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## **SOCIAL MEDIA: ENHANCING THE U.S. MILITARY'S COMMUNICATION WITH ITS TARGET AUDIENCE**

Lloyd Eldon Bedford  
*Syracuse University*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative research analysis is to highlight the key changes over the last decade that influenced the U.S. Military to redirect its efforts of ignoring social media, to make it one of its major contributing asset to effective communication. I will examine my findings by answering the following questions to prove or deny that social media has enhanced the U.S. Military's communication with its target audience. The first question is-Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication? I am aiming to find out who or what events influenced this change and how long it took to make these changes. I hope to outline key lessons learned and the benefit of becoming pro-social media.

The second question-What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's plan for managing social media? I aim to find out if the U.S. Military is effective with its current ability to manage themes and messages by use of social media.

Third question is-Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan? What have public affairs officers learned from past and current operations to help pave a new path for effective communication in an ever changing social media driven society.

During the research process for this study, 20 public affairs officers (PAO) randomly selected from the five branches of U.S. Military service were interviewed to gain insight on the effectiveness of its communication. While this is only a small number and not a representation of the whole U.S. Military, it provided sufficient information to prove the desired hypothesis.

While interviewed these 20 PAOs all three research questions were answered regarding the U.S. Military's effectiveness while communicating, concerns with the current nature of communication and recommendations for the future to make communication even more effective.

SOCIAL MEDIA: ENHANCING THE U.S. MILITARY'S  
COMMUNICATION WITH ITS TARGET AUDIENCE

by

Lloyd E. Bedford III

B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2005

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in  
*Public Relations.*

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications  
Syracuse University  
December 2016

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## Acknowledgements

When I first arrived at Syracuse University in the summer of 2013 to instruct Army ROTC, I had no idea I would be given the opportunity to become an alumni as well. I was unsure if I wanted to pursue my master's degree in graphic design or something completely new. I am truly happy I have chosen to pursue public relations and along the way I was supported by many great people to help me earn my degree.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family. My wife **Kelly Bedford** and daughter **MacKinley Bedford** have always been my biggest fans and best supporters. I would not have been as driven or compelled to give up personal time away from them to complete this degree had they not seen how important it was to me and our future.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The importance of public affairs officers in the U.S. Military is growing every day, especially in an environment that is technologically advanced with the implementation of social media. It is important to consistently monitor social media and communicate with your target audience on a daily basis to continually improve relationships. Before we learn more about the current status of communication of the U.S. Military's public affairs officers (PAOs), it is important to understand their origin. The history of public affairs according to the Defense Information School (DINFOS):

Prior to World War II, the armed forces' public affairs mission was accomplished mainly through the civilian press, but the lessons learned during the war years clearly indicated the need for a formalized public affairs training program in the military. If the military forces were to succeed in their vital mission of defending the nation, the active support of a well-informed public and an equally well-informed fighting force was a necessity. As a result, the Army Information School was established in January 1946 at Carlisle Barracks, Pa. (dinfos/about/history).

When the school began, public affairs was still in its infancy, radio was approaching its zenith, and television was an exciting curiosity. The newspaper was still the strongest voice for telling the armed forces story. Few precedents existed, even in civilian education, from which to teach the use of mass communication techniques in support of an external and internal information program that would apply both at home and abroad (dinfos/about/history).

The Army Information School continued operating through 1947, with the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps sending small numbers of students to the school for training. During this period, the Air Force operated a Public Information School at Craig Air Force Base, Ala., and the Navy established a journalism school at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, Ill. (dinfos/about/history).

Early in 1948, a series of meetings with the Army Information School was held by representatives of each of the services to consider combining their separate information training efforts. Subsequently, the Armed Forces Information School was established. It was relocated to Fort Slocum, N.Y. in 1951, where larger and better-equipped facilities were provided. Although the Armed Forces Information School replaced the Army and Air Force's information schools, the Navy continued to operate its journalism school. Because individual services encountered difficulty in meeting their student quotas, the Armed Forces Information School reverted to an Army school again (dinfos/about/history).

However, in 1961, a renewed effort began under the direction of the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, and the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, Arthur Sylvester, to consolidate service information training. Sylvester asserted that since public affairs training is common to all services and since principles of mass communication have universal application, combining the individual service schools into a joint-service school would be both economical and efficient. On Feb. 21, 1964, the Department of Defense issued a charter for the Defense Information School. In September 1965, DINFOS was moved to Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind. (dinfos/about/history).

