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Soldiers in the Blogosphere
Using New Media to Help Win the War for Public Opinion

by

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Preface

The idea for this project first came to my attention as we studied al Qaeda's effective use of the internet, in general, and new media applications specifically. As part of the War for Public Opinion research elective, we examined the military's recent waffling about how best to control service members freedom to blog, post videos to YouTube, or update friends and family through MySpace or Facebook. Mr. John Rendon provided the final motivation for this project when, as a guest lecturer, he argued that the military is way behind when it comes to new media and must do something to use it more effectively.

In order to familiarize myself with blogging, I created a blog, "Soldiers in the Blogosphere," as part of this research project. This blog quickly became more than just an exercise in familiarization as people from around the globe began reading my posts about the Army's new media policies and leaving comments with their opinions or links to other blogs, websites, and scholarly work on the subject. I am deeply indebted to the many commenters on the blog, especially the regulars like Cannoneer No. 4, LT Nixon, Adam, and dan. Many of the ideas now contained in this paper were originally floated on the blog and I benefited greatly from the dialogue that blogs enable.

Abstract

The activities and networks that constitute what is referred to as “new media” or “Web 2.0,” such as blogs and virtual communities, have become a significant part of the culture of the new generation of Soldiers and are becoming increasingly common among more senior Soldiers. The Army has recently relaxed its policy on blogging, but still bans the use of community networking sites such as MySpace on government computers. The Army has practically ignored these new media sources to get its story told. In order to win the war for public opinion, both domestically and internationally, the Army must create policies that not only allow Soldier’s use of new media but encourage it within the context of strategic communications.

In this paper, three alternative solutions are investigated concerning how the Army can best capitalize on the use of new media by individual Soldiers. This paper is not focused at public affairs professionals or organizations. Rather, it presents solutions that apply to all Army units, all Army leaders, and every Soldier. The goal of this paper is to provide a viable solution that improves strategic communication, ensures OPSEC, and takes advantage of the many benefits offered by new media technologies.

Chapter 1: The Problem of New Media and the Army

Framing the Problem

The activities and networks that constitute what is referred to as “new media” or “Web 2.0,” such as blogs and virtual communities, have become a significant part of the culture of the new generation of Soldiers and are becoming increasingly common among more senior Soldiers. The reliance on television and print media is decreasing among average Americans; they are increasingly getting information from non-mass media sources available through the internet¹.

The Army has recently relaxed its policy on blogging, but still bans the use of community networking sites such as MySpace on government computers. The Army has practically ignored these new media sources to get its story told. In order to win the war for public opinion, both domestically and internationally, the Army must create policies that not only allow Soldier’s use of new media but encourage it within the context of strategic communications.

Much like the Air Force’s “every Airman a spokesperson” concept², every Soldier has an important role in telling the complete Army story – from what’s going on in deployed locations to what life is like as a soldier or an Army family member to what it’s like to go through some of our training experiences. In short, to tell the world what it’s like to be an American Soldier. As current Army policy is written, blogs are allowed; they are not censored and there is limited oversight which allows soldiers to write nearly anything they want as long as it does not violate the principles of Operational Security (OPSEC)³ or the limitations placed on free speech in the military⁴. Participation on social networking sites (such as MySpace or Facebook) or YouTube, however, is banned on government computers⁵. Because of the Army’s current policies, a potentially great opportunity to more completely tell the Army’s story and better engage the people we are sworn to protect is being missed.

The Army's leadership has begun to identify Soldier use of new media as an important way to help tell the Army's story and fight the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by playing a role in winning the war of ideas and the war for public opinion. Secretary of the Army Peter Geren recently said, "We've got to embrace every form of media, and this new medium - and particularly blogging, for many people - has replaced traditional media as a way to get news ... So I see it as an addition of what we're doing, and a mechanism to reach some people who you don't reach at all through so-called traditional media."⁶

Our enemies are already capitalizing on new media capabilities. According to LTG Caldwell, commander of the US Army Combined Arms Center, technology of new media "has enabled and empowered the rise of a new enemy [which] is not constrained by the borders of a nation or the International Laws of War" and that use of new media by the US Army in Iraq has "proved to be an extremely effective tool in countering an adaptive enemy."⁷ He has also written that "interactive internet activities are an essential part of our responsibilities to provide information to the public. ... Leaders within the Army need to understand the power of the internet and leverage as many communications means as possible."⁸

The Army certainly has cultural challenges to overcome in accepting the Soldier's role in leveraging the communications means made possible through new media. We cannot overcome these challenges by trying to do things the same way we've always done them or discounting new ideas and technology simply because of associated risks. We must evaluate the value of the idea, decide if the value of the idea is high enough to justify further work, examine and understand all inherent risks, and develop ways to reduce that risk.⁹ We do this for operations across the spectrum of conflict and in training. We need to do the same thing for blogs and other new media outlets.

The rest of this chapter presents background information to define new media, describes strategic communications and how it applies to individual Soldiers, presents current Army policy, and outlines possible solutions and variables used to evaluate them. Chapter 2 presents an examination and comparison of the three possible solutions. In Chapter 3, I recommend one solution and provide recommendations to effectively implement it into Army policy.

New Media Overview

The terms “new media” and “Web 2.0” are used interchangeably to describe the evolving phenomenon of user-generated content and collaboration through web-based applications. Regardless of the term chosen, defining exactly what it means is difficult. Tim O’Reilly coined the term “Web 2.0” around 2005 and describes it as “a gravitational core” rather than something with a “hard boundary” that defines it.¹⁰ New media has been described as “creating collaborative Web experiences when information is shared multilaterally. If ‘Web 1.0’ was primarily one-way communication ... Web 2.0 is multiple-way communication.”¹¹

O’Reilly further describes the concept as providing the foundation for services that improve as more people use it. Improvements are caused by hyperlinking, tagging, and collective intelligence. Hyperlinking refers to one user referencing another users’ content within their web page. Hyperlinks provide readers the opportunity to directly link to other content and are used as one of the variables in most search engines. Tagging refers to reference keywords that users create rather than selecting from previously specified categories. This provides “multiple, overlapping associations [similar to those] that the brain itself uses.”¹² When combined with hyperlinking and tagging, user comments and editing help to provide the collective intelligence that O’Reilly refers to. The concept of collective intelligence – improving

understanding of issues and concepts through participative discussion by many people – is what truly separates new media from old. This has recently become easier to do as web applications now provide “the tools necessary for generating content without any technical [computer] understanding.”¹³ Today, a significantly larger number of people can become participants rather than simply users of content.

