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JUNIOR NAVAL STAFF COLLEGE
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SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION: IMPACT ON ARMED FORCES
AND WAYS TO EFFECTIVELY TACKLE NEGATIVE TRAITS

BY

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“The internet is the largest experiment involving anarchy in history. It is a source for tremendous good and potentially dreadful evil, and we are only just beginning to witness its impact on the world stage.”¹

- Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman, Google

INTRODUCTION

1. In the internet of things, ideas take a gigantic leap every day and disruption (both good and bad) is the norm. One such disruption which has revolutionised the way information is exchanged in real time has been the advent of Social media. It has triggered an information revolution the world over that has forced people, governments and organisations, both public and private, to rethink strategies on how they manage their information and engage in an increasingly interconnected world. It has challenged information hierarchies, opened up access and produced an entirely new ecosystem of information exchange. Technological innovations are rapid and constantly evolving, making barriers, borders and control irrelevant.

2. Social Media and Social Networks in actual terms differ as social media is a communication channel that transmits information to a wide audience and is usually a one-way street, while social networks facilitate the act of engagement between likeminded people, groups or communities. Social media, however, in recent times has become synonymous with social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter. It can hence be

¹ Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, The New Digital Age - Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business, John Murray, London, 2013.

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broadly defined as any “web or mobile based platform that enables an individual or agency to communicate interactively and enables exchange of user content.”

AIM

3. The aim of this paper is to find the impact of Social media Revolution on Armed Forces and recommend ways to tackle its negative traits.

MEDIA REVOLUTION

3. The urge for information has always been there and exploited by state and non-state actors both in wars and sub-conventional wars, by competing commerce, business, sports, education, etc. Earlier the information came through newspapers, radio, pamphlets, and magazines. Then came the era of television which became the primary source of entertainment. The Iraq war during the 1990s brought war to the living rooms. The CNNs and BBCs not only telecasted battles, they started shaping opinions. The next biggest life changing technological revolution was the advent of internet which further expanded in the form of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and plethora of interactive digital platforms. India, with an estimated 371 million Mobile internet users, is the largest market for social networking site Facebook after the US.² Of its 142 million strong user base in India, 133 million access the social media platform through their mobile phones.

4. The 21st century opens up an age facing an array of traditional and non-traditional security threats emanating from natural calamities, climate change, human exodus and displacement, violent non state actors, issues of ethnicity, new-fangled ideology, religious radicalism and

² “Facebook user base crosses 142 million in India”, The Livemint, 09 Mar 16, accessed on < <http://www.livemint.com/Consumer/tv2ZJPoaI6jldOZhZKkw4J/Facebook-userbase-crosses-142-million-in-India.html> on 15 May 2016>.

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political activism, with most leading to the threat of violent extremism. The Technology driven new media including social media is another source of non-traditional threat. We have seen the potential of this new media to destabilise nations and affect serious change in the case of countries like Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, etc.³

5. Government agencies may not be able to match pace with the radical innovations in technology, but they will have to be proactive in their engagement and outreach efforts in e-governance, ensure collaboration of citizens and building of secure communities, and have standard operating procedures in place which could be operationalised in times of emergency.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ARMED FORCES

“Journalists will say that war is too important to be left to generals. Reporting of war is too important to be left to reporters. Soldiers need to get involved in this.”

-Maj Gen Patrick Brady – 1990

(former Public Relations Chief of US Army)

6. **Shaping Public Opinion.** The media has surely become a mean of altering the opinion of people and shaping their actions. Today almost every person has access to media and somehow starts believing the views that are regularly being reflected by social media. Today, the digital arena is intrusive and all pervasive. Industries, administration, people, ministers, governments, and even the Prime Ministers are using social media to interact directly with the people and using it for their own advantage. Another important aspect to be understood is that, the public opinions always affects the decisions of a nation both in terms of military and non- military aspects.

³ “Premier addresses threats and challenges to national security in 21st century” on URL: <http://www.ft.lk/opinion/Premier-addresses-threats-and-challenges-to-national-security-in-21st-century/14-661961>

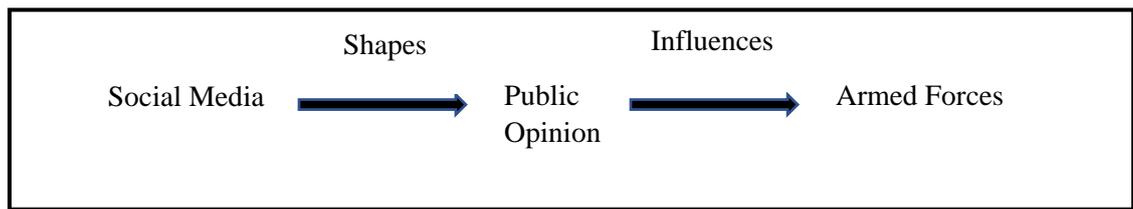


Figure 1

7. **Armed Forces- An Extension of Politics.** In the era of anti-politics, Armed forces are looked as extension of the government and are increasingly becoming a handle to leverage both by the government as well as the opposition and hence, coming under more scrutiny than ever before. The ease of access through social media platform makes it even more vulnerable.

