

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

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**SOCIAL MEDIA IN MILITARY CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY IN  
LESSONS LEARNED.**

by

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## **Abstract**

Since the Internet became commonly available in 1995, people can connect all over the world almost instantly to share thoughts and opinions, activities and agendas. Social media sites created enhanced platforms for connectivity, further enabling the sharing of information. In war and conflict, social media has taken a critical role for governments and military organizations, becoming a powerful weapon that can exploit opportunities beyond previously possible. Social media channels now provide a direct channel to communicate throughout the world, while mainstream media outlets are losing trust.

The analysis of three case studies of social media used in war and conflict reveals common characteristics of effective exploitation. The case studies include the 2006 Lebanon War, the Islamic State, and the Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. They illustrate the ability to use social media for deception, recruiting, intimidation and occupation. The effective social media campaigns had strong agendas with clear messaging; sensitive timing and integration insured viral acceptance and support.

Analysis of the case studies identifies common attributes of the social media campaigns – instrumental characteristics that significantly contributed to the strength of the communications campaign. Recommendations for DOD include fortifying the foundation, refining the message, enabling flexibility and facilitating synchronization.

## Introduction

In 1995, the Internet became commonly available and enabled individual communication worldwide. Email, instant messaging, blogs and social media have facilitated humankind's ability to connect beyond the well-established traditional, mainstream media channels. The creations of Google in 1998; Facebook and YouTube in 2005; and Twitter in 2006<sup>1</sup> have changed the sharing of information, opinions, facts and fiction by over three billion people<sup>2</sup> throughout the world.

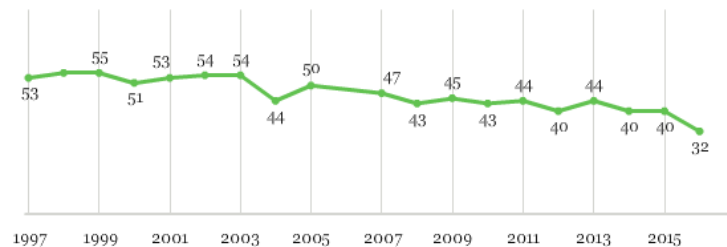
Similarly, Guetenberg's press spurred on the sharing of knowledge in the year 1440 and influenced "the development of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution."<sup>3</sup> With the availability of information worldwide, literacy and prosperity grew and leaders, who were scribes (priests), no longer controlled information and therefore the masses. From clay tablets to hypertext, the sharing of information propelled humankind forward.

Today, the Internet and social media are integral to grassroots connections, with a lessened dependence on the traditional publishing gatekeeper for information. As reflected in the illustration - a Gallup poll about trust and confidence in the mass media - mainstream

### *Americans' Trust in the Mass Media*

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

■ % Great deal/Fair amount



GALLUP

media outlets are losing support as a trusted and solid source of information.<sup>4,5</sup> Individuals can now share and validate personal opinions, concerns and perspectives directly. The pervasiveness of supported information, in multiple formats (text, video, photos), affects collective action, censoring, intelligence, interpretation and more.<sup>6</sup> Like-minded people can now group together, promote agendas and create mass responses in minimal time – creating a weapons system dimension of force.

In the past two decades, communication has changed significantly due to digital networks; the DOD has the opportunity to expand effective communication strategies, incorporating social media platforms, in order to maintain its position as a superpower and excel in crisis and war. An analysis of three crisis/war case studies in which social media played a significant role provides insight and leads to recommendations on how the DOD can leverage social media more effectively. The three case studies include the 2006 Lebanon War, the Islamic State and the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

## **Social Media in War and Government**

Social media sites have realized a significant role in crisis and military operations, with the ability to target the blind hatred of the enemy with empowered “moral forces,” as noted by Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>7</sup> Col. William M. Darley (ret.), interpreting Clausewitz theory, noted that the best “information operations campaign aimed at engendering domestic psychological support as well as demoralizing and defeating adversaries is an aggressive policy reflected in bold battlefield operations...”<sup>8</sup>

The National Security Strategy calls on the United States to “lead with all the instruments of U.S. power.”<sup>9</sup>The Instruments of Power (IOP) - information, diplomacy, military and

economic measures - are the fundamentals to empowering a nation. Information is critical in the age of digital connectivity. As stated in Joint Publication 1-0, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States, “the concept of information as an instrument of national power extends to non-state actors—such as terrorists and transnational criminal groups—that are using information to further their causes and undermine those of the United States Government and our allies.”<sup>10</sup>

Today, social media has proven to be a critical element to swiftly communicate, connect, organize and influence, while maintaining the advantage. Social media enhances adaptable, complimenting the agile strategies of counterinsurgency (COIN) to “contain insurgency and address its root causes.”<sup>11</sup> The fundamentals of COIN include gaining trust and support from the people, by providing a variety of services and support including security, economic support, and infrastructural improvements, in an effort to break them away from the insurgents.<sup>12</sup> A unifying message in a COIN operation reinforces by the credibility of the operation and the legitimacy, effective in exploiting “the negative aspects of the insurgent efforts.”<sup>13</sup>

During the 2016 presidential election, President-elect Donald J. Trump leveraged social media to help win the election. His Twitter messages and Facebook postings were instrumental in reaching voters outside of metro-areas, to gain support and electoral votes – and save money. Referred to as an echo chamber, social media sites proved to be effective in uniting like-minded individuals, and reinforcing and popularizing narrow opinions.<sup>14</sup> His messages were integrated with other grass root efforts including his Trump rallies attracting thousands of people. His message reached and inspired individuals in the majority of United States (US) counties, gaining votes and majority support of the Electoral College. President-

elect Trump uses Twitter daily and has minimized mainstream media as a communication channel.

