

Soldiers and social media: challenges, benefits, and disadvantages

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The screenshot shows a Facebook page for the 1st Engineer Battalion (@DiehardEngineers). The main content is a live video of Lt. Col. Scott Miller, the commander of the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. He is wearing a U.S. Army camouflage uniform and is speaking to a group of people. The video has 879 views and 67 reactions. Below the video, there are 12 shares and a list of comments. A secondary post below the main video announces a town hall meeting in 35 minutes at 6 PM CST. The page also features a 'Send Message' button, a 'Always Open' status, and lists of people who like the page. The page footer includes links for Privacy, Terms, Advertising, Ad Choices, Cookies, and More, and a copyright notice for Facebook © 2017.

Lt. Col. Scott Miller, commander of the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, conducted a town hall via Facebook Live with “Die hard” Soldiers’ family members. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Dasol Choi)

Skip to main content (Press Enter).

Maintaining a social media presence is typical of today's Soldiers, so it is important for them to abide by Army policies. With this in mind, the use of social media has its challenges and benefits.

The challenges include avoiding unacceptable political views, posting discriminatory comments or inappropriate material, participating in online fraternization, and copyright infringement. On the other hand, benefits include social connections with family, friends, support groups, and networking opportunities with professional organizations.

In addition to these challenges and benefits, there are several disadvantages, including operations security violations, the risk to family safety, and misconduct as a poor reflection on the Army.

Challenges

Political Views

Political conversations can cause a backlash on social media and at work. Soldiers may be tempted to express personal views on the country's political climate, which could lead to violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. In particular, disrespecting the U.S. president through posts, memes, and videos is a violation of the UCMJ.¹

Article 88 of the UCMJ states, "Any commissioned officer who uses contemptuous words against the President, the Vice President, Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of a military department, the Secretary of Transportation, or the Governor or legislature of any State, Territory, Commonwealth, or possession in which he is on duty or present shall be punished as a court-martial may direct."²

Enlisted Soldiers who make derogatory or disrespectful statements about political leaders may violate Article 134 of the UCMJ when they make these comments on a social media site.

Article 134 of the UCMJ states, "Though not specifically mentioned in this chapter, all disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces, all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the armed forces, and crimes and offenses not capital, of which persons subject to this chapter may be guilty, shall be taken cognizance of by a general, special or summary court-martial, according to the nature and degree of the offense, and shall be punished at the discretion of that court."³

Because social media provide a seemingly anonymous platform for freedom of speech and openness, Soldiers may find themselves reverting to personal politics, resulting in potential discrimination based on race, color, gender, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation. Soldiers may think they can easily share how they feel without fear of repercussions online, but that is a mistake.⁴

A way to mitigate potential misconduct is to avoid posting what you would not say in person.⁵ Words said cannot be unsaid or unheard, and while deletion of social media posts is possible, Soldiers cannot be certain the information is no longer visible.

Inappropriate Materials

The Army does not allow Soldiers to display inappropriate posters in their barracks room or office space; however, social media allows everyone to post pictures and videos to their heart's desire. The challenge here is that Soldiers may feel entitled to post pictures, videos, or whatever they choose without restriction. Therefore, they should be mindful of their posts, ensuring they remain within the Army's standard of good order and discipline. A rule to follow is if a picture cannot be displayed in their office space or barracks room, the photos should not be posted online because the effects are the same, including the ramifications of such behaviors.

Fraternization

Social media may be a host for personal and professional development as well as a means of communication within an organization. However, professional lines in a unit that has an uncontrolled social media presence can develop inappropriate relationships.⁶

Professional relationships become inappropriate when conversations stray from the original purpose of a unit's social media platform. Soldiers of different ranks and positions should wait until they are no longer assigned to the same immediate chain of command (battalion-level) before friending each other on social media, if at all. Unit posts should keep Soldiers and their families informed without creating an environment that promotes or supports action without military bearing.

Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, section 4-14b, states:

Soldiers of different grades must be cognizant that their interactions do not create an actual or clearly predictable perception of undue familiarity between an officer and an enlisted Soldier, or between an NCO and a junior-enlisted Soldier.

All relationships between Soldiers of different grade are prohibited if they:

1. Compromise, or appear to compromise, the integrity of supervisory authority or the chain of command.
2. Cause actual or perceived partiality or unfairness.
3. Involve, or appear to involve, the improper use of grade or position for personal gain.
4. Are, or are perceived to be, exploitative or coercive in nature.
5. Create an actual or clearly predictable adverse impact on discipline, authority, morale, or the ability of the command to accomplish its mission.⁷

Copyright Infringement

Finally, social media increases the chances for copyright infringement. Soldiers should know the protection status of information, images, and videos they post. While some material is available for fair use, an owner may elect to protect their property or material. To use copyright protected material which displays a protection message, contact the owner to request permission to use the material or continue searching for fair use material and give credit where it is due.⁸

Benefits

While there are several challenges for Soldiers using social media, there are also many benefits. Maintaining personal connections with family, friends, and support groups are bonuses of social media. By communicating with friends and family through chat, pictures, and videos, Soldiers relieve stress.

