

Senior Service College Fellowship Civilian Research Project

MILITARY ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

BY

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USAWC CIVILIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

MILITARY ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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The military has a tremendous opportunity to strategically communicate with its members, allies and even its enemies, through a simple concept called social media. There has never been a better opportunity for an organization to instantly communicate with millions of people, yet the Department of Defense has spent the last several years struggling to establish or use a viable networking platform. We have the potential for over a million military members to become part of a social network, receiving both operational and strategic information; not by maintaining numerous and redundant databases and accounts, but by simply having a social media site. Operational information could be shared with everyone, giving situational awareness to the entire country and even the world. Strategic messages could also be disseminated, clearly stating military objectives that may unfold in the years to come. The military must embrace social media networks and improve communications by strategically aligning itself with social media sites and persuading those engaged into using social tools to expand their knowledge of the armed forces on current and future strategies.

MILITARY ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media or Digital Communications

The entire population of the world currently appears to live in a somewhat digitally divided society based on multiple diverse generations and the intended use of digital communications, even though most everyone has access to some type of a digitally connected device. Everything we do today has a global effect on others and yet many individuals and organizations are not socially engaged with the rest of the world. Not only are these groups deficient but, the United States Government and our military organizations continue to struggle with how to connect globally by applying any type of a comprehensive social media strategy. Organizations need to embrace social channels, platforms, mechanisms and tools to communicate, collaborate and be very creative in order to build and foster online communities. Proper engagement and a comprehensive social media strategy could enable the military to utilize the available social networks and stay current with the ever evolving online social environments. As our ability to instantly communicate has become more advanced, the popularity of online social communication will continue to evolve; some social networks will be very successful and others may not, thus a strategy that envisions the need for proper engagement is necessary.

One of the biggest barriers to overcome appears to be the security of the information shared, as we have recently witnessed classified documents and portions of sensitive information appearing on the internet. As with any organization entrusted with personal data, critical information needs to be collected stored and accessed in adherence to proper engagement procedures and best practices. The military will need

to look at how other organizations successfully handle sensitive data for tactical, operational and strategic communications as well as what roles or responsibilities should be established and maintained to safeguard or distribute the information properly.

In the past decade, it seems that the social media communication gap has widened in the communities we live within and the world we operate in, which affects everyone as we try to help each other during a time of crisis. Unfortunately, not only does it appear that military organizations are somewhat disconnected from the civilian population, but that the military may also be digitally disconnected internally.

The military has always stressed the need for proper tactical, operational and strategic communication processes throughout the organization; however a strategy for staying properly networked may not be keeping up with current technology. Times have changed, technology continually progresses, and yet we seem to continue to try and conduct business with the expertise and procedures that are not only from past generations, but are somewhat archaic. It's an unfortunate issue that our entire military force may be suffering from an engagement gap. The further that gap grows, the harder it becomes to align the organization toward a common goal. Members of the military can take the initiative and determine the best social strategy to improve communications by identifying commonly used networks, tactics to spur and accelerate adoption, and mechanisms to engage the underrepresented constituents using social ambassadors or military advocates. This fosters new forms of engagement from a global digital society to expand their knowledge of the armed forces on current and future strategies. The military could then determine or even help foster effective

communities of interest and most importantly, networked social decision makers. The first step begins with an understanding of military and civilian practices that can be mapped to tactical, operational and strategic needs while enforcing the right level of security to create the greatest chance for success.

Senior leadership also recognizes the need for the military to embrace and engage with social media initiatives to enhance its communication abilities in the global environment that we operate in today. As stated in the National Security Strategy, “Successful engagement will depend upon the effective use and integration of different elements of American power. Our diplomacy and development capabilities must help prevent conflict, spur economic growth, strengthen weak and failing states, lift people out of poverty, combat climate change and epidemic disease, and strengthen institutions of democratic governance. Our military will continue strengthening its capacity to partner with foreign counterparts, train and assist security forces, and pursue military-to-military ties with a broad range of governments. We will continue to foster economic and financial transactions to advance our shared prosperity. And our intelligence and law enforcement agencies must cooperate effectively with foreign governments to anticipate events, respond to crises, and provide safety and security. Finally we will pursue engagement among people – not just governments – around the world.”¹

