
EXPLOITING SOCIAL MEDIA
FOR MILITARY OBJECTIVES
IN COUNTER TERRORIST OPERATIONS
PEOPLE
INFORMATION
ENGAGEMENT
INFLUENCE
STABILITY
PEACE
ASSAM
MANIPUR
LISTEN
ANALYSE
ENGAGE
COUNTER NARRATIVE
BUILD TRUST
PREVENT RADICALISATION
ENABLE OPERATIONS
CONNECT COMMUNITIES
REAL TIME COMMUNICATION
BUILD TRUST
INTELLIGENCE & ALERTS
COUNTER NARRATIVES
UNDERSTAND TRENDS
INFORM & EDUCATE
PARTNER FOR DEVELOPMENT
A Connected People
A Safer North East
A Stronger India
SOCIAL MEDIA = OPPORTUNITY
Monitor
Engage
Counter Misinformation
Influence
Build Trust
Community Participation
Actionable Intelligence
YOUTH
PEOPLE
PARTNERS
SOCIAL MEDIA
INFORMATION WARFARE
COUNTER TERRORISM
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
NATION BUILDING
Brigadier Sanjay P Vishwasrao
Sector Commander
22 Assam Rifles Sector
Assam – Manipur
2017
People Centric Security
Engage
Influence
Counter Extremism
Build Confidence
Enable Development
Win Lasting Peace
PEOPLE | SECURITY | DEVELOPMENT | A STRONGER INDIA

Exploiting Social Media for Military Objectives in Counter-Terrorist Operations

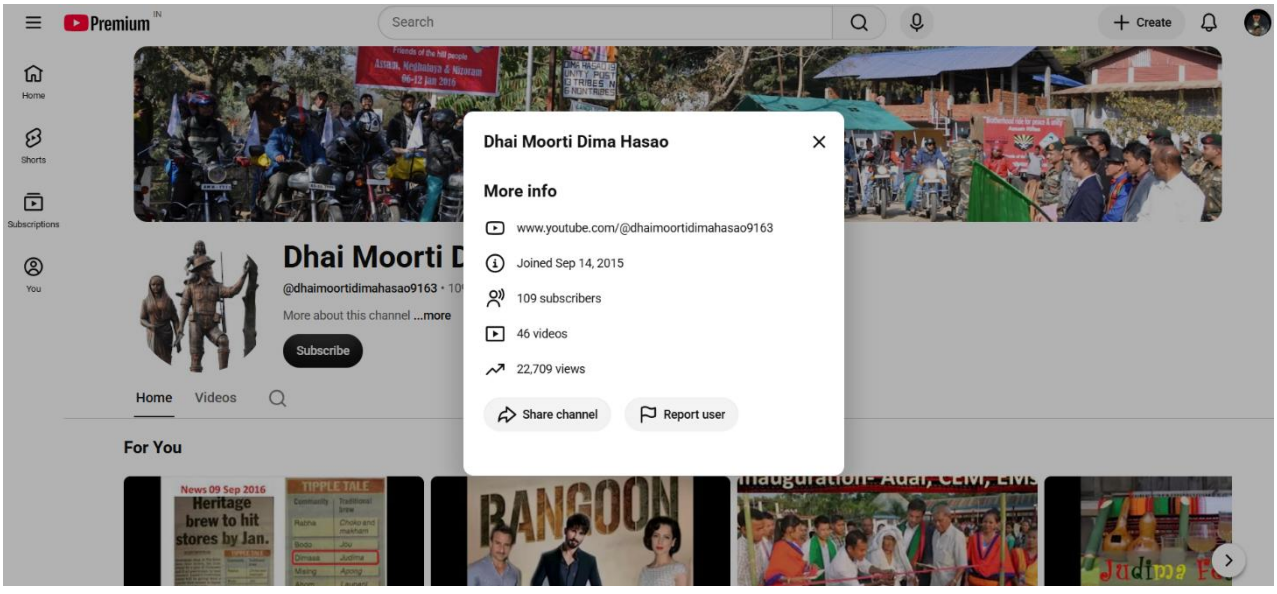
Originally written in 2017 after success in Assam-Manipur. Adopted in 2026 for a broader audience.

A Framework for Perception Management, Audience Mapping and Message Design

Sanjay P Vishwasrao, Major General, Retired

Written in 2017, drawing on experience as Brigadier, Commander 22 Sector Assam Rifles, Assam–Manipur (2015–2016).

