Unconventional warfare, meet social media.
Future mission success could depend on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google+, or iReporting. To pervert Leon Trotsky’s axiom on war,

“You may not be interested in social media, but social media is very interested in you.”
Social media — blogs, social-network sites, information aggregators, wikis, livecasting, video sharing — has decisively altered that most extreme of socio-politico acts: revolution. The 2011 Arab Spring revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East were engineered through citizen-centric computer and cellular-phone technologies that streamed web-enabled social exchanges. The Arab Spring has profound implications for the U.S. special-operations mission of unconventional warfare. This article posits that the study, practice and successful execution of future UW must deliberately account for and incorporate social media.

This article first examines the role of social media during the Arab Spring revolutions and uprisings. Next, social media’s profound political effects are woven to the historical and doctrinal practice of UW. Three areas of UW are analyzed: social mobilization, the digital underground and the weapon of the narrative. This article concludes with an appeal for the focused study of the nexus between social media and UW to include the practice of and experimentation with the use of social media enabled by handheld technologies.

The Arab Spring

Labeled alternately the Arab Spring or the Twitter Revolution, the spring of 2011 witnessed uprisings and revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, with revolution-inspired, violent demonstrations following in multiple Middle Eastern, North African and European nations. The uprisings were sparked by the Dec. 17, 2011, self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a frustrated Tunisian fruit-and-vegetable street vendor (with a computer science degree). Public outrage followed, led by viral social-media postings. Months later, across the Middle East and North Africa, social media achieved another innovative milestone: a decentralized community of web-based activists rapidly coalesced into politically powerful, loosely organized insurgents who produced not just riots, but astonishing revolutionary change.

The uprisings represented a true “starfish” moment: peer-to-peer relationships generated a collaborative will that sparked defiant acts of resistance spanning two continents. Social media proliferated compelling images and stories that resonated with all classes of citizens, worldwide, inspiring a mix of activism and outrage that ignited revolutionary sentiment. It is said that revolutions “come, they are not made.” Despite the unpredictability of revolutions, the Arab Spring uprisings demonstrated that the medium is as important as — or more important than — the message. Handheld technologies and social media connectivity aggregated small acts of resistance that produced frenzied revolutionary momentum. The lack of a cohesive revolutionary ideology was less significant than the collective thrill of millions of like-minded, networked citizens expressing dissent.

Even if revolution was not the aim, it was the outcome. Social-media collaboration generated accidental revolutionaries. The connected masses forged rapid, digital alliances too dynamic to be ignored and too unpredictable to be countered. In a remarkably short time span, social-media communities viewed their collective action in historical terms, generating the key ingredient required for revolutionary momentum: inevitability.

The pervasive and resilient character of web-based social media enabled rapid social
organization that circumvented regimes and inspired bold and effective acts of resistance. Social media demonstrated that it is effective in sparking revolutions. It also showed some proficiency in managing the tactics and flexibility required to sustain spirited, if disorganized, revolutionary momentum. Even the state-sponsored physical violence, media control and comprehensive counterrevolutionary measures could not effectively thwart the uprising.

The inspiring, liberating spirit of the Arab Spring has given way to a long year of discord, civil war and state-on-citizen violence. We are reminded that revolutions are messy, violent affairs, whether delivered by cell phone or pitchfork. Outcomes notwithstanding, the Arab Spring confirms that the digital networks that promulgate social-media content present both an environment and a communication-based weapon system.

**UW Background**

To place social media within UW, it is helpful to review the definition of UW, address special-operations responsibilities for the conduct of UW and give examples of UW campaigns.

UW is defined as “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area.” UW is not a mechanism for creating revolutionary conditions — rather, it seizes on and supports existing political, military and social infrastructure to accelerate, stimulate and support decisive action based on calculated political gain and U.S. national interests.

U.S. Army Special Forces are the Department of Defense’s only military unit designed to conduct UW, and are specially trained to operate in politically sensitive, denied areas that characterize UW environments.

UW is inherently an interagency activity, which combines the military component of the U.S. Army Special Forces with the U.S. government agencies that possess the requisite authorities and capabilities to support a UW campaign.

