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Efficacy of Social Media in Wars and Conflicts: Brief Review of Russia-Ukraine War

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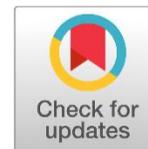
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ABSTRACT

Social media has evolved over time as a weapon, as more useful tool in modern wars, though the concept of informational warfare is as old as wars and conflicts. From the Chief Executive of the state to the battlefield commander, everybody is using social media tools to communicate, either with the outside world or their own people. If the Chief Executive is using it for strategic communication, Ministries involved in the war effort would be using it for narrative building, and the field commander may be using it to update his position to raise the morale of his soldiers. Social media has now been fully weaponized in the context of opinion formation through narrative building and at times deter the opponent through misinformation, disinformation, and fake communication. This article is aimed at exploring the efficacy and impact of social media on wars and conflict, particularly on the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The paper concludes that an effective use of social media can have an overriding impact on the outcome of the battle in the changed paradigm.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese sage Sun Tzu clearly stated in his famous treatise The Art of War that, "All wars are based on deception." (SB Griffith, 1971) Hence, the seeds of information warfare were sowed, only to be improved, and exploited with the revolution in information technology. The concept and the essence of deceiving the enemy remains the same: exploit adversary's fault lines through the use of media by creating dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and hopelessness among the populace against its own state's institutions.

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The phenomenon of the rise of social media, primarily due to revolution in information technology, has further opened the avenues of communications that is extremely quick and effective. However, like every invention, it also has its positive and negative uses, particularly when it comes to wars and conflicts. While information warfare may not be a new concept, but its canvass has expanded to newer heights due to the exploded utility of the people's podia. These people's podia have now the capability and capacity to connect with diverse groups simultaneously through different handles. Interestingly, the user can decide that in seconds and reach out to millions of its followers on different platforms, and get an instant reaction and invaluable feedback to maintain, sustain, or alter its narratives.

Therefore, this article is aimed at investigating and evaluating the efficacy and the impact of social media on today's wars and conflicts. Also, how is the deployment of social media tools impacting the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, which is well under its second year. For the purpose of analysis, one of the environmental appraisal

tools; DIME (Diplomacy, Informational, Military, and Economy) will be deployed through the lens of social media operations across all domains. However, due to paucity of space, the economic domain has been left out of this article. In order to maintain objectivity, the information collected for this article is reflective of nearly all sources: US-led western world, Russia, and Ukraine. However, the credibility of social media platform remains debatable, particularly when it comes to reporting on wars and conflicts. There are natural biases in such reporting, and there is a greater risk of spreading disinformation, which might prove counterproductive at times. The social media, with all its ills of disinformation, and with benefits of creating awareness among the people, is here to stay. However, the trends created by the initiators does not long last, unless regularly updated, and revised with evolving situation, particularly on matters related to security.

2. METHODOLOGY

Since this paper deals with an ongoing war that has the potential of expanding horizontally as well as vertically, therefore, inductive reasoning and qualitative analysis has been deployed, to reach a logical conclusion. As of now, there is no study available in which the efficacy of social media in modern wars have been evaluated on DIME, therefore, in order to fill the gap in the literature, effort has been made to corelate the stakeholders use of social media for strategic communication, and narrative building. Moreover, a careful analysis was done to determine the consequences and effectiveness of escalatory statements by the major stakeholders.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to maintain originality and objectivity, the available literature on the ongoing war was consulted from all the stakeholders. There was obvious bias in the western media against Russia and the support of China to Putin's actions in Ukraine. While western leaders supporting Ukraine have deployed social media for narrative building, particularly Twitter, and Instagram, alongside electronic media, Russian side seems to be using TikTok and Facebook to convince the domestic audience that NATO's presence on its doorstep poses an existential threat to Russian sovereignty. Scanning of a large number of articles and social media sites greatly helped in determining the efficacy of social media and its impact on the ongoing war, on account of psycho-social, emotional, economic, territorial, and military operations.

Kyle Chakya's referent of 'First TikTok war. Was of particular interest to this paper, because it certainly made an impact on peoples' emotional stability when they saw live streaming of displaced people entering bordering countries. Likewise, Najat Al-Saied's study of the region where the right information was not reaching or was blacked out by the states, was extremely helpful to determine the impact of social in those areas where the disinformation was more prevalent. Maheen Shafiq and Farah Naz's writings on the subject proved beneficial in developing understand on the use of social media in strategic communication and narrative building.

