



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Social Media and the Arab Spring

By [TJ Waters](#)

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When the average American thinks about Brazil one of two images comes to mind, Carnival or soccer. But in May 2006 some very different images of life in South America's largest country were splashed across living rooms nationwide. A prison gang called the First Command of the Capital, known by its Portuguese acronym PCC, orchestrated a nationwide revolt, seizing hostages in several prisons and setting off bombs throughout Sao Paulo.

In Europe that same summer, images of trash piling up everywhere made the evening news broadcasts worldwide. The Camorra crime syndicate, a powerful criminal organization in Naples, Italy was forcing concessions on the local government by arranging for trash pick up to be inexplicably 'delayed' for days at a time. Naples' pristine vistas were marred by garbage piled several feet high in the streets, blocking vehicles *and* pedestrians, until the local government complied with Camorra's wishes.

Finally, and more horrifically, in 2009 Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) ran a coordinated series of attacks by sending young, inexperienced militants ashore in small craft to India's largest city, Mumbai. These neophyte commandos set off bombs, fired automatic weapons, and set fire to the famed Taj Mahal hotel. All but one of the militants were eventually killed, but not until over 160 people had died.

What ties these three otherwise disparate events together? All were planned and executed using basic cellular telephones. Prisoners in Brazil, crime lords in Italy, and Pakistan-based terrorists used commercially available cellular phones to achieve military-style command and control.

While the purposes behind the three attacks vary greatly, the main tool being leveraged was the same – FEAR. Manipulating public perceptions by creating doubt the government is capable of protecting and serving the population helped all three organizations achieve their objectives.

Fast forward to Egypt, 2011

In Cairo's Tahrir Square, as protestors took to the streets in January 2011, the use of fear was particularly evident. With the international media closely watching what was taking place, protestor numbers continued to swell. But what the media showed was fear on the part of the Egyptian military, not the protestors.

In photograph after photograph, angry civilians were raising their fists against armed Egyptian military personnel. The soldiers standing together in small groups, sometimes next to tanks and armored vehicles, clearly displayed fear and uncertainty when faced with the angry mobs. As I watched the events unfold I was reminded of a movie I'd seen several years earlier.

Written and directed by Jeffrey Nachmanoff, "*Traitor*" stars actor Don Cheadle in a multifaceted story of terrorism, religious freedom, and international politics. In a pivotal closing scene, the terrorist mastermind makes a particularly compelling point:

“The art of asymmetric warfare is less about inflicting damage than provoking a response. Terrorism is theater, and theater is always performed for an audience.”

Nachmonoff’s big-screen tale would be a good master-class topic, as this one scene epitomizes the overarching future of conflict strategy – provoking a response by manipulating the audience.

No nation is likely to engage the U.S. in direct military confrontation. Tank battles across the Belgian countryside or battleships exchanging fire over the horizon are conflicts of the past. Media-savvy, non-state actors will be our nation’s most unpredictable future adversaries. What has changed is the decreasing costs and increasing leverage of new technologies in supporting virtually any organization, even those that are still forming.

A Primer on Social Media

Not long ago I sat in on a briefing of foreign military officers. One of the briefs was on the use of social media overseas. I remarked to the U.S. official I was with that it was a particularly good overview of one government’s views on social media and would be worth sharing. I then turned to look at the crowd of assembled O-5 & O-6 officers – it was reminiscent of the movie poster from *‘Night of the Living Dead’*. Each officer was a white-eyed zombie, with no lucid idea of what was being discussed.

I pointed out the speaker had lost the majority of his audience. The official noted that for most of the attendees English was a second language. I suggested social media was a language all its own and should be treated as such. He disagreed, so I asked him if he could, in ten seconds or less, tell me the difference between Facebook and YouTube. After ten seconds of quietly glaring at me he acquiesced.

So I shared with him materials I’ve used to describe social media for a class I teach in a local college intelligence program. It is by no means scholarly, but it explains for senior leaders the differences between the types of social media their subordinates are increasingly working in.

These are:

Facebook: The granddaddy of social network sites. Facebook is a platform for sharing topics of interest with one or more people. It contains many opportunities for feedback, private and public, between individuals and groups. It utilizes text, images, and video, letting individuals, companies, groups, or even social movements to create so-called ‘Walled Gardens’. How high the virtual walls are around each garden is completely up to the user, but the entire world can ‘stop in’ online and chat about anything. This is what Facebook does – it allows users to **DISCUSS**.

YouTube: This is a service that began as a social media site but has specialized in one aspect of the online world – streaming video. YouTube’s unique differentiator is it gives anyone the ability to instruct others on how to do something through a visual context. There are very limited feedback options as it was not designed for real-time events. But it does have a very high impact factor in focusing primarily on audio/video. YouTube allows users to **SHOW** just about any topic someone cares to research.

