

Building a Network: The Benefits of Social Media in State Emergency Missions

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On May 23, 2011, a Missouri National Guard public affairs specialist photographed soldiers searching through rubble following a devastating tornado in Joplin, Mo., with her iPhone. She e-mailed the picture to the state public affairs office, which forwarded it to the media. The photo appeared in dozens of Defense Department and civilian publications.

That photograph - and the fact that it would have been impossible to take and transmit so quickly and effectively three years earlier - is viewed as both a great danger and a great opportunity within the military. The rise of smart phones and social media sites has forced the military to adapt quickly to a new information environment. That change was neither instantaneous nor painless. Instead, it was the result of more than 10 years of Defense Department policy changes, evolutions in attitude, and leaders willing to change with the times.

When four back-to-back emergencies hit Missouri in 2011, the Missouri National Guard's public affairs team's mission was to tell the Guard's story and keep the public informed with timely, accurate information. These emergencies marked the first time the Missouri Guard had used social media during state emergency operations. Whereas previous emergencies had been monologues, social media transformed that communication into a dialogue. A study of some of the challenges the Missouri National Guard public affairs faced during four major disasters in 2011 offers insight into how other agencies can adapt to the constantly changing information environment and navigate it effectively to their missions.

Adapting to the Social Media Environment

In the past 10 years, the 24-hour, television news cycle has given way to a 24-hour online information cycle. Now, public affairs officers who formerly acted as organizational gatekeepers find themselves communicating directly with the public on sites like Facebook and Twitter. To be effective in this new environment, public affairs staff require buy-in from all levels of leadership, from the platoon sergeant to the policy makers in the Pentagon. To their credit, many of these leaders have accepted that social media are not going away

. This relatively quick adoption of social media is an aberration from how the military has traditionally viewed new communications technology. The U.S. military has an unimpressive track record with new communications technology, especially during wartime. From seizing the telegraph lines during the Civil War to pooling efforts during the invasions of Panama and Grenada, the military has traditionally favored restricting information. While the embedding program allowed civilian media access to American troops at war they hadn't enjoyed in decades, the military was slower adapting to social media used by their own personnel.

Soldiers on remote outposts now use e-mail, blogs, Facebook and Skype to speak directly with their families in ways that were unimaginable when the war began. While better communications may be good for morale, many within the military view it as bad for operations security. Troops have unprecedented access to social media outlets and video and file sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube. Throughout operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, many of the photos and videos that have resulted in the most negative stories have come from military members. Instant communications have allowed unedited, un-vetted footage to travel directly from theater to America's living rooms. These include:

- In 2003-2004, Abu Ghraib came to public attention after photographs taken by members of the 372nd Military Police Company.

- In 2007, a group of U.S. Marines filmed themselves throwing a puppy off a cliff.
- In 2010-2011, the so-called ‘Kill Team,’ a group of four soldiers from 3rd Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division took pictures of themselves allegedly committing war crimes.
- In 2012, a video of Marines urinating on the corpses of what appear to be dead insurgents was most likely taken by another Marine.

Ultimately, a handful of troops are responsible for publicizing the war’s most damaging stories.

While the ‘easy’ answer may be limiting troops’ access to such sites and technology, to do so would be yielding the major battlefield of the information war to the enemy. In 2006, Jarret M. Brachman published an article titled “High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda’s Use of New Technology.” Brachman argues that by effective use of internet resources, Al-Qaeda was able to evolve into an “organic social movement, making its virulent ideology accessible to anyone with a computer.” Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also recognized the enemy’s advantage in social media. In an editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Rumsfeld recognized that while the U.S. military struggled to find a coherent policy and viable use for new media, “the vacuum will be filled by the enemy and by hostile news sources who most assuredly will not paint an accurate picture of what is actually taking place.”

It is not enough simply not to limit the access individual service members have to social media – units and commands must be engaged themselves. In 2009, the Joint Public Affairs Support Element of U.S. Joint Forces Command published, “Social Media and Department of Defense Communication.” The paper recognized that as traditional print outlets continued to decline, social media sites like Twitter were exploding. Although all branches were experimenting with social media, there was no consistency of effort.

Although the service branches have begun to adopt social media, there are still major security concerns. Just as the military had to kowtow to the idea of losing control of its messages by engaging in two-way, uncontrolled conversations on social media sites, it has also had to adopt prioritizing transparency over security in some situations. That is not to say that the military is encouraging security violations. Instead, there is an organization-wide understanding that holds the potential benefits of social media are worth the risks, and that the way to mitigate those risks is through education and personal accountability. In the U.S. Army Social Media Handbook, soldiers are given guidance to ensure personal and unit security.