New media includes interactive websites where people can participate in discussion about issues or current events, create and maintain social networks, and provide real time feedback on products. Dan Gilmore uses the phrase “we, the media” to describe this recent phenomenon where the consumers of media have become participants in the media by acting as “grassroots journalists ...learning how to join the process of journalism, helping to create a massive conversation and, in some cases, doing a better job than the professionals.”¹⁴ Examples of new media include blogs, sales sites like Amazon that rely on customer reviews as part of search and recommendation criteria, social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and the increasingly popular user created and maintained online encyclopedia Wikipedia.

The number of Americans who use the internet on a regular basis continues to grow. Many now use it for more than just finding information: they use it to maintain contact and engage in dialogue. Recent studies by the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that nearly three quarters of all adults go online and nearly a third read blogs. Nearly three quarters of online goers use the internet to get news, about half instant message, and almost one third search for people.¹⁵ In fact, the number of people now going online for their news (71%) surpasses the number obtaining news through TV networks (59%).¹⁶ What about use of new media? The most recent report by Pew concerning blogging was released in 2006 and found that eight percent of internet users maintain a blog. This is up dramatically from the three percent

reported in 2002. While a small percentage, this still represents more than 8 million bloggers. Over half of bloggers reported doing so to express their creativity and document their experiences to share with others while about one third use their blogs to stay in touch with family and friends.¹⁷

Our current enemy has been particularly adept at using new media to their advantage. Many have written about this in an effort to energize better use of these emerging internet technologies by the United States. One author claims that “today’s form of terrorism is essentially strategic communication in the purest definition – message and action – utilizing the global communications network more to influence than inform.”¹⁸ Another expresses the concern that “many, especially in the military, are worried that our enemies have already occupied and dominated the infosphere battlespace.”¹⁹ Still another writes that “Sunni insurgents in Iraq and their supporters worldwide are exploiting the Internet to pursue a massive and far-reaching media campaign ... [and] the popularity of online Iraqi Sunni insurgent media reflects a genuine demand for their message in the Arab world”²⁰ It is clear that today’s terrorist networks have made effective use of internet capabilities before we have: they currently have the initiative. This does not suggest that this particular battle is lost. Rather, by examining our policies and seeking new and creative ways to engage new media, the Army can take back this piece of virtual terrain and again seize the advantage.

Current Army Policy and Use of New Media

The United States Army has continued to integrate evolving and improving new media technologies into their portal, Army Knowledge Online (AKO). AKO provides Soldiers and their family members access to their records, information of interest, documents, and contact

information for other Soldiers, family members, and DA civilians. AKO facilitates conversation through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, and forums. It also enables networking through forums and groups. The United States Air Force and United States Navy have similar portals and the Department of Defense now piggy-backs on AKO for the Defense Knowledge Portal. The military clearly sees value in the use of collaboration and these sites provide that collaboration in a secure manner by requiring users to register for the site before having access to any information. Registration is restricted to current or retired service members, their family members (accounts for whom must be created by the service member), and DoD civilians. Further security within the portals restricts certain information to individuals with reason or need to access it – such as certain manuals or briefings.

Outside of these secure portals, however, the Army is hesitant to embrace new media. The phenomenon of milblogs – military members posting journal-like entries to their personal web logs – took the military by surprise at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. DoD’s initial response was to crack down on this form of individual publishing by ordering several popular writers to cease. This resulted in a firestorm of comments in the blogosphere by people in and out of the military complaining that the military was trying to “muffle dissent from troops in the field” under the guise of ensuring OPSEC.²¹ The Army responded by developing guidance in July 2005 concerning battlefield blogging, updating Army Regulation 250-1, “Operations Security” in April 2007 to more clearly specify how OPSEC is to be maintained during on-line activity, and publishing a one-page fact sheet in May 2007 to better articulate blogging guidance to Soldiers.

Current Army policy requires Soldiers to report the establishment of a blog to their commander and security officer to “provide the command situational awareness” and to create

“an opportunity [for the security officer] to explain to the Soldier matters to be aware of when posting military-related content in a public, global forum.”²² The policy further states that reporting a blog is not required if the blog has nothing to do with the military, does not mention the military, and is not updated using government equipment. Additionally, the policy dispels the fear that every blog post must be approved by their supervisor; rather “after receiving guidance and awareness training ... that Soldier blogger is entrusted to practice OPSEC.”²³

Other new media is expressly banned for use on DoD computers and networks. Army policy published in May 2007 prevents use of social networking, photo sharing, and video sharing sites.²⁴ Citing bandwidth and OPSEC concerns, this policy does not restrict Soldiers from using sites such as MySpace or YouTube but it limits access to such sites only on their personal computers and networks.

