

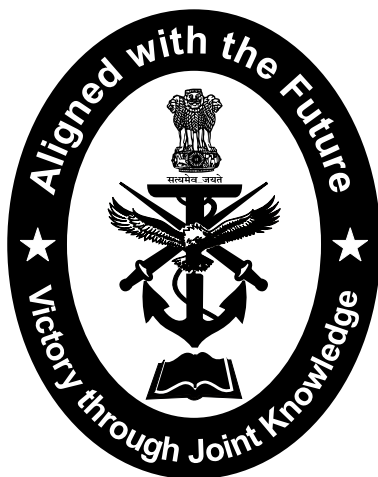
**HARNESSING  
SOCIAL MEDIA  
BY THE INDIAN  
ARMED FORCES**



# **HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE INDIAN ARMED FORCES**

*By*

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New Delhi  
ISBN : 978-93-84492-24-3  
Price in India : ₹ 100 /-*

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*Printed in India*

*Printed by*

**Xtreme Office Aids Pvt. Ltd.**

*Basement Bhanot Building (Below Syndicate Bank)*

*Nangal Raya Commercial Complex, N.D-110046*

*Ph.: +91-9811707220*

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**W**arfare in the present context has evolved rapidly ever since the last of the major war viz, the World War II happened. One could have never imagined during the early twentieth century the numerous forms of warfare that would emerge within a few years of the World War. Just as machineguns, tanks, and aircraft changed the nature of conflicts then, so did the telegraph, radio, television, and eventually the internet have changed the course of history in the intervening decades. The advances today in the information world, specifically with the advent of social media and new media, may prove as profound as any of these inventions<sup>1</sup>. *"We must hold our minds alert and receptive to the application of unglimpsed methods and weapons. The next war will be won in the future, not the past. We must go on, or we will go under"*<sup>2</sup> said General MacArthur way back in 1931 realizing the enormous power of technology that was to unfold in the not so distant future that would eclipse all forms of traditional war fighting.

The worldwide social media scenario is evolving at a fast pace transforming into a mainstream activity and becoming a part of everyday life of major section of society. Global digital snapshot<sup>3</sup> reveals that half of the world's population is now connected to the internet accounting for a 10-percent increase

in the total number of web users compared to last year. Also significant to note is that while laptop and desktop devices mark a 20-percent decrease in usage, mobile browsing currently accounts for half of the world's web traffic, noting a 30-percent increase in mobile usage year-on-year.

Social Media is different from other media such as radio, print and television in two distinct ways – first, the amount of content that can be generated by the users themselves far exceeds the content generated by news/opinion makers and second, its “viral” ability for potential spread of information by interlinking of the various social media platforms, thereby reducing the control over spread of any such information<sup>4</sup>. Social media and new media are changing the ways information moves around the world. Speed and transparency of information have increased, the roles of traditional and new media are changing, and social networking tools allow collaboration as never seen before<sup>5</sup>. There will no doubt be changes to the nature of conflicts as a result.

The power of internet and social media to influence opinion in any domain is an undeniable fact due to the transparent nature and reach of this new form of media. Social media presents sustained challenges and opportunities to the military world over. In recent years, new adversaries armed with new social-media capabilities and an information-led strategy have proven themselves capable of stopping the most powerful militaries in the world. Government agencies and armies of the world were quick to recognize the potential threat that such media can pronounce and evolved counter measures to thwart such threats. It was understood within no time that piecemeal approach towards handling individual threats is a myopic approach and a long-term vision on handling of the web and social media usage for their effective use would be required.

The current trend indicates an increasing number of militaries worldwide using social media to recruit soldiers, gather intelligence, spread propaganda and even communicate with their own and other military groups. A broad spectrum of social media is identified as the newest international military battleground with its inbuilt challenges and as the battle intensifies, more countries start participating. In the year 2015 the British army created its own special force known as the 77th Brigade for social media warfare. It is based in Berkshire and comprises reservists and regulars with journalistic skills who are social media savvy<sup>6</sup>. The Israeli military are pioneers of using social media going back as far as 2008 during its war on Gaza. They are active participants on almost all prominent platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Capability of Israel/ US/ UK indicates a potential for all nations to engage with an audience it couldn't reach in any other way.

