

Assessing the Policy Impact of Partial Ban on Social Media Use by the Indian Army

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Abstract

This research paper explores the partial ban on social media platforms by the Indian Army. The research aims to understand the on the reason of the ban on social media platforms, impact of the ban on the social lives of soldiers, whether the ban can be effectively implemented, and how a long-term solution can be achieved from the perspective of the soldiers. The study, within its limited framework, found that the ban has not had a significant impact on soldiers in the present circumstances. However, with the induction of soldiers belonging to the generation habituated to sharing all aspects of their lives on social media, the ban is likely to face problems in the future. The study also examined the recommendations of the soldiers for a long-term solution to the problem of social media usage in the Indian Army. In conclusion, the partial ban on social media platforms by the Indian Army needs to be re-evaluated, and a long-term solution needs to be implemented. The study highlights that the solution lies in educating soldiers on good, safe social behavior, coupled with clear guidelines and punishments for violating them.

Key Words - Social Media, New Media, Policy Study, Perception Analysis, Impact Evaluation, Indian Army.

Introduction

'Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.' - Jim Morrison.

Social media has revolutionized modern social communication and it has become an integral part of the way people interact with each other in the modern world. However, with the increased use of social media a new security threat in the form of inimical elements using these platforms to target military personnel has emerged. In recent years, there has been an alarming increase in the number of honey traps and leaks of classified information caused by the use of social media by military personnel, which has raised serious concerns about security [1]. In the recent past more than a dozen cases, have been detected all over India where military personnel were identified, befriended, tracked, cultivated and forced to reveal classified information to so called friendships which can be traced to social media. Honey traps are a tactic used to target military personnel by luring them into a romantic or sexual relationship with the aim of extracting sensitive information. Social media platforms provide an easy avenue for enemy agents to identify targets and engage with them [2]. These agents often create fake profiles and use them to target military personnel, using the guise of a romantic partner to persuade them to reveal sensitive information.

Leak of classified information is another significant concern arising from the use of social media by military personnel. Social media platforms are designed to encourage the sharing of personal information, and often, military personnel unwittingly post sensitive information

online, putting themselves and their colleagues at risk. [3] In some cases, this information can be leveraged to compromise military operations, endangering lives and jeopardizing national security. As such, it has become increasingly crucial for military personnel to be cautious in their use of social media platforms. They must understand the risks posed by honey traps, and how to identify and avoid them. Additionally, strict protocols must be observed in the handling of sensitive military information, including appropriate measures to avoid leaks through social media. Enhanced training is necessary to educate military personnel on the proper use of social media, its dangers and the potential consequences of lapses in judgment. Ultimately, military organizations must take the necessary steps to safeguard their personnel and confidential information in the face of the emerging threat of social media.

Social Media

Social media is one of the most popular forms of communication in the world today. It has made physical distances irrelevant and made seamless sharing of information and experiences of everyday life a possibility. Social media has led the revolution in the way the world communicates, connecting people from all walks of life around the globe [4]. We can trace the origin of social media to the early 2000s, reasons for social media to become immensely popular are its qualities of being interactive, fast-paced, and having user-friendly features. It puts engagement, accessibility, content sharing ability, and global reach within the ambit of a common man. With the rapid technological advances in smart devices, social media has become more accessible, allowing an increasing number of people to stay connected and updated on events in faraway places [5]. According to various statistics, over three billion people are active on various social media platforms. In addition, social media has become a powerful tool in the fields of education, business, and marketing by bringing in innovative learning for students and increasing reach and scope of businesses to connect with consumers respectively [6]. One can safely conclude that social media has transformed the way people interact with each other, creating a bridge between individuals worldwide.

