

Chapter 10

Social Media and New Military Public Affairs Policies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the recent United States military policy changes regarding the use of social media by members of the services. It also discusses the use of these new policies for military public affairs. The chapter analyzes the policy changes in light of network theory in the studies of new media technologies and how users construct networks of influence by employing these new technologies. It is concluded that the military use of new media networking (NMN) is an effective way of both protecting the communication security of military information and optimizing the networking potential of the new media. It appears that the military can use its new social media policies to take advantage of NMN by generating news on their own sites, directing the public to more information, enhancing the morale of service members with families, and developing new methods of recruitment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the demands of the military for traditional public affairs concerns such as demands for operational security or keeping information and communication secure (“information assurance”), in relation to new social media policies and military encouragement of personnel to

use the new media. Policy changes made in the past two years are considered in relation to network theory principles of social networking dynamics. The first objective here is to clarify the changes in military new media and social media policies that have been made in recent years, along with reasons for the changes. A second objective is to describe the tension within the military regarding how communication is kept secure while social networking is allowed to expand. Third, the efforts

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by the military to employ new and social media to be more open with the public are explained in terms of traditional and strategic military communication goals. Administrators in other sectors of society may find the changes in military public affairs instructive as they also are confronted by the challenges of an age of new media.

The basic work of public affairs in the United States military affairs involves the dissemination of factual information to external and internal audiences in ways that protect the military services and also facilitate strategic communication goals of the services. The military acknowledges a responsibility to provide the public with timely and accurate information. It has a continual focus on trust and credibility (U.S. Army, 2009). The goals of public affairs include explaining events that have caused concern in the news, educating people about military capabilities, and helping the public to learn more about certain accomplishments (U.S. Army, 2009).

Controlling military public affairs and news about military events was once a straightforward process in days of old media (TV, radio, print). A public information officer or public affairs officer stood in front of journalists and presented the official narrative and then answered questions. Another major public affairs action was sending out press releases to newspapers and broadcast stations. That situation changed dramatically after 2004 and the emergence of YouTube, Twitter, viral messaging, buzzworthy news, Facebook, Meetup, Second Life, RSS feeds, the blogosphere, and smartphones. It continues to get more complicated as new waves of connection technologies increase the social media tools available to everyone using the Internet or smartphone communication. While the new media and social media provide many platforms for many military voices, there is a principle of public affairs which says that the services should speak with one voice on certain matters (U.S. Army, 2009). However, the age of new media did not see military personnel communicating directly with members of the public.

In past times, this was done with letters sent home, diaries, and handwritten journals.

Some communication theorists postulate an age of “hypermedia” today in which communication chaining is a process of messages moving quickly from one form of new media to another with variations of old and emerging media involved in the chaining. Communication chaining can be seen in many world events such as the recent “Arab Spring” use of new media and social media for organizing protest movements. Such uses of social media were in play earlier in Lebanon in 2005 and then recently after the presidential re-election in Iran. In communication chaining, messages from the old media merge with messages from what are called emerging media (connection technologies like smart phones used for social networking). The resulting communication space is far different than the old media space of passive listeners/viewers simply receiving content (Kraidy & Mourad, 2010). In the emerging media spaces, people produce messages as well as receive messages (Kraidy & Mourad, 2010). Communication chaining involves the use of emerging media in ways that elude control by political or journalistic authorities. In 2009, in Iran, when the young woman Neda was shot during post-election protests, a video clip of her dying was uploaded to YouTube where it went viral. From there, it went into social media like Facebook and Twitter, and then onto the mainstream old media (Kraidy & Mourad, 2010). Twitter users were providing observations to mainstream media and also demanding more attention from them. Five months later, the BBC made a documentary about Neda. The reason for this being important to an analysis of military public affair is that official communication faces the challenges of a) getting out factual information rapidly through expanding social networks, and b) correcting errors in messages which have already been disseminated through those networks.

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