



For many reasons, some Soldiers report perceived wrongdoings through public media instead of through proper and protected whistleblowing channels. Because of generational issues or lack of faith in the Army's system, this issue has increased substantially as social media grows. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

# Whispering into a Bullhorn

## Soldier Whistleblowing in Public Media

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**S**ome Soldiers find official whistleblowing channels unfavorable and report activities to the public through social media, print, television news, or alternative journalism organizations. The media covered Chelsea Manning, the Army intelligence analyst who released hundreds of thousands of documents to WikiLeaks (Ray, 2024a), and Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency (NSA) information technology contractor who made public highly sensitive programs (Ray, 2024b). Other cases receive attention mostly from

current and former military, with one example being the “U.S [sic] Army W.T.F! [sic] moments” Facebook page. Created to poke fun at the ridiculous aspects of military life, it has grown into a tour de force of questionable activity and misconduct among personnel (Myers, 2019).

In everyday use, “whistleblowing” encompasses several scenarios:

- Reporting misconduct through official and protected channels
- Going to an outside agency

- Openly releasing information to the public

This article uses “public whistleblowing” to refer to the last bullet, synonymous with “leaking.” (Because “whistleblowing” implies a level of protection, “public whistleblowing” is something of a misnomer.)

Public whistleblowing undermines the chain of command (CoC), tarnishes the Army’s public and internal perspective, and denies leaders the opportunity to address problems. This article discusses the causes of public whistleblowing and its impact on the Army, three ethical lenses, and potential solutions to mitigate the phenomenon.

## Root Causes – Push and Pull

Soldiers are both pushed away from reporting problems internally and pulled toward sharing them publicly. So, a solution must address two fronts, the factors dissuading Soldiers from pursuing official whistleblowing channels and the causes driving Soldiers to reach out publicly.

One of the most apparent reasons Soldiers do not take misconduct concerns to their CoC is intuitive: they don’t trust it or the Army. Several factors could cause them to lose faith in their command, including believing the Army or CoC holds officers or senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to different standards, an unwillingness to be a “snitch,” or fear of reprisal or ostracism (Ravishankar, 2003).

Generational and societal norms attract or pull individuals to the public forum; indicators point toward generational and technological causes among the Soldier population. Most Soldiers serving since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism through today fall into the millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (those born afterward) (Dimock, 2019). Millennials experienced the birth and exponential

expansion of the internet and social media during their formative years, while Generation Z grew up with social media already in existence.

Critics often view these two groups as the generations of “instant gratification,” given advances in internet accessibility and market response to consumers. Asked in 2011 to forecast young people’s future in 2020, technology experts predicted that those raised in the internet age would make quick, rash choices and lack the patience for long-term results (Anderson & Rainie, 2012). Soldiers who report misconduct allegations to their CoC or other channels may not have the patience for protracted investigations, especially if they are not privy to their results.

Also, social media gives everyone an equal voice. It can reach vast audiences, often providing near-instant responses, validation, or empathy. One survey showed 84% of adults ages 18 to 29 and 81% of 30 to 49-year-olds use social media (Pew Research Center, 2021). Social media allows whistleblowers to share information widely through reports, pictures, and videos, fast and anonymously (Lam & Harcourt, 2019). Latan et al. (2020) argue social media is the preferred whistleblowing method, partly because of opportunity and capability.

## Impacts on the Force

The most directly impactful results of public whistleblowing on the Army involve cases releasing operational and classified information or their respective collection means. Even if reporting Soldiers believe the information is innocuous and is intended to correct issues, it may contain tactics, techniques, and procedures that could hurt us and benefit our adversaries.

Public whistleblowing also spurs further leaks. As Soldiers share publicly, an audience of fellow Soldiers will follow suit, even if the original sharer is punished.

Furthermore, repercussions or punishment against reporting Soldiers who violated Army social media policies give further credence to their mistrust in the system.

Lastly, public whistleblowing negatively affects the public perception of the Army and the force itself. Soldiers may share information publicly without context and from the affected reporting individual’s perspective; without more background information, the situation may seem more nefarious. The public sees only one side of story.

## Three Ethical Lenses

Public whistleblowing has its own set of ethical dilemmas. When viewed through the three ethical lenses of principles, consequences, and values (Kem, 2016), this issue’s proverbial waters get both clearer and murkier.

The principles or rules that apply to pub-



Soldiers with the 3rd Division Sustainment Brigade receive social media awareness training. Attentive, active, and involved leadership can and must compete with the pull Soldiers feel of whistleblowing on social media. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Laurissa Hodges)



lic whistleblowing are complex. The Army, Department of Defense (DOD), and U.S. Code have rules against releasing certain operational or classified information to individuals who do not have appropriate security clearances or “need to know.”

Beyond the rules governing the release of specific information, counterintuitively, little policy or guidance applies directly to public whistleblowing of misconduct. Most Army materials addressing social media do so from the perspective of official Army accounts and usage rather than individual usage.

