

The Australian Defence Force's Embrace of [Un]Social Media

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The Islamic State Group has harnessed the capability and capacity of social media to support its cause. It is rapidly shifting from open social media accounts, like Twitter, to more specialised applications such as Telegram and other encrypted networks, in an effort to both focus communication and protect personnel and supporters from monitoring and targeting.¹ Despite the platform, the aim is the same—attract and then sustain a support base. Social media products, disseminated through social networking sites, have been and continue to be exploited by Daesh, adding more tentacles to the pernicious presence of violent extremism online.

As a conservative estimate, the Islamic State Group is responsible for about 90,000 social media content posts daily.² At the upper end of estimates, Daesh propagandists and their online supporters may be responsible for more than 200,000 pieces of content daily.³ On Twitter alone, noting that its popularity with Islamist terrorists is rapidly waning, there were at least 45,000 accounts linked to Daesh at the end of 2014.⁴ A recent study identified an average of just over thirty-eight new and unique propaganda outputs from Islamic State's official channels disseminated online each day.⁵

The scale of adversary and potential adversary efforts is staggering, but even it is drowned out in the rapidly expanding connectedness of truly global social media. In the mid-afternoon of an Australian weekday in November 2015, approximately 10,500 tweets were sent in a single second⁶ from accounts registered to more than 300 million monthly active users across

¹ BBC, 'IS Exploits Telegram Mobile App to Spread Propaganda', <www.bbc.com/news/technology-34466287> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

² Jon Greenberg, 'Does the Islamic State Post 90,000 Social Media Messages Each Day?', 19 February 2015, <www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/feb/19/hillary-mann-leverett/cnn-expert-islamic-state-posts-90000-social-media-/> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper no. 20 (Washington, DC: Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, March 2015), p. 9.

⁵ Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (Quilliam Foundation, 2015); <www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

⁶ Internet Live Stats, <www.internetlivestats.com/one-second/#tweets-band> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

multiple languages.⁷ There are about 17 million tweets in Arabic each day.⁸ There are believed to be about 20 million fake Twitter accounts deceiving the old and young alike.⁹ Approximately 44 per cent of registered accounts have never sent a tweet, giving some indication of just how many are watching the conversation or were just so overwhelmed by the stream of information that they never stepped into the maelstrom.¹⁰ At last count, approximately 80 per cent of the world's internet users do not even use Twitter.¹¹ Chinese-language social media behemoth Weibo, the Mandarin Twitter, currently has 212 million monthly active users¹² and has experienced 30 per cent growth in the past twelve months.¹³ These users are almost exclusively conversing in Mandarin. Successful rival WeChat has 650 million monthly active users.¹⁴

Exploitation of social media and social networking sites as a vector for shaping is not confined to terrorism or violent extremist organisations. More recently, social media has been used in direct support of conventional military efforts, or what Western military forces would describe as Phase 0 or Phase 1 shaping efforts. A recent investigation into a nondescript office in St Petersburg, Russia, highlighted the workings of The Internet Research Agency,¹⁵ a state-sponsored disinformation effort. It employs hundreds of young Russians to spread false material, from false accounts online, in support of President Putin's efforts. There are similar reports of an equally impressive undertaking in China, known colloquially as the 50-cent Army, focused on shoring up support for the Communist Party leadership.¹⁶ None of these efforts require technically proficient cyber operators to hack accounts. Nearly all use freely available tools and an internet connection. A large amount of the communication is conducted from mobile devices. Social media offers a reach and rapidity that could not have been imagined

⁷ Craig Smith, 'By the Numbers: 150+ Amazing Twitter Statistics', DMR, <expandedramblings.com/index.php/march-2013-by-the-numbers-a-few-amazing-twitter-stats/> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

⁸ Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, 'Twitter in the Arab Region', Arab Social Media Report (edn 5), <www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Twitter/LineChart.aspx> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

⁹ Smith, 'By the Numbers: 150+ Amazing Twitter Statistics'.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'Leading Social Networks Worldwide as of November 2015, Ranked by Number of Active Users (in Millions)', Statista, <www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> [Accessed on 30 November 2015]

¹² Craig Smith, 'By the Numbers: 50 Amazing Weibo Statistics', DMR, <expandedramblings.com/index.php/weibo-user-statistics/> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

¹³ China Internet Watch, 'Sina Weibo News, Trends, Stats & Insights', <www.chinainternetwatch.com/tag/sina-weibo/> [Accessed on 11 November 2015].