The military has a tremendous opportunity to tactically, operationally and strategically communicate with its members, allies and even enemies, through developing a socially based strategy. Implementing proper social media strategies has allowed many organizations to instantly communicate with millions of people, yet the

Department of Defense (DoD) has spent the last several years struggling to establish or use a viable social media networking platform. We have the potential for over a million military members to become part of a digitally connected social community, receiving tactical, operational and strategic information; not by maintaining numerous and redundant databases and accounts, but by implementing and fostering an established social media strategy. Releasable details of certain tactical and operational information could be shared with different communities of interest, providing instant situational awareness to networked decision makers. Strategic messages and information could also be disseminated, clearly stating publicly available military objectives that may unfold in the years to come.

The military must embrace the social media space and improve communications by strategically aligning itself with commonly used platforms and persuading those engaged into using social media applications to expand their knowledge of the armed forces on current and future strategies. Our most senior military leader, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, recently made a statement on social media and strategic communications, with regard to the impact of using current technologies to enhance the process. He comments “As someone who “tweets” almost daily, I appreciate the need to embrace the latest technologies”² and goes on to state by emphasizing the need for proper and timely information, that “we hurt ourselves and the message we try to send when it appears we are doing something merely for the credit.”³ The Chief of the National Guard Bureau, General Craig McKinley, also supports the use of social media and has acknowledged; “I use it to stress important messages to the National Guard community. Issues such as the importance of flu vaccines or National

Preparedness Month can be highlighted to a broad audience. I also retweet stories from other senior Defense leaders and organizations to help them spread their core messages.”⁴

Previous forms of communicating such as the telephone, electronic mail and even the television were once considered a disruptive form of technology in assisting with and safeguarding tactical, operational and strategic communications. However, social media simply “refers to activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.”⁵ According to the U.S. Army Social Media Handbook, social media represents a shift in the way we, as a culture, communicate with new platforms on the Internet, such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. Embracing technology allows us to utilize newer and faster ways to connect, interact, and learn in a highly effective manner when reaching out to large communities and audiences. “Soldiers have always been the Army’s best and most effective messengers. Every time a member of the Army family joins Army social media, it increases the timely and transparent dissemination of information. Social media is a cheap, effective, and measurable form of communication.”⁶ The Deputy Secretary of Defense issued a detailed memorandum on the Responsible and Effective Use of Internet-based Capabilities, dated February 25, 2010 and it specifically states the current policy “recognizes that Internet-based capabilities are integral to operations across the Department of Defense”⁷ and clearly authorizes the use of social media applications and all military Non-classified Internet

Protocol Router Networks (NIPRNet) are to be configured to allow members access to these types of highly effective and collaborative tools.

The effective use of any social strategy to supplement, or use in place of, traditional communication engagement activities can provide instant access to information for everyone involved. The current technologies can reduce the common communication barriers by creating a more informal and interactive environment. Those frustrated with elements of the traditional approach will find some relief through the use of social media. It can provide platforms for continuing conversations beyond the time constraints of personal schedules. It can extend the communication process beyond the current confines of traditional communication processes and support the development of communities of interest. It is important to realize that, even if one feels comfortable with their communication processes, many of the members of the military and those we need to communicate with feel very comfortable with current applications for online interaction, as some members have demonstrated how social media applications can help the military communicate more effectively to a larger audience.

Social Media Applications

There are multiple applications currently available for social media engagements that are easy to use and readily available. The most popular social media applications presently available today that can assist any military organization are: Facebook, milBook, MySpace, Wikipedia, milWiki, Twitter, Blogs, milBlog, Flickr, YouTube and milTube.