The Army’s regulation on public affairs gives guidance with soft parameters warning against doing anything that may reflect poorly on the Army, but with little punitive teeth to curb the activity (Department of the Army, 2020b, p. 45).

An Army message elaborated further but did not specifically address public whistleblowing; however, public whistleblowing may meet the criteria impacting command climate and readiness (Department of the Army, 2018).

As with many indirectly addressed issues in the Army, punitive bases for public whistleblowing rest in the Uniform Code of Military Justice’s catchall Article 134, for anything that is “to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the [Army] ... [or] of a nature to bring discredit upon the [Army]” (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2012, para. 934).

Public whistleblowing viewed through the consequences ethical lens may supply more arguments in favor of this issue than against it. From an outcome-driven perspective, public whistleblowing may be more successful in resolving the root issue causing Soldiers to make releases; however, the costs for the Army of that process will outweigh the resolution of the problem. An example is Snowden’s leaks, which resulted in public and congressional reviews, reduced faith and trust in the NSA, and the eventual shutdown of the NSA’s controversial program (Ray, 2024b).

Discussing values concerning an Army problem requires including the official Army values. Regarding public whistleblowing, the Army values of loyalty and integrity conflict with this action and one another. As discussed earlier, Soldiers publicly reporting may lack faith in their CoC and the Army; this contradicts the Army’s value of loyalty and bearing faith in the Army, unit, and other Soldiers (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 26). Furthermore, publicly releasing information and the alleged misconduct violate the Army’s value of integrity.

## Recommendations with Lenses Applied

While the Army is unlikely to affect generational issues that pull Soldiers toward public whistleblowing,



A Soldier chats with friends on social media before supporting the 59th Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C. The most directly impactful results of public whistleblowing to the Army involve the cases that release operational information and classified information or its respective means of collection. (U.S. National Guard photo by Sgt. Abraham Morlu)

leaders can mitigate the factors pushing them away from reporting internally. The obvious approach is to remove the original reasons for whistleblowing: lead better. Unfortunately, if it were that simple, the problem would not exist. A method of mitigating public whistleblowing is fortifying unit climate levels that prevent going public as an option; one Army officer suggested avoiding negative publicity by building credibility, communicating effectively, and instilling a culture of pride (Meyer, 2019).

One way for a CoC to open the door figuratively to prospective public whistleblowers is the literal open-door policy; however, effective open-door policies should be more than just memorandums on which the incumbent commander replaced the preceding commander’s signature block.

Army Regulation 600-20 dictates commanders have open-door policies and set the parameters of their use. However, it puts the onus of reporting on Soldiers. It says little about the policy (Department of the Army, 2020a, p. 8). Command elements should regularly and vigorously publicize their commitment to the integrity of open-door policies, reiterate and vocally reject retaliation, and take every concern seriously (Ravishankar, 2003).

Leaders who routinely raise concerns and address issues increase the likelihood of their Soldiers doing the same as they seek to conform to organizational values (Darragh, 2018). Issues may seem of little importance to leaders, but they may be highly important to Soldiers.

Senior leaders should consider treating whistleblowing misconduct like the Threat Awareness and Reporting Program (TARP) and the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) program. Actual reporting methods for fraud, waste, abuse, and misconduct exist but are not as accessible as information on TARP and SHARP. Most Soldiers are unaware of misconduct reporting methods outside of their CoC.

Feedback to reporters who followed official channels

is crucial to preventing them from publicizing those concerns. One obstacle to preventing unauthorized disclosure is not providing an official response to reporters. Legal restrictions protect the investigative process and the alleged perpetrator of the misconduct.

While these protections are necessary, they make that crucial feedback to reporters, named or anonymous, impossible. A command could use the inspector general to facilitate feedback to the reporting individual by releasing summary reports of the releasable information or streamlining Freedom of Information Act requests to provide reporters some level of closure or validation.

A command supplying feedback to reporters (e.g., “This is ethically wrong but legally permitted . . .”) could pay dividends in helping would-be public whistleblowers understand the system worked, if not to that individual’s full expectations.

## Conclusion

For many reasons, some Soldiers report perceived wrongdoings through public media instead of through

proper and protected whistleblowing channels. Because of generational issues or lack of faith in the Army’s system, this issue increased substantially as social media grows. Through ignorance, misunderstanding, or apathy, Army leaders may push an already susceptible population of Soldiers to vent their issues externally.

Public whistleblowing negatively impacts the Army from the local unit morale and junior leadership level to the national strategic level and public perception of the Army. The issue persists despite rules, regulations, and Army values against these avenues of expression or frustration. Public whistleblowing continues, possibly because Soldiers saw previous such actions yield some positive change.

While this issue will likely persist to some degree as long as social media exists, the Army can take positive steps toward mitigation with some earnest work and open communication from leaders at all levels. Attentive, active, and involved leadership can and must compete with the pull Soldiers feel from social media. ■

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