MUDDY BOOTS IO:
The Rise of Soldier Blogs

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PHOTO: The computer generation: clockwise from bottom left, SPC Matthew Timmons, SPC Jacob Smith, SPC Jared MacKenzie, SGT Michael Shriver, SPC Jeremy Beans, and SPC Kris Ohlensehlen watch movies, play video games, maintain blog websites, and stay in touch with families via their laptop computers. (SPC Chris Chesak)

A PHONE RINGS at the Pentagon. A journalist identifies himself and states, "I just read a blog that says Soldiers use dogs for target practice in Iraq. There's a video clip showing it, too. What's the Army's position?"

How should the spokesperson respond?

Military web logs, known as blogs or milblogs, are small websites that Soldiers maintain as informal journals for personal comments, images, and links to other websites. Blogs emerged concurrently with the War on Terrorism and have become an increasingly influential and controversial phenomenon. This form of communication gives a Soldier the potential to reach a global audience.

In fall 2005, in recognition of the potential effects of blogs on information operations (IO), the Army began educating deploying units about this aspect of the evolving information domain. This article explores the milblog phenomenon, its benefits to the Army, current challenges, and the way ahead. It concludes that qualified support of Soldier blogs is good policy when coupled with clearly defined boundaries and aggressive Soldier education.

Why Do Soldiers Blog?

Soldiers create blogs because they are an effective, efficient way to communicate. Soldiers and their families now expect near-instantaneous Internet and voice communications as an essential quality-of-life element.[1] During deployments or other geographic separations, milbloggers communicate with friends and family in a way that is easier (many people type more quickly and clearly than they write) and faster than postal services (traditional mail does not meet modern expectations of timeliness) and less presumptuous than email distribution lists.

Once a blogsite is running, a Soldier can post blogs periodically, and those with Internet connections—friend or foe, American or foreign—can choose when and how often to stop by. According to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

veteran Corporal Michael Bautista, "I started [my] blog because I felt bad that I didn't write enough letters and emails to my family, and they can see what I'm doing, they can hear some of my experiences."[2]

An equally important motivation is to communicate Soldiers' experiences to outsiders. Soldiers understand that the public has become increasingly distrustful of mainstream news, and milblogs are a way to circumvent the media's power to select news content.[3] This "gatekeeper" function is the media's principal power, followed by its name recognition and access to consumers. Milblogs seize back some of this power, and many Soldiers relish the opportunity to share compelling descriptions of their reconstruction and warfighting experiences as well as man-on-the-scene coverage of daily life. In an interview, Bautista stated: "It kind of transformed itself from a desire to convey my personal experience into letting people know the real story. I think the main coverage that you'll see at home is this car bomb blew up; this amount of people died. I think my main effort now is more toward showing that this is a good thing that we've done, regardless of . . . of what political decisions were made to get us here. We're here. We have done a good thing."[4]

Some milbloggers seek to counter inaccuracies in the media from a Soldier-level perspective. A high-profile example occurred in October 2005 when a teleconference was arranged between President George W. Bush, a group of 10 U.S. Soldiers, and one member of the Iraqi Army.[5] Once the communications link was established between Iraq and the White House, a senior Department of Defense (DOD) official and the Soldiers discussed what to expect. This preparatory talk, inadvertently broadcast live to the waiting news media, was widely pilloried by journalists as belying the White House assertion that the meeting was an unscripted conversation.[6] The White House and DOD responded to this criticism, but the most compelling response—widely disseminated within the blogosphere—came from one of the participants, Sergeant Robert Long, at 278medic.blogspot.com:[7]

Yesterday, I…was chosen to be among a small group of soldiers assigned to the 42 ID's Task Force Liberty that would speak to President Bush, our Commander-in-Chief. The interview went well, but I would like to respond to what most of the mass-media has dubbed as "A Staged Event."

First of all, we were told that we would be speaking with the President of the United States, our Commander-in-Chief, President Bush, so I believe that it would have been totally irresponsible for us NOT to prepare some ideas, facts or comments that we wanted to share with the President.

We were given an idea as to what topics he may discuss with us, but it's the President of the United States; he will choose which way his conversation with us may go. We practiced passing the microphone around to one another, so we wouldn't choke someone on live TV.

... It makes my stomach ache to think that we are helping to preserve free speech in the US, while the media uses that freedom to try to RIP DOWN the President and our morale, as US soldiers. They seem to be enjoying the fact that they are tearing the country apart. Worthless![8]

This perspective penetrated the mainstream media after syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin cited Sergeant Long's blog in a column that strongly criticized the media's predominantly negative interpretation of the interview.[9]

Milblogs may also satisfy a Soldier's need for a creative, intellectual, or emotional outlet.[10] Previous generations of Soldiers wrote diaries or traded stories over a drink as a means of catharsis and retrospection, but many modern Soldiers prefer the electronic forum that can be simultaneously anonymous and public. Those who desire interaction create milblogs that allow visitors to respond with feedback and support.

