

Military's Use of Social Media

In today's society the life of most people is somehow connected to a social media network. The most common being Facebook. It is a place we share our thoughts, recent photos, and other personal mementos we may want others to enjoy with us all over the world. For members of the military this new wave of social media has to be participated in with a level of caution. Not only for the safety of oneself, but for the safety of all those around them. When a civilian posts to their social media account or uploads a video to YouTube, the only person usually affected is themselves or a few select others. For that reason they have to freedom to basically post about anything and show themselves anywhere. Social media for active military personnel is not this simple or carefree.

The military has always been at the breaking edge of new technologies and inventions. So it makes sense they would be involved in social media in numerous ways. For the first time however; they do not have the control over it like they have with things in the past. The fact of the matter is that facebook is one of the fastest moving networks in the world and continues to expand every year. So like most business have in the recent years, the US Military has implemented a social media policy and are very firm in their enforcement of it.

So how does regular usage of social media differ from how a soldier overseas

might use it? Military personnel obviously must be careful about what they post online, but it

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goes beyond just that. For them, Facebook is less about the local gossip or just to kill time and more for important contact with those at home letting them know they're safe. To look into how different the usage is, several articles have been published speaking about it. They take a closer look at not only the differences between the two, but why it needs to be so. Military.com released an article detailing some of the rules and regulations of the US National Guard, and the defensemedianetwork.com wrote an article giving an example of a soldier who was captured due to his Facebook page postings and how his wife played an important role as well.

The article on military.com is a good example to look at for what the armed forces' actual regulations are for their soldiers' online usage. Although it only gives details of the National Guard, many of the branches in the military have similar social media policies. It is stated that no member of the guard is "allowed to release National Guard emails, addresses, telephone numbers, or fax numbers not ready for official release" (Krenke). They are encouraged, however, to post about the service in an unofficial way showcasing it in a positive light (Wilson). So what happens if a soldier breaks this rule? "When assigned to a federal mission, Guard members must comply with Army or Air Force guidelines for use of social media and are subject to disciplinary action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice" (Krenke). The soldiers are held personally accountable for all things they post online to any social media site. Once a person joins a branch of

the military they personally represent that service everywhere they go, including the Internet. Due to this, it is encouraged that all soldiers act accordingly with their services expectations. If not it's

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strongly encourage they place a disclaimer on their profiles to showcase they in no way reflect the ideas of their military branch (Krenke). Not many people even think about what it would be like to have to follow these rules just to put an opinionated posting up for the world to see. Most in fact feel that the Internet is the best place to express discontent with things in our lives. Soldiers do not have this luxury.

Although it may seem like the military is being too strict on it's service members' usage of social media sites, they do have their safety as a major reasoning. J.R. Wilson of Defense Media Networks writes about a moment in Afghanistan where a soldier's life was lost due to postings by himself and his wife on their facebook pages that fell into the enemy's hands. The soldier, who goes unnamed, had information on his profile that his "captors could use in psychological torture" (Wilson). Due to the army's social media policies, Facebook was able to delete his account very shortly after his capture, which could have saved his life. However, because his wife's page did not fall under the military's jurisdiction and would violate her rights Facebook could not take it down as well. While relying on the wife to do it herself took precious time that her husband did not have. This soldier's death reinforced the "Army's determination to better inform their warfighters, commanders and public affairs officers about the potential dangers of putting too much information online" (Wilson).

To be clear, the military does not wish for it's soldiers to stop using facebook or similar sites altogether. They realize it is a great way to keep in contact with loved ones at home. They only encourage their soldiers to use it with caution and express the same to

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their family members. In fact since the start of facebook, many military families feel more at ease about their loved ones being overseas. Even if one cannot speak directly to a person, they can check their profile to see if anything new has been added. A small reminder they are okay. The army's use of social media websites has grown significantly in the past year due to this reason (Thayer).