From 1964 to 1973, the Army exercised administrative control of the school through the deputy chief of staff for personnel, Department of the Army. In July 1973, the Army Training

and Doctrine Command assumed responsibility for DINFOS, to relieve the general staff of day-to-day operational matters and to consolidate Army control of schools under a single command (dinfos/about/history).

On July 28, 1992, the deputy secretary of defense approved the functional transfer and consolidation of service training for public affairs, visual information and broadcasting under the direction of the American Forces Information Service. The Defense Information School moved to Fort George G. Meade in 1995 (dinfos/about/history).

The purpose of the proposed thesis is to examine the current trends and best practices followed by U.S. Military PAOs. In order to determine how effective, the U.S. Military is at using social media to connect with its target audience, a qualitative study was conducted. While this is only a small number and not a representation of the whole U.S. Military, it provided sufficient information to prove the desired hypothesis. During this study 20 PAOs from the five branches of U.S. Military service were interviewed to gather all the information. The goal is to highlight the effectiveness of communication from the perspective of the U.S. Military PAOs. Effective communication is defined as-Effective communication is communication that is clearly and successfully delivered, received and understood. Learning the skills of effective communication can help people to resolve differences while building trust and respect. This particular study is one of great interest to me, because I too will become a U.S. Army PAO in the next six months.

The following thesis is arranged into six chapters to present all the findings for this study. Chapter one is the introduction, along with history of U.S. Military public affairs and proposed thesis. Chapter two is the literature review, to present current trends in other government agencies and civilian organizations. Chapter three presents the methods used to gather the research for the proposed thesis. Chapter four showcases all the results

from the interview process. Chapter five provides discussion and analysis of the interviews to confirm the proposed thesis statement. Lastly, at the end of this chapter, some highlights will be presented on the limitations during the research process; as well as making some recommendations for future research on this subject.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This public relations study is focused on a general comparison of U.S. Military public affairs, government agencies and non-government organizations. Using general analysis all responses gathered during the interview process will be examined with current trends and the literature review chapter. This is to frame the effectiveness of the U.S. Military's communication from the PAOs perspective and their opinions of past, current and future use of social media in the military.

The current assumptions before conducting this study, based on the literature review and my personal knowledge of being a U.S. Army officer, are that the U.S. Military is already effectively using social media to connect with its target audience. Along with this, the military is a learning organization, which places great importance on learning from the past. This is very similar to the training all public relations practitioners are taught to assess and evaluate in order increase the effectiveness of communication. The last assumption is the U.S. Military like other organizations is placing the majority of its communication through social media.

When evaluating the variables for this study, two main classifications became apparent. The first is group variables that are shared by all of the PAOs interviewed during this study. The second is the individual variables that are not shared by all of the PAOs.

The first group variable is the initial training all PAOs receive at the Defense Information school. This is a joint school where all PAOs from all branches of the U.S. Military attend to learn the same skills for being public affairs practitioners in the military. The second is similar strategies and goals for communicating through social media. Ultimately, all have the same outcome of effectively communicating with their target audience. Lastly, the similarity between each branch of service's target audience. All communication, similar to civilian PR teams, is focused on internal and external communication.

The first independent variable is each PAO is in a different branch of service. Even though each branch has a similar strategy for social media, each branch has a different long-term goal for specific messages. Second, is the emphasis from the unit commander on using social media. Some commanders have different opinions on the effectiveness of using social media for communication, which can affect the ability of the PAO when using it for messaging. Third, is how much experience each PAO has not just in public affairs, but with using social media. Many younger PAOs have grown in the U.S. Military while using social media. Others have not only had to learn public affairs, if they held a different job previously, but are still new to using social media for communication.

While examining the different communication theories to apply to this study, the most applicable theory was that of James E. Grunig. In 1985, Grunig developed a public relations theory of communication that consisted of four parts. These four parts were- press agentry model, public information model, two-way asymmetrical model and two-way symmetrical model.

Press agentry communication works to influence public opinion, and is used more for marketing to appeal to behaviors of the audience. In this model it is not important for the

message to be entirely true. Two-way asymmetrical communication is two-way, the goal is anything but balanced. It's all about persuasion to trigger a transaction, thus its popularity with marketers (Grunig, 1989). Two-way symmetrical uses communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its publics (Grunig, 1989).

