

Veritas News Exclusive

Nov 12 2010

Psychological Warfare in the Social Media Era: Winning Hearts and Minds through Facebook and Twitter?

by

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In any military operation there are two ways to defeat the enemy. Both are firmly centred on breaking the enemy's source of strength for battle. One is ending the ability to fight and the other is breaking the will to fight.

This has remained unchanged since the dawn of warfare.

The first way is to use brute military force to crush the opposing nation to such a large degree that they are incapable of continuing forth with battle. This typically involves destroying an enemy's military forces, assets and infrastructure. This is most easily accomplished through shock and awe and overwhelming firepower. This is a favourite tactic of the U.S. military but one that doesn't work particularly well in an insurgent war (as OEF and Vietnam have proved).

The second way to defeat a recognized enemy is to end their will to fight. In this form of warfare it is possible to get an ***enemy to concede defeat or acquiesce to demands without firing a single bullet.*** This type of warfare uses much more sophisticated methods than pure brute force but can be every bit as effective.

There are several options to break an enemy's will to fight and with the advent of the global economy and more importantly the internet age the weapons in this battle are much less obvious than machine guns or tanks. ***Economics has become a regular weapon in the scope of modern warfare and a way that stronger nations influence weaker ones to bend to their will.*** Using food supplies, control of global trade, and sanctions are tools that the United States commonly uses against known enemies ranging from Cuba, to North Korea, to Iran.

Controlling the message of global media is a second powerful and growing way to break or influence an enemy's will to fight. This strategy differs greatly from using economic methods as it aims to fundamentally change an enemy's mindset rather than starve or strangle them into financial submission. ***Using media sources is nothing new*** but again the tactics and tools are changing fast as we have moved from newspapers to radio to television and finally to the internet.

In WWII pamphlets were dropped out of airplanes on population centres as a form of propaganda to shake enemy confidence in its leadership and ideology. In the Cold War radio and television signals were pushed into the Eastern Block and its Satellites to promote pro-western ideas and lifestyle. **MTV may have been as important and as effective as any other single source** in getting adversarial nations to become believers in the American way of life and to question communism. This type of warfare, branded psychological warfare (PSYOPS) attempts to stir internal strife and destabilize enemy leadership by changing the ideology of the masses therefore converting the enemy into an ally.

PSYOPS have met with varying levels of success and have even been used against the United States in conflicts like Vietnam by the Viet Cong who used loud speakers with unpleasant messages in English in an effort to demoralize American troops. Now with the advent of the internet [Jihadist groups are taking to the web](#) to promote their ideas, recruit new members, and to demonize the West.

Social media is the next evolutionary step of social interaction via the internet medium and its reach is far beyond anything pamphlet drops and rouge radio and television broadcasts could have ever hoped for. **Facebook** alone has over 500 million members (roughly 1/12th of the entire world's population). And the popularity of similar sites like **Twitter** is rapidly growing as well. **These sites are also wildly popular with the youth, which is the target demographic in PSYOPS** to create revolution, rebellion, and strife. Changing attitudes within the youth of a nation will ultimately shape the ideological trajectory of the nation as those youth eventually take leadership positions in the future.

In the Middle East and the Islamic world the use of social media and devices like Blackberry and iPhone that are specifically designed for this purpose is rapidly growing. [Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recently have been pushing back](#) as they know that rapid and unfiltered information sharing is a major threat to their traditions, way of life, and ultimately their regimes. Harnessing and controlling messages distributed via the internet and social media will be a next big battleground to win the heart and minds of the world's masses regardless of who is the enemy of the day. The question of which nations will control and push out the message most effectively will become increasingly important. One thing is clear; **whoever controls the message controls the masses**. And who ever controls the masses will have the ability to win future wars.