To help their soldiers understand what they want from them, every branch of the US military has issued a "social media handbook." Inside it lays out what they expect from their personnel, guidelines to follow when posting things online, and other safety points that may come in useful as social media continues to grow. Many of the tips given to soldiers would benefit anyone who uses the sites. They include things like spell checking "every post...Army's reputation is at stake," to not using "social media language in professional texts" (Gastaldo). They also state that it's okay to tweet quotes from senior military leaders, so long as it is done in a tasteful way (Gastaldo). The handbook is what most commanders in the military use to take care of privacy and violations of protocol online (Handbook). Since social media is so new and has so many variations, many of the most distinguished military leaders need something to look back on. With all of these regulations associated with social media networks, most soldiers

can easily distinguish what needs to be posted online and what should stay off.

This surge of new social media has also opened the door for soldiers to share their real experiences with family members by posting videos online. After the Gulf War, US service members have been allowed to carry video cameras into combat situations.

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doing so, it has opened many's eyes to harshness of war like nothing every seen before. It even inspired a documentary on MTV titled "Iraq Uploaded" and contained a vast variety of the soldier's videos posted to their facebook and on their YouTube accounts (Glaser). Surprisingly, the US Military has taken a more relaxed approach to this type of social media interaction. While they "prohibit the photographing and videoing of detainees and human casualties" they usually do not find the videos of combat related activity to be in violation of that. Instead they believe it to be in "bad taste" but not reason enough to be pulled (Glaser).

There have been incidents where this "bad taste" has gone too far in many viewers and country's minds. Corporal Joshua Belile recorded a song titled "Hadji Girl" that described the use of a young Iraqi girl as a human shield. It was a graphic interpretation that many felt needed to be removed immediately. Belile was forced to remove it and issue an apology, but he felt his rights as an American citizen had been compromised. This caused the line to blur a little more when dealing with social media in the military as opposed to in the of a civilian. After this incident the US Military and Pentagon said they would be keeping a "close eye" on all viral activity posted online to

social networks (Glaser).

Most videos posted to facebook and YouTube by soldiers are not this intense or controversial. Many are just light-hearted humor and practical jokes service members want to share with their families back home. The most popular being soldiers dancing or singing, oftentimes creating their own versions of recent music videos. One of the videos

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catching attention from all over the world recently in the news was from a marine who posted a video online asking actress Mila Kunis to attend his upcoming Marine Corps Ball. It was something unheard of, but was effective in gaining her attention and ultimately her acceptance of his proposal. It also led to numerous other marines asking similar questions to other celebrities, including Justin Timberlake and Kristin Cavallari. This could be seen as an advantage military usage of social media. If a civilian had posted the videos, it most likely wouldn't have had the effect and attention these did.

The relationship with social media for soldiers is not just one-sided like it usually is for civilians. Facebook has recognized it's importance in the communication of soldiers to their loved ones. Because of this they have been very active in promoting ways to help soldiers, and have launched a program that allows them to tell their stories (Brown). Through the "Facebook Stories Project" many soldiers (and civilians here at home) have been encouraged to share their stories from their experiences. It is a unique way for these to be heard and probably more effective than publishing because so many use facebook and would be exposed to it (Brown).

Just like in the lives of people living here stateside, the usage of social media in the military is still being carved out. Usually through trial and error on our parts. When something goes wrong they can figure out a way to fix and avoid it in the future. Making it safer for those overseas on active duty. It seems like a bad way to make policies, but as social media is still fairly new and constantly changing, it is the only answer the US Armed Services has come up with yet. They rely heavily on the cooperation of their service

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members to make their protocol work smoothly, something most have no problem adhering to. This makes them very different from us here at home. If our politicians ever tried to implement harsher social media rules and told us we could not post our locations, many would feel violated and fight it tooth and nail. Service members realize the importance of their security info and how dangerous it is to put it in the wrong hands. Perhaps many American citizens should take note of that.

In conclusion, the usage of social media in the military is not completely different from how we use it here at home. The security and amount of people who patrol it however; is much tighter in the service. When someone posts something online, it's up there for good and can not be taken back. So in the cases of spilling important information that can affect not only a soldiers life, but the life of his entire unit as well; there are no excuses or exceptions to following protocol. The military realizes that their soldiers are Americans as well and deserve their basic rights to post what they want to their loved ones. They only try to step in when completely necessary or when policies

have been broken. Service members understand this and many have no problem following the guidelines set to protect them from the extra dangers.

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