Some milbloggers want to share lessons learned from their experiences. While online professional forums exist for junior Army officers, most notably companycommand.army.mil and platoonleader. army.mil, such forums do not exist for enlisted Soldiers. Troops heading into theater routinely read

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the milblogs of those who have already deployed to better prepare themselves.

Finally, more serious milbloggers seek to enter the blogging community. The so-called "blogosphere" is filled with online friendships and rivalries, and bloggers comment on each other's postings as well as engage in spirited commentary.[11] Bloggers build communities by creating reciprocal links to other blogs, thus indicating which blog is worth reading. Greater numbers of links equate to higher search engine ratings, increased traffic, and more prestige for the blogger. Conversely, fake or inaccurate milblogs generate scorn and disregard in a community that is largely self-policing, a critical point in understanding blogging culture.

Qualified Support of Milblogs Is Good Policy

In simpler times (about 10 years ago), the Army's corporate contribution to the public information domain was limited to what was produced by the traditional news media at local, national, and international levels, coupled with post newspapers and unit flyers. At the individual level, Soldiers wishing to publish a book or article or to grant a media interview were screened, and their unit public affairs officer (PAO) approved their activities.

Given that Soldiers' abilities to publish were limited and that existing mass communications had a limited market reach, military control of Soldiers' public communications was feasible. Commanders have traditionally sought to maximize control of influencing variables, and they effectively controlled this element of the battlespace. However, this also put power into the hands of the press, because Army efforts at public outreach were limited by editors and other gatekeepers who filtered the Army's messages and controlled widespread access to the American people.

An era of greater risks and rewards has replaced this era of institutional control. The Army can reinforce its communications with the mainstream media by declaring its independence from it using the tools of the modern information domain. Without question, the domestic and international media are not a neutral force on the battlefield, and winning modern wars requires both battlefield success and mobilization of domestic and international public opinion.[12] By communicating directly with

the American public, using the Internet to provide accurate, timely information that previously was available only from the media—if and when they chose to report it—the Army now positively influences public discussion.

In fact, the 2001 Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, should be read with the understanding that the term "news media" includes use of the Internet. It reads: "Public affairs operations influence populations by transmitting information through the news media. They fulfill the Army's obligation to keep the American people and the Army informed. Public affairs help to establish conditions that lead to confidence in the Army and its readiness to conduct operations in peace, conflict, and war. Disseminating this information is desirable and consistent with security. Information disseminated through public affairs counters the effects of propaganda and misinformation."[13]

Since the Internet offers the most rapid, efficient, cost-effective, and direct means of reaching a variety of target audiences, the Army currently maintains dynamic websites to facilitate public information, community outreach, recruiting, internal (command) information, and media relations. This has dramatically increased the Army's ability to communicate its story, to build the Nation's trust in its Soldiers and capabilities, and to educate citizens about its efforts on their behalf.

However, this domain is not static. Forced to adapt to technological innovations and the evolving media culture, the Internet news market changes continually. One of the most important factors behind this has been the rising influence of blogs. In September 2006, Technorati search engine tracked 54.1 million blogs, a figure that has more than doubled in less than a year thanks to an estimated growth rate of 75,000 new blogs per day. Blogs are updated regularly with approximately 1.2 million posts daily.[14] A Pew survey conducted in early 2006 estimated that 39 percent of adult Internet users (57 million Americans) read blogs.[15] This is a communications phenomenon that cannot be ignored. To remain relevant and effective in the information domain, the Army must engage the power of this new medium by accepting and managing risk.

The primary reason to support Soldier milblogs is that they reveal the Army's human face. According to consultant and author Robert Moskowitz:

Research shows that consumers get tired of the smoothly polished corporate message, and may even tune it out. Conversely, they tend to perk up their ears when they detect an individual's honest expression. It's the same phenomenon that causes hand-addressed direct mail pieces to earn a better response than identical but machine-addressed pieces.

Moskowitz advises:

Somewhere in your company are one or more people who are passionate advocates of your products and services, who are good communicators, and who know exactly how to get the most from your products and services. These are born bloggers, and if you don't let them put their gifts to use, you're under-utilizing a major marketing asset.[16]

In a Nation with decreasing numbers of citizens who have any personal connection to the military, blogs augment Army journalists' efforts to educate people who are interested about the values, beliefs, and humanity of those in uniform. Blogs offer readers Soldiers' perspectives that seem more credible than the Army's official pronoucements. They come straight from the trenches, complete with interesting anecdotes and colorful descriptions, a perspective that is clearly unsanitized by Army leadership.[17] According to one retired officer, "The best blogs offer a taste of reality of Iraq or Afghanistan that the news media rarely capture. And they're often a grand, irreverent hoot."[18]

This fresh perspective is of particular value to prospective recruits who are anxious to learn what the Army is *really* like. Blogs offer a way to connect with these recruits, their family members, and other influencers. Most milblogs contain extensive explanations about why a Soldier decided to join the service, and they describe the personal growth and benefits gained from military service; moreover, they do so in language that is surprisingly pro-Army, pro-chain of command, and pro-mission.

