Baltic battalion soldiers during city battle training day in San Gregorio, Spain, October 24, 2015, during Trident Juncture 2015 (NATO/Siim Teder)

#SocialMediaMatters
Lessons Learned from Exercise Trident Juncture

By Gregory M. Tomlin

With the ubiquity of inexpensive smart phones and Internet access, increasing numbers of people around the globe—especially youth—glean as much of their news as their entertainment from social media platforms. For information operations (IO) professionals long accustomed to incorporating messages into host-nation newspapers and radio broadcasts, it is now imperative that they consider online methods to reach the widest audience targeted by their contemporary information campaign. Recognizing this paradigm shift, headquarters from the brigade to combatant command levels must understand how to establish credibility and gain popularity through social media if they are to effectively shape the information environment during modern military operations.

In September and October 2015, multinational participants in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise Trident Juncture learned firsthand the importance of social media as a component of the engagement warfighting function on today's battlefield. Led by Allied Joint Force Command in Brunssum, the Netherlands, Trident Juncture involved command posts in Canada, Norway, Portugal, and Spain participating in a complex scenario ostensibly set in northeast Africa. According to the road to war, the fictitious country of Kamon invaded the neighboring country of Tytan to build a "protection zone" for ethnic Klorids, a minority in Tytan but the ethnic majority in Kamon. Kamon's President Wekawu also blamed the Tytan government for constructing dams that limited the flow of the Nile River into Kamon, a pretext for

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war in Wekawu's view. Under the authority of a United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution, NATO deployed an Allied Joint Force Command to restore the Tytan border and improve stability throughout the region.

NATO simulation designers uploaded two social media applications onto the exercise's Intranet, and controllers encouraged friendly players at all echelons to create profiles. Opposing force and neutral players also established their own accounts. Most participants immediately recognized the format of the two applications. "Chatter," akin to Twitter, limited users to 120-character posts. "Facepage," akin to Facebook, did not bound a user's post to a specific word count, and it included options to paste photos and links to other Web sites. The dynamism that these applications brought to Trident Juncture necessitates the utilization of both platforms in future command post exercises. IO specialists, nonlethal targeting officers, and, perhaps most importantly, commanders became aware of the consequential impacts—both good and bad—of social media within the modern information dimension of warfare.

Foremost, Trident Juncture demonstrated that the dissemination of canned talking points through social media is no more persuasive than when parroted by a patrol leader to the resident of a host-nation village. Simplistic messages such as "NATO is here under authorization of a UN Security Council resolution" failed to gain the joint task force headquarters' profile a significant following on Chatter or Facepage. Without "friends" following a command on social media, NATO messages did not enter many personal online streams and quickly disappeared beneath the din on the application's main page.

Like the incorporation of talking points in face-to-face engagements, IO officers must be prepared to weave their messages into interesting social media postings. For example, an official Chatter post by the U.S. brigade mentioning that the commander met with a town mayor to discuss security concerns invited a comment from one host-nation user who asked the brigade to detail specific

security concerns. This comment enabled the brigade spokesman to engage in a virtual conversation through a series of comment posts. More importantly for the information campaign, it allowed the spokesman to insert focused talking points about respect for the rule of law and ethnic tolerance that would have sounded like platitudes if written as independent posts.

Trending

Like the popular Twitter application, Chatter enabled users to transform a topic into a trend through the use of the # hashtag. Leveraging this feature generated interest in a topic that, as part of an information campaign, influenced the local population to support a specific initiative. Optimally, the friendly forces headquarters would exploit this, but during Trident Juncture the best validation of the hashtag's effectiveness as an information multiplier stemmed from its use by a neutral player.

Chatter handle @ChazfromTigray used the hashtag "#TransportationMatters" to influence a multinational division to fund a road project in the fictitious Tytan province of Tigray. When the exercise began, Chaz's initial postings complained about the excessive time that it took for him to drive to work due to poor roads in his province. As the division uncoiled from its port of entry, Chaz complained about NATO forces causing greater congestion and increased destruction to the roads, thereby extending his commute even further. The division headquarters responsible for Tigray province did not comment on Chaz's posts, but other Chatter users did comment on his blurbs, mostly to jeer him for harping on the monotonous topic of #TransportationMatters. However, each time that someone commented on Chaz's account or brought his name into their own posts, they inadvertently increased Chaz's popularity. By the end of the first week of the exercise, @ChazfromTigray became the second most popular profile (according to Chatter's own metric) out of 600 active accounts.

