Contested Territory: Social Media and the Battle for Hearts and Minds

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Abstract:

Throughout history, military forces around the world have faced a similar challenge—garnering civilian support for their activities. Militaries are cognisant that their potency rests not only on their offensive capability, but also on the resolute backing of the entire population. Consequently, militaries are compelled to actively secure the wider public's commitment to defence. This is a vital task even for the world's most powerful military, the United States. Singapore is no exception. It is likely that the formulation of Total Defence as a security philosophy for Singapore was inspired by earlier models such as Switzerland's 'General Defence' and Austria's 'Comprehensive National Defence'. Psychological defence is one of the five pillars of Total Defence. The foundation for this robust pillar of psychological defence has been continual engagement with the populace and the media's impact on fostering commitment to defence is most critical. Singapore's defence strategy that e ncompasses c ultivating a national consensus has come under mounting pressure in recent years, with media consumption patterns shifting from the mainstream mass media to online social media. The author concludes that in the long run, it is timely to open up to public dialogue and deeper personal engagement, as in the contest for hearts and minds, a tight-fisted regulation of social media may yet win the battle but lose the war.

Keywords: *National Consensus, Social Media, Commitment to Defence, Continual Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The age-old challenge for militaries—engaging the people and instilling the will to fight

Military forces around the world have faced a similar challenge throughout history—garnering civilian support for their activities. Militaries are cognisant that their potency rests not only on their offensive capability, but also on the resolute backing of the entire population. Sun Tzu, the classical military theorist, observed that "[he] whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious."[1] A united community provides for a legitimacy of purpose and lends emotional support and genuine physical assistance for troops. Therein lies the importance of engagement.

Consequently, militaries are compelled to actively secure the wider public's commitment to defence. This is a vital task even for the world's most powerful

military. Admiral Mike Mullen, then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated at a conference in 2011 that the United States military "[could not] afford to be out of touch with [the people...] we cannot survive without their support—across the board."[2]

Singapore's approach to engagement

Singapore is no exception. Engagement was the impetus for the introduction of the Total Defence construct in 1984. Mr. Goh Chok Tong, then Minister for Defence, announced unequivocally that the "SAF wants to strengthen its ties with you."[3] In fact, his speech simultaneously marked the launch of the SAF Story exhibition at various community centres nationwide. This was aimed precisely at deepening engagement with the Singaporean public.

The formulation of Total Defence as a security philosophy for Singapore was likely to have been

inspired by earlier models such as Switzerland's 'General Defense' (1973)[4] and Austria's 'Comprehensive National Defense' (1975).[5] 'Total Defence' advanced two main ideas: (i) defence as everyone's responsibility—involving all; and (ii) defence as an ongoing, perpetual concern, from peacetime to war. It rested on five pillars: psychological defence, civil defence, social defence, economic defence and military defence (see *Figure 1*). These pillars were concerned with ensuring a collective will to defend the country, protection of civil resources, cohesion between diverse sub-communities, economic growth to sustain defence spending and military might itself.[6]

The pillar of psychological defence is the primary focus of this essay. Psychological defence means that "Singaporeans [who] are united in pride and passion for our country... will stand up to defend what is ours and protect our independence as a nation... whatever the crisis or challenge."[7] This resilience has seen the country through trials as significant as the SARS crisis of 2003 and the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist threat from the mid-1990s.[9]

Yet the foundation for this robust pillar of psychological defence has been continual engagement with the populace. Total Defence activities are a means of reaching out to the Singaporean public, and the Singaporean public having thus been engaged, in turn contribute to Total Defence. Over the years, national unity and commitment to defence have been cultivated through institutions and programmes such as the annual Total Defence Award which recognises employers who demonstrate strong commitment to defence; the SAF-Schools Partnership Programme, which exposes students to defence matters; and the Advisory Council for Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD), which is a body of grassroots leaders and community stakeholders who provide feedback to the Minister for Defence.[10]

Figure 1: The Five Pillars of Total Defence[8]

The restructured Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD)(Main) held its first meeting at SAFRA Toa Payoh on 25th August 2014, chaired by Second Minister for Defence, Mr Chan Chun Sing and supported by Deputy Chairman, Minister of State for Defence, Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman.

