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**SOCIAL MEDIA: VALUABLE TOOLS IN TODAY'S OPERATIONAL
ENVIRONMENT**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy**

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Abstract

The ever-increasing application of social media throughout the world, including in developing countries, signals a significant change in how new media concepts, approaches, and methods, will affect U.S. military commanders in the foreseeable future. As a result, theater-strategic and operational level commanders must more effectively leverage social media as tools for strategic communication and to gain a better understanding of the operational environment. This paper provides an assessment of how theater-strategic and operational level commanders are currently employing social media, and offers recommendations for commanders to exploit the opportunities provided by social media outlets and other new media applications.

Introduction

Social media, also known as “new media”, have impacted the military operational environment and have presented – and continue to present – challenges as well as opportunities for theater-strategic and operational level commanders. An obvious effect of social media is in the area of strategic communication. The U.S.’s current adversaries now have an inexpensive and near-instant means of reaching multiple audiences to achieve their strategic communication objectives. Compounding the issue is the reality that, unlike the U.S. military, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaida and Associated Movement are not constrained by bureaucratic processes in their use of social media; nor do they share the U.S. military’s inherent responsibility to distribute truthful information.¹ For terrorists, getting their strategic communication messages out for consumption *first* is more important than providing consumers with *facts*. Additionally, social media have enabled terrorists and insurgents to use Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks to create strategic, not just tactical effects – simply by posting videos of the IED attacks on YouTube.² Moreover, social media have created an information environment where U.S. military actions at the individual or tactical level can have strategic, theater-strategic, and operational level implications, such as damaging U.S. credibility (e.g., Abu Ghraib).

With the ever-increasing application of new media throughout the world, including in developing countries, such media will almost certainly affect U.S. military commanders in the foreseeable future. As a result, theater-strategic and operational level commanders must more effectively leverage social media as tools for strategic communication and to gain a better understanding of the theater and operational environments.

¹ Dennis M. Murphy, *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College, November 2008), 9.

² *Ibid*, 6.

This paper presents supporting information from various articles on the military's current and future application of social media. Research was gathered primarily from journals, social media sites, and academic papers. There is a scarcity of literature on the topic of social and new media's applicability to theater-strategic and operational level military organizations, but that will likely change as social media becomes more relevant in the military information environment. Furthermore, this paper provides an assessment of how theater-strategic and operational level commanders are currently employing social media, and examines some "best and worst" social media practices employed in the civilian sector to support conclusions and recommendations regarding military commanders' continued use of social media.

Counter Arguments

An obvious counter argument to this paper's thesis is that the U.S. military, including theater and operational commanders, has already demonstrated a commitment to leveraging social media. Geographic combatant commanders such as U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), and U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), and operational commanders such as U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (USNAVCENT) and International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) Afghanistan have official web pages on Facebook, a social networking Internet site. These theater and operational level military organizations are currently using social networking to distribute public affairs releases to a global audience. On the surface, this might appear to represent an effective use of new media for strategic communication purposes. However, this paper will explain why the current use of social media by theater and operational level commanders and their staffs is far from effective.

Another counter argument is that the Operational Security (OPSEC) risks associated with official use of social media outweigh the potential gains from using social media, especially in the operational environment. A specific example is the case of a social media project named Basetrack 1/8, which was funded by the Knight Foundation. The reporters and journalists supporting Basetrack 1/8 used social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr, to report on the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines during the battalion's deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).³ Despite the project's popularity, as evidenced by more than one million visits to the Basetrack 1/8 Facebook page and over 2,600 fans, the journalists embedded with the 1/8 Marines in Helmand Province, Afghanistan were asked to leave in February 2011. Hope Hodge, a reporter with the *Jacksonville Daily News*, quoted 1st Lieutenant Timothy Irish, a public affairs officer for Regimental Combat Team 8: "Basetrack is [being] asked to leave 1/8's position due to perceived Operational Security violations on portions of their website. These concerns are legitimate. Specifically the website's tie in to google [sic] maps to display friendly force locations."⁴ Indeed, when viewing Basetrack 1/8's website, it was possible to see the rank, name, and location (latitude/longitude coordinates) for individual Marines assigned to 1st Battalion, 8th Marines in Helmand Province.⁵

Additionally, there are concerns that the effective use of social media may not be possible due to generational differences between senior, mid-grade, and junior personnel in the U.S. military.⁶ Young Sailors, Marines, Soldiers, and Airmen have likely been exposed

³ Hope Hodge, "Unique Social Media Project Comes to an End," *Jacksonville Daily News*, <http://www.jdnews.com/> (accessed 3 April 2011).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ One-Eight Basetrack, <http://basetrack.org/> (accessed 16 April 2011).

