The Information Domain and Social Media

by SGM Alexander E. Aguilastratt and SGM Matthew S. Updike

A form of asymmetric warfare is waged against the United States and its citizens daily across multiple venues and platforms without reaching the threshold or definition of open conflict.[1] That form of asymmetric warfare is disinformation.

Disinformation erodes trust and the ability to establish a society with effective institutions to serve and protect. As a result, it is conceivable to assume that disinformation and its social-media venues are corrosives affecting the information domain.

Much like the early stages of the improvised-explosive devices (IEDs), disinformation presents the United States with a cost-effective, low-effort tactical problem with a strategic consequence manifested in national trust erosion. The U.S. Army faces the renewal of great-power competition with adversaries engaging in multiple domains, thus challenging the traditional definitions of war and peace and operating under the threshold that would warrant military action.[2]

A few years ago, Frank Hoffman identified the "weaponization" of social media as playing perfectly into the concept of hybrid warfare: "Hybrid warfare incorporates a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts, coercion and disorder," he said.[3]

Importance

The information domain offers adversaries the ability to engage the U.S. Army with digital IEDs and erode trust between our military and the American people. Social media is the preferred venue for foreign, domestic and proxy enemies to engage the Army remotely with minor consequences.

The information domain starts at the tactical level, and it is also a tactical commander's responsibility to occupy

it or otherwise relinquish key terrain to nefarious actors. However, there is a lack of concise guidance about information and the aspects of cross-domain warfare. The result is the effect of "paralysis by analysis" and the consequent disregard of social media as a tactical system in the new information domain.

Active measures in the realm of social media include influencing others in a coercive way; disinformation; political-influence operations in what could be considered the tactical setting for the asymmetric gray zone; hybrid; or next-generation information warfare against the U.S. Army.

Operational environment

Social media, as part of the information domain, fits perfectly as a tool to shape the information operational environment, coordinate efforts and erode trust by antagonizing below the threshold of conflict, wrote Sarah Jacobs Gamberini.

In past times, basic communication models included sender, receiver, transmission, medium and message as separate components; however, due to advances in technology, the information domain now adds the Internet, radio waves, satellite communications, wireless networks and social media to the previous media, said Robert Kolinski.[4]

As a result, the information domain will become the preferred operational environment by near-peer, extremist organizations and domestic threats that cannot match the U.S. Army's kinetic capabilities.

Example: ISIS in Mosul

When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) invaded Northern Iraq in 2014, it only had about 15,000 militants who picked up weapons and vehicles from the previous extremist groups. However, after introducing its hashtag campaign #ALLEyesOnISIS, it gained an extensive network of passionate supporters and Twitter bots to lock down other trending hashtags for Arabic-speaking users.[5]

ISIS' on-line tactics and mastery of the information domain recruited from more than 100 countries and spread fear globally.

The information domain as an operational environment is now a contested battlespace where various actors with real-world goals such as ISIS could use the same tactics with relative simplicity. For example, ISIS's top recruiter, Junaid Hussein, used the same tactics that Taylor Swift used to sell her records.

The acknowledgment of the changes in the character of warfare related to the information domain is evident not only to the military but also to corporations. Facebook, for example, is planning the creation of a "war room" to counter disinformation operations.[6]

Commanders at all levels deal with the challenges of the information domain, social media and their formations. Social media is the ideal platform for information/disinformation, on-line communities, nefarious actors, inundation and targeting, and less-than-honest techniques. For example, during the last Mexican elections, one-third of the on-line conversations were generated by bots.[7]

Social-media platforms are addictive by design. Notifications, for example, do not tell the user what the subject is about, thus creating a certain level of anxiety and the need for closure, appealing to emotions. Unfortunately our young generation of Soldiers is affected by this type of emotional targeting.

Russia's view

"Russia's theory of the United States is that its diversity is its weakness. Russia is digging deeper into the preexisting fault lines of American society by distracting, dividing and weakening. We can expect the same [modus operandi] against the U.S. Army. Occupying the information domain with a clear, genuine and transparent message would help command teams protect their formations against social-media weaponization." – Sarah Jacobs Gamberini

For example, in Chicago, 80 percent of school fights originate from on-line comments. Gangs and extremist-organization recruiters stir negative emotions such as anger to disenfranchise and absorb young recruits.

