



What's the best way to win arguments on the internet? Don't argue. On the rare occasion where it may be permissible for a senior leader to engage on personal social media accounts, leaders must consider whether they actually should. Ultimately, the application of the U.S. Army's "Think, Type, Post" will conclude that they should, in fact, not. (Illustration by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

How to Win Arguments on the Internet

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Providing credible, accurate, and timely information serves as the best means to counter misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, which can lead to deterred competitors and defeated adversaries. Maintaining trust, transparency, and credibility is critical when providing public information. Soldiers must never compromise this.

—Field Manual 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*

You are the brigade judge advocate for a brigade combat team. The brigade commander, Col. Smith, calls you to discuss a high-profile incident from your brigade that is receiving substantial media attention while under investigation. Smith learned that anonymous accounts, private citizens using their real names, and some news stations are spreading false information and rumors about the incident on social

media. This misinformation risks harming the investigative process, the installation's relationship with the local community, and the Army's overall reputation.¹ Capt. Stephens, a company commander from a different brigade, is also forwarding and reposting memes on his social media accounts ridiculing the situation and Smith's brigade. Stephens uses an unofficial account with a profile picture of himself in his Army uniform. Smith initially called to ask your thoughts on whether the investigation can move more quickly and whether the results can be released once done to help put this issue to rest quickly. While talking, Smith also mentions that she wants to respond to these rumors on social media directly and set the record straight. She also plans on directly responding to Stephens' social media posts with some pointed mentoring. What is your advice to Smith?²

The role of the information environment has grown rapidly in the past few decades. The military has always understood the importance of information on the battlefield, but its role has evolved and grown with the evolution of digital and social media. This is true in domestic operations and in combat. The modern information environment and social media have a deeper and more complicated impact on the military's relationship with its civilian leadership and the public, which impacts civilian oversight of the military and recruiting efforts.

A public affairs (PA) crisis is defined as "an event that affects an organization's long-term sustainability and reputation ... [and] has the potential to create significantly negative media coverage."³ Public affairs crises can happen at different echelons, from local matters of interest to individual units (e.g., receiving an unfavorable mention on a social media website such as U.S. Army WTF! Moments) and up to national or internationally noted incidents like Fort Hood's response to the murder of Spc. Vanessa Guillén.⁴ In the current era of the 24/7 news cycle and the rise of social media, most major incidents or events have a PA aspect. This means that—in addition to pure PA crises—most crises are *also* PA crises.

As part of reviewing the circumstances surrounding Guillén's death, the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee's report assessed Fort Hood's PA climate and handling of the PA crisis stemming from the Guillén investigation.⁵ It concluded that Fort Hood's preparedness and handling of the PA portion of the Guillén crisis was mishandled in every conceivable

way. Fort Hood's leadership did not have an adequate preestablished relationship with the community, which denied the leadership the initial credibility it needed when the crisis began. Its public affairs office (PAO) inadequately responded to the PA crisis, allowing misinformation to dominate the narrative. The command's PA efforts and direct communication were poorly received and often reflected the wrong tone, further harming the command's credibility, preventing effective messaging, and undermining trust. This overall reduced soldiers' sense of personal safety and public confidence in Fort Hood's ability to prevent similar incidents.⁶

The Fort Hood report made several recommendations regarding responses to PA crises:

1. establish better relations with the public and community around installations,
2. develop increased PA capacity to respond to crises,
3. respond quickly and factually to PA crises to inform the public and help shape perception,
4. use a trained spokesperson to respond to crises, and
5. keep the Fort Hood community informed.⁷

In addition to lessons learned from other recent PA crises, these recommendations have been incorporated into the Army's PA doctrine and related regulations, including Field Manual 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*.

Additionally, the Army has attempted to proactively engage both internally and externally on social media, including developing an official website with guidance on using

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social media for soldiers.⁸ The Army has shown that it is finally grasping the role of social media in the information domain. Looking ahead, the Army must ensure that it does not cede the information domain in the battle against misinformation, rumors, and false narratives.