¹⁴ Craig Smith, 'By the Numbers: 50 Amazing WeChat Statistics', DMR, <expandedramblings.com/index.php/wechat-statistics/> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

¹⁵ Adrian Chen, 'The Agency', *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 June 2015, <www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

¹⁶ An Pei, 'China to Train '50-Cent Army' in Online Propaganda', *Radio Free Asia*, 12 March 2014, <www.rfa.org/english/news/china/propaganda-03122014184948.html> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

by those early adherents in cellars cranking out handbills on a variation of Gutenberg's famous press.

The rapidity and reach of this medium has had policymakers, law enforcement officials and military commanders all seek to inject themselves into an online effort to establish and maintain what is known colloquially as 'the narrative'.¹⁷ To date, most efforts have been heavily criticised, and not without good reason. On one hand, the military's ability to generate and sustain a narrative, something that is so beholden to the policy decision framing the operation, means the military simply cannot go it alone. On the other hand, the military's understanding and use of the tools that are available is severely limited.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) still does not know what it wants to use social media for or, perhaps more importantly, how to use it in support of operations. It is struggling to understand who is responsible for this 'thing' that has captured everyone's attention. Social media content is more rigorously managed than the delivery of traditional weapon systems. Social media transcends the clearly defined boundaries of an Area of Operations. It pushes well beyond what tactical and operational commanders would consider their Area of Interest. It has no boundary between domestic audiences, the international population and the adversary, making distinctions in the roles of various information-related capability specialities born of the Vietnam era absolutely blurred. For most ADF personnel, accessing social media content from their work stations is not even possible. Corporately, social media is seen as time wasting and a security threat. By hesitating, the ADF has ceded a crucial conduit to the information environment (a construct—perhaps unsurprisingly—that does not exist in current Australian doctrine).

In contrast, current adversaries—and those that have been watching the interplay online over the past few years—have embraced a manoeuvrist approach and jumped into social media with both feet.¹⁸ The rapid adoption

¹⁷ "A narrative provides the compelling foundation for communication efforts, not the communication effort itself. A narrative is a simple, credible and overall representation of a conceptual ideal designed to convey the organisation's self-concept, values, rationale, legitimacy, moral basis and vision. A narrative informs and educates internal and external audiences and therefore is 'translated' in a cultural and attuned manner." Author's definition in: Jason Logue, 'Narrative—Everybody is Talking about It but We Still Aren't Sure what It Is', *The Bridge*, <medium.com/the-bridge/welcome-to-the-bridge-d34315ce826e> [Accessed 8 August 2016].

¹⁸ The manoeuvrist approach is outlined in Australian Army doctrine (LWD 1: The Fundamentals of Land Warfare) as a philosophy to guide warfare. "Manoeuvre accepts war as a competition between opposing wills, framed in time and understanding, rather than by physical position alone. It relies on the ability to change physical and non-physical circumstances more rapidly than the enemy can adapt. Manoeuvre seeks to understand how the enemy's strengths can be undermined. While it attempts to achieve the economic application of force, it accepts that combined arms close combat is a central and enduring feature of land warfare and is required to

and exploitation of the medium has been a lesson in adaption that Western military forces have been unable to match, let alone exceed. When al-Qaeda and other terrorists groups made their first tentative steps into disseminating videos online in the very late 1990s/early 2000s, many Western allied observers failed to recognise just how powerful the internet as a dissemination vector for propaganda would become. Analysts had to actively seek sites like Ogrish.com to find grainy, low-resolution depictions of the brutality that fills social media feeds in high-definition today.

