

WEAPONISING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Terrorist groups have begun to use social media to incite violence. The defence and security agencies need to prevent or minimise the harm of these attacks but this practical problem relates to a complex set of theoretical problems that are reflected in a broader academic debate. Some argue that contemporary conflict involves new and unique features that render conventional ways of thinking about the ethics of armed conflict inadequate at least or redundant and most. As the Internet has become an international asset that is vital to global commerce and communications, new questions have emerged that have produced new challenges. While there has been discussion of ‘weaponising’ social media, what does it mean and what tactics are involved? I contend that what we are in fact seeing is a process of militarisation and outline three broad ‘non-conventional challenges’ for the use of military capabilities, as well as sounding a cautionary note about processes of militarisation that expand the boundaries of war.

Social media and violence

Terrorist groups are using social media to further their goals, including as a tool to instigate violent acts to create fear within a target population. For example, Charlie Winter, senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, and Haroro Ingram, a lecturer at the National Security College in Canberra, describe the two men who opened fire outside a Muhammad cartoon contest at Garland in Texas during May 2015 as being ‘in contact with low-level jihadis on Twitter’ but having ‘little going for them in terms of organisational ISIS connections’.¹ They were not trained by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) nor directed to carry out an attack by its command. Rather, suggest Winter and Haroro, they were merely inspired by its propaganda.² Winter and Haroro also examine the impact of the incident on 12 June 2016 when Omar Mateen walked into Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida and shot 49 of its patrons and staff. According to Winter and Ingram:

When rumors of his ideological inclination first went public, observers stopped talking about Mateen as if he was an ‘ordinary’ mass shooter and effectively put the full force of ISIS behind him. He stopped being a mere man with a gun and was transformed, via the media and politicians, into a fully-fledged ISIS operative, a human manifestation of the group’s international menace.³

There are clearly some important differences between these two incidents. But the overall goal remains the same for groups such as ISIS. Social media is an important means of proliferating messages to instigate random violence that induce fear in the target population about future attacks.

In a monograph produced for the Royal Danish Defence College in 2015, the strategic communications analyst Thomas Nissen suggests that this type of incident clearly demonstrates that social media has been ‘weaponised’. He argues that it provides actors with ‘stand-off’ capability to deliver effects or ‘remote warfare’.⁴ Social network media, he suggests, are weapon systems in their own right, providing actors with new intelligence, targeting, influence, operations, and command and control capabilities. They are not, he believes, just a new, technologically provided way of communicating and exerting influence.⁵ Nissen describes weaponisation as the adaptation of something existent or developed for other purposes so it can be used as ‘a weapon (platform/system) in order to achieve “military” effect(s)’. He suggests that such a ‘thing’ could be a chemical or bacillus that is modified to be used as a weaponised chemical agent (for example, gas) to produce weapons-grade uranium for nuclear weapons, or just dirty bombs; to use or adapt existing computer code to create military effects in the cyber domain (for example, Stuxnet); or as in this case to use and or modify social network media algorithms, code and platforms for ‘warfighting’ purposes.⁶

Can social media really be described as a weapon? According to Thomas Rid, Reader in War Studies at King’s College London, and Peter McBurney, Professor in the Agents and Intelligent Systems Group of the Department of Informatics at King’s College London, a weapon is an instrument of harm.⁷ More specifically, they describe a weapon as ‘a tool that is used, or designed to be used, with the aim of threatening or causing physical, functional, or mental harm to structures, systems, or living things’.⁸ Cyber-weapons, for example, are software designed to attack and damage other software (or data within computer systems). Randall Dipert, Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York, suggests that some cyberweapons damage software

by infiltrating (or injecting) unwanted data into an information processing system that alters the database. They might also do damage by interfering with intended ways of processing that data (such as is the case with malware).⁹ Social media is not a weapon in this sense. It is not the instrument or tool that is doing the harming. Rather it is enabling a message that intends to incite others to do harm. For this reason, it is more accurately described as propaganda. In effect, the use of social media to incite violence *is* dissemination of information designed to influence people’s opinions and behaviour.