This has proven difficult in practice. When units or individual soldiers attempt to respond to PA crises, it has not always achieved the desired results. In response to one such incident, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth stated that soldiers should stay “out of the culture wars” and later added they should “[u]se good judgment online. Keep it professional.”⁹ The Army must continue pursuing efforts to positively influence the digital and social media information domain while remaining apolitical and avoiding pitfalls of this unique operational domain.

As a threshold matter, despite the underlying issue stemming from the legal domain (an investigation in the hypothetical scenario), responding to a PA matter is not a purely *legal* issue; however, it certainly can carry many legal implications. The PAO on a brigade staff (or a garrison/division PAO if your brigade does not have one) should be directly involved in this conversation at all stages. The PAO is the commander’s primary advisor on PA matters, while the legal advisor remains ready to provide legal and general counsel, including on the legal issues raised in your conversation with Col. Smith.

PA crises, whether stateside or deployed, are not a mere passing concern. They are a substantial risk to the Army’s overall credibility and to your unit’s mission. Responses to PA crises should be prepared in a rational, deliberate process, as with any other information operation.¹⁰ Further, like any operation, there must be unity of effort at all levels and with the garrison PAO.¹¹ When the PA crisis is only a portion of a larger crisis event, the PA response should be nested and coordinated within the larger overall response planning.

Unfortunately, this article does not tell you how to win arguments on the internet *by arguing*. This article discusses how senior leaders can engage in the social media and digital information domain on issues directly relevant to their organizations and the Army, and how their legal advisors can help them navigate this labyrinth. This article will first consider universally applicable regulations, requirements, and expectations for senior leaders who brave the public domain. It will then distinguish

official from unofficial accounts, identify regulatory guidance on which type is appropriate for different purposes, and offer guidance on appropriate use for both types. Finally, this article will offer a few best practices and suggestions as well as discussing how Col. Smith should respond in this hypothetical scenario.

Social Media Usage Guidelines of Universal Application

Certain social media usage guidelines apply universally, whether the individual uses official or unofficial accounts. Soldiers are held to a standard of behavior 24/7, including social media use. The Army’s recommended approach to this is “Think, Type, Post.”¹² Senior leaders are further held to a standard consistent with the responsibility inherent in their duties.

All soldiers are bound by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) at all times. Soldiers must also exemplify the Army Values in their behavior. Various UCMJ articles, such as Article 89 (Disrespect to Superior Commissioned Officer), apply equally to public online behavior.¹³ While the UCMJ has always prohibited behavior that is prejudicial to good order and discipline or service discrediting, Army regulations (AR) have expanded to address specific types of behavior that may occur online (and to clarify that behavior on the internet is regulated expressly).¹⁴ Specifically, AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, includes a portion of the Army Harassment Prevention and Response Program that prohibits soldiers from committing harassment, bullying, discrimination, and other toxic behaviors online.¹⁵

In addition to behavioral standards, universal concepts apply to those with access to different types of protected information. An example of this is personally identifiable information protected under the Privacy Act, which may only be disclosed consistent with applicable statutes and regulations if it is disclosed through social media at all.¹⁶ Private records, like medical records, have their own protections.¹⁷ Soldiers must also ensure that any statements or social media posts made protect operational security.

Finally, local or unit regulations may apply to online conduct. For example, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 350-36, *Basic Officer Leader Training Policies and Administration*, may impact the commander’s communications based on who he or she is communicating with online.¹⁸ Commanders

can (and should) engage with subordinates through appropriate forums such as counseling or mentoring. However, arguing on the internet with a subordinate or trainee would be ill-advised. Likewise, a commander maintaining an ongoing, casual communication exchange with a trainee, which could amount to an inappropriate relationship or the appearance of special treatment, would be ill-advised. Similarly, a trainee would be unwise if they were arguing on the internet with an official unit account releasing relevant information about operations. Each action threatens to run afoul of local regulations such as TRADOC Regulation 350-36 and generally applicable regulations such as AR 600-20 and UCMJ Article 89.

