

Logging On: The Army Joins Wave of the Future

By Cassandra Yardeni

The Army's use of technology is constantly evolving, constantly striving to develop and secure top-of-the-line equipment and products for its Soldiers. Over recent years, however, technology has not only advanced on the battlefield, but also in the context of a global communication revolution, with the advent and popularization of social media platforms worldwide. The Army has seen the face of the future and has officially logged on.

Social Media: A Brief History

The Army's hand in Internet technology is rooted in its predecessor, the Arpanet, a network for information sharing developed in 1969. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency developed this technology not as a result of a military need, according to Charles Herzfeld, former director of DARPA, but out of "frustration that there were only a limited number of large, powerful research computers in the country and that many research investigators who should have access were geographically separated from them," he has said of the invention.

While the Internet has been a public resource for networking and disseminating information since the popularization of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, social media has only gained momentum in the past decade. Since four Israeli technologists invented ICQ, an instant-messaging system, in 1996, technology has allowed Internet users to "chat" with one another via their computers. Social networking, or the ability to digitally connect to friends and strangers on a larger public platform, arrived on the scene in 2002, with the introduction of Friendster, a social networking site that allowed users to develop profiles and share information. As new media began to shrink distances between family and friends, a slew of free social networking sites quickly cropped up, bringing sites like MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005 and most recently, Twitter in 2006, to popularity.

The sites provide friends old and new the chance to share information like images and e-mails, and offer businesses the opportunity

to market directly to their audiences, keeping followers and fans of their brands updated and engaged in dialogue about their products.

Taking Notice

Though the Army has long maintained an online presence through its Web site at www.army.mil, an initiative in January 2009 brought the Army to the forefront of social media. Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner, then-chief of Army public affairs, began an online and social media division that combined and streamlined ad hoc platforms the Army hosted at the time. "The purpose was to combine all the online efforts and the online space from headquarters to Army-level," said Lindy Kyzer, social media manager of the Army, based out of the Pentagon.

"The purpose is for folks to have a place to engage in conversations about the Army. [Each social media platform] serves as a place for our Soldiers, family members, spouses, veterans and fans of various capacities to gather together and to talk about many issues. From a public affairs perspective, it's a great way for us to reach out. It's a great way to allow us to get feedback and allow not just Soldiers to engage in policy, decisions and things that are taking place in the Army," she said.

"More people are involved with social media every day. They're not talking just about what they're doing; they're

asking questions,” said Carroll Kim, leader of social media engagement at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine and Command, based at Fort Monroe, Va.

In an effort to manage the Army’s footprint on the Web and to engage with not only Soldiers and their families, but fans and friends of the Army at large, the social media division has since developed an official Army blog and Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo and Flickr accounts. The content on each platform is managed and monitored by the division, but open to and accessible by the public.

The Army hosts official social media sites; separate divisions, bases and Army-related individuals are encouraged to join in social networking with their own accounts. A list of the official platforms, as well as other Army profiles, is available on the Army social media Web site at <http://www.army.mil/media/socialmedia/>.

Presence and relevance

Though the Army maintains a presence on the aforementioned social media networks, Army.mil continues to serve as the official source of information for the force, according to Army officials. News updates, stories about Soldiers, videos, organizational information, leader biographies, enlistment literature and Army blogs are all accessible on the Web site. However, the various external social media sites offer more instant dissemination of information, along with the opportunity for Internet users to engage in dialogue about what the Army posts. While Army.mil serves as the hub for official information, social media platforms extend and support the Army message. As such, the content on each platform is chosen based upon the relevance to each site’s audience and the unique criteria or scope of the site.

“Social media is crucial to the Army,” Kyzer said. “There is different content in each place. The key to our strategy is presence and relevance. Part of providing relevant content is that we have a say in the content there, but so do our fans.”