An IO analyst on the division staff noticed Chaz's popularity on Chatter

and prioritized a road-paving project for Tigray during the division Information Activities Working Group. Two days later, military engineers arrived to widen shoulders and fill potholes. The division public affairs officer (PAO) issued a press release about the project and quoted the brigade commander: "We are pleased to help improve the local infrastructure because we know that transportation matters to the people of Tigray." Chaz's messaging proved so effective that it not only shaped the division's civil-military affairs priorities, but the brigade commander used Chaz's own hashtag in his public statement as well. This presents a worthy challenge to IO planners: How does one become @ChazfromTigray oneself and generate effective hashtags that will co-opt neutral or enemy application users to support the command's lines of effort?

Showcasing the engineers' efforts to improve the roads of Tigray through social media should not be confused with the information endstate. Broader objectives to increase local support for NATO forces operating in Tytan, respect for the rule of law, and trust in the indigenous government underlay this civil-military investment in local infrastructure. Immediate methods for measuring the influence of the project on local behavior and attitudes toward NATO and the Tytan government included monitoring social media sites for trending hashtags related to the allied military presence, ethnic tolerance, and pro-Tytan institutions and leaders. The sharing or reposting of a headquarters' original post about Tigray infrastructure could also indicate whether Tytans noticed the road project or considered it to be an authentic gesture of NATO's commitment to improving their country.

Competing with White Noise

Exercise controllers did not anticipate the popularity of Chatter swelling to more than 600 active accounts during Trident Juncture. This challenged the joint task force headquarters to maintain popularity and develop a following of "friends." Most Chatter accounts discussed wildly irrelevant topics in lieu of

Marines with Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response–Africa and Royal Marines with 45 Commando conduct patrol during Trident Juncture 15, October 23, 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps/Kaitlyn V. Klein)

the conflict between Kamon and Tytan. Some Chatter users—most notably @RegisKT, the handle used by the anchor of *Kamon Today*'s nightly news broadcast—clearly opposed NATO's interference in regional affairs. Simulation designers produced a daily *Kamon Today* newsreel to propagandize against NATO and the Tytan government, and Regis immediately followed up with Chatter posts that included bellicose quotations from President Wekawu and misinformation about allied military efforts. By the eighth day of the exercise, Regis had become the third most popular Chatter account, while official NATO accounts trailed in comparison. Applying the joint task force headquarters' own metric, the enemy was winning the information campaign. As a response, exercise controllers closed about a third of the Chatter accounts and prevented Intranet users from creating new profiles.

The controllers' reaction proved unfortunate. If they believed that by limiting the "white noise," including several vocal opponents to NATO, they could enable PAOs and IO officers to more effectively shape the information environment, then they removed reality from the simulation. Although robust for a NATO exercise, 600 profiles is a paltry sum compared to the millions of Twitter and Facebook users who will generate white noise in a real-world theater of operations. PAOs and IO officers must begin to consider seriously the challenges of navigating around the white noise and how to respond to the most blatant information attacks against NATO in social media.

Pith versus Rant
During Trident Juncture, Facepage did not generate the same level of popularity as Chatter among exercise participants, and controllers did not delete the most vitriolic Facepage accounts, even after

they removed a third of the Chatter profiles. One theory for the lack of Facepage's popularity could be that Chatter constrained users to write terse, 120-character posts, while Facepage permitted its members to enter long messages or paste entire media stories determined by social media users as droll. In several instances on Facepage, lengthy messages from a unit headquarters about NATO efforts to improve the security situation in Tytan elicited the same comment from followers: "Too long to read." Similarly, the appearance of daily Facepage rants by Kamon Vice President Izkaok received wide criticism: "Blah, blah, blah, this is propaganda." A typical Izkaok posting follows:

