

Social Media as a Tool for Irregular Warfare

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid is a buzzword used lately in academia. Social media and new media technologies have brought the term into the focus of media studies. Many individuals and groups today have used social media as a tool for hybrid warfare. Because of the fake and manipulative content found in social media accounts, more fights have ensued among different groups in society. Some groups, such as ISIS, have also used the platform for organizing terrorist activities. The current research aims to evaluate social media as a tool for irregular warfare. It is generally because of the use of recent online media to trigger war and provide strategic advantages to different people in society. There is, therefore, a need to address the problems related to using social media as a source of irregular warfare since any individual or organization can use this open platform. The study uses a wide range of literature from different academic articles. The proposed method is to apply mixed research to elaborate on the topic. The study selected participants by using purposive and stratified random sampling to provide conclusive findings. It considered 50 participants who provided sufficient information to support the research. The data collection instruments used were surveys, which were divided into various parts. The qualitative data was summarized and then further organized according to particular themes. It was later analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The study found that most organizations and terrorist groups have used social media as a tool for irregular warfare in society by manipulating other people and creating their influence.

Keywords: *Social Media, Media Technologies, Hybrid Warfare*

Social Media as a Tool for Irregular Warfare

Social media has shaped perceptions and redesigned societies in different ways. It has improved interactions across the world, making communication to be cheap and fast. However, the use of social media has attracted the attention of different groups, who use the platform to perpetrate crime. Thus, many individuals are using social media sites as a tool to organize and execute irregular warfare. The trade warfare between the United States and China caused a battlefield in social media because of information manipulation (Huhtinen, Kotilainen, Särmä, & Streng, 2019). It was all because of the fake and manipulative content found in social media accounts. That is why more fights have ensued among different groups in society. Some groups also use social media as a tool for organizing illegal operations. The social media networks and mobile technologies provide a redundant channel used to convey orders and instructions between different people and groups in society.

The current research aims to evaluate social media as a tool for irregular warfare. ISIS is one of the terrorist groups that have used such platforms to organize and execute attacks in different parts of the world. Social media has integrated other tools to enhance users' experiences, and many groups like ISIS can use it to recruit and mobilize people. In the past, people used social media as a tool for conveying fake news. The aim was to deter the morale and change the direction of people in society. Another use of this platform was to trigger war and provide strategic advantages to different people. This situation begs a need to address the problems related to using social media as a source of irregular warfare since any organization can use this open platform. The project will include a review of the literature, evaluation of the methodology, conclusions, and expected findings in the research.

Literature Review

Social Media and Irregular Warfare

The information age has revolutionized people's way of life. The development of information and communication technology and the invention of computers, the internet, and mobile devices have transformed how people communicate in contemporary society. The widespread use of social media has altered the landscape through unforeseen tactics of waging unconventional warfare (Larson, Eaton, Nichiporuk, & Szayna, 2009). Besides, it is necessary to comprehend the methods used to target and lure youths through social media. Failure to achieve this goal will limit the authorities' capacity to curb the radicalization of young people that could harm society (Duggan, 2015). Authorities need to study and understand trends in social media to combat irregular wars.

The information presented in this literature review is a collection from a series of relevant articles that address the connection between social media and unconventional warfare. Irregular warfare is a non-physical fight that does not involve the usual weapons. Irregular warfare entails preparation to defeat conventional forces and tools by undermining their equipment or plans (Larson et al., 2009). The findings reveal that social media has become a vital tool that fuels irregular warfare. Social media has sites and applications accessible via internet-enabled devices. They are designed to facilitate communication using modern technology. The essence of developing social networking sites was to allow people to create and share content with their family and friends. With millions of active users across different social networking sites, online popularity will continue to increase, especially among young people (Mayfield, 2008). On the other hand, the article views irregular warfare as a fight that is used to gain legitimacy among members of a particular population, such as a nation or state. It is a war that strives to win the confidence of a governed community and convince them to support insurgency against authorities such as the government (Lindsey, 2013). Thus, it is a unique struggle for legitimacy.

The Age of Social Media

Mayfield (2008) ascertains that social media has become a central part of present-day society. The modern-day community heavily relies on the use of mobile devices, computers, and the internet to exchange information. Traditionally, some sites such as Facebook would inform friends and family about one's memorable moments. However, today, it has become a vital source of information. Many youths spend considerable amounts of time behind their computers and smartphones to get updates about the events across the world. Therefore, it is relatively easy for people with malicious agendas to target and communicate with youths via online platforms.