With the widespread of agenda-driven messages, even fake news or propaganda, there is much confusion and misinformation. Resounding, irrational messages can easily mislead, and the viral effect online exacerbates this effect. Opposing agendas are widespread and unquestionably influential. Controlling the message is paramount for effectiveness. Key nation states including China, Russia and North Korea currently control the message and free speech within their countries, and in turn control the masses. The freedom of expression is limited in China; in Russia, the government perpetuates a “misinformation narrative” through “institutionalized propaganda and censorship;” and in North Korea “the intensity of the threat of communication is clear.”<sup>15</sup> Reliable sources and content are much in demand.

Clarity of the message requires command and control, in order to influence. In corporate communications in the digital age, content marketing is the backbone of an effective communications strategy. From combatant commanders to the President of the United States, a clear, controlled message is paramount. Col. Dennis Murphy, U.S. Army, and Lt. Col. Daniel Kuehl, PhD, U.S. Air Force, both retired, noted in the September-October 2015 edition of *Military Review* that while the United States “has developed multiple national strategies, including one for information sharing...ironically...there is still no national strategy for information content.”<sup>16</sup>

Message content in social media is a key attribute. In October 2015, *TIME Magazine* published an article titled, “The U.S. Is Losing the Social Media War,” authored by Rand Waltzman. Waltzman previously managed a \$50 million program called Social Media in Strategic Communication as a program manager for Defense Advanced Research Projects

Agency. From the research, they learned “‘bullsh..t’ is a weapon that is being used worldwide to fundamentally attack the medium of the press...our adversaries are using our own technology against us—while we're not allowed to use it to defend ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

Control and command of an effective message is fundamental to maintaining superiority, and for mission accomplishment today. A solid agenda, a clear message, timely delivery and integration with IOPs and current landscape can provide non-lethal influence and impact in critical time. The 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) uses the word “communication” one time within its 35 pages. In context, the NSS uses the word *communication* in reference to the global economy, technology, global cooperation and security. DOD Joint Publications of Public Affairs (PA), Information Operations (IO), Military Deception (MILDEC), Military Information Support Operations (MISO), and Counterinsurgency (COIN) have varying guidance on message integration, with questionable gaps. Joint Publication 1-0 notes that social media is critical in commander’s communication synchronization, with supporting capabilities of “public affairs, information operations and defense support to public diplomacy.”<sup>18</sup>

DOD challenges are evident on the surface level of social media communication. DOD’s Facebook and Twitter postings are a range of miscellaneous information, from historical commemorations and retirement information to feature stories and events. The messages are a mix of information appropriate for both internal and external audiences. They do not appear to be targeted and supportive to the external DOD agenda. The top goal started in the DOD’s strategic plan for 2015-2018 is to “defeat our adversaries, deter war, and defend the nation.”<sup>19</sup> All communication needs to support that goal, with care not to dilute it.

The question for this paper is: What lessons can the United States' Department of Defense (DOD) learn from the successful use of social media in conflict? I will look at three specific conflict case studies for insight, including 1) the 2006 Hezbollah/Israel War; 2) the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East; and 3) the annexation of Crimea by Russia. These three conflicts are similar in that social media played a significant role in the crisis; however, the influence and/or control of the social media messages were used in different ways, by different players, and had different effects. Social media proved to be an effective weapons system, with multi-dimensional force.

### **The Case Studies**

*The 2006 Lebanon War.* The 2006 Lebanon War, also known as the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, commenced on July 12, 2006, and lasted for 34 days. Fought in southern Lebanon, on the northern Israel/southern Lebanon border, Hezbollah was the aggressor against The Israel Defense Force (IDF).