The communication theory used for this study is the Public Information Model. This model is a one-way communication method where accuracy of the message is extremely vital. This model does not consider information about the audience to be essential in constructing messages or releases (Grunig, 1989). This is method does not rely on two-way communication or feedback from the target audience. This is true for the U.S. Military, while it would love to have positive feedback, it is not necessary when communicating with its target audience.

When examining the three assumptions with the proposed communication theory, it appears the U.S. Military is effective with its communication through social media. This study will determine through the literature review and interviews to measure each assumption along with the findings presented during the interview process. This will determine the effectiveness of the military's communication, if they are a learning organization and if social media is the main effort for communication.

## **2.1 Speed is Key in Modern Communication**

In order to stay effective with communicating, it is important to monitor social media on a consistent basis. The concept of using speed to respond to a crisis is paramount in maintaining a timely and accurate flow of communication with an audience. By responding quickly to crises, organizations will be able to maintain its reputation and brand image with its key publics (Schwarz 2012).

An interesting article presented by Walter (2009) discusses the importance of managing and releasing information on social media during an environmental or health crisis. There are many ways to handle a crisis on social media. In this particular article, successful health organizations had hotlines or a dedicated message board on Facebook. This allowed the organizations to connect with its audience much faster to prevent a crisis. Speed is the key to preventing wide spread panic or even bad information being published that could add fuel to the crisis fire. If you are not quick to respond to your audience, they will search for answers from third party sources. This is much more dangerous than saying you do not have the answers at that time. Sometimes people just want an answer even if it is you saying you are working on it.

The next article discusses how the U.S. Health Department and many other independent health organizations approached a pro-social media strategy. With all the rise of epidemics around the world and even the smaller outbreaks in the U.S., people were looking for answers. That is when PR teams in the U.S. Health departments decided to speed up communication with its publics through social media (Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wagenen, 2012). The PR teams were posting updates around the clock and responding to concerned citizens through Facebook, Twitter and its main website. The speed of communication through social media increased trust in its target audience and provided instant communication to prevent rumors and bad information from being disseminated to U.S. citizens.

Another article by Hyass (2013) talks about negative feedback being posted on social media. That is when organizations have to be quick to reply and try to fix whatever the issue is that is making that customer unhappy. The worst thing your company could do is not to monitor social media posts about your company or not to respond to a potential crisis. This can make the customer feel underappreciated and lead to others not wanting to visit your destination. It is also

the best way to stop a potential crisis before it happens.

In addition to this practice it is important to monitor and respond to the public through multiple channels of social media. In order to connect with different audiences, you need to be able to reach those audiences on various social media platforms. With all the advances in technology that we have today a crisis could go viral even before local media is able to cover the story. This is why monitoring social media is important because it could make or break your image or reputation as a public servant (Graham, 2015).

The last article for this trend focuses on the impacts of police on how U.S. Government organizations manage and communicate through social media. The primary focus of this article is the U.S. State Department the U.S. Department of Defense and The Department of Homeland Security. While transparency is key in modern communication, it is impossible for many of these organizations to be completely open about everything. The greatest concern in today's environment is national security, while we receive a lot of information through social media on who to watch and to be aware of suspicious activity; we can not release key strategies on how we are operating through any social media platforms (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). In times of national crisis social media is the fastest, most reliable way to communicate with the citizens of the United States.

## **2.2 Know your Message and Strategy**

When using social media to communicate with your target audience, it is imperative to know what your organization is trying to say (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). Along with knowing your message, you need to be aware of your organization's long term goals for communication (Kwok, & Yu, 2013). The most important part of messages for your strategy is knowing how

communication can impact change to direct your organization down the path desired for success (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

The first article discusses the importance of using social media in politics and how it is shaping the future of communication. The article highlights two key areas of how politicians are using social media to connect by responding to direct questions of voters and concern citizens on public policy, reform and national security (Shirky, 2011). The first area is providing politicians a means to discuss their views and current strategy with their audience. The second area of emphasis is the communication channels social media has created between many people that would normally never be able to engage in communication. There is no better way for a politician to communicate with its citizens than through social media.

