



Social Media Manipulations and Warfare

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Abstract: Social media has been one of the most important developments in the 21st century, shaping our society and altering the ways we live. Besides a booming sector of captivated individual users, governments, political entities and international organizations around the world have taken social media to a new level. In recent decades, even terrorist organizations and revolutionaries have increasingly used social media to influence protests, recruit members and fighters, and manipulate public opinions. Social media has indeed changed our perception of warfare; analyzing its role in armed conflict offers new insights into the development of modern uprisings and the oppression of political resistance. This paper seeks to analyze how governments, terrorist organizations, and revolutionaries use social media to manipulate public opinions and influence the course of warfare. This study first analyzes social media usage during the Arab Spring, and then moves on to explore the terrorist organization ISIS and how it uses social media to recruit new members. Finally, this paper examines the ways the Russian government uses social media to spread official propaganda in its attempts to silence dissenting views and manipulate public opinions. By reviewing these three examples, it can be concluded that social media is a tool that is not too different from other media outlets like newspapers, TV, and radio. Throughout history, governments, citizens, and various institutions have used these and other media tools to create certain beliefs and generate reactions among common citizens. The real innovative force of social media lies in the speed by which information is spread and its accessibility to private individuals. Individual citizens have the greatest ability to call attention to government corruption, but at the same time, social media also allows for manipulation of facts by making it possible for governments and terrorist organizations to disseminate false information and perceptions. This unique form of online communication is a modern vehicle for governments and institutions to achieve their goals, often by manipulating public opinions and inciting conflicts and even revolutions.

Keywords: Social media, Arab Spring, Facebook, hashtag, ISIS, Islamic State, Al-Hayat Media, Mu'assassat al-Furqan, Russia, bots, trolls, Kremlin, Putin, Navalny, social media manipulation

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I. Introduction

The emergence of social media in the twenty-first century has revolutionized our perception of warfare, conflicts, and oppression. We often see pictures of violent protests, destroyed houses, bombarded streets, and many other tragic scenes shared by the people who are affected by the events. Reporting about warfare and uprisings on social media is nothing new. The chronicling of war and social unrest on social media goes back to the Arab Spring in 2011, when activists used online platforms to spread ideas and organize protests. Later, social media was used to recruit young Westerners to ISIS. Eventually, in 2014 and 2022, Russian trolls and bots were active on social media, attempting to defend the Kremlin's aggressions against its neighbor to the west. It is undeniable that social media has grown to be a source of information, disinformation, and propaganda.

The goal of this paper is to analyze how governments, terrorist organizations, revolutionaries, and individuals use social media as a tool to influence the course of revolts or wars and to shape public views about governments. Three recent historical examples will be explored to assist in this process. First, we will gain insights into social media's power to refine public viewpoints and transform them into organized opposition by examining its critical role in the Arab Spring of 2011. Next, I will move on to the terrorist organization ISIS and its sustainment of itself by focusing on its dependence on social media to recruit new members. Finally, I will explore how the Russian government uses social media to spread government propaganda and attempt to silence dissenting views — especially important during this time of its involvement in significant armed conflict. It will be shown how social media is a powerful tool that can be used to shape and chronicle the course of history.

The Arab Spring and Social Media

During the Arab Spring, social media emerged as a viable force early on, as events were unfolding. The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests across Arab nations in the Middle East and Northern Africa in the early 2010s. The protests began in Tunisia, fueled by economic stagnation and corruption. Later, the activity quickly spread to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and other Arab countries (Brownlee, 3). The goal of the movement was to give a greater voice to the people by ending dictatorships, reforming governments, and eliminating corruption (Blakemore). Numerous countries in the Middle East became constitutional democracies after the revolts, but protests continued in many others.