For instance, a recent look at the Army’s Flickr page

revealed various photos of artillery training and Multi-Cam uniforms that were submitted by Soldiers. A recent Army “tweet,” found on the Army’s Twitter page, reads: “Boy Scouts visit Gen. Casey at the Pentagon their ‘Report to the Nation’ trip,” alongside a photo of Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., giving an Army baseball cap to a boy scout. The Army Facebook page meanwhile boasts more than 184,000 fans, whose postings

range from encouraging “Hooahs!” to talk about the popular film, *The Hurt Locker*, to users asking for suggestions on what to include in a care package for an “adopted” Soldier.

Because it allows Soldiers to stay connected with family and friends during deployment, the Army encourages engagement in social media so they can share

their lives in the military through pictures, videos and messaging. “A Soldier is the best spokesperson for



Photo by Cherie Cullen, Department of Defense

As seen on the Army Flickr page, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr., left, hands out Army hats to members of the Boy Scouts of America during a visit to his office at the Pentagon March 1. The Boy Scouts were in Washington, D.C., to give their annual “Report to the Nation.”



the Army,” Kim said.

Social media not only allows the Army and its Soldiers to transmit their messages, it also provides a way for inter activity between the Army, its Soldiers and Internet users worldwide, fostering a sense of community that transcends geographical boundaries, Kyzer said.

“The ability to communicate is absolutely crucial. In an era with so many deployments, if you don’t have that direct connection, it’s easy to forget about what’s going on in Iraq and Afghanistan. If you have a Facebook friend who’s a Soldier, it makes it a lot easier to relate to the Army. From a communications standpoint, that’s really crucial,” Kyzer said.

Safety First

According to a Feb. 25 memorandum from the assistant secretary of defense for networks and information integration, the Army “recognizes that Internet-based capabilities are integral to operations across the Department of Defense.” But the freedom of instant communication comes with the potential threat of oversharing, a risk that the social media division of the Army works to prevent. “Every Soldier gets operational security training, but

it's important to remember that online etiquette and interactions are a part of that," she said. "We say that social media gives you a piece of the pie in terms of online identity," she added, "but it requires you to lose some control, too."

However, because the social networks are accessible to the public from anywhere in the world, Kyzer says that education is the key to avoiding breaching OPSEC. Security training and briefs are an instrumental part of a Soldier's education and family readiness programs alike. Though the social media division claims to have had minimal security breaches, most have come from families of Soldiers inadvertently revealing a date or location of deployment too early.

Aside from security concerns, the social media division strives to maintain a professional bearing across their social media platforms, yet is careful to avoid taking the "realness" out of the feedback and posts the public contributes.

"We have to accept that some negative comments are going

to happen. Theoretically, we can monitor and review comments. But, because it's instantaneous, it's hard to moderate beforehand. This is really the people's site; they keep it as clean as they want to keep it," Kyzer said.