The purpose of social media has rapidly evolved over the years. In an age where a large percentage of the population has access to mobile phones and the internet, the role of networking sites has changed drastically. Today, individuals use social media to form social movements that advocate for specific issues (Erbschloe, 2017). The methods of interaction on online platforms are changing as people are now using blogs, videos, and social networking sites to rally the masses to social action. The popularity of social media has created a continuum for advancing irregular warfare.

The Unpreparedness of Security Forces and Authorities

Based on the discussions and findings presented by authors in the various articles, it is apparent that the government authorities and security teams did not anticipate the change in the usage of social media. Presently, security forces and politicians use social networking sites for political and social activism. However, many of them overlook its place in facilitating resistance and insurgency to the levels witnessed in the Arab Spring and Hong Kong protests (Petry, 2015). In these protests, the departments in charge of combating irregular warfare did not anticipate the extent to which social media could influence public opinion through online shared details. By underestimating the power of social networking sites, the authorities failed to adequately prepare for the unconventional tactics used to overpower and outmaneuver traditional methods of quelling resistance (Knapp Jr, 2012). As a result, the security forces could not manage to deploy effective countermeasures on time as they were dealing with a major movement, yet they were inadequately prepared.

Eidman and Green (2014) assert that social media is a new and complex phenomenon that contributes to the complexity of irregular warfare. One of the areas that the authorities remain grossly underprepared is curtailing the rapid spread of false information. In a globalized and interconnected society, individuals and groups can generate fake news quickly (Eidman & Green, 2014). Insurgents can make and modify their plans instantly as the authorities pursue meaningless leads and clues (Kiras, 2007). Thus, mitigating social media-fueled conflicts leads to events like the Arab Spring.

Patterns in Social Media Use and Irregular Warfare

According to Lee and Johnson (2014), it is challenging to address and resolve conflict in a region where the military, political, and social movements are involved. The reviewed article reveals the characteristics that manifest in forms of armed conflict that thrive on irregular warfare. The conflict's motives stem from nationalism or extremism. The researchers' analysis of the use of social networking sites in advancing unconventional warfare reveals that one of the main steps is recruiting followers. It is a process that denotes the indoctrination that youths go through in a bid to convince them to subscribe to the ideologies of a particular group (Lindsey, 2013). It is a pattern that replicates itself across the globe. The articles reveal that social media offers a convenient way to gain access to young people who need a purpose.

The authors have delved into the ability of insurrectionaries to exploit social media as a strategizing tool. One of the groups mentioned in the articles is the militia members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Petry, 2015). The group relies on social media to advance its ideologies and spread propaganda to the rest of the state. The dissemination of misleading information allows them to influence and control what the public hears and believes (Petry, 2015). Based on the articles, it is clear that the use of media is a critical tool for garnering support and illegitimacy.

Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the strengths of the research conducted by various researchers is the acknowledgment of the power of social media. Most of the texts begin by recognizing that the landscape has changed; thus, security officers need to implement better strategies. One of the ways through which it has changed the scene is its ability to give compelling narratives to millions of people across the region (Erbschloe, 2017). Stories, images, and videos shared via social media reach a broad audience. They can influence the way people think and perceive conditions in their countries, depending on how they are tailored. Thus, the articles recognize online media as a critical tool for social and political activism, which can expose a country to turmoil (Burnore, 2013). Hence, the authorities should develop strategies that will counter the use of social networking sites as a breeding ground for irregular warfare.

The reviewed articles fail to examine the related patterns in irregular warfare. Some elements have enabled militants to shift to the use of social media for strategizing purposes (Kiras, 2007). Traditionally, people used these networking sites for social purposes such as communication and interacting with friends. However, over time the militant organizations have embraced the use of social media for research. Security groups need to examine and discover the elements that make the targeted public vulnerable to the ideas spread through the sites (Duncan, 2013). Understanding these issues can help create a framework for addressing the problem.

Part of the problem arises when some groups use social for terrorism. According to Hassan (2018), social media played an essential role in escalating terrorism in Pakistan. Extremist groups use around 2% of social media accounts to spread propaganda. Most of the people in Pakistan have no desire to know reports centered on terrorism. Most of them prefer positive stories, but the extremist groups have intensified the rate of using social media accounts to recruit new adherents in society.

Terrorist groups use several means to recruit through social media. Awan (2017) notes that ISIS was using online messages, slick videos, and applications to spread hate and create a new generation of cyberbullies. ISIS uses the platform to communicate its propaganda to people around the world. It recruits its members through Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Online sites have been used to stream violent online videos that are carefully edited to provide the intended lessons to the viewers.