The use of social media can also be beneficial. It can allow troops to acquire up-to-date knowledge on important issues, help ease governance, and provide convenience. It can be a useful source of knowledge and convenience for troops however it is important to remember the importance of operational security and the severe consequences that can arise from unrestricted use of social media [7]. The above experience substantiates one of the threats associated with unrestricted use of smart devices used to connect to social media. There exist significant perils of connecting to social media on smart devices which can be tracked in real time. In future conflicts, the battles may be largely network centric and conducted through the internet. This means that the internet can become a threat if an adversary acquires access to information of own troops and battle plans by using internet. Cyber-security becomes increasingly important in this case, with operational security being the highest priority. Therefore, armed forces must be aware of the implications of using social media and the potential dangers of operational security being compromised [8].

Social Media and Armed Forces

Social media is increasingly being studied by armed forces around the world seeking to take advantage of its benefits and prepare safety measures to prevent backlashes. A close look at conflicts, in Syria, Lebanon, and Ukraine reveals that social media has been essential in creating public awareness and shaping opinion with a view to influence the outcome of the conflict. From sharing videos of violent protests to providing strategic updates on military operations, social media has become a powerful tool for states to advance tactical and strategic objectives [9]. Social media networking platforms have also been used as an effective propaganda vehicle by governments and organizations. For example, during the ongoing civil war in Syria, pro-government forces used Twitter and other social media platforms to deny reports of attacks on civilians using chemical weapons. This was done to counter reports in western media of massive civilian casualties due to use of chemical agents by government backed militias. Social media became the battlefield environment for each side to shape public opinion and create a favorable image of their side of the conflict. The massive scope provided for seamless transfer of information by social media makes it a valuable asset in any future conflict. Armed forces can be use social media to significantly reduce the number of casualties by, increasing the accuracy and speed of information exchange between soldiers and commanders. Social media can also be used to spread deterrence messages to adversaries. Countries routinely put out information in social media giving out intimation of missile tests, videos of army exercises highlighting new equipment which give potential adversaries a warning of the military capabilities of a nation [10]. Overall, social media has revolutionized the way armed forces operate. Its potential use in future conflicts could be immense, and it can be used in various kind of operations like search and rescue, misinformation ops, psychological ops, propaganda to shape public opinion and advance military strategy. In a peacetime role armed forces can create awareness of their activities like rescue and relief during natural disasters, peace enforcement during breakdown of law and order, protecting the environment by tree plantation, river cleaning and also creation of civil infrastructure like bridges in remote areas. Social media campaigns can also be used to educate soldiers on the perils of careless use of social media and inimical activities by adversaries. In addition to its use as a tool for recruitment and deterrence, social media can also be used by the armed forces to address the grievances of individual soldiers and to increase transparency. For instance, soldiers can be made aware of the avenues available for them to seek help or to highlight an issue, such as a grievance procedure or a medical emergency. Additionally, the armed forces can also use social media as a tool to reach out to veterans and to provide them with the support they need. social media is a powerful tool that the armed forces can use to attract the youth and to promote their message and mission. It can also be used as a platform to address grievances and increase transparency, as well as to spread deterrence messages and educate soldiers on cyber-security threats. In conclusion, it is therefore essential for the armed forces to leverage the power of social media for the benefit of their mission and the soldiers who serve.

As the world moves ever closer to a digital revolution, members of the armed forces are becoming increasingly wary of the ill effects of social media. Social media provides a platform for the spread of disinformation about the actions of armed forces personnel and

false accusations of war crimes. Moreover, malicious actors can target and honey-trap military personnel, gaining access to sensitive information and unique military hardware technology [11]. The loss of secrecy of operational plans and leakage of information of troop locations and the movements of troops are of great concern to the armed forces. Hacking of official and unofficial social media accounts and smart devices is also a major concern. In addition to the potential for spying, the proliferation of fake news and inaccurate information through social media has the potential to misinform and even inflame public opinion. Social media abuse is also becoming an increasingly pressing problem for members of the armed forces. Bullying, harassment, and trolling can have a debilitating effect on military personnel, who are already dealing with the emotional and psychological effects of active duty in warzones. In order to protect its personnel from the dangers of social media, the armed forces have introduced policies which, if breached, can result in disciplinary action or even criminal prosecution. These policies include restrictions on the use of social media for official business, and an obligation to report any offensive material appearing on social media channels [12]. Social media is here to stay, and the armed forces must use it to their advantage rather than shying away from it. In some cases, social media can be a powerful tool for recruitment, for example by showcasing the positive aspects of a life in the forces. Furthermore, the use of social media to combat fake news and propaganda is paramount in this day and age. Awareness of the potential dangers of social media is vital for members of the armed forces. This is one of the reasons why tough restrictions and guidelines surrounding the use of social media have been imposed by various armed forces including India.