The war commenced when Hezbollah soldiers, a Shi'a Islamic militant group backed by Syria and Iran, crossed the border into Israel and killed three IDF soldiers and kidnapped two. According to reports from Israeli media outlets, that the two kidnapped soldiers had been severely injured and needed medical treatment urgently. One of the prisoners was critical.<sup>20</sup>

U.S.-backed Israel responded very quickly and with little restraint. By the next day, on July 13, the IDF had incapacitated the Beirut International Airport, the Lebanese seaport and many major roadways. Israel was notably better equipped, as "a world nuclear power," whereas Hezbollah described as a small and poorly equipped guerilla group.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the 34 days, attacks by both groups across the border persisted, with ongoing publication of minute-by-minute events. Called the “first live war,”<sup>22</sup> journalists and average citizens documented the events with their smart phones, laptops, portable satellites and Internet access. Live broadcasts also occurred during the Gulf War in 1991, from liberated Kuwait and along the invasion route from Kuwait to Baghdad; however, not until the Lebanon War were real-time battlefield images available. Images from the Lebanon War included bombings of homes, disoriented elderly people, children carrying dilapidated dolls, air attacks on the Beirut airport, and striking rockets.<sup>23</sup>

Israel limited its communication channels to Western media, whereas Hezbollah leveraged a wide variety of communication channels, from Al Jazeera to approximately 150 Arab satellite channels and a range of high-quality Arab newspapers.<sup>24</sup> Arab channels were better at sharing Hezbollah-slanted news stories, hence gaining the advantage in empathy and support. Hezbollah effectively gained support beyond its “domestic constituency” by depicting itself as a “vanguard of resistance” against domination by Israel and the West; Hezbollah essentially melded its unique cultures of Shi’ism and militancy with the established and broader themes of pan-Arabism.<sup>25</sup>

Hezbollah was effective in resound and clear messaging, with “one spokesman and no leaks.”<sup>26</sup> Hezbollah controlled the messages and was supported by sympathetic reporters and bloggers. Hezbollah’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah provided nightly television addresses, shared via social media and blogging sites to reach the masses internationally. Hezbollah packaged and disseminated its messages, highlighting its successes and Israel’s mistakes, in a well-orchestrated “multi-channel cyber-strategy.”<sup>27</sup> Hezbollah effectively positioned itself as both a victim and a victor in the war. Furthermore, as stated by Marvin

Kalb and Carol Saivetz, in “The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The Media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict,” Hezbollah effectively showed very early in the emergence of social media in conflict how to “mitigate a conventional military disadvantage.”<sup>28</sup>

Israel was inundated by the 24-hour coverage, with limited control over messaging; overwhelmed by the criticism by hundreds of bloggers, Israel could not respond in a cohesive voice. The inefficient and limited communication hurt the IDF, and made Israel – initially attacked by Hezbollah – appear to be the aggressor, over time losing international support for its stand. Surveys by the two major television news stations, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, reflected the mainstream opinion that Israel was the aggressor. The survey results showed 94% of Al-Arabiya viewers felt Israel was the aggressor; 78% of the Al-Jazeera viewers agreed.<sup>29</sup> Thomas Elkjer Nissen, a recognized expert in strategic communications, information operations and psychological operations noted that, “Effectively shifting the Center of Gravity from the physical battle to the information environment, Hezbollah succeeded in creating and sustaining regional and international pressure that eventually forced Israel to cease its operations before achieving its stated strategic objectives.”<sup>30</sup>

Doctored pictures created further challenges, with traditional media losing credibility and bloggers gaining credibility for efforts to validate accuracy. Freelancer Reuters photographer Adnan Hajj published two controversial photographs. The first photograph was of a Beirut suburb, after a bombing. Hajj enhanced the smoke, making it look darker and more widespread. Another photographer showed an Israeli bomber emitting three flares; later it was discovered there was only one flare. The incidents resulted in Hajj’s firing and led to intense scrutiny of published photographs.<sup>31</sup> Other photographs appeared staged, with purportedly using the same dead boy in multiple locations for photo shoots.<sup>32</sup> The edited

photographs affected mainstream media negatively; whereas, the efforts to validate accuracy influenced social media sites positively.

Lebanese civilians suffered the greatest casualties, estimated at 743 killed; the Israeli civilian deaths totaled approximately 43. Approximately 600 Hezbollah soldiers were killed; approximately 119 IDF soldiers were killed.<sup>33</sup> The total counts were contested, with the respected governments and third party organizations citing varying ranges.

United Nations (UN) resolution 1701 ended the war, with a unanimous vote for a ceasefire, upholding the boundary set in June of 2000. Amongst multiple stipulations, the UN resolution called for a withdrawal of all forces, cessation of hostilities, and full control of Lebanon by the official government.<sup>34</sup>

*The Islamic State.* IS, a Muslim terrorist group that has gained momentum throughout the Middle East. According to the Central Intelligence Agency in September of 2014, IS is comprised of approximately 20,000 to 31,500<sup>35</sup> third generation al-Qaeda members.<sup>36</sup> Since its inception in the year 2000, IS has effectively leveraged social media to recruit Sunni Muslims, and gain support of those willing to die to establish an Islamic state across Syria and Iraq. The IS also uses social media to intimidate enemies with threats for non-conformity.