In August 2004, staff consternation in the Baghdad Headquarters of Multi-National Force–Iraq was palpable when a five-minute video appeared in jihadist forums addressed to the European nations supporting the operation. The product was narrated in English by a man with a South African or Dutch accent and advised the European forces to withdraw from Iraq because of the financial and social costs their commitments would have at home. It was deeply critical of America in general, and President Bush in particular. The video was replete with now ubiquitous IED footage and heroic jihadist fighters. It is now lost in the vast sea of product that followed it. As a psychological operations product it was well-researched, edited and disseminated. It was clear that the team behind the production had undertaken a target audience analysis of European community fears about the Iraq operation, particularly in light of the 2004 Madrid attack. The focus on cost to national blood and treasure resonated well. The product's obvious potential impact though was overlooked because it caused very little reaction within the Western (particularly American) media covering the conflict. While it did generate coverage in Europe, most was in non-English publications. Ultimately, the Headquarters at the time was far more concerned about the media coverage from the myriad of embeds travelling with Coalition troops than they were with a piece of online propaganda. Structurally the Coalition was focused on the media, not the information environment. The lack of a media pull-factor meant this product went unchallenged. Staff Officers focused on the wider information environment recognised the impact it and the hundreds of clips that followed over the rest of that year posed but, in the face of mountains of work, hesitated. It was prudent to focus on what was being asked of them rather than pushing to expand into what may come next. The video and many like it in that time were allowed to propagate without rebuttal.

Fast forward to a different fight and different location: in 2010 the two official spokespeople for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Qari Mohammed Yousef and his less reliable partner Zabiullah Mujahid, adopted a couple of websites and some password-protected forums to disseminate daily operational updates. An analysis of the Taliban's almost-daily claims versus

create discrete physical destruction on an enemy that generates a greater cognitive effect, thereby reducing an enemy's will to fight. Manoeuvre occurs at all levels of command."

reality for Australian operations in Uruzgan highlighted that about 90 per cent of the time the claim was related to an incident that occurred in the general location, and at about the time indicated.¹⁹ The key difference was in the metrics used to report success: the Taliban propaganda team massively overstated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) casualties and downplayed their own. The interesting aspect of 2010, and the years that followed, was that this product very rarely made an impact beyond Afghanistan and those living adjacent. The inflated claims, despite their availability, were recognised by all but the most conspiratorially minded in Australia for what they were, mostly because of the ADF's transparency on casualties. In a way, the decision to rapidly announce all casualties inoculated the Australian public against Taliban propaganda. In the villages and tribal areas where information was rapidly passed through word of mouth, however, the claims were embraced as unquestionable fact. The impact on the ADF was so low that this mechanism was left to establish a tenacious grip on locals struggling to comprehend the conflict. It was not until Zabiullah elevated his efforts to Twitter in 2011-12 and the resulting media enquiries that flooded ISAF and troop contributing nations, that any real effort on the propaganda itself commence. The ADF knows from experience that any time a tweet with a claim from Uruzgan was disseminated, a flurry of calls to Defence's media ops call centre would result. While mitigation efforts ensured the propaganda was somewhat contained, those still receiving the information in the villages and tribal areas continued to absolutely believe it. Again, the organisational focus on the media dominated the ADF and Western military thinking of the information environment.

So it is with today's efforts against Daesh. Information is being disseminated at a rate most struggle to comprehend, yet it only becomes organisationally important when it leads to a media enquiry or military elements can exploit an element of information for a kinetic action. There are small teams across the Department all engaged for their own ends—open-source intelligence collection, brand and reputation management, public information dissemination, counter-propaganda actions. None of these efforts are linked and most of them fail to grasp the true beauty of the capability exploited by our adversary, simply because of an organisational focus that is decidedly passive and almost solely on the conventional media aspect of the information environment. The ADF cannot compete if it does not put the 'social' in social media—actually communicating with individuals rather than disseminating to them. It cannot compete if it does not understand the differences in the social networking sites and how social media should be constructed for each. It absolutely cannot compete if the organisation does not understand with whom it should be communicating.

¹⁹ HQJTF633 (Headquarters Joint Task Force 633), Taliban Operations and Strategic Propaganda as a result of Australian operations or activities in Uruzgan Jan–Aug 2010, dated 19 August 2010.

