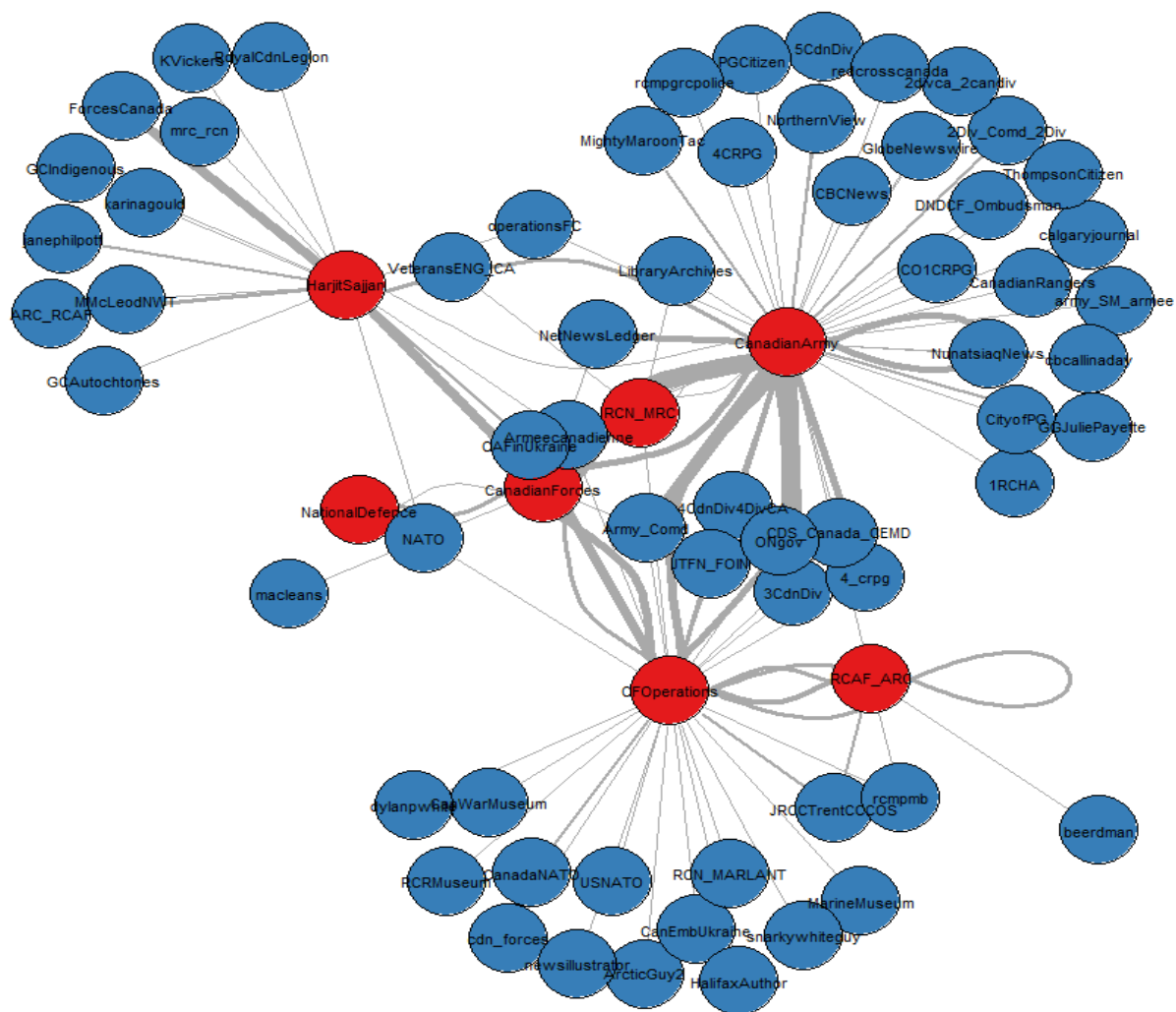


Figure 4 is indicative of strong connections and mentions between the seven accounts studied. Thick lines can be observed connecting these 7 accounts, highlighting coherence and numerous mentions among them. The analysis of themes and issues further reinforces this observation. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the frequency and connections between words in tweets published from these seven accounts. As can be seen from these two figures, these accounts tended to fulfill a promotional function: the centrality of the new defence policy (Strong, Engaged, Secured) and specific operations in the word associations and hashtags supports this observation. This

