

Not so Social Media: Theoretical Insights into the evolution of the Social Media as a tool of Information Warfare

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Abstract

Information Warfare (IW) is a constituent of Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW) that needs to be integrated into the strategic Policy environment for National security in India. The use of social media as a weapon in providing an anonymous, unverifiable, disruptive network to Information Warfare needs to be researched and analysed in a broader national security context. Case studies of Russia and the farm protests in India serve to illustrate the importance of this field. Systematic research into the field taking Russia, China and USA is required.

Key Words: *Information Warfare, Social media, Ukraine. Farm protests, Influence operations, National security*

Introduction

Can the social media cause an elected government to topple, lead to violent street protests and determine outcomes in a war? Can it lead to geo-political outcomes like incorporation of territory and loss of sovereignty of a Nation State? Empirical evidence suggests that the social media has emerged as a tool of warfare in an environment of Fifth-generation warfare (5GW). Originally conceived as a social network bringing together human beings in seamless contact for the exchange of ideas and camaraderie, social media has acquired dimensions that need recognition and study as a part of National policy. The paper aims to bring out the recent rise of the social media and related activism by bringing forth relevant case studies.

Social media can cause elected governments to topple. On 17 December 2010 Mohamad Bouzizi a twenty six year old fruit and vegetable vendor in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire in protest against

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the confiscation of his wares and his weighing scales. As he was slapped, spat at and abused by Fadia Hamdi , a lady municipal official on the streets of his town, Bouzazzi ,he could take the continued abuse no longer. He acquired a can of gasoline and set himself afire. His cousin who witnessed the incident filmed the horror and posted the video on Facebook. By the time Bouzazzi died the video had spread like wildfire. Before the government could react and clamp down , the video had reached international audiences. Within days of the death of Bouzazzi the government of President Zine el-Abidine in Tunisia had fallen. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia led to the Arab Spring in MENA (Middle East and North Africa). This was the first instance wherein social movements received impetus and were carried through social media. Media hyper-activity around geo-politics was once again evidenced since 2021 around the Ukraine issue and the Russian and American standoff thereof. A key feature in this calibrated march towards a potential war and substantial brinkmanship is the involvement of the social media in this latest international stand-off between global power players.

The thesis in this paper is that the social media which was initially a form of social networking has rapidly become a weapon of warfare which can have significant consequences for national security and stability This thesis is established in this paper through case studies.

Part 1 of this paper traces the evolution of social media focusing on its grey aspects. Part 2 lays down the empirical context in the form of well established case studies. Part 3 gives suggestive conclusions in the context of India's Geo-political code and proposes directions for future research.

Media, Social- Media and Information Warfare: Isolating and Defining Variables

In its most basic form, media is a tool of communication. One to one and mass communication, both have a social dimension. Communication is the cord that creates the networks for man to exist in his most natural social state of communication with each other. Humans thus, created their own

ways of communication and disbursement of information. Over time media established itself as a key in social processes.

In the modern age, the first big event that established the media as a key in social movements was the role of the media in the French Revolution. Closer home the national movement had a huge mass communication aspect to its evolution. Strategic communication played a vital role in the Indian movement for independence. The internet age brought with it the rise of the social media.

Social media is a form of social networking that resonates with the basic human need to connect with each other. In communication parlance, social media covers many-to-many communication. It has certain important features that distinguish it from traditional media. Social media can be best characterized as 'uncontrolled media'. It is not regulated by any frameworks or ethics. The State has very little control over social media. The lack of control is also because of the speed that social media ingains. Transmission of events, news on social media is very fast and not controlled by national boundaries. This could be seen in the Jasmine revolution where a Facebook post of the self-immolation of a beleaguered Tunisian citizen went international overnight. By the time the government in Tunisia tried to control the spread of this video, it was already unstoppable.

Traditional media is bound by professional ethics to follow a procedure of verifiability. Unlike this, social media has no such strictures governing its content. Despite these grey features, social media has acquired immense significance. Whereas its social form is used by citizens to connect with each other, to share information and news and to influence others, in its not-so-social form it is a source of concern. The not-so-social media has acquired the characteristics of a weapon. For instance, social media was used by the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS, Daesh) to their advantage. Gory videos of beheadings and killings by the Daesh were a part of the propaganda strategy of this terror organisation. The use of social media by terror organisations also came to light in the recruiting of youths to the ISIS in the Indian State of Kerala. Social media is also an active ground of child abuse, sexual grooming and paedophilia. These grey aspects are buttressed by the anonymity that social media grants to users. Suddenly everyone has the power over the narrative. This is also being used by non-state actors to take on the nation states and for spreading their ideology and propaganda.