Using Social Media During Emergency Operations

While much of the policy discussions appear based around overseas missions, how new media can be leveraged by the National Guard during state emergencies has emerged as a topic worthy of further study. Simply put, social media have not just become a part of the public affairs culture, but have *become* the public affairs culture. Heather Blanchard, co-founder of Crisis Commons USA, told the Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence in 2011, “Now more than ever, using social media during a disaster or crisis is a must do, rather than a nice to do. If you don’t listen to and communicate with the community you are putting yourself at a huge disadvantage. The conversation is happening around you; ignore it at your peril.”

How social media were used to tell the National Guard’s story and relay emergency information during Missouri’s 2011 crises came as a direct result of the policies the Defense Department has pursued during the past decade and through years of building the Missouri Guard’s social media presence. The time to start participating in social media is not when an

emergency begins. Organizations must be engaged and have been cultivating an audience before a disaster. These day-to-day interactions not only build an audience, but build trust. When disaster strikes, a site with several thousand followers will immediately be viewed as more trustworthy than one with only a handful of followers.

For the future of military public affairs policy and practice, understanding the benefits and possible dangers of social media during a state emergency is the key to finding a way forward that completes the military's mission. What follows is an examination of some of the challenges the Missouri National Guard faced in social media during the 2011 disaster season, and some of the capabilities available to the Missouri Guard because of social media. By reviewing the steps taken by the Missouri National Guard throughout 2011, other military agencies might better understand how to use social media as a tool to expand upon and improve their existing outreach capabilities.

It's a dialogue, not a monologue

The cost of doing business in the 24-hour information environment is control. Before 2011, the Missouri National Guard's public affairs team acted as gatekeepers and communicated largely by sending out news releases and coordinating interviews with civilian media. By engaging directly with the public on social media, that monologue became a dialogue. In some instances, that meant receiving negative feedback from the audience.

On the morning of Feb 2, Spc.Sarah Lupescu, of the 70th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, posted a 55-second broadcast story about National Guard missions during the blizzard of 2011. The video received almost immediate negative feedback on the Missouri

National Guard's Facebook site. A woman named Samantha claimed she had seen Guard vehicles pass a person who needed help posted what she had seen. Rather than remove the post, the Guard's response was to alert the Joint Operations Center of the potential issue, and to post a response saying, "Samantha - very sorry to hear that, if you want to send us details and we can look into it, please send to ngmo.pao@us.army.mil."

"Negative posts are difficult," said Maj. Tamara Spicer, the state public affairs officer. "Over the years, we have grown to accept them and leave them in place. This allows the poster to have shared their concerns. We can also use that information to improve our response."

Almost immediately, however, the comment began to receive negative feedback from other posters. The initial post was taken down by the poster, who then posted that it was "not a big deal" and that the poster herself had a friend who had served in the National Guard

Although it is a cause of consternation for some, the ability for the public to communicate with the Guard directly is a positive development, even when those comments are negative, said 1st Sgt. Mary Williams. Williams gained extensive state emergency duty experience with the Florida National Guard and remembered when grievances were more likely to be aired on the 6 o'clock news than on social media. By giving the public a direct means of communicating publicly with the Guard, social media is actually enhancing the Guard's response capabilities as well as its ability to communicate directly with the public on specific concerns, Williams said.

"I enjoy knowing that a person is going to be able to go to our social media site and say, 'Hey, I haven't seen the Guard in this area, but they need to be there,' and we being able to say or post a picture within five minutes and say, 'They're actually there, you just didn't see them,' versus hearing about it on the nightly news," Williams said.

Show, don't tell

Although most of the videos were produced by Guard members, the most-viewed video of the 2011 emergencies was shot on a cell phone by a first responder. The public affairs office put the video Spc. Junior Bombard and Sgt. Tim Bridges, both of the 1138th Military Police Company, rescuing a 93-year old woman from flood waters. The video, which was taken by Butler County Deputy Sheriff Bob Larkins, was uploaded to the Missouri National Guard's social media sites and DVIDS. Internally, the video received 77 'likes' on the Guard's Facebook page and 35 comments – including one from one of the soldiers' wives who was a follower. Nationally, the story was picked up on major media outlets including Fox and CNN.

Ann Keyes, who worked with the 1138th during the flood, said she wasn't surprised by the video's popularity. "it's a great video," Keyes said. "And it was spontaneous and even elementary, so I think that helped it go viral. It truly showed what the flood was like - rushing, dirty, dangerous -, so it gave people an up-close view of something they wouldn't normally see."

It is exceedingly rare to get that type of video during an operation, but when such video becomes available, it is important to have not only the connections with the traditional media to push the video out, but a means to getting that video the public. Although DVIDS is an outstanding resource, having a YouTube, FlickrR or Facebook site where it can be echoed through social media gives you a much better way to get your product out.

