Command Sgt. Maj. Ronnie R. Kelley, U.S. Army Central senior enlisted adviser, reviews questions submitted to him on the U.S. Army Central Facebook page prior to participating in the unit's inaugural Facebook Town Hall held 7 March 2014. (Photo by Sgt. Ryan Hallock, U.S. Army)

Time to Engage in Social Media

Maj. Brenton Pomeroy, U.S. Air Force

The Department of Defense (DOD) embraced social media and web 2.0 almost six years ago, yet many military units still do not utilize this form of communication.[1] The DOD banned its use in 2007, but changed its stance after a 2010 Pentagon review of its risks and benefits, citing that its benefits outweighed the security concerns.[2] I propose that many of the lower-level units across all branches of the military also need to reconsider the risk and value of adopting this modern form of communication. Units would benefit from mirroring the DOD shift in policy regarding social media.

The use of social media at the tactical level can benefit a unit in many ways, including in the areas of leadership communication, recruiting, family support, professional relationships, medical issues, training, discipline, and unit performance. Conversely, common risks identified include unprofessional content or behavior, network security risks, and operations security (OPSEC). Leadership in lower-level military units should easily be able to understand and value the benefits gained with social media while mitigating the potential risks to an acceptable level.

A quick review of the U.S. Army website social media directory lists 943 sites for active-duty units.[3] This leaves plenty of units unaccounted for in the social media realm. Additionally, many of the units had limited presence with

only Instagram or Twitter accounts, neglecting the dominant social media platform, Facebook, which has 1.59 billion active users compared to Instagram's 400 million and Twitter's 320 million users.[4]

It is important to note that according to a Pew Research Center survey, in 2015, 90 percent of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-nine years use social networking sites, as well as 77 percent of those aged thirty to forty-nine years.[5] When compared to 2014 military demographics, these two age groups account for almost 91 percent of the active-duty force.[6] Assuming that our military is representative of our nation, this data demonstrates the acceptance of social media by service men and women as a highly used means of communication.

Leadership Communication

The first benefit of social media is the opportunity for leadership to present their message to both the military and civilian public spheres. Because social media has become an accepted form of lateral communication between peers, it is key that military leadership at all levels engage in social media to ensure an accepted military narrative is provided to help shape public opinion. T. Camber Warren argues the importance of the state to be able to gets its message out to the masses through the use of radio to combat the lateral communication through the use of cell phones.[7] I argue that similarly, military leadership needs to engage in social media to provide a stabilizing effect to Facebook's lateral communications. Additionally, we should take notice of the corporate world where a 2013 survey identified that 80.6 percent of respondents identified social media as important for leaders to engage with customers and investors, while 83.9 percent also believed that social media was an effective tool to improve brand loyalty and helped facilitate deeper connections with the customers, employees, and shareholders.[8] Finally, most of our national leaders and many of our military leaders already engage in daily communication through social media. I believe it is time for the tactical leader to follow suit and engage in unit-level social media campaigns.

Recruiting

It should go without saying that if over 90 percent of the demographic of potential recruits the military seeks to enlist use social media, then the military should get on board beyond the service level. A 2011 article in the *New York Times* quoted Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley, who said, "We're working hard to increase our social media" and "we fully recognize that young people Tivo over commercials or are multitasking on their smartphones when the commercials come on."[9] The article also noted that there was a cost savings of over $120 million by switching from ads in major media to social and digital media.[10]

While the services may be utilizing social media for recruitment, I see a need for special units to engage in recruiting via social media. Specifically, if specialized units are recruiting for highly skilled personnel, they should engage likely social media groups and organizations to encourage applicants. This type of recruitment can provide a forum for potential applicants to obtain a better understanding of the duty, skills, and commitment involved, which could improve the quality of applicants. Similar to leadership communication, the military's recruiting organizations are already engaged in this method. Now it is time for lower-level units to follow suit.

Family Support

I have been married for twelve years. Over that time, my wife has frequently complained that she was unaware of organizational events, and I usually ended up in the doghouse for being the one not passing on this information. Since 55 percent of the active-duty force is married and 86 percent of dependent spouses are between eighteen and forty years old, social media engagement to message this segment of the military family is a must.[11]

Simple things like public recognition of outstanding achievement, notification of ongoing unit events, and strategic messaging to families can be achieved though social media. Jennifer Rea, Andrew Behnke, Nichole Huff, and Kimberly Allen published an article describing their research on the role of social media on the lives of military spouses. While the data set was limited, there were common themes among respondents,

Maj. Brenton Pomeroy, U.S. Air Force, is a student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he is working on an MS in defense analysis. He holds associate and bachelor's degrees in criminal justice, as well as a master's degree in environmental management. Pomeroy enlisted in the Air Force.

