



Social Media: Catalyst for Empowering the Armed Forces

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One of the most potent impacts of the latent influence of social media was the ushering in of the people's revolution or the Arab Spring. Starting with a small incident of mistreatment of a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, by government authorities in the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, the event, starting on 17 December 2010, snowballed into an unstoppable phenomenon, leading to a mass mobilisation of people against the Ben Ali regime. Active use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, messages and photographs spread through the people's social circles, and the resulting protests and rallies forced the former President Ben Ali to flee the country. The emotional mobilisation had a profound impact in the neighbourhood, leading to a change of governments in Egypt, Yemen and Libya, and also manifested in an all-out civil war in Syria. Social media had become a means for collective activism to circumvent state-operated

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media channels.¹The Arab Spring demonstrated the reach and the unstoppable power of social media and forced the world to acknowledge a powerful weapon in shaping and influencing opinions. Having started as interactive sites for people to meet and share ideas and views, the social media platforms, due to their cutting edge technology and adoption, have become an integral part of our daily lives. Apart from meeting emotional and psychological needs, these platforms cater to common attributes, tastes, interests, causes or activities. The most active social media platform, WhatsApp, today has over a billion users and any message which goes viral on the web can reach across the globe in a matter of minutes, thus, triggering reactions within a short time, and swaying the views of the masses. The platforms provide a forum to post-expressions without any apprehensions and, thus, it is here that the *anonymous are acknowledged*.

Armed Forces and Social Media

One of the most challenging aspects of social media is ascertaining the authenticity of the messages posted on various sites. As inflammatory messages go viral, they influence emotions, create varying opinions, and can generate an atmosphere of distrust. If the armed forces do not tell their side of the story, people tend to believe what is posted on social media platforms and the absence of authentic information leads to speculation and rumours. However, these platforms have the ability to deliver the organisation's message without distortion across many platforms, with a significant audience, in a more direct and 'human' way. Having recognised the power of this medium, every Army has undergone an evolution process while laying down guidelines for the use of social media. A 2010 US Department of Defence (DoD) memo states that 'Internet based capabilities are integral to operations',² and the US Army realises that social media enables them *to* communicate in new ways, to a larger audience and faster than ever before and, most importantly, without any distortion of the content.² A study carried out on behalf of the Australian Department

of Defence in 2011 on Review of Social Media and Defence suggested that professional and sound judgement, and common sense should aptly be used by all ranks for appropriate use of social media platforms.³ A 2012 British Ministry of Defence (MoD) doctrine note outlines the concept of strategic communication.⁴ Defined as, 'Advancing national interests by using all means of communication to influence attitudes and behaviour of people, strategic communication incorporates social media to achieve its objective.'

Indian Army's Experience

Social media, being a new phenomenon has a greater number of uses among junior officers and soldiers as the younger generation is more likely to use it, compared to senior officers. Today, social media sites like WhatsApp or Facebook have emerged as favourites amongst service personnel to connect with their friends and relatives and, most importantly, their peers and subordinates within the organisation. Thus, having recognised this fact, one of the most effective strategies by the office of the Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADGPI) was to launch the Indian Army's Facebook page as a means to connect with its own brethren and also other sections of society. Within 18 months of the launch, the Indian Army's Facebook page had over 21 lakh followers.⁵ The Facebook page enabled the Army to post authentic information and also provided a medium to reach out to the common man. Equally sensational was the Indian Army's debut on Twitter, with over 3.5 lakh followers within days of the launch. In addition, both Northern and Eastern Commands have Facebook and Twitter accounts and relevant information is shared with all.

Another important development has been the understanding within the Army's hierarchy about the necessity of educating the personnel on proper usage and potential pitfalls of social media. The dos and don'ts list is an exhaustive compilation, and regular checks would ensure that no classified information or pictures pertaining to individuals in uniform, equipment, or area of operations are posted on these forums. Given the increasing use of social media, it is imperative that all ranks be sensitised to its use and on following the Army's code of conduct and values. The present

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system of issuing advisories needs to be expanded by educating all the personnel on social media through courses of instruction. The education can focus on empowering soldiers and sensitising them on the exploitation by adversaries so that even inadvertently, no classified information is placed on these platforms.