Social Media and the Indian Army

The Indian Army is actively involved in guarding an active Western and Eastern border and combating active terrorism, insurgencies in some states of North East India and Jammu and Kashmir respectively. In the twenty first century social media has played an important role in propaganda efforts of all players involved in a conflict. Sharing any information which is false or lacking context could cause a lot of damage before anyone could respond with facts or proper context; this was seen in the case with a Kashmiri youth who was tied up to an army jeep - even before any explanation could be given his story quickly spread throughout the world leading to negative public opinion about India. Additionally, the narrative on the Uri and Balakote strikes played out on social media with propaganda leading to major opposition parties raising questions and asking for proof of the military actions. Recently various videos have surfaced without any authenticity of clashes between Indian and Chinese troops. Such visuals have the potential to inflame public opinion and force the Governments to harden their stances which can set the stage for a destructive conflict [13]. Furthermore, several cases have been reported where military personnel in sensitive appointments were selectively targeted on social media platforms and induced to leak secret information on plans and military technology. On 08 July 2022 the Indian Army banned the use of certain social media applications and asked soldiers to delete their accounts on these platforms [14]. It is therefore necessary to understand the rationale behind this action, its effectiveness and possible long term solution to such problems in a highly digitized world. It is equally necessary to understand the soldier's perception towards the partial ban imposed on social media, effectiveness of the ban, need for careful sharing of critical information on social

media and their thoughts on a long term solution towards this problem. List of apps banned by the Indian Army is given as given below:

Sr. No.	Category of Online Applications	Names of Online Applications
1	Messaging Platforms	WeChat, QQ, Kik, ooVoo, Nimbuzz, Helo, Qzone, ShareChat, Viber, Line, IMO, Snow, To Tok, Hike
2	Video Hosting	TikTok, Likee, Samosa, Kwali.
3	Content Sharing	Share it, Xender, Zapyia.
4	Web Browsers	UC Browser, UC Browser Mini.
5	Video and Live Streaming	LiveMe, BigoLive, Zoom, Fast Films, Vmate, Uplive, Vigo Video.
6	Utility Apps	Cam Scanner, Beauty Plus, True Caller
7	Gaming Apps	PUBG, NONO Live, Clash of Kings, All Tencent, Mobile Legends
8	E-Commerce	Club Factory, AliExpress, Chinabrands, Gearbest, Banggood, MiniInTheBox, Tiny Deal, Dhhgate, LightInTheBox, DX, Eric Dress, Zaful, Tbdress, Modility, Rosegal, Shein, Romwe
9	Dating Apps	Tinder, TrulyMadly, Happn, Aisle, Coffee Meets, Bagel, Woo, OkCupid, Hinge, Badoo, Azar, Bumble, Tantan, Elite Sinles, Tagged, Couch Surfing
10	Antivirus	360 Security.
11	Networking	Facebook, Baidu, Instagram, Ello, SnapChat
12	News Apps	Daily Hunt, News Dog
13	Online Book Reading Apps	Pratilipi
14	Health Apps	Heal of Y
15	Lifestyle Apps	POPXO
16	Knowledge Apps	Vokal
17	Music Apps	Hungama, Songs.pk
18	Blogging/Micro Blogging	Yelp, Tumblr, Reddit, FriendsFeed, Private Blogs

TABLE 1: LIST OF BANNED SOCIAL MEDIA APPS BY INDIAN ARMY.

