Social Media as a Military Communication Competency

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The U.S. Navy's senior leadership has joined the social network bandwagon. Beginning in June 2009, the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON) opened a Facebook page and by December 2009 had surpassed 10,000 "fans." During the this six-month period, the site averaged approximately two thousand page views per day with an average of 500 new "fans" per week. MCPON noted "the value of social media is the opportunity to share ideas."[1]

That the Navy is so visibly embracing social media is exciting and it makes a tremendous amount of sense given that it is rapidly becoming the "industry standard" for communication. *The Wall Street Journal* recently claimed that the reign of email as the king of electronic communications is over.[2] And, embracing social media is only natural considering today's millenial Sailors grew up with social media, used it exclusively for personal reasons and are in most cases self-taught users. Moreover, use of social media as a communication channel within Navy organizations is a terrific recruiting tool not only to entice young people to join a "web literate" organization but also as an opportunity for the sailor to develop their social media skills in a manner that would be appealing to a post-navy civilian employer. Social media can play a significant role in morale building in a variety of contexts.

Social Media 101

It has been said that never, until now, have people ever had so much power to share their opinions so widely as they do now thanks to peer media such as blogs and social networks.[3] The new millennium ushered in a new form of electronic communication – electronic social media. Initially limited to student networking at college campuses, social media has rapidly proliferated and is described in the private sector as online communications in which individuals shift fluidly and flexibly between the role of audience and author, social software enables anyone without knowledge of coding, to post, comment on, share or mash up content and to form communities around shared interests."[4] The Navy's definition is more specific, describing social media as a "tool used to connect people who share the same professional interest and activities through the use of web-based services" and used for "knowledge management, subject matter expertise, file sharing, training, references and data sharing."[5]

The proliferation of social media has been both rapid and expansive in the civilian sector. Once thought of as a passing 1990's fad, it estimated that each day approximately 500,000 people go online on the Internet for the first time in their lives.[6] In the United States alone it is estimated that nearly 75 percent of the population uses the Internet.[7] Currently, it is estimated that in the United States alone over 110 million people, or roughly 36 percent of the population use social media on a regular basis.[8] From an organizational perspective, social media enables the organization to focus on narrowly targeted audience segments.[9]

The fastest growing and most popular social media sites are Facebook, a free-access social networking site, and Twitter, a real-time short messaging service limited to 140 characters that can be sent via mobile texting, instant message, or via the Internet. As of June 2010, Facebook claimed in its company online *Statistics* page more than 500 million active Facebook users! A typical Facebook user spends an average 169 minutes per month on the Facebook site. In contrast, the New York Times website only draws readers for about 13 minutes per month.[10] In a recent Anderson Analytics survey of 5,000 U.S. social media users, 71 percent of the participants said they could not do without Facebook. Twitter, started in March 2006, boasts over 6 million users. In May 2009, Astronaut Michael Massimino, aboard the space shuttle *Atlantis,* became the first person to Twitter from space.[11] YouTube, an online video company founded in 2005, allows users to upload and share video clips on the company's Internet website, mobile devices, blogs and email. In doing so, the company's website lauds its ability to "empower [people] to become the broadcasters of tomorrow."

YouTube claims that people watch hundreds of millions of videos everyday and every minute of the day there are ten hours of video loaded into YouTube. In February 2008, YouTube recorded 269 million visitors, an increase of 84 percent from February 2007.[12] The average American Internet user spends approximately ten minutes a day viewing video online.[13] Blogging, short for "web log," is a website maintained by a person who keeps a running commentary on topics of their choosing. It is estimated there are 22.6 million bloggers in the United States who collectively make approximately one million posts every day and that 360 million people worldwide read blogs (60 million of which are in the United States).[14]