Understanding Strategic Communications

Like “new media” and “Web 2.0”, strategic communications (SC) is a term for which it is difficult to find an agreed upon definition. Joint Publication 5-0 defines it as “focused US Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of US Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of power.” The same publication goes on to state that proper “SC planning establishes unity of US themes and messages, emphasizes success, accurately confirms or refutes external reporting on US operations, and reinforces the legitimacy of US goals.”²⁵ The Report by the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication describes SC as

“a sustained and coherent set of activities that include: understanding identities, attitudes, behaviors, and cultures, ... advising policymakers, diplomats, and military commanders on the public opinion and communication implications of their strategic and policy choices, ... engaging in a dialogue of ideas, ... influencing attitudes and behavior through communication strategies, ... and measuring the impact of activities.”²⁶

Halloran articulates the ideas of SC in less formal language when he writes that SC

“is a way of persuading other people to accept one’s ideas, policies, or courses of action. ... [It] means persuading allies and friends to stand with you, ... neutrals to come to your side, ... adversaries that you have the power and the will to prevail over them, ... [and] the nation’s citizens to support the policies of their leaders so that a national will is forged.”²⁷

Taken together, these definitions and descriptions of strategic communication suggest that SC is not something that is only done by the highest levels of government. Additionally, they infer that SC is about much more than simply crafting and transmitting specific messages. Finally, they all articulate the importance of dialogue in communication; this dialogue requires understanding of your audience, a willingness to listen, not just speak, and trust from those with whom we wish to communicate.

Potential Solutions

Three possible solutions are compared in this paper and the best is further expanded into recommendations for Army leadership to consider. The first possible solution, “Status Quo Solution”, is to keep policies as they are currently written. These policies have already been revised several times within the past five years in order to address OPSEC concerns. A second option, “Encouragement Solution”, is to make selected modifications to the policies with the goal of encouraging Soldiers to engage new media more than they currently do. This solution must not negatively impact OPSEC or increase the workload of the chain of command. Any risk must be worth the potential benefit. The final possibility, “Ban New Media Solution,” is to

reverse the changes made to policies in the recent past and again ban use of new media sources. This solution removes any risk of OPSEC violations and simplifies policy enforcement.

To compare these three options, I examine three different variables are used to articulate the benefits and risks of each option. The first variable examined is arguably the most important: OPSEC. Since al Qaeda claims to obtain 80% of the information they need about their enemy from open sources primarily on the internet,²⁸ the Army must ensure its policies ensure OPSEC is maintained. The second variable examined is the impact on strategic communications. In order to keep the American public informed, the military must be forthright about its activities. This is a responsibility of not just senior leaders and public affairs officers, but of every Soldier. Each option is examined to determine if it will enhance or degrade the Army's strategic communication efforts in both short- and long-terms. The final variable examined is ease of implementation. Given the Army's current operational tempo, creating unnecessary work is foolish. Each possible solution is examined to determine if it will create additional requirements for policy writers, Soldiers, or unit commanders. If additional work is required, the benefit must be clearly articulated.

Chapter 2: Comparing the Alternatives

Impact on OPSEC

Ensuring OPSEC is likely the single most concerning detail about Soldiers use of internet communication in general and new media specifically. DoD Directive 5205.02 defines OPSEC as a “systematic method used to identify, control, and protect critical information”²⁹ and the accompanying manual describes five steps to this process: identify critical information, conduct a threat analysis, conduct a vulnerability analysis, conduct a risk assessment, and apply OPSEC countermeasures.³⁰ As AR 530-1, Operations Security, states that OPSEC “is everyone’s responsibility[,] ... is a continuous process and ... must be fully integrated into the execution of all Army operations and supporting activities.”³¹

The first four steps of the OPSEC process as outlined in DODM 5205.02-M are primarily the responsibility of each command. By clearly articulating what information is critical to mission success, what information the enemy desires and the methods the enemy uses to obtain it, the command can determine where its vulnerabilities lie. Regardless of what information is deemed critical, internet communication will always be a vulnerability and each command must decide how to manage the risk of their Soldiers engaging in communication over the internet. In most cases, lists contained in current Army policy provide a good starting point to enable Soldiers to determine what they should not publicly discuss. A memorandum from the Secretary of Defense lists “comments on daily military activities and operations, unit morale, results of operations, status of equipment,”³² as specific things that should not be included in blogs. AR 530-1 explains that “Improvised Explosive Device (IED) strikes, battle scenes, casualties, destroyed or damaged equipment, personnel killed in action (KIA), both friendly and adversary, and the protective measures of military facilities”³³ should not be publicly disseminated.

Current Army OPSEC policy is clear enough to provide Soldiers with an understanding of what should not be discussed publicly. Therefore, the “Status Quo Solution” has no detrimental impact on OPSEC. Similarly, since adequate OPSEC guidance currently exists, the “Encouragement Solution” has no impact on OPSEC. The most common argument against allowing Soldiers to blog is the risk of OPSEC violations. Recent reports suggest that this fear is somewhat unfounded. In fact, a recent study shows that security violations were more common on official military websites than on milblogs.³⁴ Although the risk is low, there is still need to educate all Soldiers about how OPSEC regulations apply to the internet. Either the “Status Quo Solution” or “Encouragement Solution” requires that Soldiers clearly understand how OPSEC applies to their online activity. The “Ban New Media Solution” has no negative impact on OPSEC. In fact, it may reduce the risk of OPSEC violations.

Strategic Communication Effect

The “Ban New Media Solution” will have a negative effect on strategic communications both in the short- and long-terms. In the short term, by instituting a ban, it will appear to the public that the Army is trying to muffle its Soldiers. Despite any good intentions or clearly articulated reasoning, it will be nearly impossible to convince the public that such a change is necessary. This is what happened when the Army first banned blogs in the beginning stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom and then quickly lifted the ban by putting new control measures in place. In the long-term, the ban on use of new media by Soldiers will remove Soldiers from on-going conversations – conversations in which they could offer a unique perspective based on their experience.

The “Status Quo Solution” will have little SC effect since it changes nothing in the short- or long-term. The “Encouragement Solution”, on the other hand, will have positive short- and long-term effects. The authors of a recent study on credibility state that “people have a general distrust of public relations professionals ... [but] individuals ‘from the field’ are perceived as having a higher degree of competence and are viewed as less likely to deceive”³⁵. This finding certainly suggests the perceived value of information provided directly by Soldiers. By encouraging Soldiers to engage new media, the Army will make a clear statement that it values its Soldiers and trusts them to tell the Army’s stories. Over the long-term, new media use by individual Soldiers offers a unique way to accomplish SC objectives.