The not-so-social aspects of social media demand more attention because social media usage is also an exponentially growing phenomena. The table 1 below shows the depth and reach of social media usage throughout the world. According to statistics available in open sources in 2021 there are 4.48 billion social media users in the world which is an increase of over 13 percent over 2020. In six years since 2015 this number has increased from 2.307 billion which is an increase of 115.59 percent. Amongst the social media applications Facebook is extremely popular which rapidly crossed one billion registered accounts and at present has 2.89 billion monthly active users. Facebook at present as the core platform now also owns WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram making its reach phenomenal. The social network Twitter, which is essentially a microblogging network with limited characters for posting, is extremely popular in the United States. As of October 2021 Twitter had a reach of 77.75 million users making it the leading Twitter user globally. Japan and the India were ranked second and third with more than 58 and 24.5 million users respectively. China has Sina Weibo which is its own version of Twitter.

United States tops the charts in most social network users, but services like Chinese social networks WeChat, QQ or video sharing app Douyin are also popular due to their local language appeal. Through social networks which are also available in multiple languages, users can reach out globally to connect across geographical, political, or economic borders. In the year 2022, the numbers of social media users is estimated to rise to 3.96 billion. It is estimated that as mobile device usage deepens these numbers will grow.

Table 2: Social media usage by country:- (source:- datareportal.com)

2021	(+13.13%)	4.480
2020	(+13.7%)	3.960
2019	(+9.2%)	3.484
2018	(+9.0%)	3.196
2017	(+21%)	2.796
2016	(+11%)	2.307
2015		2.078
Years	Growth in percentage	Users in billion

6 Year Social Media Growth Statistics:- (source:- Statista.com)

Country	Users
CHINA	930.8 MILLION
INDIA	448.0 MILLION
USA	240.0 MILLION
ISRAEL	6.81 MILLION
RUSSIA	99.0 MILLION

As stated above most top ranked social networks with more than 100 million users originated in the United States, but services like Chinese social networks WeChat, QQ or video sharing app Douyin have also garnered mainstream appeal in their respective regions due to local context and content and are considered influential.

The leading social networks are usually available in multiple languages and enable users to connect with friends or people across geographical, political, or economic borders. In 2022, Social networking sites are estimated to reach 3.96 billion users and these figures are still expected to grow as mobile device usage and mobile social networks deepen.

Clearly social media is a key variable in understanding social changes and movements happening all around the world. Given its significance social media is a variable that the armed forces globally have begun to integrate in their strategic planning. As militaries realise the depth of 5GW, they are also realising the role of the social media in National security.

Social media comes together with military and strategic national interests in the area of Information and Influence operations.

‘Information operations and warfare are also known as influence operations are the tactical collection of information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in the pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent.’

Further, American Policy defines Influence operations as.. *‘the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviours, or decisions by foreign target audiences that further U.S. interests and objectives.’*

At least three countries have very advanced influence operations. These are Russia, China and USA. Influence operations of all three are worth study in a comparative framework. The control of narrative is a tool that has also been developed to the level of State policy by Israel. It has effectively adopted social media to its Hasbara aims. Hasbara is a well framed Public policy in Israel aimed at projecting Israeli national interests to an international audience.

The most important point that one sees in the survey of literature is that both Russia and USA *have recognised information warfare as a part of their strategic military doctrines*. Important in the frameworks adopted by Russia and USA are the aims of Information security which are central to their military doctrines. Also clearly underlined is *the need to achieve information superiority to win future wars*. Thus they use a rapidly growing social media as a weapon of warfare, which is used in the cognitive mind space with lethal effect. As the case studies given below show, social media is used by militaries to give effect to their strategic and geo-political aims. Social media can be used to affect a loss of territory, weaken the adversary and win wars without firing a bullet. On the other hand social media can also be used by non-State actors to challenge the legitimacy of the Nation-State and undermine national security.