⁶ Jon R. Anderson, "About Facebook," *Air Force Times*, 27 July 2009, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 12 February 2011).

to social media to a greater extent than older military service members and, therefore, may be more willing than their senior leaders to embrace the official use of new media.

Yet another counter argument is that the amount of resources – namely manpower and time – required for theater and operational commanders to effectively leverage social media simply are not worth the gains. What is the point of dedicating additional resources toward the employment of social media in an already resource-constrained military environment?

Social Media and Strategic Communication

Joint Publication 1-02 defines strategic communication as: “Focused U.S. Government efforts to understand and *engage* [emphasis added] key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”⁷ A common perception may be that strategic communication efforts are conducted at levels well above the theater or operational commander and his or her staff. However, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote: “I don’t care for the term [strategic communication]. We get too hung up on that word, *strategic* [emphasis in original]. If we’ve learned nothing else these past 8 years, it should be that the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical are blurred beyond distinction.”⁸ If Admiral Mullen’s assertions are valid, it is a mistake to discount the importance of the theater and operational commander’s role in strategic communication.

⁷ Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 (Washington, DC: CJCS, as amended through 31 January 2011), 348.

⁸ Michael G. Mullen, “Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 55 (4th Quarter 2009): 2.

Timothy Cunningham, a Deputy Program Manager at the Director of National Intelligence Open Source Center, described “traditional media” as “monologic”, referring to the one-way flow of information or messages from the distributors of the information to the consumers of the information. In contrast, he described “new media” (which includes social media) as being focused on “dialogic” communications between producers and consumers of information or messages, allowing for interaction among distributors and audiences through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.⁹ This key difference between traditional and new, or social, media cannot be overemphasized when it comes to employing social media for strategic communication purposes. As Cunningham points out, the failure to recognize this difference is a main reason why the U.S. military has been “outcommunicated since 9/11.”¹⁰

As previously stated, it may appear that theater and operational commanders have already embraced social media as a means of achieving strategic communication objectives. However, after examining several geographic combatant commanders’ (GCCs) and operational commanders’ social networking sites, there are three primary flaws in their application of social media: (1) a failure to remain engaged with the consumers of their messages, (2) a failure to distribute the appropriate types of messages to their audiences and, (3) an apparent failure to recognize who their target audiences should be.

The failure by theater and operational commanders to remain engaged with their audience when using social networking sites is, quite simply, a failure to capitalize on the opportunity to continue to influence the audience as the commander’s messages circulate among consumers of the information. Additionally, while the commander’s presence in

⁹ Timothy Cunningham, “Strategic Communication in the New Media Sphere,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 59 (4th Quarter 2010): 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 110.

social media is necessary, that presence alone is insufficient.¹¹ The ISAF Afghanistan Facebook page presented many public affairs releases and images for consumption. There were, among others, articles about North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces conducting a key leader engagement with village elders in Qual-e Jala on 21 March 2001, an orphanage in Herat providing hope to local Afghans, and another article reporting that Afghan Security Forces are going to assume responsibility for providing security in Herat City.¹² While there were frequent comments posted by the audience (sometimes over 40 comments for a single article), the only interaction by ISAF Afghanistan was in the form of administrative posts, such as a post to inform readers that some comments had been removed because of the web page's language policy. There were no instances where ISAF Afghanistan interacted with their audience in a manner that added *value* to the delivery of the message. Additionally, USCENTCOM and USNAVCENT did no better at leveraging their respective Facebook pages to engage in dialogic, as opposed to monologic, communication with their audiences. A seven-day review of various articles and photos posted on USCENTCOM's and USNAVCENT's Facebook pages revealed no occurrences of either commander's staffs engaging in the exchange of ideas and opinions posted by the consumers of the commanders' messages. The significance of examining social media use by USCENTCOM, USNAVCENT, and ISAF Afghanistan is that the Middle East is the region of the world where the preponderance of U.S. military forces are currently deployed, and will be for the foreseeable future, in support of overseas contingency operations. It is reasonable to assume that effective strategic communication pertaining to U.S. military efforts in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) is a priority for our civilian and military

¹¹ Chondra Perry, "Social Media and the Army," *Military Review* (March-April 2010), 64, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 12 February 2011).