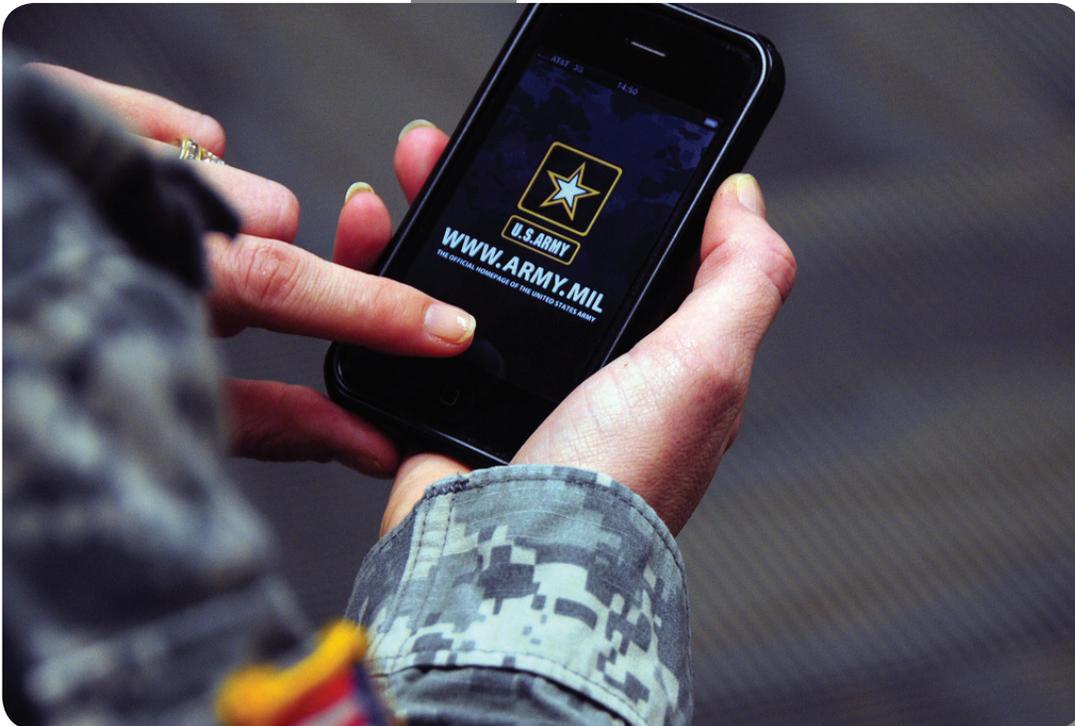
What's ahead

The Army continues to integrate itself into the electronic media landscape, Kyzer said, and has recently stepped into the mobile realm. In December 2009, the Army introduced the Army iPhone app, a free application downloadable by any iPhone or iPod Touch owner. Through the app, users can access thousands of Army images, videos; its Twitter, Facebook and blog accounts; as well as podcasts, games and fun facts about the Army, its weapons and vehicles. In an age where dissemination of information and communication are evolving at an unprecedented rate, the Army continues to look toward the future of social media. 

Photos courtesy U.S. Army

Right: A screenshot of the official U.S. Army Twitter page, www.twitter.com/usarmy

Below: A Soldier accesses the free U.S. Army iPhone application from her mobile phone.



For more information on Army-related social media Web sites, or information on how to make your own, visit <http://www.army.mil/media/socialmedia/>.

Social media platforms continue to evolve, and the Army has made it a priority to stay connected, in touch and on the forefront of the trend. Here is a brief breakdown of the official presences on the most popular social networking Web sites:

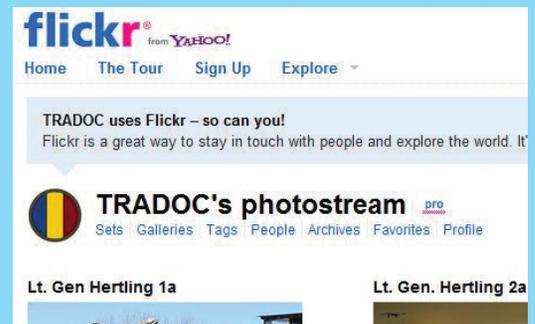
Facebook

Facebook is a free site that can be accessed by anyone with a valid e-mail address. Facebook users create profiles that include personal and professional information and photos. Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, and school or college. The Army Facebook page includes polls, discussions and photos. You can “friend” the Army at www.facebook.com/usarmy.



Flickr

Flickr is an image- and video-hosting Web site and online community. The site allows users to upload and catalog personal photographs and is widely used by bloggers to host images that they embed in blogs and other social media. The Army Flickr pages include photos submitted by Soldiers and public affairs officials. View the Army's Flickr pages at www.flickr.com/soldiersmediacenter.



Twitter

Twitter is a free site that allows users to share messages — “tweets” — of 140 characters or less. Tweets are text-based and are posted on a user's profile page, which can be viewed by his or her followers, and if public, anyone who logs on. Privacy settings are adjustable and users can restrict messages to authorized followers only. The Army tweets photos, video and truncated headlines from Army.mil. Follow the Army at www.twitter.com/usarmy.



YouTube ~ Vimeo

Both YouTube and Vimeo are free video-sharing Web sites where users can upload and share videos. Unregistered users can only watch the videos, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos they create. Both sites contain Army-related videos submitted by Soldiers and Army officials and are monitored by the Army's social media division. View the Army's videos at www.youtube.com/soldiersmediacenter and www.vimeo.com/usarmy.