In fact, the more the public perceives that military personnel who blog are honorable, interesting, intelligent people, the more it will respond with support and trust in our warfighting abilities and with volunteers in our ranks. During this period of intense warfighting, the Army receives constant media coverage and public interest. However, should the Army's news profile decline, milblogs will help maintain an essential, unique contact with citizens seeking insight into the Army.

A secondary, but equally vital reason to support blogs is to allow military bloggers to counter falsehoods propagated on other blogs. Bloggers exert significant control over fellow bloggers, and the blogging community is, to a large degree, self-policing. This policing function is one the Army cannot perform for itself because "official" blogs are not well received in the blogosphere.[19] Therefore, to silence the most credible voices—those at the spear's edge—and to deny them this function is to handicap the Army on a vital, very real battlefield. The Army's reputation is maintained on many fronts, and no one fights harder on its behalf than our young Soldiers. We must allow them access to this fight.

Troubles with Milblogs

Of course, some milblog perspectives may be undesirable. Soldiers may use blogs as a forum for airing legitimate grievances or whining self-indulgently. Soldiers may also misrepresent, lie, exaggerate, backstab, embarrass fellow Soldiers, or play out personal feuds. But just as most readers consult multiple blogs to gain context, leaders should also view an undesirable posting in context with the entirety of the blog and the overall blogosphere.

The Army position should be that *we seek to protect operational security and individual privacy, but we have nothing to hide and much to communicate, and we comprise over a million uniformed individuals with over a million perspectives.*

Public affairs officers should tell the news media that leaders want to know when something is wrong, and dissonant milblogs help satisfy that desire (although we traditionally rely on long-established chains of command to communicate, investigate, and fix problems). At the same time, of course, we

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should assure the media that the Army has long-standing mechanisms in place, such as inspectors general and equal opportunity offices, to support whistleblowers and ensure that Soldiers can get complaints and problems heard.

The worst-case milblog scenario would be the release of sensitive information that jeopardizes the success and safety of a future operation. Clearly, Soldiers should do no harm with their communications. If milblogs include inappropriate information about units and missions, this represents an unacceptable breakdown of discipline, unit cohesion, and Army culture. It also implies that leaders, operations security (OPSEC) officers, and PAOs failed to educate their Soldiers about information security. More senior milbloggers seem to understand these risks intuitively, although all milbloggers need clear-cut guidance.[20]

An August 2005 ALARACT (All Army Activities) message from then-Army Chief of Staff General Peter J. Schoomaker stated that commanders should be keenly aware of potential security violations.[21] Clearly, any instance of breached OPSEC may have catastrophic consequences. However, fear of OPSEC violations has far outstripped the reality experienced by commanders in the field: since 2001, hundreds of blogs have originated from deployed and stateside locations, and there appear to be few instances where commanders have ordered that blogs be discontinued or violators punished for divulging sensitive information. At the most basic level, the evident discretion of milbloggers may be linked to their personal interests as combatants operating within the region.

"Security violations are rare," stated Brigadier General Carter Ham, then the commander of well-known blogger and now published author Specialist Colby Buzzell (www.cbftw.blogspot.com). "While [operational security] is a very real everyday concern for us, I do not see potential violations as widespread."[22] Buzzell states that he was called to account for two blogged observations: that his unit ran low on water during an extended operation and that he took certain tactical steps to obtain additional ammunition during a firefight. He subsequently removed both items following counseling and command intervention, but he was specifically not ordered to discontinue his blog.[23]

A lesser but still significant concern is the milblogged publication of information that does not

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jeopardize security but violates the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Army policy, or the Army's sense of propriety. Soldiers may share opinions about how to distribute and employ resources in the defense of our Nation, but their professional ethic demands that they refrain from partisan banter and public criticism of the chain of command. Even the most senior officers who are called upon to provide policy advice to civilian leadership cannot make public political statements. In fact, very few identifiable milbloggers violate this prohibition because they understand the penalties for breaching political boundaries set by UCMJ and DOD directives.[24]

Clearly, milblogs must also not infringe on the privacy of Soldiers or their families. Concerns range from descriptions of the follies and foibles of identifiable colleagues to real-time images of dead, wounded, or compromised individuals—friendly, enemy, or non-combatant. One milblog written by an Army doctor inappropriately revealed the numbers and types of casualties as well as the overwhelmed state of the local medical system following the December 2005 Mosul mess-hall bombing. Published prior to notification of next of kin, the blog increased the stress on frantic families awaiting word of their loved ones. While the products of embedded journalists are constrained by a contractual embedding agreement with DOD that forbids publishing a range of images and topics, milbloggers' products are under no such clearly defined official restraint or review. (Nevertheless, the thoughtless doctor was ordered to discontinue blogging.)[25]

For unit commanders, the most basic gut-level problem with milblogs is that Soldiers may publish anonymous real-time information about the Army without the Army's knowledge. This raises three concerns: Who speaks for the Army? If everyone may speak, what is the impact? What controls, if any, should the Army impose on Soldiers?