> *"Public sentiment is everything.*
> *With public sentiment nothing can fail.*
> *Without it nothing can succeed.*
> *He who moulds opinion is greater than he who enacts laws."*
>
> **— President Abraham Lincoln**



YouTube Channel used by Brigadier Sanjay P Vishwasrao as Commander 22 Sector Assam Rifles to win peace by 'All Tribes, One India' Tricolour Revolution Strategy, 2015-2916.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT FOR TODAY'S READER

This paper was written in 2017, drawing directly on the author's own use of social media as Brigadier commanding 22 Sector, Assam Rifles, across Assam and Manipur in 2015–2016 — the same tenure in which his 'All Tribes, One India' outreach strategy contributed to eight terrorists kills, and 95 terrorist apprehension, resulting in three of four units under his command receiving Unit Commendations/ Citations and 72 soldiers receiving gallantry and distinguished-service awards, a record for the Assam Rifles. The specific platforms discussed below have since evolved — but the underlying doctrine — mapping an audience, designing a message for stickiness, and building a trusted network to carry it — is exactly the discipline behind brand-building, public outreach and reputation management today.

Introduction

Social media is a mixed bag of computer-, internet- and mobile-based applications and tools that let people share ideas and information — commonly called Web 2.0. Unlike traditional one-way media, it is interactive: it gives every individual the ability to express an opinion. Given its reach, speed and popularity, exploiting social media to achieve one's objectives has become unavoidable — for a security force as much as for any brand, campaign or institution.

Perception Management

Definition. Perception management is the concurrent application of psychological operations, information operations, public diplomacy and public information on a target population, to engineer a change in their awareness, beliefs, emotions, decisions and actions. Psychological and information operations are the key to influencing minds and winning hearts.

Process. Perception management follows a seven-step iterative process — observe, analyse, design, disseminate, monitor, adjust and reinforce — repeated continuously rather than run once and forgotten.

Designing a Strategy for Social Media

Tool 1 — A Strategy for Engineering Change. To shift an ideological stronghold, Gene Sharp (author of 'From Dictatorship to Democracy') sets out a four-stage strategy: **Stage 1, Selective Resistance** — build resistance among the people to extortion, kidnapping, corruption and violence; **Stage 2, Symbolic Challenge** — counter the ideas of radicalism, secessionism and terrorism with alternative symbols such as the Tricolour, the National Anthem and visible development; **Stage 3, Spreading Responsibility** — widen involvement across society, from NGOs to taxi drivers to government employees and their families; and **Stage 4, Targeting the Source of Power** — aim directly at the nexus's centre of gravity by identifying and addressing its ideology and ideologues.

CORPORATE PARALLEL — THE SAME FOUR STAGES RUN ANY CAMPAIGN

Strip out the counter-insurgency setting and this is a template for any campaign meant to shift public opinion — a brand repositioning, a policy-awareness drive, or a crisis-recovery communications plan: build grassroots resistance to the old narrative, offer a memorable alternative symbol, widen participation across every stakeholder group, and only then take on the source powering the old belief directly. Skipping straight to Stage 4 without the first three is the most common reason campaigns — corporate or governmental — fail to stick.

Tool 2 — Mass Mobilisation. Credible perception-management outcomes require mobilising the masses, achieved through a process of news, views, emotions and mobilisation. Interest generation requires the idea to find resonance; interest articulation requires catchy, memorable messages together with 'slacktivism' (low-effort social-media action); and interest aggregation requires leadership and coordination to bring it all together.

Stage	What It Requires
Interest Generation	An idea that genuinely resonates with the audience
Interest Articulation	Catchy, memorable messaging — including low-effort ('slacktivist') actions
Interest Aggregation	Leadership and coordination to bring scattered interest together

The Social Media Mobilisation Process

Tool 3 — Applying the Strategy of Change. Malcolm Gladwell's 'The Tipping Point' shows how small factors can produce large shifts. Four of his principles apply directly here: **Battle of Networks** — security forces (or any organisation) need a wider, more effective, positively controlled network than their adversary's, with commanders and staff as connectors and forward officers and soldiers as the 'salesmen' carrying the message; **Improving the Environment** — an idea-epidemic can be started or stopped by changing the context around it, through small, well-chosen corrective actions such as stopping extortion or improving civic cleanliness; **Character of the Maven, Connector and Salesman** — a target audience's acceptance of a message depends on the character of the person delivering it, which is why force ethos and bearing carry real strategic weight; and **Stickiness of the Message** — a message's saleability and its staying power in the audience's mind depend on how it is designed, so themes, messages and medium must be chosen for maximum reach and permanence.