THE MEDIA'S PIVOTAL ROLE IN ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

However, it is the media's impact on fostering commitment to defence that is arguably second to none. The mass media's pervading presence is evident in everyday material like television advertisements aimed at recruitment and newspaper reports of successful humanitarian missions. The persistent positive messaging contributes significantly to the collective's pro-defence orientation.

The media's pivotal role in public engagement should be understood in the following manner. Because of our finite capacity for first-hand experience, the media are "our window onto the world, and onto ourselves."[11] They condition our understanding of reality and "shape the process of thought."[12] When the media communicate events, ideas and aspects of culture, they simultaneously influence and persuade.

The expansive outreach of the mass media enables them to shape public opinion by setting the news agenda,[13] framing events in particular ways,[14] and priming audience responses.[15] In essence, the media steer public consciousness. Manuel Castells, the influential communications theorist, even goes so far as to assert that "what does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds."[16]

Consequently, the mass media, which has been the predominant system of communication in the modern era, serves an essential function. They operate under the auspices of political actors to forge consensus within society and, in the case of the military, to foster commitment to defence. This system of communication produces 'a relatively controlled public sphere'[17] as "the ideology of the elite is [constantly] reaffirmed, and counter-ideologies are suppressed."[18]

In Singapore, the government and the mass media have historically been a tightly-knit pair. The government either owns or otherwise indirectly influences the endeavours of the two dominant mass media corporations in Singapore: Mediacorp[19] and Singapore Press Holdings.[20] The Parliament has also passed a set of legislative rules that clearly defines what the media can and cannot do. These include Article 14 of the Singapore Constitution,[21] and various acts of Parliament such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (2002),[22] and the Broadcasting Act (2012).[23]

This close supervision of the mass media is largely due to a political conviction that the survival and success of Singapore is contingent on consensus and a united front. Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was adamant that the media could not follow the liberal Western model of the Fourth Estate and, instead had to be "subordinated to the definition and integrity of the nation."[24] This conviction was forged in the crucible of racial and religious cleavages and remains unchanged today. In fact, the same beliefs were more recently echoed by the Minister for Communications and Information, Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim. He professed that Singapore's media model is "based on forging consensus and facilitating nation-building... [on] information and viewpoints that inform and evaluate, and not disturb and divide."[25]

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THE DISRUPTIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Given the mass media's well-defined role in public engagement and social media, it presents a new media environment that constitutes a

In conjunction with the Ministry of Defence's 2012 NS45 campaign, Jack Neo's film Ah Boys to Men sets to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Singapore's National Service and foster commitment to defence.

contemporary information revolution with their unique characteristics.[26]

Defining social media

Juxtaposed against the mass media, social media is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It is a subset of Internet media, but there are crucial differences. Social media belong to the realm of Web 2.0 and are characterised by connectivity, interactivity and individual expression.[27] While earlier developments such as e-mail and websites may have paved the way for online interaction, social media offers a qualitatively different experience. The ethos of social media is participation and collaboration.[28] Social media users belong to an active community, otherwise known as the 'networked public'.[30] Examples of social media include social networking sites such as Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn; blogs, vlogs and stream-able or downloadable podcasts; community-based websites such as Wikipedia; online forums; and social networking tools such as Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Flickr, Reddit, Digg, del.icio.us and RSS. Ultimately, social media, as their name suggests, is about 'making connections'.[31]

