Framework for Military Applications of Social Media

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Abstract:

Social media has revolutionised the way in which people communicate, interact and engage. This phenomenon has transformed the digital world with its ease, convenience and numerous capabilities for sharing, involving and participating in exchanges. The military is now being confronted with how this platform can be used to aid its activities. When utilised correctly, social media could become a force multiplier for the military. Day-to-day functions, official communications, networking and training are just some of the capabilities that can be supported by social media. However, clear guidance, management and governance are required in order to ensure that the platform is implemented correctly. This paper discusses the drive for the use of social media within the military and how it can be utilised for military activities. It addresses the high-level functionalities of social media within the military, as well as an overall approach to guide the process.

Keywords:

Communication, Social Media, Military, Exchange

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Introduction

Society is now living in a digital world whereby they can engage in a range of activities like chatting, communicating, job hunting, gambling, buying a car or finding a home in an online environment. Social media and media sharing technology are becoming increasingly popular as users can now communicate, socialise, share and connect in widely accessible platforms over the Internet. Social media platforms provide an engaging experience and is revolutionising the way that information is exchanged. With the spread of mobile and smart phones, users are able to gain access to social media more easily and cheaply. This shift in communication has provided a forum though which users generate content targeted at their peers. There are many popular examples of social media like Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Flickr that are widely being used. According to Smart Insights (2017), there has been a 21% growth in social media users from 2016 with an increase of over 482 million. This shows the sheer growth and popularity of social media.

The key characteristics of social media are:

• Ability to go viral- messages can be spread far and wide and reach a large number of users

• Mobility- Social media has penetrated society. In 2016, Facebook had 1.79 billion active users and is the most popular social network world wide (Statista.com, 2017). There are 310 million monthly active users on Twitter with an average of 208 followers (Smith, 2016).

• Distributes mass communication and social engagement

• Low cost has led to increased number of users

• Sharing- users have the ability to easily make contributions and provide feedback in an immediate time frame.

- Openness- social media is open to users to engage, participate and provide feedback. In social media, users can share, vote, comment and repost content.

- Exchange- social media provides the ability for users to converse, exchange idea, images, videos and other digital content.

- Community- users with similar interests can easily form communities and show appreciation for these commonalities. In social media, communities are formed around similar interests like music, television or hobbies.

- Connectedness- social media provides links to other content, contacts, sites and resources. Users can easily search and locate other material.

- Speed- messages and information can be spread at a rapid rate in large volumes. This results in maximum impact in a very short time frame.

- Annonymity- due to the anonymity afforded by cyberspace, many people may express their opinions without claiming authorship. Social media and web sites can be used to create fake content that is easily distributed to the masses. Cyberspace offers the ability to be controversial without revealing the person or group behind the creation of the content.

People now have the ability to connect, share, link, communicate and influence each other through an easily accessible medium. Social media has virtually an unlimited reach with respect to time and space, providing an effective platform to conveniently aggregate common interests across a broad demographic spectrum which in turn allows for the emergence of new and different types of target audience (Nissen, 2015 (a)). So too can social media be deployed as a key tool within the military. There continues to be debate around the drive for transparency offered by social media and the demands for security required in the military. However resistant the military may be to social media, there is also a growing requirement to recognize that social media has become a staple platform for communication. Connectivity, accessibility, support and information exchange are just some of the benefits of social media.

The face of warfare is now no longer just fields, battlegrounds, arms, tanks and aircrafts. It has now extended into the realm of cyberspace, the Internet and the new advent of social media and new age media. The information revolution has brought with it many profound developments that need to be factored into military strategy and approach. Social media has provided a shift in the way that society interacts and effective use of the social media can help the military better understand the current environment. Successful harnessing of social media has the potential to place the military in better situational awareness and achieve its goals more innovatively. Militaries may also be targeted by external participants that may use cyberspace as a battleground to voice their opposing arguments. Civilians, activists, non-state actors, and terrorists can now use social media as a platform to engage in. The face of future conflicts will be greatly affected by the power, reach, command and convenience of social media.