The principle components of an insurgent or resistance movement are the underground, the auxiliary and the guerrilla force. UW pairs Special Forces with resistance groups, insurgents, revolutionaries, tribes or other cohesive indigenous social groups that qualify as a legitimate threat to an existing power. The insurgent forces must be determined to be a suitable partner, both militarily and politically, for the conduct of operations in support of U.S. national interests.

The two major U.S. wars of this decade — Afghanistan and Iraq — were initiated with successful Special Forces-supported UW campaigns. Strategically, UW offers a rapid, flexible option where large-scale conventional forces are not suitable or advisable.

UW and its nearly polar opposite, foreign internal defense, remain the principal mission for the Fort Bragg, N.C.-based United States Army Special Forces Command (Airborne).

**Linking the Arab Spring and UW**

To clarify, the Arab Spring revolutions are not case studies of UW. The majority of the Arab Spring uprisings are homespun insurrections in various phases of their revolutionary cycle. In Libya, the anti-Qaddafi regime rebels have received external support.
from the U.S. and NATO. This support, both direct and indirect, falls short of the full application of UW. As of this writing, NATO support to the Libyan rebels is best classified as indirect support or limited intervention.

The value in examining UW against the Arab Spring is twofold. First, the Arab Spring revolutions and uprisings contain the environmental complexities resident in UW environments. Studying these cases offers insight into the way UW environments might take shape in the future. Second, the aim of UW is to coerce, disrupt or overthrow an occupying power or government; precisely the aim of a revolutionary. The successes and failures of the resistance movements and the subsequent actions of the governments provide valuable information for informing future UW theory, doctrine and training principles.

Borderless social mobilization. UW will be affected by the advent of hyper-accelerated social organization. The ability of citizens to instantly connect, communicate and act constitutes an evolution of the military notion of mass. High-volume social-media content forms a relatively innocuous type of mass until they stimulate and assist in illegal acts of resistance or war. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, creators of the concept of *netwar* have synthesized cyber, social and military capabilities into a modern concept of “swarming.” Arquilla and Ronfeldt define swarming as “seemingly amorphous, but it is a deliberately structured, coordinated strategic way to strike from all directions.”

Swarming in the digital domain can easily span time zones, geography, economic and cultural barriers. The Arab Spring demonstrated how social media can congregate its users digitally, then quickly shift to directing or influencing some form of focused physical mass or swarm.

In Egypt, thousands of social-media exchanges combined the normally benign activity of online social commentary with the unpredictable actions of revolutionaries, disenfranchised individuals and opportunists. The result? A persistent wave of e-mass inspired civil disobedience that toppled a 30-year regime in 18 days with a “narrative and a nudge.”

Revolution in Egypt was stimulated by Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian-born, Google regional marketing manager, who created a Facebook page titled, “We are all Khaled Said,” dedicated to a slain Egyptian businessman. Ghonim’s Facebook page became a catalyst for the revolution. In a modern
example of swarming initiated by digital mass, Ghonim’s Facebook page went viral, igniting the masses against the 25-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak.

Wael Ghonim’s role in the revolution illustrates how social media has made the creation and mobilization of active revolutionaries in days and weeks — a stunning evolution that impacts the organizational principles of resistance movements.

Borderless social mobilization, enabled by digital mass, has compelling organizational implications for UW. Initially, borderless social mobilization allows like-minded groups to coalesce digitally with less risk than the traditional early, vulnerable stages of building a resistance movement. Subsequently, borderless social mobilization can be blended with traditional organizational methods, combining established techniques with innovative social-organization technologies. The organizational progression blends a digital front and a physical front, both of which are decentralized. The result is a multi-front, or more aptly, a “multi-sphere” campaign. This is the art and science of interpreting and acting on social-media cues as a principal element of combat-advising indigenous resistance forces. UW practitioners must now consider their organizational capacity to leverage social media in concert with traditional methods of supporting an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force.

In the initial phases of digital-centric mobilization, U.S.-supported resistance forces can capitalize on the rapidity and relative safety of the decentralized cyber domain. For a regime attempting to defend or attack its internal threats, social media can create a highly decentralized and challenging front. As this decentralized front self-organizes in the cyber domain, a traditionally organized front of armed military capability — the supported guerrilla force — can organize in the physical domain. The threatened occupying power faces a multi-pronged, networked threat that is as difficult to predict as social media itself. This multi-sphere UW campaign methodology combines the chaotic power of borderless social mobilization with the lethality and precision of focused military effort.