Take the Australian Army's current foray into Twitter. The overwhelming majority of the content is disseminated by named senior leaders or the official corporate account. In the case of the very progressive 1 Brigade, accounts linked to the Commanding Officers of units are also active in disseminating material. All of it is focused on sustaining Army's brand by disseminating imagery of events or activities. All of it is one-way communication. The ADF uses Twitter in the same manner it uses Facebook, despite the differences in the platforms, and happily reports statistics such as number of followers as measures of success. The ADF is highly effective at reinforcing the already formed beliefs of those supporting the organisation. Very rarely does anyone associated with the accounts inject themselves into conversation streams already occurring, through appropriate hashtags. There are very limited efforts to broaden the audience reached except through inadvertent third-party exposure. The rapid uptake in branded accounts has resulted in circular reporting, as each account retweets or likes those closely associated with it. Almost no one responds to queries addressed to the accounts. The ADF is not engaging in communication—the very reason social media exists.

The ADF's current efforts were recently described as "repeatedly dropping a single PSYOPS leaflet somewhere in the world and not even giving the recipient the benefit of a piece of paper".²⁰ Current adversaries, however, take a different tact. For Daesh, and those like it, social media is all about the conversation stream. The adversary focuses on those with unformed opinions in order to shape and manipulate them for his own ends. Our adversary looks beyond those already communicating on social media and instead creates content to attract the young and impressionable that passively ingest what they find in keyword searches. The adversary understands that his focus must be on generating inquiries from those yet to form an opinion. At this point—this tentative toe-dip into social media by the target to ask a question—he masses his capabilities, an army of online warriors, to focus on behavioural change. He exploits his narrative to persuade and influence. The ADF disseminates disparate elements of its narrative to inform and sometimes educate. We focus on social media awareness without understanding the basis of opinion formation or even the real pros and cons of various social networking sites.

The key issue for the ADF and Defence is the perceived risk of communication—it is the critical vulnerability. The ADF's focus on mission command is completely absent in its use of the information environment. Organisationally, the ADF seeks absolute control. The internet has made this notion difficult; social media has made it nigh on impossible. It is this hesitation, and that of the ADF's Coalition partners, that has enabled the adversary to generate an information advantage. Even if the military limited

²⁰ Comment by a member of the HQJOC (Headquarters Joint Operations Command) team supporting the @Fight_Daesh account.

itself to simply supporting the public affairs function of community relations, the inability to directly inject into conversation streams in a timely manner makes social media use decidedly unsocial. Organisationally, the focus is on what the media could use in the response rather than engaging with those attempting to communicate. Most importantly however, our efforts are insincere. Using a social platform for a monologue defeats its very purpose. A recent review of digital diplomacy efforts around the globe highlighted that

social interaction rests on two-way sharing of information. By only speaking at people, FAMs [Foreign Affairs Ministries] are breaking the “social media contract” that exists between SNS [social networking site] users. There is something disingenuous about using social media to become part of a global community while refusing to contribute to that community.²¹

Even if we focus on using social media as an extension of command communication we are still just broadcasting. Actually communicating with soldiers and young commanders is a two-way street. We want them to tell us what is wrong and why. We want them to query, expand and develop their professional mastery through interaction. We want to be able to engage to support our primary focus of education. A virtual barrage of tweets telling us to read something with no opportunity for real debate on that same social forum seems inherently limited. If those that have gone to such lengths to create a social media account and attract followers simply disseminate missives, evidence suggests that the popularity will soon wane.

In his study of digital diplomacy efforts, Ilan Manor suggests that:

By failing to meet the needs, and expectations, of social media followers Foreign Affairs Ministries risk losing their online audiences. Indeed social media followers who feel ignored, and who are spoken at rather than with, may soon abandon [the] profiles without bothering to return.²²

Social media should be key in supporting military and security operations. It is now ubiquitous. Even the most remote regions of the world are gaining access to mobile data. We have a ready-made vector through which a multitude of effects in the information environment can be created.

Here is one example that stands as an outlier to the accepted practice of the time. A very progressive Marine Corps officer ran the Command Engagement Group for Headquarters Regional Command South-West (RC-SW) in 2012-13. Note the name of the group—it is important. The group did not undertake the then-traditional public affairs approach. Instead they focused on engagement. He sought and gained approval to put social media to the test during his thirteen-month deployment. Starting with an inherited Facebook page, he rapidly introduced supporting, branded social

²¹ Ilan Manor, 'The Rules of Engagement: Why MFAs Should Engage with Social Media Followers', *Exploring Digital Diplomacy*, 18 April 2016, <digdipblog.com/2016/04/18/the-rules-of-engagement-why-mf-as-should-engage-with-social-media-followers/> [Accessed 2 May 2016].

