

Social Media and the Armed Forces

-Defstrat Team

The industrial revolution deeply impacted the world during the 18th and the 19th century; rapidly changing the way people lived. Social Media has caused another revolution in the world on a scale much larger than what happened during the industrial revolution. Earlier we only had newspapers, letters and landline telephones keeping people connected and informed. However, now cell phones and other electronic devices have become the means of communication. These provide instant connectivity. Aided by social networking sites and continually developing Apps connectivity has reached new heights. All social media sites whether it be Facebook, Linked In, You Tube, Twitter or Instagram have myriad and continually growing communities of followers. Estimated number of social media users is 2.03 billion people with a global penetration of 28 percent. 39757 years of our time is collectively spent on Facebook every single day. Social media has thus had a vast impact on our lives. Not only does it help us keep in touch and informed, it also shapes our values and perceptions.

The vast reach and impact of social media is clearly evident from recent world occurrences. During the recent Turkey Coup, when events were rapidly unfolding and there was a haze around what was actually happening, Turkish President Erdogan used the video on his cell phone to communicate with the nation, urging people to come out and oppose those involved



First ladies of the Indian Army and IAF graced the occasion with their presence and underscored its significance

in the coup attempt. The message was further conveyed on social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media was thus instrumental to a very large extent in helping defeat the coup attempt. A few decades ago people would not have been aware of such events unfolding. The narrative thought out by those attempting the coup was thus altered and the world witnessed the far reaching influence of social media. Social Media also came to the fore in the Ukraine conflict when Russian involvement came to light on account of the selfies posted by Russian soldiers.

On the other end of the spectrum, organizations such as Islamic State, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Hezbollah and Hamas also exploit social media to their advantage. ISIS routinely posts videos of its grisly be-headings and executions and uses it for propaganda and recruitment. ISIS have developed Apps known as 'Dawn of Glad Tidings' and 'Amn- Al- Mujahid'. All attackers in the Bangladesh terror attacks were indoctrinated via Social Media and used the secure App Amn-al- Mujahid to coordinate the attack.

It is therefore only natural for social media to pervade the armed forces in equal measure. Armies the world over are seized of this reality and are accordingly gearing up to take advantages that accrue on account of social media and at the same time they are getting ready to deal with the myriad challenges that the proliferation of social media will bring in its wake. In 2013 the British JFC recognised the fact that there was a capacity deficit and accordingly set up a new unit-77 Bde- that would use psychological operations and social media to help fight wars 'in the information age'. The brigade is a combined regular army and army reserve unit. The reserve element draws specialists on a nationwide basis. The British Military are also engaging with the industry and forging international partnerships to enhance relevant capacities. The US, Russian, Chinese and Israeli Armies all have dedicated social media cells.

Social networking sites can be used to reach critical masses instantly and provide them points of view both own and contra. Militaries the world over have thus to be live to the omnipotent





The Symposium was enriched by a diverse experts panel

reality of social media. To create awareness of the potential of social media DEFSTRAT conducted the second edition of the symposium on “Social Media and the Armed Forces” on 12 Aug 2016. The first symposium was held in Feb 2015.

The Keynote address was delivered by the Chief of Air Staff and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha PVSM, AVSM, VM, ADC. We were also privileged to have amidst us Mrs Lily Raha and Mrs Namita Suhag amongst other distinguished guests including several ladies.

The key themes of the seminar were: -

- Social Media and the armed forces: threats and opportunities.
- Managing perceptions: the capabilities of the social media.
- Social Media strategy in the armed forces: educating the environment.
- Considerations for deploying social media across defence services.
- Measuring social media strategies: audience engagement.
- Access to internet and understanding potential of social media for armed forces
- Data mining and exploiting social media for on line sentiments.
- Challenges and opportunities with real time communications

We had a galaxy of distinguished speakers from the services, senior retired service officers and members from the industry and diplomatic missions.

The Take Aways

Some of the key issues that got raised during the event and merit attention and a few recommendations consequent to the deliberations are outlined below:

Legal Aspects. Fifty percent of the misdemeanors on social media do not fall under the purview of the IT Act but attract provisions of IPC which are far harsher. Though Section 66 A has been dropped from the IT Act provisions of IPC can be invoked to punish wrong doings on social media. The advice of District and Sessions Judge Mr Talwant Singh who spoke at the seminar -Do not ‘like’ anti national comments/posts on social media as it makes you an equal party in crime to the person initiating the post/comment, writing ‘Forwarded as

received’ does not exonerate a person and ignorance of law is no excuse.

Exploit Gainfully. Social Media has pervaded all spheres of life and society at large and the armed forces cannot remain divorced from this aspect. The forces must harness its strengths and exploit it as a force multiplier - to be able to do this we need to remove protocols of time and space barriers. At the same time the forces must also remain live to the many challenges that social media poses and be prepared to negate the same.

Restructure Response Organisations. We need to re look at the organisations involved in the three services which are looking after social media aspects. Towards this end we must set up cells, which have the necessary skills and technical wherewithal to monitor and analyse social media and react to all negative inputs with alacrity. It may be worth the while even to consider a Joint Services Organisation; the 77 Bde of the British is looking after social media of the entire British military. In times of crisis we should have one SPOC and not like as in the case of Mumbai when several agencies were involved in briefing the media, during the terror attacks.

Move Away from Centralised Response. We have to move away from the concept of centralised response and disaggregate so that responses are rapid. The concept of taking approval on minute sheets (which take up time) must be done away with. Social Media is horizontal and not hierarchical therefore time is at a premium and immediacy of response is required. To be able to do this we need to empower the response teams.