Not so social media; Case studies in use of Social media as a tool of Information Warfare

a. Russian Influence Operations in Ukraine

Russian-USA and NATO are all invested in Information Operations in the region of Ukraine. This is an important case study in the context of ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region. The current tensions between Russia and USA combined with the NATO in Ukraine have a history. If one looks at the utilisation of the social media in the Ukraine crisis in 2013–15 one sees the following key features. The social media in this crisis was used in the following ways: it was used to organise events, indulge in information warfare, spread rumours, half truths. One also saw the use of social media trolls to capture the narrative. The aim of these operations was to confuse the enemy, generate uncertainty and anxiety. Of all social media platforms Twitter was seen as important in the narrative war between Russia USA and NATO in 2013–15. The main narratives could be observed on Twitter. The Russian narrative focused on the Theme of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. It also focused

on the narrative of one nation wherein Ukraine was traditionally seen as a part of the Russian world. The NATO and USA recognised and countered this Russian narrative in the following ways. Five main themes were *used to* counter the Russian narrative. These were: the theme of Russian militarism, the narrative of a despotic Putin, appeals to a Slavic ancestry and ties to Europe and the overall narrative of NATO intervention to establish just world.

The tactics used by the Russians were as follows: Paid Russian trolls would insert pro-Russian news in social media post of American media outlets. Russians also spammed posts on horrendous crimes allegedly committed by the Ukrainian extremists on all social media platforms. Russia has portrayed Ukraine as pro-Nazi on social media platforms. Analysis by the British media has isolated top themes that Russia has propagated in the current conflict which started in December 2021. Such analysis of Russian social media posts show spikes that overlap with world events and could include any diplomatic event in an international forum like the United Nations which goes against Russian diplomatic efforts. Secondly Russia has been able to label its adversaries as Nazi.

Analysis by British media also show that Russian social media pro-Kremlin trolls have been able to post comments in 32 prominent media websites across 16 countries which support the Russian view of Ukraine. The aim was to create a distrust of all Western media. During this time period Russia also started the Russian today network (RTV) which broadcasts in foreign languages. Studies on the use of social media by Russia also revealed that in 2014 during the annexation of Crimea, the Russian government spent a substantial amount of money to fund social media operations with respect to the annexation. There were some prominent aims of such social media operations. They were to sway public and international opinion in the favour of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Further media operations were aimed at overwhelming the voices of dissidents to create an image of population in Crimea which supported the Russian takeover. The idea was to dominate the cognitive space. Not only was the influence operation targeted at international audiences also at pro-Russian population in Crimea to support the Russian annexation of the region. Several stories were released in the social media showing the Ukrainian forces bad light. Most of the stories were found to be untrue and in the category of rumours. Russia also appealed to ethnic loyalties in Crimea. According to some news reports almost 71% of Crimeans viewed the Russian annexation as a positive event.

Seen in the background of the Crimean influence operations of 2014 which were engineered by Russia it is illustrative to understand and decode the Russian social media operations in the current crisis which started in December 2021 when Ukrainian officials reported that the Russian government placed 100,000 troops near the border with Ukraine. In December 2021, the Russian administration released a list of demands toward Western countries, one of which was a legally binding guarantee that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would not expand any further to the east. Multiple talks have been held on the international level, with the participation of NATO and the U.S. In January 2022, the U.S. and NATO submitted written responses to Russia's demands, urging the use of diplomatic means to solve the conflict. The U.S. reinstated its commitment to the 'open door' principle of NATO, in accordance with which, its allies agreed at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 that Ukraine, as well as Georgia, would join the bloc at some point.

According to Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, NATO expansion to Ukraine, as well as placement of Western troops on the Ukrainian territory under bilateral agreements, is a 'red line' for Russia because that would mean the presence of NATO forces in close proximity from the country's border. However, the Kremlin has denied any plans to invade Ukraine. The minister highlighted that each country had a right to freely place its troops within its territory. The government of Ukraine, which considers NATO accession the country's strategic goal, accused Russia of backing a coup and organizing cyber attacks. Both Russian officials and Ukraine's President criticized Western countries, such as the U.S., for creating panic over the situation.

The key variable in Russian social media operations spanning 2013 to 2022 in Ukraine is the effectiveness of the social media as a weapon system in war. Russia was able to leverage one section of the population against another, without using large conventional forces. Social media narratives were properly timed, properly targeted and suitably messaged to choose to support Russian strategic aim Games in Kenya and Ukraine. As such this case study holds a number of important messages for any nation trying to understand information warfare.

b. Policy contestation over Farm Laws in India

The second case of the use of social media to engineer and steer social movements is also to be seen in the policy contestation over the farm laws which were passed by the Indian Parliament in 2010. What is seen in the policy contestation were 12 months of street protests by the interest groups that were against the legislations. Twitter and WhatsApp were used by groups protesting the farm laws. However protest in social media was not limited only to the contestation of farm policies. This protest buttressed by social media, with international networks weighing in on social networks, played on national faultlines in India. The entire movement which went on for over one year represented war in the classic cognitive battle space.