Probably the most popular social network is Facebook, which currently has “more than 500 million active users, 50% of our active users log on to Facebook in any given day, average user has 130 friends, and people spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook.”⁸ The average user on Facebook “is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events and creates 90 pieces of content each month.”⁹ The most interesting statistic is that since its inception in 2004, “more than 2.5 million websites have integrated with Facebook, including over 80 of comScore's U.S. Top 100 websites and over half of comScore's Global Top 100 websites.”¹⁰ Facebook is a social utility that allows users to interact with other people they choose to connect with and to participate in groups to share information. Users post updates, share photos, add links to other sites, upload videos or other forms of multimedia, and can engage in many different social games and activities. One of the most beneficial aspects of a social network, for a military organization, is the users’ ability to not only choose what content or information is posted, but to also decide what to make available to different groups or specific users to view or access. The great attraction to social outlets such as Facebook, is the user does not have know how to create web pages, nor are they required to understand any form of code to use the application. Most users who are actively engaged in social media sites “prefer the social portal model versus having to log into AIM, Yahoo Messenger, Gmail, Hotmail, Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, etc. Instead, Facebook gives them a single alternative to all these applications, with one login and interface to manage their online social interaction needs. This largely explains the explosive growth Facebook continues to experience”¹¹ and the popularity of this

type of social channel for military members to connect or share with others and keep up to date on information within their social sphere.

As the popularity of social outlets continues to grow, the U.S. Army and the DoD, realized the benefit for a similar application where information could be safeguarded within an organization's network. The web based community of Army Knowledge Online/Defense Knowledge Online (AKO/DKO) created an overarching platform called milSuite, with its own application called milBook. Quite simply "milBook is an initiative to connect people across the AKO/DKO community and acts as a central hub for networking workforce professionals with others of similar interests, much like the popular social media sites. Users have the ability to share information through blogs, forums and private wiki pages allowing secure communities of interest to grow and connect with others across the greater military."¹²

Another very popular social media site is MySpace, which is actually a precursor to Facebook and milBook. Launched in 2003, MySpace is also a "social networking platform that allows members to create unique personal profiles online in order to find and communicate with old and new friends. The services offered by MySpace include any MySpace-branded URL [Uniform Resource Locator] (the "MySpace Website"), MySpace messaging services (including, without limitation, instant messaging, private messaging, and email services), MySpace music and video services, MySpace developer services, and MySpace mobile services"¹³ to any registered user or groups of users. MySpace was once the best choice for most users, prior to other sites becoming more popular, thus every organization will need to look at multiple social media sites, to ensure relevancy in an ever changing digitally connected society.

The advantage of these types of social media networking sites and applications is that the immediate interaction between users and the information being shared can actually be knowledge and data instantaneously transferred throughout the organization. However the disadvantage may be data overload from the overwhelming amount of information that is presented and viewed. This can be a difficult challenge to overcome in any organization, whether or not it is done through social media. This emphasizes the need within any social strategy to have tools and practices to quickly sort and filter vast amounts of information.

Wikipedia and the military version milWiki, are interactive web pages that allow users to create and edit content. In these sites, the community votes on appropriate content associated with pages. In Wikipedia, the community is open while in milWiki the content is controlled based on access level. "The name "Wikipedia" is a portmanteau of the words wiki (a technology for creating collaborative websites, from the Hawaiian word wiki, meaning "quick") and encyclopedia."¹⁴ The information provided on Wikipedia and milWiki is a collaborative effort of sharing knowledge and building libraries or databases of information. Whereas Wikipedia is considered to be a compilation of general information, milWiki is intended to be more military specific and is considered "a Knowledge Management tool used by the AKO/DKO community. It allows users to integrate and interlink knowledge into topical-based articles and collaborate on issues up to and including UNCLASSIFIED//FOUO [For Operational Use Only] documentation, as milWiki's goal is to capture the intellectual property of the AKO/DKO community and allow users to easily locate and expand upon that knowledge through community updates."¹⁵ These and other wikis are mostly text-based information which also

provides the ability to add pictures and multimedia to enhance the web pages. The advantage of using wikis is that anyone with the proper access can add to and edit the information and an alert can even be sent to the other users that a change has been made, thereby creating a collaborative and efficient working environment. The owners or administrators of these Wikis can even set specific access levels for viewing and editing of the information, thus creating a more controlled environment. The disadvantage to wikis is anyone with the proper access can edit the information, which can create an environment of disorganized ideas and may even include misinformation. However, the ability to collaborate in a real-time environment demonstrates the value of wikis to any organization trying to develop or manage a database of information that is intended to be structured and concise for future reference.

Microblogs, such as Twitter, allow users to post information in a chronological order, where “Twitter is a real-time information network and each Tweet is 140 characters in length”¹⁶ and the information provided through Twitter by the users can be sent and viewed by anyone or by those who are specifically allowed access, depending upon how the information is managed. The disadvantage to the users of this type of social media is that the information is in a linear format and is never really intended to be accessed as a reference for all inclusive type information.