Social media has emerged as a powerful force in shaping public opinion in today's world. From its humble beginnings as a platform for connecting friends and family, social media has

grown to become a key tool for communication, marketing, and influence. The birth of social media can be traced back to the early 2000s, with the launch of platforms such as MySpace. However, it was the rise of Facebook and Twitter in the mid-2000s that truly marked the beginning of the social media revolution.

Problem Statement

The research aims to understand the perception of the Indian Army soldiers on the reason behind the ban on some social media platforms, impact of the ban on their social lives, their thoughts on whether the ban can be effectively implemented, and what are the steps needed to be implemented for a long-term solution to be achieved.

Description: Soldiers often live in isolation and in remote areas, but social media is an important tool that can provide the solace of being in touch with their loved ones. The pleasures of a simple video call to stay connected to your loved ones can only be enjoyed and appreciated by those who are not fortunate enough to see them in person. This will certainly have an impact on the social lives of people who spend most of their time away from their families. Thus a ban on some of the social media platforms will have some effect on the soldiers and thus it is important to understand their perception on reasons that led to the ban. It is very difficult to judge the effectiveness of the ban on social media by Indian Army. In this age of cheap smart devices and cheap mobile data effective implementation of the ban is a herculean task. The careless use of social media by soldiers can pose a significant risk to national security if not managed properly. The current social media ban cannot be a permanent solution but only a stop gap solution till a clear policy is laid down. The Army needs to leverage such a powerful communication medium rather than ignoring it. Success of the ban will only be possible if the time interval is used innovatively to come up with a clear dynamic policy giving out a clear criterion of Do's and Don'ts on social media. SOPs need to be formulated on how implementation of the ban will be supervised for effectiveness.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the present study is to conduct a holistic study of the reasons behind the ban on certain social media applications by the Indian Army, for its personnel. The study seeks to assess the impact of the ban on soldiers, effectiveness of the ban in achieving its aim and propose steps on a long term solution to this complex problem in an increasingly digitally connected world. The study accounts to following set of objectives:

- (a) To study the armed forces personnel's perception of the rationale behind the partial ban on social media applications by the Indian Army.
- (b) To examine the impact of the partial social media ban on soldiers.
- (c) To study the effectiveness of the ban on social media exposure of Indian Army soldiers.

Hypothesis

- H1: The Indian Army's decision to ban certain social media platforms will cause mixed reactions among its soldiers. However, many will be in favor of the ban, and will be optimistic about the potential benefits of this ban. A major reason for this

reaction is that most soldiers who joined the army prior to 2010 are not habituated to social media and still associate it with entertainment.

- H2: The effectiveness of the ban will also be limited. Though Facebook and Instagram are banned there is no laid down protocol to strictly enforce the ban other than checking mobiles of soldiers. Many can simply get over the ban by creating new accounts under different identities on these banned platforms using new mobile numbers. Also there are no restrictions on family members having accounts on these banned social media platforms.
- H3: The impact of the ban is limited due to the fact that the major communication platform such WhatsApp has not been banned. Furthermore, entertainment platforms such as YouTube remain available, thereby leaving an avenue for soldiers to stay connected.
- H4: The careless use of social media by soldiers can pose a significant risk to national security if not managed properly. The current social media ban cannot be a permanent solution. At best it is a stop gap solution till a clear policy is laid down. The Army needs to leverage such a powerful communication medium rather than ignoring it.

Literature Review

Review of literature is essential for any research. It helps to narrow down to research that helps the study, and to establish a relationship or pattern among the variables. It is difficult to make a precise clear statement before the literature is reviewed. For example, in the book “Social Media and The Armed Forces” by Brigadier Deepak Malhotra (2016) does a wonderful job in providing a holistic study of social media history, features and trends [2]. He also analyses use of social media by state and non-state actors for their aims especially in the Indian context. Guidelines for use of social media for armed forces personnel from US, UK and China have also found a mention in his book. The review of other literature available on the subject of Social Media and its impact on Armed forces reveals the focus has mainly been on how the digital space has become equally important as the physical battlefield. In a clash between two nation states it is equally important to set the narrative to own advantage which can be done by using social media.