If units do not occupy and employ the information-domain operational environment, they risk enabling nefarious actors to target Soldiers, spread disinformation and operate with impunity.

Speed and level of response

The need for a social-media presence as part of information-domain occupation is paramount for U.S. society and its symbiotic relationship of trust with its Army. One of the most efficient ways for commanders to occupy the information domain and counter disinformation is to practice consistent messaging, whether doctrine or science/fact-based.

As social media continues to evolve with visual venues, including China's TikTok, it is essential to point out that the enemy uses artificial intelligence and algorithms to flood the virtual battlefield. As a result, reliable information must be treated as a defensive/ offensive weapon system and an area-denial tool against nefarious actors.

The most effective tool against nefarious actors is an educated and empowered population of Soldiers and leaders capable of identifying and discrediting disinformation attempts. The U.S. Army must recognize at echelon that social media can be used as a weapon of adverse effects; therefore, it must invest in social-media literacy and instill awareness of methods and goals of targeted campaigns by nefarious actors.

For example, Russia believes that the United States' weakness is its diversity, so to counter this, the U.S. Army must show strength in its pluralism and pave the way to heal the divisions in our country by shielding our own culture.

When the Army acknowledges social media as part of the information domain and develops an effective strategy, it will deny nefarious actors crucial terrain in the information

environment and nullify one of GEN Valery Gerasimov's Russian new-generation-warfare pillars.

Changes in technology

The U.S. Army's adversaries see information as a domain and all forms across platforms as potential venues of power ready to be weaponized. Near-peer threats also view all U.S. information-technology systems as vulnerabilities, according to Gamberini.

As information technology evolves, so do its platforms (using TikTok as an example). Technological advances enable nefarious actors to manipulate media with artificial intelligence-enabled "deep fakes," according to Gamberini. Tech companies are developing

methods to reveal such deep fakes and image alterations that create anger and negative public opinion.

Also, developers are working on their algorithms to counter those used by nefarious actors to discourage the practice of sharing misleading information based on the title alone. The algorithms will aid in creating a healthy level of skepticism, improving social-media literacy, wrote Gamberini.

Despite all advances in technology, the most important advance must occur within the human domain. The most effective tool to counter disinformation and divisionism is the educated and empowered U.S. Army, capable of discrediting disinformation and targeting efforts. In addition, the Army must inoculate its Soldiers against those who seek malign control of the information domain.

Command teams must invest in social-media literacy and instill awareness, methods and goals of targeted disinformation campaigns while measuring fissures in their information campaigns.

Strategic communications and information advantage

The spread of misinformation and division is actually a "biohazard" that can spread throughout any formation if command teams do not effectively occupy the information domain. Command teams at echelon must define purpose with clarity and convey clear and concise messaging while considering the target audience and desired effects to counter or deny the enemy of crucial terrain to infect the information domain.

Social media is an effective platform to inform Soldiers and families while combating disinformation. Also, young Soldiers, officers and noncommissioned officers live in an era in which social media is essential in their lives.

Humanizing the narrative to create positive effects within formations is critical for countering the infection created by the weaponization of social media. Units that humanize their narrative can use the information domain as a means for Soldiers to:

- Know the unit's purpose;
- Communicate that purpose often and in different ways;

- Make it personal by creating informal feedback loops;
- Reinforce narrative with actions;
- Give purposed-based feedback; and
- Align behaviors with purpose.

Pre, during and after-action plans

Effective social-media communication provides command teams a venue to exercise information-domain advantage and deny nefarious actors key terrain and avenues to infect formations. Also, command teams and staff must have the capability to engage in contingency operations to inform or respond to emergencies before, during and after crises.

Time is of the essence, especially if that time is during a crisis. You will likely use social media and on-line platforms as the first resource to react and to put out information. Because social media provides speed, reach and direct contact with audiences, it is a crucial tool to disseminate command information and provide a place to receive timely updates.

Develop the social-media strategy as part of your crisis-communication plan. Having a set strategy the team is comfortable with will help your unit better prepare to use and manage responses during a crisis.

Command presence and talent management

Command teams must manage the information domain like any operational environment. Staff and senior-enlisted advisers can help the commander navigate the complex environment using experienced members within their formation (Soldiers and civilians) who are talented and adept to the social-media environment. A candid, genuine command presence can help leaders define their expectations, style and expectations to Soldiers and geographically displaced family members.