Analysis on DIME

Since there was no literature that evaluated the efficacy of social media on the ongoing military engagements that are well into the second year between Russia and Ukraine, this author endeavors to contribute in the academic literature, because social media is here to stay in each domain of our lives and livings.

Diplomacy and the Social Media

In today's media intensive environment, nothing succeeds without an integrated social media campaign. No sooner the Russians crossed into Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022, the US-led western media embarked upon an exhaustive and largely effective media campaign, which was more dominant on the social media outlets. Russia was immediately painted as an aggressor, and violator of the international laws and conventions for the ground attack on Ukraine, thus infringing on its territorial veracity. Ukraine was painted as a symbol of resistance to Russian aggression, and its social media campaign was led by the Ukraine government's Twitter handle. The Conversation carried out the study of the social media platform used officially by the Ukrainian government, and discovered that the objective was to project "the theme of resilience to boost their own image on the platform." (Boatwright, 2023).

In fact, the social media provided the much-needed outfit for the people to expand their knowledge base, as well as a readily available entertainment venue. It not only facilitated the people in much faster communication, but also the cheapest form of integrating with family and friends. And, nobody else can visualize this potential and appetite among the people better than the politicians and diplomats, to utilize this vast potential for strategic communication and narrative building. Interestingly, the social media platforms can be used for both; positive and negative diplomacy. In fact, positive diplomacy can push the wars and conflicts towards the resolution, instead of only managing it. Whereas, the negative diplomacy may lead to fuel the conflict to an unending war that would only bring deaths and destructions. Therefore, the messages crafted on social media can be used in either way, and becomes instantly effective, particularly when a diplomatic language is used, primarily because the clientage is very wide, extremely diverse, very well aware, and above all very responsive. Moreover, the people are far more sensitive and emotional about wars and conflicts of the 21st Century, which are most among the Unequal Military Powers (UMPs). This is what has been seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and now in Ukraine.

Since, the essence of diplomacy rests in its communicability and timings, the diplomats and official found it easy to use social media platforms for the purpose to not only impress the people within but the people without also. The primary purpose was molding the public opinion in one's favour more than the soundness of information that the people were looking for. Particular to Ukraine war, the diplomatic support on the social media came from all parts of the world. An analysis of the Twitter messages by the western world leaders in favour of Ukrainian leadership made Zelenskyy an instant stateman and a symbol of resistance. Likewise, it painted Russian President Putin as an irresponsible, arrogant, and a war criminal. In fact, both Russia and Ukraine are extensively using official social media platforms to project their own viewpoint to win support from the people. Moreover, a number of people's media cells are helping the diplomatic effort of each side to gather support for oneself, concurrently maligning the adversary to gain a favourable response from the people at home and abroad.

Perhaps, it has been rightly called that the Ukraine-Russia war is the First TikTok war (Kyle Chakya, 2022). The purpose remains that the social media users across the globe click, watch or read, and agree to what is being told and shown to them. In a way, the job of diplomacy has been made easy and much cheaper than the traditional methods of diplomacy through meetings, exchange of high-level visits, and other traditional means. Moreover, social media platforms can target a wide-ranging populace with different professions, differing interests, and age groups. For instance, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, have all different clientage and serves as extremely useful platforms for strategic communication and diplomatic tools for instant information as well as disinformation. Social media campaigns were particularly efficacious in projecting the Ukrainian refugees' entrance into other European countries. Though people tried to give it a racial colour, but it successfully won the sympathies of the people around the world against the Russians. Subsequently, these Ukrainian refugees acted as the cultural diplomats for their country's narrative of infringement on the territorial integrity of the state. This cultural diplomacy by the displaced persons paved the way to create awareness among the host nations, particularly in the initial days of the military operations.

Information Warfare through Social Media

The experts on the deployment of social media as a tool of modern wars have rightfully pointed out its efficacy in information warfare and pointed out that the lightening developments in information communication technology (ICT), has played a pivotal role in its deployment as an important component of information warfare. Moreover, peoples' interests in their security forces fighting for the preservation of the sovereignty of the state, has undergone a change due to ever expanding knowledge on the military operations due to readily available information (Miroslav Mitrovic, 2018). In fact, the use of critical information in the domain of warfare has been an important component of the strategies formulated by the warring parties, since the time immemorial. Now, the social media employment forms part of the informational warfare strategy of the warring states. It is not only used to mold the public opinion only, but serves as data bank to gather intelligence necessary for the purpose of exploiting the adversary's weaknesses in a particular domain. Social media's integration in its defensive warfare plans greatly helped Ukraine in projecting its narrative of self-defense against the Russian aggression.