This is no less morally problematic. After all, Nissen notes a number of legitimate ethical concerns with using social media in this way. For instance, what are the ethical implications of conducting ‘military’ activities against threats on social media? Using social media for warlike activities is counter to their ‘social’ or ‘civilian’ purposes. Trying to deny audiences the ability to speak freely on social network media sites and platforms can be ethically problematic, especially for Western liberal democracies where the notion of keeping the moral high ground and defending freedom of speech are deeply rooted values. It might also make them ‘dual-purpose’ objects and thereby lawful military targets.¹⁰ Nissen also observes that when we refer to social media as weaponised, we ‘securitise’ the issue, which might unnecessarily undermine human rights. Such labels frame the activity as being conducted in a state of emergency and render all responses to be a security, intelligence or defence issue.¹¹ The problem described by Nissen is, however, one of *militarising* the use of social media rather than *weaponising* it. Militarisation is where something designed for civilian use is adapted for a military function or purpose. This is appropriate in some circumstances, particularly in warfighting. But it can develop into a problem when it leads to an overarching ideology of militarism. The American

military scholar and ex-Army officer, Andrew Bacevich, helpfully defines this problematic type of militarism in terms of the following three elements: 'the prevalence of military sentiments or ideals among a people; the political condition characterised by the predominance of the military class in government or administration; the tendency to regard military efficiency as the paramount interest of the state'.¹²

Non-conventional challenges

One reason to militarise social media is that modern conflict presents non-conventional challenges. These involve new and unique features that render conventional ways of thinking about the ethics of armed conflict inadequate or redundant. Several scholars are currently looking at this problem. For example, Joseph Margolis argues that these conflicts involve non-state actors, high civilian-combatant casualties, the participation of mercenaries, and the use of unconventional tactics such as terrorism and human shields.¹³ Jessica Wolfendale suggests that modern conflicts no longer conform to the conventional model of interstate conflict motivated by concrete political aims.¹⁴ Authors such as Mary Kaldor and Herfried Munkler use the term 'new war' to describe current forms of armed conflict.¹⁵ Paul Gilbert suggests that these modern wars are characterised by low-intensity intrastate conflicts motivated by 'identity politics'.¹⁶ Michael Gross attempts to articulate the modes of warfare that deal with modern dilemmas but in a way that still meets the just war conditions of necessity and humanitarianism.¹⁷ Simon Bronitt and his colleagues suggest that the 'War on Terror' provides a new context in which legal systems have struggled to determine the legitimate boundaries on using force to prevent

acts of terrorism, including the development of lethal force.¹⁸

So what are these non-conventional challenges? One set of challenges is the non-conventional threats we now face. For example, Christopher Kutz argues that recent developments in modern violent conflict have meant the increasing use of 'asymmetrical' tactics, such as guerrilla raids, hiding among either one's own or one's enemies' populations, infiltration of enemy lines, sabotage, and joint operations with collaborating civilians.¹⁹ According to Rod Thornton, such asymmetric tactics allow a weaker actor to target the vulnerabilities of a much stronger opponent using unexpected methods, including actions outside the conventional norms of warfare.²⁰ Furthermore, contemporary terrorism is now a major focus for defence policy revisionists who, David McCraw suggests, believe that the current era is dominated by unconventional rather than conventional warfare.²¹ Michael Gross also describes the problematic move towards criminalising armed conflict. He contends that the tendency to view non-conventional conflict as a criminal activity creates a problem because adversaries are more likely to conclude that their enemies are despicable villains rather than honourable foes. This outcome, he believes, signifies a sea change in the conventional way of thinking about war, since an important norm of conventional war asserts the moral innocence of combatants on any side.²²

A second set of challenges is the *emerging technologies* that are transforming the norms of armed conflict. The development and use of social media is one example. Another is military robot technology and its use in targeted killing. Outside the conventional battlefield, Mary Ellen O'Connell suggests that the use of military drones has created more opportunities to employ targeted killing against terrorist groups.²³ Another example of the influence of transformative technology is developments in cyberwarfare.

Patrick Lin and Shannon Ford suggest that the modern world's dependence on digital or information-based assets, and the vulnerabilities of critical national cyber-infrastructure, mean that a non-kinetic attack (for example, cyberweapons that damage computer systems) could do serious harm.²⁴ This is why the United States, for example, takes the cyber threat seriously, declaring that, as part of its cyber policy, it reserves the right to retaliate to a non-kinetic attack using kinetic means. Or as one United States Department of Defense official remarked: 'If you shut down our power grid, maybe we will put a missile down one of your smokestacks'.²⁵ There are a host of other emerging technologies that will pose significant challenges in the future, such as artificial intelligence, human enhancement, autonomous weapons, and the possibilities go on.

