

Role and Limitations of Social Media in Image Building and Perception Management*
Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, AVSM (Retd)@

I consider it a great privilege and an honour to be speaking to this distinguished audience. At the very outset I would like to thank USI for giving me this opportunity to deliver the memorial lecture which has been instituted to commemorate the great service rendered by Colonel Pyara Lal to this institution.

All of us are leaders and as leaders communication becomes a very important tool. All of us, while in service or otherwise, have communicated through words, actions, body language and at times by setting an example. Every bit of it was communication to the soldiers that we commanded. But, to amplify that communication, we have to look at other modes of communication also. In today's fast changing world, we have realised that apart from television and radio, social media is also changing fast because of the way the world communicates now with each other. At one point of time social media was considered an icing on the cake, but now it is the cake itself. It has its pluses and minuses. Today every leader, and at times the organisations themselves are leaders; so a leader or an organisation needs to keep pace with fast changing world of communication and adapt to the latest communication techniques.

Then there is globalisation as well as localisation. The Government of India (GoI) has rules and regulations regarding starting up of various channels, their licenses and permissions. We also keep a track of the kind of programmes and news that are shown on these channels. We have established programme codes and guidelines to which all the channels are signatories and, therefore, answerable to that programme code. But yet there is internet through which the foreign channels can come in without these programme codes and guidelines, and without being signatories to any of these terms and conditions of the GoI.

Most of the people in urban cities these days are reading news, less in the newspapers and more online. We are catching up on the news on the go on our mobile phones. As a result of this, the growth of newspapers in the world is in the negative, while online and other applications is on the rise. In India, however, the newspapers are still in the positive growth and one of the reasons for the same is that people in rural India have started reading newspapers now. But it won't be very long before the 4G technology or the other ways in which internet is delivered will penetrate the rural hinterlands and newspapers will again go on the decline there as well. On the other hand, there has also been a boom in the regional news channels. The local cable television operators have set up their own news networks in the cities. There is a sort of a competition between the consumption of global news and local news and, this provides both opportunities and challenges to various news channels. So far there was only one way communication, whether it was reading newspapers, listening to radio or watching television; but social media has changed all that. Social media gave each one of us the ability to communicate hence; people's interest in the social media grew manifold. Each one of us on social media is like a channel itself. No individual or community is marginalised and are able to communicate their thoughts and processes, their ideas and opinions and views on any policy or issues freely on the social media. Thus, it became an extremely attractive component of communication process and that is why it has caught the imagination of the whole world.

Apart from giving each one of us the ability to communicate, and therefore become a two-way communication, it also provides us real time information and communication. We have the ability to communicate at any given moment and get response at that very time. This adds to the fascination of social media. Amongst the first ones to know of any incident that occurs in any part of the world, is the person present there with a mobile phone who tweets about that incident. The news channels have now started feeding off the social media. Social media has become the content provider, and the news channels have become drivers to amplify that event further. So saleability is with the news channels and content is with social media and they continue to feed off each other. A visit to the Twitter account of the anchors of various news channels would reveal who all they are following. There would be the politicians who make policy decisions, sports personalities, celebrities and anybody who has developed the ability to communicate and spread news and views. This is how they are taking news from social media. There is a great interlink between the social media and news channels.

Social media has developed the ability to influence public policies. Now the Government is seeking views of the public. Ten years back it was perhaps difficult to understand what the people wanted; but today it has become that much easier. GoI's official website, www.MyGov.in, is very user friendly like Facebook. Once you register on it, there are various discussion forums that one can join. All these discussion forums are being tracked by the Government to pick up the bright ideas that people may have on issues. On many occasions we have had logos and advertisements designed by the people. In terms of policies also, drafts of various policies and blogs are uploaded on the internet and people are free to respond to them through the social media. This is done to get a sense of what people think about the various policies of the Government.

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry is coming up with a new Cinematograph Act for films. The last Cinematograph Act was formulated in 1952 and hence the need to amend and modernise it. We prepared a draft and put it on the internet and let people respond to it. We received thousands of responses; some interesting and some wild, but we also received some that could even be incorporated. So these are the ways that government has started communicating with the people. In the bargain, the individual has developed the ability to influence policy decisions and that ability gives him a sense of confidence and rightly so.

The social media follows a process of news, views, emotions and mobilisation. On social media people develop and join various groups. If a person wants he can start his own channel on YouTube. For example, if you have experience of war or counter-insurgency; you could record a video and post it on YouTube or you could record an interview of a jawan and put it on YouTube, and gradually you will find people of similar interest following your channel on YouTube. Also, when an individual who has a following on social networking sites tweets something it reaches out to

the entire group; and if a person who has his own following, re-tweets it he is getting the groups interconnected. And that is how the process of news to views, to emotions and then to mobilisation comes about. The 16 Dec 2012 rape case, when thousands of people gathered on the Delhi streets, is an example of mobilisation through social media. And even before that, Arab Spring came about as a result of mobilisation through social media.

