

Social Media and Indian Army's New-Age Soldier

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The famous singer had no idea the storm he created in the virtual world. He was venting his discomfort at being woken up by morning prayers being aired through loudspeaker. It is an issue that has plagued the nation since long and almost all religious institutes are guilty of noise pollution. Since his remark was against a particular religion which was perceived to be disturbing his peace, it created furore dividing the media, celebrities, politicians, and even the common man on religious as well as argumentative lines. Earlier it was the video of Kashmiri youth hitting CRPF soldiers followed by a local Kashmiri youth tied on the bonnet of an Army vehicle that drew sharp and extreme responses from the netizens and citizens alike.

Human being since evolution has used five senses as the physiological perception of a stimulus. They are sight, i.e. ability of the eye and brain to detect electromagnetic waves within the visible range of light and interpret the image; hearing, i.e. sense of sound, when vibrations propagating through a medium (e.g. air) are detected by the brain, sound

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is perceived; touch, i. e. sense of pressure perception, mostly in the skin; taste and smell. Amongst the five, arguably sight is the most important as it is vital in how humans view the world, facilitate them to connect with the surroundings, and help them process their opinion accordingly. These senses needed physical contact or proximity. It was necessary to have direct communication to influence an individual or group of people. A movement thus needed a gathering to be addressed by a leader to reach out to his or her target population or through door-to-door campaigning. The leader led when he or she was seen, heard and touched. The social media and the internet platform has changed all that. Physical proximity is no more obligatoire

The urge for information has always been there and exploited by state and non-state actors both in wars and sub-conventional wars, by competing commerce, business, sports, education, etc.,...the list is endless. Earlier the information came through newspapers, radio, pamphlets, and magazines. Then came the era of television which became the primary source of entertainment. The impact of television was immense as it became the engine for socio-economic behavioural changes in the society. The Iraq war during the 1990s brought war to the living rooms. The CNNs and BBCs not only telecasted battles, they started shaping opinions. India which was fed on slow, government-owned Doordarshan could not remain insulated for long. The opening of economy during the early 1990s also opened up Indian skies to Satellite Televisions. Indians lapped up the soap operas, sporting arena, and knowledge based channels. What followed was spate of channels airing news 24x7. The news channels, with their ability to shape the environment were never short of sponsors and many of them allegedly were patronised by commercial, political, and social bigwigs. The news hungry Indians made these channels more and more popular and soon news was replaced with views. Today, India has more than 1,000 channels. The television has changed the ways Indian live and its impact can be felt across all walks of life.

The next biggest life changing technological revolution was the advent of internet which further expanded in the form of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and plethora of interactive digital platforms. Today, the digital

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arena is intrusive and all pervasive. Industries, administration, people, ministers, governments, and even the Prime Ministers are using social media to interact directly with the people. Social media is not only raising pertinent concerns about the human environment, but has been consistently attacking power structures in a bid to define their relevance and achieve better transparency, efficiency, accountability, honesty, and probity. Besides, as fear reduces, frequently raised issues are likely to become more forthright, forcing governance to be proactive in filling information voids, the root cause of suspicion and distrust.

Therefore, military organisations cannot remain impervious to changes outside. In a redefined global social order in which the boundaries among competition, conflict, and combat have so merged that the combat space appears less evident, important organisations like the Army would always invite attention. Concomitantly in the era of anti-politics, Armed Forces are looked as extension of the government and are increasingly becoming a handle to leverage both by the government as well as the opposition and hence, coming under more scrutiny than ever before. The ease of access through social media platform makes it even more vulnerable. The ill-effects of the social media is manifesting in the form of cyber bullying, online harassment, Facebook depression, sexting, social unrest, rumour mongering, data theft, etc. The vast expanse of network also lends itself to cyber crime, perpetuated by cyber criminals and nations/non-state actors inimical to any nation. The cyber security today is one of the most vital elements of national security.