Early Adopters

For the past few years, a new generation of Sailor has entered the Navy's workforce. Born from the early 1980s to today and known as millennials, these Sailors join three other generations in the workplace. Millennials have come of age in an era of mass media and technology which have had a significant impact on their perceptions and bring to the job attitudes which are a product of profound societal and technological influences.[15] It wasn't so long ago that when the mooring lines were taken in few opportunities existed underway for Sailors to communicate with others ashore. This was a double-edged sword in my opinion. On one hand, a commanding officer could enjoy distraction-free periods of focused training or operations and the relative assurance that what happened on board, such as the operational schedule, would remain within the lifelines. And while there were "Class Easy" messages (personal telegrams through the Navy Message System) or the command's response to American Red Cross – AMCROSS – messages, these were the exception and were closely reviewed by the chain of command. Conversely, this information blackout probably caused more morale problems than it prevented. Domestic and financial problems festered underway between port visits. Even with the appearance of cell phones and email in the 1990's, commands could still exercise a certain element of information control. Cell phones were range-limited and ships had the ability to monitor outgoing and incoming email content.

What worked with yesterday's sailor won't necessarily work with today's Sailor. Millennials are heavy users of technology and have interacted with their peers and family in frequency and depth not seen in previous generations.[16] It's not uncommon for a college student on a daily basis to speak with their parents by cell phone three or four times and also "chat" on their social networking site with "friends." In this sense, social media has been woven into the very fabric of the millennial.

Policy

In the private sector, emerging social media has been described as "uncharted territory."[17] The dilemma faced by the private sector is the lack of standard convention or protocol of use, forcing organizations to address it individually. Then there is the problem of rushing into the implementation of an unknown quantity. One of my former Navy bosses once cautioned me, "Want it bad, get it bad." However, this is not the case of the Navy's implementation of social media. Commendably, the Navy has prepared and published force guidance in advance regarding use of social media and addressing those "hot button" issues of implementation, security, and user behavior. Organizations in the private sector would be best served to follow this example.

Related to organizational implementation and use of social media, it is recognized just because social media may be a communication or marketing option it is not always the right one.[18] The Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer (DON CIO), to its credit, clearly points out that social media may not be everyone or every situation and wrote, "The decision to embrace social media technology is a risk-based decision, not a technology-based decision. It must be made based on a strong business case, supported at the appropriate level for each department or agency, considering its mission space, threats, technical capabilities, and potential benefits."[19] MCPON affirmed this viewpoint stating that "allowing access to social media is a local [command] decision"[20] This of course means not all commands will implement/authorize social media and raises the issue of force-wide equity. While the naysayers may believe this to be a reason not to implement social media, any brilliant innovation, process, or policy must first take a foothold somewhere to proliferate. Don't kill social media based solely on Mill's Principle of Utility (the greatest good for the greatest number of people.)

Then there is the issue of security, certainly a consideration in the private sector but a truly significant concern in an armed forces organization. DON CIO recognizes this and mandates that "while these collaborative tools present many useful opportunities, their application must not compromise data confidentiality and integrity."[21] Related is the issue of user behavior. At issue is whether there can be a reasonable expectation of enforcement of professional use of what has become widely recognized as a personal use site.

The millenial Sailor is well versed in the exclusive use of social media for personal reasons and must now also take a professional tack, i.e., begin thinking organizationally and strategically. DON CIO recommends command policies "should be created to focus on user behavior, both personal and professional"[22] Additionally, concerns arise to the sanctity of the chain of command. This is an especially sensitive issue to the "old timers" where remember the uncertain early days of the post-Tailhook Navy Hotline. Their fears of abuse were never realized because the Hotline worked as it was designed to and abuses were few. To his credit, MCPON stated that it has never been his intent to use Facebook, or any form of social media, to subvert a Sailor's standard chain of command.[23] In essence, DON-CIO's policies provide excellent foundational guidance and direction for local commands to develop their own command-level social media implementation and administrative policy.