Appropriate Training and Skills. It is imperative that the personnel dealing with social media aspects have the necessary skills to deal with issues pertaining to social media. They must be trained to understand the influence of social media as also possess language and cultural skills which may be required. And last but not the least people staffing social media cells must be tech savvy. The British military has started a Formal Practitioner Course with a view to impart requisite training. The Indian armed forces must also look at structured training in the field of social media.

Policy and Regulation. It is of the essence that policies and regulation that facilitate the use of social media in the armed forces are put in place. Presently the forces have taken only

What they said

Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha, CAS



Internet has shrunk the world as 24/7 connectivity is available 365 days a year. Rapid changes in technology are impacting the way we live and changing social norms.

In the book *Future Shock* written by Alvin Toffler in 1970; Toffler defines the

term “future shock” as a certain state of individuals and entire societies brought about by “too much change in too short a period of time”. Toffler’s perception has indeed proved right as Social Media has done just that.

Communication technology has greatly evolved in the past couple of decades. Earlier there used to be one landline phone in the entire neighbourhood and the owner was considered privileged. Now with OFCs and satellite communications coming in there is a phenomenal increase in connectivity and consequently in the quantum of transfer of information.

Internet and computers have their own risks. They are very vulnerable to hackers indulging in cyber warfare. Social Media can be misused for the purposes of data mining, misrepresentation of facts, spreading ideology and laying honey traps. Social Media may also lead to inadvertent compromises of operational security- photographs of four Apache helicopters at a particular location in Afghanistan on the social media led to a rebel attack being launched on these choppers.

There are positives that can be derived from social media. It can be of tremendous help during disaster management due to the fast flow of information. Social Media can also be used to counter propaganda by providing factually correct and positive information. We in the forces must exploit social media and use it as a force multiplier.

Lt Gen VG Khandare, DG DIA



Social Media is rapidly transforming communications and shaping perceptions. This transformation will continue in the future. It has both negatives and positives. We have seen the positive impact of social media during the Kashmir floods of 2014. Social media

became the “most reliable” tool to inform rescue teams about the location of the stranded people. Facebook and Twitter served as sounding boards for panic-stricken people desperate for information. The negative nuances have come out clearly during the recent Kashmir unrest.

We in the armed forces have been slow and conservative in adopting the use of social media largely due to traditional and dated concepts of security. However, we cannot keep ourselves insulated from society and must integrate with the society in this regard.

There is a very high level of penetration of social media in the armed forces but at the same time it is also available to terrorists. The military must train to use it as facilitator in peace, this will help in managing it during war.

Each service is presently managing social media independently. There is a lack of comprehensive policy in the armed forces/ govt. The forces have to collectively harness the tremendous advantages that social media offers whilst keeping info security aspects in mind.

Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma, Adjutant General



Social Media poses various challenges like misrepresentation of facts, we have to take it head on.

Indian Army has taken only baby steps- there is no cogent policy as yet. Sentiment analysis based on posts / messages reveals that 90% of the cribs on social media relate to AG’s and

MS Branches.

We have to decentralise so that responses are rapid. The concept of taking approvals in traditional manners must be done away with. We need to be open and transparent and not get weighed down by the Official Secrets Act.

Maj AW Wire, British Army



A brief case study of the Brussels Airport attack was spelt out.

Information about the attack was picked up on Twitter by the Defence Open Source Hub using automated tools a few minutes after 7.00 AM. BBC broke the news after it had been picked up by the military. The

news about the subsequent attack at the Metro Station was also on social media before it was broadcast by BBC.

Not only was there was a great deal of information about these attacks on social media, the initial reporting was confusing and contradictory. Given this the analysts were overwhelmed and there was a need to use automatic tools (artificial intelligence) for analysis. However, the human aspect viz the judgement of the analysts could not be replaced. Also the reporting processes could not keep pace with the flow of information which was came in very fast and in large quantities. New technology by way of streaming video was difficult to access from some platforms. There were challenges in validating this information.

There has been a great deal of evolution in the British Army in the social media between 2013 and 2016. This capability gap was recognised by JFC in 2013 and steps taken to rectify the situation.

As of 2016 there is a formally endorsed policy in place and to impart training a formal practitioner course has been introduced.

Jessica Edwardsen, Director Media-US Embassy



Jessica spoke on Crisis Communication and she had the following to state.

Emergency situations can arise quickly and it is important for any organization to have a plan with standard operating procedures during a crisis. Global audiences rely

heavily on social media during times of crisis.

Organizations must incorporate social media into all crisis communications planning and know what is the primary goal of the communications with specific reference to the type of crisis. All content posted should be pertinent to the crisis situation and keep the target audience in mind.

At the time of a crisis immediately post an acknowledgment of the situation; “holding language” should be posted as soon as possible following the onset of an acute crisis and reference given of a forthcoming emergency message, security message, or official statement and thereafter consistently post status updates.



baby steps e.g. use of Facebook is allowed but showing uniform photographs therein is prohibited in the army. How can we then exploit the full potential of the medium by imposing restraints on ourselves on account of archaic security practices. We need to be open and transparent in these matters.



Industry Perspective/ Suggestions. Policies and regulations as at present are posing some challenges. These must be so tailored that the industry can provide best possible services. Besides other things this would help improve connectivity in cantonments. Private Sector must also be allowed to play the role of a Lead Players in establishment of COWS (cell on wheel towers) in remote areas, currently they only assist the Public Sector. Presently the forces have a layered system of communication; we need to have an appropriate access matrix for all so that people can be fed information. To effectively use Facebook/other social media one must make short messages



and use theme based messages. To promote the image of the Army; ask people that what the Army has done for them and put out stories of achievement and sacrifice. [SA](#)