



People typically act differently within the digital realm of social media than they do in "real life." Leaders owe it to themselves, their Soldiers, and the military to treat cyberspace as a real place. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Mark A. Moore II, NCO Journal)

The Digital Domain Of Leadership

By Staff Sgt. Oren Hammerquist

2nd Cavalry Regiment, Rose Barracks, Germany

Here is a question which is sure to start an argument: Should you "friend" your Soldiers on social media?

While some may say yes while others vehemently no, a more complicated question is how should leaders deal with social networking in the Army. Social networking has changed our world, and Army leaders owe it to Soldiers to guide the way social networking is changing the force. The pitfalls and benefits of the internet mean noncommissioned officers should actively monitor their Soldiers' digital presence.

The Army Criminal Investigation Division reportedly receives hundreds of reports of Soldiers caught in online fraud claims ranging from fake Soldiers asking for money, to probes for sensitive information, to sextortion (threat to release embarrassing images unless the subject pays or performs favors).¹

The majority of those joining the military today cannot recall when the internet did not exist, but we as hu-

mans do not have the instincts to function in an online world.² Many find out the hard way that the internet's perceived anonymity, which contributes to much online misconduct,³ is false security.

Going Viral

We cannot predict when a careless or thoughtless (and often ignorant) statement will go "viral, after which replies often progress from friendly jokes and good-natured teasing to anger and hate in reaction to even the most innocuous statements. A tweeted joke giving the age of the Earth as 2,014 years old gained 16,000 retweets in 24 hours, some of which told the original poster to "kill yourself."⁴ A joke regarding Pearl Harbor survivors during a Carson Daly interview quickly escalated to direct, personal attacks on the interviewee.⁵

Military examples are sadly numerous. In 2014, U.S. Marines burning bodies and posing with a skeleton set off a controversy.⁶ Photos of more than a dozen

Airmen, including at least one senior NCO, posing with a casket sparked outrage in 2011.⁷ Though clearly unprofessional conduct, consider the disproportionate anger in response to a video of two Marines throwing a puppy from a cliff in 2007.⁸ One of the most surprising is perhaps Pfc. Tariqka Sheffrey's posting. Sheffrey posted a photo of herself "hiding, so I don't have to salute the 1700 flag".⁹ This sparked outrage, not only from "expert" journalists on military customs and the Uniform Code of Military Justice but also the public. Within a day, agitators downloaded her image and created several Twitter accounts in her name where they posted increasingly anti-US sentiments.¹⁰ NCOs and leaders should recognize and understand how each of these stories gained equal if not greater publicity than various scandals giving the military a proverbial "black eye" during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Improved search algorithms can be a threat to military operations as illustrated by the Justine Sacco incident. This journalist posted a racially insensitive comment (intended as a joke) about AIDS before an African trip and then turned her phone off.¹¹ At the halfway point of her flight, the internet began giving her flight number and arrival time to anyone searching for Justine Sacco.¹² By the time her plane landed, more than 20 million people had seen the "hashtag" #hasjustinelandedyet, and the number of views at the end of 24 hours topped 60 million.¹³ This incident also turned dark as photos of her family circulated and her nephews began getting rape threats via telephone.¹⁴ Imagine how harmful this level of information could prove to a military operation.

Things You Would Not Say In Public

Perceived anonymity and lack of censorship raise concerns involving radicalization of potential insider threats and the proliferation of socially unacceptable beliefs. The internet often echoes rather than causes radicalization, fetishism, racism, or any twisted need a human can conceive because it allows for instant and seemingly benign contact with like-minded persons.¹⁵ One example is Maj. Nadal Hasan, who used email to contact radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, months before committing the Fort Hood shootings.¹⁶

The internet acts as an echo chamber for more than radicalization. Data analysis shows a shocking, unprecedented spike in internet searches containing the "N-word" in November 2008, coinciding with President Obama's election.¹⁷ The day after the election, roughly one percent of searches for "Obama" also contained either the "N-word" or "KKK."¹⁸ Presumably, the searchers would not make similar statements publicly and hesitate to state them on social media, but both of these actions prove unnecessary on the internet. Like-minded groups and pages already exist. The internet allows

socially unacceptable views to find an audience, allowing individuals to rationalize their views.¹⁹

What causes people to conduct such antisocial searches? Dr. Mary Aiken, a cyberpsychologist and adjunct associate professor at University College Dublin, Geary Institute for Public Policy, Dublin, Ireland, calls this the online disinhibition effect, or ODE.²⁰ Simply put, the structure of the internet causes people to be "bolder, less inhibited, and judgment-impaired almost as if they were drunk."²¹ This behavior leads to online amplification and can lead to greater generosity, amplification of anti-social ideas, or outright cruelty.²²

The internet and social media are pervasive in society at large. People check their smartphones an average of 200 times per day, or—depending on how much sleep you get—every five to seven minutes.²³ Facebook reported 4.5 billion "likes" per day in 2013²⁴ when there were approximately 1.1 billion users.²⁵

Without email, most units accomplish very little staff work, and online training is a requirement of the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System. Some Army units now conduct a great deal of business via online platforms. We, as leaders, must take great care when using social media and the internet.

