



Increasing the need for the DoD's Minerva Initiative in today's turbulent world

By Capt. Kevin Sandell, U.S. Army

At the height of unrest during the anti-police riots in Baltimore earlier last year, a data mining company contracted by the U.S. government, discovered upwards of 50 social media accounts that were also tied to peak violence levels in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The finding led to a belief among law enforcement and government officials that “professional protesters” were provoking violence nationwide using their Facebook and Twitter pages.¹

Five years earlier in an unrelated – yet similarly volatile - event, during the Arab Spring when seven Middle Eastern and North African countries plummeted into disarray, the government's efforts to measure and study social media impacts on civil unrest unfolded. Today, the Department of Defense sponsors a research project known as the Minerva Initiative. Seeking to build a “deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape regions of strategic interest around the world,” the Initiative hopes to “yield more effective strategic and operational policy decisions.”²

While the authors of a Stanford academic report claim social media played a nominal role in the Arab Spring protests, they do write that the digital revolution there contributed dramatically:³

“These instances of social unrest have been interlaced with a technological and digital revolution, in which the Arab world has increasingly been opened to various forms of social media. In the last few years, Internet penetration rates, social media activity, and mobile phone usage have increased enormously in urban areas.”

The paper continues by saying “social media also allowed for greater government efforts to monitor organizers’ online activities, coordinate the suppression of these endeavors, and thwart protesters’ goals.”³

To effectively study the collective role of social media across unstable areas, the Minerva Initiative must increase its call to universities with communications expertise, and be funded suitably to achieve its objectives.

In 2015, the Minerva Initiative awarded research grants to 11 academic institutions to study various cultural and social topics. Topics included, “The social and neurological construction of martyrdom,” to “Dynamic statistical network informatics.”⁴ None of the academic studies specifically mention social media’s impact on civil unrest, according to an informal review. It’s time to change that, and ensure our military’s research organizations are attuned to the developing impact of social media worldwide.

The Initiative was started in 2008 by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who funded the project with \$50 million in DoD money. To fund a national research project that pays for external university grants and internal overhead and capital, the Minerva must be a priority for DoD leadership. Its coffers must reflect the dynamics of studying a changing world, and Pentagon leadership must ensure the project’s budget is maintained or raised. With more funding, the Initiative could increase its grant money to top-tier schools who can conduct studies more effectively than the military’s bureaucratic culture. Additionally, it could fund research into the study of persons congregating around a common belief, which correlates to civil unrest.

The Pentagon is no stranger to offering grants for university research – under all realms of defense studies – and according to a research article by VICE News, has contributed over one billion dollars to universities to research DoD research and development funding.⁵ In the November 2015 article written by



VICE News reporters, William Arkin and Alexa O'Brien, 100 universities were given the moniker of the "100 Most Militarized Universities in America." An informal review of the listed top 10 private and public non-profit universities yielded \$1,128,012,000 in federal funding for DoD research purposes.⁶ That staggering number means the Pentagon recognizes the potential in university research to achieve its objectives.

The complexity of social behavior on social media is highlighted in one report on social media's role in our messy world. Businessman Curtis Houglan writes that, "Rather than seek(ing) out new beliefs, people choose to reinforce their existing political opinions through their actions online. Individuals self-organize by affinity, and within affinity, by sensibility and personality. The ecosystem of social media is predicated on delivering more of what the user already likes. This, precisely, is the function of a 'Follow' or 'Like.'"⁷

Not only can social media often extend violence simply by posting graphic pictures or inflaming comments, but it also recruits those who want violence to spread. The Islamic State's skyrocketing recruitment has been attributed to social media's prevailing ease and utility. In his article, Houglan continues by saying, "The true purpose of the ISIS videos is not to shock Westerners outraged by the savagery; their purpose is to recruit like-minded zealots to the cause and establish their brand promise under a black flag."⁸

To effectively predict, respond to and manage civil unrest throughout the world, the Department of Defense must continue funding the Minerva Initiative either by matching or exceeding the initial \$50 million per fiscal year, and increase its call for social media research. Our world is steadily growing too unstable to not have a research initiative of this importance and magnitude.

Works Cited

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³Dewey, Taylor, Juliane Kaden, Miriam Marks, Shun Matsushima, and Beijing Zhu. *The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest. Stanford Public Policy Program*. Stanford University, 20 Mar. 2012. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.

⁴University-Led Research." (*Minerva Initiative*). N.p., 30 June 2015. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.

⁵Arkin, William M., and Alexa O'Brien. "These Are the 100 Most Militarized Universities in America." VICE News. Vice News, 5 Nov. 2015. Web. 7 Jan. 2016.

⁶Arkin.

⁷Houglan, Curtis. "How Social Media Leads to a Less Stable World." *Things Fall Apart: How Social Media Leads to a Less Stable World Comments*. Wharton - University of Pennsylvania, 6 Oct. 2014. Web. 18 Dec. 2015.

⁸Houglan.