A few other advantages of social media are that the government is able to reach out to a large audience with lesser investment; especially during the time of crises and natural calamities the information about missing people, the location and phone numbers of the help centres can be easily made available to people in distress and requiring help. It is open knowledge that Prime Minister of Nepal got to know about the Nepal earthquake last year through Prime Minister Modi's Tweet. The district administration is better organised now because of social media networks.

In spite of all this, there has always been a slight hesitation by some organisations to get on to various social media platforms. There is a feeling that these are newer technologies and at times one doesn't understand them. But it is now imperative that all our organisations must invest into the social media. No leader or organisation, that needs to move forward, especially when connected with public issues, can stay away from communication on social media. There are a number of examples of international organisations taking to social media. CIA came on Twitter. ISRO's #MarsOrbiter and NASA's #MarsCuriosity were on Twitter and they had an interesting exchange of first tweets. Similarly, for 26 Jan 2015 Republic Day Parade, the invitation was tweeted by Prime Minister Modi to the US President Barrack Obama and it was accepted through Twitter. These are some of the interesting ways to attract people to social media and make themselves count. President Obama and Prime Minister Modi have the largest following in the world on Twitter and Facebook. Both are great communicators and therefore, it goes without saying that both are very active on social media.

These are some of the pluses of social media but there are also the negatives. As I mentioned earlier, the news channels take information from Twitter feeds and other platforms but because of high competition between the channels to be the first to report, they themselves have confessed on many occasions that they don't vet the information before broadcasting it. So, as soon as news breaks on one channel, its competitor will immediately break that news and check its veracity only later; and then withdraw it, if it is not found correct. But in this process the person/organisation on which the news is broken has already gone through character assassination. This is the biggest negative of today's fast communicative world.

Another aspect is that rumours can very easily be spread on the social media. For example, when in August 2012 people of northeast India started moving out of Bangalore in huge numbers because of unfounded rumours floating on the social networking sites about violence against them. There are umpteen examples of pictures or videos taken, perhaps in some other countries, and then referred to as something that happened in Muzaffarnagar or Gujarat or any other part of India to ignite emotions of a particular community. It is very difficult to police it. So, because of such like reasons social media could be extremely dangerous at times. But the only way of countering this situation is for a mature individual to send a positive message, one can look at the original handle of the organisation to ascertain if it is a rumour or otherwise. If the organisation is tweeting positive message then there are enough number of good people retweeting that information so that the right message reaches maximum number of people. There was a time when we would think that keeping quiet on a certain issue would make the news die down but in today's times that is not true.

Coming to the issue of national security. The social media as an entire medium of communication was meant to be absolutely free of any kind of government or regulatory authority. The entire essence of internet when, it was created in 1967, was to break down the authority of every authoritarian department and government. Social media was born from the same spirit. Any government that has tried to control or put restrictions on social media has had to face public ire. This phenomenon is not limited to India; the same is the case with other countries in the world as well. The Indian Government does not fear free communication; in fact it favours and encourages it. But the ability of the people to create ideological groups on social media sites with questionable intentions and then go on to views, to emotions and then, God forbid, go onto mobilisation is something the Government is obviously worried about.

We are proud of our Armed Forces and also of the fact that no one can come through our defences. Our defences are very well covered, from air, land and sea, but not from the internet. And today the enemy or elements inimical to India's interests, without any restrictions, through news or through views on social media can enter our country. There are no boundaries between districts, states and countries as far as internet is concerned and this certainly is a threat. The only defence against such mischief is that we have larger number of people present on the social media so that we understand when there is an 'ideological seed' being planted and then we are able to counter it. When the person who is trying to foment trouble is identified, then that particular handle or Facebook profile is taken care of. But it is such a large platform that it becomes very difficult to identify such people if we are not present on social media ourselves. We all have to become soldiers on the internet. If we all play our part as soldiers then we will be able to police it to some extent.

Also very important is the person who is handling the social media in a department or an organisation. As individuals we could tweet or retweet frivolous issues, but as organisations there is a certain amount of grace and dignity involved. Therefore, the person who handles the social media on behalf of an organisation has to be very mature in understanding of the issues. Today, ministries and various government departments are on social media and it becomes imperative that nothing goes out that does not depict India in the grace that it ought to be as these are international messages that go across the borders and can have implications.

