

Social media: the new intelligence collection platforms

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Mr Johnston demonstrates that intelligence collected from social media can have tactical value in a kinetic conflict.

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As always, the world and its battlefields are ever evolving. Technology, however, is developing faster now than perhaps at any time in history. A major technological development of the past two decades is social media and today's battlefield commanders and intelligence analysts need to leverage this new paradigm to significantly increase their intelligence picture. Every day, millions of posts are uploaded to different platforms in every corner of the globe and, used correctly, these posts can fill intelligence gaps, provide real-time situational awareness of unfolding events and, to a limited extent, provide strategic intelligence.

The exploitation of social media also can be incredibly more economical and easier to manage than other means, such as deploying a human asset to collect such intelligence. Perhaps, however, the greatest benefit of intelligence derived from social media is the ease and speed with which it can be distributed to forces, thanks to its open-source nature. Reduced need to classify information or carefully monitor its distribution, allows more people on the ground to receive more information faster and ultimately have an enhanced fighting edge.

Over the past year, there have been several notable examples of how social media exploitation could benefit the overall intelligence cycle. This paper will examine some of them.

Tracking Military Assets – The Battlecruiser *Pyotr Velikiy*

In its simplest application, social media can track a large number of military assets globally, giving greater situational awareness and advanced warning of potential threats. A recent example is the deployment of Russia's Northern Fleet battlecruiser *Pyotr Velikiy* to the Barents Sea. On 21 May 2021, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that the *Pyotr Velikiy* had sailed for the Barents Sea to conduct anti-submarine warfare exercises (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2021).

Russian journalist Artem Kolodkin, however, had already posted a photo of himself aboard the battlecruiser in the Barents Sea on 13 May, a whole eight days before the press release (Kolodkin 2021). Furthermore, residents of Severomorsk, the main base of Russia's Northern Fleet, had already begun posting photos of the *Pyotr Velikiy* at anchor on Instagram from 21 May (Petkevich 2021) indicating it had already returned to port, despite ongoing media releases supposedly updating its training activities (Mironova 2021).

Social media in this case gave the user eight-days prior notice of the battlecruiser's movements and location. In a kinetic conflict situation, the extra warning time and

informational advantage would be invaluable for a potential adversary.

Azerbaijan-Armenia War 2020

Such scenarios are not necessarily hypothetical either. Social media have already proven to be valuable intelligence collection tools in numerous conflicts, including the most recent hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

From September to November 2020, Azerbaijan and Armenia reignited their long-time feud over Nagorno-Karabakh and fought a six-week war which finally ended on 10 November (Crisis Group 2021). While much has been written on the use of drones in this conflict, little attention has been given to the use of social media. Both sides heavily used social media platforms as weapons in their propaganda war. They spouted battlefield victories, many of which proved to be false, and made claims of war crimes, intent on drawing ire from the international community.

Outside of propaganda, however, local populations also fed information into social media which greatly enhanced situational awareness on the ground. Throughout the conflict, citizens posted captions, comments, photos, and videos which gave observers insights into movements of military equipment, positioning of strategic assets and real-time updates on the unfolding situation around them (Aldin 2021). Perhaps the most significant piece of intelligence sourced from social media during this conflict was a Facebook post on 10 November, showing Armenian forces firing an Iskander short-range ballistic missile towards Azerbaijan (Toumayan 2020). This was the first public information on ballistic missiles being deployed in the conflict and marked a major escalation. It was not until after the conflict had ended that Armenia acknowledged their use (Pashinyan 2021). For observers, this kind of granular information gave critical real-time updates on the ground, as well as forewarning and targeting information which could easily be exploited for tactical gains on the battlefield.

Russia-Ukraine Border 2021

Russia's amassing of forces on its border with Ukraine in March 2021 is another recent example of social media providing both forewarning and tactical intelligence. Residents of western Russia posted on-masse videos and photos of large numbers of military personnel and vehicles travelling toward Crimea. The local Crimean population also posted locations and movements of these assets near the border. The day after the United States European Command raised its awareness level to "potential imminent crisis" (Vandiver 2021), users on Instagram posted footage of large numbers of Russian military equipment, including armoured personnel

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carriers and self-propelled artillery, crossing the Crimean Bridge (Simferopolnovosti 2021).

Additionally, in a sign of the ever-evolving development of social media, TikTok was, for perhaps the first time in a conflict-like situation, an incredibly powerful intelligence collection platform. As users passed columns on the road, or witnessed trains carrying tanks and other armoured vehicles, they would immediately upload footage to the app. TikTok became a critical instrument in the monitoring of Russian movements across southwestern Russia.

Other social media sites, such as Twitter and VK, also revealed insightful information, including the movements and location of strategic equipment, such as a 59N6 Protivnik-GE radar on the side of a highway outside Feodosia and a 9S36 passive-phased array radar, which indicated the location of a Buk missile system in Voronezh Oblast (The Loud Hawk 2021; Girkin 2021). Military observers could exploit the information gleaned from social media to form better calculations of the possible number of Russian forces near the border, their composition, transport routes and location of critical assets.

Information Overload

Harnessing social media, however, does not come without its challenges. Approximately half the world's population now own at least one social medium account, and this equates to an immense amount of data. Everyday, there are approximately 350 million photos posted to Facebook and over 500 million tweets tweeted on Twitter (Smith 2019; Internet Live Stats n.d.). These statistics, whilst representative, are minuscule in comparison to the billions of posts across all social media platforms globally each day.

To filter relevant intelligence from the noise, analysts and militaries need to leverage the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI). AI gives the user the ability not only to filter the data received by social media but to passively learn from the user which information is valuable and which is not, continually improving the filtering process. AI, however, does not negate the need for a capable analyst to review the filtered data, identify valuable intelligence, verify it, and incorporate it into the larger intelligence network.

Unlike intelligence derived by most other means, however, after the intelligence has been filtered, identified, and verified, its dissemination also can be immediate. It can be sent directly to forces in an easily accessible format, without the need for classification. This difference puts actionable intelligence in the hands of more forces, quicker.

Conclusion

Effective and timely intelligence in the right hands can be a significant force multiplier, providing a measurable edge over an adversary. The development of social media creates an additional tool for intelligence collection which, if used correctly, can greatly enhance and fill gaps in the intelligence picture: providing forewarning, force protection, situational awareness, asset tracking and targeting information.

Additionally, due to the necessities imposed by the classification of intelligence, information often can be bottlenecked, slowing and reducing the amount of critical information relayed to junior ranks. In a kinetic situation, these junior ranks, who in most circumstances are the ones fighting on the frontline, are the ones who would benefit the most from more tactical intelligence. While the data collected would still need to be analysed by both AI and a trained analyst, the open-source nature of social media and the ease of its distribution allow for greater and faster dissemination among

forces, greatly mitigating the bottleneck effect. Intelligence, in the hands of those unable to act on said intelligence, after all, has nil effect on the battle, and it is perhaps in this respect that social media, as intelligence collection platforms, hold their greatest strength.

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