The US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy states that “All agencies and embassies should make a major commitment to more aggressively tell the story of how these programs are helping people improve their lives and opportunities.”³⁶ Soldier blogging can play an important role in this story telling. In fact, this same strategic document also suggests that “all agencies and embassies must also increase use of new technologies, including creative use of the internet, web chats, blogs, and video story-telling opportunities on the Internet to highlight American policies and programs.”³⁷ Therefore, current guidance directs government agencies to use new media as part of a more aggressive SC strategy and the “Encouragement Solution” helps meet this intent.

To further explain how the military can implement SC, the DoD published a guide describing the nine principles of SC. These principles are: leadership-driven, credible, dialogue, unity of effort, responsive, understanding, pervasive, results-based, and continuous.³⁸ Three of the principles, leadership-driven, unity of effort, and results-based, require leadership action. Leadership-driven means that leaders control the process; they must “place communication at the

core of everything they do.”³⁹ To make the “Encouragement Solution” viable, leaders must develop policies that guide their Soldiers engagement of new media and these leaders must also educate and equip their Soldiers to improve their effectiveness. Unity of effort implies vertical and horizontal integration and coordination. In order to achieve this, Soldiers must be empowered and trusted to communicate via new media. As in the discussion about leadership-driven, leaders have an important role to “coordinate and synchronize capabilities and instruments of power within their area of responsibility.”⁴⁰ Strategic communication is results-based; it must focus on specific outcomes and then communicate to all in the organization the target audiences and themes they wish to communicate. Just as talking points are provided to Soldiers on patrol in case they are approached by the media, these talking points can be taken into consideration when Soldiers voluntarily engage new media.

Credibility is built on trust, accuracy, and consistency. It has been found that individual Soldiers are generally accepted as more credible than professional spokespeople.⁴¹ Over time, milbloggers can increase their credibility by accurate and insightful writing. Credibility can also be enhanced by Army bloggers through consistency of message, professionalism, and accuracy. Current public affairs guidance states that “by projecting confidence and commitment during interview or in talking to family and friends, DoD personnel can help promote public support for military operations.”⁴² This confidence and commitment can be demonstrated through a blog just as it can through traditional media. Dialogue is a principle that is well-suited for application of new media since one of the primary benefits of blogs is a back-and-forth dialogue between potentially many individuals.

We understand the importance of pervasive communication when it comes to Soldiers on patrol. There has been much discussion about the “strategic corporal” and the impact that

decisions of very junior service members in combat can have in the strategic environment.⁴³

That same junior service member can have a similar impact by engaging the public through blogging. To be responsive, information must be timely and presented to people who are interested in it. The social aspect of blogging enables better responsiveness as Soldiers provide tailored information to their regular readers or post comments to other blogs. The final principle of strategic communication concerns its continuous nature: it is not something that is done at specific times and ignored the rest of the time. Blogs are particularly well-suited to this principle as they are maintained on a regular basis and can, therefore, continuously engage their audience on issues important to the Army.

Ease of Implementation

Of the three solutions presented, the “Status Quo Solution” requires the least amount of effort to implement: none. The “Ban New Media Solution” requires a little effort on the part of policy writers as several regulations would need rewriting to reflect the ban. The amount of work to do so is minimal, however.

In order to implement the “Encouragement Solution”, effort will be required to revise several regulations, develop new training programs, and register and monitor Soldiers new media exploits. Since policies are in a current state of revision, the amount of work to reflect the new encouragement policy would be minimal; it would fit well into the regular review cycle. There currently exists a requirement for annual OPSEC training into which expanded discussion of OPSECs application to online activity could easily fit. Additionally, other training opportunities to equip Soldiers with the skills to be effective bloggers will be necessary. This will require time from instructors, commanders, and Soldiers. Finally, the time required to monitor Soldiers blogs

and other web activity can take as much, or as little, time as a command deems necessary. Since recent reports showed that the OPSEC risk from milbloggers is low compared to other official military websites, it is likely that occasional spot checks of milblogs will be more than adequate.

Comparing the Three Possible Solutions

The “Status Quo Solution” will have no impact on OPSEC or strategic communication. Nor will it require any time to implement. If the Army seeks the easiest solution, this is surely it. However, there is nothing to be gained from this solution; it maintains the status quo.

The “Ban New Media Solution” has no significant impact on OPSEC but it will have a negative impact on strategic communication both now and in the future. It also will require a small amount of work to revise existing policies and regulations. This solution has more negative impacts than positive and is therefore a poor choice.

The “Encouragement Solution” presents no significant OPSEC concerns but will generate a positive impact on strategic communications both in the short- and long-terms. It will require time to revise policies, develop training programs, and monitor online activity of Soldiers. This time is worth the positive gains of improved strategic communication and perception of the Army as open, honest, and trusting of its Soldiers. In the next chapter, this solution is expanded into specific and detailed recommendations with which it can be implemented.

Chapter 3: Encourage New Media Engagement

The “Encouragement Solution” fits well into the Department of Defense’s principles of strategic communication and, through clearly articulated policies and valuable training, will present no significant OPSEC concerns. It is clear that encouraging Soldiers to engage new media, specifically to maintain personal blogs and interact with other blogs, is a valid idea that will have positive gains for the Army’s strategic communication effort. In order to effectively implement this idea, there are three primary tasks that must be accomplished. First, the Army must actively encourage Soldiers to use new media. Secondly, the Army must revise regulations to clearly identify what is expected of Soldiers using new media, does not overburden commands with additional administrative tasks, and demonstrates trust in Soldiers to do so responsibly. Finally, it must prepare them to do so effectively by providing adequate and interesting education.