Another very popular and much less structured form of information sharing on the World Wide Web is known as Blogging or Blog, “a portmanteau word blending “Web Log” as “We Blog””¹⁷ and can be a great platform for individuals or an organization to have open communication activities. In most cases, blogs provide an outlet for sharing information with postings, in a chronological order, that are of interest to a community or

communities. Currently, technology has allowed most Blog creators the ability to also attach documents, photos, videos and other types of multimedia to assist in communicating their message. The advantage of Blogs is the ease at which individuals can post comments and responses to the information presented and as with most social media applications, can be restricted to others outside of the community of interest, or can be created with specific access to select individuals. The disadvantage is they are not as structured as other social media applications and may become burdened with too much information or too many comments, however as the information is normally chronologically posted, searching a Blog for specific information is relatively easy. Again, as the AKO/DKO community recognized the benefits for these applications and they created milBlog, which “is a place to find and share the latest news, insider articles, comments and posts from the DoD community. It is designed to invite collaboration through discussion and comments on news, events and announcements that impact the greater AKO/DKO community. The fastest way to get information to the community is to post on the Blog. Readers can comment and ask questions that really get the discussion started. milBlog provides quick, easy access and a secure awareness to mission-related knowledge and information.”¹⁸

Photo sharing sites such as Flickr provide an easy outlet to participate in a social experience. The General Manager of Yahoo’s Flickr, Kakul Srivastava, commented that “Flickr, at its core, is two things. First and foremost, it is a photo-sharing site, making it easier for people to share what is happening with their lives, with their friends, their families, or potentially with the world. And it is really this last part – the second part of what Flickr is – that it really is a social media site. When you think about traditional

media, you think about places where you find out about news and information; Flickr fundamentally is that. We are really capturing what is happening in the world and in people's lives for a very, very personal perspective. So we see our vision as being the eyes of the world and really making it possible."¹⁹ With the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words", using photo sharing as a compliment to a military organization's tactical, operational and strategic initiatives could provide tangible benefits such as sharing photos on certain combat operations, emergency operations or even global relief efforts.

As opposed to images, video consumes most of the bandwidth within the social space. The largest platform for sharing and distributing videos is YouTube. The individual who posts the video can set viewing permissions, allowing certain access to others who subscribe to the channel created or open access for anyone to view. "YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch and share originally-created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators"²⁰ and as the videos are tagged according to their content, they then become easily searchable. A recent advancement in video technology and a simple application downloaded from YouTube allows these videos to be played on mobile platforms including tablets and cell phones. The military equivalent is MilTube and "is a platform to capture the numerous internal videos being created across the Department of Defense. After the release of the much anticipated milBook in October 2009, MilTech Solutions, the organization behind milSuite, began to evaluate the various research and development projects in milSuite Labs. One of the more consistent requests was a

better way to share video, especially related to trainings, vignettes, and news/educational footage. Leveraging existing hardware and software recently acquired for use on the Army Team C4ISR [Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance] Knowledge Center, the milSuite team set out to build a media sharing platform for both audio and video.”²¹

There are new social channels, platforms and tools being created daily. New ways of communicating and sharing information online is changing rapidly. In understanding the appeal, limitations and rules of engagement of these new channels, it becomes evident that any organization, especially the military, preparing to use these activities in their communication processes can benefit by developing a comprehensive understanding of the types of tools and how best to apply them to tactical, operational and strategic initiatives.