Social media contributed to the rise of the Arab Spring in three ways: by sharing information domestically, spreading ideas internationally, and organizing protests and revolts (Frangonikolopoulos, 17). One of the triggering events for the revolts can be traced to a small town in Tunisia called Sidi Bouzid. Market inspectors confiscated street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's property and publicly humiliated him by slapping his face. He reported this incident to the government, which ignored his complaint. Driven to despair over his abuse by the unfair treatment, Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of a local government building. This incident struck a chord with many Tunisians who were equally dissatisfied with government corruption (Gelvin, 27). The Tunisian state media tried to ignore Bouazizi's protest, but citizens used Facebook and Twitter to disseminate the images and descriptions of events to other parts of Tunisia (Howard, 1). Eventually, Bouazizi's fate caused people to take to the streets in protest. Later, during the peak of the uprising, citizens used their phones to post pictures and videos documenting the protests and the police brutality that ensued on social media platforms (Howard, 8).

Spreading information about the revolts domestically was successful because Egypt and Tunisia, the origin sites of the Arab Spring, have sizeable tech-savvy populations (Howard, 5). The resulting online activities gave a sense of empowerment to people who felt oppressed by their governments, which in turn, led to uprisings (Smidi, 198).

Social media also helped turn the Arab Spring into an international event, as it channeled criticism of the government to the global mainstream media. Bouazizi's act of self-immolation and news of the ensuing uprisings spread like wildfire through various online portals, providing a platform for criticizing the highly corrupt Tunisian government apparatus. Networks like Al Jazeera picked up on these developments and reported the news to other countries in the Middle East (Howard and Hussain, 2). In Egypt, for example, people revealed similar grievances. Word of vehement protests in Egypt and Tunisia spread through social media to the surrounding nations (Frangonikolopoulos, 16). Opposition leaders in Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, and many other countries soon followed the example of Tunisia and Egypt, turning the Arab Spring into an international crisis (Howard and Hussain, 3).

Social media was not only used to spread ideas, but it was also used for the organizational facilitation of domestic uprisings. Facebook groups created a sense of community and shared identity, bonding the protesters to form more extensive — and successful — rebellious outbreaks. In Egypt, for example, an ordinary citizen named Khalid Said was killed by the police. In the wake of his death, enormous, widespread anger resulted, and a Facebook group called "We are all Khalid Said" was created to commemorate his violent passing and honor the memory of this man who posthumously achieved the status of a legend. Eventually, more young activists joined to disseminate word of the misdeeds of the Mubarak regime (Eltantawy, 1213).

Other Facebook groups were created to improve communication during the uprising, such as "Voice of Egypt Abroad" and "Egyptians Abroad in Support of Egypt" (Eltantawy and Wiest, 1217-1218). These Facebook pages helped people communicate, spread ideas, and, most importantly, create a collective identity by appealing to similar grievances. In Tunisia, organizers of protests used Facebook to communicate and discuss their strategies. These included tips on how to avoid the police, where to build barricades, and how to best convey messages during days of protest (Wulf, 1415). The same situation existed in Egypt, where protesters used social media to share information about the location of their protests and later, to distribute images of the uprising (Frangonikolopoulos, 15). Relying on online communication portals to spread their message, various protest groups have even shared tip sheets providing detailed information on conducting successful protests (Howard and Hussain, 4). A former Egyptian police officer who had sought asylum in the U.S., for example, used social media outlets like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to support the Egyptian population in organizing protests against the government (Eltantawy and Wiest, 1213).

Using social media as a tool for organization brings many advantages to protesters and their causes. This method introduces speed and interactivity to people from different regions to join in the discussion (Eltantawy and Wiest, 1213). It is additionally successful because it creates a decentralized form of leadership in which everyone turns into a source of information (Howard and Hussain, 2). Historically, because many Arab Spring bloggers were working simultaneously, the targeted governments no longer had the power to stop or slow the spread of information. Consequently, criticism of the governments reached a broader section of the population so that the size and impact of the revolts grew exponentially. With the speed of social media, protesters could

communicate with each other, conduct organized protests, and share ideas with domestic and international audiences to increase the level of protests and civil unrest.