A third set of challenges is the non-conventional uses of the military to serve a wide range of institutional roles and purposes. Military capabilities are not only used in wars. Military operations encompass a wide range of tasks including peacekeeping, supporting civil authorities, counter-terrorism, disaster relief, enforcement of sanctions, and so on. Many of these activities do not require the military to use force. In some cases, because they are working in an environment of dangerous conflict, the military are prepared to use force. In particular, in the past two decades the military has increasingly been used for purposes other than fighting conventional wars. This is due, in part, to the emerging norm in the 1990s favouring military intervention to protect civilians whose lives are seriously threatened.²⁶ The international response to the popular uprising against Muammar Gaddafi in Libya during 2011 and the country's descent into civil war in 2014, for example, demonstrates how the politics of humanitarian intervention have shifted to the point where it is harder to do nothing in the face of atrocities.²⁷

Another reason for the increasing use of the military outside of war is the recognition, by some, that the military can perform a variety of political functions in peacetime. The heightened attention to the threat from international terrorism has already been noted. But military capabilities might also be used to affect a target's decision-making without resorting to (or intending to use) actual violence. Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan, for example, argue that most uses of the armed forces have a political dimension because they 'influence the perceptions and behaviours of political leaders in foreign countries to some degree'.²⁸ They hold that a political use of the armed forces occurs when physical actions are taken by one or more components of the uniformed military services as part of a deliberate attempt by the state's authorities to influence, or to be prepared to influence, the specific behaviour of individuals in another nation without engaging in a continuing contest of violence.²⁹

Extending the boundaries of war

It is necessary in some cases to use military capabilities to respond to non-conventional threats.³⁰ But we potentially create a moral problem when we allow the boundaries of war to extend too far; when, as Rosa Brooks describes it, everything becomes war and the military becomes everything.³¹ We should resist the notion that violent conflict is a normal element of human social interaction, which too easily permits the uniquely destructive activities that should only happen in war. This is because such action contradicts the conventional view of civil society that considers '*bellum omnium contra omnes*' (or 'war of all against all') as a feature of the state of nature that should be avoided. As the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes remarked more than three centuries ago:

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War; and such a war, as is of *every man, against every man*. For War, consisteth not in Battle onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battle is sufficiently known.³²

In this state of nature, Alex Bellamy claims that individuals can never be sure of their security and are forced into a war of all against all.³³ Tom Sorell describes how in the classical social contract theories of Hobbes, John Locke and others, the state of nature is the human condition before there was a state order and the condition that human beings would be returned to if an existing state were to dissolve.³⁴ Sorell describes the state of nature as a state of generalised insecurity in which the concept of morality has no footing.³⁵ In this state, Sorell asserts that each person has the right of nature, taking whatever seems a help to his own self-preservation and prosperity.³⁶ Bellamy explains that to avoid this situation, individuals agree to the establishment of states to meet their most fundamental needs. That is, the people agree to a social contract in which they place a monopoly of power and the right to rule in the hands of a sovereign. In return, the sovereign promises to protect the political community from the twin dangers of internal anarchy and external aggression.³⁷

Yet recent scholarship has sought to apply the principles of war to an increasingly wide variety of practices, contexts and institutions. The terrorist use of social media is one of these areas. But there are a number of others. John Stone, for example, demonstrates the way in which cyber-attacks can be construed as acts of war.³⁸ Randall Dipert also applies the conventional principles of the just war tradition to cyberwar. He concludes that existing international law and principles of just war theory do not apply

to cyberwar in a straightforward way.³⁹ Michael Quinlan uses just war thinking to morally evaluate intelligence practice. He argues just as we cannot morally engage in any war we like and fight it any way we like, so we cannot engage in any intelligence activity and conduct it in any way we like.⁴⁰ There is even an influential literature that seeks to apply the principles of war to business practice.⁴¹ Mark McNeilly, for instance, uses Sun Tzu's ancient text *The Art of War* to formulate six strategic principles that apply to the world of business.⁴² In similar fashion, Andrew Holmes adapts Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* to business practice as 'part and parcel of man's social existence'.⁴³

