

SOCIAL MEDIA – THE VITAL GROUND: CAN WE HOLD IT?

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This Letort Paper seeks to answer some specific questions on how the U.S. Army, and by extension its allies, can best leverage social media, particularly on operations. Are they a viable and effective messaging conduit? Have they changed the information operations (IO) landscape? Does the United States have the correct force structure, training, equipment, and technology to leverage social media? Finally, how can we train our leaders to better understand and use social media?

The impact of social media on the media environment has been widely recognized, as has the ability of extremist and adversarial organizations to exploit the media to publicize their cause, spread their propaganda, and recruit vulnerable individuals. Supporting the growth of social media has been the phenomenal global increase in mobile telephone usage, and much of this increase is in areas where there are existing conflicts or conflicts are highly likely.

However, the full implications of the mobile and social media revolution are not yet fully understood. Social media will increasingly have a direct impact on virtually all aspects of military operations in the 21st century. In doing so, social media will force significant changes to policy, doctrine, force structures, and virtually all staff functions within operational units. New training requirements and new approaches to traditional operational challenges will be required. All this will require a wider understanding of social media and the realization that it is no longer an area simply of concern to public affairs officers (PAO) and possibly intelligence (INT).

Although with new threats come new opportunities, and the interactive nature of social media in particular means that it is potentially a very powerful medium for IO, that potential needs to be recognized before capabilities can be developed to respond to this rapidly developing revolution.

There are four distinctly different applications of social media; and understanding each, together with its impact upon the Army, is critical to addressing the various questions posed.

- Social media can be regarded primarily as a media channel, just like radio, newspapers, and television.
- In addition to this, social media can be seen as an interactive medium for exerting influence.
- Importantly, social media is a way of communicating within an already established network or networks.
- Finally, social media is a near real time, sensor-to-sensor network.

There is a need for commanders, and in particular operations and INT staff, to understand social media and all its different functions, not simply its media function, in order to understand its potential impact on operations, and to incorporate that understanding into their planning and operations.

The key recommendations include:

- A social media capacity needs to be built into every level of command. In the real-time information environment created by social media, operational commanders at every level will need simultaneous and identical situational awareness of unfolding events.
- Social media is integral to the conduct of operations, not just a PAO or INT function. Thus, the U.S. Army needs a custom-made doctrine and an educational capacity to inform commanders on its intelligent and safe use.
- In order to integrate social media into operations, each of the staff functions needs continuous access, at their desk, to the Internet.

- Social media must be integral to all exercises. This needs the creation of a virtual social media environment—i.e., a sandbox or simulation—to add the social media space to training environments. This must be a space in which it is “safe to fail.”
- Within headquarters, the responsibility for social media needs to be clearly articulated and the posts resourced appropriately.
- U.S. Army and Department of Defense (DoD) policy and doctrine must clarify a host of difficult issues relating to social media usage, in particular its use in deception and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS).

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