ISIS: Social Media Warfare and Recruitment

Several years after the Arab Spring, ISIS rose to power and also used social media to its advantage. This jihadist group, formally known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, adheres to extremist Islamist ideas, such as ruling with Islamic Sharia law or restoring the Islamic Caliphate (“What Is ‘Islamic State’?”). At the peak of its power, ISIS created a sophisticated network that spread propaganda online and worked to recruit young fighters from the Middle East and Western countries. On social media, ISIS used methods not limited to posting videos and publishing newsletters. Using social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook as tools for propaganda was convenient because it allowed for the quick spread of ideas and joined together more extensive groups of people from all over the world. However, social media also provided a certain degree of anonymity, allowing ISIS to deceive its followers through false promises and by misrepresenting the reality of warfare.

During its hey-day, the ISIS propaganda system was based on two media outlets: Al-Hayat Media and Mu’assasat al-Furqan (Gerstel, 2). The latter was tasked with spreading fear within areas conquered and controlled by ISIS. For example, ISIS posted videos and photos on social media to show off its prisoners of war, display footage of staged and authentic fighting scenes, and reveal images of its newly captured territory (Irshaid). The other outlet was responsible for recruiting new members. In terms of recruitment, ISIS went so far as to hire foreigners from the Western World, which allowed ISIS leadership to understand more about Western society. ISIS attached such great importance to its social media workers that they received much higher pay than the average soldier (Gerstel, 2). Its new and improved knowledge of Western society significantly impacted how ISIS modeled its online presence, and enabled it to recruit countless foreign fighters from countries such as France, Germany, Canada, and the U.S.

One factor that led ISIS to develop an online following in the West was its strategic usage of hashtags, creating a sense of belonging, glory, and adventure. The advantage of hashtags is that they classify messages and channel the information to the appropriate audiences. This process increased the searchability of ISIS posts on social media and linked them to similar interest groups (Saxton 5). In addition, the repeated view of these hashtags created a snowball effect that exposed more people to view the information released by ISIS.

Furthermore, ISIS successfully used hashtags to target its audiences by creating a sense of belonging. Besides spreading information, hashtags also created an environment that made people feel recognized as a part of an organization. (Ozeren, 10). Among the main targets of ISIS propaganda campaigns were young Westerners aged 16 to 25 (Callimachi). Of particular interest were adolescents and young adults who either did not identify with traditional Christian upbringings or were the offspring of Muslim immigrants who felt alienated from their host countries (Gerstel, 3). When these young Westerners embraced hashtags related to ISIS, they felt they were being recognized for being part of an organization or a special group of people.

Various additional factors contributed to ISIS’s successful usage of social media. For instance, online communication brought more anonymity to the conversation (Ozeren, 2). ISIS used this anonymity to manipulate the truth and gain the trust of its targeted audiences. The anonymity of the Internet allowed ISIS to emphasize adventure, attention, caring, and a sense of recognition in the information it spread online. This approach, in turn, helped it to recruit more foreign fighters (Gerstel, 3). As a case in point, many ISIS propaganda videos showed how easy it was to make friends in the New Caliphate, which was open and welcoming toward newcomers (Gerstel, 3). Other videos included fight scenes that mimicked the heroes in celebrated Hollywood films. Alternatively, these videos were shot from the first-person perspective, recalling popular video games such as “Call of Duty,” “Halo,” and “Battlefield” (Robinson and Dauber, 11). ISIS also built up a sense of glory by using militants that had been killed as hashtags on trendy online platforms, depicting them as heroes and glorifying warfare (Ozeren, 114). These are all signs of the glorification of war and the manipulation of the truth. As a result, countless young adults were seduced by the “glorious” and “perfect” lifestyles they watched and read about, and were tempted to join ISIS or at least accept its radical worldviews.

ISIS’s social media manipulation was also successful because it catered to the loneliness and adolescent angst prevalent among teenagers and young adults in the West. The typical ISIS sympathizer was prone to spending much time chatting with different people on social media. Many of the group’s later recruits desired companionship; when ISIS supporters approached them, they were more likely to fall into the trap. For example, a 23-year-old former Sunday school teacher, an American named “Alex,” converted to Islam and began communicating with ISIS operators online. On the surface, they treated Alex kindly, buying her gifts and making her feel welcome. However, they also indoctrinated her with radical Islamic teachings and groomed her to join ISIS in Syria. Fortunately, Alex’s grandparents were able to stop her from joining the organization. (Callimachi).