Equally important is access to support groups, which enables Soldiers to receive help. For instance, a former member of the author's previous unit was able to receive mental health support after posting what seemed to be a suicide note on Facebook. The Soldier's friend immediately contacted the chain of command who then located and provided assistance to the Soldier.

In addition to maintaining contact with friends and family, access to and networking with professionals and their organizations is another benefit of social media. As a result, social media may facilitate career opportunities for Soldiers leaving the Army. There are numerous websites and other online resources allowing Soldiers to post resumes and share information with potential employers. These services provide Soldiers with hiring opportunities and help save money while job-hunting.

Soldier Feedback

The Army benefits from social media because it gives Soldiers a voice on a wide variety of topics. For example, to continue improving the fighting force, the Army can solicit and use Soldiers' suggestions to develop systems and processes or Soldiers can instantly communicate and support Army messaging to friends, family, and the general population. Social media also opens communication channels, allowing Soldiers to access Army updates on current and future programs and policies. In short, social media does not replace face-to-face leadership; however, it reduces the time communication takes to reach individual Soldiers.

On a different note, Soldiers who violate the Army's command policy of disparagement are subject to punishment under the UCMJ.⁹ The best way to ensure this is not a problem in the first place is to make on-the-spot corrections and escalate to disciplinary actions as necessary.

Disadvantages

Operations Security

The Office of the Chief of [Army] Public Affairs explains operations security is a primary concern as social media increases in popularity.¹⁰ Habits of posting one's location through geotagging, which shares the location of the user in real time, could lead to OPSEC violations and jeopardize missions. Terrorists may follow Soldiers online to aggregate information for future attacks.

When Soldiers share location and plans, they place personal and family safety at risk. Military identifying information such as rank, name, and movement dates should not be posted online in addition to equipment types and capabilities. Thieves could follow Soldiers' social media posts to determine exactly when to rob a home or lay-in-wait for malicious intent.

To assist in operational, personal, and family security, the geotagging function should be disabled on the social media platform in use. As the recent Fitbit's geotagging security issue demonstrated, Soldiers' locations can be found online through geotagging.

Related: Fit to Be Spied: Fitness Trackers and OPSEC Risks

(<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/March/Fitbit/>) by Dayton Ward, NCOJ

Poor Reflection of the Army

Individual misconduct reflects poorly on Army values, discipline, and culture. Misconduct will affect how people view the Army and the mindset of potential recruits and their family members.

Spoken words may echo before fading over time; however, social media posts last forever, even after deletion. It only takes one person to repost and reopen a wound. Soldiers need to be smart and learn from their mistakes. More importantly, they should learn from the mistakes of others.

Conclusion

The Army cannot function on electronic communication alone, leaders must address communication challenges with their Soldiers before they become problems. Soldiers raised in a social media environment may not have the necessary proficiency to maintain face-to-face conversations, but face-to-face communication is important when explaining major points and soliciting feedback in real-time.

Developing a culture where Soldiers understand social media's limitations are paramount to overall understanding and appreciation of these platforms. The key to individual success is thinking before posting. Moreover, leaders should continue to model the right behaviors for young Soldiers to emulate.

Notes:

1. "Article 88. Contempt toward Officials," Uniform Code of Military Justice website, accessed 11 May 2018, <http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/888-article-88-contempt-toward-officials> (<http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/888-article-88-contempt-toward-officials>).
2. "Article 88. Contempt toward Officials," Uniform Code of Military Justice website, accessed 11 May 2018, <http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/888-article-88-contempt-toward-officials> (<http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/888-article-88-contempt-toward-officials>).
3. "Article 134. General Article," Uniform Code of Military Justice website, accessed 18 May 2018, <http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/934-article-134-general-article> (<http://www.ucmj.us/sub-chapter-10-punitive-articles/934-article-134-general-article>).
4. Department of the Army Equal Opportunity Branch, Professionalization of Online Conduct, ALTRACT 075/2017 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army Equal Opportunity Branch, August 17, 2017), https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/ALARACT_075_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf (https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/ALARACT_075_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf).
5. Department of the Army Equal Opportunity Branch, Professionalization of Online Conduct, ALTRACT 014/2017, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army Equal Opportunity Branch, February 26, 2017), https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/alaract_014_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf (https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/alaract_014_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf).

- (https://www.army.mil/e2/download/v7/socialmedia/diadaoc_014_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf).
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 7. S. Army, Army Command Policy, AR 600-20 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 6, 2014), https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r600_20.pdf (https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r600_20.pdf).
 8. Victoria McGrath, "How to Know if Internet Images Are Copyrighted," Legal Zoom website, <http://info.legalzoom.com/internet-images-copyrighted-24225.html> (<http://info.legalzoom.com/internet-images-copyrighted-24225.html>).
 9. Pomeroy Brenton, "Time to Engage in Social Media," Military Review, March 23, 2017, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Time-to-Engage-in-Social-Media/> (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Time-to-Engage-in-Social-Media/>).
 10. Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, U.S. Army Social Media Handbook (Washington, D.C: Online and Social Media Division, Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, January 2011), <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a549468.pdf> (<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a549468.pdf>).