SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INDIAN ARMED FORCES

At the recent symposium on this subject held by Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, a lot of speakers talked about our approach to the issue and many, including the writer of this article, advocated a greater participation of the Indian Armed Forces on Social Media. This article is based on the talk delivered by the writer during the symposium as also information from the other speakers and open sources.

Social or Communication Media

Social Media has become a buzzword which seems to transcend all other forms of communication. It is a little misunderstood and it's impact is probably far more than we initially imagined. But first let us look at the SOCIAL part of it, which leads us to think that it is meant for social networking. While the original intent was for expanding networks for social interaction, social media has metamorphosed into something far beyond the social dimension. We have used letters, telephones and clubs for social networking long before computers came into use, and in the initial stages of the computer age social networking sites were used primarily for social networking. It has however taken on a new dimension with the advent of smart phones and the development of aps for news views and chats that are carried on the same device.

Convergence of Interactive and Propagative Media

As long as the social media sites were being used for networking the security agencies had a benign view of their use. However the smartphone has gradually overtaken TV,

CONVERGENCE OF COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

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two swords represent the combat capabilities". They have adapted to social media as an extension of a wide range of activities they were already doing for decades.

The Indian Experience In our case we were just opening our internal departments for Public Information and Info Warfare which were at a nascent stage in 2002 following the Kargil War. We did not have trained manpower or units for this task and these posts were occupied by tenure based personnel with no prior exposure to this kind of work. In the Indian Army the appointments themselves were ad-hoc, equipment and funds were severely constrained and the personnel were posted in penny packets at corps, command and Army HQ level. By and large they were handling Public Information through the Ministry of Defence Public Relations Officers and some amount of direct dissemination of news to media. As far as social media is concerned it remained taboo and we were neither employing it nor monitoring it till 2013 when very proactive steps were taken by launching the Indian Army Facebook page followed by a Twitter handle. Both are very popular with information of ongoing operations, ceremonial events and historical snippets.

Existing Social Media Policies : IA The policies have evolved and gradually opened up with Army HQ, Northern and Eastern Commands, followed by the Srinagar and Nagrota Corps coming up on Facebook and Twitter. Can make their presence felt on social media in their private capacity on non- military topics wherein military identities cannot be revealed. Our capability to monitor social media at large and exploit the medium to it's full potential is being gradually improved. The presence on various sites is being actively

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maintained as a tool of Public Information giving out the Army perspective on current events in a proactive manner by ADGPI and other IW staff who have the permission to post content on social media, with excellent results.

There are presently no units entrusted with this task and there is no HR policy to promote talent in this field, with most personnel doing their first and only tenure

FACEBOOK - ADGPI   TWITTER PAGE - NORTHERN COMMAND

in this domain however existing resources are being utilized to the best extent possible.

Inception of a Social Media Program We need to build on the excellent work done by the ADGPI in the field of Social Media as a component of Psychological Operations and Information Warfare. Similar adaptation can be done by the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force who are working in this field. The following steps may be considered for progressing a formal social media programme that will reach down to the smallest unit/ establishment in all three services of the Armed Forces:-

- **Exploit Army Intranet/ AFNET/ Indian Navy platforms** The initial unit and formation sites can be opened on secure networks already available with the services and shifted to open domain once they are populated and validated. Within the secure network a greater amount of content may be permitted to enable service personnel to

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network and share information.

- **Balance between Security and Sharing** There is an urgent need to open up social media to all units of the defence forces. Information security has to be ensured by a combination of software logarithms, extensive training and revised HR policies for staffing. After the initial monitoring of unit content on secure networks it may be shifted to the open network with various safeguards, checks and balances. Units and specified individuals would be permitted to post details of their activities to attract the youth to join, as also to promote networking among serving personnel and generate a feedback channel for the forces.

- **Social Media Monitoring and Exploitation** A synchronised IW structure needs to be set up with requisite wherewithal, trained staff and dedicated units for Information Warfare. With the restructuring presently under way, a dedicated cadre for psychological and cyber

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operations can be raised and full units of Territorial Army created for this purpose. There is also a need to streamline the structures for flow of information and response mechanisms across multiple agencies and departments involved at the national level

Conclusion

Social media needs to be recognized as an essential element of Perception Management and Information Warfare. This medium transcends both these domains riding on the single device today- the smartphone which is today the window to news, views and chat used by an increasing proportion of people across the globe. We can no longer rely on traditional media which is fast becoming obsolete. Social Media has come of age and it needs to be harnessed by the Armed Forces as a tool of Info War. Perception created is reality defined in the cyber connected world and the route to achieve our objectives passes inexorably through Social Media.

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Print Media and the PC as a broadcast agent, and several aps have become popular where views on events are flashed to an exponentially increasing audience. Most people now turn to social media for obtaining news and expressing their views in the public domain 24X7. These social media aps have thus entered the space of propaganda and have emerged as tools of Information Warfare.

From Enabler to New Threat

This new dimension of social media has resulted in security forces the world over feeling the need to regulate the presence of their personnel on such sites. It is no longer a medium of social networking as the convergence of news views and chats onto the Mobile Phone lends it a massive potential as a tool for Information Warfare. 46 % of the world population uses mobile internet and the annual growth rate for the same is 30 %. While we may look at Newspapers once a day and TV twice a day, people are checking their mobiles for social media up to 80 times a day. The potential for influencing perceptions and modifying policy decisions is thus tremendously higher than it was before the advent of the smartphone. Various nations and agencies have looked at Social Media in different ways based on their unique approach to the issue.

Characteristics of Social Media
Let us look at some of the characteristics that make Social Media both an opportunity and a threat before we consider the way forward in this new dimension.

Advantages
- **Large Reach with Cascading Effect** - Potential to reach half the globe.