The media strategy of the IS has proved to be effective to spread its message “as an agent of change, the true apostle of a sovereign faith, a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice, and a collection of avengers bent on settling accounts for the perceived sufferings of others.”<sup>37</sup> IS social media ranges from barbaric murders and religious reverence to humanistic insights – soldiers eating snickers and nurturing kittens.<sup>38</sup>

The IS has effectively used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram<sup>39</sup> and YouTube<sup>40</sup> to provide insight on activities in Syria and Iraq, where there are few, if any, journalists.<sup>41, 42</sup> The expansive social media shares have proven effective in the IS recruiting efforts, and has “inspired recruits from all over the world, including US citizens and Europeans.”<sup>43</sup> However, the majority of Muslims worldwide have not aligned with the IS, having decided, “This is not my Islam.”<sup>44</sup> Recruiting efforts have proven to be more effective outside Iraq and Syria.<sup>45</sup>

The Brookings Institute estimated in late 2014 that the IS controlled between 46,000 to 90,000 active Twitter accounts, with 1,000 to 2,000 accounts with the most activity.<sup>46</sup> The majority of the accounts were said to be originated in IS controlled areas, primarily in Syria and Iraq, with many duplicate accounts as a countermeasure for account discontinuation.<sup>47</sup> The IS social media strategy is credited with the organizations explosive growth between 2013 and 2014.<sup>48</sup> In October of 2015, the IS was releasing “on average, 38 new items per day – 20 minute videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays, audio clips, and pamphlets, in languages ranging from Russian to Bengali.”<sup>49</sup>

Mid-2015, Twitter began an effort to shutdown accounts “threatening or promoting terrorist acts.”<sup>50</sup> From mid-2015 to August 2016, Twitter closed down an estimated 360,000 accounts, the majority with relations to the IS. Relying on user reports and spam-fighting tools, Twitter has reduced the response time and increased shutdowns approximately 80%.<sup>51</sup>

The IS has used peer-to-peer applications to spread its message, including Telegram and SureSpot, and content sharing sites including JustPaste.it.<sup>52</sup> Telegram provides encrypted communication services, enabling inter-organization communication and coordination. Through Telegram, a user can chat privately or connect with as many as 200 people; the platform enables the sharing of multiple forms of communication including photos, videos,

messages and files.<sup>53</sup>Telegram has a security feature that destroys the conversation within a set amount of time. These types of services make intelligence observations difficult; they have created significant security challenges for the US - adding to the debate of encrypted messaging on Apple and Google platforms.<sup>54</sup>

While recruitment efforts for the IS has purportedly slowed down from approximately 1,500 per month to 200 per month in April 2016, the fight in Iraq and Syria continues, with heightened activity in Mosul, Iraq, where millions of civilians are trapped in the crossfire.<sup>55</sup> The IS terror has also led to an increased number of Syrian refugees, with an estimated three million seeking asylum as result of the IS.<sup>56</sup>

*Russia's Annexation of Crimea.* In February of 2014, Russia commenced a well-orchestrated effort to take control of the peninsula of Crimea—a province of Ukraine with a population of approximately 2million.<sup>57</sup>The annexation followed an uprising in Ukraine, nicknamed Euromaidan, a period with civil unrest as result of the Ukrainian government not signing an agreement with the European Union. Widely condemned by the international community,<sup>58</sup>the annexation of Crimea incurred minimal casualties, while providing Russia oceanfront land ownership and open access to the Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) issued a non-supportive statement of the annexation, saying, “Military action against Ukraine by forces of the Russian Federation is a breach of international law and contravenes the principles of the NATO-Russia Council and the Partnership for Peace.”<sup>59</sup> NATO also imposed economic sanctions; beyond that, NATO nations took no military action in response.

One month later, on March 16, 2014, a 99.77 percent positive vote by the people of Crimea determined Crimea’s annexation from Ukraine, to be integrated as part of the Russian

Federation.<sup>60</sup> The two vote options on the ballot were for either becoming part of Russia or restoring the 1992 Crimean Constitution – enabling Crimea’s power to establish relations with other states, independent of Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> The option to maintain Crimea’s current status as part of Ukraine was not an option. Ukraine declared the vote illegal and unconstitutional, and the United Nations General Assembly declared the referendum invalid.<sup>62</sup> However, Russia succeeded at the annexation, using a mix of all the IOPs - diplomatic, informational, military and economic. John Simpson, World Affairs editor with the BBC News stated, “The annexation of Crimea was the smoothest invasion of modern times. It was over before the outside world realized it had even started.”<sup>63</sup>

Russia leveraged social media before, during and after the annexation of Crimea, to garner local, regional and worldwide support for its efforts. As part of a “hybrid warfare” strategy, Russia integrated cyber warfare, conventional and irregular warfare to achieve its mission. Peter Pindják with *NATO Review Magazine* explained, “Hybrid conflicts involve multilayered efforts designed to destabilize a functioning state and polarize its society. Unlike conventional warfare, the centre of gravity in hybrid warfare is a target population. The adversary tries to influence influential policy-makers and key decision makers by combining kinetic operations with subversive efforts.”<sup>64</sup> András Rác, in *Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist*, adds further insight, saying hybrid warfare defeats “the target country by breaking its ability to resist without actually launching a full-scale military attack.”<sup>65</sup>