The second article discusses how nonprofit organizations are using social media to communicate and provide information on its goals and strategy for the organization. The most important impact a nonprofit can make, other than the essential services provided, are making everyone aware of your organizations ability to influence change (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012). Social media has provided a platform for communication for many nonprofit organizations to connect with its audience and share its strategy of how the nonprofit's will handle crisis, assist in disaster relief and restore communities in times of need. The abilities social media provides for communication is allowing nonprofit organizations to remain timely, responsive and informative to its target audience.

In the U.S. Military, each branch publishes its own social media guidance to direct how messages and communication will be used to keep with the strategy of the specific branch. For example the Air Force social media guidance for its leaders can be broken down into three

simple steps: “Encourage Airmen to tell their unique Air Force stories, be honest about your unit and mission (without violating operational security) and keep your interactions conversational and informal, yet professional and tasteful” (U.S Air Force, p. 3).

This goes along with one of the most important messages for all branches and that is telling its story. Which falls right into place with the strategy of connecting with family members, supporters and even recruiting. The U.S. Marine Corps give this guidance to its leaders when using social media to communicate its strategies. “Listen to active audiences to determine how to best engage. The paradigm of telling everyone what they need to know no longer carries significant weight when communicating via social media channels- social media requires, and begins with, listening. If you don’t know and understand the audiences you are communicating with, then the interaction will be of limited value” (U.S.M.C., p. 5).

While determining each branch’s strategy for social media, the U.S. Coast Guard’s guidance specifically states its strategy by platform. An example of this would be Instagram: “Instagram has become an immensely popular tool for sharing photos and short video clips. Instagram serves as a means to give the American public a “day-in-the-life” view of Coast Guard units across the service by enabling various units to guest host and post daily photos of missions and operations. Instagram has more than 300 million active users” (U.S.C.G., p. 2)

The U.S. Navy’s guidance to leaders on using social media for communicating its strategy is: “The content your command produces and distributes sets the tone of your communication strategy and can determine the ultimate success of your efforts. Is your content relevant to your primary audiences? Will your primary audiences find it interesting? Will this content cause your primary audiences to take a desired action? These are the key questions your command needs to ask before determining how and where it will share its content” (U.S. Navy, p. 6)

Lastly, the U.S. Army's overall strategy for using social media to fit in with its communication strategy is: "Today, Army social media enables the Army Family around town, around the country and around the world to stay connected and spread the Army's key themes and messages. Every time a member of the Army Family joins Army social media, it increases the timely and transparent dissemination of information. It ensures that the Army's story is shared honestly and directly to Americans where they are and whenever they want to see, read or hear it. Social media allows every Soldier to be a part of the Army story and it allows America to connect with its Army" (U.S. Army, p. 10).

### **2.3 Word of Mouth Can Make or Break your Reputation**

In today's fast-paced society with social media usage being at an all-time high, it has never been better or worse for organizational reputations. It is encouraged for all organizations and businesses alike to invest time and energy into managing a social media platform to boost its reputation (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Along with doing this, it provides your customers and followers an opportunity to tell their stories about your organization.

Sometimes the best marketing and advertising is not the one you pay for, but the one your customers tell with their own mouths (Chu, & Kim, 2011). Having your target audience tell other people how well your organization is doing, and what they have done for you is critical in today's technological environment. With the internet and unlimited information being available to anyone, it is better to have a strong target audience that will promote your organization without asking anyone to promote your services.

The next article discusses how word of mouth and your public perception is critical to managing your reputation. In today's society, where everything is so fast-paced and most

everyone has some connection to social media, maintaining your reputation is very important (Aula, 2010). If you are in a government organization or a nonprofit, people need to see what positive things you and your organization are doing. This could be corporate social responsibility or just the effects of your work over social media. Along with this, provide your audience the ability to comment on your organizations contributions. The best advertising or reputation builder are those moments you gain advocates for life and provide them with a voice to tell their story (Aula, 2010).

This too is critical on how well you manage your social media and respond to posts on your organization's various platforms. Many organizations have proven to enhance its reputation even when dealing with crisis or negative posts on social media (Mangold, & Faulds, 2009). The worst thing an organization can do is to not respond or delete negative comments. The more you take ownership of the interaction your organization has with its target audience and are transparent about the current topic, the more trust your organization will build for the future.