8. **Threat to National Security.** The vast expanse of network also lends itself to cybercrime, perpetuated by cyber criminals and nations/non-state actors inimical to any nation. The cyber security today is one of the most vital elements of national security. Therefore, military organisations cannot remain impervious to changes outside. The rapid increases in communications technology has challenged the aim of maintenance of operational security.

9. **Armed Forces Personnel and Social Media.** Soldiers in the Armed Forces come from the same society and cannot remain oblivious to the technological revolution which has become national addiction and like any human being are equally affected by the presence of social media and have also undergone behavioural change which in a way is life changing. Today, the society is grappling with information overload. The Armed Forces are more rigid and compartmentalised in their functionality which essential stems from their operational philosophy. Social media has now opened avenue for all ranks and files to air their opinions, views, cribs, criticism, and target individuals and organisations jumping the hierarchical ladder. Last few years proved more catastrophic for the unrest and upheaval created in the nation due to social media and specially in Armed Forces.

10. **Social Media – An Instrument of War.** In today’s modern world, social media has become an Instrument of war and is increasingly altering the course of war all around the world.

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The British action during Falklands war, withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, shaping up of US- Iraq war etc are some of the examples where media has played an important role in shaping the war and its results. The Armed forces nowadays, use social media in terms of informational warfare and psychological warfare to influence their opponents.

11. **Media and Terrorism.** Media does not create terrorist, nor does it promote terrorism. Once terrorism gets going, terrorism and media becomes symbiotic. The media's insatiable drive to supply newsworthy content is simultaneously mirrored by the strategic necessity of terrorist movements for the oxygen of publicity. Terrorism is a communicative act in the sense that it seeks to send a message to multiple audiences: to a government, to a wider population, to captivated audiences at home, to their own movement/organization, to a constituency of sympathizers and to prospective recruits. The media in a way helps achieve them their aim and provides them with the communication media.

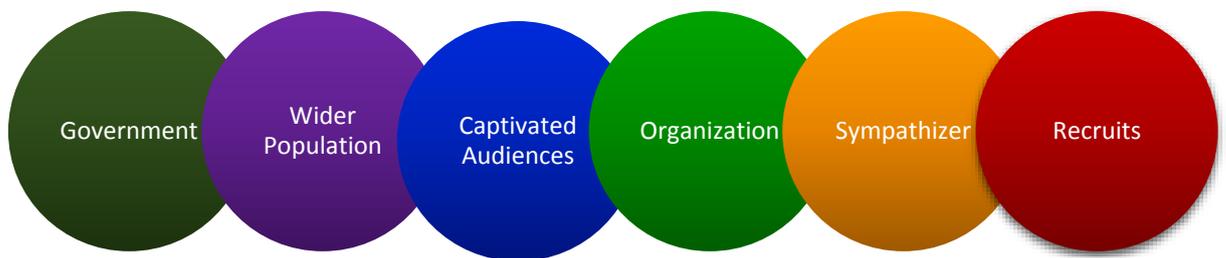


Figure 2

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

12. **Positive Impacts.** Social Media because of its vast expanse and widespread accessibility to the personnel can be used as a strong medium to enhance the National Security of a country. The media should be handled in a positive manner in an order to shape the national as

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well as international environment to meet the interest of a nation. Some of the important positive impacts that media can be used in shaping the National security are highlighted below: -

- a. The effective use of social media may have the potential to help commander to get a complete understanding of the environment and help him in taking the correct decision. Social media may allow more agile use of information in support of operations.
- b. Moreover, they may be harnessed to help achieve unity of effort with partners in conflict. A strong message using media can help finding allies during the war.
- c. It can help develop confidence and trust among the populace in armed forces and in turn the government. This will help armed forces in conduct of smooth operations.
- d. A strong relationship between media and Armed forces will help in improving the image of Armed Forces and help justify their actions in front of the Nation and the international community.
- e. Media also plays a key role in handling situations and giving assurance to the civil populace on behalf of the government and Armed forces in the eventuality of a natural or a manmade disaster.
- f. Media can also act as the eyes and ears of Armed forces to further strengthen the national security.
- g. Social media are changing the way that information is passed across societies and around the world. The rapid spread of blogs, social networking sites, and media-sharing technology aided by the proliferation of mobile technology can be used to spread awareness about disasters and to ensure safety of personnel.