Within the military, there may be a vast struggle between the demands for security and the advantages of connectivity and openness. Some in the Defence domain may oppose the adoption of social media do to the concerns for Operational Security (OPSEC). However, it may prove to be unwise in the long run for the Defence industry to overlook the benefits of social media and how it can be strategically positioned.

This paper proposed a framework highlighting key areas in which the military can leverage social media to serve as an influential instrument to aid and support military operations. In the next section, a high-level approach for the application of social media in the military is discussed.

How can social media be best used in the military?

Fig 1 proposed a high-level approach for military application of social media (Adapted from Australia's Review of Social Media and Defence (Patterson, 2011)). The military should identify that social media can be strategically positioned for various communication uses within the military. In order to govern and guide this process, apt policies needs to be developed. Policies will set the tone, setting and context in which social media can be used. In addition, training can be provided to help members become more aware of how to use social media. Over time, as members become more accustomed to this form of media, they can exercise discrimination and judgement on the appropriate use of the platforms. The use of social media should be monitored and manged to ensure that operational security is not compromised. Through education and support, good practices can be reinforced and members will be able to use this innovative medium and reduce the risk of information disclosure.

Figure 1:   Key Components for Military Approach to Social Media (Adapted from Patterson, 2011)

A structured approach for military use of social media will aim to prevent information leakage, location disclosure, information aggregation and overall compromise of security. Wei (2013) talks of the five key risks that that faces the Singaporean Armed Forces through social media. They are: risk through direct disclosure, risk through revealing locations, risk through user anonymity, risk by design (open visibility of information) and risk from information aggregation. Users may expose their location by posting photos with geotags or making inappropriate posts about their deployment. The military needs to understand how social media can play a significant role and pose a powerful risk to information disclosure. The development of a core management, education, support and monitoring capability for social media can help to mitigate some of the risks.

Management plays a critical role in shaping the use of social media within the military. Policies will need to cater for its use. This can help it become a more functional medium and prevent the disclosure of compromising information. The development of a suitable policy will help with social media management by helping co-ordinate, guide and direct the proper use of social media by military members. Best practices and guidelines can help provide direction on how military members can safely utilise social media as a strategic and communication tool. Proper procedures and guidelines can help govern the safe use of social media.

Education and awareness of safe social media usage will also be beneficial in developing a social media culture that fits within the military context. Bits created in one part of the physical world can easily find themselves elsewhere, allowing an adversary to piece together trivial pieces if information to provide a robust picture of activities, friends, and family, all of which can be used, augmented and aggregated to create a highly list of potential intelligence targets (Dressler, Bronk & Wallach, 2015). Lessons and online material can be used to educate members about being aware and careful online so as not to disclose or leak information. Members should be educated about social media risks and given advice about how to best use the technology. Updates to the curriculum can help ensure that developments within the social media landscape are catered for.

Without proper training, personnel can inadvertently release sensitive information on social networking sites and it is also important to make sure family members understand the importance of operations security and what they can and cannot post (Perry, 2010). Military information is sensitive and should be treated as such. Military members can develop a strategy to protect critical information while still communicating their story online. Training in social media use must always emphasize the minimal use of recognizable faces, no unit insignia, no GPS locations on photographs, no full names, no dates, no discussion of capabilities and strength, and no discussion of future operations, to name only a few (Storlie ,2017).

 In general, support and monitoring should be set up to assist and observe the engagement in social media. Members can provide feedback on their perspectives on social media and propose core topics for training. Overall, a strong approach for social media strategy, policy and governance is required. This will help provide ongoing training and guidance to reduce the risks of using social media. Major R Walinski (2015) says that there are operational and security risks in regards to open Internet mediums, but they are risks that can be minimised through proper education and enforcement with policies that fully lay out the "dos and donts" for military members to follow. A balance needs to be created between security and sharing and through proper governance members can be made aware of this approach. The next section addresses how social media can be utilised within the military.

