



"Harassment, bullying, hazing, stalking, discrimination, retaliation, and any type of misconduct that undermines dignity and respect -- including that done online on social media platforms -- will not be tolerated by the Army," said Maj. Gen. Jason Evans, director of Military Personnel Management, 2017.

To Post or Not to Post

By Sgt. Maj. Florian Emonet

Guest Author, Swiss Armed Forces

Social media platforms have become an accepted means of communication for U.S. Army Soldiers. They often maintain contact with loved ones and document daily activities by regularly sharing content. Yet, as a Soldier, whether intentional or unintentional, in uniform or out of uniform, they represent the U.S. Army. This can have positive and negative effects as their presence on social media increases the reach of the Army throughout the world; therefore, any positive post boosts the Army's image globally. However, if education and guidance on operational security (OPSEC) and ethics are not provided, a Soldier's online presence may also have a harmful impact on the Army and everything it represents.

The Dilemma

In today's modern culture, social media platforms are recognized as the preferred communication method, especially for Generation Z (Green, 2019). This societal

construct requires that a nation's military usually adopt one of two stances: forbid all social media posts to increase operational security, or embrace social media and encourage its use in order to promote a positive image (Shaw & Terry, 2015).

On one end of the spectrum, the Swiss Armed Forces forbids social media posting unless a battalion or higher commander permits the content (Swiss Federal Council, 2004). This allows for active control over online interactions, ensuring operational security and a consistent message, although it requires manpower to monitor posts. Following this philosophy, Russia is also cracking down on military information sharing and introduced a bill to ban its service members from sharing information about their units, activities, or military personnel (Bodner, 2019).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the U.S. Army has fully embraced the use of social media and encour-

ages Soldiers to tell their Army story (Department of the Army, n.d.a.; Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, 2016). This increases the Army's reach, while also allowing Soldiers to maintain contact with their network and facilitate career opportunities for Soldiers leaving military service (Miller, 2018).

Root Cause

A drawback to social media content publishing instantly is that some users, in their rush to seek recognition throughout their network, post content without considering official guidelines. According to *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, receiving "likes" on social media acts as a reward and fires off dopamine receptors, giving a pleasurable feeling (Sherman et al., 2018). The problem is when this need, or addiction, overshadows professional responsibilities. For example, in a desire to be heard, users might be overly critical of the institution they serve without realizing that once the institution's reputation is damaged it is very difficult to repair it. They need to realize that their actions have second and third-order effects (Patel, n.d.).

For military personnel, problems appear when social media users fail to recognize the "individual versus community" dilemma that every online interaction represents (Kem, n.d.). These interactions serve individual or organizational needs in a personal and professional context, but rarely serve both at the same time. In a world where internet servers capture every activity, the impact of inappropriate content can have a far reach.

Impact

Soldiers represent more than just themselves. They represent the entire organization whether on or off social media (Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, 2016). Unethical social media activity, similar to unethical behavior on the battlefield, can have a negative strategic impact. The speed, persistence, and scope of social media networks allow social posts to spread in dimensions unmatched from traditional vectors, especially harmful content that goes viral (Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015).

Education

Combining three ethical systems (principles, consequences, and virtues) along with the U.S. Army's Online Conduct Policy, *Think, Type, Post*, will provide a useful values-based education system for military members (Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, 2016). This enables Soldiers to understand the scope and reach of online interactions and the potential impact, positive or negative, each of their posts could have.

Principles

Soldiers took an oath, and therefore endorse a moral contract to not harm the Army's reputation. Soldiers should analyze posts before publishing to determine if the content is moral and pertinent. Soldiers should consider the existing rules and understand their obligation to promote the positive values of the Army (Kem, n.d.).

Consequences

The addiction to social media interactions (likes and shares) is a powerful motivator and can even influence users to post controversial subject matter to boost interactions (Andreassen et al., 2017). Soldiers should always consider the potential second and third-order effects of their content and ask themselves if a post supports or damages the organization (Kem, n.d.).