Words Network Association for All Accounts

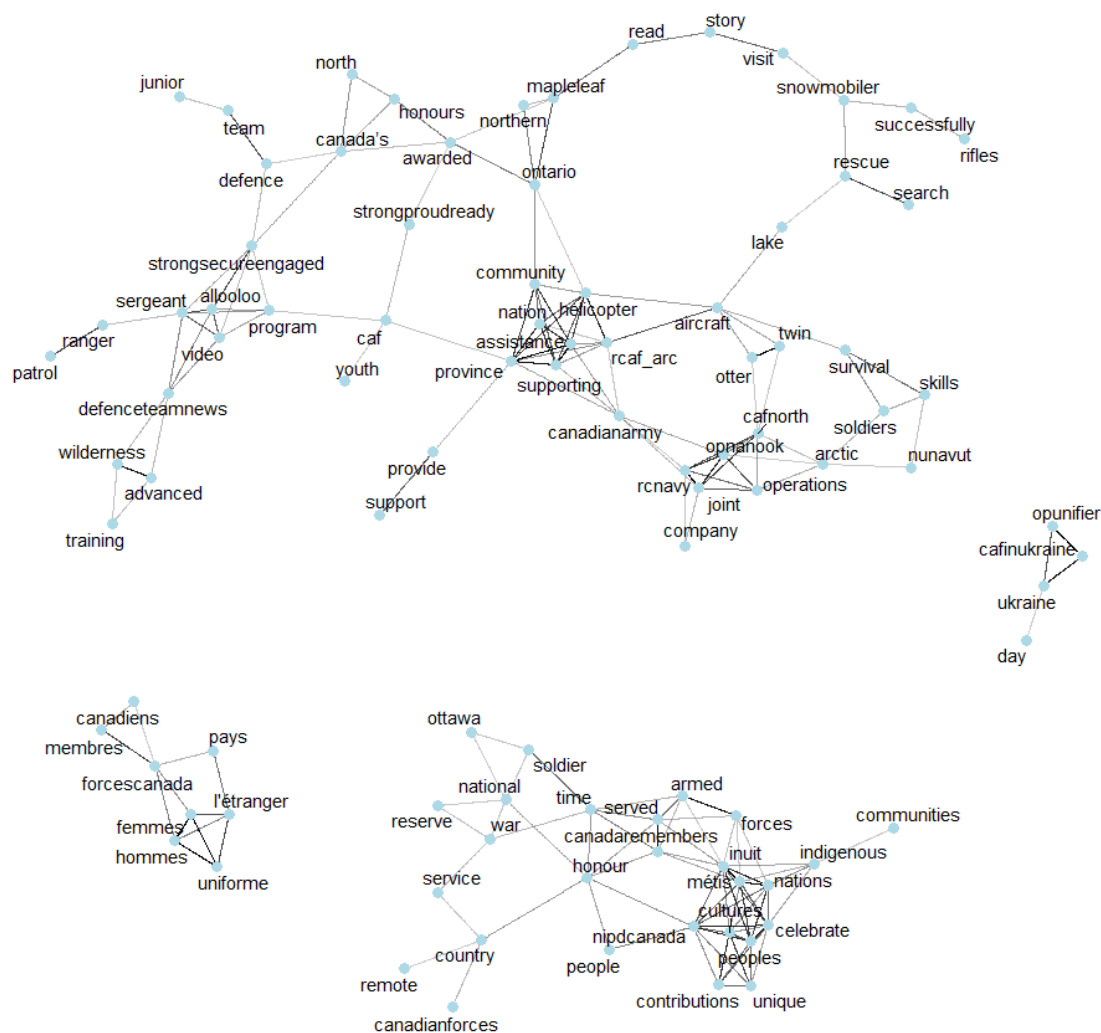


Figure 5: associations between terms in tweets

Conclusion

Social media will never fully replace the importance of face-to-face interactions to build and strengthen networks and long-term cooperative ties. However, it is an additional tool available for DND and CAF to reach out to specific audiences in order to diffuse their messages. So far, our study has found that Twitter is not fully utilized by either organization to achieve this objective. Little attention is devoted to Inuit People and references to this crucial stakeholder is scarce. On the positive side, the bulk of tweets are not focused on commemorations (such as National Indigenous Peoples Day or National Aboriginal Veterans Day); messages are posted throughout the year, especially when important operations and exercises are deployed in Canada's North.

However, more can be done. Mentioning, following and retweeting accounts of Inuit People, organizations and administrations could help build cooperative networks while promoting specific messaging and objectives. It could also help turn these DND and CAF accounts into bidirectional tools rather than unidirectional ones, engaging with key constituencies and favoring exchanges rather than solely communicating information. The strength of social media is after all in the increased interaction it can generate, if managed properly. Social media hold extraordinary potential for any organization that strives to expand and deepen relationships with Northern Indigenous communities.

¹ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secured, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa, 2017): 80.

² Lackenbauer, P. Whitney and Adam Lajeunesse. "The Canadian Armed Forces in the Arctic: Building Appropriate Capabilities", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 33-37.

³ Kimmons, Royce, George Veletsianos, and Scott Woodward. "Institutional Uses of Twitter in U.S. Higher Education", *Innovative Higher Education* 42, no. 2 (2017): 97-111.

⁴ Waters, Richard D. and Jensen M. Williams. "Squawking, Tweeting, Cooing, and Hooting: Analyzing the Communication Patterns of Government Agencies on Twitter", *Journal of Public Affairs* 11, no. 4 (2011): 353-63.