



24 April 2023

PERSPECTIVES



A “Post-Like-Share” Revolution: Strategic Messaging and Social Media as a Tool of Irregular Warfare

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As daylight broke on January 24, 2023, more than 123 million Iranians reached for their smartphones and scrolled through their social media platforms. Checking Instagram, they began watching a video posted that morning by NXTanimal, a social media creative agency.

The [video](#), narrated by Arian Moayed,--best known for his role of Stewie Hussieni on the HBO hit show *Succession*--quickly gained traction across the country. In the first 24 hours, it was viewed more than a million times on Instagram, millions more on platforms such as Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and others.

The caption accompanying the video was short but powerful: “They may have robbed our country of its riches but they can never steal our spirit and determination to taste freedom #IRGCterrorists.” This two-minute video conveyed a powerful truth to the Iranian people. It told the story of average Iranians having to make hard decisions to feed their families and make ends meet to survive.

The video shows Iranians trading sneakers for a piece of meat, bartering goods to heat their homes, and selling their schoolbooks for grains of rice. The video then highlighted the value of Iran’s oil output, \$35 billion in 2022, and showcased how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) squandered billions of dollars of this revenue on its proxy forces in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere across the Middle East—at the cost of [the continued implosion of the Iranian economy](#).

While the Islamic Republic spends on its proxy wars, food costs for the Iranian people soared nearly 70 percent. Meanwhile, the IRGC’s nuclear program and adventurist foreign policy in the region, including its support for terrorist groups, resulted in the regime being slapped with [sanctions](#)—which only further exacerbate the daily living conditions of the Iranian people, depriving them of access to medicine, modern medical equipment, and other resources.

NXTanimal’s video ricocheted across the internet. Farsi language television platforms outside of Iran also broadcasted the video. People reacted and shared, amplifying the protest movements and calls for change in Iran. Their actions fit neatly into what we call irregular warfare (IW).

The NXTanimal video was one of many developed by other social media organizations outside of Iran, such as [Middle East Matters](#) and [Legomahi](#), to support anti-government protests following the death of a young Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini. The regime arrested Amini for not wearing her headscarf properly, and the 22-year-old Amini suffered severe head trauma while in custody, dying on September 16, 2022. Iranians were enraged and took to the streets in protest against the regime.





The video was an excellent example of the impact of non-linear strategic messaging and amplification—both valuable tools of irregular warfare. The Department of Defense (DoD) [defines](#) irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.” Messaging is one of the most important aspects and tools of IW. Messaging can build or erode legitimacy, constrain government options, and fundamentally change the balance of strategic power, especially as authoritarian governments seek to control the message that their populations receive. The spread of this video exemplifies the power of a message that resonates with the people and the efficiency of social media in disseminating that message, showcasing the utility and impact of social media as a tool of irregular warfare.

The 2009 [Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept study](#) defines strategic communication as: “focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.” The NXTanimal video would certainly fit that definition of strategic communication.

For years, the IRGC has attempted to control social media and internet access, seeking to limit the amount of information the Iranian people have about its meddling in the Middle East. The IRGC has spent [more than \\$16 billion](#) on wars and conflicts outside of Iran. For years, average citizens took almost no notice. Quite naturally, they focused their attention on more immediate concerns, like the rising prices of food, gas, and other day-to-day goods, some of which soared more than [500 percent](#). That gave the IRGC a free hand to effectively control internal messaging. Using anti-Western rhetoric and blaming the sanctions levied by the United States and the rest of the Western world, the IRGC could keep most of its population in the dark and distract them from their extravagant spending to finance external conflicts instead of addressing the needs of its own people.

Then came NXTanimal. From its professional editing quality, to how it used prominent Iranians as narrators and distributed the video via known Iranian influencers, NXTanimal represented a new frontier in strategic messaging against the Iranian regime, and landed with the Iranian people in a never-before-seen manner. NXTanimal produced a whole series of videos exposing the Islamic Republic and their regime, titled “[Diaries of A Revolution](#)” that tell the stories of Iranians who sent in anonymous reports and accounts of daily life during the protests. NXTanimal also produced another video titled “[No Due Process](#)” shortly after the executions of two Iranians, [Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Mohammad Hosseini](#), who were both found guilty of corruption in a rushed trial, a charge which the regime has slapped upon protestors. The video portrays Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and other senior officials of the Iranian government as criminals with their mugshots, messaging the Islamic Republic must be accountable for the death of these two Iranian citizens.