To support messaging, Russia tapped into the Euromaidan unrest, and reached back into history, to a time where Crimea was part of the Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR), appealing to the majority of Crimean citizens with Russian heritage. The message that

“Crimea is Ours!”<sup>66</sup> was effective in communicating the mindset of Russia and apparently the majority of Crimea citizens. Russia promoted the notion that the annexation was the will of the Crimean people. Pro-Russian communication via social media helped to promote a sense of stability and safety for the people of Crimea, while cultivating a culture of misinformation to induce fear and anxiety, even hatred toward Ukraine.<sup>67</sup>

Social media has continued to be a formidable force in the region, providing insight on the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Putin reportedly handed out awards to “social media propagandists” who promulgated false reports of Ukrainian aggression, in an effort to further destabilize Eastern Ukraine. The coercive efforts purportedly included false postings about horrendous crimes committed by the Ukrainian extremists on the Russian version of Facebook, called “Vkontakte;” staged or altered photographs depicting innocent, murdered citizens; and rumors to destabilize communities, questioning the quality of public water sources, the construction of concentration camps, and the presence of threatening Ukrainian fascists, lurking in wooded areas.<sup>68</sup> A report from the NATA Cooperative Cyber Defence Cooperative Center of Excellence noted that “pro-Russian voices...have manipulated and distributed images of purported atrocities by the Ukrainian army, including: mass graves of tortured people, civilians used for organ trafficking, burning crops to create a famine, recruiting child soldiers, the use of heavy weapons against civilians, and acts of cannibalism.”<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, Western journalists inside Crimea, including Simon Ostrovsky, documented the other side of the story – a revolutionary effort by Russia to coercively takeover Crimea from Ukraine. Ostrovsky, an award winning videographer with VICE news, documented Ukraine’s efforts to maintain unity with Crimea.<sup>70</sup> Ostrovsky’s videos include Russia’s

invasion of Ukraine, from March 3, 2014; the series continues to May 28, 2014. The series documents the ill-equipped Ukrainian soldiers, surrounded by the “little green men” - Russian Special Forces in unmarked uniforms. Ostrovsky was kidnapped by the pro-Russian separatists on April 21, 2014; he was held for three days in a basement - beaten, interrogated and subsequently released. The VICE news series documents the confusion and non-acceptance of the Crimean vote and Russia’s ongoing aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia resulted in very few casualties, with two deaths and 35 injuries at a demonstration at Supreme Council of Crimea in Simferopol, Ukraine,<sup>71</sup> and two deaths at another demonstration outside of the Crimean Parliament.<sup>72</sup> Since the operation, the tension between Ukraine and Russia has continued to escalate with ongoing skirmishes in eastern Ukraine, bordering Russia. As of August 2016, the United Nations estimated casualties with over 9,600 killed and over 22,100 injured in Ukraine since April of 2014.<sup>73</sup>

### **Analysis of the Case Studies – Common Attributes**

Social media platforms provide governments, military organizations and citizens an immediate opportunity to connect with the world, share agendas through activities/information/opinions and to influence opinions and gain influential support. The case studies show a weapons-like effect of agenda-driven social media messages; in a timely effect, social media can influence worldviews and effect change. When integrated into the IOPs, social media messages can be more powerful than a bullet, bomb or a missile.

The three case studies reveal four common characteristics of successful social media deployment, including: 1) a solid agenda, 2) clarity, 4) timeliness, and 4) integration.

*A solid agenda.* As reflected in these case studies, powerful agendas supported by social media enabled effective deception and influence on public opinion and political dynamics. Hezbollah the aggressor leveraged social media to show the world they were overpowered by Israel. Russia declared Crimea theirs because as they wanted access to the Mediterranean Sea. With a solid agenda, and social media support, Russia quickly annexed Crimea from Ukraine within a few weeks, with an estimated four deaths; IS leverages social media to spread and fortify religious beliefs, recruit and intimidate. These powerful agendas were effective because they clearly communicated and controlled messages, they integrated their agendas quickly into belief systems and gained support via social media platforms.

The greater availability of information has influenced another level of scrutiny, but it takes time to validate the agenda and messages when supported by many voices. In a free speech society, traditional mainstream media is losing trust and confidence. Social media shows evidence of breaking up the monopoly of established channels and bringing to the communication a mix of billions of more voices, more noise and compounded confusion. Social media has also provided a broader forum for more like-minded, timely group connections, which have significant influence – good or bad. Viral shares quickly spread the word, building further support, apparent validation and response.

In the 2006 Lebanon War, although Hezbollah initiated the conflict, it then gained advantage by repositioning itself. Hezbollah garnered support of the world by positioning itself as a victim, rather than the true aggressor. Through online communications, Hezbollah shared the immediate destruction of buildings, injured civilians and related destitution and destruction. Hezbollah created a weapon to protect itself – social media. In this example, the aggressor overcame the much more powerful enemy, which reacted with resounding force.

