

Rules of (Social) Engagement

Leading from the front: calling leaders to the information battlefield

by Maj Richard W. Korges

What do college athletics and the Marine Corps have in common? Just about everything. Our rosters turn over every few years. We rely on the performance of 18–24-year-olds to achieve success. We have a core of leaders who are responsible for turning those revolving 18–24-year-olds into a cohesive, disciplined team. Those 18–24-year-olds—who grew up on social media and are often far from home, family, and friends—spend huge amounts of their time in the information environment using social media. Leaders in both organizations are responsible for advertising the success of their team to recruit the next generation and excite public support. Those leaders must thread the needle as they make their athletes into marketing stars while also keeping them away from the perils, temptations, and distractions of social media and society. Leaders who fail at guiding their 18–24-year-olds through the information environment and responsible social media use can likely expect to see their team laid low by criminal charges, toxic attitudes and influences, and personnel losses. But the analogy fails when you consider the consequences at stake: in college sports, the worst-case scenario is NCAA sanctions; in the Marine Corps, those losses are young Marines in body bags and the erosion of America’s national security.

The relatively trivial threat of NCAA sanctions is enough to prompt college athletic programs to have legions of coaches, graduate assistants, compliance officers, and administrative staff constantly working to ensure their athletes

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Disclaimer: The following is an account based on my personal observations during eight years of time in Prosecution, Defense, and Staff Judge Advocate billets. The views contained herein are my own and do not reflect any official position of the Department of the Navy or the Marine Corps. My observations on the Russo-Ukraine war are based on open-source media and are not intended to convey any official position of the U.S. Government.

are taught how to use social media and meticulously monitoring their activity. These leaders are present, engaged, and leading by example. Why, then, are so many Marine Corps senior leaders, both officer and enlisted, quick to proudly exclaim they have no social media understanding or presence despite the clear risk of ignoring this aspect of conflict? When the stakes are this high, our leaders cannot afford to abandon the information and social media battlefield.

“The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example.”
—John Wooden

To those who dismiss the importance of the information environment and social media on military operations, consider the current situation in Ukraine. Both the opportunities and challenges

of the information environment are being vividly displayed during the Russo-Ukrainian War, which is entering its fifth week at the time of writing this article. That is about four weeks longer than anyone expected the Ukrainians to last against Russia’s perceived massive military advantage. Against all odds and contrary to traditional calculations of military strength and national power, Ukraine has managed to effectively resist the Russian invasion. To achieve their success, Ukraine recruited unprecedented levels of international support due in large part to Ukraine’s masterful use of the information environment. Through effective social media messaging, vivid imagery, and first-person perspectives from the battlefield, Ukraine has demonstrated the power of the information environment to influence the battlefield from the tactical to strategic level. Russian leadership also recognizes and fears the power of the information environment and social media as they attempt to isolate their population, blocking foreign content and working to create an information bubble to preserve their propaganda narrative.

As unexpected as Ukraine's success may be, the power of operations in the information environment should come as no surprise. Historic conflicts repeatedly demonstrate the power of operations in the information environment to sway public opinion, inspire or destroy morale, and spur international coalitions to action or inaction. In World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill used the power of the radio to inspire British resistance and Allied support. Similarly, President Roosevelt rallied the American people out of the Great Depression and into enthusiastic support of World War II through his skillful use of radio addresses.¹ Conversely, the Nazis infamously used propaganda messaging to inspire the worst, most divisive, despicable tendencies of human nature to lead their country to launch World War II and commit the Holocaust. Also, consider that during the Vietnam War anti-war social messaging destroyed the American population's support for the war effort.

Today in Ukraine, frontline troops post videos of ambushed and destroyed Russian convoys while targeting officers post footage of drone strikes. The result of this engaging, accessible, appealing messaging campaign is that popular support for Ukraine is surging around the world. At the same time, the Russians have demonstrated the dangers of social media as their frontline troops recklessly share content that broadcasts their positions, erodes morale, and emboldens their adversaries. Considering the stark discrepancy in their respective uses of the information environment, perhaps Ukraine's battlefield success should be less surprising.

The potential advantage and danger of the information environment could not possibly be clearer. Now, however, the same power so effectively wielded by Churchill and Roosevelt lies at the *strategic corporal* level as global connectivity gives everyone with a smartphone and an internet connection the same audience once reserved for presidents and prime ministers.² The absence of senior leaders to mentor, guide, and supervise this connected strategic corporal is a critical vulnerability for the Marine Corps, with potential real-world impacts.

In addition to operational concerns, the lack of present, engaged leadership on social media adversely impacts good order and discipline. Junior Marines lack leaders they can observe practicing responsible social media habits. There are no "adults in the room" to quickly discourage bad behavior before it becomes a full-blown criminal matter. Then, when receiving a brief on a case, leaders do not understand the dynamics of the online world their Marines inhabit. This creates a blind spot for commanders when—in my experience as a prosecutor, defense counsel, and Staff Judge Advocate—a significant majority of cases have some element of social media either directly or indirectly contributing to the misconduct. This absence of engaged leadership must be addressed if the Marine Corps is going to curb this type of misconduct and realize its full potential on the battlefields of today and tomorrow.