Utilisation of Social Media within the Military

Influence of Social Media

Social media can influence people in a multitude of ways stemming from propaganda to misinformation. The aim of social media in the military is essentially to affect the perceptions, attitude and behaviour of certain target groups in order to communicate; exchange, co-ordinate and complete activities (see Figure 2). Many activities support each other and can be carried out simultaneously in a digital environment, as well as with a physical effort (like training videos online, together with classroom engagement). The physical and cognitive effects can be closely linked. For example, a social media marketing campaign to show the achievements of a certain group (who have exceled in their peace-keeping mission) will also generate feelings of pride, loyalty and endorsement. Social media can be used to affect cognition, perceptions, thinking, attitudes, ideas, beliefs and even prompt behaviours. Therefore, it can serve as a weaponisation tool for the military to help carry out military objectives and goals. By shaping the human mind (perceptions and attitude), social media can affect the actions and capabilities (behaviour) of the public, troops and even opposing forces.
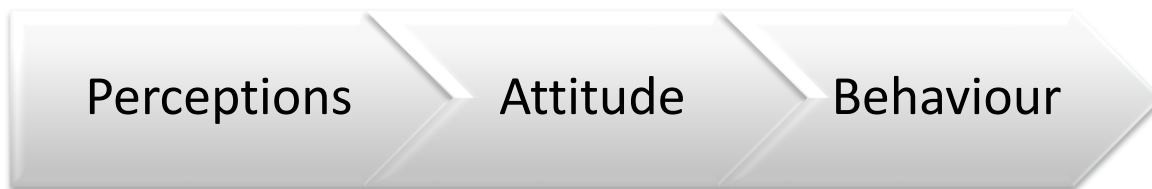

Figure 2:   **Influence of Social Media within the Military**

Framework for Use of Social Media within the Military

The previous section briefly described the overall influential goals of social media. In this section, the more specific uses of social media for the military are discussed. Fig 2 provides a framework that summarises the main uses of social media within the military. These will be discussed next.
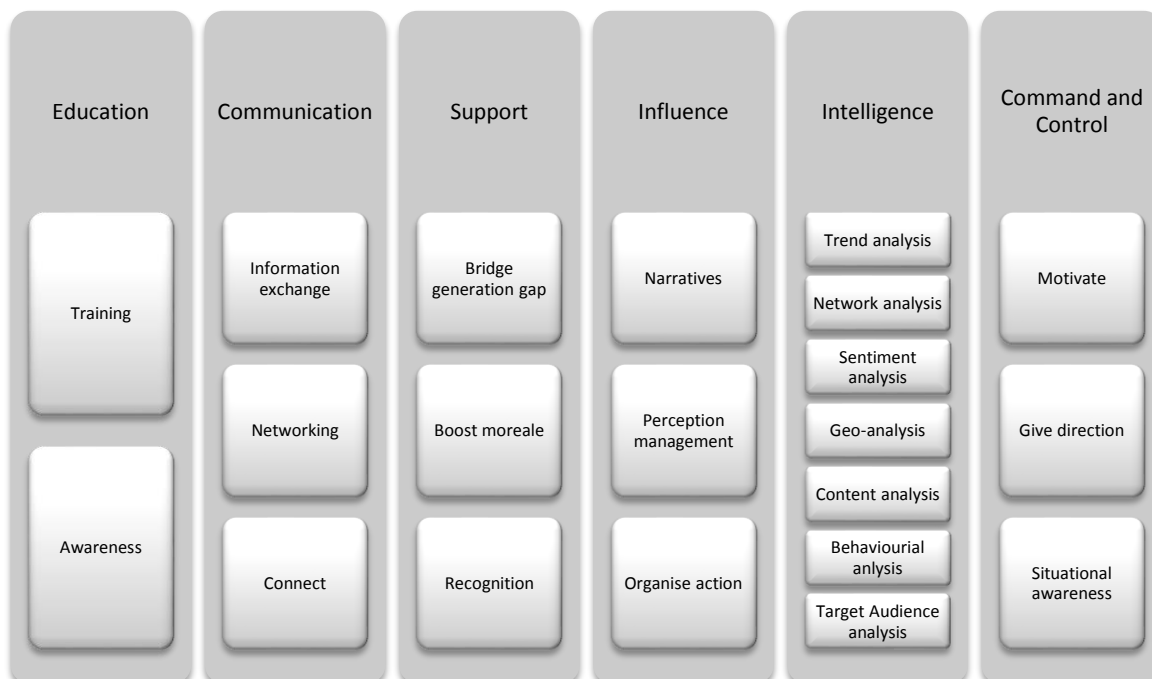