Current guidelines are adequate for printed books and articles, and most Soldiers comply with the requirement to consult a PAO if they wish to publish military content or use their military rank or title. Such PAOs serve the Army by ensuring that our personnel do not violate the traditional concerns of security, accuracy, policy, or propriety. They usually require the addition of a codicil, such as "This work does not reflect the views of the Department of the Army. The views here are his own." Presently, no such checks or statements are required on electronic communications, but many milbloggers voluntarily post a codicil.

Many leaders are aware that milblogs can spread information that might be damaging to unit morale, can create forums for gripes and hearsay, or can help enemies assess unit morale and other intangibles. Such forums could reveal embarrassing unmet needs for Army materiel, command information, or up-to-date lessons learned. When a leader learns the identity of a discontented milblogger, it may require extraordinary restraint to allow the blog to continue. But what a leader perceives as bad news might ultimately help his unit or the Army: if a unit is having difficulty, blogs can provide alternative means of communication with Army and outside leaders who may help to fix the problem. The release of negative information may be uncomfortable and embarrassing, but depending on how the blog is written, it need not represent indiscipline. Unremittingly positive blogs are both rare and unrealistic. We may be able to learn something from the more critical sites.

When a milblogger writes about the negative emotions and discomfort associated with military service, deployment, and war, these observations may accurately reflect that Soldier's experience. As the Army carries out the will of lawfully elected leaders on behalf of the American people, we want our fellow citizens to understand the true costs of service, including the burdens, the loss of comrades, and the toll on loved ones.[26]

A final, potentially significant problem is the prospect of phony milblogs. Like imposters who claim to be former members of the Special Forces or SEALs, such bloggers may misrepresent themselves and publish incorrect or harmful information. Such a blog might read, "I can't tell anyone what I saw for fear of retribution, but tonight we committed atrocities in my sector of Iraq." If the media picks up this phony story, what then?

Milblog Controls

A basic truth is that the Army cannot effectively mandate that its personnel refrain from all public communications. To do so, the Army would need to prohibit Soldier access to all means of communications, because Soldiers' family members and friends are not restricted from publicly releasing information they receive from their Soldiers by regular mail, email, or telephone.[27] In fact, anecdotal insights from fellow Soldiers indicate that private Soldier communications to family members who subsequently make inadvertent or intentional public statements are the primary source of leaked sensitive information. Some Army units temporarily restrict Soldier movement and access to communications equipment before significant operations or following a unit casualty, but cutting Soldiers off completely from family and friends is not a feasible long-term control measure.

Instead, the risk associated with Soldier communications is best managed by educating and trusting Soldiers. Given our values-based organization, the Army should make the same assumptions as do many U.S. corporations. Successful companies believe and communicate that their employees are reasonable and trustworthy and act in the company's best interest.[28] A review of current corporate blogging policies reveals that their leaders believe employees must be educated as to what is allowable and forbidden. Companies typically do this in a clearly written, comprehensive, well-publicized document.

Just as milblog producers can be expected to exercise self-control, milblog consumers can be expected to exercise their own controls by heeding *caveat emptor*, "Let the buyer beware." Akin to news aficionados who consult several news sources, milblog consumers are likely to monitor a variety of milblogs to expand their understanding of the Soldier experience. Obviously, quality control measures do not exist for milblogs; in fact, few Internet websites have such measures. Therefore,

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some milblog consumers will seek to expand their understanding of the Army's story by visiting official websites such as www.army.mil—to the ultimate benefit of the service.

An additional control is that the mainstream news media are particularly cautious about using information reported solely in the blogosphere, particularly since news content is now so thoroughly scrubbed by bloggers themselves. The media may have been prompted by gaffes such as the one that occurred in February 2005, when the Associated Press (AP) reported that an Iraqi militant website had posted the image of a captured U.S. Soldier and the threat of his beheading unless Iraqi prisoners were released.[29] While the AP article noted that the claim and the photo's authenticity could not be confirmed, the AP was subsequently embarrassed when bloggers quickly researched and revealed that the "captive" was a plastic toy action figure.