Be first with the facts

When Newton and Duquesne counties were hit by a devastating tornado on May 22, 2011, the Missouri Guard was mobilized immediately. For the Missouri National Guard's public

affairs staff, the top priority was explaining to the Guard's role to the public. Thanks to social media, the Guard could record a video of Maj. Gen. Steve Danner, the adjutant general, explaining the Guard's role and anticipated missions. Putting the product together and getting it to the public was a relatively quick process, said Spc. Adam Winters, the broadcaster.

"I think I put it together in 30 minutes," Winters said. "It was just a quick interview of him saying, 'listen, this tornado happened, the Missouri National Guard is responding, we've been called up by Gov. Jay Nixon to assist local first responders in any way we possibly can. Getting that who-what-when-where-why out there as quickly as possible was key to a successful campaign."

Due to equipment issues and communications issues in southwest Missouri, it would be days before more video would be produced. Winters' video, although it contained no footage of the tornado and nobody on site, effectively outlined the Guard's mission, goal, and command messages.

New technology means new opportunities

In the early morning hours of May 23, 2011, unit public affairs representative Ann Keyes had no photographs of the ongoing search and rescue missions. The affected area was "pitch black," Keyes said, so taking a picture was a fruitless endeavor. That changed with the sunrise. In still-limited light, Keyes began taking pictures of the Guard's search and rescue efforts.

"It was during the southeast Missouri flooding that I realized how much more quickly I could get photos out with my phone," Keyes said. "By using my traditional digital camera, I

would have to wait to get back to a computer and upload. The iPhone allowed me to shoot a pic and send with a cutline instantly.”

That photo, of five soldiers working in the rubble of a destroyed Walmart, was one of the most picked-up images the Missouri National Guard sent out to the media. For Sgt. 1st Class Craig Collins, the fact that Keyes’ photograph was taken on a phone and of a good enough quality to be picked up as the cover to a national magazine showed how far technology had come and how important it was to get good images quickly.

“It captured what was going on really well and told the story in that moment by itself,” Collins said. “If you can capture your images that do that and send them off, people are really willing to overlook the technical limitations that image had. They will find a way to make it work.

Stop rumors at their source

Early in emergency operations, the Missouri National Guard developed a social media monitoring system. The monitoring program was important for gauging the mood of the people in the area, seeing if and how Guard messages were being picked up, and identifying any possible issues before they became problems. Missouri was very transparent about monitoring activities from the beginning. On April 28, during the first flood operation, the Guard put out a release on its use of social media and received no negative reaction.

Quickly, the Missouri National Guard as a whole had recognized that social media was an invaluable tool not only for public affairs, but for the task force in general. Even so, it was not without its pitfalls, said Maj. Alan Brown of the 110th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade. On one

occasion, there was a false report about a levee breach. Thanks to social media, the report reached state headquarters before it reached the task force operations center.

“There were guys out there,” said Sgt. 1st Class Craig Collins, who was on-site. “They had eyes on. That levee was not doing what was being put out on the social media. The more eyes you have on something, the better.”

Although the emergency was fake, the lesson was real. The task force had to keep up with what was transpiring on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, Brown said. In addition to his regular duties, Brown became the task force’s *de facto* social media guru.

“We actually beefed up – I took an NCO, a sergeant, and he assisted me in keeping an eye out on any reports,” Brown said. “We’d also gotten a handle on the social media outlets that the citizens were using on a regular basis in that area. We were keeping an eye on those to make sure that it didn’t create any chaos, that making sure if there was a problem, we could react in kind and in a fast enough manner to put the citizens at ease in that area.”

Conclusion

The key to successfully using social media during emergency operations is being familiar with them and cultivating an audience well ahead of an emergency. By knowing how to communicate most effectively, agencies can ensure their messages are getting to the public quickly and accurately. By building an audience during day-to-day operations, agencies and units can build trust with that audience.

Organizations need to recognize that interactions will not always be positive. During emergencies, people are often scared and tempers can run hot. It is the job of the public affairs officer to speak with a calm, professional, authoritative voice during such times. Do not ignore negative posts and do not erase them – remember, the public has a right not know how their

resources are being used and what their government is doing to help them in times of crisis.

Share these negative comments with your leadership; they can only lead to improvements in how operations are being carried out.

The dawn of social media marks a drastic change with how public affairs officers have traditionally done business. No longer are they simply gatekeepers who communicate with the public through the media. Now, in addition to public affairs' the crucial media support function, leaders and public affairs officers have the opportunity to communicate directly with the public they serve. Although this new, direct communication can be frightening, it will ultimately lead to improved responses and a greater connection with the public we serve.