CORPORATE PARALLEL — CONNECTORS, MAVENS AND SALESMEN IN ANY CAMPAIGN

This is, almost word for word, the language of modern brand and influencer marketing: a small number of well-connected, credible people (mavens and connectors) carry a message further than any amount of paid reach, provided the message itself is built to be memorable ('sticky') and the messengers themselves are trusted. Recognising and building this network deliberately — rather than hoping it forms on its own — is the difference between a campaign that spreads and one that simply airs.

Tool 4 — Cultural Awareness. Designing the right themes and messages needs an in-depth understanding of local or tribal culture, history, language, and the relationships between communities.

Tool 5 — Reading the Local Calendar. Perception-management activity must be planned and timed against the local calendar — community and tribal festivals, dates significant to hostile groups, and national days.

Tool 6 — The Target Audience Analysis Worksheet. A worksheet built for each audience segment (see Table 1) helps set the right perception-management strategy, technique and tool for that specific group.

Evaluating Social Media

A few facts about social media are worth noting: smartphone users already outnumber laptop and desktop users; YouTube is watched more than television; social media is the single most popular activity on the internet; after office hours, it is WhatsApp or Facebook; engagement runs about 32% higher on weekends; the best read-times are during the commute and after work; email is read at the opposite times to WhatsApp or Facebook (barring office use); and the speed, colour, music and length of a message all affect how well it performs.

Platform	Use & Reach	Content Friendliness	Ease & Speed	Military Fit	Score
WhatsApp	4	5	5	4	18
Facebook	3	5	4	4	16
YouTube	2	5	3	3	13
SMS	5	2	3	2	12
Google+	2	3	1	2	8
Instagram	1	2	3	2	8
Twitter	1	1	2	1	5

Evaluation of Popular Social Media Platforms (2017 assessment)

Factor	WhatsApp	Facebook	YouTube
Building a network of contacts	Easy	Slow	Slowest
Trust	High	Low	Low
Control over network width	Possible	Difficult	Most difficult
Reach	Best	Limited to towns and younger users	Limited to uneducated/ semi-educated
Target specificity	Immediate, target-specific reach	Difficult to isolate and reach a target	Difficult to isolate and reach a target
Editing / recall of a message	Not possible	Possible	Possible
Control over visibility	Possible	Difficult	Difficult
Ability to make content go viral	Best tool	Second-best tool	Third-best tool

Factor	WhatsApp	Facebook	YouTube
Security of sensitive information	Good	Poor	Poor
Handover of a network between commanders	Easy	Difficult — tied to a personal account	Easy

WhatsApp vs Facebook vs YouTube (2017 comparison)

A NOTE ON A FAST-MOVING TOOLSET

This platform-by-platform scoring is nearly a decade old and does not include the tools available today. That is by design, not oversight: the value here is in the method — how to score a channel against reach, message control, trust and target-specificity — not any single row of the table. Point the same scoring framework at today's platforms and it holds up unchanged.

Recommended Tips. Build a recognisable brand for the campaign itself — as was done with 'It's Your Army' for the Indian Army, *'Awam aur Jawan, Aman hai Muqam'* for the Rashtriya Rifles, and *'Dhai Moorti — Friends of the Hill People'* for the Assam Rifles. Start every campaign with a Target Audience Analysis Worksheet. Combine physical and electronic platforms to widen reach. Involve one's own people and the local community in creating content. Use profile pictures, cover photos and status updates deliberately as perception-management tools. Give content local flavour so it travels. Test content on a sample audience before release. Keep control over content and its spread. Time releases to the local calendar and to daily and weekly routine. And use one's own people to seed and spread the message.

Platform Features Worth Knowing

A few features are common across platforms: servers based in countries with strict secrecy laws offer only limited real security; hacking tools typically reveal who communicated with whom, not the content of the message; and speed depends on network bandwidth. WhatsApp supports one-to-one and one-to-many communication, permanent need-based groups, temporary broadcast lists, and delivery confirmation. Telegram adds the ability to share Word and PDF documents directly. Other platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter (as they stood in 2017), were less suited to day-to-day operational use — a gap that has narrowed considerably since.

Using It for Communication, Command and Control

Communication and Command. Communication is the foundation of leadership and command; WhatsApp or Telegram can carry instructions, gather feedback, and share lessons learned, best practice and even greetings.

Coordination and Control. Commanders and staff at every level can use these platforms to coordinate operations and events in real time.

Intelligence Acquisition. The only reliable way to read a social-media group's sentiment is to be a genuine part of it — this builds background understanding of prevailing ideas and the community's mood.

Intelligence Dissemination. One-to-one, smartphone-based platforms are the fastest way to get time-sensitive information to the people who need it.