Recommendation #1: Encourage and Enable Soldiers to Use New Media

The Army should encourage Soldiers to blog. Robbins, an Army Public Affairs officer, came to this same conclusion when she wrote that “qualified support of Soldier blogs is good policy when coupled with clearly defined boundaries and aggressive Soldier education.”⁴⁴ In her research, she found that Soldiers blogs show the Army’s face and communicate messages that the Army cannot communicate through official channels. She also found that most milblogs are “pro-Army, pro-chain of command, and pro-mission”⁴⁵ – in other words, they are positive strategic communicators.

Use New Media to “Fill the Gap”

A gap exists in the information that is presented in mainstream media and what the American public desires.⁴⁶ Soldier blogs are one way to help fill this gap. To do so, the Army should encourage Soldiers to blog about two broad topics: stories about the rebuilding effort and positive stories about events in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The media overestimates the public interest in coverage of terrorist activities and even more strikingly underestimates the public’s desire for stories about the reconstruction effort.⁴⁷ Additionally, the public wants to hear more stories about individual Soldiers.⁴⁸ Knowing this, Soldiers can fill a significant need – tell stories about their involvement in reconstruction. There are many engineer Soldiers who are rebuilding schools and hospitals. Medical Soldiers are providing needed care to many who have not had such care in quite some time. There are civil affairs Soldiers involved in helping to establish local governmental organizations and demonstrate the legitimacy of the Iraqi government. These Soldiers need to have their stories told – and main stream media isn’t doing it to the degree that the American public desires. Soldiers’ blogs can provide stories of interest to the American public.

Suggesting that Soldiers tell positive stories about events in Iraq and Afghanistan is not a recommendation that the Army hide problems and challenges nor is it a recommendation that Soldiers only be encouraged to blog positive stories. Stories that are not inherently positive must not be spun into something they are not, nor can negative stories be ignored or brushed under the carpet. The American public absolutely has a right to know the full costs of the wars. However, there is a significant disconnect between the balance that the media believes they provide and the American public perception. 68% of the media believes they provide balanced information while 70% of the public sees the coverage as predominately negative.⁴⁹ Soldiers can provide

their own coverage of the many positive events that are occurring on a daily basis while remaining real and fair about what it is really like to serve as a Soldier in these current wars.

Blogging to Increase the Army's Credibility

Encouraging Soldiers to blog demonstrates a willingness to truthfully share our stories. Nothing will be more self-defeating than to be perceived as dishonest whether when speaking to the media or posting to a personal blog. The American public perceives that the military is willing to and does provide inaccurate information to the media⁵⁰. Additionally, the media believes the military is restrictive in providing access and that officers are not encouraged to speak with reporters.⁵¹ Soldier blogs can help change this perception. While a Soldier blogging is not the same as engaging face-to-face with reporters, it is still a way to show our interest in being open and honest when disclosing information about events that they have been a part of. In order to further demonstrate openness and honesty, Soldiers should blog under their own name and be transparent about their rank, experience, and type of military occupation. Many like to blog under creative pseudonyms, but by posting under their own name credibility will be easier to achieve. This is not asking for something extraordinary: nearly half of all bloggers already blog under their own name.⁵²

Encouraging Soldiers to blog about personal experiences will result in two potential outcomes. First, traditional media sources will pick up on the stories being published on blogs as many examples over the past few years prove they'll do. Secondly, if there is a preponderance of these stories in the blogosphere and they are being read, shared, and linked to, perhaps mainstream media will see the appetite that exists and begin to publish more such stories on their own initiative.

The most important and interesting story for Soldiers to tell is their own. However, the Army can gain more strategic impact on public opinion if Soldiers blog entries corroborate the stories being told through official channels. By this I do not mean that the Soldiers simply repeat what official press releases say. If Soldiers are seen as puppets, this would have a detrimental impact on their credibility. If, however, the stories Soldiers tell further enlighten and personalize the information from press releases or other stories in main stream media, this could have a positive impact for the Army.

One way to accomplish this is to provide talking points for Soldiers to consider when blogging. This is no different than what we currently do in operations where Soldiers may have contact with mainstream media. The Army provides talking points to Soldiers to prepare them to intelligently engage the media about current operations. Soldiers are not simply given phrases to repeat to any question; rather, they are informed of the operation's intent, provided with some background and key points that we desire the public to hear, and then instructed to talk about what they know and what they do – to “stay in their lane.” What I propose is that this same model be applied to the blogosphere. Provide Soldiers with their command's talking points and encourage them to blog about what they know and what they do. When doing so, it must be made clear that Soldiers are not demanded to always include talking points in their blog entries. Rather, the Army should educate Soldiers about the strategic impact that blogging can have, inform them of the higher commanders' intents, and allow them to tell stories of their choosing in their own words.

Defensive Blogging

Not all Soldiers will be interested in maintaining their own blog. They can still play an important role in helping the Army in getting its message out correctly and completely. I refer to

this idea as “defensive blogging”: peruse other blogs and leave comments to correct, complete, or amplify a point in a story written by others. Perhaps someone has written a post about an operation that the Soldier was involved in or about a recent change in Army policy that affects the Soldier. Posting comments on other blogs is a way to get the Soldiers opinions (and facts) out to a broader audience. This is particularly important if incorrect information is being posted and discussed in blogs. Military members have an obligation to set the record straight when incorrect information is posted publicly, and must do so in a transparent manner to avoid the appearance of the military trying to covertly impact public opinion.

The concept of defensive blogging is already being implemented at the combatant command level. CENTCOM does not maintain their own blog but they actively engage other blogs by leaving comments. The CENTCOM bloggers are required to be completely open about who they are and who they work for when leaving comments on a blog. This is a very reasonable requirement. According to reports about this operation, the comments they leave have been received favorably and part of that is due to their transparency.⁵³

Having a small organized team with the task of trudging through the blogosphere and correcting or completing stories about an organization seems a very valid and important use of resources. This should be considered by all major commands in the Army but it is probably not practical or necessary to have an organized team like this at the battalion or brigade level. At those levels the Army should empower Soldiers to perform the mission. This is, admittedly, a bit more risky because it is not controlled. This risk can be mitigated if Soldiers are provided with information, power, and trust. The Air Force recently published guidance in the form of a blog assessment flowchart for their PA officers to use.⁵⁴ It is perfectly suited for individual Soldiers and could easily be included in any training provided as well as in published guidance.