To underscore the significance of this problem and its link to social media, consider the following data from the DOD's Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report of Sexual Assault in the Military (the most recent data currently available).³ The Services received 6,290 reports of sexual assault by service members for incidents that occurred during military service and an additional 912 reports from civilians and foreign nationals alleging sexual assault by a Service member. Appendix F to that report, titled "Sexual Harassment Assessment," states 696 substantiated sexual harassment complaints occurred in the same time period. What does social media, a purely online forum, have to do with sexual assault? In Enclosure 2, the Navy's portion of the report, the Navy discusses five signals that tend to indicate when Marines and sailors are at a higher risk for sexual assault. The five signals are: 1) sexual harassment; 2) gender discrimination; 3) lack of responsibility and intervention; 4) lack of cohesion and respect; and 5) workplace hostility. All five of those signals can occur online or can be greatly exacerbated through social media platforms. To greater or lesser extents, present leaders can influence or discourage all those signals. Additionally, as discussed in more detail below, a significant portion of military justice

cases, to specifically include sexual assault and rape cases, either directly or indirectly involve misconduct through social media or other online communications.

"The three most important ways to lead people are: ... by example ... by example ... by example."

—Albert Schweitzer

Why are Marine Corps leaders failing to make their presence felt in the information environment, specifically on social media? While Marine Corps leadership prides itself on leading from the front, demonstrating engaged leadership, and fearlessly dominating the battlespace in any clime and place, officer and enlisted senior leaders are notably and distressingly absent from the information battlefield where their Marines spend huge amounts of time. When discussing cases involving online misconduct, commanders and senior enlisted advisors who I know to be enthusiastically engaged in every other aspect of mission accomplishment and troop welfare routinely, often proudly, tell me they have no social media presence. They do not understand how "FaceToc" works, why the "SnapBook" video disappeared, or what is trending.

Tragically, they do not try to learn or engage, not out of apathy but out of what I believe is fear due in large part to a lack of institutional support. Leaders are all one mis-click away from a charge of fraternization, a counseling for unprofessional conduct, or a relief for cause because of a loss of trust and confidence. In the absence of clear guidance regarding best practices and institutional pressure to engage, the safest course of action is to avoid individual presence in the information environment altogether. It is hard to blame company-, battalion-, and regimental-level leaders for their absence when our most senior leaders have failed to craft guidance that spells out even the

most basic best practices for conduct in the world of social media.

To be fair, there is plenty of guidance for Marines regarding social media. For example, *ALMAR 008/17, Social Media Guidance—Unofficial Internet Posts*, encourages Marines to “responsibly engage in unofficial internet posting about the Marine Corps and Marine Corps related topics consistent with their professional expertise, personal experiences, or personal knowledge.” But that guidance almost always takes the form of what you CANNOT do as opposed to educating leaders on what they CAN and SHOULD do. That same ALMAR then spends the next several paragraphs cautioning Marines to “think twice before engaging in questionable online activities,” points out the myriad forms of misconduct possibly applicable to online activity, and reminds Marines that violations may be punished through a variety of Articles of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Additionally, the *U.S. Marine Corps 2021 Social Media Handbook* exists but it contains just a single page dedicated to “Guidance for Commanders.”⁴ That page is bereft of any functional guidance on what a leader can do on social media, instead focusing on training goals while vaguely and ominously referencing “an ethical wrinkle to friending or following your subordinates” because of the requirement to act on any observed misconduct. In short, all the guidance published by the Marine Corps tells a leader that there are an infinite number of ways they can get in trouble through social media. Tragically, leaders are left with one inevitable conclusion: the only safe course of action is to avoid social media altogether.

This absence of guidance on encouraged social media practices is an institutional failure. The recognition of the power of information is not a modern phenomenon as military philosophers including Sun Tzu and Clausewitz referred to tactics and considerations we now associate with information operations.⁵ Learning from these philosophers and absorbing the lessons of previous conflicts, the DOD and Marine Corps have formally recognized the importance of the information environment as an

integral part of the battlespace for decades. Beginning in the 1990s, military doctrine began to define concepts such as Command and Control Warfare, Information Operations, and eventually Operations in the Information Environment. The Marine Corps took the step of including information as a warfighting function with Gen Neller writing that the role of information is to “influence relevant actor perceptions, behavior, action or inaction, and support human and automated decision making.”⁶ Despite all of these doctrinal steps to recognize the operational role of information, the Marine Corps has failed to issue guidance on how it believes senior leaders and junior Marines should interact with each other on social media.