These videos had a wide reach among both Iranians and the Iranian diaspora. The Iranian people saw NXTanimal as an outlet to share their stories without fearing retaliation, arrest, imprisonment, or even death.

Although the popularity of social media has ushered in an era of messaging, information in and of itself is not enough. The presentation of the information, not just the message itself, is paramount to success. The NXTanimal video demonstrated the necessary components for a great message to be effective and spread. Native speakers and cultural experts were necessary to develop the message while making sure it felt organic to the targeted audience. From an irregular warfare standpoint, the ability to understand what grievances and unifying ideas at a local level enable better targeting for exploitation of an audience is just as important as the language used. NXTanimal was able to leverage the outrage of everyday issues that affect the Iranian people, and tapped into daily grievances that all Iranians could agree upon.

In the wake of the protests, the regime began arresting citizens for posting messages of support on social media. The arrests did not quell the protestors, forcing the regime to begin limiting internet access across the country in order to restrict access to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok, where these messages were metastasizing. That, too, failed to stop the protests. In response, groups from across the world started to fill the void, amplifying



the voices and videos of the protesters. Groups outside of Iran distributed protest times and dates through channels not blocked by the government. Additionally, these “outsiders” highlighted messages showing how family members [of the Iranian regime’s officials](#) were living lavishly in Europe and not according to the rules of the Islamic Republic, all while the average Iranian was struggling to afford the basic necessities of daily life. Eventually, a nearly seamless transition occurred from the people in Iran to the people outside of Iran, who were free to coordinate protests and disseminate anti-regime messaging within the country.

And therein lies a foundational lesson for irregular warfare and information operations: even with limited internet access, amplification of voices and messages that resonate to a target audience can still happen despite any governments or state’s restrictions. The local populace of a country will know how to bypass censorship, but more importantly, they know how and with whom to share a message so that it resonates and its reach grows organically.

The DoD and other U.S. government agencies use strategic messaging and information operations to control and shape the battlefield, to limited success. Strategic messaging will take on greater import, in this era of irregular warfare. As such, there are a few key lessons that Washington should learn from viewing the success of NXTanimal.

Data analytics will form a key plank of effective amplification strategies. Developing influence mapping algorithms and, more broadly, using science-based methodology to amplify messages of freedom will further enhance the influence of social media-based messaging. Organizations can identify or insert the source of a message and its path using advanced data analytics thus predicting how effective messaging will be against a target audience. From there, organizations can measure success on several different factors: effectiveness, reach, and impact. By aligning planned messages with specific discussions and audiences, DoD planners can improve the likelihood of engagement. Data analysis can also help identify which topics of interest are effective and receive measured engagement which can guide decision making.

The effectiveness of strategic messaging on social media, as a tool of irregular warfare, should not be underestimated. Strategic messaging, social media, and a dispersed international network provide invaluable resources. A well-crafted message that resonates with the target audience will find a way to spread and can have significant influence over the people. With the reach of social media, messaging apps, and the internet, the United States and other U.S. allies can effectively influence and shape a population in support of their mission. In addition, the cost of this type of strategic messaging is nominal compared to other resources. The DoD and other agencies need to leverage and keep up with trending digital changes, new methodologies, and advances in data analysis and analytics to ensure they are prepared to implement messaging as necessary.

From leveraging different digital platforms to analyzing successful social media trends from around the world, the DoD must establish a baseline for strategic messaging that can be used as part of an irregular warfare campaign. The baseline should include at minimum: target audience identification; measurements for outcomes; and plans for potential counter-messaging. The DoD should establish a strategic messaging office that would work across all services and with local entities to establish the baselines, coordinate messages and effective targeting plans. This office would be responsible for planning and supporting strategic messaging campaigns and establish baselines and analysis that could be leveraged for irregular warfare campaigns.

In the two months since NXTanimal posted the video, it has been viewed more than 60 million times and shared in almost 100 countries. Its message has reached the halls of the French National Assembly, where the video was subtitled in French and submitted as part of testimony during an event titled “Freedom for the Iranian People” on February 3, 2023. And its reach is still expanding. In the new era of a connective world, those who control the narrative have the ability to control the people. Messaging matters, but so does the message.

About the Author:

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