Also, subordinate commanders can emulate a solid and genuine social-media command presence. Defining leader expectations for the information domain is as important and comparable to the four rules of a gun range:

- Watch the muzzle and keep it pointed in a safe direction at all times;
- Treat every weapon system as if loaded at all times;
- Positively identify the target and the backdrop; and
- Keep your finger off the trigger until ready to engage.

Social media is an excellent medium for sharing information and reaching out to otherwise geographically displaced personnel; however, it is also a target-rich environment for nefarious actors. As a result, a strong command presence, coupled with action plans and expectations, is required to protect command integrity and safeguard Soldiers and families from the effects of disinformation and deliberate targeting.

Threats

Foreign. Open-source intelligence indicates that foreign actors are engaging in covert information operations against the United States. Disinformation is not a new concept. Russia has a long history of seeking to project power and influence while playing to our potential technological and geopolitical handicaps, according to Gamberini.

Without the equivalent conventional might of the United States, Russia, China and other nations recognize our appetite for information. They use social media as a platform to exercise tactics of influence, coercion and the capability to control the narrative, thus manipulating a specific population's hearts and minds, Gamberini said.

The diverse, pluralistic and democratic nature of the United States makes it a target-rich environment of social-media-empowered Russian disinformation. As a result, the all-volunteer force composed of free citizens of a diverse nation offers the same opportunities for a country that has long fought to rebalance power, Gamberini said.

At the macro level, Russia has realized U.S. conventional superiority, with Gerasimov's doctrine revolving around information control as the key to victory. The Gerasimov Doctrine, or Russian new-generation warfare,

advocates simultaneous operation and control of the military, political, cyber and information domains, which can be accessed employing social media.[8]

Gerasimov also made the following statement about information technology: "Information technology is one of the most promising types of weapons to be used covertly not only against critically important informational infrastructures but also against the population of a country, directly influencing the condition of a state's national security."[9]

Russia operates under the concept that the distinction between war and peace no longer exists and uses misinformation to protect itself from a military response. In essence, once it has started, Russia must maintain momentum since it acknowledges that the United States' advantages in information technology will undermine Russian social, cultural and political institutions if pushed beyond the threshold of conflict, said Gamberini.

China also seeks to influence the American public, although its approach differs widely from Russia's tactics. "We believe that the Chinese state has employed a plethora of state-run media to exploit the openness of American democratic society in an effort to insert an intentionally distorted and biased narrative portraying a utopian view of the Chinese government and party," analyzed *Recorded Future*, https://www.recordedfuture.com/china-social-media-operations. "What distinguishes Russian and Chinese approaches are their tactics, strategic goals and efficacy."

A paper published by the Hoover Institution in November 2018 included findings from more than 30 of the West's preeminent China scholars, collaborating in a working group on China's influence operations abroad. The scholars concluded: "[T]his report details a range of more assertive and opaque 'sharp power' activities that China has stepped up within the United States in an increasingly active manner. These exploit the openness of our democratic society to challenge, and sometimes even undermine, core American freedoms, norms and laws. ... [T]hese activities seek to undermine

traditional American values (like the freedoms of press, assembly and religion) that Chinese leadership increasingly views as threatening to their own system of authoritarian rule."

"The Russian state has used a broadly negative, combative, destabilizing and discordant influence operation because that type of campaign supports Russia's strategic goals to undermine faith in democratic processes, support pro- Russian policies or preferred outcomes, and sow division within Western societies," stated *Recorded Future* analysts. "Russia's strategic goals require covert actions and are inherently disruptive, therefore the social-media influence techniques employed are secretive and disruptive as well.

"The Chinese state has a starkly different set of strategic goals, and as a result, Chinese state-run social-media influence operations use different techniques," said *Recorded Future*. "[Chinese President] Xi Jinping has chosen to support China's goal to exert greater influence on the current international system by portraying the government in a positive light, arguing that China's rise will be beneficial, co-operative and constructive for the global community. This goal requires a coordinated global message and technique, which presents a strong, confident and optimistic China."