In addition to the above limitations, leaders are expected to exemplify the standards and be stewards of their profession in all behavior, including their online activity. AR 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, calls upon leaders to be stewards of the profession, to behave in such a way as to develop subordinates through proper example, and to apply the core competencies of leadership to all behaviors, including online behavior.¹⁹ Further, AR 600-100 prohibits counterproductive leadership. Counterproductive leadership can extend to a leader's online behavior. Examples of counterproductive online leadership from the regulation include bullying, distorting information, poor self-control, showing little or no respect, talking down to others, or behaving erratically.²⁰

When considering investigations such as the one in this article's hypothetical scenario, the commander should not assert pressure on the investigation to appease public pressure or outside concerns. Interfering with an investigation based on public pressure risks undermining the integrity, credibility, and quality of the investigation. In the long run, such actions risk undermining the results, which could harm the Army's credibility even worse than any earlier damage done by the rumor mill. If the investigation is undermined, truth and accountability may not flow from its results. When truth and accountability are not the result of investigations, it undermines the Army's broader mission objectives and long-term credibility.

While it is clear that the commander should not interfere with the investigation or otherwise behave reactively to the PA concerns, there are other responses that the commander should consider. While this

section addressed general concerns universal to public affairs activity, the next sections will discuss where that response should come from and some considerations for each option.

How Should the Commander Respond to the Public Affairs Crisis?

Col. Smith wants to address the rumor mill and misinformation on the internet because it harms the unit's reputation and undermines the Army's legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Such a response, particularly when made by someone in a leadership role, such as brigade commander, should only come from official communication methods. Assuming social media is used to distribute the response, then the response would be through official social media accounts.

Commanders have a responsibility to correct erroneous information about the Army.²¹ When correcting misinformation, commanders should provide official, relevant, and correct information about the Army. Department of Defense (DOD) "personnel must only use official DoD social media accounts to disseminate official information. DoD personnel are prohibited from using personal social media accounts for official purposes, including for conveying DoD information or official DoD positions."²² While commanders can maintain personal social media accounts, those accounts should not be used to convey anything other than clearly identified personal views, and the accounts cannot be used to conduct official DOD business.²³

Given that commanders have a responsibility to correct misinformation about the Army, and the misinformation is best corrected by conveying official policies or other information that originates with official DOD sources, responding is performing an official duty.

Even if the proper response method were not such a clearly defined issue, a brigade commander would need to consider the wisdom of responding from a personal, unofficial account. Commanders must not risk even the appearance of something expressed from an unofficial account that looks like an official DOD position that is being first expressed from an unofficial account. Given the power and authority that the hypothetical Col. Smith wields over her brigade as its commander, and how closely a military unit is associated with its leadership, is it even possible for Smith to make public remarks about her unit and have them not viewed

as her official position as the brigade commander? Because Smith cannot separate her personal persona from her role as the brigade commander, and because she has a duty to respond to misinformation through official channels, Smith's response should be handled using official Army communication channels and guided by the PAO staff.

While this hypothetical scenario is an easy answer, what about other scenarios? What if a mainstream media personality makes derogatory comments about the unit? Or a negative post is made on U.S. Army WTF!

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Moments? While there will not always be a one-size-fits-all solution, these scenarios have the same answer as above. If a media personality comments about the unit, and a commander corrects misinformation about the Army, this requires a response from an official account. It is important to note that anything other than purely anonymous responses will be associated with the speaker. If the speaker is a senior commander, then it is extremely difficult for any comments that touch upon the Army or their unit to be differentiated from their official position.

What about if the comments are not purely misinformation but rather an expression of a derogatory opinion about the Army? Individuals are entitled to their personal opinions. No matter how publicly the opinion is uttered, the wisdom in responding should always be considered. When the opinion includes misinformation, a narrowly tailored response can correct misinformation without getting entangled in the opinion-based arguments. Given that responding to such information is an official function, it should be clear that an unofficial response from a commander that delves into the realm of argument has no place, while argumentative behavior on an official account would be conduct unbecoming the dignity and professionalism of the unit, position, or leader who is responsible for the account. Timely, accurate information is the best

and the only appropriate response in many forms of information-based operations.

Having established the role that official social media accounts must play in PA crises, this article will next turn to how to establish official social media accounts and their proper use in distributing information.