¹² ISAF: NATO forces in Afghanistan, <http://www.facebook.com/ISAF/> (accessed 27 March 2011).

leadership. Yet, by employing social media in a traditional media way – as a means of one-way flow of information – USCENTCOM, USNAVCENT, and ISAF Afghanistan support Cunningham’s assertion that “We have *adopted* [emphasis in original] new media tools for strategic communication purposes but have not yet *adapted* [emphasis in original] to the new media universe itself.”¹³

The failure to deliver the appropriate type of message through social media suggests that theater and operational commanders may not fully recognize which audiences should be targeted in the new media environment. It is worth noting that, based on material posted on ISAF Afghanistan’s, USCENTCOM’s and USNAVCENT’s Facebook pages in March 2011, ISAF Afghanistan appears to have the better understanding of what types of social media messages should be distributed. USCENTCOM’s Facebook page contained one legitimate strategic communication message, an article about Qatar’s participation in coalition air operations against the Government of Libya,¹⁴ which was surprising considering that, traditionally, the first two quarters of the calendar year are the peak season for Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) exercises in the USCENTCOM AOR.¹⁵ Articles and posts about TSC exercises and engagements with regional partners are exactly the type of messages that geographic combatant commanders like USCENTCOM should be distributing through social media outlets such as Facebook. In March 2011, USNAVCENT’s Facebook page contained only one message about TSC, an article on Exercise Aman 2011. Instead of presenting more articles and images of recently completed or upcoming bilateral exercises and engagements, the bulk of USNAVCENT’s Facebook page was filled with force protection announcements

¹³ Cunningham, 114.

¹⁴ U.S. Central Command, <http://www.facebook.com/CENTCOM/> (accessed 27 March 2011).

¹⁵ This is based on my personal experience as an exercise planner on the USNAVCENT staff from August 2009 through August 2010, during which time I coordinated on a weekly basis with USCENTCOM J-5 exercise planners.

and regionally meaningless messages, such as an article about a recent “Family Day Picnic”.¹⁶

Theater and operational commanders’ social media sites must focus much more on delivering messages on TSC, especially combined exercises and key leader engagements, because *those* are the message that will contribute to shaping the operational environment. Themes and messages about TSC and other military shaping operations are more likely to resonate with the audiences that should be targeted as consumers; namely, civilian populations of regional partners, governments of key regional partners (e.g., Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries), as well as the U.S.’s adversaries. Until theater and operational level commanders deliver the right messages to the right audiences, and then remain engaged with the audiences as the messages are circulating, social media will not be effective tools for setting favorable conditions for achieving U.S. strategic and operational objectives.

Many civilian corporations, companies, and organizations leverage social media, and have been doing so for a longer period of time than the U.S. military. Therefore, it seems appropriate to examine some of the “best and worst” social media practices employed by civilian enterprises, and to determine if any of these practices could be applicable to military theater-strategic and operational commanders’ use of social media to achieve strategic communication objectives. Lee Odden, from Top Rank® Online Marketing Blog, offered seven “best” and seven “worst” practices for social media marketing.¹⁷ Marketing may be defined as “an aggregate of functions involved in moving goods from producer to

¹⁶ U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, <http://www.facebook.com/NAVCENT.C5F/> (accessed 27 March 2011).

¹⁷ Lee Odden, “Best and Worst Practices Social Media Marketing,” *Top Rank® Online Market Blog*, entry posted 12 February 2009, <http://www.toprankblog.com/> (accessed 2 April 2011).

consumer.”¹⁸ A logical comparison can be made between civilian marketing and U.S. military strategic communication efforts. For the purpose of theater-strategic and operational level strategic communication efforts, the terms “moving goods,” “producer,” and “consumer” in the definition above can be replaced respectively with “delivering desired themes and messages,” “the commander and his or her staff,” and “target audiences.” Not all of Odden’s best and worst social media practices can be directly applied to the use of social media by theater and operational commanders. However, three of Odden’s best, and one of his worst, social media practices stand out as being directly applicable to commanders trying to leverage social media.