Use of Social

One of the more recent examples on a global basis of how best to use social initiatives to conduct a successful communication strategy involved monitoring the H1N1 Flu Virus outbreak during the time it became a worldwide pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, “the federal government worked alongside state and local health agencies to ensure that Americans were prepared for and protected against H1N1, and the H1N1 vaccine was the keystone of these efforts.”²² There was an immediate and necessary need to communicate critical H1N1 information globally. “With a newly discovered, deadly strain of influenza, scientists and medical professionals around the globe had to work efficiently, yet intelligently to understand the disease and its

behaviors so that a vaccine could be manufactured. When the vaccine was developed, President Obama urged more trials than required in order to demonstrate its safety to the American public.”²³ This was a “method of leveraging the wisdom of the crowd; by adding content, encouraging user-generated content, audience comments and audience referrals”²⁴, and in social media is known as crowd sourcing. Crowd sourcing became an important tactic to gather information from non traditional sources and began in “the early stages of the outbreak, the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] held daily press briefings, where government officials believed it to be beneficial to “tell people what they knew, when they knew it,” while making certain that the public was told what to do as a result of any information they were given. The CDC was honest with the public and admitted their uncertainties about this new form of flu and the agency’s messaging would shift as new data and information emerged. The CDC used a combination of online and offline tactics to spread information about protecting Americans from H1N1. Through a variety of initiatives, from press briefings to Twitter to a blog on WebMD, the CDC was able to circulate several key messages which resonated loud and clear with the United States public. From knowing to cough into your arm to staying home from work or school if you were experiencing symptoms, state and federal agencies, with the support of the media, succeeded in delivering clear, succinct messaging.”²⁵

There were also private organizations involved in mapping and distributing this type of data using crowd sourcing. One such organization developed an online application called FluTracker that could quickly aggregate and visually display spread and prevalence of the disease in real time. “FluTracker is able to make outbreak data

available to the public 5-10 days ahead of the estimates provided by the CDC.”²⁶ With this type of data, individuals within different communities such as federal, state and local governmental, private organizations, and other interested parties “can utilize controlled outsourcing and take advantage of the newly developed technology and the omnipresence of the public to inform people of flu outbreaks. This is just one example of how Community Participatory Mapping is being used to make information more readily available to the public.”²⁷

The U.S. Government, State and local organizations can look to the social space to assist in any strategic communication gap, not only in the U.S., but around the globe. The military can provide assistance to private and public organizations and be instrumental in crisis organization, coordination and preparation. For example, when a crisis develops, aid relief efforts can be enhanced by collecting and reviewing details of the crisis from “citizen photos, security camera videos and satellite images pooled together on a data-rich map in layers based on their content and when they were taken. Using that data, a system can combine with three-dimensional maps that are so detailed they can pinpoint pockets in crumbling buildings where survivors might be gathered. The champion of this plan - and it is less futuristic than you might think - is Harris Atlas, a newly formed joint venture between the U.S.-based Harris Corp, which has contracts with the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence, and Atlas Telecom, a local company that works closely with the UAE [United Arab Emirates] Armed Forces and police departments. Harris Atlas is creating the skeleton of an open access cataloguing system for people to dump photos taken on the ground and at the scene with GPS [Global Positioning System]-enabled cell phones. Meanwhile, companies and

government departments can make their own data available to emergency responders and engineers, such as surveillance tapes and floor plans.”²⁸

This would allow military organizations and emergency agencies within any given community to “have access to the catalogue and map on the internet. Companies and government agencies could adjust the settings to keep sensitive information private. Abbas Rajabifard, the president of the Global Spatial Data Infrastructure Association, said that more companies are offering information that can be used for disaster relief efforts, and powerful hand-held devices now allow individuals to share more data faster. “The tools to respond, as well as awareness on the societal side to collaborate and share, has changed incredibly and as a result we are seeing multi-source data and integrated accessing coming from all different types of sources and organizations,” said Dr Rajabifard, who teaches at the University of Melbourne in Australia. “It took months after the tsunami to collect the same data that took just days in Haiti, and could take only hours if the technology and facilitation were to improve.”²⁹

As is the case in so many emergencies, it is very difficult to not only determine where the people are located that we are trying to assist, but where our own responders are located in an emergency operation and whether or not they are in any imminent danger. Using social channels to disseminate real time information, emergency responders or military personnel would be able to gather instant data on the location of those in need and this could be then broadcasted to a centralized system to inform others of their whereabouts and any required support.