Recognizing the Threats and Embracing the Opportunities

That isn't to say the world of social media is always rosey; rather, it can be fraught with peril to the unengaged and unaware. While social media provide us unprecedented speed and ease in communicating, it can become less personal and intimate and the constant stream of messages makes it more difficult to ascertain importance. [24] Inadequate use of or unfamiliarity with software privacy settings can also lead to potential problems. Social media can "help individuals wax vitriolic to an audience of millions."[25] For example, in 2004, a posting to a popular bicyclist blog announced that one of the Kryptonite brand bike locks could be opened with a Bic ballpoint pen. The company issued a statement that the lock still deterred theft and promised an improved new product line. This response proved to be slow and ineffective and in the ensuing days more and more bloggers began writing about the problem. Five days after the initial blog posting, the mainstream media picked up the story and reported on it, which resulted in more blogging. Almost two weeks following the initial blog post the company promised to replace any affected lock, nearly 100,000, at a cost of $10 million dollars – half of Kryptonite's $25 million annual revenue.[26]

An April 2009 situation involving Domino's Pizza employees illustrates abuse internal to the organization. Two Domino's Pizza employees uploaded a video to YouTube that showing one of the employees sticking a piece of cheese in his nostril then placing the contaminated cheese on a customer's sandwich. The video received approximately one million Internet views before it was taken down and was also picked up and shown by television media. Domino's responded 48 hours later when the president of Domino's USA apologized in a company YouTube video. Sadly, Domino's corporate leadership was not aware of the YouTube video's existence until customers mentioned it to the company.[27]

Kept in perspective, such case studies serve as opportunities which can be addressed through education at the local level related to message generation, discipline, filtering, privacy settings and the speed at which social media works. Beyond the aforementioned recruiting and morale-building opportunities, social media does indeed provide a tremendous opportunity for inter- and intra-organizational communication. In this sense, the Navy's published view of social media as "an inherent part of the toolbox for members of the millennial workforce" as "the standard by which we can share and collaborate on information inside and outside the network boundaries." [28] This is a proactive, forward-looking approach which will reap efficiencies and will engage today's Sailor in a familiar electronic medium. The Navy has an opportunity and the wherewithal to incorporate social media, implementation, use and etiquette in all afloat and ashore training curriculums and lessons learned forums. Train Sailors as to which social media tools are appropriate given a certain context, when it is appropriate to use social media and when its not, how to effectively and professionally communicate and reach the intended audience. Social media implementation and administration could be incorporated into the command review process and as a turnover item in the change of command process. Workgroups could further develop and tailor social media policy and operationalization at the command level. The opportunities are limitless and exciting.

Navy recruiting command can also further capitalize on social media. According to a 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study (as cited in Choi, 2009), "85 percent of Americans who use social media believe that a company should not only be present on social sites, but should also interact with its consumers via social media platforms." [29] In today's tough economy "more and more job seekers are willing to try Twitter as a job-hunting resource."[30] Twitter provides the Navy a great way to look for quality and fit through dissemination to a much broader audience. This is especially the case with college students and officer program accessions. Through Twitter, Navy recruiters can "join in the conversation" much in the same way as private sector organizations, such as Comcast have. And, "Interviews taking place on Twitter, called Twitterviews, have gained popularity due to the increasing role of social media by public officials and celebrities"[31] The possibilities are endless.

Some contend that social media simply gives the troops an opportunity to waste time at the expense of being engaged in viable communication. Others believe social media is just another passing fad. Yet others have voiced concerns about chain of command integrity. To those naysayers of social media I say "Get onboard!" While social media platforms, e.g., Myspace, Facebook, etc. may change with time, the communication channel itself will not disappear; rather, it promises to endure and evolve. Social media is not a replacement for good old fashioned personal communication. It's simply another tool in the communication tool box that, arguably, will make us more productive. And, Social media, whatever form it morphs into in future years, is here to stay. This is affirmed by DON CIO's belief that "many of our [Navy] processes are rooted in the Industrial Age and will need to move toward the Information Age to remain relevant in the coming years"[32] Social media helps to achieve this vision and the Navy is wise to embrace it as an essential tool in its 21st century force structure.

Background

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