Lt. Gen. James L. Terry, U.S. Army Central commanding general, logs onto the U.S. Army Central Facebook page prior to participating in the unit's inaugural Facebook Town Hall held 7 March 2014. (Photo by Sgt. Sharmain Burch, U.S. Army)
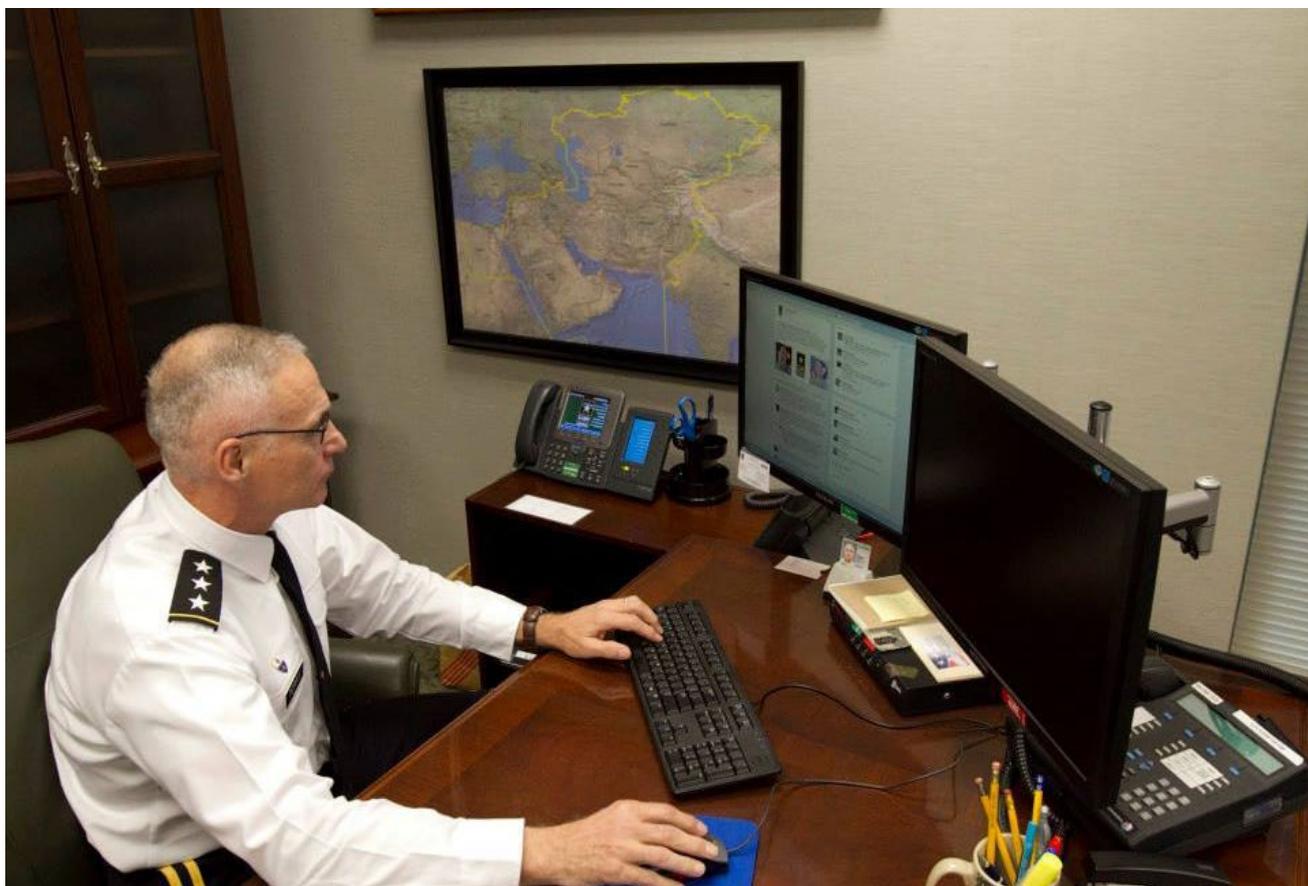
such as the ability to communicate with their spouse during deployments being essential to maintaining some form of proximity to their loved ones.[12] Military spouses identified the importance of connecting to family through social media during deployment.[13] This study also found that many respondents identified a lack of social media engagement to acquire the resources available to them.[14] While they knew that certain resources were available, there was no social media presence to steer them to the resources.

While many post or base social media sites promote the larger events affecting everyone stationed there, smaller-unit-level events and news often go unmentioned. When a unit deploys, it then has the opportunity to post links to current resources within the community to deal with separation or reintegration upon return that might not be published on the post's social media site. This is where the unit should be engaging by providing the resources and updates to families of unit events through social media. It will also help reduce stress on members like myself who often forget to notify their significant others of ongoing events or resources available to them.