²² Ibid.

media efforts on YouTube and, while he would have liked to do more, simply did not have the staff capacity to give each outlet the time it needed. He tasked his small team to focus on content that would support direct communication from the platforms they owned, rather than producing content solely for dissemination back to commercial media in the United States. Most importantly, he spent most of his day directly corresponding with those who commented on his platforms and on the comments section of media coverage about his organisation. He also focused his organisation's media engagement strategy on those agencies that allowed for online comments, to maximise the opportunity engagement offered. Good, bad or indifferent, Lieutenant Colonel Cliff Gilmore, United States Marine Corps, II MEF, engaged and communicated on behalf of RC-SW.²³ What he found was not surprising for those invested in communication theory. His levels of followership skyrocketed and rapidly progressed beyond just the families of those deployed to a vast cross-section of the United States and the globe. At an update brief early in the tour his Commander enquired as to the popularity of the account. The team had reached 10,000 views of a YouTube clip and the Commander—almost jokingly—asked to be advised when the team broke one million. They did so within a couple of months. The team's content was retransmitted across other social media sites and online forums. When he directly engaged with belligerent posters in that professional and polite way that only US Marines can pull off, a conversation started and in most cases resulted in the person admitting a degree of ignorance on the topic and thanking him for his assistance. When they were particularly belligerent, he found that he was repeatedly out-communicated by active supporters of the mission. His fans were engaging on his behalf which became crucially important in supporting some of the less publicly acceptable decisions required to support the draw down of forces from the area, such as the reduction in number of fresh meals served at dining facilities in the closing weeks. Embracing a qualified officer with twenty years' experience in communication, the II MEF Commander supported the talent on his staff and, through mission command, let Gilmore get on with the job. The only criticisms came from other Commands because their effort, almost solely focused on the media, was being compared rather negatively.

When Gilmore's team closed down Camp Bastion and left, no other Regional Command picked up the mantle. For a fleeting thirteen months military forces had a view of what mission command coupled with social media could achieve, albeit solely focused on generating and sustaining public support—and then it was gone. Observers also had an understanding of what communication, rather than just dissemination, could accomplish. While his higher headquarters was promoting photo caption contests of completely unrelated imagery to generate followers, Gilmore effectively and efficiently communicated, shifting more and more of those with unformed opinions to

²³ Online conversations between the author and Lieutenant Colonel Cliff Gilmore, United States Marine Corps (Retd).

his side of the bell curve. For their efforts on that deployment, the Command Engagement Group were awarded all four team prizes in the United States Marine Corps Professional Communication awards that year.

It could be argued that the current Western military focus on social media and its exploitation by adversaries and potential adversaries, in what is currently framed as Hybrid War, is simply the latest manifestation of the struggle democratic nations have with information in conflict. Moreover, from a military perspective, it is the struggle to truly understand what that central line of operation in the Australian Army's famous Adaptive Campaigning diagram actually means.

While the current fight, both physically and virtually, against Daesh is dominating thinking, there is perhaps a more impressive effort already underway in many parts of Europe. The Ukraine is a fantastic case study in internet-enabled *Maskirovka*.²⁴ Social media is not solely responsible for Russia's successes, but it has become a valuable tool in both accelerating and masking the originator of these effects. If the ADF is not watching and learning now, by the time action is required it may well be too late. Key to this is a realisation that having a social media account is not enough: having smart people, dedicated to the task and working to an agreed campaign, is essential. Providing the appropriate resources is crucial. Empowering them to communicate, in the true sense of that word, is vital.

Perhaps the issues in the ADF's use of social media or operations in the information environment are seated in a broader internal conflict. Current thinking has military elements seeking to generate effects so late in the game—on the commencement of military operations—that the decisive punch may already have been thrown. Phase 0, so embraced by those executing Hybrid War, may be incompatible with modern democracies. Perhaps this is a lesson of the past decade of conflict: the form of operational commitment we make has already been so shaped by the adversary that our tenants of manoeuvre are neutered before the announcement is made. Is this why our narratives fail?

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²⁴ Russian Military Deception. See Lucy Ash, 'How Russia Outfoxes Its Enemies', BBC News, 29 January 2015, <www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31020283> [Accessed 6 August 2016].