The Benefit of Unit Blogs

In addition to individual Soldier blogging exploits, there is benefit for individual units to maintain blogs. There exist a growing number of blogs created by military organizations which serve to provide command information to the public or enable internal communication. These are often seen as outputs of propaganda at worst and, at best, providing no new insightful information. To improve their effect, a unit blog should be maintained by a responsible and effective writer within the organization. The blog should provide information similar to what is often provided to families through family readiness channels or to the public through press releases. A unit blog could also maintain links to blogs of Soldiers in the organization. This would provide a way for the organization to keep up with its Soldiers' blogs and, more importantly, provide interested readers with a more detail on the activities of that unit. By maintaining such a blog at the unit level, readers would be presented with a broader perspective than they currently can get by looking at somewhat random individual blogs, it could significantly assist in the distribution of stories that otherwise don't get told or are buried in other press outlets, and potentially could serve as a link between official statements through traditional PA channels and the very unofficial stories told by milbloggers.

Engaging YouTube

New media is about much more than simply blogs. YouTube has taken the world by storm and over the past few years it has grown to be much more than just posting random goofiness. People now post messages, short films or animation they have created, trailers for movies, and footage from their combat experiences⁵⁵. Current Army policy bans the use of YouTube on government computers claiming excessive bandwidth needs.⁵⁶ However, some

Army leaders believe that YouTube offers distinct advantages to getting messages out and countering insurgent videos and propaganda.⁵⁷

The Army recently launched its own version of YouTube called TroopTube. The Army pitches it as a way to boost morale for deployed Soldiers by providing a site to send video messages back and forth with home.⁵⁸ While TroopTube is not a bad idea it will not replace YouTube for three reasons. First, this new video site cannot compete with the YouTube brand name - people know it, go to it, talk about it and it offers something that appeals to nearly everyone. TroopTube, on the other hand, is focused on a narrow topic and a small group of people. Secondly, it requires an account which, although available to anyone (not just military members) will turn some people away. Finally, it is censored. Instead of simply trusting Soldiers and family members to post responsibly, videos can be edited and must be approved. While this is not inherently a bad thing – the Army should absolutely do its best to project a positive image - the perception that this censorship creates is potentially harmful.

TroopTube will not get videos seen around the world by a broad audience - only YouTube will be able to do this. If the Army is to capitalize on new media, it must authorize use of the new media. If more control is desired, use of YouTube is best restricted to particular people in an organization such as PAOs or unit commanders. Just as with blogs, the Army must educate Soldiers to understand how OPSEC applies to all things posted to the internet and techniques to prepare videos that will capture people's attention and convey the important messages that need to be told.

The two elements of new media that offer the largest advantage to the Army are blogs and YouTube. Other popular social networking sites have little to offer the Army as it seeks new ways to get its story told to the public. While they offer a way to remain connected with friends

and family, this is not much beyond an individual or recreational benefit and the policy toward these sites should remain as it currently is written. Policy on blogs and YouTube, however, needs to be revised.

Recommendation #2: Revise Policy and Update Regulations

Before developing training plans for organizations to use in developing their Soldiers to be effective bloggers, the Army must develop well thought out policies that articulate the intent for Soldier engagement of new media, outline all requirements for Soldiers to understand, and describe the risks of such engagement and measures to reduce these risks. LTG Caldwell has published a blogging policy for the US Army Combined Arms Center (CAC) which provides a great starting point for any organization's policy on this subject. The policy instructs all members of the CAC to fully attribute the posting to themselves (to include name, position and organization). Concerning content, the policy stipulates that all blog entries must be 100% accurate, based only on personal experience or observation and clearly documented if not, not contain any sensitive, classified, or derogatory information, not discuss tactics, techniques, and procedures that have not already been released, and will not contain political bias or violate any legal regulations.⁵⁹

In addition to organizational policies, the Army's public affairs doctrine (AR 360-1) must be revised to better describe the role of individual Soldiers in communicating the Army's story. As part of this revision, guidance and expectations for use of new media by both individuals and organizations must be detailed. The current version of the regulation contains a very vague paragraph about the use of the internet for publishing information: this must be dramatically expanded. The ideas set forth in this paper form the framework for these revisions. AR 530-1,

Operations Security, also needs revision to clarify the requirements for Soldiers who decide to blog. These requirements must be clearly articulated, unlike the current version which required the publishing of a fact sheet to clarify the policy.

Recommendation #3: Train Soldiers to Engage New Media

Once policy has been developed and distributed, the command can turn its attention to properly training their Soldiers for this new activity. Units must develop training that interests, inspires, and educates our Soldiers to be effective in helping to tell the Army's story while ensuring they are fully aware of the challenges and risks. The Army already requires regular training about operational security. Adding discussion about how that applies to web content is simple. Most soldiers already understand what OPSEC is, why it is important, and their role in it. Applying that knowledge to the web is not much of a stretch and several effective training presentations exist for download through AKO.⁶⁰

Educate Soldiers about Online OPSEC

Ensuring our Soldiers practice security when blogging requires two things: proper education and trust. Proper education comes in several forms, one of which already exists as a regular training requirement for soldiers. Annually, every Soldier must attend a training session about OPSEC. This training is conducted at the unit level and typically consists of standard training material coupled with information specific to their unit and/or location. Adding discussion about how the principles of OPSEC apply to all manners of transmitting information will ensure Soldiers understand all aspects of OPSEC. Several slide presentations prepared by the 1st Information Operations Command provide an excellent basis for any unit to use when

educating their Soldiers about the security risks of online activity and how to be an honest and interesting blogger while still maintaining appropriate OPSEC.⁶¹