WE ARE WINNING THE KLORID WAR ON IMPERIALISM! Yesterday's success by the Kamon People's Army to secure an airfield in Tytan has enabled our benevolent President Wekawu to send

Landing craft air cushions transport U.S. Marines and Portuguese marines from the USS *Arlington* Kearsarge Amphibious Ready Group toward Pinheiro Da Cruz beach to participate in combined amphibious assault exercised as part of Trident Juncture 15, October 20, 2015 (U.S. Marine Corps/Jeraco Jenkins)

essential humanitarian aid to our Klorid brothers who have starved under the Tytan regime. Kamon has created a safety zone for all people oppressed by NATO in Tytan. Our field commanders report that, in every Tytan village they liberate, citizens have joined their brothers in the fight for Klorid justice. Mark my words: We will run the NATO occupation forces back into the Red Sea. The imperialists will return to their decadent homes in Europe and North America lamenting their grievous mistake of giving into their carnal desires to become colonial masters again. The NATO Generalissimo will never take our Nile life waters! NATO will never destroy the Greater Klorid Nation! Let us be eternally grateful that Providence has bestowed upon us our president at this moment in Klorid history. Fear not! President Wekawu will protect us all!

The Facepage application's format made the vice president's diatribes immediately recognizable as propaganda. Neither NATO nor the enemy spokesman effectively messaged through this medium, and neither gained a significant following of friends. Exercise controllers did not remove the vice president's profile, despite the highly critical nature of his posts, because they did not deem this account as threatening—hence effective—as compared to other anti-NATO profiles on Chatter, such as @RegisKT. The juxtaposition of the enemy's Facepage and Chatter messages indicates how powerful a pithy message in social media can be at confounding PAOs, IO officers, intelligence collection managers, and even operation officers. While readers could shrug off Izkaok's rants as delusional or desperate, on three occasions during the exercise, the *Kamon Today* newsman's Chatter posts enabled the enemy to gain an information advantage, forcing NATO to respond to its adversary's highly successful spin.

In one instance, a group of Tytan men determined to exacerbate ethnic tensions, impersonated police officers and massacred dozens of ethnic Klorids in a Tytan village. The allied division responsible for that province in Tytan considered the incident a matter for local authorities to handle and chose not to make any public statements, for fear of drawing attention to the atrocity in their area of operations. Within hours of the massacre, @RegisKT exploited the division's silence when he posted on Chatter: "KT News Alert—President Wekawu: 'I weep for the loss of 75 defenseless Klorids murdered in cold blood today by Tytan police.'"

Regis did not post his message about the massacre of ethnic Klorids until after two other host-nation Chatter users mentioned rumors of the atrocity. The declarative nature of his "News Alert" led the division intelligence collection manager to include Regis's Chatter post in his open-source intelligence report. The post

Two pilots assigned to 71st Rescue Squadron at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, fly C-130J Hercules during rescue and refueling training near Beja Air Base, Portugal, October 23, 2015, in support of Trident Juncture 2015 (U.S. Air Force/Luke Kitterman)

also generated numerous responses about what occurred in the village and speculation that NATO's silence surrounding the incident equated to the West's callous indifference toward ethnic violence. Although the division commander chose a passive approach to handling the massacre with the media, the sheer volume of Chatter posts led one international journalist to contact the division PAO directly. In a major Canadian newspaper the following day, the reporter criticized NATO severely for moving too slowly to respond to the incident and questioned the multinational division's ability to stabilize Tytan.

The atrocity should have taught division collection managers to monitor local chatter on social media more carefully, since the expansiveness of the area of operations prevented allied forces from patrolling its entirety. However, a few days later, the headquarters missed a second opportunity to proactively shape the information environment when @RegisKT posted more breaking news: "KT News Alert—President Wekawu orders Kamon People's Army to initiate artillery barrage of NATO battle positions in western Tytan."