Official Communication on Social Media

As the last section highlighted, official accounts are the appropriate method of putting out official infor-

mation or correcting misinformation about the Army. DOD personnel are required to use official social media accounts when performing official duties (including conveying official information or positions).²⁴ The Army recognizes three types of official social media accounts: organizational (e.g., U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery School's Official X [formerly Twitter] account, @u_artillery), institutional (e.g., Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering's X account, @DoDCTO), and individual (e.g., Sergeant Major of the Army's official PAO Reddit account, /u/SMA-PAO).²⁵ As will be discussed, these accounts have specific procedures for establishing, preparing, and distributing messaging, and messaging guidance.

Establishing an official account. DOD Instruction 5400.17 provides guidance on establishing official social media accounts.²⁶ This guidance, titled *Official Use of Social Media for Public Affairs Purposes*, includes a cost-benefit analysis of establishing such an account, the communication objectives it will accomplish, the availability of resources to manage such an account, and the PA offices that can support the effort. Commanders at the brigade level and above are encouraged to use social media as part of their communication strategy.²⁷

The account managers must have received proper training and signed applicable forms (e.g., the Acceptable

Use Policy). The accounts must be registered with the DOD and U.S. Digital Registry.²⁸ If the account is on a new or emerging platform, the Defense Information Systems Agency must first vet the platform. The accounts cannot be previously private accounts repurposed to official ones. Although most social media account types are free, any costs must undergo the appropriate fiscal reviews. Likewise, official accounts should be managed only with official government resources.

The account must be clearly identified as an official account. It should contain a title, use official DOD logos and imaging, and provide proper contact information. All messaging that comes from the account will be official messages. These messages must be preserved as official records. These messages are subject to the same requirements as any other official form of communication. While many rules and requirements affect official communications, a few key limits will be highlighted.

Usage guidelines. Ultimately, PA is the commander's responsibility.²⁹ Communication from the PAO on behalf of the commander is regulated by the universal standards of conduct applicable to soldiers and leaders in particular, as previously discussed (UCMJ, expectations of professional behavior, etc.).³⁰ Additionally, various issuances, directives, and regulations provide further guidance, limits, and direction on using official social media accounts.

First, all messaging should be in line with the PA tenets.³¹ These tenets call for information (1) to be made fully and readily available (consistent with statutory limits); (2) without censorship or propaganda; (3) not to be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment; (4) to be only withheld when disclosure would adversely affect national security, threaten the safety or privacy of service members, or if otherwise statutorily authorized to be withheld; and (5) to be released with proper PA planning and coordination.³²

Second, DOD Instruction 5400.17 offers additional guidance through its social media principles.³³ These principles call for governance, professionalism, propriety, acumen, establishment need, and transparency.

- ◆ Governance requires that official social media accounts are properly overseen, and communications from them align with proper PA objectives.
- ◆ Professionalism is the requirement that conduct on these accounts remains respectful, displaying the

high standard of professional and ethical behavior expected of soldiers. Professionalism also carries the requirement not to violate other Army regulations, such as not providing official endorsements of private organizations and avoiding partisan political activity.

- ◆ Propriety requires that content is accurate, appropriate, timely, in the appropriate tone, and approved for public release.
- ◆ Acumen is the duty of PAOs to remain current in the best practices of their skillset and to use them when communicating.
- ◆ Establishment need is the requirement that official accounts and communication be limited to that which fulfills a mission requirement.
- ◆ Finally, transparency requires that official social media content not be deleted or removed unless necessary, that it is never done to stifle discussion or avoid embarrassment, and that all official communications are preserved consistent with record keeping requirements.³⁴

Additionally, a unit's PAO will be expected to be familiar with the various other guidance, much of which has already been discussed, that limits or otherwise directs what information may be released and when or how it should be. This includes the various authorities to release information, general social media usage guidance, and express limitations on what information may be distributed.³⁵

Strategic messaging considerations. One of the biggest advantages of having an official social media account is its established presence, providing a method of disseminating information before a PA crisis has begun. An active presence can help develop credibility before the account is needed to respond to such a crisis and will have already accrued an audience (e.g., X followers) who will receive the organization's message without laying the groundwork for communicating while the crisis is happening. The importance of maintaining credibility on an official account cannot be overstated. The credibility of an official account is an extension of the credibility of the unit to which the account belongs and the credibility of the Army as a whole.