In accordance with the Army's current blogging policy, before a Soldier is authorized to blog about anything pertaining to the military they must have a conversation with their commander and their unit security officer.⁶² The security officer must cover in detail how OPSEC applies to the Soldier's blog and things they should be very careful about when blogging. After providing quality education and training and maintaining a register of all websites maintained by Soldiers in their command, commanders must then trust their Soldiers to practice proper security while blogging. Commanders can certainly spot check Soldiers' blog entries, but this will not prevent security breaches: it will only identify them after they have occurred. Preventing the breach in the first place requires the Soldier to be fully aware of what can and cannot be posted as well as being aware of methods the enemy uses to piece together bits of information gained from around the wide variety of open sources. Knowing that their commanders may spot check their blog at any time may motivate Soldiers to think clearly about any possible security violations in a draft post and remove them before posting. This requires the commander to trust his Soldiers online just as he trusts them with a weapon and the mission.

Educate Soldiers to be Effective Communicators

Just as important as ensuring they understand the application of OPSEC to the web, Soldiers must be educated to be effective communicators. They must be able to clearly articulate the story they have to tell, make it readable and interesting, and be aware of the best ways to get that story out to the most people possible. This is where the Army should focus the bulk of its education and training efforts concerning new media. This training should be made available to all Soldiers but not required. During regular OPSEC training, when the discussion turns to the

web the offer should be made for those interested Soldiers to attend a focused session about engaging new media.

In this new media training session, it would be most effective to begin with a few examples of successful blogs. Aside from providing motivation by demonstrating how effective and far reaching many Soldiers' blogs have become, this will also make some important points about blog layout, subject matter, and the use of pictures, videos, and other items that make blogs more appealing. Knowing that most of the widely read milblogs are written well, this training session must also review basic composition skills – a refresher on creative writing. The bulk of the training session must address the basics of blogging. Most blog hosting sites provide an interface that is very easy to work within, so the focus of the training should not be on how to set up the blog. Rather, the focus is more properly on discussing best practices: regularity of posting, accepting and monitoring comments from readers, additional features to add to the blog, and interactive features to generate and maintain interest. The training should also provide Soldiers with tips for successful blog creation: where to register their blog, how to generate interest initially, how to maintain interest and increase readership, and ideas.

Part of training Soldiers to effectively engage new media should focus on applying the fundamentals of information described in public affairs doctrine. These fundamentals are: tell the truth, provide timely information, practice security at the source, provide consistent information at all levels, and tell the DoD story⁶³.

With integrity as one of our core values and the importance of honesty in all we do, this fundamental to “tell the truth” is already a fundamental of soldiering. Blogs offer a key advantage over other forms of traditional PA when it comes to providing timely information. One recent best practices publication by the military's public affairs community stated that

blogging “empowers the average person, regardless of their background and qualifications, to *rapidly* distribute both information and analysis” (emphasis mine).⁶⁴ In the public affairs community the importance of getting the story out fast is emphasized: “The first side that presents the information sets the context and frames the public debate. It is extremely important to get factual, complete, truthful information out first”⁶⁵. As long as Soldiers are cleared to discuss the issue, mission, or event, their blogs are one of the quickest way to get information out. By ensuring adequate OPSEC training and understanding, leaders can safely trust Soldiers to practice security at the source.

Consistency is critical when presenting a story. In fact, inconsistency will reduce credibility. Consistency in this regard does not mean every level must be telling the same story verbatim; rather, each person/level’s story must not contradict another. Ensuring Soldiers understand that talking points apply to online activity can help prevent contradictions. Talking points and command messages can help Soldiers understand how they fit into the big picture. This understanding will likely influence their writing and help ensure consistency while still allowing them to remain unique and not appear as puppets for the Army. Blogs are a great way to tell the Army’s story – by Soldiers telling theirs. By encouraging Soldiers to blog about their experiences, they will provide more information of interest and useful to the public we serve. Major General Bergner, a recent spokesperson for Multi-National Force-Iraq, clearly sees the benefit that Soldiers’ blogging brings to the Army in telling it story:

“It’s the personal aspect of what bloggers are able to convey. No one can do it with the same personal insights, the perspective, and the texture that comes with those dialogues. That is what is so meaningful for the American people and so important for the Army because all of us want Soldiers to be able to tell their story, like only a Soldier can do.”⁶⁶

Chapter 4: Conclusion

New media is being increasingly used by citizens and businesses. Blogs are numerous and regularly read by many. YouTube is among today's most popular websites. Businesses use new media to better engage with their customers. The military has incorporated several capabilities of new media in service portals to improve communication and facilitate professional dialogue. When blogs first surfaced in large numbers at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Army reacted first by banning posts but quickly modified that policy to provide oversight of Soldiers blogging. Since this time, the Army has struggled with deciding whether to embrace or ban new media engagement by Soldiers. The result is poorly articulated policy and a perception that the Army wants to muffle its Soldiers in the public arena. Many senior leaders recognize that this is not effective policy and recommend the Army make more effective use of new media.

By not just allowing but encouraging Soldiers to blog, the Army will improve strategic communications, improve public perception of the institution, and not increase the risk of OPSEC violations. In this paper, it has been shown that of three options - maintain the status quo, ban new media use by Soldiers, or encourage and enable new media engagement – the best thing to do is to encourage Soldiers to engage new media. Soldier blogging fits in the principles of strategic communication and public affairs' fundamentals of information. Additionally, allowing Soldiers to blog not only gets more stories about the Army's accomplishments out to the public, by having Soldiers rather than public affairs professionals writing the stories improves the credibility of such accounts. This, in turn, will undoubtedly improve the public perception of the Army as an organization that values and trusts its Soldiers.