LinkedIn: This is a social network in the classic sense, but with the unique caveat of being primarily focused on the past. LinkedIn features many-to-many social connections based on jobs, groups, education, and other factors. But the majority of the information it contains is based upon the past, rather than the present or future. Think of it as relationship trading. Whereas the Chicago Board of Trade deals in the present value of commodity futures, LinkedIn is a place to trade on the present value of past groups. Who are you linked to that I want to meet? LinkedIn’s differentiator is its ability to **CONNECT**.

Twitter: Finally, there is Twitter, possibly the most active of all the social networks. Twitter is a

microblog, a way to send a message to one person or to many persons, with a 140-character limit on the message. It is the ultimate ‘fire and forget’ social network, a short burst transmission of text or a picture to the world. Twitter allows users to **INFORM** an audience of what they are doing in a given place and time.

The Three Dimensions of Manipulation

Social media eliminates two important impediments to communication – distance and delay – creating new pathways for people to connect in near-real time. But the social networks themselves are insufficient to drive a population to the streets. It is the increased use of these systems on mobile platforms that has created new expressions of leverage and power.

When the events in Brazil, Italy, and India occurred the cellular systems used were audio-only. New smartphones bring to account a powerful new addition – the visual aspect. While communication is largely verbally-based, we acquire information better with a visual context. A smartphone provides one-way (visual) information transfer and a two-way (verbal) communication exchange.

Whereas we once used local hard drives to store information, many of these tasks are now handled ‘in the cloud’. Large corporations provide the ability to store information in remotely based server warehouses. These professionally maintained servers cost pennies per day (at most) to consumers. As a result, very high-end computer systems are available to anyone, anywhere, literally on demand. Computer technology is no longer a barrier from a cost, location, or expertise perspective.

Virtually every smartphone now has a camera incorporated into it. The overwhelming majority of the devices include high quality video as well. We increasingly see consumer video showing up on the evening news showing weather anomalies, criminal acts in real time, hidden video ‘exposes’, and even surveillance-specific applications.

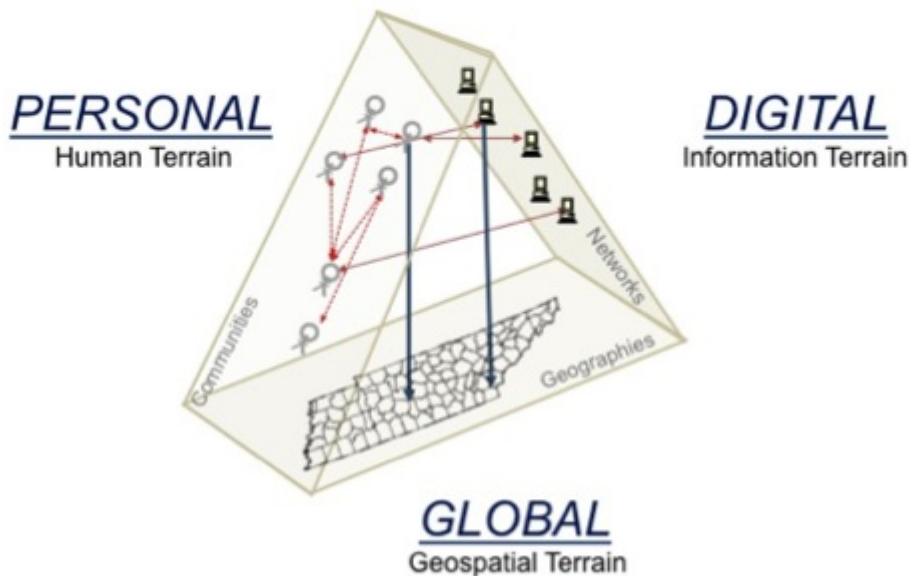
This juxtaposition of cheap cloud computing, smartphone visualization, and the ability to upload still or moving pictures whenever events take place has become a force multiplier for social networks that cannot be exaggerated.

Three Interrelated Dimensions

Our social networks, fostering information and communication to these ubiquitous mobile-handsets, are best understood by considering the three key dimensions in which they exist. These three related dimensions are:

- PERSONAL (the human terrain): These are the relationships among individuals. Friends and foes, bosses and subordinates, strangers and friends. These relationships, strong and weak, are in constant flux.
- DIGITAL (the information terrain): Data moves throughout the world instantly and cheaply compared with previous generations. The complexity often comes not in accessing information but rather in eliminating extraneous data to find only what is needed for decision making.
- GLOBAL (the geospatial terrain): Everyone can exist in one, and only one, place at any time. Their location affects their social interactions and access to or interaction with information. Location can be a force multiplier or a means to deny access, depending on the situation.