In the article "Social Media and Information Operations in the 21st Century" Nicholas Shallcross'(2017)examines the modern threat landscape between countries, proto-governments, states, non-state actors, and super-empowered individuals [3]. The population is now a decisive battleground in these battles, with many of the most significant clashes taking place on the multi-faceted Internet. Nations have come to understand this potential power and have used it to great effect. Maria H, Eva-Karin O and Charlotte W (2016) found that the EU Armed Forces embrace social media as an opportunity more than they emphasize the risks. Rupinder Kaur Mangat's (2018) dissertation on "Tweeting Strategy: Military Social Media Use as Strategic Communication" focused on the Canadian Armed Forces and its use of social media as a form of strategic communication. The study concluded that armed forces couldn't make full use of social media as they had to appear 'apolitical' and hence couldn't offer their own comments on ongoing national issues other than echoing the Government's stand. Sandeep Dixit's (2015) article in the Tribune titled “Why Social Media Is Army's New Front” on reported that the Indian Army has a greater grasp of the power of social media

now and has formed the Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADGPI) under the Military Intelligence branch to harness the power of social media to show the public the work the Army is doing during its peacetime role [5]. In 18 months, the page had gained an impressive 21 lakh followers, due to rare photos from the 1971 war with Pakistan and their 'Great Battle Series'. AnshumanMainkar's (2018) article in the India Foundation Journal titled "The Indian Armed Forces on Social Media: Reimagining the Narrative" has a contrary view and discussed how the Indian Army, Indian Air Force, and Indian Navy have social media channels largely highlighting promotional materials, inputs about visits, exercises, appointments, community assistance projects, and trivia about historic battles and military heroes [6]. However, they rarely communicate their vision, mission and ideas to the audience. Suyash Sharma's (2023) article in the Focus journal on "Social Networking: Boon or Bane for the Armed Forces" discussed how the armed forces have gone from a reclusive and isolated organization to one that is more vibrant and engaged with the mainstream [7]. Rajneesh K and Dr. Shalini S (2017) state that geo tagging and location features are a latent threat to the Armed Forces [11]. An example of this is when pictures of four Apache helicopters were uploaded on social media, leading to their destruction by rebels. and Dr. Uthamkumar J & Ramakrishnan R (2018) spoke for adopting a lenient social media policy for all ranks is essential for as part of a sound social media strategy. The current organizational structure looks into the issues pertaining to social media, cyber policy planning at the apex level, which may affect the overall operational performance. Additionally, researchers have given out guidelines and actions taken by various armies to regulate behavior of personnel on various social media platforms. Some researchers have also brought out ways to train soldiers on right way to use Social Media. This literature review brings out that there is a significant gap in knowledge on the perception of the soldiers who are impacted by the ban [15].

The research attempts to conduct a holistic study of the perception of the soldiers on various aspects of the social media ban. The study aims to look at the ban from the viewpoint of the soldier on the topics of the reasons behind the ban on certain social media applications by the Indian Army, the impact of the ban on soldiers, effectiveness of the ban in achieving its aim and steps recommended by the soldiers themselves on a long term solution to this complex problem of preventing loss of classified information in an increasingly digitally connected world.

Research Methodology

This study has been carried out using mixed research methodology wherein both quantitative data was sought in form views on reason for the ban, impact of ban, effectiveness of the ban and qualitative data on suggestions on future steps needed. The researchers have resorted to using survey as a research method and followed it up with the technique of snowball sampling procedure and to test the hypothesis for this research. We have conducted an online survey through Google forms. The questionnaire has 23 questions and each of these questions is designed to support or disprove my hypothesis through the options. Out of the 23 questions seven are MCQ type questions, 15 yes or no questions and one open ended question. Quantitative and Qualitative data was collected by comparing answers given by various participants. A total of 252 responses were received. [N=252]

Results and Findings

The survey results reveal that nearly half of the respondents believe the ban was imposed to prevent soldiers from being targeted on social media, some believed that the ban was to prevent soldiers from sharing posts that go against the ethos of the army, and a minority felt that the purpose was to avoid soldiers sharing opinions on controversial national topics. Majority of the soldiers felt that the ban was necessary and that the social media ban will help improve operational security by preventing the leakage of classified information.