In the past three decades, India has faced two cross-border terrorism i.e. in Punjab and in Kashmir both which border Pakistan. Political configurations in Punjab rapid spilt into Policy contestation over the farm laws. In 2022, Punjab was also a poll bound state and the farm protests on social media soon acquired political dimension. Internally it became an issue for influencing populations in the poll bound states especially Punjab. Internationally it became a focus of anti-government and anti-state posturing by external actors and networks. Non-resident Indian populations common between India (Punjab) and Canada, UK and USA were seen to be active participants in street protests in the national capital Delhi. These protests also turned violent.

Genuine farmer issues were soon left aside and these street protests soon acquired the characteristics of a cognitive battle space in which social media played a key role. Key features of the social media i.e. inability of the state to impose controls, lack of verifiability, anonymity, lack of validity led to a democratically elected government withdrawing a public policy. A vibrant democracy can be seen as responsive and open to stakeholder views. However in the case of the farmers the government did not foresee the cognitive battle for which it needed to be prepared and therefore it was possible for adversaries to manipulate the perceptions of citizens. It was also unable to control the external environment eventually opting to withdraw the farm legislations. While data on the farm protests has not yet emerged a similar street protest had taken shape in Canada where the Freedom Convoy of truckers started protesting against vaccine mandates. These protests had spread to New-Zealand, Italy and Belgium.

Canada imposed mandated Law and order statutes and had cleared the street protests within days of their initiation. In the case of the Farm Laws protests, India on the other hand fell prey to Influence operations that had national and international origins.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

In the brief survey of empirical cases and theories delineated above there are some key conclusions that can be discerned:

- a. The social media is an expanding phenomena world- wide and is projected to rise exponentially in the coming years. The tools have a life of about 10 years and hence constant updating of policies and strategy is required. New platforms are being added as also the old ones being updated almost every six months. The enabling technologies have facilitated a smooth interface and thus the user require little or no training to use these.
- b. Social media has certain key characteristics i. e. anonymity, lack of accountability, lack of validity. This has led to manipulation of information. There are no laws, treaties and policies governing the use of social media other than the platforms own code of conduct which they use at will and which is affected ideologies of the owners/ employees. Twitter blocking Donald Trump's account is a case in point.
- c. Social media dissemination is characterised by intense speed. The traditional media can never match this. The media houses have their own social media presence but the common users and influencers have the ability to control the narrative.
- d. Social media has acquired the characteristics of a weapon. It can cause immeasurable damage. The Arab Spring and Burhan Wani episodes are the examples of destructive power than can be attributed directly to the social media.
- e. Various countries mainly Russia, USA, China and Israel recognise social media as a key variable in their military strategies and have doctrines crafted for the same.
- f. The cognitive battle-space has become an important dimension in modern day warfare along with the physical dimensions like land, sea, air, space and abstract dimension like cyberspace.

- g. Information and Influence Operations are carefully crafted out by nation states and have well defined aims and effects.
- h. The nature of the social media is such that it has the potential to swiftly erode the powers of the Nation-State.

Some directions for future State policies in India can include:

1. Incorporation of Information and Influence operations in the Indian Military doctrine both at tactical and strategic levels.
2. Creation of a Strategic definition of what constitutes a war in the Information Space.
3. A thorough investigation and recognition of fault-lines and the need to shape the information environment to meet these fault-lines.
4. The evolution of a *Stated Party line* for national security that goes beyond individual political-ideological party lines.
5. Research into Information and Influence Operations as a part of curriculum and academic programmes.
6. Restructuring of curricula in International Relations and Security studies to meet National Security needs.
7. Evolution of protocols for defensive Information Warfare.
8. Incorporation of social media ethics framework vis a vis the Fundamental right to Freedom and expression.
9. Evolution of clear red lines for communication at the international level of what constitutes an incursion into sovereign spaces as far as the information dimension of warfare is concerned.
10. A whole nation approach that would require policy formulation to ensure advantage in Information Warfare.

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