High rates of social media usage in Singapore

From about the turn of the century, social media has been burgeoning in popularity. Today, Singapore is 'one of the most evolved social media markets'.[32] She is ranked 16th out of 138 countries on an index that measured the use of virtual social networks in 2011.[33]
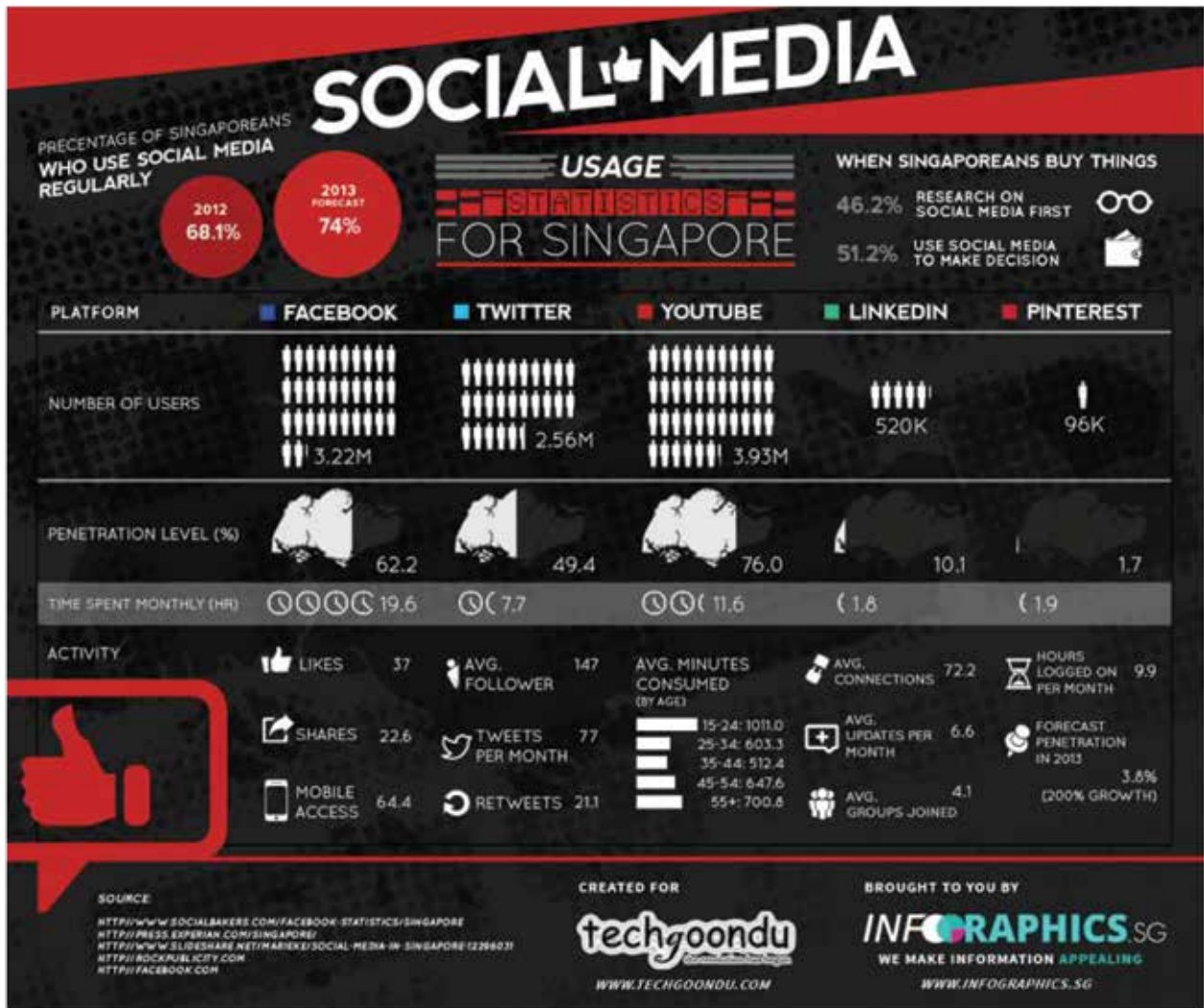

Figure 2: Infographic depicting social media usage in Singapore in 2012 [29]

In 2012, 76% of the 5.2 million strong population watched YouTube videos, while another 62% frequented Facebook and 49% accessed Twitter regularly (see Figure 2).[34] 61% of the digital users in Singapore also visit online forums monthly.[35] Collectively, these users spend twice as much time accessing online media as compared to watching television, or five times as much time as compared to reading newspapers.[36]