This paradigm levels the physical realm of war with the digital realm, recognizing social-media-centric communication as an equal to tactical military actions. Without question, acts of war and violent, tactical military actions will always shape the narrative. Arguably, tactical actions and social narratives can rarely be separated. However, this scenario illustrates the “information order with an operations’ annex” supposition that emphasizes the lasting effects of effective information proliferation over the fleeting nature of successful tactical actions. We must recognize that citizen-generated media content will shape public perceptions with credibility and speed. Our meticulously crafted and dogmatically staffed military public-affairs releases will be poor competitors for influence in this environment. Our UW proficiency will depend on revised authorities, uncomfortable risk calculations and social-media aptitudes that are not normally associated with the military action.

Our application of UW information management must understand what sociologist Manuel Costells calls the shift from the age of mass communication to the age of mass self-communication. To shape the way people feel, think and behave, UW must consider social media as one would a catastrophic weapon system with no single owner or operator: how is it oriented, what are its targets, who understands its capabilities, how can one influence it, how can I protect myself and how can I leverage it against my adversaries?

Social media has expanded the possibilities for both U.S. and indigenous forces to mobilize, organize, recruit, communicate and network. The traditional resistance organization methods — furtive meetings, clandestine contacts, cellular structures — still have great relevance. However, social media is a proven accelerant, defying historical prognostications for the time required for irregular force information dissemination and organizational action. Previous methodical approaches and linear progressions of UW campaigns can now leverage unthinkably rapid social mediums. Managing this paradigm shift in a UW environment might be less suited for U.S. Cyber Command and better suited for Special Forces Soldier with a smartphone, a computer and a cadre of a wired, indigenous underground. For SOF, herein lies our challenge: Will the Special Forces leader who recognizes a decisive but fleeting opportunity, have the command authority, legal authority, the connectivity, the situational awareness and the confidence to risk seizing the initiative through social media?

Future UW campaigns must be designed to anticipate, nurture and capitalize on the multi-sphere concept. As a start, current UW education, training and experimentation venues must widely educate and train our force on borderless social mobilization, the phenomena of digital mass, swarming and the impacts of hyper-accelerated social organization.

The Decentralized Underground

Successful insurgencies and resistance groups require leadership. In doctrinal UW, the underground is the nucleus of leadership that provides the direction, organization and stewards the strategy for the resistance force. Historically, the underground is a clandestine, cellular structure with adequate hierarchy to synchronize resistance actions. The proliferation of social media has introduced a new type of underground: a digitally connected, leaderless organization with varying levels of commitment to the cause.

The multiple-nation Arab Spring uprisings contained a similar pattern of electronic and physical mass that pre-existed any true unified leadership. In all affected countries, the resistance leadership formed after the initial revolutionary thrusts. To be sure, pockets of leadership did exist prior to revolutionary actions. However, these leaderless revolutions witnessed aspiring leaders scrambling behind the leading edge of the revolution, reacting and attempting to build organizational cohesion and primacy in the midst of upheaval.

Ori Bronfman and Rod A. Beckstrom describe the emergence of leaderless organizations in The Spider and The Starfish: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations. The authors explain how decentralized organizations survive, thrive and, often, dominate. The first principle is “when attacked, a decentralized organization tends to become even more open and decentralized.” This principle aptly describes the behavior of nearly all 2011’s North African and Middle Eastern web-inspired insurrections.

Examined against UW doctrine, the leaderless Arab Spring revolutions were
initiated by a previously non-existent, highly decentralized digital underground. Remarkably, these self-forming digital undergrounds performed the exact functions of a traditionally organized underground: intelligence, counterintelligence, subversion, propaganda, control of networks and direction of tactical actions. The digital underground has additional characteristics evolving in the media age: redundancy, distributed leadership and the ability to survive by mutation.