Figure 3:   **Framework for the use of Social Media within the Military**

Within the military the idea of "Raise train sustain" is an important concept geared at winning resources, building capabilities and maintaining operational competence. Social media can support this paradigm by providing innovative platforms through which members can share operational lessons for the development of better strategies for future campaigns. Educational training, instructive videos, coaching, quizzes, games, broadcasts, lectures, webinars, podcasts and tutorials can all be facilitated through social media. All these forms of educational training help to create awareness of military practices, principles and approaches. The speech and reach benefits of social media make it a far- reaching tool that even surpasses traditional forms of printed media. Furthermore, material concerning safe practices for social media programs, initiatives and resources can be made accessible. The US Department of Defense offers various educational training topics on social media (Available at http://dodcio.defense.gov/Social-Media/Social-Media-Education-and-Training/).

Social media has provided a perfect global medium through which military professionals can engage in discourse and debate (Ryan and Thompson, 2016). Since social media is publically accessible at all times, there is a far wider audience through which military members can connect, exchange information and communicate. The power of social media is that topical issues can be discussed and explored through an interactive forum that is widely and easily available. Military dialog through social media can promote the interchange of idea and emerging topics discussion. Commanders can take advantage of social networking sites as an outreach tool to enhance unity of effort (Mayfied III, 2011). Partner organisations could then understand the commanders' intent with certain operations like disaster relief or peace-keeping

Furthermore, networking is another added benefit that can be derived from social media. Social media enables individuals to connect into networks of people who can be mobilized for learning, parties, projects, movements, fundraising, or even just to raise awareness (Byerly, 2015). Leaders in the military can extend their professional connections by developing networks on various social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The social network RallyPoint has been established for military members and serves as point of contact for military professionals to network and find career opportunities. Using social media, development sessions can be carried out through videos demonstration leadership techniques, awareness and strategies. Articles can be shared, ideas exchanges and support provided over social media. Social media networks built in peacetime might be mobilized during war to help gain situational awareness, advance messaging, and aid in collaboration with our partners and allies (Byerly, 2015).

Social media can help bridge the generational gap between older work forces and younger military members (Ryan & Thompson, 2016). If older generations can learn to embrace this newer form of communication, it can provide a useful way in which to interact and exchange information. People say that social media empowers the youth, provides them an avenue to speak their mind; that it is a generational thing but that does not mean that older generations of people cannot learn it just as fast (Walinski, 2015). While there may be a strong learning curve to adjust to the technical operation of social media, it is good that older members adapt to the latest technologies in order to stay abreast in the changing communication landscape. In this way, older members can stay relevant and participate in the rapid use of social media.

Another beneficial use of social media is the support it can offer to military families. Through this widely accessible forum, military families can view the accomplishment of relatives. Social media helps aptly describe the contribution of military members in a manner that can be easily accessed and viewed. It can be utilised for the promotion of local activities, as well as for members deployed away. Relatives can support each other and also try to grasp the difficulties of assignments, exercises and missions.

