



Not all information is best suited for the scroll. To restore institutional trust, reinforce mission readiness, and ensure our messages endure, the military must reaffirm the role of print media as a cornerstone of command information. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua Holladay)

Beyond the Scroll

Leveraging Traditional Storytelling for a Strategic Advantage

By Command Sgt. Maj. Stephanie L. Carl

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Nearly 20 years ago, social media transformed how we consume information. It promised instant updates, real-time engagement, and a direct line between organizations and their audiences. As attention spans shortened and digital platforms

took over, traditional news outlets followed suit, abandoning long-form storytelling in favor of bite-sized content designed for maximum clicks and shares.

Like many institutions, the military adapted — shifting internal communication efforts toward tweets, posts, and

algorithm-driven outreach to try to keep up with a rapidly evolving information landscape. However, in the race to stay relevant, the organization overlooked an essential truth: Not all information is best suited for the scroll.

While social media excels at immediacy, it struggles with depth, permanence, and control — three pillars of effective military communication. Algorithms dictate what gets seen, adversaries exploit the information space, and viral distractions obscure important messages.

In contrast, print storytelling offers a lasting, authoritative, and distraction-free medium that reaches audiences wherever they are — whether in a dining facility, medical clinic, or orderly room.

As the military navigates an era of information warfare and strategic influence, it's time to ask: Have we sacrificed clarity for convenience? Have we allowed our stories — our history, lessons, and leadership — to be reduced to fleeting digital sound bites?

If we want to restore institutional trust, reinforce mission readiness, and ensure our messages endure, it's time to reaffirm the power of print.

Print's Depth and Permanence vs. Social Media's Fleeting Nature

Print storytelling offers a deliberate, structured, and enduring method of communication essential for conveying military history, doctrine, and command messages with clarity and authority.

Unlike social media, which is designed for short-form, high-turnover content, print publications allow for comprehensive analysis, contextual depth, and narrative continuity — all critical for ensuring servicemembers, families, civilian employees, and veterans fully understand and internalize key messages.

While a social media post may grab attention momentarily, its brevity often fails to provide the depth or nuance required for effective internal communication. A well-researched article, by contrast, enhances knowledge retention and provides a referenceable source that remains accessible long after its initial release, reinforcing institutional values and strategic messaging.

Social Media Algorithms and the Loss of Command Information Control

One of the greatest challenges of relying on social media for military communication is the lack of control over message reach and dissemination due to platform algorithms.

These algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content — favoring controversy, sensationalism, and popular trends — rather than ensuring command information reaches the intended audience.

As a result, important messages about readiness, policy updates, and institutional initiatives can be buried beneath entertainment and individual user tendencies.

In contrast, print materials bypass algorithmic



Printed materials placed in dining facilities, medical clinics, unit orderly rooms, and high-traffic workspaces provide an organic, passive engagement opportunity that ensures command messaging reaches those who might otherwise overlook it. A physical magazine or publication in these settings encourages casual reading, allowing information to be absorbed without the distractions of digital media. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

interference, guaranteeing every recipient receives the same message as intended by military leadership. This advantage ensures command messages remain clear, consistent, and uninfluenced by external commercial interests.

Adversary Disruption and the Information Space

Social media platforms have become battlegrounds for information warfare, where adversaries actively exploit vulnerabilities to spread disinformation, manipulate perceptions, and undermine trust in military institutions.

Adversarial entities can hijack conversations, flood comment sections with misinformation, and use artificial intelligence to generate reality-distorting content — making it increasingly difficult for servicemembers and their families to discern fact from fiction.

Moreover, the ephemeral nature of social media posts makes it easier for adversaries to craft real-time counternarratives, eroding the credibility of official military communications before they gain traction.

On the other hand, print storytelling serves as a static and authoritative command information record — insulating it from adversary manipulation while providing a trusted source of reference that can't be easily altered or removed.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: A Strategic Return on Investment

While some may argue that print materials come with higher production costs than digital content, a cost-benefit analysis reveals that their long-term value far outweighs the initial investment.

Unlike social media posts, which have a short lifespan and require constant updating, monitoring, and engagement management, print publications serve as permanent, reusable resources that maintain their relevance over time.