Another example is a Dutch citizen, Munir Hassan al Kharbashi, of Moroccan descent. He had a tough childhood, dealing with his parents’ divorce and his descent into a life of crime. After he became an adult, he had three failed marriages and felt discriminated against by the people around him because of his appearance and race.

He finally joined ISIS to escape his troubled life in Europe (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 95). Once he was in Syria, he was quickly disillusioned by the realities of warfare. Eventually, he was taken prisoner and sent back to Europe (“Practicing Islam in the Islamic Caliphate” 3:40).

Another woman, a Canadian named Kimberly Pullman, suffered from depression. She met a man from ISIS, and he seduced her into getting engaged. The man lured her into coming to Syria through their conversation, claiming that her nursing skills could support ISIS. He promised her that she would be able to help others and serve a purpose in their community (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 95). Despite the assurances, after she arrived in Syria, she was constantly sick and did not get proper treatment. She was also abused by her husband and sent to jail because he claimed that she had disobeyed him. Her family has since struggled to bring her back to Canada, thus far to no avail (Letta).

The ISIS online recruitment and propaganda campaign has been so effective that governments across the globe have established a task force to contain the spread of ISIS messages online (“Members – the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS - United States Department of State.”). Coalition governments tried to shut down thousands of ISIS accounts and monitored social media constantly to reduce the impact of ISIS, slow its recruitment efforts, and curtail the spread of its ideology (Erbschloe, 58). From mid-2015 to early 2016, on Twitter alone, over 125,000 ISIS accounts were deleted to halt the impact of terrorism and extremism. Twitter also claimed that it was working with Western governments to limit the online presence of ISIS (“Twitter Deletes 125,000 Isis Accounts and Expands Anti-Terror Teams.”) Moreover, many organizations and institutions were created to monitor social media activity and counter ISIS propaganda campaigns. One example would be “The U.S. Cyber Command,” established on October 31, 2010, to help the U.S. government maintain security on social media (Erbschloe, 65). Yet, Alberto Fernandez, the coordinator of the USDS *Think Again Turn Away* program (an effort started by the U.S. Department of State to warn citizens of the ISIS recruitment effort), conceded that the American government could not keep up with the speed and efficiency of ISIS. This failure was partially due to ISIS’s ability to identify and appeal to specific groups of targeted audiences. In addition, ISIS successfully manipulated its followers by spreading false narratives and taking advantage of people’s beliefs and values. The U.S. government could not achieve the same effect in countering ISIS propaganda (Allendorfer and Herring, 14). Whereas the government used pure facts in attempting to deter potential ISIS recruits, ISIS, by contrast, relied on a narrative of companionship, adventure, and recognition that was more appealing to its targeted audiences (Simon). If anything, the inadequate and slow response to ISIS online propaganda has shown governments worldwide that social media must be monitored, as it is an essential tool for influencing public opinions and endangering social stability.

Russian Social Media and Manipulations

The effectiveness of social media in organizing the uprisings during the Arab Spring and accelerating ISIS recruitment efforts would suggest that this medium holds the key to undermining and sidestepping governmental control. Yet, Russian attempts to effectively challenge the Kremlin or affect political change through social media have failed so far. To a considerable extent, this lack of effectiveness has to do with the Kremlin’s control over the Russian media apparatus, which also extends to social media. When controlling the media, the Russian government is first and foremost dedicated to manipulating the truth to gain support from the public. The Russian government creates false narratives and spreads them through state and social media to achieve this goal. In doing so, it avails itself of oversimplification, demonization of the enemy, and false presentation of cause and effect (Khaldarova and Pantti, 2).