Acknowledgement and appreciation for achievement can also be provided by social media (Ryan & Thompson, 2016). Military organisations normally recognise achievements at award ceremonies at which members receive medals, ribbons and commendations. However, social media can also be used to publicise these accomplishments and provide reward to military members. Posts about outstanding acts, deeds, successes and triumphs can also help acknowledge achievement.

Acknowledge and recognition on social media can also help boost the morale of the military members. Significant achievements and accolades can be acknowledged on social media platforms to give credit, respect and appreciation for outstanding acts performed while in service. Furthermore, when military members are able to communicate to family it can help to reduce stress and frustration. This also helps to boost their morale when away on long or remote deployments. The facilitation of communication with friends and family can be a significant game changer for deployed forces.

Perception management and the creation of narratives can also aptly be carried out through social media. As a powerful cognitive weapon, social media can be used to shape views and sway opinion. Various informational, marketing and recruitment campaigns can be conveyed through social media. Initially, strategic content may be pushed down to users who then also have the opportunity to comment, respond, react and voice their opinions on developing issues. Since social media is interactive, it allows for expansion and development of the initial material. Using a variety of forums, the strategic narrative tries to reach the widest audience and gain the broadest impact. Narratives competing for attention are not a new phenomenon. Hilter tried to convery his anti-Semetic views in a very convincing and determined manner. Today, we are flooded by ISIS footage promoting their activities, recruiting members, gathering support and trying to gain visibility of their message through social media. Similarly, militaries can use social media to communicate key messages, stories and information. Stories or narratives are an important construct that unite and sustain human communities and are a fire around which individuals, nations and people gather (Cantina, 2015). Social media can be used to distribute strategic narratives that stem from important ideas that should be conveyed to the public. Strategic narratives form an integral part of formulating military strategy and through the shared medium of social media, it can be tapped into to influence and manage perceptions. Militaries should also be aware of the "contest of narratives" and that they might be competing with opposing perception management campaigns.

As a cognitive weapon, social media can be used for perception management. Due to the speed, accessibility, reach and ease of social media , it can easily influence ideas, shape views and swing opinions. Using social media, the effect of a marketing, recruitment or informational promotion can be evaluated. In social media, users can post their views, interactively engage in the medium, make enquiries and react to other comments. Feedback in social media platforms can help assess the effects of recruitment, marketing or recognition campaigns. This also brings visibility for military activities and initiatives.

Another manner in which social media can be used for perception management is sock puppets. Sock puppets are accounts that are created to automatically participate in conversations in social media. Sock puppets generate responses based on the current content posted and therefore the accounts are able to automatically participate in conversations on the web. The responses from the sock puppets are programmed to point in certain directions and influence the train of thinking. Due to the effect of sock puppets, it would appear that the viewpoint is steering towards a particular line of thought. Having a large number of sock puppet agents could influence a topical conversation and sway opinion. Already in 2013, China had been using an army of sock puppets known as the 50 Cent Party to control public opinion on the web to comment on various message boards, blogs and social media (Elsman, 2013).

The military should be aware that social media can be a powerful tool to organise groups and protest against an issue or government. The events of the Arab Spring uprising stemmed from the unification of people from the digital medium of social media. Twitter emerged as a key source for real-time logistical coordination, information, and discussion among people, both within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and across the globe (Lotan et al. 2015). Digital tools like social media can be used for the demonstration of social movements as people can now voice their opinions, rally support and gain tremendous coverage of events. Due to the interconnectedness of social media, it can serve an influential role in organising masses of people supporting a common cause. Social networks can be an effective unifying tool and help coordinate the activities of the masses (Fridman, 2013). The Arab Spring uprising was a social revolution that was led by social media and further proliferated by the ease of accessibility to mobile devices. The organisational capabilities of social media now allow for the public to come together for a unified cause.