Having a strategic communication process in place is critical in understanding the role of social within an organization. This is clearly recognized by international security, defense and emergency agencies where a keynote address was given by “Mr Ingersoll at the Geographic Information Systems for National Security, Defence and Emergency Management conference held by industry leaders in Abu Dhabi. He has worked with Harris Corp to provide aerial and satellite imagery during disaster relief operations after Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 and the earthquake in Haiti this year. Since the start of the year, Abu Dhabi officials have been taking aerial photographs for a mapping project to simplify planning of roads and public utilities. But in a rapidly growing city that has few street signs; those maps could become quickly outdated or even meaningless if a disaster toppled buildings.”³⁰ Outdated information should always be of great concern to any member of a military organization and emergency response teams that may be called upon to assist, thus stressing the fact that information about a community should routinely be made available to tactical, operational and strategic planners and must be kept current and readily available to edit through an online application.

Enemy forces also understand and recognize the benefits of utilizing social channels. “Terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda have for years been effectively using the internet to spread their propaganda to a broad audience. Much like the rest of the online world, the terrorist organizations are now turning their attention to the social media to suit their purposes. They are using the tools to organize and direct activities. For example, Al Qaeda has established a “special media” department called “As-Sahab” the Global Islamic Media Front as the focal point for their social media and outreach

program. They have found that people are more easily radicalized through these more informal tools like chat rooms and blogs. They are increasingly using social media tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube because the younger generation of potential jihadis are more comfortable using these media. Jihadi organizations use links to videos showing everything from sermons by radical clerics to videos on how to make a bomb. A prominent Al Qaeda website recently announced a new project call the “Al Ansar Mobile Team” whose aim is to spread extremist ideology and recruit supporters for their cause in the Arab world using mobile phone technology. In an attempt to circumvent the internet security crackdowns, they upload audio of music, sermons and lectures promoting terrorist ideals and send them out using the web enabled mobile technology. The use of anonymous phones and prepaid phone cards helps the organizations avoid any detection by government and intelligence collecting agencies.”³¹

Recently, terrorist groups have been using this medium to expand “their efforts around the world in areas where they have had difficulty in spreading their message. In Africa, Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Magreb (AQLIM) has become quite effective at using the social media to unite their supporters. They have Twitter accounts and Facebook pages that are sufficiently masked to avoid attracting attention. They take advantages of the many languages supported by these social media tools to communicate with brothers in different regions of the continent. On these and other websites, they discuss their intentions and demonstrate a very adept knowledge of the workings of the newest tools available using mobile technology and social media. The social media tools have also been used to recruit and organize potential supporters around the world, including in the United States.”³²

A recent example of a war fought not only on traditional battlefields, but also as a media campaign conducted online is the Israeli offensive against Hamas. Launched “on 27 December 2008, Israel unleashed a furious air attack that in mere minutes struck 50 targets in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. The daylight raid took Gazans by surprise and marked the beginning of a 24-day offensive designed to stop Gaza-based missiles from raining down on southern Israel. A fragile ceasefire between Hamas and Israel had ended just eight days earlier. Israel, determined to avoid mistakes from the “Second Lebanon War,” embarked on a massive public relations campaign that employed new media extensively. In fact, one newspaper featured the headline: “On the front line of Gaza’s war 2.0,” by Mary Fitzgerald[.] A war in cyberspace unfolded simultaneously with ground and air operations – including blogs, YouTube, and Facebook – to tell their differing versions of events. To learn from the Second Lebanon War, the Israelis created a special study group, the “Winograd Commission.” The recommendation that followed was to organize an information and propaganda unit to coordinate public relations across a wide spectrum of activities, including traditional media, new media and diplomacy, as reported in Rachel Shabi’s, “Winning the media war.” The function of the resulting body, the National Information Directorate, was to deal with hasbara, or “explanation.” One news source held that, “The hasbara directive also liaises over core messages with bodies such as friendship leagues, Jewish communities, bloggers and backers using online networks.”³³ This clearly demonstrates how other military organizations are embracing social media applications and improving their tactical, operational and strategic communications during a crisis or military conflict.

Recommendations

Many people have integrated and derived benefit from social outlets. This extends, to include both public and private organizations and can easily be embraced by the military if a proper strategy is in place. Reviewing community building practices and social initiatives of organizations that have mapped out a strategy on how best to use these technologies is essential for success. One of the success factors is in enhanced community based interaction, both internally and externally.