What are the GoI and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting doing in terms of social media? We realise that it is a very important tool of communication, so we have created our own social media cell. It is a communication hub and we are tracking the social media continuously twenty four hours. We have software that trawls up to 40 million websites in an hour and it picks up all the keywords we are looking for. So it provides to the Government the trends and analysis of anything that is happening. Even on One Rank One Pension (OROP) issue Government had used this feedback. In fact on every issue on a daily basis such feedback is communicated to the Government. This process started two years ago and till date we have generated about 1500 reports. On a daily basis the reports are sent to

concerned ministers and they can gauge the effect of their policies on the general public. So without going on ground if one wants to understand what people are thinking then social media is the place where one can see the trends and analyses.

The Government has its own YouTube channel. We decided to have the 26 Jan 2015 Republic Day Parade broadcast live on YouTube inspite of some apprehensions from certain quarters that it was a holiday and people would rather watch it on television. In the event, we had 11 lakh hits live on YouTube channel. These were the people who may have been on the move and did not have access to television but wanted to see the parade. So to think that people will not make use of such platforms is a fallacy and the moment you give an option to people they would use it and put their views and opinions on it.

We also realised that some of the communication that the Government wants to do with the people should be done in a format that we want. For example, the Budget Day speech is very important and every news channel wants to talk to Finance Minister that day, but with nearly 800 channels existing it is impossible. So we devised a way. His speech inside the Parliament was telecast live on Lok Sabha TV and DD National and in the evening we conducted a Talkathon. We invited questions from general public. A day before we had started advertising 'ask your query to Finance Minister' through #AskYourGovernment and by evening it was trending Number One on social media. We had about three crore hits on #AskYourGovernment. So we keep having such Talkathons with the ministers and we publicise it through the social media. We are also coming up with mobile applications now so that people can have access to the direct information from the Government and it becomes a two-way traffic between the people and the Government. We realise it is extremely important to be a part and parcel of the social media and to be able to understand, communicate and deliver in a way that our voters want and expect.

Thank you and Jai Hind!

Interactive Session

During the interactive session a number of issues and questions were raised to which the Hon'ble minister answered very freely and frankly. A few of the important points that emerged are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

Responding to a question the Minister informed that his Ministry was by far quite liberal in giving benefit of doubt to those people who voice their criticism against the government policies and actions, and if at all an issue of anti-national activity is brought up, it is handled by Inter-Ministerial Committee of Secretaries. He also said that they were reluctant to issue notices to news channels for breaking programme code, but after the live coverage of events during 2008 Mumbai attack, the channels were advised to follow 'self-regulation'. During Gurdaspur attack recently, there were some minor violations on part of a few news anchors and the Ministry sent 'advisory' to those channels. However, some news channels crossed the "Lakshman Rekha" in the Yakub Memon hanging case and they were issued a Show Cause notice.

Informing the audience about his Ministry's upcoming tasks and activities he said that the Government had decided to spend INR 600 crores to restore, archive and digitise very old films, and that he had requested the Chief of Army Staff to provide such movies to his Ministry so they could be preserved for posterity. The Government has also started a new channel, DD Kisan that provides all the information regarding agriculture to our farmers, and a new channel DD India was being thought of that would be on the lines of BBC. Responding to the concern of Armed Forces officers present in the audience, he informed that his ministry was also in the process of creating movies on all the Param Vir Chakra awardees.

He said that during the Frequency Modulated (FM) Phase II policy, sports channels were not allowed to be aired on private radio channels but with the FM Phase III policy being implemented, the private radio channels have been allowed to air sports related news. Every town with a population of one lakh and above would be covered by FM radio in the near future.

The Minister also highlighted some very interesting facts about Doordarshan and All India Radio (AIR). He informed that there was no other channel that employed upto 33,000 people, as Doordarshan did. It broadcasts programmes in 23 different languages. He said that his Ministry had the mandate to keep the Indian culture alive and for that AIR was in the process of recording nine lakh songs (some not even of the level of folk songs) that are sung in various big and small communities throughout the length and breadth of our Country. He said that right then 45 per cent of India was covered by FM radio and in 2-3 years the percentage would rise to 60, and by 2016 all the television signals would be digitised.

*Text of the talk delivered by Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, AVSM (Retd), Hon'ble Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting at USI on 09 Sep 2015 with Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM, (Retd), Director USI in the Chair.

@Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, AVSM (Retd) was commissioned into 64 Cavalry with the coveted 'Sword of Honour' on 15 Dec 1990. A second generation 'Grinder', he was transferred to 9 GRENADIERS on 28 Feb 1992. He took part in CI operations in J&K (1995-96) and was awarded the COAS Commendation Card. In 2004, he won the Silver Medal in Athens's Olympics and was honoured with the Arjuna and Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna awards followed by AVSM and Padma Shri. After premature retirement in 2013, he became a Member of Parliament in 2014 and is presently the Minister of State, Information and Broadcasting.