Soldiers in the Armed Forces come from the same society and cannot remain oblivious to the technological revolution which has become national addiction and like any human being are equally affected by the presence of social media and have also undergone behavioural change which in a way is life changing. Today, the society is grappling with information overload. It has also led to lack of quest for knowledge, thus

lack of understanding. Suddenly everyone is enjoying direct connect to the complete spectrum of society, organisation, and administration. Suddenly everyone seems accessible and that has also led to citizens bypassing existing structures and hierarchy. It is a new exciting phenomenon in a nation like India built around classes, hierarchy, and barriers in official or personal interactions. The Armed Forces are more rigid and compartmentalised in their functionality which essential stems from their operational philosophy. Social media has now opened avenue for all ranks and files to air their opinions, views, cribs, criticism, and target individuals and organisations jumping the hierarchical ladder.

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Last few years proved more catastrophic for the unrest and upheaval created in the nation due to social media onslaught on various issues whether it was JNU or 'Award Wapsi' or spread of the Islamic state in the international arena. Most recently a BSF soldier complained of poor quality of rations, food, and equipment. He also categorically stated that the government was doing everything but officers were responsible for the poor state of affairs and the soldiers were being denied their basic dues. The media was quick to take note and it was everywhere—WhatsApp groups, Facebook, print, and electronic media. The hierarchy of the organisation took note so did the Prime Minister Office (PMO) and the Home Minister. The quick march to fame is toxic and contagious. Soon a CRPF jawan was complaining about disparity between the Central Armed Police Force and the Armed Forces in pay and perks, allowances, facilities, etc. It was a matter of time before some soldiers from the Army also started putting up their perceived grievances and more are sure to follow. Suddenly, it appeared as if nothing was right in any of the uniformed services and if these videos supplemented by the energetic first past the post news deliverance electronic media were to be believed, the security forces were dusting themselves to din. While one should not shoot the

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messenger, there is a need to address this issue in a poised and purposeful manner rather than manifesting a knee jerk reaction.

Last year one of the famous hosts of a comedy show had tweeted to the Prime Minister that he was paying Rs 15 crore income tax for the last 5 years, yet he needed to pay Rs 5 lakh bribe to the government office for constructing his office, questioning the idea of *Achhe Din*. He has a mass following and as expected created a flutter amongst the twitterati as well in the government machinery. It was left to the Prime Minister to give a much nuanced reaction. He alluded that some opinion makers want answer from the PM for anything happening in a village panchayat, district council, or in any state. While every citizen has a right to communicate with the PM bypassing all available structures, but therein lays the danger of these structures to feel and become redundant.

General Rawat, the Chief of Army Staff, was quick to respond about the available mechanism for redressal of grievances in the Army. In addition, he has passed instructions to put in place a suggestion-cum-grievance box in Army HQ and lower formation HQs. The Chief also reiterated that the complaint should be addressed within the organisation and *NOT* in the social media as it could prove detrimental as a two-side weapon. More often than not the social media builds up a case for the lower wrung of society or hierarchy, in line with the existing narrative of the story of oppressor and the oppressed—a familiar storyline from the times of freedom struggle. The Indian society absorbs such stories with consummate ease and strongly reacts forcing the administration and the government to take corrective actions. While many a times it strikes the right chord, there are ample examples of social media/electronic/print media misusing its reach for a wrong cause. Such flurry of videos by soldiers put the officers' cadre of various security agencies in a very poor light. The officers of the Indian Army come through a much rigorous training curriculum, tougher than the recruit training even in physical terms with the sole purpose of making

them understand the rigors of a soldiers' life. Most of the units have this time tested tradition of putting the young officers in the soldiers' barrack for 2 to 3 months before they are formally accepted as officers. No other institution can boast of such deep sense of regimentation and structured evolution of camaraderie.