A similar study conducted by Prier (2017) shows how different individuals have been using social media as a tool for modern information warfare in society. Online bloggers use the platform to create more propaganda, build social networks, share information, and spread fake news to different people. For example, Russians have used the platform to persuade and coerce new members into social movements (Prier, 2017). Thus, online media has been a non-state actor that yields adverse influence on people by encouraging attacks.

Methodology

Research Design

The proposed method is to apply mixed research to elaborate on how social media has been used as a breeding ground for irregular warfare. The study also adopted a descriptive design to explore the qualitative and quantitative data. The researchers used the method to obtain facts and evaluate the current state of changes in relationships. In the present study, descriptive research ascertains normal and typical conditions of the use of social media as a tool for irregular warfare. The design was valid as the study used survey tools to collect information from participants.

Target Population and Sampling Procedures

The study selected participants by using purposive sampling and stratified random sampling to provide conclusive findings. The use of this method will be essential because it allows most researchers to handle cases with the required information on irregular warfare on social media platforms. The researchers have handpicked various instances of the subjects because they are informative, and they offer sufficient information about social media use and the integration of irregular warfare. Moreover, the sample population considered in the current research was subjected to a snowballing sampling with few participants. As a result, the participants increased as the researchers extracted new contacts from the people. The study considered a total number of 50 people who provided sufficient information to support the research.

Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments used in the study included surveys, which consisted of different sections. The first part consisted of education levels that covered the user's background information. There was a second section with questions on social media use as a breeding ground used by most organizations to create irregular warfare among people. The survey tool consisted of ten questions administered to the people through the face-to-face approach after taking their approval. The researchers also coordinated the interviews through face-to-face communication. The questions asked about ways in which participants used social media as a source of warfare. The conversations used in the current study were useful, as they provided a straightforward approach that answers the main research problem using five questions. The data collection tools used in the study are reliable, as they offered sufficient information relevant to the research questions and the issue to be addressed. They explain about social media and the ways irregular warfare has erupted, thereby increasing more pressure.

Data Collection Procedures

Before embarking in the study, the researchers required a permit. After taking the license from the authorities, the team administered the surveys and interviews with the respondents. They recorded the findings and stored them in spreadsheets for statistical calculations. The calculations included percentages and frequencies of the collected details.

Data Analysis

The information collected was analyzed using graphs and tables. The qualitative data from different approaches such as questionnaires, open ended surveys was summarized and then further organized according to particular themes. It was then analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The SPSS outputs assist the researchers in answering questions on the influence of social media on irregular warfare.

Conclusion and Expectations

The findings expected in the current research should support social media as a factor used as a source of modern warfare. The conclusions arrived also seconded the use of social media as a tool to create chaos among individuals. The higher percentage of individuals responded that social media was a threat to individual security. From the findings, few people reported cases of molestation. The results from the qualitative data also showed that social media escalated conflicts between individuals in society. Most of the respondents believed that social networking tools were essential in coordinating cyber-attacks. The findings of the research are in line with Hassan (2018) and Prier (2017) studies, which portrayed social media as a source of terror. Besides, the study outcomes supported Lee and Johnson (2014) and Lindsey (2013) views on the role of social media in cyberwarfare by recruiting young people. Cyberwarfare has been increasing, with high rates of registration being conducted on social networks.

The findings of this study also supported Larson et al. (2009) and Erbschloe (2017) studies, which showed that online media provided a platform to create social movements. Most of these movements start online and have far-reaching impacts on society. The destructive nature of the fake news spreading using social media limits the trust accorded to most social media platforms. The findings of the research proved that social media is a useful tool as it has supported more cybercrimes by using integrative tools to enhance word searching. The information posted online thrill many people. Most social media crimes start with hacking experiences and sharing information with other people. The social warfare and political movements created in the social media accounts have grown because of lower measures put in place by the authorities on the networks.

There are various sources of warfare among individuals in online media. With the escalation of unmanageable conflicts in social media, most groups have used the site as a platform to expose their propaganda on political issues. The findings of the research show that various strategies have been used to prevent social media from being a source of conflict among individuals. The current approaches involve providing accurate information, but with an increased number of registered people, there is a need to formulate better strategies to prevent irregular warfare.

Social media has revolutionized communication in modern-day society. People no more have to wait for days before they can relay information from one end of the world and get feedback from the other. It has exposed the human population to individuals with different motives by making the world a global village. A literature review on the topic of social media and irregular warfare reveals that militants target and involve the young people in their war against authorities. They also use social networking sites to manipulate the public through false and doctored news reports that encourage people to act and rise against systems in society collectively. Thus, through misinformation and spreading of radical ideologies, revolutionaries use social media to dupe and outmaneuver security agencies.

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