The military and non-military operations in today's wars and conflicts are no more confidential and secret. These are peoples' wars at best, because the social media has given a lot of awareness to the people across all ages and affiliations. Now, the images of military men and machines are no more no-go areas for the civilians. In fact, the government of Ukraine has successfully integrated such images taken by common people to project their achievements and Russia's impediments (Peter Suciu, 2022). Consequently, the Ukrainian government organized a network of social media outlet to highlight Russian military's shortcomings in critical operations, particularly to boost the morale of its own security personnel, who were certainly faced with stronger force. Another aspect that one needs to be highlighted is the on-time effect of the social media as a tool of informational warfare to the places where no other means of information are easily accessible. For instance, the live information on the military operations may not be available through any other medium in some Arab countries. Hence, the information is readily available on the

social media, particularly for the young Arab, who are very familiar with use of social media platforms. The surveys suggest that the primary source of information on Ukraine war was the social media that was relied upon by over 60 percent young Arabs. Whereas, some 40 percent used the news online and the newspapers (Najat Al-Saied, 2023). Since, the social media information may not be always accurate, therefore, efforts are made to reduce the inflow of unqualified information to the people, and therefore, measures were instituted by the social media service providers to restrict unqualified information that may cause harm to society due to a deliberate disinformation campaign against a particular state (Social Media Apps, 2023).

Likewise, the Russians also needed to take precautionary measures to protect its population from being polluted with the inflow of fake news and disinformation campaign launched from various internet giants, including Facebook and Twitter (Shannon Bond, 2023). In fact, it largely depended on these social media platforms as to what kind of information must be sent to which region, and what time, to gain what effect. These social media platforms acted as an essential component of Ukraine's informational warfare on Russia, and actually put Russians on the backfoot, particularly in the initial days of military operations. The popularity and the usage of the social media has in fact added a new dimension to Russia-Ukraine war, because, the people have resorted to reporting live events of interests on all available social media platforms. For instance, well over 50 percent of the Ukrainians consider Facebook as the most reliable source of information, whereas the remaining populations relies more on Instagram and Viber. Interestingly, the common people of Ukraine are not too familiar with Twitter, though it is extensively used by the government to project its viewpoint, perhaps for the outside world (DRI, 2022).

Military and Social Media

In the domain of military under DIME, this author intends to discuss more of cyber warfare aspect than the traditional military operations, because the cyber-attacks are having more profound impact on the operations as well as the people. In fact, it is causing a collateral damage to the non-combatants, at the least. Moreover, "the militarization of social media has the potential to achieve tactical, strategic, operational, and military objectives. To strengthen national security, States need to develop and regulate effective social media laws" (Maheen, 2021). Interestingly, cyberattacks have now become an integral part of the respective war plans of the warring nations, and hence deployed by both: Russia and Ukraine. However, the most attacked areas remain the critical infrastructure of the state, including the financial systems, and government departments (Besacenter.org, 2023).

However, the Russians have gained a relative superiority and expertise in the cyber domain over the Ukrainians, and perhaps more effective as well. In fact, as part of its cyberwarfare strategy, Russia has effectively deployed its components against Ukraine since the Crimea operations in March 2014. Russia's use of cyber elements was particularly helpful in gathering sensitive information that can have an impact on the military advances into Crimea, and cause deliberate interruptions in Ukrainian in critical infrastructure. Over the decade long operations at different intervals, Russia has integrated its cyber operations against Ukraine as part of its military strategy, however, the same was known to the US Intelligence Agencies, well before the

military operations began in Crimea. "In early January 2022, the US warned Ukraine that its critical state infrastructures were under threat of cyber-attack. Shortly after this warning, the websites of Ukrainian government ministries (Education, the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and others) were defaced and messages warning the residents of Ukraine about Russia were posted on them (Pinko, 2023)."

In essence, the cyberwarfare, as an element of hybrid warfare, has been successfully deployed by Russia to achieve its politico-military objectives against Ukraine. Russia's cyberwarfare strategy against Ukraine is primarily designed to keep its governance system under watch, and influence the functions of the Ukrainian government's critical departments. In fact, Russia's strategy has not only made the Ukraine government's functions vulnerable, but also have ingresses into the personal security domain of a common citizen, which causes uncertainty and distress to the people. Moreover, the people remain under constant pressure of being robbed financially through the cyber interventions into their financial systems.