The next article discusses how local government is using social media to provide transparency in order to boost its reputation within its community. Local government, like larger government, is practicing transparency of its day-to-day operations in order to strengthen its reputation in the community, as well with its voters (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). The large number of success is measured by reactions and comments through social media, to include restoration projects, help with small business and community events. The best way to build your trust in your community is to allow its citizens to tell their story through social media and manage communication even in times of prosperity, not just crisis' (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012).

When looking at word of mouth from the sales perspective, more consumers are willing to buy products or services from organizations recommended by people they know (Chevalier, & Mayzlin, 2006). This being said in today's market place consumer ratings are helping to make or break a company's reputation and the quality of its products. Consumers will almost always trust word of mouth on the quality of products and services before any marketing or advertising campaigns.

## **2.4 Having an Effective Crisis Plan**

It is extremely important to use social media to help manage risk and to effectively communicate with your publics during a time of crisis (Veil 2011). By having a crisis plan your organization will be better prepared to send timely and effective messages, which could prevent a crisis from spiraling further out of control. This is paramount to maintaining your company's reputation and communication with your publics.

One article by Brown (2014) discusses the importance of having a crisis plan when dealing with sports fans on social media, especially in the fast-paced world of college and professional sports. In today's sporting arena there are many crises that could negatively affect a sports organization and communicating effectively is paramount to retaining your team or organizations reputation. If players is injured and the impact of the injury could change the outcome of the season, you need to be quick to respond to the fans on the severity of the injury. It is also important to update the fans on the recovery timeframe and when to expect the player to return. This will keep fans in the loop on how this will affect the remainder of the team's season.

The next article discusses how to effectively build and manage a successful crisis plan for social media. The first step in building an effective crisis plan, is to think what are all the things

that could go wrong for our organization in a worse case scenario; then prioritize them by level of critical importance to our operational effectiveness (Freberg, 2012). Every crisis should be handled with speed and transparency, however, understanding the level of importance of the crisis is a critical step in how it is managed. The larger the crisis the more work, attention and outside organization help might be required. Still, managing crisis is an art and social media is the center piece for all communication to effectively manage relations with your publics (Freberg, 2012).

Another article from the Insurance Marketing and Communications Association talks about the importance of using social media to effectively connect and communicate with your audience. Knowing your target audience is one of the most important factors in effective communication. Along with understanding the demographics of your audience that are represented on various social media platforms, communicating the same message on all platforms is critical. The most effective public relations teams actively communicate with their audience on Facebook, Twitter and respond to posts on their website. One effective way to manage this is to have a prefabricated website or social media post designed to respond to a crisis. Addressing the crisis immediately will show that your organization is aware of the crisis and allow time to learn more about the crisis for future social media updates (Feb. 12 IMCA 2015).

The next article discusses using your audience to help with communication during crisis. If your organization has a strong reputation with its audience, then it is good to provide them a voice on how your organization is handling the situation (Gao, Barbier, Goolsby & Zeng, 2011). Just like the previous trend of using word of mouth to build your organization's reputation, word of mouth is an excellent tool in handling a crisis situation. This is not the most common approach

used when dealing with having a crisis plan. However, if your organization has a strong reputation with its audience it can be very effective. This is done by allowing your audience to comment on social media in response to a crisis and speak on your behalf. The only downside is, when you provide a voice you need to be aware that there will not only be positive comments, but negative a like (Gao, Barbier, Goolsby & Zeng, 2011).

The last article with this trend by Wendling (2013) covers the importance of using social media for public officials to avoid risk and manage a crisis to retain their reputations. As a public official, you are always in the spotlight of the media covering various topics on political affiliations, views on a hot topics and potential scandals. Using social media to communicate your views and respond to your voters is critical to maintaining your reputation.

## **2.5 Building Trust with Your Audience**

The importance of building trust with your audience will make your organization much more effective when communicating goals to your audience. During times of crises, trust and influence can determine how well your organization is able to help its audience with adverse situations (Cho, 2013).

One article by Dilbeck (2013) talks about the necessity of building trust with the student body of all universities and colleges in order to prepare and respond to crisis situations. One of the best ways of handling this is to consistently support your campus security and to continually send information on what to do during a crisis. Remembering communication goes both ways is important when allowing students to voice their ideas and opinions to help the university. This is one of the easiest and most effective methods to earning someone's trust. In addition, making

sure the student body knows what to do and how security will handle crisis situations is important.