On the effectiveness of the ban majority felt that there may be a lack of strategy in place to ensure the effective implementation of the ban on banned content on soldiers' smartphones. While implementation procedures may be subsequently laid down, it is necessary that these include measures to check if personnel have additional smart devices which have not been declared or accounts on banned social media platforms under different names. This is important to ensure that soldiers are not able to access banned content through alternative means. Furthermore, it is also essential to educate soldiers about the risks associated with accessing and sharing banned content on their smartphones and ensuring that they understand the consequences of such actions.

On the impact of the ban the survey results indicated that while a significant portion of soldiers reported that the ban had no or very little effect on them, there were still some who felt its impact to a moderate or significant degree. This suggests that the social media ban is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that it is important to consider the specific needs and preferences of soldiers in implementing policies.

On the question of a long term solution to the problem many felt that education, awareness, and sensitization of troops were necessary to prevent the loss of operational security on social media. Rather than an outright ban, proper standard operating procedures should be implemented, and strict punishment should be given to defaulters. Soldiers should be taught about secure communication, and the army should have cyber watchdogs and agencies in place to ensure no leakage of operational information through social media.

Discussion

As the rise of social media continues, millions of people are joining social media platforms every day, and the realm of social media shall become more and more intertwined with our daily lives. As elaborated in the paper, social media's impact will not be just to the overall security dimensions but also to the members who serve in the organization that protects a country's territorial sovereignty and integrity. If steps are not made to address the challenges posed by social media on the Indian Armed Forces - the consequences can be detrimental. The answer is to educate, train soldiers and employ technology to stop soldiers from disclosing vitally important, classified information and to create a holistic social media policy that is adaptable to changing conditions. The goal of the strategy should be to inform soldiers on how to use social media appropriately and lay out precise rules for their behavior. In conclusion, the Indian Army's partial ban on social media sites can only act as a stop-gap measure until a long-term solution is found and put into place.

Conclusion

The impact of social media on society cannot be denied and Armed Forces need to harness its strengths as a force multiplier. The research suggest that the military should analyze how soldiers use social media and educate them for using it for tactics and intelligence gathering, but caution them that cultural differences exist between military and online society. Improper or immature posts can alter public perceptions and compromise operational security. However, there is also a call to embrace social media, especially with younger generations. The current battle experience shows that social media is significant in military operations and this domain should not be ignored. Policies and regulations must be put in place to facilitate the use of social media while also being prepared to negate its challenges. The responses to any breach must be rapid and decentralized to meet the immediacy of social media. The Armed Forces must train and empower their response teams with the necessary technical skills to monitor and analyze social media, understand its influence, and react to negative inputs. The Army's hierarchy needs bring about a change in the mindset of the soldiers to understand the importance of using social media responsibly. This can be fulfilled by education, trust, and training to create rules of online behavior for encouraging its responsible use by military personnel and their families.

Limitations of the Study

It is truly said that limitations are the future directions of the research. Researcher though has taken an utmost care but there are some limitations which can further be taken care in next level research. The limitations of present study are:

1. The responses revealed very fewer women had formed part of the study. This is due to the fact that the Army has only 3.80% of women.
2. The response of the participants to the questionnaire might not be honest in all cases.
3. The thought behind the questions could not be explained to all the soldiers who filled the questionnaire.
4. The survey might not have reached enough diverse set of individuals which will limit its reach.
5. The source of data was not classified as per age this would have clearly brought out the difference in thinking in the new recruits who are joining the Army.
6. To reach an adequate amount of people and to get adequate amount of useful data is a time-consuming process required for the research.
7. This research does not have financial means to support print media and is thereby constrained to digital media.

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