Some argue that milblogs can be cited by news media as convenient anonymous sources to "substantiate" all kinds of outrageous claims against the military. But for this threat, too, there is a control. Journalistic ethics decree that anonymous sources—say, milbloggers—can be cited only if the reporter has built up a trusting relationship with each one. To cite just any blog would be like trusting the contents of a leaflet found blowing in the street: it would equate to a violation of journalistic ethics.[30] Therefore, a reporter is duty bound to authenticate a blogged source. But, how to do so? As an Army spokesperson, I have received several inquiries from the media regarding blogged content. The real-life example that opened this article—a journalist requesting information about a blogged account of Soldiers shooting dogs—occurred because a journalist sought not only comment, but the confirmation needed to publish the account. Such contact gives the Army the opportunity to mitigate the impact of negative information.

As aforementioned, regardless of what we or the traditional media do, bloggers themselves exert significant control over fellow bloggers. Most Soldiers understand that when donning a uniform, they voluntarily agree to limit their free speech and political activity—a point that milbloggers reinforce among themselves.[31] Milblogs frequently link to other milblogs and comment on each other's content. Thus, the most credible milblogs are those that have been recognized by a small cadre of hard-core bloggers. They have survived the self-policing provided by those currently in the field, by those who have returned from the field, and by veterans who know enough to be able to assume this role.

In fact, the online community takes pride in "outing" all forms of deception and often is the first to reveal a falsehood. Two of the better known examples of this are "Rathergate" and "Easongate." On 8 September 2004, a *60 Minutes Wednesday* story based on an inauthentic document questioned President Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard. When bloggers exposed that the report was false, CBS resisted, then apologized, and ultimately Dan Rather resigned with two years left on his contract.[32] Similarly, on 27 January 2005, CNN news chief Eason Jordan publicly accused the U.S. military of deliberately targeting journalists with lethal force. Jordan subsequently recanted, but a blogger who publicized the original comments ignited a controversy that forced Jordan to resign 15 days later.[33] Such online outing takes place within the blogosphere as well, to authenticate or invalidate those who pass themselves off as veterans or awardees, particularly those who claim to be affiliated with elite military organizations.[34]

Finally, because maintaining a milblog is hard work that requires time, Internet access, and some professional peril, the simplest controls on blogs are resources. For a blog to gain readership, it must achieve the blogging community's high standards of timeliness, consistency, and quality. Most Soldiers do not have the time or stamina to maintain such a blog, and most attempts wither from "diary syndrome"—a surge of up-front effort followed by fewer and fewer entries as interest and effort wane.[35] Internet access and bandwidth may not be available during a deployment, and commanders may limit use of scarce government resources for real-world communication missions. Ultimately, too, most individuals have no interest in subjecting themselves to additional command or peer scrutiny—a scrutiny that is itself evolving.

Current Actions and the Way Ahead

The latest Army guidance regarding blogs focuses on maintaining OPSEC in electronic communications. A rapid revision of Army Regulation 530-1,

Operations Security, dated September 2005, calls on all Army personnel to properly implement OPSEC procedures in their communications and explicitly includes blogs in a listing of public forums.[36]

But the issues before the Army are larger than OPSEC. In recognition of this fact, the most specific guidance to date to Soldiers was released in April 2005 by Multi-National Corps—Iraq (MNC-I), in the policy memorandum "Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites." The policy prohibits the release of any official information not generally available to the public or releasable under the Freedom of Information Act. It lists five types of prohibited information: classified information, casualty information before formal next-of-kin notification, information protected by the Privacy Act, information regarding incidents under ongoing investigation, and For Official Use Only information. The brevity of the MNC-I policy makes it difficult for a typical Soldier to understand it fully and comply, but it clearly communicates that specific types of information may not be released.

The primary effect of the MNC-I policy and the September 2005 ALARACT message has been to scare Soldiers. In response, many established milbloggers have voluntarily discontinued their milblogs, and most likely, many more never began one. Most signed off like this author of an extraordinarily insightful, positive, and moving blog, who wrote: "Operational security continues to be an issue for our Armed Forces. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that I must back away from the blogging community. . . . I love my soldiers and want to do what is best for them . . . . I pray that I have been able to shed some light on the everyday events that our men and women overseas deal with . . . into their struggles and triumphs. . . . What I do, I do willingly out of respect for our leaders and love for our soldiers."[37] Managing Soldiers by scaring them into silence is regrettable because this blog and nearly all of the discontinued milblogs had served their readers and the Army well.

Therefore, the way ahead must engender an appreciation in commanders for the warfighting advantages that their Soldier-authors bring to the information battlespace.[38] This can be accomplished by addressing the three basic concerns about blogging listed earlier:

1. "Who speaks for the Army?" First, Soldiers have always served as ambassadors of the Army within their hometowns, their military communities, and throughout the world. Second, there are limited numbers of dedicated Army spokespersons (i.e., PAOs) to augment commanders. Third, it is a widely repeated truism that the best representatives of our Army—the best spokespersons—are our Soldiers themselves. Therefore, while commanders and PAOs serve as the "official" voice of the Army, all Army personnel represent and "speak" for the Army.