The relentless need to maintain the social media and disinformation continuum of operations under the destabilizing Gerasimov Doctrine enables Russian tactical commanders to conduct offensive cyber and information operations. In contrast, U.S. tactical commanders lack clear social-media guidance at the tactical level. It is fair to conclude that a Russian tactical commander is more empowered to conduct offensive information operations than a U.S. tactical-level commander due to the protection of several disinformation layers. As a result, Russian tactical-information units and their proxies occupy the proverbial "high ground" of the information domain.

Modus operandi. Western newspapers once described Russian President Vladimir Putin as "the cold-eyed ruler of Russia," "a cold, calculating … spy who sought to undermine freedom in the West." With "his dark past, his sinister look," he was "straight out of KGB central casting."[10] Thus one could say that Putin is the spy who would be king. As such, he understood that once he embarked on the Gerasimov Doctrine, his methods for occupying the information domain would become predictable.

As a result, the need for relentless action at the tactical level would become the Russian apparatus' cornerstone. Therefore Russia's social-media exploitation method is predictable. They identify a contentious issue, employ bots and trolls on various social-media platforms to spread divisive messages, and amplify discord, wrote Gamberini.

In addition, a diverse U.S. Army, recruiting from a pluralistic society dealing with societal fissures and racial tension, creates opportunities for

Figure 1. "Nefarious actors" use social media to engage in information-domain warfare.

Russian disinformation attacks against the foundations of trust between the U.S. Army and the American people. In the case of creating friction against the U.S. Army, Russia employs tactics such as those used against African-Americans in advance of the 2016 election and the exploitation of the Black Lives Matter movement by flooding Twitter Hashtags and diluting legitimate concerns (Gamberini).

The need for a response and occupation of the information domain becomes prevalent when the Russian threat recognizes the need to identify, exploit and amplify U.S. political tensions, racial wounds and the promotion of health scams (anti-vaxxer movement) in a divisive and emotional manner.

Domestic. On-line social-media platforms are playing an increasingly important role in the radicalization processes of U.S. extremists. While U.S. extremists were slow to embrace social media, in recent years the number of individuals relying on these user-to-user platforms to disseminate extremist content and the facilitation of extremist relationships has grown exponentially. In fact, in 2016 alone, social media played a role in the radicalization processes of nearly 90 percent of the extremists in *Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States* data.

Social media exists for the extremist the same way it exists for the everyday user, neither evil nor benevolent. Social-media sites are simply a method extremists use to conduct a myriad of organizational functions.

Facebook, Twitter or YouTube are the most popular social-media sites today, but that does not mean they will stay on top. Tumblr, Linked In, Google+ and Instagram are all social-media sites growing in popularity.

Command teams and staff must acknowledge and keep abreast of new advances in social media.[11] However, it must not consume their time, nor should they neglect professional distance, but rather consider social media as part of the information domain.

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Notes

[1] Sarah Jacobs Gamberini, "Social Media Weaponization: The Biohazard of Russian Disinformation Campaigns," **Joint Force Quarterly**, 4th Quarter 2020.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Frank Hoffman, **Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare**, Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007, cited in Dr. Ofer Fridman, **The Danger of "Russian Hybrid Warfare,"** Cicero Foundation "great debate" paper, July 2017.

[4] Robert Kozloski, **The Information Domain as an Element of National Power**, Center for Contemporary Conflict, 2020.

[5] The University of Pennsylvania, **Why Social Media is the New Weapon in Modern Warfare**, Knowledge@Wharton, 2019.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gamberini.

[9] Dr. Harold Orenstein and LTC (Retired) Timothy Thomas, "The Development of Military Strategy Under Contemporary Conditions: Tasks for Military Science," **Military Review**, November 2019.

[10] Greg McLaughlin, **Russia and the Media: The Makings of a New Cold War,** London: Pluto Press, 2020; retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ct-vzsmdt1.

[11] U.S. Air Force MAJ Joshua Close, **#Terror: Social Media and Extremism**, paper for graduate requirements, Air Command and Staff College, May 2014.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

AWG – Asymmetric Warfare Group
IED – improvised explosive device
ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
TRADOC – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command

Survey of top social-media sites

"Movement" is the chief characteristic of social media. According to **Search Engine Journal**, "The top social media sites have seen plenty of movement in the last few years. … Attention must be paid to where your demographic might be moving to."