A key advantage of an official account is that it brings together the command and the Army resources through the PAO.³⁶ The PAO can implement a preexisting information strategy, combined with the rapid

decision-making process, to prepare a timely response to the PA crisis. If the unit is already maintaining an active social media presence, it can be proactive in its messaging rather than reactive. Even during a crisis not specifically foreseen, media messaging does not need to be reactionary.

Another important consideration is ensuring that communication is coordinated at all levels of the chain of command. This will ensure unity of purpose and unity of effort. Unified, consistent messaging ensures that the Army maintains its credibility as an organization throughout the PA response and beyond. Inconsistent messaging can exacerbate problems and

way that risks interfering with the investigation. If that did not happen and negative narratives have already begun to fill the gap left by the command's inactivity, the command should immediately seize the initiative and provide information where it can.

When asked questions about the investigation, an appropriate response is usually, "It is under investigation." With that said, there are ways to convey information and instill confidence in the process without harming the investigation's integrity or improperly disclosing information.³⁸ For example, a commander or an appointed subject-matter expert can discuss the investigative process without discussing any specific

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create questions or concerns where none needed to exist. Further, commanders at every echelon should be careful not to "get ahead of their boss" by distributing information that a higher echelon may have been planning to release or discuss themselves later.

Ultimately, PA missions are information operations and should be treated as such. They should be considered, planned out, and coordinated up and down the chain of command. They should reflect the commander's intent, and a course of action should be taken across warfighting functions to nest within broader operational plans and strategic goals.

What should Col. Smith do? Concerning Smith's response to the hypothetical unit's PAO crisis scenario, the PAO should be leading the effort utilizing their specialized training for this type of situation.³⁷ While this article does not detail what type of incident is under investigation, a proper PA response may have been to "get ahead" of foreseeable negative narratives and rumors from the outset. This could include a reassuring and informative statement that the matter is being investigated properly, and that information will be released at the appropriate time, but not in such a

facts about the investigation. The spokesperson could describe applicable Army regulations and give detailed answers about those regulations and each step of investigations in general. The spokesperson could be somebody who is not involved with the investigation and has no knowledge of its progress, so they can only speak about the investigative process in general terms without risking improper disclosures.³⁹

Smith, or her senior leadership, could appoint someone familiar with regulations controlling investigations to give a briefing about the thoroughness and professionalism of investigations performed by the Army. Smith or the PAO could then follow this informational briefing to reinforce the investigation's credibility with a brief, tightly worded statement. Smith could confirm that an investigating officer was appointed and is performing the process consistent with all applicable rules and regulations. Smith may also consider a message. For example, "We appointed an investigating officer who is not being identified so he is not disturbed while he does his job. We will continue to ensure that he is performing the investigation consistent with all applicable rules and regulations." In this way, Smith can provide an informative and

credible response without violating rules about information disclosure or interfering with the investigation.⁴⁰

Concerning the social media posts about the incident by anonymous users and private citizens, any response should avoid responding directly to sources of misinformation in such a way that devolves into argument. If information and status updates can be released without violating the various limits or interfering with the investigation, then they should be released. When the information is released, it generally should be published without acknowledging the misinformation sources to avoid bringing attention to their platform. This helps prevent speculation that

As seen from this discussion, official social media accounts are the most appropriate—and required—method of responding to a PA crisis. Smith should be using her PAO in coordination with her brigade judge advocate and higher headquarters to coordinate a proper response to this incident. Although a personal social media account is not the proper response to this article's offered scenario, the proper usage and related guidance of such accounts will be discussed in the next section.