Social media streams gained validity as result of mainstream media misinformation. Altered photographs from a Reuters photographer created further mistrust of traditional, mainstream media channels and increased trust of social media users. On the other side, Israel relied on mainstream media to communicate, and therefore had faltered and questionable channels to support its agenda of response. Although social media messages were not balanced in reporting, the many voices and key messages were resoundingly clear for Hezbollah. The quick manipulation of facts via social media proved to be effective.

The IS has been successful in spreading support of a Jihad. Messages of strength and intimidation attract new members, and create fear and concern worldwide. The IS has leveraged social media to attract followers who are willing to give the ultimate sacrifice of death in the name of a higher power. The IS has gained momentum to destroy established international societies norms of peace and respect, equal rights, respect for human life and opportunity for open exchange and free. The IS leverages archaic religious principles of control and destruction as an agenda.

Russia effectively used misinformation and deception to gain control of Crimea. Russia stripped its Special Forces of insignia, maintaining a shroud of deception to create a willful majority. Russia's agenda was supported by messages of Crimean citizen support for a change in government, before, during and after the operation. More voices supported the operation and the vote, then opposed it. Despite the fact that Crimean citizens and journalists knew whom the soldiers were, and shared this insight on social media, the quick annexation was effective. The Russian state remained aloof; once the dust settled, the world knew the players. Yet in the short period of the annexation, no superpowers responded to save Crimea. The annexation was coercive and undermining, yet incredibly effective and successful.

*Clarity.* In addition to a solid agenda, analysis of the case studies reveals a common control of the message to insure clarity and effective message delivery. In the environment of crisis, the success of communicated agenda relates to clarity of action driven messages via reliable sources and channels. Clarity and continuity of messaging reinforces belief and influences integration and influence. Clarity requires a reliable channel or spokespeople, and key, action driven messages that are timely, influential and integrated – supported.

Clarity of a message enables that message to have the effect intended. The basics of communication are the sender and receiver, and a clear, comprehensible channel. The channels are important – whether they be well-known social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, or peer-to-peer applications that enable sharing of thoughts and plans in select groups, publicly or privately. Clarity also comes from key messages designed to engage, build respect, create support and drive action in support of an agenda. In Lebanon, Hezbollah had one spokesperson, who effectively delivered nightly speeches via social media. General Hassan Nasrallah’s messages were and loud clear; whereas Israel did not control the message and relied on unreliable channels, creating chaos and confusion for impressionable audiences nationwide.

The Islamic State effectively controls its organizational communication, sticking to key messages with regard to recruiting and IS ideals. The IS clear messages strongly support its agenda to spread Islamic beliefs. The IS also leverages social media clarity in its peer-to-peer platforms to control internal communication and coordinate efforts very quickly with minimal logistical challenges. The platforms used help to protect these communications, providing privacy and less evidence for tracking.

Russia controlled its messages before, during and after the annexation of Crimea, lessening concern and heeding response. The idea that Crimea's citizens supported the annexation, and that there was little to no combative aggression, nullified the need for a superpower reaction. In the VICE News YouTube videos, unmarked Russian soldiers were courteous to the Ukrainian soldiers, creating a mirage of peace. The message of acceptance was loud and clear.

*Timeliness.* The timeliness of a message is a critical element in delivering the right message at the right time in the right place. Timeliness relates to understanding human emotions and all the other parts of the equation. It relates to the past history, regional and cultural characteristics, main players, capabilities, leadership and current events and wildcards. The instantaneous capability of social media provides a number of capabilities and affects never known before, most notably the ability to respond immediately.

Social media makes communication simple - word travels easily and almost instantly throughout the world - granted the user is leveraging the right channels with followers in the target demographic. In Lebanon, during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, the world witnessed battlefield actions in real time, for the first time. Hezbollah used many channels to disseminate messages; whereas Israel limited itself to Western media and therefore did not get reach the masses nor garner support. Hezbollah also used timely communication to garner support for purported aggression from Israel. The Islamic State used duplicate Twitter accounts to insure maximum reach and circulation. Russia pre-planned the support of many voices – instant acknowledgement of the will of the people of Crimea. Russia continued this support throughout the annexation, disseminating word of non-aggression throughout the

world, easing legitimate concerns and subverting immediate international combative response.

Part of understanding the current situation links to integration of communication within the US IOP's. Communication is part of the information aspect of communication but understanding United States' diplomatic efforts, military and economic efforts, and integrating them to synchronize efforts is pivotal.

*Integration.* One of the most important aspects of social media is that it never stands alone – it is part of the hybrid approach to warfare, and highly effective in combination with counterinsurgent, asymmetric, irregular, conventional and/or unconventional warfare. Social media as a facet of the information IOP is instrumental when integrated with the other powers of diplomacy, military and economics.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah integrated social media with asymmetric warfare to effectively fight a much better equipped enemy, and hold its own despite significant disadvantages. The Islamic State has exemplified the use of integrated social media into its unconventional strategy to grow its members and spread its supporters throughout the world, lurking in dark corners, ready to pounce. Russia integrated social media with irregular warfare to overtake the peninsula of Crimea within a matter of weeks, with limited overt aggression and minimal loss of life. Russia integrated social media into its information instrument of power, and used social media to further diplomatic, military and economic measures to painlessly annex a very valuable geographic location – taking it directly away from Ukraine and making it part of Russia.

## Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the three case studies, the recommendations identify opportunities for the DOD to develop a foundation to exploit social media to the advantage of US efforts. The recommendations include 1) fortifying the foundation, 2) refining the message, 3) enabling flexibility for expedience, and 4) facilitating synchronization. The recommendations are basic in communication principles yet go beyond to incorporate the unique characteristics of social media – timely, synchronized communication that helps to insure a sound voice and viral support.

*Fortify the foundation.* The DOD can improve its agenda by leveraging social media to reach people throughout the world. The DODs messages infrequently reach beyond internal audiences, unless there is an attack, violation or accident. The DOD would benefit by proactively reaching beyond mainstream media, in one controlled voice for clarity, with timely dissemination of truthful information to improve influence worldwide.

To build followership, the DOD needs to understand content marketing and search engine optimization. Fortifying social media channels may require investment; engaging conversations and noteworthy messages that lend themselves to building relationships and a personality. DOD may consider advertising or sponsorships for the DOD channels, to build followers, and create the social media conversations. However, according to regulations, public affairs cannot pay purchase promotional space. Bought space for DOD messaging can help to improve reach and influence and refinement of the policy would enhance communication efforts.

A review of the DOD's Facebook and Twitter accounts today reveal a mix of confusing messages and information. The DOD's Twitter account has 2.93 million followers; the

DOD's Facebook account has 1.4 million likes. These are less than five percent of the public following Taylor Swift, who has 82.1 million followers on Twitter and 74 million Facebook likes. While some may say it is not fair to compare the two, others would hope that the US DOD has more followers and likes than a 26-year old musician.

The top goal started in the DOD's strategic plan for 2015-2018 is to "defeat our adversaries, deter war, and defend the nation."<sup>74</sup> The social media messages do not appear to be targeted and supportive to the DOD agenda, but widespread and trying to cover everything related to the DOD – a huge range of subject matter. The majority of DOD messages should relate to national-level, external messages with regard to exercising US military muscle and deterrence. Some may say that DOD's focus should be elsewhere – peacekeeping missions and tying into diplomatic efforts; those efforts are absent or significantly diluted, as well. Delving down into the DOD and joint services, depending on the agenda, other social media accounts, blogs or peer-to-peer platforms may be more appropriate, depending on the involved entities, target audiences and more. However, a review of top DOD social media accounts is a viable barometer of communication priorities within the organization. The DOD would benefit by communicating a solid agenda, with clear messaging for optimal impact and effectiveness.

Today, the United States is fighting wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Africa and protects hot spots throughout the world. We have been fighting throughout multiple Middle East countries since 2001. In the past few years, relations have become more concerning in the Pacific Area of Command. DOD's social media communication should support of those operations. The DOD needs to communicate an agenda in order to position itself effectively; that is fundamental in communication. Furthermore, the attributes of clarity of message,

timeliness and integration need consideration for effective impact on social media. Viral support from many voices is what the DOD needs to maintain its position globally.

*Refine the message.* The keyword today is communication. As a foundation for fundamental relations, the United States needs to support its agenda with digital-age clarity. Communication is the action of sharing information; without proactive communication, the United States cannot compete. An emphasis on leveraging communication in today's world of interconnectivity and social media needs to be part of the NSS. The United States and DOD are competing amongst a trillion voices to be heard in the world; social media provides the platform for resounding messages.

A solid agenda supported by clear messages, delivered in a timely manner while integrated into societal beliefs is the key to influence the future of our country. Leaders need to communicate directly via social media without interference. The principles of journalism - built on truthfulness as a reliable source of fact-based news covering the 5W's and communicating all sides without bias – are in question and scrutinized beyond individual voices. Therefore, The DOD's agenda to “defeat our adversaries, deter war, and defend the nation.”<sup>75</sup> must be clear and resounding, agile and effective, from the Secretary of Defense, to combatant commanders. DOD leadership would benefit by building an audience built on trust and transparency; with an emphasis on strength, technology and excellence. With a strong agenda, the US DOD can build stronger bonds, focus on deterrence and when engaged in battle, act swiftly – leveraging the expedience of social media.

Clarity comes from clear messages that are relevant and succinct. In social media, clear messages are quickly understandable and comprehensible from a headline. A clear message is controlled and targeted. The basic tenants of communication apply to clarity with social

media, with a sender, receiver and solid channel to transmit. The Internet and social media provide opportunities for repetition and redundancy; basic tenants of communication.

Implemented correctly, a solid social media campaign compounds virally. Those viral voices are important; every military member has a voice and therefore can help spread the word.