Similar to U.S. corporations, the Army needs to implement widespread training on information security and electronic communications to both support and caution Soldiers, Department of the Army (DA) civilians, and DA contractors. In addition, these personnel should receive traditional media training to "stay in their lane" and to preface comments with statements such as "What I know as a platoon sergeant is that . . . " and "I don't speak for the Army, but I think . . . " Following instruction, individuals should be trusted to exercise self-control, as well as self-interest and selfless service, in publishing sensitive information.

In October 2005, the Army began sending out OPSEC mobile training teams to educate deploying units. This is a good start, but such education should be standardized into an annual classroom requirement, or a web-based tutorial and a predeployment refresher.

Most Soldiers want to do the right thing, but problems occur when they fail to recognize that their private and public electronic communications have merged. Education should ensure that milbloggers understand the potentially international nature of their audience.

A particularly pervasive problem is that most Soldiers do not understand the private-public merging of email. For example, an irreverent email from a Soldier to his father is a private communication, and one may certainly complain or question a superior in such a format. However, if the father forwards the email to his business associates, many of whom do not know the son personally, this private communication becomes public. As the email is forwarded or posted in the blogosphere, the result is widespread publication of a credible document with serious implications for the Soldier and the Army—no matter the sender's original intent.

2. "If everyone may speak, what is the impact?" When everyone may speak—Soldiers and non-Soldiers alike—consumers become more savvy about what they consume. The fact that a milblog exists does not mean that it is read. Since the barriers to

Internet publishing are low, consumers choose their sources based on credibility, accuracy, and timeliness. When credibility is hard to determine, consumers choose those blogs that regularly post information that is both useful and consistent with other sources. Corroborating sources include personal experience, news media accounts, and other blogs.

Like private citizens, the Army has a limited ability to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic milblogs. One approach, contained within the MNC-I memo, is to require all milbloggers to register with their commanders. Unfortunately, such a policy discourages "good" Soldiers while allowing "bad" Soldiers to blog unfettered unless caught. From a policy perspective, the Army should not feel obligated to respond to blogged allegations that lack such vital data as date, specific location, or unit name, for it is impossible to provide detailed responses to anonymous, unspecified rubbish. We need not set a precedent for troublemakers to waste Army resources by blogging falsehoods. The media cannot credibly publish any such blogged accusations without first substantiating them.

The Army can also benefit when individuals quickly speak for themselves to rectify inaccuracies in the national and international media. In a small number of cases, milbloggers can defend the Army more credibly and more quickly than official spokespersons.

3. "What controls, if any, should the Army impose on Soldiers?" If the Army opts for total control and restricts Soldiers from blogging, then Soldiers who like the Army and who are proud of their service will comply by shutting down their blogs and removing their positive influence from the blogosphere. In fact, these pro-Army blogs were never an issue because the Army benefits from the positive coverage. Most Army detractors ignore positive depictions of the military—experienced PAOs will attest that good news is rarely deemed newsworthy. If the Army restricts milblogs, the only voices that remain in the blogosphere will be the disgruntled and disaffected few, egged on by fellow miscreants and fakers. These troublemakers are perfectly capable of shifting the "preponderance of the evidence" in the blogosphere or even concocting phony issues that create noise in the system.

The MNC-I memo presents a carefully crafted set of restrictions ending with a paragraph stating, "This is a punitive policy." Since meaningful

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restrictions require enforcement, the MNC-I policy states that commanders are responsible for reviewing blogs within their commands quarterly. This requirement is an additional burden on commanders with a lengthy time lag between publication and possible command feedback, a lag which renders such effort nearly useless. At present, limited help is available from outside sources. The Army Web Risk Assessment Cell specifically monitors official Army websites, although it also samples milblogs.[39] Unless the Army unwisely devotes vast resources to monitoring personal transmissions, commanders must primarily rely on the honor system and their Soldiers' common sense.

Not only is enforcement a problem, but most possible violations exist in the eye of the beholder. Valid opinions differ between honorable people. But as one milblogger stated, "All good soldiers crave appropriate guidance to avoid problems."[40] The MNC-I policy is an excellent start, but Soldiers deserve a more expanded and operational definition than it currently offers.[41]

Therefore, the Army needs to create a document on Soldier communications similar to the clearly written DOD media-embedding ground rules that constrain the publication of a range of images and topics.[42] Such a document would more clearly outline what is acceptable and unacceptable, although gray zones will always exist. Education on the document should be the centerpiece of annual OPSEC training and education requirements.

Muddy Boots IO

Previous eras of widespread information control have been replaced by a present period offering greater risks and rewards. The newly found ability of Army personnel to communicate directly with the public, inadvertently or deliberately, anonymously or openly, requires updated and expanded guidance and education.

Military blogs written by those in muddy boots—of their own volition and in their own words—give readers precious insight into the quality, efforts, and sacrifices of our forces. Blogs written within the boundaries of security, accuracy, policy, and propriety are a combat multiplier in the information domain.