Personal Social Media Accounts

Soldiers generally retain their First Amendment right to engage in personal social media use. They are

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further ignites rumors in the absence of credible information. The response should also consider the appropriate tone given the gravity of the situation (and the underlying incident). Especially when responding to misinformation on the internet that is likely to attract further argumentative responses, the best one can do is state their position, provide evidence, and stop responding.⁴¹

In addition to using official social media accounts to inform the public and address rumors regarding the PA crisis, there may be more conventional ways to address the posts by Capt. Stephens rather than directly responding on the internet (which will inevitably draw further unwanted attention to this secondary problem as well as on the primary PA crisis). Smith could directly call her counterpart in Stephens' chain of command and make them aware of the captain's questionable actions. Stephens should be counseled by his superiors on the standards of professionalism expected of all soldiers when using personal social media accounts.⁴² Alternatively, the brigade judge advocate or PAO could call their counterpart in Stephens' brigade and request that they ensure their brigade's personnel are aware of social media usage guidelines.

free to establish personal, nonofficial accounts but must do so in accordance with the other applicable statutes and regulations. Soldiers are held to the same standard of behavior and professionalism when they use personal social media to communicate.

Unofficial accounts cannot have the appearance of official accounts. They should not include official military logos or symbols.⁴³ To avoid confusion between official and personal positions, they should include a disclaimer that the views expressed are those of the individual and do not represent official views of the Army.⁴⁴ They should not identify the account owner by their official military position. Commanders cannot release the results of investigations (and should not discuss them) on unofficial channels, release nonpublic information, or make any other official announcements. Unofficial accounts should not be maintained using government funds or resources.

The Army does not require the contents of unofficial, personal accounts to be preserved or archived. Although there is no requirement to preserve the contents of unofficial accounts, this should not be treated as a conclusion that social media activity will not be preserved. In addition to the ease of copying content on the internet by any third party (or the website hosting the content), there

are internet archives automatically gathering content for preservation constantly engaged.⁴⁵ One must assume that anything on the internet is there forever.

The generally applicable behavioral limitations described in this article apply to senior leaders in their personal social media usage.⁴⁶ Soldiers in general and senior leaders in particular are expected to display a high standard of professionalism in everything they do. This includes avoiding inappropriate or influential political messaging, protecting operational security, not releasing personal identifiable information, etc.⁴⁷ For senior leaders, this is a personal standard of conduct and extends to their duty of being shepherds of the Army. Behavior on personal social media should exemplify the same leadership values that commanders exemplify all other times.

Col. Smith should not use her personal accounts to respond to this public affairs crisis. As discussed, the facts in this article's hypothetical scenario should not be responded to by a senior leader on a personal, unofficial account. Doing so creates significant risk for the senior leader responsible for the posts and the Army in accomplishing its official messaging and informational missions.

Additionally, responding directly to Capt. Stephens' posts would be unwise. This would go well beyond the notion of an on-the-spot correction from a senior leader communicating directly to a subordinate. Further, because Stephens has already displayed a failure to maintain decorum and to understand that behavior on the internet is no different than behavior in person, a digital message from Smith to Stephens may not carry the gravity that it should from Stephens' perspective, thus undermining the corrective action.

General considerations for soldiers' use of personal social media to express personally held opinions.

While this article's specific hypothetical scenario has a clear answer, this is not meant to indicate that soldiers can never express their opinions on personal social media accounts. While soldiers must ensure that the account is clearly identifiable as an unofficial account and reflects only their personal views, they generally retain their First Amendment rights to self-expression. This right also extends to the right to share publicly released, unclassified information through non-DOD forums (after it has been publicly released through official channels).⁴⁸

In their personal capacity, a soldier could respond more candidly in expressing their views on social media on issues in general (but should be very careful about doing so regarding issues specifically affecting their unit). When communicating on social media, soldiers should never forget that even though a social media post may be directed at one recipient, it is subject to responses from the entire internet. Put another way, any argument on the internet potentially argues against everyone who chooses to respond. Especially when discussing controversial topics, arguments on the internet tend to attract uninvited participants.

While the *wisdom* of arguing on the internet may be universally in doubt, a soldier's freedom to do so with their personal contacts in their personal capacity remains, especially when such arguments extend to topics like which team is most likely to make the playoffs this season. When arguments on the internet extend beyond very innocuous topics, soldiers must exercise caution and diligence not to violate the various express requirements and general standards of professionalism that always apply. In this area, a soldier's judgment must consider whether they *may* argue on social media and whether they *should*.