Rules and Etiquette for Managing Groups

Group Administration. The senior-most officer, together with one staff officer, should administer every group and should: set up need-based groups (for company commanders, staff officers, community elders, shopkeepers, and so on); prepare need-based broadcast lists tied to the current operation, event, community or festival; treat display pictures and status updates as

communication tools in their own right; keep group membership current as people are posted in or out; and set clear rules and etiquette for members. One staff officer or personal assistant should also keep a written record of instructions issued, for follow-up, alongside appointments, birthdays and anniversaries worth tracking.

Rules and Etiquette. Keep positive control over content. Share links and clips only after viewing them, and hold members accountable for what they post. Never share or discuss classified information on these platforms. Keep professional groups free of unnecessary spam or gossip. Be clear and brief, and avoid unauthorised abbreviations. Use emojis sensibly — they can genuinely save time. Precede operationally important messages with a call or missed call, rather than keeping notification sounds on at all times. Company commanders' phones should carry a cover, so a lit screen does not give away their position during an exchange of fire. Being reachable at all times is not optional in counter-terrorist operations — it is a necessity. And avoid using these platforms to manufacture work-related stress, such as demanding immediate reports out of hours.

Conclusion

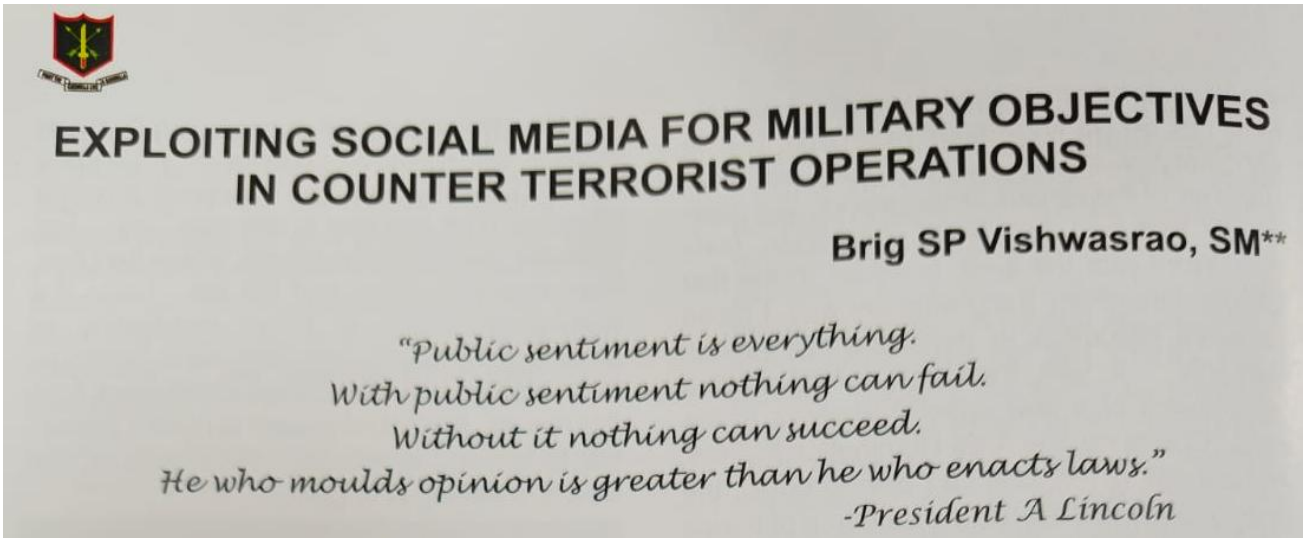
The growing spread of 3G and 4G networks, rising internet penetration, and the sheer popularity of social media make it essential to use for operational effect — influencing minds and winning hearts to win peace over Fourth Generation Warfare. Educating officers and soldiers, alongside disciplined monitoring of these platforms, pays real dividends without putting one's own operations at risk.

RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S BOARDROOMS AND INSTITUTIONS

The platforms named in this paper have moved on; the discipline behind them has not. Segmenting an audience before messaging it, building a message for 'stickiness' rather than volume, identifying and equipping the connectors who will actually carry it, and scoring channels honestly against reach and control — this is the same operating model behind brand campaigns, public outreach, and reputation and crisis management today. I built and ran this model in the field, with a measurable result, and bring the same discipline to strategy, marketing and change-management advisory work now.

"The rules of war have cardinally changed,
and the effectiveness of non-military tools in
achieving strategic or political goals in a conflict
has exceeded that of weapons."

— General Valery Gerasimov,
Russia's Chief of the General Staff, 2013



Photograph of this article published in
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