As witnessed in 2011, these digital undergrounds can morph into highly visible “overgrounds.” Publicity, transparency and mass posted content, analyzing and potentially influencing the social-media indicators and resulting behavioral outcomes. The social-media common-operating picture will track and display Facebook feeds, Twitter posts, citizen-posted reports, YouTube videos, iReports and critically, their trends in viewership. The doctrinal decision-support matrix might contain actions to be taken when social-media tripwires are sprung. Battle drills might contend with flash mobs (creating or preventing), technology denial or patching detours around state-sponsored Internet censors. Both the military-style field leaders and the digital catalysts constitute insurgent leadership. While both play a factor, it is people who topple regimes, not cellular phones. SF should be prepared to effectively support both the decentralized digital insurgents and our traditional partners, the armed guerrilla leader. Success in future UW campaigns will likely blend the understanding of social networking with the application of SF advisors and U.S. joint firepower in support of a resistance movement or insurgency.

We must understand the nature of leaderless organizations and calculate how distributed leadership can support and not cripple, the U.S.-sponsored resistance group. Social media has radically changed the mechanics of how communication affects social organization. We must educate and train ourselves to recognize and interact with these nontraditional forms of leadership and power.

**Weapon of the Narrative**

Social media, wireless Internet, cellular phones and associated liberation technologies are increasingly the predominant methods of transmitting compelling narratives. The Arab Spring, the London riots, the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit episode and most famously, the Occupy movements are examples of the emergence of a visually-oriented, ideologically impulsive Internet culture with the means to rapidly and collectively plan and act.

Electronic narratives are so pervasive that they generate actions before ideologies are considered. Nearly all the Arab Spring insurrections lack ideological cohesion for governing; what they have in common is powerful narratives for dismantling. Social media enabled the proliferation of these powerful narratives, amplifying what cultural anthropologists already know: narratives...
in the form of stories, rumors, biographies and pictures drive our behaviors and shape our convictions.

Future UW considerations must ascertain how to compete in a fickle psychological arena in the era of the electronic narrative. Historically, insurgent ideological indoctrinations were slow-boiling, methodical processes in which narratives were used for the “hook,” and ideological indoctrination followed. The methods of Mao Zedong and other communist insurgent methodologies employed compelling, emotive narratives to recruit supporters. Only after these narratives mobilized recruits would the communist political indoctrination be introduced. Following the political indoctrination, one could then be trained as a true guerrilla.

With greater emphasis on building a narrative and less on ideology, social media offers an alternative to the historical, linear progression of developing a resistance storyline. This shift is incidental and accidental; a byproduct of our digitized world. Social-media content — personal, citizen-centric, picture-rich, story-filled — promotes personal narratives in greater volume and frequency, resulting in the increasing centrality of personal chronicles that demote the importance of ideologies.

Social media proliferates information so quickly and broadly that the narratives replace ideology, at least temporarily. Whether it is narratives or ideologies that generate momentum, the psychological aspects of UW in the digital age require reviewing the agility of our methods of supporting insurgents, surrogates or resistance groups.

At its essence, UW is a method of psychological warfare. The merger of social media and UW is a natural progression. The U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School was originally named the Psychological Warfare Center because of the inherent nature of special-operations forces and their emphasis on indirect, nonstandard methods.

Importantly, UW is a method for coercing and disrupting not just overthrowing. Coercion and disruption are psychological-influence methods used against our adversaries, where the objective is not to overthrow a regime but to achieve a more limited goal: creating a second front, supporting a deceptive operation, pressuring for peace or discrediting a regime’s ability to provide security.

Within UW, social media could prove to be a tool for persuading neutral populations to support an embryonic effort. A polarizing video, post or message could create favorable conditions for a UW campaign. Conversely, a detrimental posting could go viral, spreading negative perceptions that could erect unforeseen obstacles or foil well-sequenced actions. Future UW endeavors — even those in remote areas with little connectivity — remain subject to the perceptions created by citizen-generated information.

A UW campaign could be sequenced with psychological and social lines of effort as the principle “means” of delivery. Tactical actions would be planned and executed based on anticipating, shaping and exploiting social and psychological conditions. For example, the digital lines of operation could be monitoring (understanding), post-

**Conclusion**

The future study, practice and successful execution of future UW must deliberately incorporate and account for the highly public sphere of social media. For U.S. SOF engaging in UW, the effective use of social media and the use of handheld technologies is perhaps less about technology training and more about mindset shifts in how we view the boundaries of UW.