Three Interrelated Dimensions



By leveraging technology we can discover and manipulate these terrains to influence and sometimes control outcomes. As the personal and digital terrains theoretically move closer together we can act on information faster; sometimes almost instantaneously. Information consumers are now also providers. Cameras on mobile devices mean faster creation and less filtering of information. It's harder to enforce a 'denied' area because local citizens with mobile technology are increasingly supplanting traditional media.

Neda-Aghan Soltan was standing on a Tehran street in 2009 watching crowds protest the presidential election fraud when she was shot in the head by Basij forces. Her final glance skyward as she died was Tweeted around the world and became the iconic symbol of the failed movement. World condemnation was swift, and Twitter began to rapidly evolve.

Twitter As a Force Multiplier in Tahrir Square

So what took place in Cairo's Tahrir Square? Why wasn't the movement predicted by intelligence services or law enforcement? Evidence suggests the demonstrators themselves didn't know what was going to happen until the crowds began to gather.

An analysis of Twitter feeds in early 2011 suggests the crowd self-organized. Emergent leaders developed a social media following that became uniquely mobile. As a result, Twitter became a defacto organizational tool of the protestors.

The protest was five days old, but as the crowds reacted to the military's very measured and professional (nonviolent) response, they became larger. But they also organized and moved information around faster than the Egyptian government or even the world's media could follow.

The crowds, who had been taking pictures and video with their mobile phones and uploading it for the

world to see, were also tracking each other. Twitter was already popular, but because it easily incorporates a device's Global Positioning System (GPS) data, it was particularly useful for tactical and operational support during the uprising.

A geospatial analyst I know analyzed a sampling of Tweet metadata and found a number of surprising revelations. Twitter provides the sample to developers upon request, (it does not contain the contents of the Tweets, nor any user identity information). Over the course of several days he discovered how the Cairo protestors found each other and mobilized:

- Feb 4, 2011: Total mobile Tweets – 2268. Mean nearest neighbor – 65.2 meters.
- Feb 5, 2011: Total mobile Tweets – 2176. Mean nearest neighbor – 26.27 meters.
- Feb 11, 2011: Total mobile Tweets – 5272. Mean nearest neighbor – 11.02 meters.

Twitter senders and followers were responding to each other as events unfolded. The number of Tweets being sent from a mobile device (versus a stationary PC) more than doubled, and the distance between Twitter users decreased dramatically. This strongly suggests Twitter helped mobilize crowds into the streets, allowing them to find each other and coordinate activities in ways not seen before.

The Accidental Protestor

In 2009, Australian Army Lt Col David Kilcullen published a groundbreaking book on counterinsurgency entitled '*The Accidental Guerilla.*' Among the many salient points of this book was an intuitive graphic on the strategy of conventional (terrestrial) warfare.

Kilcullen pointed out that, for a given territory, the conventional state-sponsored strategy is to focus operations against the adversary's government and military – leaders, facilities, infrastructure, etc. This is intended to isolate the population. It protects them from collateral damage and (possibly) allows them to privately and discretely begin the task of finding new national leadership.

Kilcullen notes Irregular Warfare focuses on the government and the population, isolating the military. This is largely because irregular (insurgent) forces cannot match the firepower, organization, logistics, or technology of a nation's military. By targeting the government and the population, insurgents drive a wedge between the nation and its defenders, as the populace no longer believes the government can protect them. Kilcullen's research, based on his many years of service, is compelling.