Harnessing the Power of the Medium

In the present digital world, 'social media is the new frontier for signal intelligence.' As the use of social media increases exponentially, Army authorities have to devise means to exploit these platforms for gains in numerous fields. The Singapore Army uses Facebook to pass orders on a daily basis and issue instructions. Though the same is not feasible in India's case, the social media platforms can form the backbone for the twenty-first century digital Army. Its applications range from its use in intelligence collection, training, connecting with all ranks, reaching out to veterans and, most importantly, enabling commanders to connect with their command through an unconventional channel. It can be effectively used to control narratives, fight malicious intentions by posting the truth, and equally significantly, keep all service personal abreast of the latest developments in contentious fields so that they are aware of the true facts. Its broad applications can be as given as follows:

Tool for Information Warfare

Two examples of extremely successful use of social media platforms in the past have been Hezbollah's efforts in the second Israeli-Lebanese War and the exponential use by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). During the conflict, Hezbollah uploaded several videos and photos on blogs, social networking sites, and YouTube to foster its own image and decry Israel, and its security services. Further, Hezbollah managed to instil a 'perception of failure' in the Israeli political-military establishment which conditioned the course of the conflict.⁶ The second successful exploitation has been by the ISIS where the handlers used social media to recruit

volunteers, gather resources and funding, while posting gruesome videos to instil a terror image of their outfit.

The biggest asset of the social media platforms is the instant messages passing ability. Within seconds, a million followers can have access to the details posted. There is a requirement of having a dedicated organisation for monitoring social media at the Army Headquarters (HQ), with cells down till the Divisional HQ level, comprising trained experts who continuously scan the social media sites to collate information and trends in their area and who should be able to anticipate likely scenarios to be one step ahead. These cells must counter negative perceptions, interact with the public to gauge reactions, and glean information as the common man is the worst affected. Use of academicians, think-tanks, and volunteers must be made to form public opinions or plan themes.. The Army's digital efforts must be proactive to form an overwhelming positive national and international opinion on national security issues concerning our adversaries. The present capability needs a major capacity enhancement to effectively fight a digital war in perception management.

Collection of Intelligence

Today the availability of information on these platforms is vast and requires professional analysis. Assistance from civil firms would be a force multiplier in this regard. The example illustrates the scope of sifting data and joining the dots to form an intelligence picture. The shooting down of the Malaysian Airline Flight MH17 over Ukraine on 14 July 2014, was attributed to the pro-Russian rebels by collating information available on social media. Using a Big Data analysis firm, the experts were able to collect posts and images uploaded by the rebels. The first post on the VKontakte social media profile attributed to the Donbass Separatist Militia, claimed responsibility for shooting down an AN-26 near Torez. The investigators were able to trace the move of the Buk Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM), used to shoot the aircraft through posts on social media by the militia leaders who had posted their photos with the missile system. Another example was the tracking of cell phone signals of Israeli soldiers during the second Israeli-Lebanon War by the Iranian Army.

By analyzing the signal clusters, the Iranians were able to pinpoint the troop concentrations and deduce likely thrust points in Lebanon and pass advance information to Hezbollah.

In the Indian context, a simple search shows sufficient data on our adversaries. Numerous photos of officers in uniform and with equipment are available for specialists to gather information. Using Big Data analysis, a more comprehensive intelligence collation can take place. For example, the website of the Federation of American Scientists lists details of all Pakistani air bases, with facilities, including the names of squadrons, and the numbers and type of aircraft at each base.⁷

Connecting with Soldiers

Another significant application can be the connect between senior officers and the men they command by using social media. The social media platforms present an opportunity to extend their span of influence beyond the chain of command, cut through multiple layers of bureaucracy, and potentially develop a personal form of 'soft power'.⁸ The WhatsApp number of the Western Army Commander is available on the command website. It provides an indirect communication channel to his troops. The same can be tried by commanders at all levels to understand and interact with soldiers in the present times.