A social strategy can allow the military to become better connected, provide proper access to share information, and learn from others, as it builds a knowledge base for its members. All of this can be done if the military has a proper strategy in place so that it can understand how to build incremental value and develop key metrics to measure success. An effective social strategy can reshape the way military organizations view knowledge as something that belongs to the collective good, versus individual and/or organizational specific information, all the while encouraging a culture of sharing any type of information that may assist others. Building and activating online social communities encourages a collective learning environment by simply connecting members of an organization with other members. This is in contrast to the more formal and traditional process of information flow, where it is normally a top-down driven communication process. Mixing social with traditional communication channels correctly could also provide military organizations viable opportunities to engage in new ways, become approachable and even more personable, and develop new and positive relationships with others.

Understanding basic principles is an important factor in developing a successful social strategy. Military organizations need to realize that traditional ways of thinking and communicating won't necessarily connect an organization strategically with different communities in a timely fashion; information is being disseminated at a much faster pace in today's globally connected society. "Complex work and work in complex environments require faster feedback loops. We need to get data, information and knowledge quickly, and cannot wait for it to be bounced up and down a chain of command. Social networks, which are comprised of people that we trust in some way, can enable us to connect to someone who may be able to help. However, to do this, we have to already have that connection. Social media allows us to initiate and nurture relationships with many people in many different ways. The quality of our networks becomes critical in enabling us to do complex work."³⁴

Organizations will naturally develop their own network of people they engage with during strategic communications. A military organization looking to extend or support strategic communications would do well to look for ways to help members connect with each other and provide easily accessible means to find and utilize critical information. The best approach would be to determine what types of social channels, platforms and tools the organization currently uses. In addition, it is critical to understand what social outlets members believe are best suited for the different forms of data and activities they require to communicate internally and externally. This will ensure the greatest chance for adoption, which will lead to enhanced value and benefit in the long run. An organization's mission and culture will help determine what type of social communities can assist in developing strategic initiatives. Any organization

needs to be careful to ensure that communities they develop, sponsor, foster are managed and monitored properly or it may simply desire to utilize social media communities that already exist which would require less oversight or management. The most important issue when determining which tools to use is be very clear in what types of problems the organization is trying to solve and who is the targeted audience for the identified strategic initiatives. To be successful, the positive work culture of the organization also needs to be fostered in respect to the fact that social media activities and their success or failure is part of every individual's performance evaluation and these activities are not considered to be trial and error events. Simply stated, a military organization that is looking to engage in social media to assist with its tactical, operational or strategic communication process needs to initially answer the basics: who, what, where, when, why, and how.

One of the more difficult parts of any organization looking to utilize social activities is the information security risks. These security risks can be minimized, however, through the development of proper guidelines on the use of social outlets and the organization's approach to user level training. "There are two main elements to user level training: training regarding the standards of use of the hardware and software assigned, and training on Operational Security (OPSEC) with respect to the information posted and shared over military information systems. Both of these are of major concern when discussing the use of social media on the GIG [Global Information Grid]. OPSEC is also a concern over any communication medium – personal, telephone, letter, email, and social media – by members of the DoD. The old World War II adage

of “loose lips sink ships” is still applicable today, and social media is just the latest form of communications technology that require personal diligence in its use.”³⁵

Identifying specific goals and objectives for individuals or groups within the military organization may help in determining the overarching goals and objectives for any tactical, operational, or strategic communication initiative, although everyone must consider the information required is necessary to both those within the organization and those outside of the organization. If a military organization wants to succeed by using social media, it is essential to communicate with non-military individuals to determine their level of expectation from the organization, so that something of value can be offered to all involved in the process.

The military will soon be looked at as a credible source by offering to those outside of the organization valuable content; since most military members are very knowledgeable and skilled at what they do, why not offer that knowledge and insight to others? To provide that insight, the military will need to determine the best approach to communicate its tactical, operational and strategic information. Creating and implementing a social media engagement plan can provide an organization a benchmark not only of where it is currently is, but where it wants to be when it comes to deriving value from enhanced communication initiatives. This strategic plan can also determine who within an organization needs to have access to the information, and most importantly, who would benefit from the information outside of the organization. The plan should dive into more details and specifically identify what types of social outlets would be best used to accomplish a value added approach in communicating with all interested parties.