Regis used a Tytan Radio transcript released 30 minutes earlier on the exercise's Intranet "Newsweb" as his source. The transcript cited several villagers in western Tytan who called in to the radio station to report the impact of Kamon artillery shells near their community. However, no one on the division staff had monitored Newsweb closely enough to recognize that Regis had taken a real media scoop out of context, by insinuating that Kamon's preemptive attack would destroy battle positions occupied by NATO forces poised to invade Kamon. Regis made the Kamon military operation sound defensive in nature. As a consequence, the allied headquarters' delayed response to enemy indirect fire

occurred only after learning from Chatter about the attack, rather than utilizing its own collection assets to be the first to inform the Tytan people about the commencement of a Kamon offensive across the international border.

A final example of @RegisKT forcing the multinational headquarters onto the information defensive occurred when he posted on Chatter the nationality of the first NATO pilot shot down during the exercise: "Tonight on KT News at 2200: Exclusive video of the first POW in Klorid War on Imperialism; American pilot shot down over Kamon." Regis based his post about the captured pilot on a Newsweb video that reported the downing of a NATO fighter over Kamon. NATO headquarters would not confirm the nationality of the pilot, so Regis claimed to have an American (eventually we learned that the pilot served in the Canadian Air Force). Exercise controllers deleted Regis's account immediately after

this posting, in lieu of allowing a senior PAO to respond. Even if the headquarters chose to remain silent, the failure of *Kamon News* to produce the video of an American pilot that night on its nightly newscast would have destroyed Regis's credibility. Indeed, the newsman's following on Chatter would have evaporated on its own without the need for a controller's heavy hand.

Worthy Training Tools

In future exercises, simulation controllers and commanders must allow social media to play out naturally. Controllers would never delete "Red Air" from a simulation if the air component command failed to gain air superiority prior to the ground forces crossing the line of departure. Rather, the ground commander would have to face the dangers of enemy aircraft targeting his troops and vehicles as he maneuvered toward an objective. Likewise, commanders cannot pretend that trends on social media are merely white noise during an operation, for they could directly affect the alliance's lines of effort. The information dimension of warfare must be mastered by developing a following of inquisitive international observers and host-nation friends on social media platforms who seek on their own to navigate around the white noise.

It would be optimal to contract with a marketing or public relations firm to play the opposing force and host-nation population on social media. A tech-savvy business would present PAOs and IO officers with the most sophisticated information environment based on current online trends. During the exercise's train-up and after action review process, the civilian experts could also coach PAOs and IO officers responsible for developing a headquarters' official social media messages. Although a costly investment, this approach would prevent participants from leaving an exercise with a false sense of bravado about their ability to shape an information environment of only several hundred profiles.

While the experience during exercise Trident Juncture made Facepage seem irrelevant for advancing NATO's information campaign, real-world applications such as Facebook should not be discounted summarily by IO planners in future command post exercises or deployment operations. Internet surfers in some cultures continue to appreciate reading detailed articles, and scholars and policymakers in most societies expect access to open forums where thoughtful discourse is not restricted to a 120-character post. During the Cold War, for example, Voice of America found that its audience in the Soviet Union overwhelmingly favored lengthy monologues on U.S. foreign policy read by American broadcasters. In Latin America, on the other hand, regular listeners to the Voice preferred short news updates that they could listen to at a cafe during a midday coffee break.

A final consideration for IO planners will be to ensure that they understand the time required for higher headquarters to approve Military Information Support Operations messages for dissemination, as well as themes to avoid in such messages. During a unilateral mission, U.S. planners serve under a single chain of command that may make it easier to gain approval for new message nominations in a matter of hours. But multinational operations may require the approval of messages through separate national command authorities that could easily delay the approval of new messages for days. Not only might messages in support of NATO operations require the approval of the North Atlantic Council, but also individual nations might reserve the right to review them independently. Factoring a realistic review process into an IO planning timeline could encourage officers to nominate messages and themes early in the operations cycle and to formulate memoranda of understanding to expedite the approval process for new messages during current operations. Such advanced considerations could empower PAOs and IO officers whose responsibilities remain essential to proactively shaping the information environment before another @RegisKT befuddles a friendly headquarters through his social media popularity and mistruths. **JFQ**