Professional Relationships

Some social media sites are specifically geared toward professional relationships. Applications such as LinkedIn allow professionals around the world to network. It allows professionals to vouch for others skills and abilities. This can be beneficial for recruitment within the military as already discussed but also has utility for those transitioning out of the military. It allows professionals to build online credibility in their skills and experience. Because of my LinkedIn profile, I receive e-mails almost weekly telling me that some company is looking for people with my skills to apply for certain positions. With social media applications like this, it is also possible to solicit help with unique problems through your professional network. Unit profiles on these sites should be started so their

assigned personnel can link to them as members. It is important for lower-level unit leaders to develop and encourage these types of connections.

Medical Issues

Encouraging social media in the military at all levels has the added benefit of extending the safety net and identifying earlier those that may need assistance with suicide prevention and other behavioral health issues. In a unit I commanded, one of my young defenders took her own life. She, as many do, demonstrated many of the signs of depression and even reached out for help, telling her roommate that she was contemplating killing herself. Her roommate failed to tell anyone, and unfortunately, the young woman committed suicide. Back then, social media was not what it is today. Had she reached out on Facebook as many do nowadays, she may have been directed to a mental health professional who could have provided the clinical help she needed. I have also had personal friends in the military who told me they were having troubles and, after engaging in some serious dialogue with them, I took them to see the chaplain to get the help they desperately needed. By having a social media presence, lower-level units are at least capable of receiving cries for help.

Social media sites also provide active-duty members the opportunity to connect with people who suffer from similar problems such as traumatic brain injuries or posttraumatic stress disorder. There are social media sites established specifically for the needs of these communities so they can share their stories and learn from each other. It may not be a good idea to establish a unit-level group to address the medical needs of the personnel; in fact, if there were an unauthorized disclosure of someone's personal health information, it would probably violate the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.[15] However, it is a good idea to engage them through social media by posting links to resources and by leaders openly supporting the use of these resources, which unfortunately are typically thought of as bad for your career. By dispelling the belief that these services are frowned upon, our military personnel will be more inclined to seek the treatment they need.

I have had neighbors who failed to seek marriage counseling when they needed it because they believed it would affect their career. Even after telling them that the military and family life counselor is not even allowed to write anything down, and that I used this resource without any ill effect, it was difficult to convince them that it was okay to get the help they needed. This is an area where leaders at all levels need to engage through social media to ensure the active-duty members and their families get the help they need.

Training

It seems only logical that if our military members understand and already use social media platforms in their daily lives, then the military should adapt its training to benefit from these resources. Many educational institutions have already adopted some form of social media even down to the lowest level. My son's kindergarten teacher at the local public school uses YouTube in the classroom to find information to support her class. Yingxia Cao and Paul Hong found that in colleges, levels of student satisfaction and learning outcomes had positive correlations with social media utilization.[16]

While much of our required annual training in the military has been moved to computer-based training, there are still plenty of opportunities to integrate social media. I am currently attending the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where I have some professors who rely on e-mail as the means to collaborate, while others embrace better tools such as Dropbox and Google Drive to easily allow two-way sharing of documents and improved collaboration. This is where the unit-level training programs can benefit from social media. Providing some information to be digested prior to training and then reinforcing it in a formal setting can enhance training effectiveness.

Additionally, military units could benefit by setting up wikis to back up the training received. By establishing a good wiki, a unit can reduce some of the workload from teaching someone to do a simple task. A great example is the Naval Postgraduate School Computer Self-Help Wiki that I used multiple times to set up my laptop, cell phone, and tablet to connect to the local network. The wiki is very user friendly and up-to-date. I could follow the instructions on the wiki, and each time I was able to resolve my own problems. Social media and web 2.0 applications such as wikis have enabled teachers and students to collaborate and engage fully in their tasks, resulting in more confidence in the use of social media in their respective disciplines.[17]

Discipline and Law Enforcement

Social media can also be a great source of evidence to support discipline or Uniform Code of Military Justice action within a unit. At one assignment, I had a young man who claimed his back was so bad that he could not carry anything over ten pounds. Over the next weekend he posted pictures and video of himself dancing and carrying his 180-pound friend in his arms. While this evidence was not used to punish the individual in this example, it did get him back to work as the doctors were no longer buying his story. I have also observed investigation sections utilizing social media accounts to go undercover and infiltrate isolated rings of drug users on Facebook. This enabled them to identify suspects and bring down the group. Finally, military police (MP) units and the community can benefit from an official MP presence on social media. This allows the community to communicate with the MPs about their concerns, and the MPs to publish safety and security information in a timely manner. These interactions can build trust within the community.[18]

Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Social media has often been perceived as a threat to organizational performance, professionalism, network security, and OPSEC.[19] Through my literature review, I found that most studies listed at least one of these factors as a risk to using social media, while common mitigation strategies focused on policy and training. I would like to add my own perspective that most risks mentioned above would likely be ignored in people's off-duty use of their personal cellphones and computers, even if units choose to abstain from engaging in social media. Being able to monitor and engage in what is happening through official social media use allows for early intervention, discipline, retraining, or policy changes.