Living and Working "In" the Internet

Leaders should treat "cyberspace" as an actual location.²⁶ If we knew our Soldiers attended radical rallies or events, we would intervene to stop their participation. Online misconduct is punishable under articles 88, 89, 91, 133 and 134 of the UCMJ,²⁷ which cover contempt toward officials, disrespect toward superiors, insubordinate conduct toward superiors, conduct unbecoming, and actions ruled to be detrimental to good order and discipline. Leaders who fail to address such activity could be subject to UCMJ action as well.

It is a good idea to "friend" your Soldiers on social media. The terminology here seems problematic. NCOs should not be their Soldiers' friend but their leader; NCOs may not fraternize with their Soldiers. However, the "add friend" button is not equal to fraternization or friendship. Naturally, special relationships—trainee/ Drill Sergeant, trainee/instructor, and probably recruit/recruiter—are in a special class. Nor does it make sense for the first sergeant to "friend" all his Soldiers although keeping an eye on his or her NCOs is advisable. NCOs should "friend" their Soldiers and follow their Twitter feeds, read or at least skim their blog posts regularly, and otherwise monitor online activity for several significant reasons not listed above.

Remember Who's Watching: First, the major contributing factors to ODE are perceived anonymity and lack of authority.²⁸ The examples above, such as Sheffrey, prove online anonymity is limited at best,

and knowing that one's NCO will see what one posts may positively alter online posting habits, resulting in a more professional image and eliminate operations security violations. Naturally, Soldiers can block their NCOs and post the same content, but at least they have to consider their audience before clicking "post." This practice works both ways: NCOs who know their Soldiers may see their content will be more careful what they post.

Involved Leadership: Second, Soldiers who post their interests online may never mention them at work. Leaders may identify troubling behavior or behavior that puts Soldiers at risk for radicalization, targeting by predators, or insider threats. Conversely, knowing one's Soldier likes a particular sport, a specific style of music, or other personal details supports involved leadership. This approach also allows leaders to gain a better knowledge of a Soldier's family, which shows Soldiers you care. NCOs must inspect where their Soldiers live both online and offline.

People Tell More Secrets to Strangers: Third, people are more likely to share secrets with total strangers than with close acquaintances or friends.²⁹ Essentially, users substitute anonymity for the same safety: people treat the web as a stranger while sharing highly personal stories of sexual assault or suicidal ideation. The story of the viral "#MeToo" hashtag serves as a sobering illustration of this behavior. When actress Alyssa Milano shared a Me Too movement post, she received more than 60,000 comments, including many stories of women enduring sexual assault. One anonymous poster said her assaulter "liked" her post.³⁰

Closely related to this are numerous stories of suicide notes posted to social media. A trend towards online suicide notes, real ones along with those written as simple cries for help, is sadly on the rise. The methods we invented in the 1990s to help people considering suicide, such as suicide hotlines, may soon become obsolete, and what will replace them? In the military, direct intervention is the best option but only if leaders and friends monitor the online lives of their brothers and sisters in arms.

Your Soldiers' Professional Image: Fourth, careful consideration of social media presence supports the Soldier for Life concept. The Army only has a Soldier for a finite time. Then, that Soldier returns to the civilian work sector where social media increasingly influences hiring decisions.³¹ The Guardian, an online news agency, gives several specific pieces of advice to avoid embarrassing situations in the future: refrain from rants and outbursts, remember every "like" leaves a permanent footprint, and ensure your photos display a professional image.³² Such practices should be common sense; however, if that were the case, there would not be a plethora of scholarly articles and other

online literature addressing the subject.³³ This serves as another example of the human failure to adapt to our new world.

Some Soldiers may feel their privacy settings insulate them; The Guardian reminds us this is by no means a sure thing.³⁴ Aside from the possibility of your potential employer knowing one of your friends, perhaps even more likely with former Soldiers who tend to seek similar jobs, remember the Sacco story. She did not need to post her flight number; the internet did it for her.

The Operational Environment: The final reason for NCO involvement in social media does not deal with Soldier conduct. The 7th Army Training Command, which runs the Joint Multinational Readiness Center at Hohenfels Training Area in Germany, incorporates notional social media into the operating environment of all training rotations. Though these may be mistakes, issues can and do arise, both in training and real life, from the information we did not know we broadcast.

Besides the operational environment, we must consider OPSEC compromises, which can come from unsuspected sources. Turning off cookies and location services is not always enough. Websites can and do record both the domain and search arguments bringing you to their site even if you have cookies turned off. Even the citations in the endnotes of this article reveal more about the author than I might intend. To demonstrate, I performed an internet search with the following terms: "jobs interviews and social media presence." Even with personally identifiable information removed, the resulting search URL still shows I speak English, and I am on a German internet server.

The effect social media can have on military operations is not theoretical, but drawn from lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unit mistakes in JMRC, ranging from poor interviews with key leaders to enemy information operations, impact the mission just as they would in the real world. Leaders cannot underestimate the impact social media has on the operational environment, and active involvement in social media improves understanding of these processes.

Conclusion

Like a pound of C4, the internet is both highly useful in the right hands and highly dangerous in the wrong hands. The smartphone in your pocket may weigh less than the C4, but it can cause far more wide-reaching damage. To ensure Soldiers respect the danger and power of the internet, we should treat it with the same respect as C4. People typically act differently online than they do in "real life" due to perceived anonymity and lack of accountability: both of which provide a false sense of security. Leaders owe it to themselves, their Soldiers, and the military to treat cyberspace as a real place. ■

Notes

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