There is nothing wrong with seeking to develop such interdisciplinary insights. There is a risk, however, that we can miss the point of the exceptional nature of the destructiveness that we apply to military combatants in warfare. A patently absurd example of this inattentiveness is William C Bradford's argument that academic 'scholars, and the law schools that employ them, are – at least in theory – targetable so long as attacks are proportional, distinguish non-combatants from combatants, employ non-prohibited weapons, and contribute to the defeat of Islamism'.⁴⁴

Plainly, war needs boundaries because in war we permit substantially more harm than we do in normal life. Most nations treat war as something that allows moral exceptions to the prohibitions against destruction and killing. The just war tradition is an important source for understanding and limiting this form of moral exceptionalism. Michael Walzer refers to this limitation as the adaptation of ordinary morality to the 'moral reality of war'.⁴⁵ Shannon French argues that the strong moral prohibition on murder produces a dilemma for those who are asked to fight wars and are directed by their political masters to kill an enemy. Soldiers must learn to 'take only certain lives in certain ways, at certain times, and for certain reasons [...] otherwise they become

indistinguishable from murderers and will find themselves condemned by the very societies they were created to serve'.⁴⁶ David Luban contends that the military paradigm offers much freer rein than normal life. He suggests that in war, but not in law, it is permissible to use lethal force on enemy troops regardless of their degree of personal involvement with the adversary.⁴⁷ Luban observes that one can attack an enemy without concern over whether he has done anything wrong. He further notes that, in war, 'collateral damage' (that is, foreseen but unintended killing of non-combatants) is morally permissible and the requirements of evidence are much weaker.⁴⁸ In his history of war and the law of nations, Stephen Neff identifies a set of normative features that make war different to the rest of social life. He asserts that war is a violent conflict between collectives rather than between individuals, thereby distinguishing it from interpersonal violence.⁴⁹ He proceeds to argue that wartime is distinguishable from peacetime.⁵⁰

The just war tradition attempts to explain the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of the decision to fight a war and the way in which a war should be conducted. The purpose of the first set of just war principles (*jus ad bellum*) is to prevent the *harms of war* by limiting its initiation. The second set (*jus in bello*) aims to minimise the *harms in war* by restraining its conduct. This stipulates that military combatants should *only* do the harm that is justifiable because it is necessary to secure victory. But this still permits much more destruction and killing than normal life. The harmful means employed by military combatants in war are unlike, say, those of a police officer in a well-ordered society. As Geoffrey Corn and his colleagues explain:

For the soldier, the logic is self-evident: the employment of combat power against an enemy –whether an individual

soldier firing her rifle, a tank gunner firing a highly-explosive anti-tank round, or an Apache pilot letting loose a salvo of rockets – is intended to completely disable the enemy in the most efficient manner in order to eliminate all risk that the opponent remains capable of continued participation in the fight.⁵¹

According to the British ethicist David Whetham, the just war tradition provides an ethical framework for distinguishing justifiable military action from mass murder. It provides a common language within which the rights and wrongs of armed conflict can be intelligibly discussed and debated rationally.⁵² That is, destructive acts that are disproportionate and/or indiscriminate are off limits. So the just war tradition demands that military combatants exercise restraint in their pursuit of military goals. By way of contrast, theorists such as James Turner Johnson emphasise the judicial function of war. This approach suggests that the just war focuses on a 'conception of sovereignty as responsibility for the common good of society that is to be exercised to vindicate justice after some injustice has occurred and gone unrectified or unpunished'.⁵³ I am not disputing that the just war thinking is concerned with justice. But these notions are not incommensurate. The just war tradition is a complex, long-standing historical discussion about both harm mitigation *and* the pursuit of justice.

The use of social media to incite violence creates a number of practical ethical problems. But it also highlights a broader (and more complex) set of non-conventional ethical challenges for the military. In particular, we are facing more non-conventional threats and we should expect novel uses of emerging technologies. The upshot is that Western nations need to put much more effort into thinking about how they use military capabilities in conflicts short of war. This includes responding to the use of social

media by terrorist groups. But there is good reason to be cautious about extending the boundaries of war. Such an approach can end up ignoring the fundamental tenet of modern international society that identifies the state of nature as a problem to overcome. Instead, the better approach is to emphasise the underlying principle of restraining violence that is promoted by the just war tradition.