Organizational Performance. Any time a new technology comes around it provides an easy opportunity to be used as a scapegoat for poor performance. I remember when computers were first introduced into the U.S. Air Force; if someone was working at a computer instead of immediately responding to someone else, the response was often, "They must be playing Solitaire or Minesweeper." I have heard similar comments over the past few years, but the common response is now, "They must be on Facebook." Fortunately for the military, studies on commercial use of social

media have demonstrated a competitive advantage to those organizations that engage in social media.[20] For those that are still concerned about the effects on daily performance or the time lost due to social media use, these can be mitigated through local policies governing the use of social media in the workplace.

Unprofessional Content or Behavior. It should not be a surprise that social media can be perceived as a threat to professionalism.[21] Applications such as Facebook encourage people to post pictures, video, and comments about their actions; they allow people to interact with one another and often capture inappropriate behavior and conversations. It is this behavior that poses a risk to the military reputation, from the unit level up to DOD. An effective strategy for dealing with this kind of damaging information is to limit who is privileged to post on the unit's behalf through user controls. Leadership engagement stands to have a calming effect on social media akin to how most live social engagements go when a unit's leadership is present.

Another aspect of unprofessional content is negative commentary about a unit or its members on social media. For this, there are organizations that monitor the internet for negative comments related to a unit.[22] This service allows unit leadership to address any pertinent unprofessional comments. The final mitigation strategy for this factor is policy. While each branch of the military has an official policy on social media use, units can supplement where they see a need to further address behavior just as they would with anything else.

Network Security Risks. The threat of infecting a military network with malware or viruses through social media is real. Information technology security practitioners identified social media as a contributing factor for increases in malware on their systems.[23] Wu He suggests the following techniques be taken to mitigate the security risks:

- Develop a social media acceptable use and security policy,
- conduct routine social media site monitoring,
- monitor employee's internet activity,
- educate and train users,
- update software for firewalls,
- maintain antivirus and antispyware software,
- archive social media content, and
- develop a social media incident notification and response plan.[24]

Most of these strategies are already addressed through current military regulations and procedures but some can be improved upon. User education and training is an area that in some services is limited when it comes to social media and web 2.0. Similarly, while the military has network attack checklists and plans, lower-level units should develop plans to address social media incidents. These plans need to be included in training to ensure our military personnel are prepared to respond properly. By providing appropriate training and bolstering the mitigation measures already implemented within the DOD, units should be able to reduce the risks social media poses to their networks.

OPSEC. "Loose tweets sink fleets" is a great play on the World War II propaganda posters "loose lips sink ships" that holds true today.[25] OPSEC is critically important to successful mission accomplishment, and the use of social media creates an obvious risk, not only from military members but also from their friends and family. There is a risk from posts by parents who ask for prayers for their military sons or daughters who are deploying while providing all of the details of the flight, numbers of personnel, and missions. Military members must also take steps to ensure they are not inadvertently disclosing information by posting geo-tagged photos, photos of quarters, armored vehicles, as well as other information that allows the enemy to gather information about a unit's capability.[26] Finally, military units in a combat zone should develop plans if captured. These plans could include unit access to passwords securely stored at the unit or other location so that if a military member is captured, someone can change the passwords and prevent an adversary from gaining access to their online accounts. To mitigate the OPSEC risks, adequate training and planning is required. Military members must educate their family and friends that their posts online could endanger lives.

Conclusion

Social media use continues to rise as a means of communication within the United States. All military units should evaluate which applications or online services provide the greatest benefits at the lowest costs and invest now. The risks mentioned in this article will remain present if lower-level units do not engage in social media; participation helps mitigate those risks by providing an official voice from the unit on social media as well as by providing unit leadership with situational awareness in the social media realm. Additionally, social media can help unit leadership identify areas for improvement within their unit, and it allows them to effectively communicate with their personnel as well as the public in a manner they are well accustomed to.

Finally, social media has the potential to help support recruiting, family stability, professional relationships, and training. If the military fully engages now, we stand to improve the number and quality of personnel we are recruiting. We will benefit from improved communication with families and a better understanding of their needs. Our professional network will expand, and it will last longer since it is easier to maintain relationships online as we all move around the world. Social media is here to stay. It is time to reap the benefits of it and engage. ■

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