From time-to-time, the issue of buddy system keeps on raising its head in social media, making it appear like a draconian practice. It is a time tested, proven system and an excellent manifestation of inter-personal relation between the officers and the men but the social media brings it out as a malpractice plaguing the organisation. First and foremost, no buddy sticks around if he is not willing. He becomes an extension of the officer's family. No buddy goes back home on leave without a gift for his family given by the officer or his spouse. The buddy also brings back something from home as a token of love from his family and try you may as much, he does not accept any payment for it. In a challenging war or insurgency environment, the buddy is the bodyguard to the officer in all the operations. Late Captain Vikram Batra, Param Veer Chakra in Kargil war had famously not let his buddy go in for the final bunker assault and led himself attaining martyrdom. There are stories abound of buddies saving injured officers in operations and vice versa. These are stories of compassion, mutual respect, and loyalty. Yes there may be few cases which at best can be bracketed as exceptions and due mitigation mechanism are in place to ameliorate grievances if any.

It is common routine for any officer leading the men, to look after the hygiene factor. Any youngster, as a drill, enters his company lines through toilet and *langar* (company kitchen) to ensure the required standards of cleanliness and hygiene and quality of food. In field areas, he eats the same food, lives in the same complex and is under more duress than his men. He toils day and night to ensure the safety of his troops, the career progression of his men and his own, deliverance on operational front, not to forget trying to balance his family life located thousands of miles away like everybody else, he has his hands full. In harsh field conditions, problems faced are the same for everyone, may be more so for the officers. It is a routine in all the units of Indian Army to have a suggestion box

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at company level, battalion level, and the official Sainik Sammelans as a platform to address grievances. The soldier today is doing much more difficult job which is further compounded by complex web of extended family ties back home leading to high levels of duress; hence, he must have ample platforms available to give vent to his problems/aspirations. The leadership in the armed forces today need to be trained in the command and administrative challenges social media is posing and have to come out with innovative ways to be in step with the changing social narrative.

All the time-tested drills of connecting officers with men are being compromised on two accounts. As it is expanding in size and structure, trying to meet the new security challenges, officers' intake continues to remain dismal. With lowering of the age profile for the Commanding Officer and enhancing promotion avenues (which has largely benefitted the HQs), the strength of officers at unit level is critically low especially in peace areas and with merging threats blurring the line between hinterland and border areas, officers are finding themselves busier in peace stations, a place they are supposed to bond with the troops. As the famous old adage goes, 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war.' Sweating, the men in uniform are, in peace but not together, owing to multifarious engagements. Second, officers and men alike are moving with the excess baggage of communication through social media leading to information overload, arising aspirations beyond one's reach at times therefore causing disillusionment. Today there are more officers in the HQs than the units, losing the unique organisational structure in terms of profile and numbers the Army had so well-developed over the years. An organisation structured in the proportion of three is to one as a bottom up approach (three battalions to a brigade, three brigades to Division, etc.) now has probably three officers instructing one—a routine at cross-purpose with the organisation structure itself. It is time Army had a relook at its staffing the units and the formations. Induction of Short

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Ever since the economy opened up during the early 1990s, there is a qualitative improvement in everyone's life. It reflects in the Army too. While there is a huge improvement in offices, mess and the Quarter Guards, there stands scope for commensurate improvement in the standard of barracks, kitchen, family quarters of soldiers, and soldiers' habitation in field areas.

The media, while undertaking constructive criticism where necessary, has often failed to educate the people on the fact that the values of civil society will conflict with military ethos; and that the military, by law and its own Code of Conduct, remains aloof primarily to protect its ethos, focus on role and tasks, and maintain the security of its capacity and methods. This self-imposed isolation has helped ensure cohesiveness and kept the rank-and-file away from the influences of socio-religious groups, divisive and sectarian tendencies, and the impact of pseudo-intellectuals trying to prove a point. Being efficient, nationalistic, and unprejudiced has brought the armed forces love and respect from the people.

