Framework for Military Applications of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Communication, Exchange, Military, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

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

The key characteristics of social media are:

- **Ability to Go Viral:** Messages can be spread far and wide and reach a large number of users
- **Mobility:** Social media has penetrated society. In 2016, Facebook had 1.79 billion active users and is the most popular social network world wide (Statista.com, 2017). There are 310 million monthly active users on Twitter with an average of 208 followers (Smith, 2016).
- **Distributes mass communication and social engagement**

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Low cost has led to increased number of users

**Sharing:** Users have the ability to easily make contributions and provide feedback in an immediate time frame.

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

**Exchange:** Social media provides the ability for users to converse, exchange ideas, images, videos and other digital content.

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

**Connectedness:** Social media provides links to other content, contacts, sites and resources. Users can easily search and locate other material.

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

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

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

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

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

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