Commanders must educate Soldiers and provide them with specific guidelines in order to minimize possible OPSEC and other violations. However, commanders at every level must boldly accept risk in order to support the rewards and warfighting advantages that Soldier-authors bring to the information battlespace. *MR*

NOTES

1. Family members now expect superb connectivity and may send computers and phones to deployed service members. See Moni Basu, "Georgia Guard: The 48th: Georgia GI's in Iraq often without Net," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 4 July 2005, 6A. Also, "Thanks to facilities stocked with computers and telephones, soldiers were able to keep in regular touch with loved ones. . . . Kadeisha Cornell and her husband, Sgt. Thomas Cornell, talked almost every day while he was gone." Claire Parker, "Tears, hugs greet GIs returning from Iraq," *The Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, 4 September 2006, <www.fayettevillenc.com/article?id=241214>.

2. "I Wanna be a Soldier Blogger," National Public Radio "On the Media," aired on WYNC, New York, 29 April 2005, < www.onthemedia.org/transcripts/transcripts_042905_blogger.html>.

3. Paul Gronke and Timothy Cook, "Disdaining the Media in the Post 9/11 World," paper prepared for delivery at the August 2002 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2002.

4. "I Wanna be a Soldier Blogger."

5. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Addresses U.S. Troops in Iraq in Video Teleconference," 13 October available at <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051013.html>.

6. Deb Reichmann, "Bush Teleconference with Soldiers Staged," The Associated Press, 13 October 2005.

7. U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement from Pentagon Spokesman Lawrence Di Rita," DOD News Release No. 1045-05 (Washington, DC: 13 October 2005), < www.defenselink.mil/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=8956>.

8. Sergeant Ronald E. Long, "Speaking with President Bush," 14 October 2005, <http://278medic.blogspot.com/2005/10/speaking-with-president-bush.html>.

9. Michelle Malkin, "All the News is a Stage," *Washington Times*, 21 October 2005.

10. Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, "Bloggers: A portrait of the internet's new storytellers," *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, 19 July 2006, 7-11.

11. Ibid., 18-21.

12. Kenneth Payne, "The Media as an Instrument of War," *Parameters* (Spring 2005), 81.

13. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office [GPO], June 2001, 11-20.

14. "About Us," Technorati website, <www.technorati.com/about/>. By comparison, on 12 November 2005, Technorati was tracking 21.1 million blogs with an estimated growth rate of 12,000 new blogs per day, updated by 275,000 posts daily.

15. Lenhart and Fox, 17. As compared to a study about 18 months earlier that estimated that 27 percent of adult Internet users (32 million Americans) read blogs. See Lee Rainie, "The State of Blogging," *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, January 2005, 2.

16. Robert Moskowitz, "Five Reasons to Blog," iMedia Connection, 14 March 2005, <www.imediaconnection.com/content/5229.asp>.

17. This article specifically focuses on blogs, but much of the content applies to videos Soldiers create and post online to sites such as <www.youtube.com/> or <www.ifilm.com/>. For example, "Lazy Ramadi," produced by Indiana National Guardsmen Staff Sergeants Matt Wright and Josh Dobbs, became an overnight sensation among both military and civilian viewers and was profiled by ABC News. See "Soldiers Turn SNL Rap Skit Into 'Lazy Ramadi': Rapping About Pizza and Muncie, Ind., Iraq Video Becomes an Internet Hit," ABC News, 18 May 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=1979301>.

18. Ralph Peters, "Reporting for Duty," *Army Times*, 17 October 2005, 54.

19. Corporate blogs tend to fail because either the company's message is exposed as false by other bloggers or because the company fails to identify the blog as corporately owned. According to one study, "Bloggers have an almost visceral reaction to these and see them as intruding on sacred ground. Blogs pride themselves on their transparency and independence from corporate ties. When a blog pops up that is obviously biased and lacks these two important traits, it is immediately suspect. Corporate blogs have been most successful when they have been run by—and subsequently identified with—one individual. Often this is the CEO or another high ranking officer in a company. . . . (1) They have a personal touch and do not seem to have the "Approved by the PR Department" stamp on them and (2) They touch on a variety of subjects." From "Introduction to Blogs: A quick guide to understanding and maximizing communication efforts in the blogosphere," *Bacon's Executive White Paper Series*, Volume I, 2005.

20. Younger soldiers such as Colby Buzzell, <http://cbftw.blogspot.com/>, a milblogger whose posts earned command attention, are less cautious than their experienced elders. In contrast, the popular blog allegedly written by a first sergeant, "Dadmanly," <http://dadmanly.blogspot.com/2005/08/profiles-ncoic.html>, wrote following an operation, "I can't share details about this attack, because to do so would:

   * Aid an enemy making a Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) of the success of their attack;

   * Spread knowledge of the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) to other cells that otherwise might not learn of new methods;

   * Jeopardize operations security (OPSEC) for the Scouts, Quick Reaction Force (QRF) and other first responders to Jihadist attacks; and

   * Open up specific unit and leader decision-making to inappropriate public scrutiny. This can create situations where information, necessarily incomplete due to imme-

diacy, preservation of individual Soldier rights, and classification, would otherwise distort how the overall information might be received and interpreted.