Perhaps, the Ukrainian government lacks the capacity to deal with such advanced tactics of the Russia's cyberwarfare campaign. Military operations, once a no-go area for the non-combatants or a common man, is no longer a taboo when it comes to accessing information, and commenting on the operational aspects of ongoing operations. Social media has not only enhanced awareness of the civilian personnel, but also exposed the military commanders and officials for their follies and lack of application in a particular crisis. The people now have become very sensitive to loss of lives, particularly to innocent civilians and non-combatants, and do not accept the logic collateral damages anymore. The real-time information of military operations and painful images of deaths, and destruction, are immediately responded on the social media as well as in the streets of major capitals around the world.

This author has redefined the terminology of cyberwarfare as a weapon of mass disruption in an opinion article. In fact, cyber interventions can be extremely damaging for the critical infrastructure of the state, as well as the command and control of the military systems. Such interventions can seriously affect the decision-making processes of any government and the military establishments through interjections of wrong information, concurrently extracting the sensitive plans of the strategic nature (Shamsi, 2022). Perhaps, the militaries of the warring nations are more in focus than ever in the long history of warfare. The conventional militaries are now faced with irregular, unregulated, and unseen adversaries.

Social media platforms are brazenly used to promote one's ideology and span hatred against particular communities, and recruit people to harm the militaries as well as the civilians to create unrest and uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, the live reporting of military operations does not remain confined to the official media outlets, and have fallen in the domain of the common people who are acting as soldier-cum- journalists. While risking their lives, the amateur social media individuals, and groups have done a great job, particularly for Ukraine to provide a clear picture of the evolved battlefields (Shallcross, 2017). The Ukrainian groups successfully projected the accomplishments of their soldiers, concurrently spanning negativity about the Russian military establishments.

Strategic Communication and Narrative Building through Social Media

The most effective use of the social media is being done by the political elites around the world in synch with military officials to protect and project oneself as the guarantor of peace and stability. Concurrently, it is deployed to tarnish the image of the adversary by continuously targeting and criticizing its role in any given crisis. The warring nations: Russia and Ukraine, do understand and realize the significance of messaging and images to mold the public opinion through highly popular social media applications. However, to achieve the desired objectives, right phrases for narrative building was needed, and both the states have done so, by claiming victory from their own perspective. Russian narrative is based on "Putin's victimhood: he claims to be a protector from foreign aggressors, a liberator of forced-Ukrainian Russians, and a restorer of historically Russian land." (Butcher, 2022). Whereas, Ukraine's narrative is built around, "... its right to independently thrive through a new media-fueled narrative that has paired militarism with the birth of modern mythology (Butcher, 2022).

The information warfare is all about building a strong narrative prior to the kinetic operations against the adversary. The very purpose of building a narrative is not only to convince people at home but the stakeholders abroad. In the globalized environment, it is extremely important that the state has the support of its doings against an adversary, regardless of its strengths, weaknesses, and political clout. The military operations, in particular, need an unflinching support from the international organizations and the allies, well before they are planned and executed. Social media provides the platform the undertake the strategic communication of the narrative, with instant results from the people at home and abroad. The world leaders are forced to take positions and give their perspectives immediately, either through the social media or through the more organized and traditional manners of press conferences.

Farah is of the view that it has become increasingly important that states understand the significance of narrative building, for and against, to be able to make plausible response strategies, and prepare the people for an informed debate, especially in the evolved security environment (Naz, 2022). This author supports her claims due to ever expanding influence of the social media in the private lives of the people, because the silence by stakeholders is not accepted by the people these days, and they want to hear everybody's viewpoint before building a perception on a particular issue, especially if it relates to security paradigm. In case of Russia-Ukraine war, both the states had a cogent narrative. Russia maintained that Ukraine is its red line and it would never allow NATO on its borders. However, the Ukraine's leadership missed the Russia's line and pursued its membership of NATO, perhaps on certain assurances by the US-led European leaders that they will not leave alone to Russian aggression. There is no denying that NATO is supporting Ukraine with weapons, training, and requisite finances to strengthen its defenses against the might of Russian military. However, this support may not be enough to reclaim the lost territory, particularly because of the demographic advantage that Russia has in the captured territories.