Army Specific Applications

A very resourceful application could be developing the Army specific applications for use by soldiers on a daily basis. With every soldier today in possession of a smartphone, these applications will be very beneficial. The US Army has a long list of applications to assist the soldiers in field conditions. The applications can be used to educate the soldiers by having training pamphlets and other instruction material to provide readymade reference. Applications like iSurvive and Army First Aid today provide information on basic and advanced first aid, besides giving information on navigation, communication, and personal protection techniques. Applications using military coordinates based on the Indian Remote National Satellite Service (IRNSS) can assist during peace-time and operations. An application on the entitlements of soldiers will be

of immense assistance to the personnel, and one on the lines of Army Onesource Service Locator can provide administrative details at a specific station or information on schooling facilities and other important local information. The list is endless and there has to be a concerted focus on the development of such applications as a priority. These applications can be encrypted with specific codes for security.

Controlling Narratives

The immense reach of the medium makes it a potent tool in the hands of adversaries or insurgents in shaping people's thought process and influencing their opinions. Negative or provocative messages tend to exploit emotions and create an unhealthy divide. Hence, it is essential that the social media narrative is managed and guided by own core principles of honesty and integrity. It is not feasible to suppress/hide or distort facts or incidents. Hence, the true picture and correct information must be given by own channels at the earliest. Mistakes, where made, must be acknowledged and corrective measures taken. The Twitter handle of Headquarters Northern Command and Facebook page of the ADGPI give authentic information of any incident on occurrence and, thus, speculation is laid to rest. The next step must be to make these forums interactive to reply to individual queries, where necessary, and allay any apprehensions.

Interactive Forums

Perhaps, the most significant application in the coming times of social media platforms will be interactive forums at all levels to connect with the soldiers and their families and provide accurate information on a 24-hour basis. Today, officers are required to know all the procedures and details of every case being dealt with by them and it is not always feasible to have access to the requisite information. Many times, mistakes are committed due to limited knowledge and ignorance of rules. Forums at Army and subordinate HQ, till the corps level, can answer genuine queries related to procedures, and provide guidance related to official or legal cases, and so on. The applications of the Principal Controller of Defence Accounts (PCDA), Pay Offices at Regimental Centres, can answer queries in real time regarding any issue related to pay and allowances. The welfare of

veterans can be improved immensely through interactive forums at the Defence Pensions, Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS), Department of Ex-Servicemen's Welfare (DESW), Ministry of Defence (MoD)/Directorate General Resettlement (DGR), etc. Regular interface can take place through the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) to reach the families and resolve their queries. However, dedicated teams are mandatory at each of these portals to provide the requisite details with clarity and patience.

Community Connectivity

Public relations must be built as a vital mission for the Indian Army. The Facebook page as well as Twitter handle have been exceptional forums to upload true information and have served as an ideal way to project a positive image of the Army. Their potential as a medium of community connectivity was realised during the Chennai floods when people used these to request for the Army's help to evacuate stranded persons. Local Army units were guided to the stranded persons and their safe evacuation was lauded on the same pages. Numerous photographs of Army persons wading in difficult areas and evacuating civilians went viral on the net, thus, earning the gratitude of the country besides showing the humane face of the Army and highlighting its versatility. The Facebook page has been actively used to showcase the valour of war heroes, pay homage to martyrs, and post information on recruitment or other important activities. Comments from the public indicate that the Army's activities are followed with an increasing regularity and the forum must become more robust by replying to genuine queries and comments to bring about a closer virtual connect with the public.

Conclusion

As use of social media platforms increases, it becomes vital that guidelines and directions are followed on appropriate 'net behaviour'. It is likely that many unwarranted posts, comments or improper messages may be initiated by soldiers. It must be remembered that these forums are not a grievance airing mechanism. The platforms must be used to enrich the

users in the fields of education, health care, entitlements, and resolving genuine problems being faced by the soldiers. It must also be remembered that the armed forces cannot be isolated from usage of these platforms in today's digital world. With its unprecedented reach as well as constructive and destructive powers, it is imperative that the armed forces learn to harness this potent tool for achieving organisational goals.

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