As smart phones, digital cameras, and webcams become more prevalent in the battle space, the possibility of an unofficially sanctioned conflict “live feed” reaching a mass audience no longer seems inconceivable. Social media would be the likely delivery vehicle for such content, as evidenced by Pakistani live tweets during the bin Laden compound raid and “selfies” taken by locals in Crimea with Russian soldiers. Social media not only poses practical challenges to operational security, but more fundamentally, redistributes the narrative power previously consolidated in official actors. Formatting and disseminating information related to the conflict environment is no longer the exclusive purview of news outlets and political-military leadership, but rather, any social media user has the potential to create unanticipated effects that could influence the conduct of military operations. As war has become increasingly focused on perception and deception as opposed to the kinetic destruction of military targets, public perceptions influenced and shaped by tech-savvy stakeholders may be just as decisive in determining outcomes as the precision of our technologies and the competency of our leadership. Recent developments in social media have profound ramifications for leaders at all levels of warfare (tactical, operational and strategic) and a lack of understanding of the massive amount of new “communication vectors,” particularly by senior leadership, could undermine operational effectiveness and even jeopardize a nation’s ability to prevail in conflict.

The effects of social media at the operational level of war (OLW) can be divided into “first” and “second order” challenges. First order challenges merely amplify existing concerns about operational security (OPSEC). The fundamental OPSEC challenge is how to limit the quantity and quality of information about military operations that reaches adversaries. However, unlike previous major engagements where OPSEC was successful (e.g. the invasion of Normandy), we now live in a world where the ease of collecting data by both active and passive means makes it increasingly difficult to conceal behaviors, motivations and intentions. Social media, including content generated by DoD organizations and personnel, thus threatens to compromise operational security by revealing the locations, capabilities, and intentions of military assets in a variety of ways. Consider, for example, how much information a social media-literate adversary can gain about ship movements simply by aggregating the GPS data tethered to Facebook posts by ship personnel. Similarly, an Instagram photo of naval equipment might reveal information about its technical limitations and modes of implementation. Ironically, a sudden lack of “normal” social media activity by a unit or vessel might indicate operationally-imposed constraints that, if correctly interpreted, could also provide useful information to an adversary. The way in which social media exposes the operating environment thus poses immediate “first order” challenges to not only how a Maritime Operations Center (MOC) is manned, trained, and equipped, but also to operational planning, preparation, and execution.
A “second order” challenge, and one which perhaps has not yet been well understood during the planning and execution of recent military operations, is how social media has restructured the ability to influence public opinion. Social media not only changes what is reported about military operations, but more importantly, who has the ability to “tell the story.” A single photo posted to social media has the potential to spark global outrage and can have tremendous impact at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. (e.g. Abu Ghraib photos of torture). Decision-makers at all levels of war need to understand that changing global opinion often hinges on aggregating a critical mass of “followers” online, rather than the authenticity or credibility of content and authors. The fact that social media content often becomes “representative” of military operations does not always emanate from a judgment of content quality, but only allows us to make a statement about the content’s resilience within the “attention economy” online. In other words, the average media consumer’s palate is not as sophisticated and discerning as military leadership would desire, often exhibiting a preference for the most shocking, rather than the most reliable and professional content.

Additionally, information about military operations disseminated through social media channels is often received by end users in small packets and various formats, making it even more difficult for social media consumers to construct a singular, cohesive, and reliable narrative about a conflict and its associated military operations. Compounding the problem, the instability of social media contributes to public faith in its inherent truthfulness. The amateurish and fragmented nature of the medium actually increases confidence that what is presented is not being “spun” by political, military, or news media leadership, regardless of the veracity of the content or credibility of the source(s). Therefore, the “second challenge” of social media is the seemingly haphazard way in which it can impact public opinion about US military operations, particularly when social media content concerning military operations goes “viral.”

This “second challenge” has huge ramifications, as domestic, regional, and global public perceptions can and do alter the rhythm and direction of conflict. A textbook example of domestic public opinion having a significant impact on military operations occurred during the Vietnam War, yet even the pace and scope of that shift pales in comparison to what is possible in today’s “24/7” globally-networked environment. Therefore, when military leadership forfeits its opportunity to engage with public perceptions in a meaningful way, it incurs additional risks: military forces become reactive operators, the development of policy and procedure becomes hopelessly iterative, and the capacity for thorough planning diminishes.