Having recognized how social media can spread false narratives, the Russian government has created a network of amplifiers on various social media sites that effectively broadcast its version of the truth. Trolls and bots are two powerful tools the Kremlin regularly employs to spread narratives online. Using these two methodologies, the Russian government can flood social media with pro-Kremlin messages, stop negative opinions, and influence a large segment of the Russian-speaking world. Bots appear in the form of normal user accounts on social media. However, these accounts are not run by humans; they are controlled by relatively simple algorithm-guided machines designed to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda messages (Woolley and Howard, 29). Because of their simplicity, bots are relatively easy to spot. In addition, they tend to produce similar messages and content and do not have many followers or distinguishing characteristics (Woolley and Howard, 32). The number of Russian online bots significantly increased when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014 (Stukal, 315). This surge in bot usage indicates that the Russian government employs them to defend controversial political moves.

Trolls are more complicated than bots because they are human commentators who were recruited to distribute online messages supporting Russian political leaders (Aro, 122). A Finnish journalist group investigated the matter and discovered troll factories in St. Petersburg, where recruited commentators work together to spread false ideas and narratives (Jessikka). The trolls are responsible for posting erroneous accounts and discrediting anti-Kremlin messages. One common false narrative is a direct comparison between the Ukrainian army and the Nazi soldiers that wrought havoc during World War II (Khaldarova and Pantti, 6). Bringing up World War II is a

strategy that aims at garnering patriotic sentiments among Russians. Much of the Russian population views WWII as a proud moment in its country's history, since its forces defeated the enemy (Khaldarova and Pantti, 6). Another popular trope is a description of trumped-up fear of American world dominance. The allegation that the U.S. is trying to dominate the world and that Russia is the only political entity capable of stopping it has been a frequently repeated theme amongst Russian trolls since the onset of the Ukraine invasion in 2022 (Gerber and Zavisca, 81). These examples demonstrate a demonization of the enemy and manipulation of facts relating to current events. As bots and trolls post and repost these claims on social media, they create the impression that the information provided is reliable and legitimate. It is hoped that more users on social media will begin to claim the same thing. The sharing of the same posts creates a snowball effect, causing others to trust the information presented in multiple accounts (Forgas and Baumeister, 43).

When trolls spot anti-Kremlin information on social media, they find ways to discredit the information or the person creating it by creating fake posts. Russian Pro-Kremlin trolls will even use their ability to influence debate in other nations, like Finland. For example, trolls typically discredit any anti-Kremlin messages by alleging the author has mental health issues or is controlled by and working closely with NATO (Aro, 123).

Nonetheless, using social media to create and distribute false narratives through bots and trolls is not always sufficient. Not all Russians have been swayed by these narratives, and they, too, could theoretically use social media to spread *critical* views about the Kremlin. One famous example is Alexei Navalny, who used social media channels like YouTube and Twitter to expose Vladimir Putin's corruption and dishonest political voting system. After he became famous and gained millions of followers, Navalny was banned online and marked an "extremist." In 2014, Alexei Navalny and his brother Oleg were accused of stealing \$500,000 from two Russian firms. The incident, which came to be known as the 'Yves Rocher Case,' resulted in a prison sentence of three and a half years. Oleg remained in prison, but Alexei's sentence was suspended, allowing him to leave prison on parole (Rfe/rl). The suspended sentence would come back to haunt him when he was poisoned during a trip to Siberia on August 20, 2020. On the verge of death, Navalny was transferred to a hospital in Berlin, Germany, for treatment. To his detriment, his trip abroad was a direct violation of his parole, and consequently, he was immediately detained by the Russian government ("Alexei Navalny: Poisoned Putin Critic Navalny to Be Kept in Custody"). Finally, a court decided that Navalny would serve two and a half years to finish the sentence ("Alexei Navalny Sentenced to Prison Term for Violating Probation as Protesters Detained"). In a subsequent trial, he was sentenced again to nine years in prison due to crimes related to large-scale fraud and contempt ("Alexei Navalny Sentenced to 9 More Years in Prison after Fraud Conviction.")