To provide the widest range of options to our leaders, SOF must be prepared, rehearsed and comfortable in combining low-technology practices within a high-technology, commercially driven, social-media rich environment.
The classic UW image is of the underground resistance-cell leaders meeting with U.S. advisers, clustered in a dark basement around a crumpled map, secretly organizing and planning their next tactical move. This image, and its low-tech nature, is not passé—it is more valid than ever. UW remains a business of trust, respect and the human connection that is the hallmark of language-trained, regionally-oriented, combat-experienced SF Soldiers. But the traditional image of UW is now incomplete. It has a counterpart image that is equally important: a scattered network of digerati, males and females, urban and rural, local and global, all texting, tweeting, posting and hacking from thousands of locations. Publicity is as paramount to the success of the digerati as is secrecy vital to the success of the traditional underground resistance cell. We must be prepared to operate in the secret and the public domains, simultaneously.

UW campaigns are bold and decisive acts of military and political will. Future campaigns will contend with mature and powerful social-media environments. The Arab Spring merits further analysis of borderless social mobilization, digital undergrounds and the weapon of the narrative. Refreshing the theories, education, training, authorities and experimentation of UW will serve us well when our nation calls and our best option is—once again—UW: SW

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Notes

5. Operation Enduring Freedom—Afghanistan was initiated with a doctrinal unconventional-warfare campaign, partnering the 5th Special Forces Group and their interagency partners with the Northern Alliance resistance forces. The northern front of Operation Iraqi Freedom was also a doctrinal unconventional-warfare operation, pairing the 10th Special Forces Group with the Iraqi Kurdish Forces.
6. Support to Libya has components of indirect support and direct support, less ground combat roles. The acknowledged use of US and NATO airpower is direct support to a resistance force and could well be considered doctrinal combat support.
8. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt have well-developed theories on swarming dating back to In Athena’s Camp (1997), Networks and Networks (2001).
9. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, Swarming and the Future of Conflict (RAND, Santa Monica, CA, December 2, 2010). This excellent study examines the possibilities of adopting swarming as a doctrinal technique for US Forces.
13. Traditional organizational methods include clandestine organization methods used by undergrounds to establish leaders, organizational goals and tactical actions.
14. Remarks made by Admiral Eric Olson, commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, January 2009 at the NDIA-SOLIC conference, Washington, D.C. The author of this article was present for this speech.
16. Brafman and Beckstrom.
17. Ibid, 21.
20. For Egypt, the story of the #25Jan hashtag illustrates the power of a 22-year old female in disseminating information rapidly.
21. Glantz and Markoff, 1. The term “liberation technology” broadly refers to communication networks and supporting technologies that provide regional and global connectivity that bypass state-sponsored restrictions or enable technologically underdeveloped regions.
22. The London riots occurred between August 6 and 10, 2011, following a public protest organized around the fatal shooting of a British citizen by law-enforcement officers. Outside of traditional media outlets, much of the reporting occurred on social media outlets, both informing the public and shaping the events themselves.
23. The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) incident in August 2011 included local officials shutting down cellular phone service to thwart protesters from organizing via handheld technologies. The incident provoked wide public discussion on the role of law enforcement in limiting access to technologies that could cause potentially be used to cause harm to the public or damage property.
24. The CORE Lab at the Naval Postgraduate School “was established in 2007 with the mission to support U.S. and international field operatives in the analytical craft of integrating geospatial, cultural, relational and temporal data in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Irregular Warfare environment.” COL Greg Wilson and Dr. Sean Everton are the co-directors of the CORE Lab. In addition to real time analysis, the CORE Lab instructs NPS students on how to apply advanced analytical methods for current conflicts. Reference CORE Lab pamphlet and author’s visit to NPS in September 2011.
25. The CORE Lab conducted an analysis of the hashtag referenced in footnote 18 (#25Jan hashtag) using open source data. This type of analysis provides invaluable information in mapping networks, network nodes, deception attempts, and social data relevant to understanding and visualizing a rapidly changing environment.