In summation, soldiers are free to maintain personal, unofficial social media accounts and use them to convey personal messages. While soldiers can express themselves in their personal capacity (consistent with the various requirements in place), such actions in the age of the information revolution should be handled with care and vigilance, especially for senior leaders. Soldiers cannot leave their professionalism at the door when going online. Soldiers and senior leaders should strongly consider the wisdom of unofficial accounts and how they use them.

Conclusion

The information domain and the rise of social media are here to stay. PA is now a key feature of multidomain operations. The U.S. military recognizes this and is quickly pushing out guidance in support of these operations.⁴⁹ The Army cannot and should not cede ground in the information domain. When a senior leader observes viral misinformation about their organization or about the Army, they should consider the best way to correct the record and provide accurate, timely information. Countering misinformation is not

a casual activity and should not be treated as such. It is a military operation in the information domain and should be regarded with a big-picture, operational approach. Commanders can and should engage, but they should do so in an appropriate, nonconfrontational way in close coordination with their PA and legal advisors focusing on distributing accurate, timely information.

Leaders should be proactive in seeking out misinformation and negative narratives. One popular function of social media is that many individuals turn to it as a place to air grievances, often through anonymous means. Many leaders resent this, whether due to a traditional view that the chain of command is the appropriate method of addressing concerns or because the leaders are uncomfortable with publicly airing the unit's dirty laundry. Regardless of why soldiers turn to social media to raise complaints, leaders must accept that it is here to stay. Leaders should proactively monitor these sources of information, both as an opportunity to identify and respond to misinformation before the narrative takes

hold and to become aware of legitimate problems in their area of operations.

The best possible response to a soldier airing a grievance is addressing the concern. If the grievance is erroneous then, to the extent permissible, the best response is providing accurate, timely information. A leader's simple public response of "thank you for bringing this to our attention, it will be addressed" followed by appropriate action, is one of the best remedies to a bad narrative and builds tremendous credibility in that unit's leadership when future issues arise within the ranks.

Accurately, timely, and professionally delivered information from a credible source is the best response to misinformation. Even on the rare occasion where it may be permissible that a senior leader *could* engage on their personal social media account, they must strongly consider whether they *should* do so. Often, a critical application of "Think, Type, Post" will conclude that they should not. Ultimately, the way to win arguments on the internet is ... don't argue. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Field Manual (FM) 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2022), para. 1-5.

1. *Ibid.*, para. 1-38. Misinformation is defined as "a subset of information that includes all incorrect information." This is different from disinformation, which is defined as "the deliberate use of incorrect or false information with the intention to deceive or mislead."

2. It is important to note that this scenario is distinguishable from public affairs (PA) operations as part of the Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA). This article does not discuss DSCA-specific issues, though DSCA PA operations have some similarities to issues discussed in this article. For further discussion of PA support to DSCA operations, see *ibid.*, para. 1-74–1-79.

3. *Ibid.*, para. 5-79.

4. For example, see "U.S. Army W.T.F.! Moments," <https://www.facebook.com/usawtfm/>. U.S. Army WTF! Moments is a social media organization with a presence on multiple social media domains that allows individuals to post anonymous complaints, allegations, memes, and other announcements of potential interest about the Army or specific Army units.

5. Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense [DOD], 6 November 2020), https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 132.

8. "U.S. Army Social Media Guide," Army.mil, accessed 12 December 2023, <https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/>. See also "Office of the Chief of Public Affairs," accessed 12 December 2023, <https://armyeitaas.sharepoint-mil.us/sites/HQDA-CPA/>. This official SharePoint site contains relevant information for PA operations, including the 2023 Army communications plan, updated guidance, and officially approved information and templates for PA operations.

9. Matt Berg, "Army Secretary Urges Soldiers to 'Stand Up for Women' amid Carlson Controversy," Politico, 14 October 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/14/army-secretary-urges-members-to-stand-up-for-women-00061884>.

10. FM 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*, para. 5-79–5-91. FM 3-61 describes the process as akin to the military decision-making process.

11. *Ibid.*, para. 1-20, 6-6.

12. See, for example, ALARACT 058/2018, "Professionalization of Online Conduct," 25 July 2018, para. 5.B, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/ALARACT_058_2018_PROFESSIONALIZATION_OF_ONLINE_CONDUCT.pdf.

