

Disarming foes without a shot being fired

by Mark Pavilons

We are definitely living in sobering times.

The conflict in Ukraine, and response from around the world, shows just how important social media, and ?instant? messages are these days.

We get to see, almost instantly, the massive crowds gathered in the streets of Toronto, London, Tokyo, Riga, even Moscow, in opposition to aggression.

Here in Ontario, these protests and various levels of government response have been lightning-fast. Large-scale protests and rallies are organized and carried out in hours.

It's like someone lit a fire and it has spread across the world, in a matter of minutes.

And that's all thanks to technology and social media platforms.

Posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube are showing us sights and sounds from Ukraine continually. We are listening to Ukraine President Zelenskyy and his brave, passionate speeches, calling on his citizens to protect what's dear to them.

Some of his cries for assistance have been answered, some within hours.

Elon Musk activated Starlink in Ukraine ? roughly 10 hours after a plea from officials.

Musk launched thousands of Starlink satellites around the globe, which increase broadband service and provide data links to areas of Ukraine that lost internet access.

U.S. President Biden's State of the Union Address was broadcast live, and it featured a condemnation of Russia's aggression. Biden, too, was passionate in expressing democratic resolve in the face of aggression.

He undoubtedly sparked a great deal of patriotism.

The internet is literally blowing up with daily accounts from the Ukraine, and reports of devastation, bravery, iron will and, yes, sadness and death.

It's all very moving and all too real.

This would have been impossible just a few short years ago. In an age before smart phones, uploading images was unheard of. Before social media, spreading the word was slow and painful.

What this means goes way beyond technology and innovation. It's about bringing human beings together.

We have seen an amazing, almost unbelievable coming together of like-minded people ? not unlike you and I ? from around the world. Citizens from countries far removed from the conflict are standing up, standing out, shouting loudly.

That's what free speech, individual rights and common good is all about.

Whatever the outcome, President Zelenskyy has given the world a hero to root for and he won over the hearts of people in a way that authoritarian dictators will never be able to.

And that's the power of media, virtual or otherwise.

Leaders can be elevated to heroic status instantly, and Zelenskyy is the new poster boy for politicians with a sense of humanity.

Others, like members of the Russian oligarchy, can be instantly stripped of credibility, contact and even financial security.

Given my profession, I've always believed the pen is mightier than the sword. Words can hurt and they can heal.

Other famous activists and authors have died for their convictions, by merely writing about them. They become literary martyrs.

Today, public opinion and virtual perception is mightier than any tank or rifle. In fact, continued pressure over the airwaves and through the atmosphere may win this war for the good guys.

This battle over the internet has also revealed the power governments have over our economy. Banks are told to freeze accounts and assets. Companies stop doing business with Russian corporations. International mail delivery and even VISA services have been suspended in Russia. Western citizens support Ukraine B&Bs, by booking rooms that may or may not exist. It's a donation, but it can do wonders.

Many celebrities, organizations and even school children, have come to Ukraine's aid with various fundraisers. Millions are being raised to help Ukrainians. This virtual aid translates into real-time work on the ground.

While some say economic sanctions don't go far enough, in today's connected world, they can mean everything.

Cut off a country from foreign imports, raw materials, trade and money and you can cripple a society. Sure, it may send thousands of average citizens out of work, and make it hard for them to make ends meet. But that's still better than being shot on the street. Just ask anyone of Ukrainian heritage.

When the world comes together, the combined might is almost like building an invisible, towering, impenetrable wall around Russia, with nothing going in or out. Think about it. Turn off the juice, cut off the internet and a country goes dark. Unplug ATMs. Freeze bank accounts. How do you cope when the internet goes down for a couple hours?

Think about everything we have that relies on the information superhighway. From TV and streaming services to music, shopping, news, banking, even ordering our dinner, would cease. We'd be reduced to crying babies, curled up in the fetal position on the living room floor.

And we're a wealthy western country. The Ukraine is not. Russia, despite its prowess, suffers from a lot of internal friction. They may have a large military, but they're likely a little behind in terms of economic technology.

In every conflict, however, it's the citizens who suffer. Civilians are collateral damage in the war, no matter what form it takes.

After the fighting, when peace is restored, we will have to help them pick up the pieces.

The mourning will continue forever. The cleanup, which will likely cost billions, will take place and the cost will be shared by the west. Streets and shops can be fixed. But how do you replace centuries old churches, monuments and town squares? How do you repair the wounds to statues representing Christian values?

I am sad that I have witnessed such a thing. And I am equally sad that my children will see the very real impacts of war.