This reflects a pertinent shift in media consumption patterns, away from the mainstream mass media and towards online social media.[37] One of the catalysts in supporting this trend is mobile access to internet technologies. Singapore has the highest smartphone penetration per capita in the world and Internet-enabled smartphones facilitate perpetual and ubiquitous connectivity to social media. According to Nichola Rastrick, the managing director of Millward Brown in Singapore, social media "[has] become a functional part of the new Singaporean lifestyle [serving as the platform] where Singaporeans gather news, discuss social issues, arrange social gatherings… create professional networks [...] and decide what to eat, buy and collect."[38]

Social media effects and implications

With the advent of social media, the mass media no longer retain their monopoly over public consciousness. The public sphere is relatively less controlled, as individuals are empowered on two counts: firstly, to speak up and be heard and secondly, to form their own conclusions on the basis of first-hand access to information. This individual empowerment means that social media are often purveyors of alternative, more-personalised accounts, while the mass media typically remain as outlets for mainstream or establishment views. Although it is over-simplistic to conflate them so readily into opposing camps, there is a genuine sense of communicative or journalistic autonomy on social media.[39] This also leads to an unprecedented diversity of information, which individuals can access to broaden their perspectives.

Faced with the plethora of opinions, defence policies will be critically scrutinised like never before, and policymakers will be driven to answer difficult questions that may not have previously arisen.[40] For instance, blog posts such as those by David Boey, criticising the defence establishment for a lack of transparency in accounting for deaths in the SAF, or Gordon Lee, proposing to dispose of National Service (NS) in favour of a larger regular force backed up by a volunteer reserve force, will be increasingly common.[41] This unfettered contest of ideas will inevitably lead to a weakened unity of mindset and the possible dissolution of a fragile national consensus—the implication seemingly being that citizens in this newly-fragmented society will be less willing to face up to national challenges together.

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Yet this dystopia may be more imaginary than realistic. While there is a relative lack of publicly available longitudinal data for meaningful analysis, the data at hand does not support the thesis that national commitment to defence has been compromised. Surveys conducted in 1993 and 1999 by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that survey respondents in the later survey were more likely to agree with the statement that "Singapore is worth defending no matter what is the cost to me" and conversely disagree with the statement that "In the event of war, I will leave Singapore."[42] Even more recently, the independent study commissioned by the Committee to Strengthen National Service in 2013 found that more than 98% of survey respondents agreed with the statements that "NS is necessary for the defence of Singapore" and "NS provides the security needed for Singapore to develop and prosper."[43] These statistics, when taken at face value, indicate that the impact of social media on national unity and commitment to defence is not as damaging as previously imagined.

In actuality, the use of social media can reap positive benefits for the nation-state. The ease of publication on this medium allows individuals to articulate useful critiques and constructive suggestions. On the other hand, the online community can be self-policing, with disparaging and unhelpful posts censured and discouraged by commenting peers. This was evident in the case of the STOMPer who was rebuked by netizens for criticising an NSman for drinking water on the train (Figure 3). Given that these responses were coming from members of the same virtual community, they were considered more authentic than official replies and their voices consequently carried more weight.

As citizens are empowered to participate in online discussions, they will be engaged at a deeper cognitive level than before. Instead of being on the receiving end of information, they can be actively involved in the co-creation of new information. With social media, it is perhaps the case that engagement is enhanced, rather than being undermined.

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON: THE SAF'S FORAY INTO SOCIAL MEDIA

To cater to the changing media consumption patterns, the SAF has tentatively ventured into the field of social media. In 2007, MINDEF introduced N.E.mation!, a digital animation contest for students. This annual competition centres on various Total Defence themes, with viewers voting online to determine the eventual winners.[45] In the more conventional social media space, MINDEF has also established an online presence. Cyberpioneer, the online complement of the Pioneer magazine, is now available on YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter.[46]