13. UCMJ art. 89 (2019). Article 89's explanatory paragraph (c)(2)(c) discourages use of Article 89 to punish statements made in "purely private conversations." See also Army Regulation (AR) 25-13, *Army Telecommunications and Unified Capabilities* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), para. 3-2(a). This states that unauthorized use or abuse of DOD technology and web services may subject users to administrative, criminal, or other adverse action.

14. UCMJ art. 134 (2019).
15. AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2020), para. 4-19(a)(5).
16. 5 U.S.C. § 552a (1974).
17. 42 U.S.C. § 1320d-6 (2009).
18. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 350-36, *Basic Officer Leader Training Policies and Administration* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 2020). This places limits on interactions and relationships between cadre or unit leaders with soldiers in training status.
19. AR 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), para. 1-9(a), 1-11(b)-(d).
20. *Ibid.*, para. 1-11(d).
21. AR 360-1, *The Army Public Affairs Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2020), para. 2-4(a)(7).
22. DOD Instruction (DODI) 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media for Public Affairs Purposes* (Washington, DC: U.S. DOD, 2022), para. 6.1(d).
23. *Ibid.*, para. 8.
24. ALARACT 073/2022, "Army Social Media Policy," 27 October 2022, para. 3.B.2.
25. DODI 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media*, para. 6.2.
26. *Ibid.*, para. 4.1.
27. AR 360-1, *Army Public Affairs Program*, para. 8-1(e).
28. See DODI 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media*, para. 4.1(b), for more information on registering official accounts.
29. FM 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*, para. 1-12.
30. For further discussion, see DODI 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media*, para. 6.1.
31. DODI 5122.05, *Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (ATSD[PA])* (Washington, DC: U.S. DOD, 7 August 2017), para. 5.1, cited in FM 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*, para. 1-42.
32. *Ibid.*
33. DODI 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media*, para. 3.2.
34. *Ibid.*, para. 3.2(a)-(e).
35. FM 3-61, *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*, para. 7-6, 8-1, 8-3.
36. *Ibid.*, para. 1-34.
37. *Ibid.*, para. A-37-A-55. This section discusses tactics for countering social media and online misinformation and disinformation.
38. For further discussion about crisis communication, see *ibid.*, para. 5-79-5-91.
39. Jason Welch (public affairs deputy, U.S. Army Central Command), in discussion with the author, 3 May 2023. The response strategy was based on this discussion.
40. For additional discussion about PA considerations specific to criminal investigations, see Shaun B. Lister and Joseph A. Morman, "Advising Commanders During High-Profile Investigations: Balancing the Rights of the Victim and the Accused in the Age of Social Media," *Army Lawyer*, no. 3 (2022): 54-69, <https://tjaglcs.army.mil/tal/advising-commanders-during-high-profile-investigations>.
41. Welch, discussion.
42. "DoD personnel who are acting in a private capacity have the First Amendment right to further release or share publicly released unclassified information through non-DoD forums or social media provided that no laws or regulations are violated. DoD personnel will not post comments or material that denigrates another military or civilian member of the DoD team." DODI 8170.01, *Online Information Management and Electronic Messaging* (Washington, DC: U.S. DOD, 2 January 2019, incorporating change 24 August 2021), para. 3.26(g).
43. DODI 5400.17, *Official Use of Social Media*, para. 8(a)(1).
44. *Ibid.*, para. 3.1(c), 8(a)(1).
45. See "The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine," <https://web.archive.org>. The Wayback Machine boasts having archived over 805 billion webpages from various past dates, many of which are original versions of webpages that have since been edited or deleted from the original webhost.
46. For further discussion of general behavioral guidance on social media, see "Social Media Usage Guidelines of Universal Application" section of this article.
47. AR 360-1, *Army Public Affairs Program*, para. 8-6.
48. DODI 8170.01, *Online Information Management and Electronic Messaging*, para. 3.26(g).
49. See, for example, Joint Publication 3-61, *Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 17 November 2015, incorporating change 19 August 2016); see also the "U.S. Army Social Media Guide" at <https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/> for further discussion on guidance released in support of PA operations.