A major lesson to be learnt from the turmoil in Kashmir Valley is how effectively social media can be misused against peace and security. Blatant misuse of social media by the militants and their handlers from across the border with the aim of swaying the emotions and misguiding the innocent youth of Kashmir is an example of how important it is to manage and control the social media space 24X 7 by our security forces. Barely had the embers of the Kashmir mayhem cooled that another surprise was sprung on social media by a flurry of videos with members of the para military and armed forces using this platform to vent their frustrations against the system. All these videos created quite a stir in the media and the public and the fact that these videos were repeatedly aired on TV channels for up to four days continuously, it cannot be put past some anti national elements being behind this well-coordinated and sensational attempt to show security forces/ government in poor light.

Despite the risks and challenges, social media and open communications has the ability to make the armed forces stronger. In the evolving conundrum, it thus emerges that the Indian Armed Forces need to leverage the social media space not only from the point of view of countering its use by anti-nationals but also use it to own advantage in shaping the electronic battlefield in a way that can move the masses in its favour. Social media is here to stay, whether anyone else wants it to or not. Using social media effectively is a process, and it requires strategy, goals, manpower and foresight. This is to ensure an appropriate balance where the safety of armed forces personnel and sensitive information is protected, while at the same time, our people and organisations continue to employ appropriate social media to engender transparency and a closer connection between the military and society<sup>7</sup>.

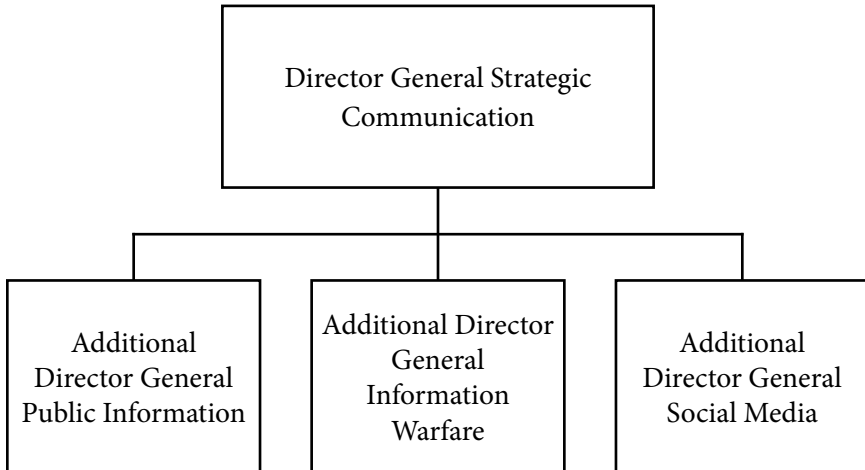
### **Recommendations to Harness the Power of Social Media**

In the today's digitally connected era the need of the hour is to carryout realistic assessment with an aim to craft a practical and effective social media strategy to fully harness the power of this new media. Some suggested key issues are elaborated in succeeding paragraphs.

- **Organizational Structures**. The social media domain is expanding at a very fast pace leading to emerging complex dynamics of operation in this space. The present existing structures in the armed forces are not geared up to handle this emerging media. Effective handling of social media space thus requires establishment of a dedicated organization. The aspects of public information, media management, information warfare and social media are closely inter-related



and need close coordination and management. Thus, it is recommended to bring all these under one umbrella organization under HQ Integrated Defence Staff. A suggested organization is given below :-



- **Policies and Guidelines.** The existing guidelines are neither exhaustive nor enabling for military personnel to operate effectively in the social media space. Hence there is a need to issue comprehensive guidelines encompassing all facets of social media which should be simple and easily implementable.
- **Training.** The social media space is fraught with dangers which can have adverse effects on the operational security. It is thus imperative that comprehensive and practical training be imparted at all levels from category A to category B establishments. Effective training will ensure

that all military personnel are aware of the pros and cons of the social media space leading to enabling military personnel. This is a priority requirement.