*Enable flexibility for expedience.* PA serves as the voice of the commander, and PA staffs usually manage social media accounts. The voice of the commander must be heard and understood, and then received and acknowledged appropriately. In addition to making statements and acknowledging information, sharing information lends validation to the conversation. In combat environments, the roles and processes need to be simple and easy to implement, to facilitate timely dissemination of the information. Control and repetition of action driven messages will rightly influence target audiences.

Laws and policies need to be adhered to, but social media provides an opportunity for creative communication. For all services, the office of Public Affairs (PA) maintains official social media accounts for military organizations and leadership. These official accounts enable the easy sharing of community and media-related information. Guided by the principles of public affairs, including Freedom of Information, the objective of public affairs is to inform, as an extension of the commander's voice, with consistent, reliable information; and to tell the DOD story.<sup>76</sup>

Social media is fast moving and 24/7. There are billions of social media users interested in current events. Users who communicate frequently establish trust, and supporters validate the message. Release of information is an integral part of command and control. From the theater commander to the battle commander, DOD would benefit from orchestrated

messaging to insure resounding influential messages. Collaborative internal communication is key to flexibility.

*Facilitate synchronization.* Flexibility ties into synchronization. The DOD would benefit from better integration of social media strategy and guidance in joint publications for enhanced collaboration. Commanders need a solid understanding of communications guidance, policies and laws, and comprehension of communication lanes of responsibility. A solid understanding of the evolving landscape and how the message integrates is critical. Versatile use of different social media platforms needs to be considered and supported; a clear, comprehensible message should travel far and wide. Limiting channels can be detrimental to validation; controlling the message does not mean controlling the expansiveness of shares.

The greatest challenge with flexibility is the control of strategic communications. While this falls under PA, there is a need to coordinate exceptionally well internally. Solutions may include reconsideration of a DOD strategic communications division, as well as embedding PA specialists throughout the joint forces. Field PA communicators could help at various levels, while garnering the support they need from PA and the strategic communications division.

Externally, commanders must synchronize the message and timing with the culture and the situation globally. Synchronizing DOD military social media efforts with NGOs, diplomatic and humanitarian efforts aids in validation and support.

## Conclusion

The power of information is fundamental, as witnessed by Gutenberg's press. Social media augments the influence of information exponentially, with the opportunity for many voices of support or dissention. Military leaders can leverage social media as a weapons system; the effects are so impactful that it can change the entire scenario. Social integrates into the information instrument of power and counterinsurgency strategies and aids in proactive military communications for public affairs, information operations, military deception, and psychological operations.

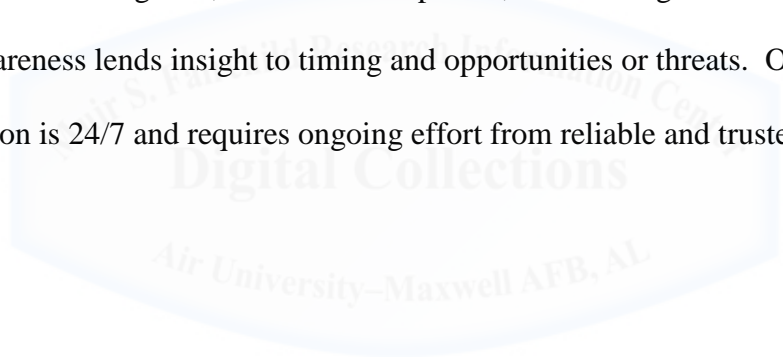
The case studies revealed common attributes of effective social media campaigns including a solid agenda, a clear message, timely deployment and integration. Hezbollah leveraged social media to gain the international community's belief in its position as an underdog, although they were the initial aggressors. Hezbollah influenced the undermining of Israel, and effectively positioned themselves as both victims and victors. The Islamic State's influence attained via social media for recruiting and intimidation has created an enemy that superpower nations in tandem have not been able to overcome, in 15 years. Russia's influence through social media during the annexation of Crimea was so effective that nobody responded to help Ukraine, beyond issuing statements of non-support and sanctions. Almost three years later, Russia has moved deeper onto Eastern Ukraine where continues efforts to overtake the region with increasingly aggressive behaviors. Still, the world is watching but not reacting.

Overtime, like-minded social media voices serve to validate an agenda and clarify the messages. In a crisis, clear, moving and integrated agendas – whether true information,

misinformation or propaganda – have viral capabilities on social media. The effectiveness of an agenda-driven message is dependent on the clarity of that message, the timing, its integration into the culture and its influence –the ways and means of delivery.

Understanding the landscape and integrating the message is paramount to deployment.

The DOD has an opportunity to effectively leverage social media as a weapons system. Defining the DOD foundation and simplifying key messages is fundamental. Leaders need to communicate action-driven messages that support the priority of defeating our adversaries, deterring war and defending the nation.<sup>77</sup> Flexibility and synchronization facilitate the orchestration of social media communication. Internal and external collaboration and integration further the agenda, and aid in acceptance, acknowledgement and support. Situation awareness lends insight to timing and opportunities or threats. Online communication is 24/7 and requires ongoing effort from reliable and trusted sources.



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