Besides individual activists, many online organizations criticize the Russian government. For example, an organization with over 100,000 followers called Vesna advocated for protests against the invasion of Ukraine during Russia's Victory Day celebrations in 2022. In a prime example of mass opposition, after Russia mobilized 300,000 reserve forces for the war against Ukraine in 2022, Vesna began to advocate for protests. They claimed: "Thousands of Russian men, our fathers, brothers, and husbands, will be thrown into the meat grinder of the war. What will they be dying for? What will mothers and children be crying for?" As a result, thousands of people began to protest, and many were arrested by the Russian government, which claimed they had broken the law ("Russia Protests: More than 1,300 Arrested at Anti-War Demonstrations"). Another organization, Feminist Anti-War Resistance, created and disseminated anti-war messages online. The group also organized multiple resistance art projects and spread affiliated messages on social media (Olimpieva). Since these feminists do not work as a uniform group, instead spreading messages online independently, this practice makes it hard for the Russian government to suppress them on social media ('It Was Impossible to Keep My Head down': Feminist Anti-War Resistance in Russia").

Social media can contribute to the spread of large-scale protests, radicalized ideas, and resistance against governments. This advantage of social media was showcased during the Arab Spring, and to a certain extent, during the rise of ISIS. For this reason, the Kremlin has been proactive in silencing critical voices. Silencing the opposition and spreading propaganda through state media and television has a long history in Russia and existed way before the emergence of social media. The Kremlin's power over the spread of information is currently exemplified by Putin's control of the media and the oppression of his critics. Russia's media before Putin was dynamic and contained views from different political sides, producing a pluralistic environment. However, in Putin's early presidency, he began eliminating opposing ideas, canceling political talk shows, replacing famous hosts, and gaining control of large media companies (Mariia, 9-10). As a result, people were more likely to trust Putin and his party, as they lacked access to diverse opinions. His campaign was successful, making his party the only influential political group in Russia.

To stop the spread of anti-Kremlin ideas, the Russian government issued laws and regulations that claim to banish "extremist views" (Woolley and Howard, 29). These laws allowed the government to keep social media users and influential figures from posting or spreading anti-Kremlin messages. The introduction of these laws also enabled the government to shut down any social media websites or accounts — to prevent negative voices from expanding. A website called "lenta.ru" featured an interview with an ultra-nationalist Ukrainian group. The

interview contained information about the group's leader, Dmitriy Yarosh, whom the Russian government had marked as an international terrorist. The Roskomnadzor, responsible for licensing and supervising the Russian media, warned the website that its operatives might be charged as extremists. In the end, the editor of the website, Galina Timchenko, was replaced by a pro-Kremlin editor (Dougherty, 9).

The Russian government can use social media to spread pro-Kremlin messages quickly and to eliminate any anti-Kremlin messages on social media. Implementing these goals allows it to secure support from the public without fear of criticism from within Russian society.

II. Conclusion

As this paper shows, social media has been used by governments, citizens, and terrorist organizations for different purposes. For example, in 2011, citizens who were oppressed by the governments in certain Arab countries used social media to organize protests and advocate for more freedom and rights. ISIS was able to use social media for its international recruitment efforts, and the Russian Government is still taking advantage of social media to oppress the political opposition and spread views that support the Kremlin.

On the surface, social media is a tool that is not too different from other media outlets like newspapers, TV, and radio. For decades, governments have been using these more traditional media to shape public opinions and instill patriotism in their citizens. Yet, the real innovation of social media lies in the speed by which information is spread and its accessibility to private citizens. These two factors are both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, citizens can use the medium to call attention to their plight and spotlight government corruption. Nevertheless, on the other hand, social media also allows for falsifying facts by creating a false sense of intimacy. Thus, ISIS manipulated unsuspecting individuals into following its radical ideology, while the Russian Government still uses social media to oppress its citizens.

Understanding how social media affects political systems and society is crucial because it offers new insights into the development of uprisings, conflicts, and the oppression of political resistance. Of course, we are still uncertain how social media will change the world in the future, but we should keep our eyes open and watch for the effects of this newly developed technology.

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