Within one year from its launch in 2008, views on the Cyberpioneer YouTube channel increased tenfold from 200,000 to 2 million. Popular CyberpioneerTV video series include *Every Singaporean Son* and special features on elite units such as the Commandos or the Naval Diving Unit. Individual services have also got involved with social media. In 2011, the RSN created a website entitled the *'Sea of Support',* which allowed family and friends to post messages of goodwill and support to navy personnel who had sailed off to serve in the Gulf of Aden.[47]

To regulate the use of social media at the level of the individual, MINDEF and the SAF created a Code of Conduct on Social Media Participation.[48] This Code of Conduct is targeted at in-service personnel and

Figure 3: Post on STOMP criticising an NS personnel and sampled comments.[44]

provides a useful list of 'dos and don'ts' on social media. The guiding principles are summarised accordingly:[49]

1. Be Responsible: be yourself, observe operational security and own what you say.

2. Be Professional: uphold the highest standards of leadership, personal conduct and professionalism, both offline and online.

3. Be Reliable: speak the truth and know what you are saying.

4. Be Respectful: be respectful during online conversations and sensitive to the type of comments you make.

5. Be Receptive: practise deep listening and quality conversations.

6. Be Safe: adjust your social media privacy and security settings to prevent personal data from being compromised.

7. Be Ethical: behave and converse online as you would in a public face-to-face conversation.

This form of genuine engagement will encourage well-meaning social media contributors to provide a constant supply of reasoned, alternative arguments and will further strengthen commitment to defence by making them active stakeholders in policy decisions.

Do note that as it is on social media that individuals gain the liberty to express themselves freely, it is almost naive to assume that this freedom would be so easily and willingly surrendered or curtailed. It is not that the guidelines are not relevant; they are well-intentioned but impossible to administrate. There is no realistic means of enforcing social media regulations, short of archaic throwbacks to hardline censorship via Internet Service Provider (ISP)

blocking or gazetting of websites. Restricting, or being viewed as attempting to restrict, social media activities may ultimately lead to greater discontent and disengagement. The traditional form of top-down control is incompatible with the technical architecture of the medium, which is about lateral connections. Social media, as a democratising phenomenon, need to be more clearly understood to be better utilised.

PROPOSITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the age of social media, the new reality is a plurality of media accounts. Instead of trying to control the conversations on social media, we need to accept and be accustomed to the diversity and variety of opinions. This is perhaps the most significant mindset shift required.

The well-regulated information regime is a thing of the past. The emphasis, henceforth, should shift towards developing new media literacies and critical thinking skills, as well as educating discerning citizens to sift through the subjective 'noise'. An educated, politically aware and technologically empowered citizenry will have the wherewithal and the gumption to critique policies that have long been accepted as sound and immutable. This may be viewed as an advancement of public dialogue and an opportunity to relook policies and their assumptions, rather than as an interminable slide towards populism.

As conversations are allowed to flourish, the diversity of opinions can be leveraged to widen policy considerations and uncover hitherto hidden grievances and other blind spots. New ideas such as the conscription of females and the imposition of a National Defence tax on foreigners can be thoroughly debated even before entering the courts of lawmakers.[50] The desired end-state amidst this flurry of ideas are people who speak up.

As in-service personnel, we should respect the social media ethos and engage as individuals, person-to-person, and not behind a wall of bureaucracy. We should be authentic, sharing "what we believe in [and] not blindly [trumpeting] positive messages."[51]

While engaging on social media, we should follow up with relevant actions in the real world, since that is the object of engagement. This form of genuine engagement will encourage well-meaning social media contributors to provide a constant supply of reasoned, alternative arguments and will further strengthen commitment to defence by making them active stakeholders in policy decisions.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's defence strategy has encompassed cultivating a national consensus that is strong enough to overcome racial, religious and other communal differences. This consensus has come under mounting pressure in recent years, with media consumption patterns shifting from the mainstream mass media to online social media. Yet the jury is out on the impact of social media. What is undisputed is that they have a unique set of characteristics and that there is a new medium of communication. The new reality of information heterogeneity must be embraced and the ethos of participation and collaboration clearly grasped. It is time to open up to public dialogue and deeper personal engagement, as in the contest for hearts and minds, a tight-fisted regulation of social media may yet win the battle but lose the war 🌍

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