The first of Odden’s best social media practices is: “Start with a plan, not tactics.” In terms of military strategic communication, this means that theater and operational commanders must have a social media strategy *before* establishing a social media presence. The commander’s social media strategy must consider the desired effects and which method(s) will be used to monitor audience feedback in order to determine the effectiveness of social media for delivering the desired messages.

The second of Odden’s best social media practices is: “Give to get”, which is his way of suggesting that the producer should provide value to the consumer through the social media outlet. Translated into terms for the theater and operational commander attempting to employ social media for strategic communication: deliver a meaningful message to the target audience to stimulate the producer-consumer interaction afforded by social media. Use social media more to inform consumers about TSC, multilateral real-world security operations (e.g., Maritime Security Operations in the USCENTCOM AOR), and other theater

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster.com, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> (accessed 16 April 2011).

shaping efforts. Meanwhile, use social media less to inform consumers about events such as family picnics for military dependents in Bahrain.

The third of Odden's best social media practices is: "Commit resources and time to be successful", which he described as the difference between simply experimenting with social media and being committed to capitalizing on the full potential of social media. As previously stated, the mere presence of theater and operational commanders in the new media environment is not a sufficient level of commitment if social media are to be fully exploited for strategic communication purposes.

The most applicable of Odden's worst social media practices is: "Not listening." What he specifically addressed is the mistake of using social media for a one-way flow of information. Monitoring how the target audiences react to the messages delivered through social media outlets is essential. More important, however, is the need to have a dialogue with the target audience.

It should come as no surprise that successful and unsuccessful social media practices identified by non-military or non-government organizations also have applicability for the military's use of new media. Moreover, the "best and worst" social media practices discussed above directly relate to criticism of not just theater or operational level commanders, but the U.S. military in general, pertaining to the current use of social media. This paper identifies three flaws with theater and operational level commanders' use of new media as means for strategic communication; all three flaws could be remedied, or at least improved upon, by applying Odden's principles on what does and does not work in the social media environment.

Social Media to Gain Understanding of the Operational Environment

New media, including social media, can be useful tools for theater-strategic and operational level commanders to improve their level of situational awareness of the operational environment. New media offer commanders and their staffs a means of monitoring activities in their AORs and areas of interest, ranging from terrorist networking and collaboration to civil unrest in countries of interest to the U.S. In the new media environment, open sources include social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter, as well as other Web 2.0 applications such the Google Trends search engine.

U.S. intelligence officials have been criticized for not anticipating the 2011 civilian uprisings in Egypt, a key U.S. regional partner in the USCENTCOM AOR.¹⁹ Dina Temple-Raston, of National Public Radio (NPR), reported that U.S. intelligence officials acknowledged that, in hindsight, there were clues available through new media regarding the recent uprisings in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt. Temple-Raston quoted Lieutenant Colonel Reid Sawyer, a U.S. Army intelligence officer with West Point's Combating Terrorism Center as saying, "The traditional intelligence community is absolutely biased toward classified information." Sawyer also opined, "...open source [intelligence] provides a critical lens into understanding the world around us in a much more dynamic way than traditional intelligence sources can provide."²⁰ As major stakeholders in their AORs, GCCs and subordinate component commanders should lead efforts to leverage social media for detecting signs of significant events like the uprisings in Egypt. The U.S.'s apparent lack of preparedness for the Egyptian uprisings is an indication that neither social media nor other

¹⁹ Dina Temple-Raston, "Google: A New Tool for U.S. Intelligence?," *NPR*, 25 March 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/25/134666365/a-new-tool-for-u-s-intelligence-google?sc=ipad&f=1001> (accessed 26 March 2011).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

new media applications were effectively monitored at any level of U.S. military intelligence. In theory, USCENTCOM intelligence personnel could have used Google Trends to find out what people in Egypt, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia were focusing on when using the Internet. Evidence of Google Trends' effectiveness can be found in the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) use of the search engine in response to the 2009 swine flu epidemic. The NIH was sometimes able to beat other U.S. government predictions on areas of flu outbreaks – by seven days or more – by using Google Trends to identify locations where there were increased levels of Google searches about swine flu symptoms.²¹