Additionally, print products eliminate the hidden costs of social media management, such as efforts related to moderation, cybersecurity risks, and potential reputational damage from adversarial interference.

The military invests heavily in training, leadership development, and strategic communication.

Allocating funds to a reliable, controlled, and widely accessible medium like print ensures a higher return on investment regarding message retention, trust, and mission effectiveness.

Accessibility: Reaching the Full Military Community

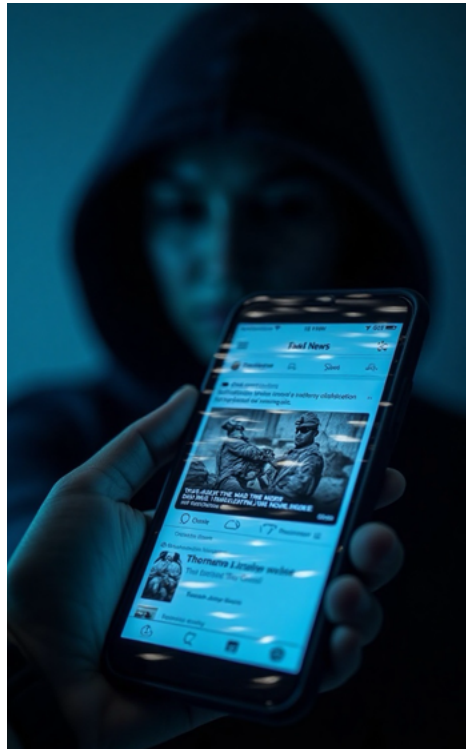
One of the greatest advantages of print storytelling is its ability to reach audiences who don't actively seek

or engage with social media for command information. Many servicemembers, particularly junior enlisted personnel, don't actively follow military leadership accounts or spend time reading policy updates online.

However, print materials placed in dining facilities, medical clinics, unit orderly rooms, and high-traffic workspaces provide an organic, passive engagement opportunity that ensures command messaging reaches those who might otherwise overlook it.

A physical magazine or publication in these settings encourages casual reading, allowing information to be absorbed without the distractions of digital media.

Additionally, veterans and civilian employees, who may have limited access to internal military social media platforms, can benefit from a reliable and tangible source of institutional knowledge and updates.



Social media platforms have become battlegrounds for information warfare, where adversaries actively exploit vulnerabilities to spread disinformation, manipulate perceptions, and undermine trust in military institutions. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Fostering Critical Thinking and In-Person Dialogue

Beyond accessibility, print storytelling plays a crucial role in cultivating critical thinking and interpersonal discussion, particularly among junior servicemembers. Unlike social media — where engagement is often passive, reactionary, or limited to superficial comments — long-form narratives encourage deep reflection and comprehension.

A well-researched feature on leadership lessons, historical case studies, or ethical dilemmas can catalyze in-person discussions during professional development sessions, small unit meetings, or informal peer conversations.

Encouraging servicemembers to engage with complex topics in a thoughtful, uninterrupted format fosters a



A well-researched feature on leadership lessons, historical case studies, or ethical dilemmas can catalyze in-person discussions in professional development sessions, small unit meetings, or informal peer conversations. Encouraging service members to engage with complex topics in a thoughtful, uninterrupted format fosters a culture of intellectual curiosity, mentorship, and informed decision-making. (U.S. Army photo)

culture of intellectual curiosity, mentorship, and informed decision-making — an outcome that algorithm-driven, engagement-prioritized social media can't replicate.

Reaffirming Print's Role in Military Communication

While social media serves as a valuable supplementary tool for rapid information dissemination, it shouldn't replace print storytelling's depth, permanence, and security.

The unpredictable nature of algorithms, the vulnerability to adversarial disruption, and the

brevity of digital content pose significant risks to the effectiveness of military internal communication — while often suppressing critical thought.

Military leaders must reaffirm the role of print media as a cornerstone of command information to maintain message integrity, restore institutional trust, and build information resilience.

By doing so, they preserve a legacy of strategic storytelling that transcends social media's fleeting nature and provides servicemembers, families, and veterans with a reliable, enduring source of information that strengthens cohesion and mission readiness. ■

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