For those considering the best strategy for information operations on social media, "The best move is to consider which channels are right for your audience," advised **Search Engine Journal**. "Test a presence on the relevant social media sites, and from results, strategically choose which ones to double down on."

Russia and China have competing presences on social media. In fact, China has several of the top-ranked social-media sites – for example, WeChat, TikTok, Weibo, QQ and Qzone. Says **Statista**, "Most top-ranked social networks with more than 100 million users originated in the United States, but services like Chinese social networks WeChat, QQ or video-sharing app Douyin have also garnered mainstream appeal in their respective regions due to local context and content. Douyin's popularity has led to the platform releasing an international version of its network: a little app called TikTok."

The following table is offered as a launching place for further research as organizations build or expand their social-media strategy.

Assembled by **ARMOR** staff from **Smartblogger.com**, **Hootsuite**, **Statista** and **Search Engine Journal** (although more sources were surveyed). **Smartblogger.com** information posted Sept. 27, 2021. **Search Engine Journal** information posted June 22, 2021. **Statista** information as of Sept. 10, 2021. **Hootsuite Media** information current as of May 17, 2021.

Table 1. Survey of top social-media sites for 2021 (based on monthly active users)					
Social-media site	Icon	Home country	Year founded	Characteristics	Ranking source
#1 Facebook		USA	2004	90% of daily active users live outside North America. Seven in 10 U.S. adults use Facebook. Now favored by an older user group.	All 4 sources cited place Facebook in the top spot.
#2 YouTube		USA (owned by Google)	2005	Dominates video content-sharing (long form). Strong user base across all age groups, including difficult-to-reach 65+ demographic. 38% of U.S. adults use platform. World's second-largest search engine.	All 4 sources cited place YouTube as the runner-up to Facebook.
#3 Whatsapp		USA (owned by Facebook)	2009	Free messaging and voice-over-IP. Main means of Internet communication in multiple locations, including Latin America, Indian subcontinent and large parts of Europe and Africa.	3 sources. **Hootsuite** ranks app as #1, commenting "This might be news to a lot of North Americans, but WhatsApp is one of the world's foremost social-media apps. … Every day, 175 million users in 180 countries message one of the 50 million businesses on WhatsApp."
#4 Facebook Messenger		USA (owned by Facebook)	2011	Standalone messaging app and platform. Text, voice or video chat. Messenger has allotted 24-hour window to respond to audience inquiries.	**Smartblogger.com**, **Hootsuite** Ranked #5 by **Statista**. Not listed in **Search Engine Journal**'s list of its top 10 social-media sites and platforms for 2021.
#4 Instagram		USA (owned by Facebook)	2010	Video and photo-sharing social platform. Largest demographic is under-35 urban females with above-average income. Gen Z and Millennials have migrated here also, per **Search Engine Journal**. Content providers need to consistently post unique, high-quality images and videos.	**Search Engine Journal**, **Statista** Per **Search Engine Journal**: "If your target demographic is under 35, Instagram is a gold mine: 75% of 18-24-year-olds use Instagram, with 67% Generation Z and 57% Millennials using the app daily." Ranked #5 by **Hootsuite**; ranked #6 by **Smartblogger.com**
#5 WeChat (Weixin in China)		China (owned by Tencent, parent company of QQ and QZone)	2011	Dominant social network in China. Goes beyond messaging – users can video call, shop, use government services, call rideshares, play games, etc. According to one survey, 73% of respondents in China had used WeChat in the past month. If your audience is *in* or *from* China — including tourists, students and expats – this app may be useful, but "approach with caution": per Wikipedia, user activity on WeChat is analyzed, tracked and shared with Chinese authorities upon request as part of the mass surveillance network in China. WeChat censors politically sensitive	**Smartblogger.com** #6 on **Hootsuite**'s and **Statista**'s lists Not on **Search Engine Journal**'s list of top 10, who says "Because American social media sites are restricted in China, the country has its own flourishing social ecology."