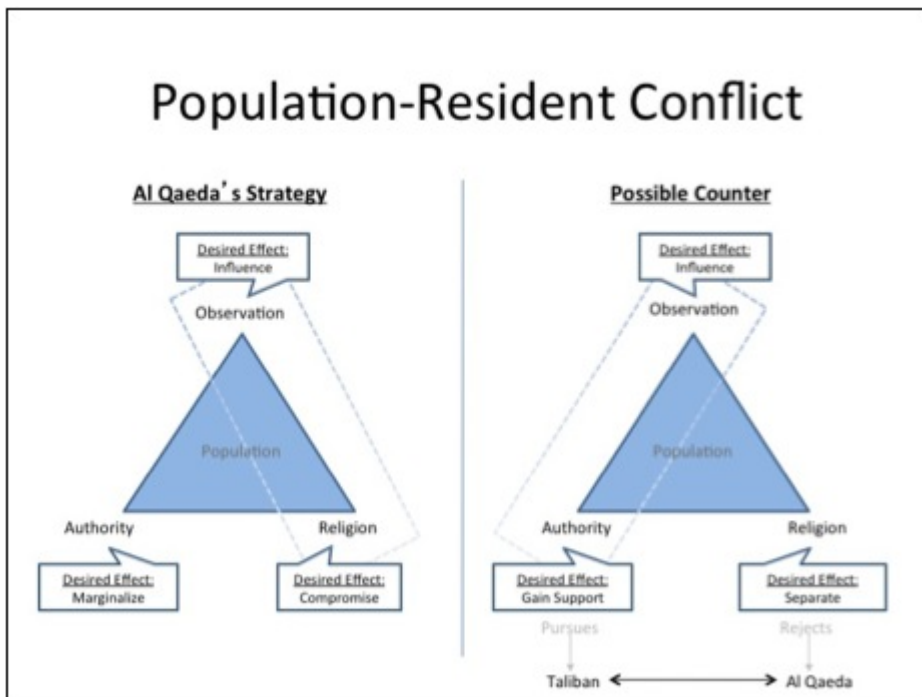
So what if we took that model and instead, applied to a *population* rather than a *location*? Would we see the same sort of differences? Suppose the goal of an insurgent force was not ground per se, but rather the population that existed on it. Rather than targeting the ground to control the population, what if insurgent forces targeted the population in order to control the ground?

But with the population as the 'territory', the three points of the triangle have to change. Where does a population get its information? I once read there were three sources – observation, religion, and authority. If we consider the conflict in Afghanistan as an example these are notable points of consideration.

The Taliban (and Al Qaeda) could be seen in a modified Kilcullen model as manipulating religion and observation, isolating government authorities. Certainly, stepping over the body of a murdered Imam (Observation) to read the regularly posted 'night letters' placed on a mosque's outer walls (Religion), would encourage a population to bend to TB will. This was a too-frequent event only a couple of years ago. The tribal authorities, the only real local government in many parts of the country, were viewed as incapable at best. It was relatively easy for the TB/AQ to take over.

Now consider U.S. military strategy. We focused on Authority and Observation, hoping to isolate Religion. The U.S. government, not wanting to appear to be competing with Islam, instead tried to isolate and protect it. If legitimate Afghan leaders pursued the Taliban while mainstream Islamic leaders publicly rejected Al Qaeda, we'd be looking at a very different situation on the ground there.

Unfortunately, not all of our actions have been especially positive in this regard, and many of those elected Afghan authorities are rife with corruption. As a result, this effort has not been as successful as we'd hoped, though the strategy is sound.



If Nature Abhors a Vacuum, *Human* Nature Really Hates It

So now consider countries in civilian turmoil. Though at peace, they lack effective government leadership and accountability. The population, armed with an unprecedented amount of information, demands change. These information systems are not just letting the population learn what could be – they are helping execute the necessary changes! The craft of story-telling is adjudicating this change by tailoring itself for these social media outlets.

Letting the outside world know what is happening - supplanted with pictures and video of atrocities, attacks, or assaults - has created an all new type of central power. Bullets and bombs are ineffective when a government cannot use them. Knowing it would be splashed across the world's media the following day, even the most vicious of regimes shuns an armed response against its own citizens.

Nor can a government simply shut down all of its telecommunication or Internet access, as Egypt initially tried to do. Isolationism, a difficult strategy in even the best of times, is guaranteed to fail in an increasingly interconnected global world. News stories make for dramatic political pressure in both the Arab and Western worlds, a tactic likely to be repeated by other groups in the future.

All peoples have choices in how and by what means they tell stories. The choices they make can radically affect the outcomes. Sticks and stones - bullets and bombs - are no longer the weapons of choice. It is most certainly words that can hurt us, or anyone else, the most.

Colonel Robert Killebrew (US Army, retired) now a senior fellow for the Center for New American Security, once wrote, "*The story you're trying to tell in future conflicts is the strategy by which (the conflict) will be fought.*"

That's something all governments, including our own, might take a few moments to consider before the next campaign: What story will social media carry from the planned action?

Who will see it, how will they react, and what might happen next?

About the Author



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TJ Waters spent four years as a co-team chief at U.S. Special Operations Command Headquarters. Prior to this he was a Senior Counterintelligence Analyst for USCENTCOM and an Intelligence Officer for the Central Intelligence Agency after a successful corporate career. His CIA memoir *CLASS II* was published by Penguin Putnam and remains # 2 on the CIA's list of recommended reading for new employees. His two other nonfiction books on intelligence, *HYPERFORMANCE* and *PRIOR TO THE SNAP*, are popular with military and academic readers. He has appeared on Fox News and TraderNation, and quoted in The USA Today and The Wall Street Journal. He resides in St Petersburg, Florida.

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