   These are not trivial concerns."

21. Peter J. Schoomaker, "Chief of Staff of the Army OPSEC Guidance," ALARACT, 23 August 2005. This message built on a previous message from Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Richard A. Cody, "Sensitive Photographs," ALARACT, 14 February 2005.

22. Christopher Cooper, "Army Blogger's Tale Attract Censors' Eyes," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2004, B1.

23. Ibid.

24. See UCMJ Article 88, "Contempt Toward Officials," and DOD Directive 1344.10, "Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces on Active Duty," 2 August 2004. Also, see DOD Directive 1325.6, "Guidelines for Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces," 1 October 1996, certified current as of 1 December 2003.

25. Major Michael Cohen's blog at <www.67cshdocs.com/Daily_Journals/December/dec21.htm>. Also see Associated Press, "Military doctor closes online war diary," 5 January 2005.

26. Those who are concerned that enemy forces will use anonymous milblogs to gauge morale or feed enemy propaganda should consider the current effects of U.S. editorial pages and the public statements of political leaders, both of which have been cited in enemy communiqués.

27. Witness the large number of blogs maintained by spouses and parents such as one of the longest running at http://an-army-wife-life.com.

28. "Corporate Blogging Policies: Introduction," <http://en.blogworkers.com/archives/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html>.

29. Robert H. Reid, "Questions raised over Web claim of soldier kidnapped in Iraq," *Associated Press*, 1 February 2005.

30. In one study, 53 percent of journalists self-reported that they use blogs for story ideas, but only 1 percent was willing to state that they find blogs to be credible. "Rebuilding Trust: Rebuilding Credibility in the Newsroom and Boardroom," Eleventh Annual Survey of the Media with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 18 August 2005, 27.

31. Greyhawk, the founder of milblogs located at <www.mudvillegazette.com/>, advises milbloggers to "Write under the assumption that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and your mother will read your stuff and know you wrote it," quoted in "10 Tips for Posting Your Blog," *Army Times*, 16 March 2005, 16.

32. Dick Thornburgh and Louis D. Boccardi, Report of the Independent Review Panel on the 8 September 2004 60 Minutes Wednesday Segment "For the Record" Concerning President Bush's Texas Air National Guard Service, 5 January 2005, available at <www.cbsnews.com>.

33. A "blogstorm" of protest erupted when Rony Abovitz broke the story morning of 28 January 2005 at <www.forumblog.com/blog/2005/01/do_us_troops_ta.html>. An excellent chronological history is Michelle Malkin, "Easongate: A Retrospective," 11 February 2005, <http://michellemalkin.com/archives/001489.htm>. A mainstream media account is Howard Kurtz, "Eason Jordan, Quote, Unquote: CNN News Chief Clarifies His Comments on Iraq," *Washington Post*, 8 February 2005, C01.

34. An example is the public discrediting of Robin Moore's 2003 book, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, which relied on interviews of Jonathan Keith "Jack" Idema, a self-promoting felon who repeatedly capitalized on his previous (although unsuccessful) stint as an Army Green Beret from the late 70s and early 80s. Idema used his military credentials to further a variety of business ventures and to gain credibility with the media such as CBS's 60 Minutes. In September 2004, Idema was convicted by an Afghan court of charges that included operating a private torture camp. See Mariah Blake, "Tin Soldier; An American Vigilante In Afghanistan, Using the Press for Profit and Glory," *Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 2005).

35. Lenhart and Fox, 12. According to the Pew survey, most bloggers blog infrequently when inspiration strikes (only 13 percent post daily), and the typical blogger spends about two hours per week on a blog.

36. Army Regulation (AR) 530-1, *Operations Security* (Washington, DC: GPO, 27 September 2005), 6.

37. Chaplain (Captain) Brad Lewis, "Fade to Black," <http://chaplain.blogspot.com>, 8 November 2005.

38. A term used in "Army Vision 2010—Information Superiority," <www.army.mil/2010/information_superiority.htm>. The term is also used in FM 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, May 1997), 32.

39. AR 25-1, *Army Knowledge Management and Information Technology Management* (Washington, DC: GPO, 30 June 2004), 27.

40. Joseph R. Chenelly, "Bloggers in Iraq must register sites," *Army Times*, 4 July 2005, 25.

41. Lieutenant General John R. Vines, Multi-National Corps—Iraq Policy #9, *Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites*, 6 April 2005.

42. DOD message dated 10 February 2003, Subject: Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR). See Section 4, "Ground Rules."