However, the isolation of the military has also created deep information void among the public. The sincere desire to know the what, why, when, and how of the military was placed in the public sphere by the media thriving on competition and negative sensationalism. With the advent of new media, self-imposed isolation would no longer be possible. Besides, increased availability of information on military matters will invite scrutiny from citizen journalists or the Fifth Estate, particularly on fiscal matters, ostentatious styles or concessions. Such issues will naturally fuel comparison and rivalries with other organisations. The military leadership would need to realise that most social media platforms, being global in nature, would

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not conform to restrictions for a select few, and, hence, protecting the military ethos would need adaptation to the new normal. While every effort must be made to strengthen internally, there would be an inescapable requirement to garner outside support by filling information voids. The Army view that operations are conducted based on mandated use of force and with maximum restraint; that the response for countering threats is based on a philosophy of prediction, prevention, and protection; that utmost fiscal prudence is exercised; and that the people cannot absolve

themselves of the responsibility of unlimited liability to guarantee their military protection, respect and care, must be stated intellectually. For the purpose, and in addition to websites, media centres co-located with recruiting offices, staffed by qualified media officers, may be considered. Media campaign themes must be intelligently changed and not always be built on the macho image of soldiers projecting vitality and violence. Alternate themes based on virtuosity and vision could be interspersed. It may be remembered that organisational relevance needs constant reminders. In the new communication age, with people short on time and with a reduced attention span, media campaigns would need to project the Army as a responsible nation building organisation which is participative, professional, growth-oriented, innovative, and uncomplaining. The social media, the prying electronic and print media is here to stay and cannot be abhorred. The Army, like any government agency, has to take note of adverse publication or telecast. But reacting to every such news may result in getting trapped into externalisation of organisational issues questioning its own competence. At the same time, the grievance mechanism has to be strengthened to weed out mal-intentioned propaganda from the genuine ones and visible and early mitigation provided to the latter.

The social media is not all about negativity. Social media is being effectively used for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events, including political and

philanthropic events and growth of ideas; enhancement of individual and collective creativity through development and sharing of artistic and musical endeavours; creation of blogs, podcasts, videos, and gaming sites; expansion of one's online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds (such communication is an important step for all adolescents and affords the opportunity for respect, tolerance, and increased discourse about personal and global issues); fostering of one's individual identity and unique social skills and skillfully honing up knowledge.¹ There are immense positives to be drawn and Army's leadership has to adapt itself to the challenge of rightfully using the social media.

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Pre-eminence cannot come through macho mindsets and invisible intellectual capacity. The Army must seize the opportunity and move forward from being content users to content producers, by encouraging online professionalism. This would bring greater respect from diverse communities both within and outside, and also open up immense opportunities. Recent trends of officers writing on various media platforms clearly indicate their immense intellectual talent and incisive capacity to create content comparable to the best in the world. To achieve this, it would be necessary to open own online professional interactive forums and proactively join existing global professional networks, seminars or discussions. Besides, through such forums, the Army could significantly contribute to nation-building by forging better understanding with, and integration of, the peripheral areas where it is privileged to serve. Calibrated adoption of professionalism online and a comprehensive review of the Promotional Examination encouraging self-education could indeed be transformative.

The leadership quotient in the Army goes much beyond rules, regulations and Dos and Dont's. It is the emotional chord between the leader and the led, developed over a period of time with the dictum of

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‘Follow Me’ for the *Naam, Namak and Nishan* that has stood the test of time and has won us almost all the wars and still keeps our nation secure. The number of gallantry awards won by officers and the number of officers attaining martyrdom in the line of duty bears testimony to the highest standards of leadership. It is credit to the organisation’s fair and equitable handling of its men and their families, that today, more and more children of the soldiers and Junior Commissioned Officers are joining the armed forces as officers and doing well even in the non-military domain.