13. **Negative Impacts.** On one hand, where social media is a boon for industries, business, non-government organisation etc., it can be a serious threat to the National security of a nation. Some of the critical impacts of social media endangering National security are as mentioned below: -

- a. Media acts as a platform for terrorist communication and inspires 'Copy-Cat' terrorism. This helps the violent groups to achieve their objectives with least amount of efforts and resources.

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- b. It can be hazardous and often shapes up an anti-government sentiment among people, leading to civil riots and unrest.
- c. The news channels, with their ability to shape the environment were never short of sponsors and many of them allegedly were patronised by commercial, political, and social bigwigs. They use the media for their advantage and interests. This leads to development of biased opinion among public.
- d. Due to its vast expanse and accessibility, social media can lead into compromise of operational security.
- e. It can be effectively used by non-state actors for spreading their radical ideas and to increase sympathizers and get more recruits.

MEDIA MANAGEMENT IN ARMED FORCES

14. **Levels of Management.** As per hierarchy in the armed forces, the management of media is also to be undertaken at different levels according to the sensitivity of the information. Certain information can be handled at the level of Commanding officers, certain at Area Commanders and certain needs to be handled at the level of service headquarters. Presently the media management in armed forces is done at three major levels: -

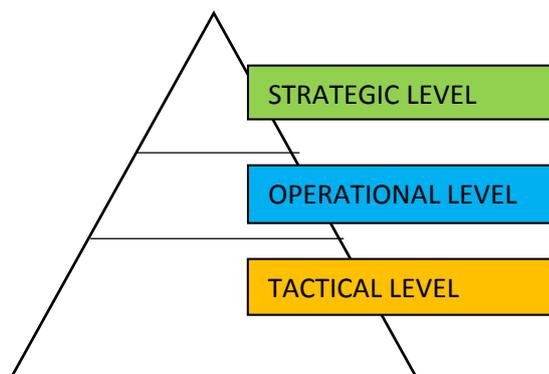


FIGURE 3

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15. **Principles of Engagement.** Some of the Principles to be followed in Armed Forces during media engagement are as mentioned below: -

- a. Know the background of the issue in hand.
- b. Know the limitations of information that needs to be released as per higher directive.
- c. Know your audience i.e. the people, the media, the agencies involved etc.
- d. Asses the interests of media and try to cover those aspects.
- e. Know your objectives that has been given by higher authorities.
- f. Deliver to the point and highlight the point in issue.
- g. No off the records statements to be made.
- h. Maintain ethics
- i. Maintain and control the information flow to media and outside agencies.

16. **Risk Communication.** One of the critical aspects of Armed forces is to manage the natural and manmade disasters, which puts them in a position to shoulder the responsibility of handling media during difficult times. The criticality of handling media at such situations, is a real test of armed forces personnel who needs to be trained and sensitized at various stages of their career, to be prepared for the day of eventuality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

17. One of the most important factors in undertaking an effective media management is to develop a strong relationship with the Media. The military must rely on trust and relationships between its spokespersons and reporters. Some of the key aspects in developing this strong bond between Armed forces and media are as mentioned below: -

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- a. Media should be integrated by commanders during the operational planning stage.
- b. Identify and address the various interest of media.
- c. Maintain credibility of the information being passed to media.
- d. Another important aspect is to maintain the news value of the information release.
- e. Timely providing information to media at the first available instance so as to help release social pressure.
- f. Regular interaction with media is to be maintained. Make them feel what role do they play in ensuring operational security.
- g. No unnecessary hindrance to be created to journalists while operating, however, the operational security needs to be maintained.
- h. Keep a single point of contact like media officer at all level of hierarchy to maintain healthy relation with media personnel.
- j. Provide assistances likes escorts, media pass badges, refreshments etc. during events and operations.
- k. Introduce a media capsule in all basic courses for officers as well as sailors to make them realize the value of media management and the harmful effects it can have if not handled properly.
- l. Undertaking of specialized courses for officers in media management to understand the recent developments and technological advances in field of media today.
- m. Nomination of an officer as media officer in every unit who is qualified to handle media in terms of any eventuality.

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CONCLUSION

18. The Armed forces must seize the opportunity and move forward from being content users to content producers, by encouraging online professionalism. This would bring greater respect from diverse communities both within and outside, and also open up immense opportunities. Pre-eminence cannot come through macho mindsets and invisible intellectual capacity. The Military leadership has to accept the media as a new dimension of conflict and create a structure capable of utilizing the positives of media and shape up the environment as per their own requirements. A key to successfully adapting to the changes will be commanders' ability to develop strategies that take advantage of the changes and deny the enemy exclusive rights to the same. The U.S. military has the tools available to perform the tasks inherent in a strategy that will allow it to capitalize on the emerging trends in information and improve their ability to understand the environment, communicate more effectively, and generate unity of effort throughout the battlefield.

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