- **Fastest Means** – Instantaneous dissemination to mobile handsets.
- **Best defence against Rumors & Myths** - Propogating the correct version
- **Perception Management Tool** - Ability to influence perceptions, modulate public opinion and inform your own people
- **Interactive Tool** – Ability to gauge the reaction and mood
- **Economical** – Extensive reach with minimal Finance/ Resources
- **Flexibility in Accountability** - Deniability can be feigned to an extent.

Disadvantages
- **Open Availability** - Content available to friends & enemies
- **A false sense of connection**- Virtual connection not comparable to face to face communication.
- **Uncertain Effect** - Reach dependent on carriers and media, hence target audience may not be fully addressed
- **Uncensored and Irretrievable.** Mistakes, when they happen, will go viral
- **Potential Misuse**- Vulnerable to hacking for obtaining intelligence or misuse
- **Threat of False Propaganda**
- **Threat to Security and Privacy**

Threats posed by Social Media .
Security agencies are keeping social media on their watchlist because of the unique opportunities this medium offers

to terrorists, criminals and hostile nations. Let us see the potential misuse of Social Media by Terrorists and Hostile Agents.

- **Use of Social Media by Terrorists**
  - ✓ Online Radicalisation
  - ✓ Recruitment
  - ✓ Coordinating Attacks
  - ✓ Profiling targets
  - ✓ Fund Raising
- **Use of Social Media by Adversaries**
  - ✓ Gleaning Security Information
  - ✓ Attack cohesiveness of Armed Forces
 - ✓ Weaken Resolve
  - ✓ Jus ad bellum - distortion

Response to Threats.

Many technological advancements have become threats or have a history of misuse by criminals, terrorists and enemy agents. The automobile was never designed to kill people but we lose thousands of lives in accidents. The radio was designed to facilitate control of large forces but it is vulnerable to interception and impersonation. Gunpowder created for pyrotechnics and dynamite designed for the construction industry were quickly adapted to guns, bombs and IEDs. In all these instances security forces continued the exploitation of the developments while putting in place effective means of minimizing risks and threats which they posed. However the capability of Social Media to transcend International Boundaries riding on Cyber Space, has

not been easily matched by the Security Forces capability to harness , exploit and control this new new dimension of warfare.

Meeting the Challenge- Fight or Flight

As mentioned above the initial response of security agencies was benign towards social media. Subsequently, as the popularity of these sites mushroomed, instances of the above misuse increased. Various nations took different approaches in response. The US Army already had a Psy Ops program in place and a dedicated psychological operations cadre. They readily absorbed the new medium and took proactive steps to harness the potential of social media. UK Army similarly had a dedicated unit involved in Psy Ops which has since been enhanced to a Brigade. The Israeli Army opened a Social Media Warroom and is very active on this medium. Units and formations in these forces with a more open social media policy exploit social media to attract fresh recruitment, inform own troops of activities and generate a feedback channel. The US Army Social Media Directory is available at https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/directory/ and it lists hundreds of units, formations,
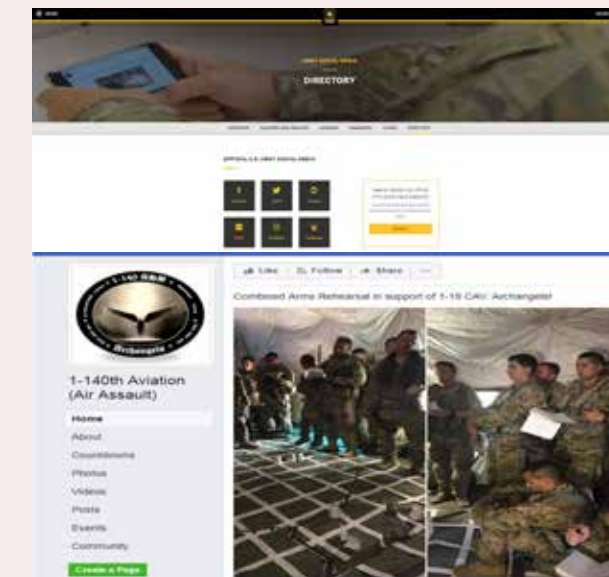
HQs and Training Establishments. The page contains instructions to register their accounts on Facebook, Twitter, U Tube. Instagram. Flikr and Slideshare.

Existing Social Media Policies : US Army
The US Army has a publicly available social media policy. Some excerpts and highlights are given below :-
- ➢ The Army acknowledges the importance of social media, and encourages our commands, Soldiers, Families, and Army Civilians to safely and accurately use social media to share their experiences and provide information.
- ➢ Important role in personal, social & professional life recognized.
- ➢ As Army communicators, we must utilize social media platforms to report the most accurate and up-to-date information.
- ➢ The Army recognizes that social media gives people the ability to communicate with larger audiences faster and in new ways. It has become an important tool for Army messaging and outreach.
- ➢ Result…
  - ▪ Units, Formations, training institutions and individuals on Social Media
  - ▪ News and events flashed with high PM value
  - ▪ Important **Feedback / Internal PM / networking Channel** functional.
  - ▪ All users registered and content monitored.

- ➢ **The US Army understands the risks associated with social media and has developed training to help Soldiers and Family members use social media responsibly.**
- ➢ **A dedicated cadre called the Psychological Operations Corps has been part of the US Army for decades with distinct special units in every corps level force.**
- ➢ The description of the Regimental Insignia of the Corps give an insight into their approach . "*Silver gray, white and black represent the three types of Psychological Operations; white represents the overt processes, black is for the covert and gray for the hidden. The laurel wreath symbolizes honor and achievement.. The chess knight represents the ability to act obliquely and influence all types of warfare. The lightning bolts represent the psychological operations ability to strike anywhere with speed and the*

U.S. Army Psychological Operations Corps