The strength of the Indian Army is its organic structure which is being run on the backbone of the harmonious relation between the officers and the men. Maintaining the moral high ground, whether in combat or non-combat situations, must be vigorously pursued by the Indian Army. Any dilution of the people’s expectations of the Army, looking for exceptional professionalism, exemplary conduct and commitment, inspiring patriotism, moral use of force and remaining capable because it is crucial, would invite adverse comments on social media. Intelligently used, it could become an invaluable tool to consolidate cohesion, build trust and faith, and contain desensitisation. To derive maximum benefit for the purpose, the online websites of the Army will have to be all encompassing, interactive, and linked to other popular sites. Such sites must offer health-related advice pertaining to depression, stress, substance abuse, irritation, suicide, kinky sexual behaviour, pornography, distress, and other forms of invisible wounds. Besides, they should be able to provide online advice and assistance for making informed choices in all matters, to include legal services. There would be an inescapable need to reinvigorate and link the Kendriya Sainik Bidyalayas (KSBs), professionalise care under the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) and Adjutant General’s (AGs) Branch, provide for job sites, encourage entrepreneurship, and provide insurance and loans oriented guidance. In fact, the sky is the limit as such sites could revolutionise the concepts of command and welfare. For this purpose, the daily routine could be

reviewed to accommodate time for leisure and personal activities.

The Army leadership has to accept the media as a new dimension of conflict and create a structure capable of using the lexicon and combined power of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to shape the battlefield by creating favourable perceptions and opinions, both domestically and globally. Such a structure must have the capacity to network with the inter-service establishments, specialised agencies, academia, research excellence centres, selected individuals and field formations.

Selectively encourage combatants to use ICT aggressively in order to infiltrate the networks and minds of those who are inimical or fence-sitters. This would help 'crowd out' and ultimately reduce extremist propaganda capacity, on the one hand, and simultaneously increase the objective reasoning of passive followers. Generating such an offensive capacity cannot remain an option to be exercised later. In addition, opportunities provided by social media must be used vigorously to propagate, instruct, update, announce, advertise, promote brand loyalty, improve administration, increase interaction, and carry out incisive introspection for organisational improvement.

The Army also need to include participatory defence as an essential component of the joint strategy by involving the people, state law and order apparatus, financial institutions, service sector, and government surveillance systems capable of networking with all agencies and sectors. Critical to participatory defence would be the government's resolve to remove through legislation the conflict of interests between agencies/sectors to allow speedy adjudication.

The Army operating in insurgent areas will have to learn to operate under the lens of social media. A growing popular support base is a clear indicator of the strategy of winning hearts and minds. The Army also has to drive joint operations to create a leaderless movement by shifting the focus from the visible armed cadres to the invisible intellectuals engaged in

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the process of gaining or retaining social control. Current popular themes such as 'critical mass', rise of the 'virtual jihadi' or new tactics of 'lone wolf' or 'wolf pack' attacks that find resonance over social media would need to be tackled intelligently. In addition, the Army would need to deftly manage the unholy alliance between social and mass media, reduce stated legal and moral obligations on combat soldiers, and in a significant way, wean away the unremarkable and unemployed fence-sitters.

The Army would need to deploy resources to reduce the sustainability of inimical media campaigns, particularly those designed towards creating resistance to negotiations. This would require a substantial increase in levels of socio-cultural knowledge of the target population. Defeating networks by networks and destroying the insurgent web terrain by creating confusion, dissent, distrust, and defamation, while providing alternative views, particularly to those of clerics and religious institutes, would be essential. Separating genders, generations, secularists, and moderates from mainstream extremism would help. It must be realised that non-technical and disparate responses cannot limit techno-savvy extremists. The Army, through the use of media laboratories and professional media officers, eminently qualified in the desired areas of interest, has to work towards becoming important stakeholder in the digital platform in the regional context.

The Army may review its social behaviour and adopt visibly sincere and austere methods to identify with public aspirations. This would also remove opportunities for silent scorn by the rank and file on social media.

To conclude social media could indeed complement mass media and be extensively used for psychological operations as part of over all military strategy to convey truthful information and indicators to target audiences in order to disseminate correct information, motives, objective reasoning, and, ultimately, the behaviour of their governments, organisations, groups, and individuals. According to a CLAWS report (yet to be published) on *Leadership Challenges in the Social Media*, the soldier is the pillar of strength of the Army, and should be protected from the negative impact and guided to take full advantage of the digital platform for the organisational and personal growth.

Note

1. Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, 'The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families', Council on Communications and Media, available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/>, accessed on Ref CLAWS Report on *Leadership Challenges in the Social Media*