The next article the importance of trust in the buyer and seller relationship. This article is primarily focused on consumer products, however, it does mention the importance between the U.S. Government and its contracted manufacturers. When referring to the U.S Government it specifically is referring to the U.S. Military and manufacturers like Lockheed Martin and Boeing. These companies' have had a longstanding relationship and reputation for providing the U.S. Military with top quality products that enable U.S. Service members to be the best military in the world (Sashi, 2012). When a service member receives an item of equipment that was manufactured by one of these companies, the level of trust is already present just from the quality and reputation embodied by those companies.

Another article by Soule (2010) discusses how in today's society managing social media is relevant to your organization's success, whether you are on Facebook, Twitter or another platform. Being able to manage various sites all with the same theme can build trust with many audiences that are hearing the same message. Organizations that communicate with their audience through social media are more likely to be trusted and taken seriously. This two-way communication and mutual trust could prevent or lessen crisis wildfires that tend to go viral on social medial.

Lastly, Wachanga (2015) talks about the use of social media to build trust with specific ethnic audiences in times of crisis. The main message this article discusses is having the ability to reach your target audience by knowing and understanding your audience. One of the best ways to know your audience is to interact and communicate with them through social media. In times of national crisis, many ethnic groups have reported that they do not feel like the government

cares about them or how to effectively manage the crisis at hand. One way to fix this problem is to give that audience a voice on social media to present their concerns and communicate with them on what the government is doing to fix the problem or crisis.

## **2.6 Summary**

In the sections below, some strengths and weakness will be highlighted to provide thought and insight on the five identified trends. These will show how organizations could better manage a social media strategy based on the literature review section. Knowing the benefits and weaknesses of following these trends is paramount in understanding why managing social media is the way of the future for effective communication.

### **2.6.1 Strengths**

From the literature review of using social media to enhance communication there were five apparent trends that will determine if an organization is able to appropriately manage its communication while interacting with its target audience. These trends (speed is key, knowing your message, word of mouth, crisis plan and building trust) are all connected to a strong public relations team that effectively manages its organization's social media plan and strategies while communicating with its target audience.

In order for social media to be used as a platform for communication all five trends must be used effectively. The first trend is one of the most important trends due to the fact it requires public relations teams to use speed to communicate with its audience. If a crisis is not responded to quickly your target audience will search for answers, which might not be truthful information that could ultimately send your company into a deeper crisis.

The second trend is one of the most important trends when developing your organization's key messages. It is important to know what the overall strategy is in order to design your messages to fall in line with your organizations long-term goals. Organizations that clearly define its goals for communication with its target audience are far more productive when engaging through the various platforms of social media.

The third trend is the way future organizations will monitor and measure its success when engaging its target audience. If you provide your audience an outlet to communicate with your organization, you will be allowing them to have ownership of your organization and its success. The best advertising is that done by happy consumers or from an audience that is proud to be a part of your organization.

The fourth trend is also import when realizing your organization will one day be in a crisis situation and having a plan before it happens will save a lot of time and help your PR team manage the crisis more effectively. Companies that maintain a current crisis plan are much more likely to reduce the effect of a crisis while maintaining its consumers and reputation.

The last trend is paramount to any organization and that's building trust with your target audience and stakeholders. In order to maintain communication with your consumers and stakeholders you will need to be transparent with them on all situations with your organization, ultimately building trust to foster positive relations internally and externally for your organization.

### **2.6.2 Weaknesses**

Although speed is key, knowing your message, word of mouth, crisis plan and building trust work together for one common goal of effective communication, each trend needs special

attention. If you focus on just one of the trends and not the others your organization will not be as effective as it could be at communicating. All of these five trends are all a part of the foundation for a great social media strategy in our modern society.

Based on the literature review and associated research we have found that organizations that post and respond to the public on Facebook and Twitter build more trust with their target audience. It shows the public that you care while allowing the public to have a voice. A well-informed public is less likely to panic in times of uncertainty. This can only be achieved by monitoring and responding quickly through social media. Organizations that do not respond quickly or delete negative comments on social media are less likely to have a strong reputation.