- **Education of Families**. The actions of our military families have a direct impact on the operational environment of the security forces. There is thus a need to educate our military families so that they can contribute positively on the Social Media space and inadvertently not compromise the security of the armed forces personnel.
- **Leveraging Celebrities**. The impact of social media is felt by the changing sentiments and the hot trending topics which indicate the mood of the environment and specifically the targeted population. To run a successful social media campaign, it is imperative that a large section of the population tweet and post comments in our favour indicating a positive and a successful campaign. However, to manage huge crowds for running a successful campaign is not an easy proposition. Thus certain celebrities who are closely associated with the defence forces being honorary members of the armed forces need to be leveraged to carry our message to the masses. Their huge fan following will impact the sentiment towards the truth in our favour and defeat the evil designs of the enemies of the state.
- **Response Mechanism**. The aspect of information void following an incident causes the

defence forces to cede ground to conjectures which are best avoided. Silence and failure to involve the media may lead to conjectures which will benefit the adversary who is trying to propagate the false story. Our response should be truthful and without any delay. Accordingly, structures and policies must be created to ensure an immediate response mechanism. Presently the armed forces are very shy to respond which cannot work in the Social Media space. Decentralised approach would be imperative for an immediate response. The young members of the armed forces have to be involved to engage the audience.

- **Micro Websites and Webpages.** To ensure that information about any incident or action is brought to the fore at the earliest it is important that all the details, descriptive photographs and images depicting the truth are hosted on the website with speed to convey our point. Micro websites could be brought up for a particular incident immediately so that the truth is brought to the knowledge of all concerned immediately. This will ensure that false propaganda is defeated.
- **Dissemination of Information.** There is a lack of a clear and concise information dissemination policy for the armed forces personnel in the social media space. There is a need to disseminate information laterally to all effected in the social media network. Social Media is a battle of networks and information should be passed to all sector commanders and company commanders

by the higher headquarters instantaneously so that the correct picture is known to all without delay. The policy for information dissemination needs to be revised and made responsive to ensure fast dissemination of data to all our armed forces personnel. Networks have to be integrated for information flow with adequate security.

- **Usage of Social Media in Counter Insurgency / Counter Terrorist (CI/CT) Operations.** The Armed Forces Special Forces Act (AFSPA) permits the armed forces to use all means to fight terrorism. Accordingly, Social Media is also a weapon that should be used by the armed forces effectively to fight the false propaganda being spread by the militants/ separatists/ antinational elements. Management and creation of innovative campaigns is thus vital in CI/CT operations to ensure truthful and factual reports about all incidents are brought to the fore for dissemination to the citizens with speed. The aspect of leveraging social media in CI/CT operations is a facet which needs immediate and deliberate attention on priority.
- **Pre-and Post-Crisis Management.** Effective handling of crisis necessitates pre-and post-crisis management which is woefully lacking in the armed forces in the social media domain. There is thus a need for pre-crisis and post crisis planning at each stage with clear cut responsibilities and authority delegated to the subordinates to ensure that real time response can be generated. Most important in the whole

game is to be able to draw an assessment at the end of the incident so as to draw post incident analysis for future. This needs incorporation of domain experts.

- **Centre for Army Lessons Learnt (CALL)**. The CALL at ARTRAC is mandated to keep a record of all important case studies with an aim of disseminating lessons learnt to our armed forces. CALL needs to be incorporated to ensure all important lessons are recorded for posterity with aim to learn from them for better management of social media campaigns and crisis situations. CALL is part of post crisis management which will help in pre-crisis management.
- **Content Generation**. The secret to success in the Social Media space is content generation and management. Designing themes for campaigns needs a high level of expertise. Hence the need to create a core team consisting of service personnel at the highest level for content generation which is then passed down to all selected levels for dissemination and further momentum. Experts from the civil street as well as the armed forces need to be selected and earmarked for this vital job which is the start point of a successful social media campaign.
- **Information Warriors**. There are diverse views on incorporating all members of the armed forces as information warriors to participate in the social media campaigns. However, it is felt that involving all personnel maybe counter – productive and fraught with dangers due to

lack of adequate knowledge by all. Therefore, it is recommended that a mid-course could be adopted wherein the campaign is conceived by the core group and selected members who have been trained be incorporated in the campaign irrespective of their location. Slowly the number of trained information warriors will increase which ensure successful management of the social media campaigns. A long-term Perspective Plan be chalked out and phase wise execution be undertaken.

- **Sentiment Analysis.** Among the main aims of a social media campaign is managing the sentiments of the target populace by running carefully managed campaigns. Victory goes to the player who manages the sentiments in his favour. Sentiments also indicate the corrective action needed if any to effectively turn the sentiments in our own favour. Hence sentiment analysis is a vital aspect of social media domain which needs specialized attention. The social media organization should use all means including technical to gauge and turn the sentiments in our favour.
- **Matching Platform to Platform.** To remain ahead in the OODA loop every social media platform needs to be matched. Thus, we cannot be restricted to only whatsapp or facebook or Twitter. All social media platforms need to be leveraged to defeat the nefarious designs of the enemy. The need of the hour is to identify the Social Media Space which matters and get active there.

- **Special Operations.** Social Media operations need to be classified as special operations and handled accordingly. The fast changing nature and its wide ramifications of Social media necessitate specialized supervision and management.
- **Hiring of Experts.** Social Media operates on special platforms necessitating hiring of experts. Certain functions of Social Media need to be outsourced so that the specialized functions can be handled professionally. Thus, the organizational structure should cater for hiring of domain experts for effective social media management.
- **Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR).** Social media campaigns aim to manage the perceptions of the target audience and hence require experts who can understand human behavior more deeply. DIPR is one such institute of the armed forces who need to be incorporated in conceiving campaigns and managing crisis for favourable outcomes. An analysis of their capability needs to be undertaken in a professional manner.
- **Smart Phones.** Smart Phones are the weapons and tools of social media. The present orders on the subject do not permit the usage of smart phones in the official work place and hence its utility in the social media space is highly restrictive. There is a need to re-examine the orders on the usage of smart phones building in adequate precautions so that social media

can be effectively leveraged by the members of the armed forces. The need is to strategise the employment of smart phones rather than be restrictive.

- **Indian Social Media Platforms.** Using social media platforms such as whatsapp and facebook which are owned and operated by foreign companies increases the vulnerabilities of our armed forces. The data being generated on these platforms is being used by foreign nations for leveraging it in the social media domain. India being the IT hub of the world should be able to launch a social media platform akin to whatsapp with servers and data farms in India so that vital and sensitive data is not leaked out. Necessary collaboration between government departments need to be encouraged to generate this valuable tool. The armed forces should also develop in house social media platforms akin to whatsapp which will facilitate faster dissemination of information while ensuring operational security.
- **Big Data Analytics and Artificial Intelligence.** Big Data Analytics coupled with Artificial Intelligence is the future of all data platforms in the new world of computing. Social Media platforms and their content are also impacted by these technologies. The defence forces need to step into these domains with urgency producing professionals who will be an asset for managing social media contents and platforms.
- **Long Term Strategy.** To effectively leverage the Social Media space a long term strategy



has to be worked out to encompassing all facets of structures, policies, training and oversight mechanism. Social media management needs an integrated approach and whole of government approach incorporating the academia, industry and ministries such as DIETY, MHA and NITI Aayog.

- **Change of Mindset.** The defence forces have been reticent by nature and loath to transparency. The fast moving and changing world of Social Media requires the armed forces to also change their mindset towards operating in this new dimension of warfare. The change has to come from the top so that structures and policies are created which are enabling rather than restricting ensuring that every soldier is a virtual information warrior.

The effective use of social media has the potential to help the Armed Forces to better understand the environment in which it operates. Social media allows more agile use of information in support of operations. Finding clever and innovative ways to help achieve the desired ends may be the key to success in a continuously evolving social media environment. This demands cultural and organizational changes within the Indian Armed Forces to adapt to the world of digital inhabitants.

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