After developing a social strategic plan, an organization needs to engage quickly and determine if they are producing expected results. Any military organization can start using social channels mentioned earlier to engage in basic communication processes with others and from there, determine if these or other applications would be best suited for the type of content and data is created, shared and stored. Military organizations will want to keep in mind that there are many social outlets available with new ones coming online continuously. Some may or may not be the right fit, thus being flexible in your approach to social is one of the keys to success.

As previously stated, from benchmarking where an organization is today and where it wants to be, the most critical element of a social media communication initiative then becomes the measurement of success. Good metrics will show what is and what isn't working, thus allowing an organization to make any required adjustments. This may initially appear to be a daunting task, however there are many companies designing applications to quantifiably measure social interaction and engagement. These applications can easily be used to determine how an organization is doing in respect to the effort put forth to be socially engaged. Some of the more popular commercial applications for measuring social activity include comScore and Radian6. "There are some free tools that can help with this type of measurement, including; AideRSS allowing you to enter a feed URL and returns statistics about its posts, including which are the most popular based on how many times they are shared on a variety of social networking sites, Google Analytics and Feedburner are essential, free tools to help analyze your company's blog traffic, subscriber count, keyword optimization and additional trends, Xinu is a handy website where you can type in a

URL and receive a load of useful statistics ranging from search engine optimization to social bookmarking and more.”³⁶ Using these types of tools to measure social media engagement is an important exercise to determine if your organization has met their goals and objectives, and by defining the metrics for success beforehand, it will allow the measuring process to be understandable, implementable and most importantly adopted.

Conclusion

In preparing to engage with social media in any military organization, the most important factor of a successful strategic communication plan is determining how the use of social channels, platforms and tactics will solve a problem. A military organization will therefore need to look at other organizational best practices focused on social community development, activation and utilization as well as what roles and responsibilities should be established and maintained to safeguard or distribute the information consistent with proper use. The benefit in fostering a social strategy is greater levels of transparency and openness as well as information readily accessible and sharable than with other traditional channels. This, of course, is predicated on utilizing the appropriate channels and tactics that suit the mission and the organizational culture.

Organizations can create partnerships with other organizations to assist in determining the proper social media applications and allow those who appear to understand the positive and beneficial impacts of social media to try different methods to achieve the best strategic approach. A larger military organization may have to

identify different approaches and overall strategies for some individuals or groups, depending on how they intend to use social media applications and who their intended audience may be. “Social media and government started not with some policy or memo from the senior leadership, but from regular people sitting in a cubicle who saw an opportunity and decided to do something about it. They didn’t see a policy prohibiting blogging and say, “oh well, I guess that ends that.” No, they pulled together briefings on why blogging was needed. They found examples of others who were doing it. They told anyone who would listen about the power of blogging. They eventually changed the policy.”³⁷

The military should embrace social media networks and improve communications by strategically aligning itself with social media sites and persuading those willing to engage in using social tools to expand their knowledge of the armed forces on current and future strategies. The payoff for using social media in a tactical, operational, or strategic campaign is huge. Organizations will have the ability to see how they are perceived by their targeted audiences and will be able to establish conversations with key people, thus enabling and empowering others to communicate with them, not at them or for them. Without an overall strategic approach to social media, it will be very difficult to achieve success in the digital age. As today’s digital divide widens, and information and data is required even more quickly to make a tactical, operational or strategic decision, a military organization will need to allow its members to share their knowledge, ideas, and thoughts to enhance the value of information that exists when it is shared. An organization will not necessarily be successful simply because it shares information on new technological platforms, but because its members will feel

empowered with the knowledge that they are all working together toward a common goal or initiative.

The military needs to properly engage and develop a comprehensive social media strategy to utilize the available social networks and stay current with the ever evolving online social environments. The popularity of online social communication will continue to evolve; some social networks will be very successful and others may not, thus a strategy that envisions the need for proper engagement is necessary. A proper engagement strategy will allow individuals to enhance their tactical, operational and strategic communication processes and instill a sense of cooperation and transparency within the networked community that organizational knowledge is and will be readily available to those who need it, rather than something that needs to be requested or searched. By the time the sought-after information has been received or located; it can often be outdated or no longer relevant, which can be extremely frustrating. Utilizing social media creates a constructive environment of properly sharing information to those who need access in a relatively instantaneous timeframe.

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