Examples of how social media outlets provided evidence of civil unrest in Middle Eastern states involve events in Syria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Near the end of March of 2011, after a speech by Syrian President Assad, in which the president failed to lift the decades-old state of emergency laws, social networking sites quickly saw an increase in posts and comments by activists. Some activists urged Syrians to resume protests against President Assad.²² In early March of 2011, Saudi Arabian police in the city of Qatif used force to disband Shiite protesters who were demanding the release of political prisoners.²³ After Saudi police used live ammunition to disrupt the protests, activists established Facebook groups in an attempt to organize protests in the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh. NPR staff writers reported that one Facebook group gained 30,000 supporters. In the cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia, social media could have served as open source intelligence tools

²¹ Ibid.

²² NPR Staff and Wires, "Syria's President Blames Rebellion on 'Conspirators'," *NPR*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/30/134977535/syrias-president-blames-rebellion-on-conspirators?sc=ipad&f=1001> (accessed 30 March 2011).

²³ NPR Staff and Wires, "Saudi Police Fire Shots at Protestors," *NPR*, 10 March 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/10/134432966/saudi-police-fire-shots-at-protesters?sc=ipad&f=1001> (accessed 11 March 2011).

for the GCC and subordinate component commanders' staffs to confirm or challenge intelligence being collected through more traditional means.

There is another reason for GCCs and their subordinate component commanders to actively monitor social media: terrorist organizations and extremists groups are using social media to achieve varying objectives. As Colonel Thomas Mayfield III, Chief of the Plans Division for U.S. Army Europe suggests, a social media presence by forward deployed commanders provides unique methods of recognizing potential and emerging threats in a given AOR.²⁴ In his 2008 Multi-National Force Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance, General Petraeus tasked his commanders in Iraq with "understand[ing] the neighborhood."²⁵ Mayfield simply asserts that social media are a complimentary means to traditional resources for commanders to better "understand the neighborhood," to use General Petraeus's words.

Furthermore, social media sites offer opportunities for theater and operational level commanders and their staffs to gain knowledge about terrorist activities and trends, including radicalization, information sharing and training, and recruitment. Yuki Noguchi, a NPR News correspondent, and Evan Kholmman, a terrorism consultant and analyst, determined that 90 percent of terrorist Internet activity is conducted through social networking tools.²⁶ If Noguchi and Kholmman are accurate in their estimation, can GCC's like USCENTCOM afford *not* to tap into social media resources, instead relying solely on more traditional intelligence sources? Gabriel Weimann, a professor at Haifa University, provided an

²⁴ Thomas D. Mayfield III, "A Commander's Strategy for Social Media," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 60 (1st Quarter 2011): 80.

²⁵ David H. Petraeus, "Multi-National Force Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance," *Military Review*, (September – October 2008), 3.

²⁶ Gabriel Weimann, "Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* XVI, issue II (Spring/Summer 2010): 46.

example of terrorists using social media sites to inform a jihadist on how to incorporate homemade explosives into an IED, including instructions on how to make the detonators necessary to initiate the device. Weimann also cites a 2008 U.S. Army intelligence report that expressed concern over the potential for terrorists to use the social networking site, Twitter, as a means to command and control attacks against military forces.²⁷ Terrorists' use of social media and other new media applications to provide instruction on IED construction and employment is not a new phenomenon. However, GCC and component commanders can exploit this activity as an *additional* method of detecting potential changes in terrorist or insurgent IED tactics, techniques, and procedures, which impacts how a commander conducts operational protection for subordinate forces.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Theater-strategic and operational level commanders should be commended on one hand for having a social media presence, but criticized on the other hand for not fully leveraging social media. Regarding their employment of social media for strategic communication purposes, commanders must shift from their current trend of using new media in an "old media" way, meaning they must interact with their social media audiences after initial delivery of strategic communication messages. Additionally, commanders must do a better job of providing their social media audiences with *quality* strategic communication messages, as opposed to populating their social media sites with material that appears to be posted just for the sake of providing something – anything – to social media users. Social media content that does not target local populations and governments of key