Although NATO and Ukraine's effort to employ social media to build a counter narrative appeased the global

public, and Ukraine's narrative of self-defense against Russian onslaught got far more acceptance on social media, but the same did not impress the experienced leadership of Russia, and it continues to advance into Ukrainian territories. Moreover, the impact of Ukrainian narrative is losing steam due to Russia's counter narratives against NATO, and the military offensive of Hamas on Israel. The US-led immediately turned its attention towards the Middle East, and particularly the social media is flooded with the images of Israeli atrocities in Gaza. Hence, Ukraine feels abandoned at this time, particularly on the social media. Interestingly, the earliest narrative to give a racist colour to the war, especially when refugees started to move out (Ray, 2022), also lost out quickly. Perhaps, because the people around the world immediately raised the issue on social media about the refugees from other parts of the world who were non-European.

4. Conclusion

Russia-Ukraine war, as has been referred as the First TikTok War, will continue to be analyzed through the lens of social media in the coming decades. Perhaps, it has already made the stakeholders understand the significance of an integrated social media plan. Its major components must include a strong narrative and persuasive communication at all levels, and more so a synergetic execution on all available platforms. The campaign must be robust, flexible, and encompass an inbuilt counternarrative to blunt adversaries' defensive mechanisms. While the Russia-Ukraine war was entering into its four month, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, declared that the "process has begun, ...As far as an iron curtain is concerned, it's practically already coming into place .... Let them just behave carefully." (Aljazeera, 2022). This was a very strong message by Russia, and the message was spread among masses through the use of social media (Aljazeera, 2022). And, once again the Twitter was used to announce another big message of President Putin of using all options including nuclear, to station the tactical nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus (Twitter, 2023). Soon after his announcement, President Putin withdrew from nuclear treaty talks (Putin, 2023), to which President Biden declared that we are heading towards an Armageddon (Biden 2022). Subsequently, Russian Duma on October 18, 2023 has voted to renounce the ratification of Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to begin testing of its newly developed technologies, thus raising the escalation ladder to newer heights (Lebedev and Trevelyan, 2023).

It is necessary to reiterate that the people across Europe came out on the streets to show solidarity with the Ukrainians, and showed their displeasure against Russian attacks on Ukraine's territories, particularly when the refugees started to flood European cities, and images of destruction became viral on social media. Ukraine's infrastructure has suffered immensely, and a revised Marshal Plan (National Archives, 2022), must be considered without much delay to rebuild, as soon as practicable. It may be appropriate to suggest that modern wars are no more the sole propriety and the responsibility of the governments of the time. It has now become a peoples' war in which each citizen is acting a diplomat as well as the journalist. Each person is keen to contribute in national defense of the homeland. He/she does not hesitate to make comment, extend advice, and film a particular event of interest to immediately communicate to world. The people are far more aware of the evolving situation due to the speedy information of interest, and willing to share the same at first person reporting to take the credit as well.

However, it is necessary to highlight that the social media trends are not of a permanent nature, and quickly shift its focus to evolving environment. The most recent and perhaps the pertinent example is the ongoing Hamas-Israel war in the Palestinian territories. Since the launch of Hamas' rocket attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, the entire focus of the electronic, print, and social media has shifted from Ukraine to middle East. Nearly all social media platforms that are controlled by the US-led west is projecting Israel acting in self-defense, whereas Hamas is projected as the terrorist organization. Israel, under the umbrella of self-defense is committing genocide of the Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza, by destroying the United Nations' shelters for critical food supplies, schools, hospitals, and areas of common interests for the people. Unfortunately, the UN remains powerless, though the people across the globe are coming out on streets in large numbers, including more on western capitals, but their governments are supporting Israel's atrocities against the poor unarmed non-combatants. In little two weeks of Israel's military operations, over 12000 civilians have been killed with over 15000 wounded. The majority of dead are children and women. Social media images are painful, but the US-led west is solidly supporting Israel, whereas, the Muslim Ummah remains in silent mode, unfortunately though.

Social media is here to stay. Its effective connectivity with people and instant communication has made it a favourite tool for the leaders across the globe. Perhaps, it is not a luxury anymore, but has become a need of the time. The evolved security paradigm has created a lot of awareness among the common people across all regions to remain abreast with the fast-changing scenarios, regardless of the place of occurrence. However, the most trends do not have a longer life, and therefore, it is necessary to keep revising the narrative with the evolving situation, to maintain its effectiveness.

Conflict interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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