				topics in China. Data transmitted by accounts registered outside China is surveilled, analyzed and used to build up censorship algorithms in China.	
#5 Tiktok		China	2017	Bills itself as "leading destination for short-form mobile video." For video up to 60 seconds. "Buzziest social media app," per *Hootsuite.* Audience is young adults (Generation Z) looking for creative or visually appealing side to your brand. In the United States, 25% of audience is a teenager or younger. Those users are highly engaged, too; as of January 2021, time per user spent on TikTok exceeded that for Facebook.	*Search Engine Journal*, who says "TikTok has seen the fastest growth of any social media platform. From launch only five years ago, the video-based platform is now fifth for most monthly active users." #7 on *Statista*'s and *Smartblogger.com*'s lists; #8 on *Hootsuite* list
#6 Snapchat		USA	2011	Specializes in *ephemeral content* – media only accessible for short time. Users share image and video massages called "snaps," which can be modified with stickers, text, filters and other effects. 82% of users under 34. Most popular app for teens. Millennials or Gen Z also on this app. Not for older audiences. Platform has fun, laid-back vibe.	*Search Engine Journal* #12 on *Statista*'s list; #13 on *Hootsuite*'s and *Smartblogger.com*'s lists
#7 Reddit		USA (owned by Conde Nast)	2005	Social news aggregation, Web-content rating and discussion Website. Blend of content and community. Content is user-generated and includes written posts, discussions, photos, videos, and links to articles. Users often pose questions to the community (similar to Quora) or just browse for random stories. *Search Engine Journal*'s advice: "However, be warned, Reddit is a fickle place and won't tolerate blatant self-promotion. Tread lightly as you begin to navigate because if you get the tone wrong, commentators are quick to jump in and can trash a brand." Will probably be able to find at least one subreddit (i.e., a niche on-line community devoted to a specific topic, like gaming or stock-picking) that attracts your target audience. However, this is not a platform for a hard-sell, branded content, or even influencer marketing.	*Search Engine Journal* #11 on *Smartblogger.com*'s list; #15 on *Statista*'s list; #17 on *Hootsuite*'s list
#8 QQ		China	1999	Designed as an answer to Israel's ICQ in 1999, in 2021 QQ remains China's second most-popular messaging app. Users can participate in group chats and send texts and audio messages. Live translation feature for up to 50 languages enables it to be used internationally. Platform popular with Gen Z. If audience is not in China, or they're older and have a higher income, you're better off with WeChat. Will need an account to use QQ's blogging subplatform QZone. Per *Hootsuite*: "Both QQ and WeChat are owned by tech giant Tencent, but while WeChat has gained dominance, QQ has spent the last few years dropping in popularity. … QQ's desktop and mobile messaging attracts a consistently younger demographic than WeChat."	*Smartblogger.com*, *Statista* #10 on *Hootsuite*'s list; not on *Search Engine's Journal* list of top 10 sites

#8 Pinterest		USA	2010	Some of most popular content includes fashion, food, decor, wedding, workout and do-it-yourself-related pins. Anything with rich visuals can thrive on Pinterest. "People visit Pinterest for inspiration and to find and share new ideas." 81% of users are female, especially "Millennial moms." 40% of new Pinterest signups are male. Per **Hootsuite**: "Pinterest has been experiencing notable user growth through the pandemic. For instance, their popularity outside of America was up 46% in 2020." **Smartblogger.com**'s caution: "Content must be visually amazing on this platform. If you're not willing or able to invest in great images, then you'll be wasting your time."	***Search Engine Journal*** #14 on ***Statista***'s and ***Smartblogger.com***'s lists; #16 on ***Hootsuite***'s list
#9 Twitter		USA	2006	Microblogging and social-networking service. Posts (tweets) are short (280 characters maximum). Users can then like, comment on or retweet posts to followers. Twitter Polls allow users to ask followers a question with 4 answers to choose from; this is an easy way to engage your audience and get feedback on ideas. Hashtags, which were started on Twitter, can generate brand awareness and drive engagement. Biggest target is millennial males, living in urban areas, with above-average income. Per **Hootsuite**: "Given its fairly small user base, Twitter has impressive name recognition – 90% of Americans have heard of Twitter, though only 21% use it. That, combined with an active population of politicians, journalists, celebrities and comedians, keeps the platform punching above its weight, especially in North America (and Japan, where it's the #1 platform)."	***Search Engine Journal*** #15 on ***Smartblogger.com***'s list; #16 on ***Statista***'s list; #18 on ***Hootsuite***'s list
#9 Sina Weibo (Weibo in China)		China	2009	Microblogging social network, called China's answer to Twitter. In addition to publishing text-based updates (up to 2,000 characters), users can share music, videos and images; comment, follow, private-message, search and use @Usernames to tag others; and can post images (9 max per post) and create Stories. Target audience: Chinese web users. Caution: Foreign companies pay up to $2,000 USD to register for an official account.	***Smartblogger.com*** #11 on ***Statista***'s and ***Hootsuite***'s lists; not on ***Search Engine Journal***'s top 10
#9 Douyin		China	2016	Before Chinese tech giant ByteDance created TikTok, it created Douyin. The Chinese version of the short-video app is almost as popular as the international version (TikTok) in terms of user numbers alone. Audience: youth in China. Hosts variety of short-form user videos from genres like dance, comedy and education, with durations from 15 seconds to 3 minutes. TikTok and Douyin have almost the same user interface but no access to each other's content. Their servers are each based in the market where the respective app is available. The two products are similar, but features are not identical. Douyin includes an in-video search feature that can search by people's faces for more videos of them and	**Statista**'s and **Hootsuite**'s lists Not on ***Smartblogger.com***'s or ***Search Engine Journal***'s lists of top 10