The Marine Corps cannot wait for the DOD to issue guidance on this matter. Despite the existence of MySpace and other forms of social media for decades, the DOD just updated *DoDI 1325.06* on 20 December 2021 to define, for the first time, concepts such as “liking” and “sharing.”⁷ I urge the Marine Corps to issue guidance addressing commanders’ concerns, giving them top-cover to directly engage with their Marines on social media and thereby demonstrate

showing pictures of vacations, hiking trips, holidays, and pictures from their kid’s t-ball game. The unfortunate reality is a significant number of our junior Marines need to see healthy family dynamics. Draw your own line regarding how much you feel comfortable sharing to the world, only to friends, or only with family, but the Marine Corps should make it clear that demonstrating healthy family and social habits through personal presence on social media is to be encouraged.

2. Should a leader “friend” their subordinates? Who should initiate the connection?

a. This question is filled with concerns about military decorum and crossing the boundary into fraternization. I suggest the best practice is to let subordinates send the request if they want to. If seniors initiate, there can be an uncomfortable dynamic where the junior Marine may feel obligated to let their superior into their social media world. I argue this is counterproductive. If the goal is to lead by example, then leaders should not force themselves in like a room inspection but should be a presence to

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by example the responsible use of social media. Below are the issues and questions I have received over the years as leaders have discussed their concerns about their own social media conduct, followed by policy suggestions.

1. Should a leader make their profile public? How much information is too much to share when the audience is likely to include subordinates?

a. This question has operational security implications, and the advice is to not share anything that you would not feel comfortable sharing in a public setting face-to-face. There is nothing wrong with a leader giving a glimpse into their personal life by

be looked to for inspiration and guidance. Therefore, I advise leaders to make it known that they will accept the friend request of any subordinate who asks, but the burden is on the junior. If you extend the invitation, and it is genuine, the Marines will take you up on the offer. They want to humanize their leaders and an online connection is just as meaningful to Gen Z as an office with an open-door policy.⁸

3. We have a unit Facebook/Twitter/Instagram account, is that enough?

a. No. If the goal is to demonstrate responsible, healthy social media activity, then the leadership has to come

from a person. Unit accounts are like watching commercials or listening to the news. They have their role, but they are not going to demonstrate appropriate individual conduct. Leaders do not inspire physical fitness, military bearing, or healthy family dynamics by playing workout videos, waving recruiting posters, or sending emails about conflict resolution. They inspire by being present in the gym every morning, walking through the workspaces showing involvement with unit operations, and volunteering to coach their kid's soccer team. Social media is no different. You have to be present on a personal level to inspire change and influence conduct.

4. The Marine Corps is only officially on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. What about other platforms that are not officially utilized?

a. Personal accounts can be whatever you want them to be and on whatever platform you choose. The goal is to demonstrate leadership and responsible social media presence, not to push Marine Corps social media messages. Go where your Marines are, which will likely require leaders to wade into the newest platforms as junior Marines abandon older platforms and move to the newest trend. Only go where you are comfortable, but the Marine Corps should encourage leaders to push themselves to expand their comfort zone. The goal is to be present, be in the room, and demonstrate maturity. The Marines Corps has an interest in developing leaders who understand and are familiar with emerging platforms both to identify operational opportunities and for good order and discipline purposes. The Marine Corps should proactively state that all platforms are encouraged for responsible personal use.

5. Leaders are concerned about their obligations to take action on any misconduct they see online. They hesitate to engage on social media because they "don't want to deal with all that."

a. This is lazy leadership analogous to refusing to walk through the barracks to avoid seeing the beer bottles. Undoubtedly there are going to be some growing pains as Marines learn

what is and is not acceptable online conduct. The first foray into social media may be like the first room inspection after a hurricane shuts down the base for a week; you might be horrified by what you find. But just like a hurricane party that gets a little too crazy, the anything-goes mentality on social media is the result of a lack of on-site leaders demonstrating appropriate, responsible conduct. Trolling by posting controversial or offensive memes is just conduct that occurs because there are no real-world consequences. The Marine Corps should emphasize in all but the most extreme criminal cases, commanders have the entire toolbox of options available to deal with inappropriate conduct to include informal counseling. Much like the guidance when the Marine Corps directed the removal of public displays of the Confederate battle flag, the Marine Corps should encourage leaders to explain why a Marine's online conduct is harmful or divisive and give the Marine an opportunity to correct themselves.⁹ Poor online behavior is a leadership challenge that we should not hide from just because it is easier to look away and ignore the problem until it hits the commander's desk as a formal complaint.

These are simple pieces of guidance that I encourage the Marine Corps to adopt, thereby providing some top-cover for leaders who want to engage but are not willing to risk their careers on the gamble that the Marine Corps agrees with the idea that a colonel accepting a friend request from a lance corporal is not fraternization. In my experience, the Marine Corps has the most passionate, engaged leaders in the DOD. The fact that so few are engaging with their troops in the information environment is not an indictment of them, but of the organization that has not given them the tools to be leaders in this new world.

Notes

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