THINK ABOUT WHAT MESSAGE IS BEING COMMUNICATED AND WHO COULD POTENTIALLY VIEW IT.

TYPE MESSAGES THAT ARE CONSISTENT WITH OUR U.S. ARMY VALUES.

POST IF THE MESSAGE DEMONSTRATES DIGNITY AND RESPECT FOR SELF AND OTHERS.

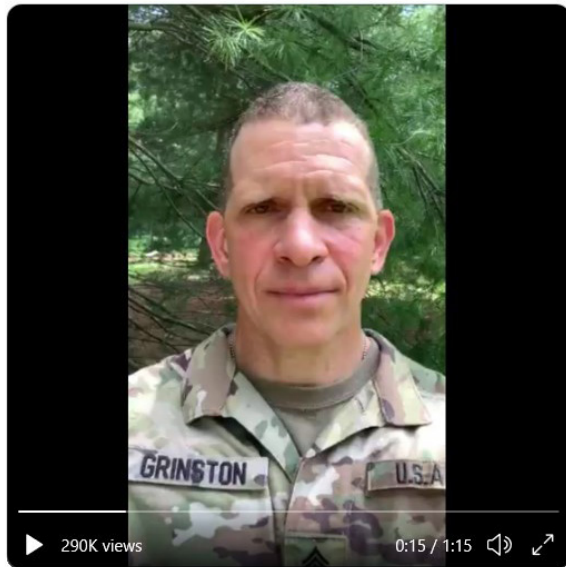
"When engaging in social media, Army team members should apply the 'think, type, post' methodology," wrote Robert Speer while serving as acting Secretary of the Army in 2017. (Graphic courtesy of U.S. Army)

A consequence analysis allows Soldiers to assess the potential impact of their activity appropriately.

Virtues

Instilling strong virtues in Soldiers is the foundation of building great leaders. Leadership without virtue and a strong moral compass is not leadership at all, its simply management. The U.S. Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage are virtues that every online interaction should reflect (Department of the Army, n.d.b.). If Soldiers take the time to assess whether their social media posts represent these values, they will be more aware of its potential impact and how they are representing the organization.

Michael A. Grinston @16thSma · Jun 5
To understand one another and to make our @USArmy stronger, we have to trust that we can tell our stories. Here's part of my story.



637 2.3K 8.3K
Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston posts a video message on his Twitter social media platform, June 5, 2020.

A Solution

A solution to the social media dilemma is to provide values-based social media education to all military members on a continual basis. Through proper training, armed forces worldwide could benefit from a diverse and active corps of unofficial representatives at all levels. This training should be mandatory, occur early on at basic training, and be continuously updated and completed every year, or at least every two years because of the rate at which these platforms evolve (Vigdor, 2020). The Swiss Armed Forces could implement it in its fundamental Soldier's regulation to ensure 100% coverage of the troops (Swiss Federal Council, 2004); and the U.S. Army could delegate the responsibility to the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs in coordination with the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership.

Conclusion

Social media is here to stay, and it's going to evolve, but with the right training it can be a positive tool for militaries worldwide. Being careful of OPSEC, and receiving proper guidance on ethical posting, could positively boost a military's image, hypothetically leading to increased recruitment numbers. This would attract a nation's top talent and better prepare them for the future. ■

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Sgt. Maj. Florian Emonet is currently working for the Swiss Armed Forces College as class leader to the fundamental instruction course of the professional NCO school. In 2019, he graduated with class 69 of the Sergeant Major Course at the U.S. Army NCO Leadership Center of Excellence in Fort Bliss, Texas. He holds a federal degree in Adult Education and his previous duty assignments include serving as the senior enlisted leader of the 7th Mountain Infantry Battalion and the senior operations NCO (G3) to the Multinational Task Force South of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 2009. He has also held several teaching assignments including the Swiss Armed Forces College as class leader to the NATO/Partnership for Peace NCO Leadership Course.



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