Within the military, intelligence is an important capability. Intelligence is defined as the capacity for learning, reasoning, understanding and similar forms of mental activity and an aptitude for grasping truths, relationships, facts and meanings (Dictionary.com, 2017). It is evaluated conclusions drawn from information that forms military intelligence. Intelligence is mainly carried out through the collection and analysis of information in order to make deductions and interpretations. Social media can help to carry out various types of intelligence relevant to the military. This includes (Nissen, 2015(b)):

- Trend analysis- looking at changes over time and identifying patterns or common activities
- Network analysis- finding links between relationships, connections and communication in social networks
- Sentiment analysis- building profiles to determine how individuals feel about a particular topic
- Geo- analysis- studying the locations of activities
- Content analysis- identifying themes, key words, semantics of conversation and expression on social media
- Behavioural analysis- researching users' activities like web sites visited and interactions in social media
- Target Audience Analysis- method of profiling users to determine their opinions, motivations and behaviour

Since intelligence from social media takes places in a digital manner, it does not require troops to be stationed in a particular area to gather and collect information. This can speed up the processing time and makes it widely accessible. Strategically social media can help reveal information of views, sentiments, activities, interests and trends that are taking place. It can uncover influential actors, connections, communication, events and influencers. Intelligence from social media can uncover useful insights like key players, topics of interest, driving forces and developing issues.

Another application area of social media is Command and Control. Command and Control can be supported by social media as it can help to communicate, share information, co-ordinate activities and promote more responsive decision making. While social media may not be precisely applicable to command and control activities carried out during mission deployment due to Operational Security (OPSEC) considerations, it can still help influence an organisation with

regards to information sharing, communication and support. Social media for command purposes can still be used to motivate and direct people into action. Social media can assist in situational awareness and understanding of the environment. Societal insights, emerging behaviours, trends, patterns of activity can all be found in social media platforms.

Figure 4:   Differentiation between Personal and Professional Use

Another differentiation that can be made on the use of social media in the military is that of personal and professional use (see Fig 4). Personal use relates to communication made by members in an individual role and may entail interactions in social media sites pertaining to own activities and insights. However, at a professional level, the military can make use of social media for official communications. This may include publication of the organisation's activities (award ceremonies), digital marketing and online content. Some uses of social media will span both personal and professional use. Education can be carried out at an individual level to increase understanding and skills. Learning programs, digital education and podcasts, for example may be engaged at an individual level in order pursue educational opportunities. Professionally social media can also be used to enhance ones career and many official educational prospects can be explored. Furthermore, individuals may connect and communicate online at an individual capacity by talking about their experiences, ideas and emotions. Social media accounts can also be created for organisational efforts and communiques. Social media can provide for encouragement and support in both a professional and personal capacity. Individuals can be congratulated on significant achievements and also chat to family and friends. Official announcements and messages can also be placed on organisational accounts. However, intelligence tends to fall into the realm of the military mainly and thus would be used for professionally. Some activities may form part of official military reconnaissance measures and may not be made publically available. Although individuals may try to use the social media for personal influence, it is rather a use of

major military/ governmental campaigns to affect perceptions, create narratives or organise mass social action.

In whichever format social media is utilised, policies will need to cover both forms of use- personal and professional in order to ensure that sensitive information is protected and that only necessary details are published in the open domain of social media. Overall, due to the revolution in communication, policy, management and supportive measures are all required in order to better govern and secure exchanges on social media within the military.

Conclusion

Social media can provide a beneficial platform for communication, interaction and networking within the military. However, there are also inherent risks, challenges and concerns that cannot be overlooked. Within the military, proper governance and policies need to be developed in order to support and monitor social media communications. This can help reduce the risk of disclosure and provide guidance on how to aptly use the outlet for information sharing. With the assistance and support of management and leadership, members can become cognisant of what they post and view online. Operational Security should not be compromised through the use of social media. Many opportunities exist within the military to make use of social media for military activities. However, it is important that a proper strategy be developed that can guide members on how to personally and professionally use the medium.

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