²⁷ Ibid, 48. The homemade explosive discussed by Weimann is triacetone triperoxide (TATP), and the information exchange was conducted between a Hamas representative and a Hamas supporter. The Army's 304th Military Intelligence Battalion produced the intelligence report entitled, "Potential for Terrorist Use of Twitter".

regional partners, nor targets U.S. adversaries, is not worth distributing via social media outlets. In short, theater and operational level commanders must demonstrate that they have a social media *strategy*, similar to what Lee Odden described as a best practice for social media marketing in the civilian sector.²⁸ Equally important, commanders must dedicate the appropriate resources, especially in the area of competent personnel, toward effectively leveraging social media. Personnel who are fully aware of the commander's desired strategic communication themes and messages are essential if the commander's staff is going to engage social media audiences, because having the *wrong* person sending the *wrong* message is worse than not engaging the audience at all. It may seem impractical to expect commanders to dedicate additional manpower and training in order to effectively use social media as an interactive means of strategic communication, especially in a resource-constrained military environment. However, as Timothy Cunningham wrote, "...while traditional one-way, monologic communication methods may be easier in both conceptual and practical terms, they are also woefully less effective."²⁹

Social media and other Web 2.0 applications can also provide commanders and their staffs with tools for open source intelligence collection, which can be valuable if used in conjunction with more traditional intelligence collection methods. A major challenge for commanders will be in efficiently monitoring new media outlets for useful information, such as indications of civilian uprisings in Egypt. An option available to the commander is to establish a "social media monitoring team" that is trained and staffed to monitor and collect, in a systematic way, information relevant to the commander's AOR.³⁰

²⁸ Odden.

²⁹ Cunningham, 112.

³⁰ Mayfield, 82.

The use of social media by commanders must be done with a common sense approach regarding Operational Security (OPSEC). The fact that the U.S. military maintains a social media presence means that commanders at various levels of command are assuming a certain amount of risk when posting material of value within a given AOR, such as information regarding TSC or other shaping operations. There is always a chance that an individual service member who was (or is) associated with a TSC engagement might post a comment that presents an OPSEC risk. In the case of the Basetrack 1/8 social media project, the potential reward did not exceed the risk of having embedded journalists providing social media updates on the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines during its deployment to Afghanistan. Additionally, there was arguably no strategic communication value in the project, which ended up becoming more of a means of communication between deployed battalion personnel and their families.³¹

Critics of social media use in the military information environment might suggest that the generational differences between senior leaders and junior personnel are an obstacle to effectively employing social media, including at the theater and operational level. However, it is possible that, in the officer ranks, it is personnel at the ranks of O-5 and O-6, not at the highest and lowest ranks, who are experiencing the most difficulty in embracing the concept of official use of social media.³² This notion is supported by the fact that Admiral Mike Mullen actively uses Twitter to communicate (albeit “one-way”) to multiple audiences. Similarly, General Raymond Odierno, Commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command, maintains a Facebook page to provide updates on his activities. If the U.S.’s most senior

³¹ Hodge.

³² Anderson.

leaders can take a step in the right direction when it comes to leveraging social media, there are few excuses for subordinate commanders and their staffs.

In summary, theater-strategic and operational level commanders must modify their use of social media as follows:

- Use social media to engage in a dialogic, as opposed to monologic, exchange between the providers and consumers of messages and information.
- Target the governments and populations of key regional partners, and current and potential adversaries when delivering strategic communication messages through social media outlets.
- Deliver valuable strategic communication messages through social media outlets in order to stimulate engagement with target audiences.
- Dedicate the requisite resources to effectively execute the commander's social media strategy (e.g., a "social media monitoring team"³³). Commanders should leverage personnel with expertise and experience beyond that limited to public affairs professionals.

Social media will not – and should not – become the centerpiece for theater-strategic and operational level commanders' strategic communication and open source intelligence efforts. Commanders obviously have myriad tools at their disposal. However, social media can be highly effective tools *if* they are leveraged to their full potential.

³³ Mayfield, 82.

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