Such a decision must not be made blindly, of course. In order to make this change, new training programs must be developed. These programs must stress the importance of OPSEC and make clear to Soldiers how OPSEC principles apply to online activity. Importantly, these training programs must also teach Soldiers to be effective writers and provide guidance on developing interesting blogs that will draw readers in and keep them coming back.

Such a decision can also not be made without a level of trust of Soldiers. Leaders must develop clearly articulated policies that enable Soldiers to understand the limits placed upon them when blogging, but these policies must also make it clear that the organizations leadership trusts its Soldiers to behave appropriately online. This trust must be articulated, but it must also be exhibited. Commanders can spot check their Soldiers blogs to ensure they are following the rules, but care must be taken that the blogs remain unique, honest, and open – the Army must avoid doing anything that creates the impression that Soldier blogs are puppets for public affairs or their unit commanders.

By developing effective training programs and clear policies, the Army can safely and effectively encourage Soldiers to blog and engage other new media. This is not something that should be done simply because new media is “all the rage” among the civilian community. It is something that should be done to improve the Army’s communication and dialogue with the American public – the public whose support is critical during long, important wars like the ones currently underway. Encouraging the use of new media by Soldiers and units can assist in achieving victory in the War for Public Opinion.

Notes

- ¹ Pew, "Online News..."
- ² Myers, "Every Airman a Spokesman"
- ³ AR 530-1, *Operations Security*, 4
- ⁴ Kiel, "When Soldiers Speak Out", 71-72
- ⁵ Bell, "Restricted Access to Internet Entertainment"
- ⁶ Kyzer, "Secretary of Army encourages Milbloggers"
- ⁷ Caldwell, "Changing the Organizational Culture"
- ⁸ Caldwell, Command Policy #19-08
- ⁹ Caldwell, "Changing the Organizational Culture"
- ¹⁰ O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0", 2
- ¹¹ McConnell and Huba, *Citizen Marketers*, 57
- ¹² O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0", 8
- ¹³ Ovaska and Leino, *A Survey on Web 2.0*, 64
- ¹⁴ Gilmore, *We the Media*, xiv
- ¹⁵ Fox and Madden, "Generations Online"
- ¹⁶ Pew, "Online news ..."
- ¹⁷ Lenhart and Fox, "Bloggers", iii
- ¹⁸ Josten, "Strategic Communication"
- ¹⁹ Eder, "Toward Strategic Communication"
- ²⁰ Kimmage and Ridolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media*, 3
- ²¹ NPR, "Soldiers' Iraq Blogs Face Military Scrutiny"
- ²² U.S. Army Public Affairs, "Fact Sheet – Army Operations Security"
- ²³ U.S. Army Public Affairs, "Fact Sheet – Army Operations Security"
- ²⁴ Bell, "Restricted Access to Internet Entertainment Sites"
- ²⁵ JP 5-0, *Joint Operations Planning*, II-2
- ²⁶ Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, January 2008, 10-11
- ²⁷ Halloran, "Strategic Communication", 6
- ²⁸ Rumsfeld, "Web Site OPSEC Discrepancies"
- ²⁹ DODD 5205.02, DOD OPSEC Program, 8
- ³⁰ DODM 5205.02-M, DOD OPSEC Program Manual, 12-14
- ³¹ AR 530-1, *Operations Security*, 4
- ³² U.S. SecDef, Information Security/Website Alert
- ³³ AR 530-1, *Operations Security*, 4
- ³⁴ Baron, *The Bush Years*
- ³⁵ Corman, *Credibility in the Global War on Terrorism*, 13
- ³⁶ U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, 7
- ³⁷ U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, 6
- ³⁸ DOD, *Principles of Strategic Communication*
- ³⁹ DOD, *Principles of Strategic Communication*
- ⁴⁰ DOD, *Principles of Strategic Communication*
- ⁴¹ Corman, *Credibility in the Global War on Terrorism*, 13
- ⁴² JP 3-61, *Public Affairs*, 1-6
- ⁴³ Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal"

- ⁴⁴ Robbins, “Muddy Boots IO”, 109
- ⁴⁵ Robbins, “Muddy Boots IO”, 111-112
- ⁴⁶ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, 36
- ⁴⁷ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, Charts 1A and 1B (pp50-51)
- ⁴⁸ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, Charts 1B (p 51)
- ⁴⁹ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, Chart 13 (p 70)
- ⁵⁰ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, Chart 12 (p 69)
- ⁵¹ *The Military-Media Relationship 2005*, Charts 8A and 8B (pp62-63)
- ⁵² Lenhart and Fox, “Bloggers”,ii
- ⁵³ Alvarez, “CENTCOM team engages ‘bloggers’”
- ⁵⁴ Shachtman, “Air Force Releases ‘Counter-Blog’ Marching Orders”
- ⁵⁵ For examples see the following YouTube channel (of course, you cannot access them on a government computer):
http://www.youtube.com/results?orig_query=army+iraq&search_query=us+army+iraq&orig_query_src=3
- ⁵⁶ Bell, “Restricted Access to Internet Entertainment Sites”
- ⁵⁷ Caldwell, “Changing the Organizational Culture”. See also a recording of an address by LTG Caldwell to the 2008 Milblogging conference discussing how the Army can make better use of new media (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhmEDtPjuzs>)
- ⁵⁸ Gilmore, “TroopTube gives morale boost to deployed servicemembers”
- ⁵⁹ Caldwell, Command Policy #19-08
- ⁶⁰ U.S. Army 1st Information Operations Command, “OPSEC in the Blogosphere”
- ⁶¹ U.S. Army 1st Information Operations Command, “OPSEC in the Blogosphere”
- ⁶² US Army Public Affairs, “Fact Sheet”
- ⁶³ JP 3-61, *Public Affairs*, 1-5 and 1-6
- ⁶⁴ USJFCOM, *Engaging the Blogosphere*
- ⁶⁵ JP 3-61, *Public Affairs*, 1-4
- ⁶⁶ Kyzer, “Secretary of Army encourages Milbloggers”

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