Beyond the loss of control implied by social media’s multiplication and diversification of narrative influencers, adversaries might pursue active means of deception through social media--employing social media to distort the story about what is really going on in a particular region, and therefore driving perceptions towards certain favorable ends. An enemy could also propagate information via social media with the intention of generating a wrong evaluation of its capabilities, intentions, etc., or to instigate a certain US military response. For example, culpability in the 21st of August 2013 gas attacks in Syria remains under suspicion, with some speculating that the attacks (and others since then) were staged, and then digitally captured, by desperate rebels trying to provoke a US response. Therefore, there is danger not only in how social media multiplies and diversifies situational reporting, but also in how realistic assessments of the tactical scene are complicated by actors purposely misrepresenting their plans and activities through active deception on social media. Given the power of these emerging communication vectors to influence large populations, the consequences of assigning unwarranted significance to unreliable or deceptive social media could be devastating.

A Way Forward for Leaders

A dystopian assessment of social media assumes that its presence in battle space will always undercut military effectiveness by compromising operational security and obstructing the development of a unified, credible narrative concerning operations.
However, such an appraisal discounts the possibility that social media’s obstacles to mission success (notably how it increases transparency and democratizes speaking power) could actually become opportunities if leveraged intelligently. For example, a military presence on social media platforms might be used to facilitate a healthier civil-military discourse. Social media also provides significant intelligence value in its own right (a.k.a. social media intelligence, or SMINT). Alternatively, social media could be used to mislead adversaries, eclipsing the true intentions of military operations. Regardless, all of these things need to be considered by operational-level commanders and their staffs.

**Flexible Frameworks versus Communication Hierarchies**

A successful approach to managing social media at the OLW must, first and foremost, recognize the insufficiency of employing a singular metaphor or descriptor for social media when applying the term as staffs plan, prepare for, and execute military operations. For example, commanders who conceptualize social media in purely platform-specific terms (e.g. social media is Facebook) will quickly find their thinking outpaced by the rate of change on sites themselves, as well as the speed at which various social media platforms come in and out of public favor. It would be similarly reductive to relegate social media to a single, specifiable social activity (e.g. social media is for sharing pictures) or to ascribe it demographic characteristics (e.g. social media is a space for young people). Astute military staffs must recognize social media’s dynamism and resistance to being inventoried the way one might pieces of equipment. Leaders must encourage their staffs to think about social media in multiple ways, and should be wary of becoming too reliant on one particular descriptive framework.

The second component of a more effective approach to social media within the MOC at must be a willingness on the part of leadership and planners to abandon the logic and rhetoric of “technological determinism” when confronting the challenges of social media. For example, a deterministic perspective would expect cell phone adoption in Africa to imitate the usage patterns in established markets, like Europe and the Americas, as a traditional means of communication made portable. In reality, such logic underestimates the ability of creative people to leverage existing technology in new and disruptive ways, as evidenced by the use of cell phones to start a personal banking sector in Africa which resulted in a significant disruption to traditional financial structures. Military planners must be cautious when making assumptions as to how social media might be used in the battle space being careful to avoid applying preconceived notions of traditional use. By extension, MOC staff members should also avoid engaging in Luddism with regards to social media usage by military members. Pursuing purely technological solutions to social media problems will cause management strategies to inevitably lag, rather than lead, actual social media practices.

The goal of this article is not to suggest that the volatility and unpredictability of social media prevents military leadership from developing requirements, procedures, and decision-making models at the operational level of war. After all, to suggest merely that social media is difficult to describe fails to advance existing literature on the topic, and ultimately is useless to commanders and staffs confronting the challenges of social media. Rather, the goal of this article is to explain and promote a new and useful framework for approaching social media challenges at the OLW by treating it as an influencing means that can be proactively utilized rather than a static asset within the cyberspace domain.

**Four Vector Strategy**

OLW commanders and their staffs should view social media through four key, relationship “vectors” that are critical to mission success: military to military, military to population, population to population, and population to military. It is important to note that the terms “military” and “population” are intentionally broad. “Military” can apply to the U.S.
military, a partner nation’s military, or an adversary’s military (or even a non-state actor militant group). Similarly, the term population might include a host nation, the homeland population, or any other subset of the global community with a vested interest in conflict outcomes. While these four vectors generally capture the relationships commanders should seek to influence via social media, it is important to understand that each relationship category contains extraordinary diversity.