Knowing your audience and relaying the information to those specific audiences is paramount during a crisis. In addition, learning from past mistakes and how crisis management can be controlled is crucial. Public relations teams that have preconceived crisis plans tend to respond faster and more efficiently when dealing with social media crises. This will also boost your organization's reputation of managing and communicating with its audience. Companies that do not implement crisis plans are slower to respond to crisis, which could make tough situations worse than they could have been.

Most of the research that has been conducted to learn more about social media and preventing crises goes back to mutual trust between organizations and their publics. Many focus groups mentioned that organizations that actively communicate with their audience are more trusted than those who do not. Making sure that the audience has a voice and their opinion has value to your organization is paramount in building trust. Trust is key to insuring your audience supports your organization and remains a loyal consumer during and after a crisis. Organizations that implement these trends are much more effective with communication and reputation

management when dealing with a crisis. Organizations that do not follow these trends tend to lose its reputation and consumers to competitors that do practice these trends.

## **2.7 Research Questions**

Based on the reviewed literature, the following research questions are proposed for this study:

**Research question 1 (RQ1):** Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication?

**Research question 2 (RQ2):** What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's social media plan?

**Research question 3 (RQ3):** Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan?

## **Chapter Three: Methods**

This study investigated the past, current and future practices used by U.S. Military PAOs, regarding the methods and measures of effectiveness of communication through social media. Effective communication is defined as-Effective communication is communication that is clearly and successfully delivered, received and understood. Learning the skills of effective communication can help people to resolve differences while building trust and respect. It followed an exploratory approach, particularly qualitative interviewing as the method for data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), to examine the influence of social media in managing communication for the U.S. Military and its target audience.

### **3.1 Interview Process**

The desired research to be obtained was qualitative in nature, to support or deny the theory of how the U.S. Military is currently using social media to enhance its methods of communication with its target audience. The desired method is to present all results from the

PAOs perspective and to provide them with a voice to express how effective the U.S. Military is at using social media to communicate. While there was only a small number of PAOs interviewed, it provided sufficient information to prove the desired hypothesis, but it is not a representation of the whole U.S. Military. Since this subject is a new topic to be researched, with little to no current studies on the subject, finding the necessary information was best attained through an interview process. The interview process was started by contacting a U.S. Military public affairs officer that currently works at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, MD. After receiving their advice to use the U.S. Military email server, I contacted the public affairs officers (PAO) to be interviewed to help answer the proposed theory.

Among the list of PAOs recommended to participate in the interview were representatives from all departments of the U.S. Military. These included the U.S. Navy, U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Coast Guard. The goal was to interview the various branches of the U.S. Military to see if any specific branch was better or worse at managing social media. Along with that to determine what the mission, goals and objectives were based on each branches target audience.

The end result was to gather strengths and weakness through qualitative research to show how effective the U.S. Military was at communicating through social media. Along with highlighting the strengths and weakness, a list of proposed recommendations would also be addressed to provide feedback to those service members participating in the research interviews.

### **3.2 Questions**

The questions used during the interview process were designed as three main overarching questions. Underneath each of the three main questions another four to seven subcategory

questions were asked to answer each main questions. The purpose of this design was to find out what methods were used in the past, what are the current methods and what future methods will be utilized by PAOs to communicate with their target audience.

The first question was:

- I. *Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication?*

The focus of this particular question is on past policies and methods used before the use of social media. The desired information to be obtained from this question was asked by using the seven sub-questions below, to identify any past trends and cross examine them with the current five trends to identify and key changes.

1. *What methods were used for communication before social media?*

The goal was to find out what methods were used in the past and was it typically standardized press releases, emails and local to national media channels to obtain an audience and release information.

2. *How effective was communication before using social media?*

This question was aimed at discovering what methods were used to measure the effectiveness of past communication. Also to determine what was measurable to classify the communication as effective.

3. *What was the military's first reaction to social media?*

The goal was to find out how receptive the U.S. Military was initially when approached with the new method of communication through social media. Along with how well was the idea

of communication through web based platforms received by the various ranks of service members in the Armed Forces.

*4. What were the initial benefits seen for implementing a social media strategy?*

This question feeds of the information obtained from the previous question, on how it was perceived along with the initial benefits of social media. The idea is to find out what the initial benefits were and how those benefits adapted over time with more emphasis being placed on social media.

*5. Was there any resistance to social media and why?*

Resistance to change is normal to human nature, especially in an organization such as the U.S. Military. This question is seeking to know if there was any resistance to social media, why was there resistance? