An Initial Look at the Utility of Social Media as a Foreign Policy Tool

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In 2009 a handful of countries were rocked by protests. While not unusual, a new phenomenon was observed when dissidents took to the streets in Honduras, Moldova, China, and Iran of that year. For the first time, social media platforms were being used by people to organize protests and communicate their grievances with the outside world. The interaction between social unrest and social media garnered even more attention as protests spread across Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and other Arab countries in 2011. That people around the world could watch these events unfolding in real time was not new, cable and satellite television has made this possible for decades. This was different. The fact that they could participate by "friending" or "following" protestors caught the popular imagination. People around the world sat glued to their Twitter feeds as they watched a medium they used primarily for sharing pictures of cats become a vehicle for the mobilization of people power.

In Washington, the important role of social media in facilitating the Arab revolutions of 2011 did not go unnoticed. Indeed, many pundits and policymakers were caught up in the same tide of excitement. In several countries, the media proclaimed the emergence of the "Twitter Revolution" and lauded the Facebook Youth of Tahrir Square. It was clear that social media had a significant role in these movements, though many questions remained regarding the nature of that role. Nevertheless, the prominence of social media platforms and their clear utility encouraged many in the US government to explore its possible use as a tool of foreign policy. Those efforts that were already underway similarly received a significant boost in funding and encouragement.

There is no doubt that the United States government has begun to leverage social media as tool of foreign policy. Today there are a great number of offices across the interagency using social media platforms for diplomatic, military, and intelligence purposes that advance US foreign policy interests. Yet the field is both relatively new and changing rapidly. For this reason, CNA has undertaken to examine the use of social media platforms by the US government as a tool of foreign policy. To this end, this paper examines a number of these efforts in order to glean useful lessons. The authors have conducted numerous interviews with social media experts in the US government and have conducted a literature review of relevant US government and

press sources. While this effort is an intial and cursory examination, what follows is a primer of successes and potential pitfalls of using social media as a tool for foreign policy practitioners, policymakers, and those who may see the utility of social media platforms, but have not yet begun to use them in their mission.

What is Social Media?

Facebook, Twitter, blogs and micro-blogs of all kinds – these are some of the most familiar forms of social media. Social media has been defined as a group of internet-based applications that build on ideals and technology that foster collaboration to allow the creation and exchange of user generated content.[1] In short, social media is distinguished by interactivity in the communication between and amongst participants on the web. It challenges the notions of "broadcast" media, which by its very nature only projects communication. In a social media environment, the initial message is only a starting point to prompt reactions, re-tweets, and spin-off conversations. But in its essence, social media as a genre is a medium of communication. As such, any social media platform can be used to either deliver communication or to receive it. As a tool of foreign policy, the US government uses social media platforms to deliver communication with the goal of informing, influencing, and persuading. As a receiver of social media communication, the US government uses these same platforms to listen, watch, observe, and understand.

Social Media in Use

One of the most common ways that the foreign policy establishment has begun to use social media is through the establishment a social media presence, via the creation of Twitter feeds and Facebook pages. Such sites have typically been established to fulfill a public affairs and strategic communications function. The White House (@whitehouse), State Department (@StateDept), Department of Defense (@DeptofDefense), and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (@PentagonPA) have all established Twitter feeds to broadcast messages to the press and the public. Their tweets can be retweeted, allowing the public affairs message to circulate widely. The Twitter platform also allows these accounts to post links to websites for other agencies or organizations or even retweet other posts as appropriate. Facebook offers a different set of options for content, as it allows users to post photos, videos, or statements, rather than only links.

A number of offices are involved in a subset of strategic communications, messaging to counter violent extremism. Two parallel efforts that have received a fair amount of

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[1] Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media," *Business Horizons* (2010), 53, 59-68.

public attention are the State Department's Digital Outreach Team and CENTCOM's Digital Engagement Team.[2] The idea behind each of these efforts is to strategically engage online communities to counter falsehoods and misinformation that fuels extremist ideology. Both teams employ a number of linguists who are native speakers of strategic languages, such as Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu. They both operate openly and identify themselves as part of the US government. Apart from the scope of their missions – the work of CENTCOM's team is limited to countering narratives directly relevant to the military's operations in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, whereas the State Department team is not – the approaches and strategies of the two teams are quite similar.[3]

Across the interagency, a number of entities are also using social media as part of all-source intelligence collection and building situational awareness. There is no denying that social media provides a unique window into understanding the contemporary world. According to one US government official, intelligence reporting lags behind media reporting by hours to days, but media reporting lags behind social media reporting by hours. Just as reports by fax machine and cable news provided unprecedented visibility into the situation in Tiananmen Square as it developed in 1989, tweets on Twitter and posts on Facebook were able to provide yet another level of granularity into developments on the ground in Libya in 2011. In this sense, social media provides tactical level information, which must be analyzed over time to understand the broader picture.

One of the great advantages of social media is the quality of data that it provides. Today there are a variety of tools available to both the government and the private sector for analyzing social media data. Tools for assessing influence and analyzing content, sentiment, trending topics, and social networks are popular and increasingly common in the marketplace. One online service known as Klout promises to assess a person's influence online by analyzing the number of followers, comments, retweets, and likes he or she receives in their social media presence.[4] The problem, of course, is that social media data do not necessarily reflect impact beyond social media, which is why Klout gave famous rated teen pop idol Justin Bieber a higher score than President Barack Obama.[5] While social media analytics continue to improve, there continue to be notable gaps in the usefulness of results.

[2] Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. military goes online to rebut extremists' messages," The New York Times, 17 November 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/world/us-military-goes-online-to-rebut-extremists.html

[3] Philip Seib, "CENTCOM's Digital Engagement Team tries to counter extremists," University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy Blog, 26 Aug 2010. http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/centcoms_digital_engagement_tries_to_counter_extremists/

[4] http://beta.klout.com

[5] Morning Edition, National Public Radio, 16 August 2012. http://www.npr.org/2012/08/16/158911317/the-last-word-in-business. Klout has since changed

The elusive ideal for social media analytics is predictive analysis. The prominence of social media during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt led many, including senior US leaders, to question the readiness of the intelligence community to read the signs of revolution apparent on social media platforms.[6] Yet activists on the ground often expressed doubts about the ability of social media to transform electronic advocacy into real action. In his memoir of the events of 2011, Wael Ghonim, who mobilized many thousands of Egyptians with his "We are All Khalid Said," Facebook page, records his own doubts about the ability of his page to mobilize massive street protests.[7]

Predictive analysis using social media remains as difficult as other forms of predictive analysis. Yet it is tempting to believe that the vast amounts of data made possible online can provide that crystal ball. Courtesy of a *New York Times* article, a widely cited example of the art of the possible was exemplified by Target's ability to predict the pregnancy of a teenage girl before her father learned of it.[8] Large companies, such as Target, Wal-Mart, and Sears, often match metrics gathered from social media sources to individual customers to create an individual profile, which can provide more accurate and targeted advertising as well as better metrics.[9] Yet identifying a mother-to-be and predicting the moment of erupting mass unrest are very different challenges. The former relies on the creation of individual profiles, a process that is greatly facilitated by the willful provision of information by customers to the merchants they frequent. These individual profiles then contribute to broader trend analysis. The intelligence community, on the other hand, does not have the need, desire, or resources to develop individual profiles, let alone the legal authority or the complicity of the individuals in question, who willingly provide such data to the merchants they frequent. Rather than personal data, other context such as reporting through traditional media and diplomatic cables can help predict the emergence of events that impact the national security of the United States. As one observer noted, "Tunisians took to the streets due to decades of frustration, not in reaction to a WikiLeaks cable, a denial-of-service attack, or a Facebook update."[10]

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its algorithm to ensure that the President has the highest influence score, followed closely by pop stars Lady Gaga and Rihanna.

[6] Josh Gerstein, "Dianne Feinstein: U.S. intel missed warnings in Egypt," *Politico*, 16 February 2011. Available at: http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0211/49686.html.

[7] Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater Than the People in Power : A Memoir*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012)

[8] Charles Duhigg, "How companies learn your secrets," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shopping-habits.html

[9] Brandon Gutman, "Sears explains its success In content marketing," *Forbes*, 18 May 2012. http://www.forbes.com/sites/marketshare/2012/05/18/sears-explains-their-success-in-content-marketing/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=statusnet

[10] Ethan Zuckerman, "The First Twitter Revolution?," Foreign Policy, January 14, 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/14/the_first_twitter_revolution

In short, social media is only one source among many, but it is not the lynchpin of open source analysis. Social media reporting must be analyzed in the context of information gathered from other sources. It accompanies reporting provided by traditional media sources, such as television, radio, and newspapers. Alone, social media lacks the broader context to frame the massive amount of data that the medium generates. In addition, the anonymity provided by the internet often makes it difficult to identify sources on social media sites. The US intelligence community understands these caveats and have worked through many of the difficulties of methodology and collection that are inherent in the field of social media. Today, the Open Source Center studies social media platforms as a source, just as it studies newspapers and television and radio broadcasts.

Considerations for using social media

Our review of the literature and interviews has identified a number of lessons that can be useful to foreign policy policymakers and practitioners who may be exploring the use of social media.

- **Do not over-emphasize metrics.** Despite the abundance of data available via social media platforms, it remains difficult to directly correlate efforts to influence with success. As noted above, the analysis of social media data remains a developing field and many of the metrics of effectiveness remain simple. Marketing experts in the private sector are still struggling with ways to measure return on investment in social media. In industry, the basic methods of measuring the success of social media efforts include "unique visitors, time spent, pages/visit, follower counts, social engagements and sentiment."[11] This means, essentially, that while activity can be quantified, it remains difficult to quantify effectiveness. Therefore, policymakers should not overemphasize the necessity for measuring success. Return on investment in social media for communication and analysis will remain difficult to quantify. According to an industry analyst on National Public Radio, among large corporations "there's still been some skepticism as to what the true value of these social platforms can be."[12]

- **Shop smart, as there are many imperfect products available.** A number of sources noted the difficulties working with contractors for social media analysis. One office director noted that her unit, which focuses on media analysis for public affairs, had tested several commercial products that

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[11] Brandon Gutman, "GE, General Mills And Sears Explain Their Success In Content Marketing (Part 2)," *Forbes*, 17 May 2012. http://www.forbes.com/sites/marketshare/2012/05/17/ge-general-mills-and-sears-explain-their-success-in-content-marketing-part-2/?ss=cmo-network

[12] StellaService CEO Jordy Leiser as quoted in Alex Schmidt, "Twitter Lets Customers Skip Recordings, And Make Choices," NPR, 15 August 2012. Available at: http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2012/08/15/158781405/twitter-lets-customers-skip-recordings-and-make-choices.

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boasted capabilities to search social media sites for trending topics. Either these off-the-shelf products did not adequately deliver the advertised service, or the results they produced required a level of additional filtering that rendered the product no more useful than manually scanning feeds. Another source reported that contractors he has engaged have insisted on delivering analysis, while keeping the methodology proprietary. Without the ability to study and understand the methodology, however, he found that the analysis becomes suspect.

- **Don't fake it.** Guidelines produced for the business and marketing emphasize that subterfuge should be avoided, since the risk of generating a counter-productive result outweighs the potential gains. Efforts to influence public opinion by creating false identities are very likely to be discovered because many users of social media are savvy users of technology. A best case scenario employing this tactic of deception results in adding one supportive voice to the conversation, whereas failure runs the risk of painting the user as foolish, unprofessional, desperate. Though the allegation was denied, it appears that fast food chain Chick-fil-A was recently caught in just such an embarrassing situation, having created a false identity to attempt to alter the course of a discussion about the company's politics.[13] Similarly, a US government social media analyst reported that Syrian Twitter users have proven to be quick to identify impostors and label them as *shabiha*, or loyalist thugs.

- **The challenge is in coordinating resources, not clearances.** The strength of social media is the ability to generate content and communicate collaboratively across networks. It is counter-intuitive to the medium to expect coordination to occur at any singular node in the government bureaucracy. While government public affairs bureaus have been slowly learning to devolve responsibility in recent years, any tendency to subject social media engagement to a lengthy clearance process should be avoided. Where coordination is needed is in the allocation of resources. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, a great deal of money was allocated to enable and enhance the social media efforts of the US government. As the government enters a period of austerity, resources will have to be consolidated and unnecessary redundant programs and contracts will be revisited. As such, it is essential for social media users across the interagency to leverage existing social media resources, such as those generated by the Open Source Center and Department of State, for example.

- **Social Media is not always the answer.** There is no denying that social media has become an important communication tool and data source for the foreign policy establishment. Yet, users in the US government must not see social media as applicable to every situation. For foreign policy

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[13] Casey Chan, "Did Chick-fil-A Pretend to Be a Teenage Girl on Facebook?," Gizmodo, 25 July 2012. http://gizmodo.com/5928926/chick+fil+a-got-caught-pretending-to-be-a-fake-teenage-girl-on-facebook

professionals, especially, it is important to remember that social media platforms still do not reach most citizens of the world. Television and radio remain the dominant forms of mass communication worldwide. The Broadcasting Board of Governors, a public diplomacy agency that prioritizes reach and audience access, has established a goal of expanding its audience by 50 million by 2016, but expects that over 80 percent of those will be reached through radio, television, and other traditional, non-digital media.[14] When considering the implementation of a social media plan, the target audience and/or desired information must be considered, as must the broader context of the social media activity.

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[14] CNA interview with Broadcasting Board of Governors Official, 2012.