Moving forward, as commanders and staffs plan courses of action to accomplish operational objectives, they would be wise to develop deliberate and meaningful “conversation strategies” designed to make these four relationship sets look the way they want them to. Not only does this relational paradigm provide a methodology for developing outgoing communications via social media intended to have a desired effect, but it also offers a prism through which to assess social media content generated by adversaries and third party sources. One way to evaluate the health and direction of these four relationship vectors is to ask the question, “Does the social media content affirm or disaffirm the perceived status of my relationship with party X?” Thus, thinking about social media as a tool for modifying and assessing relationships in line with mission goals avoids the problems of over specification, both in terms of social media’s qualities and its capabilities. In short, it makes more sense for commanders and their staffs to define particular relationship outcomes, establish a “relationship vector commander’s intent,” and then employ social media as a tool for driving the relationships towards specific outcomes.

A Shift from 20th to 21st Century Information Paradigms

The difficulties of operating in a social media-saturated environment will only be resolved if military leadership acknowledges a new dialectic of power based on “multi-stakeholderism” and the politics of attention rather than the consolidation of materials and infrastructure by an institution or nation state. Furthermore, in a conflict environment where perception is just as important as the concentration of force, the US military must relinquish its recursive, post-industrial (broadcast) online media strategy and admit that DoD websites and existing social media infrastructure currently fail to compete with counter-narratives being generated by unaffiliated, and even novice, social media users. This means acknowledging that public affairs “mass media” models cannot be retrofitted
to the social media space. Traditional public affairs strategies are simply not sustainable in an online environment where attention is the principal currency driving what messages are ultimately “heard” by consumers.

It follows that OLW staffs should not overlook the advantages of social media as a conversational medium, most notably its ability support brief, efficient messages between large numbers of contributors. Much of the current public affairs guidance focuses on the control and messaging elements of one-way announcements. An effective social media plan must instead focus on diversifying and expanding military conversations on various platforms, de-emphasizing broadcast transmissions and inviting more soldier, sailor and citizen participation. Until these changes occur, the military will continue to “talk to itself,” and will find its accounts of operations silenced by louder voices online. In order to retain influence over the message concerning military operations, the OLW staffs must commit to “getting social” on networking platforms.

At the OLW, this translates into the need for commanders and their staffs to join, rather than start conversations. The first requirement, then, is to locate cells of activity on social media sites where important conversations related to the mission are already unfolding. The amount of time and expertise required to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) on the web suggests that MOCs would be well served by forming a “social media” cross-functional team (CFT) with the manning and expertise to locate and assess relevant, high attention conversations. However, locating the right conversations to weigh in on is only half the battle. Commanders will also require assistance in formulating messaging designed to have the desired effect on one or more of the relationship vectors via social media. The need to formulate a timely and well-crafted “input” into the on-going conversation on key web sites cannot be overstressed, as most social media users have a small appetite for asynchronous, long-winded “news articles” and are equally hostile towards poorly-manufactured products. Driving the conversation (and thereby the relationship) towards the commander’s desired relationship outcome will also requires a team of highly-skilled communication professionals.

The current public affairs infrastructure within US Navy MOCs is inadequate to produce desired effects on a large scale via social media. Therefore, to ensure that a sufficient number of trained and skilled social media experts can lead and participate on social media CFTs, senior Navy leadership should consider the merits of identifying, recruiting, and developing young talent within the Navy (“digital natives”)⁶, specifically those with backgrounds in Internet/Social Media/Computer Science studies. Only with augmentation will MOC commanders, in the near term, be able to leverage social media to drive the four relationship vectors towards desired outcomes. Fundamentally, commanders' efforts to influence critical relationship vectors in the operational environment via social media will become obsolete absent a shift from today’s official communication structures that are overly reliant on vertical, lengthy and overly rigid approval chains.

**Conclusion**

Social media is a medium that is increasingly being used to fundamentally disrupt military operations and communications as they were structured throughout the twentieth century. However, MOC command, control and communication structures, as well as their conceptual frameworks, have not yet adapted. The rapid pace of change within the social media ecosystem makes it difficult to define, yet it is important to remember that dynamism and instability are not necessarily synonymous with a total lack of control. It is past time for commanders to acknowledge that social media will continue to have a significant impact on the planning, preparation, execution, and assessment of military operations with increasing frequency and impact. Therefore, the current US military communications philosophy must shift "from control in a closed system to credible influence in an open system,"⁷ and we must re-structure our future force as well as the MOC organization and processes as required or risk being over-matched by social media savvy adversaries who are willing to adapt and be more agile.


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