				other features such as buying, booking hotels and making geotagged reviews.	
#10 QZone		China	2005	Social-networking Website; is bonded service to QQ. Allows users to write blogs, keep diaries, share photos, listen to music, play on-line games, shop, date and watch videos. Users can set background and select accessories. QZone's user base leans heavily toward youth living in the smaller, less sophisticated cities and towns of China. If you're going after university students or working professionals, consider WeChat or Sina Weibo. An estimated 97% (481.9 million) of its users are in China.	*Smartblogger.com* #14 on *Hootsuite*'s list; not on *Statista*'s or *Search Engine Journal*'s list of top 10
#10 Linked In		USA (owned by Microsoft)	2003	Focused social-media platform catering to network of professionals and decision-makers. Most users are in senior positions. 44% of users have an income above the national median. More than 50% of Americans with a college degree use LinkedIn.	*Search Engine Journal* #7 on *Hootsuite*'s list; not on *Statista*'s or *Smartblogger.com*'s lists
#10 Telegram		Russia	2013	Messaging app that allows large group chats (up to 200,000 people) and public one-to-many channels. Bills itself as a more privacy-focused alternative to Facebook's WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger.	*Statista* #12 on *Hootsuite*'s list; not on *Search Engine Journal*'s or *Smartblogger.com*'s lists
#12 Kuaishou (Kwai outside of China)		China	2011	Short-video sharing and live-streaming app. *Per Smartblogger.com*: "Users share clips of stunts and pranks and live streams of video gameplay. Kuaishou's algorithm is designed for inclusivity, ensuring more visibility for a wider range of user-generated content. This has opened the way for people from China's rural regions to share their lifeways while generating extra income, which they do by promoting their businesses or linking out to eCommerce platforms." Site has carved out niche in subset of social commerce that hasn't yet hit peak popularity in the West: live commerce. Livestreaming is highly popular on Kwai, as is social gifting. Kwai allows users to send virtual gifts to their favorite influencers, as well as buy products in-app from those influencers as they livestream. International brands like Volkswagen, the NBA and Cristiano Ronaldo are all active on the platform. Main demographic is Gen Z in China's smaller cities and rural regions. If your Chinese-speaking audience is more mature and sophisticated, you may have better luck with WeChat.	*Smartblogger.com* #13 on *Statista*'s list; #15 on *Hootsuite*'s list; not on *Search Engine Journal*'s list of top 10
#17 Quora		USA	2009	Question-and-answer Website where questions are answered by community and answers voted on. Offers advertising options including "promoted answers." There are also plenty of opportunities for sharing content (repurposing blog posts, for instance) and thought leadership.	*Statista* #19 on *Hootsuite*'s list
#20 VKontakte (VK)		Russia	2007	Called "Russia's Facebook clone"; only YouTube is more popular in Russia. Most of VK's users are millennials, and *Statista* estimates that half of them live in St Petersburg. For communication with Russian speakers, VK is key for the whole on-line funnel: everything from brand awareness to e-commerce.	*Hootsuite* Not included on other 3 sources' lists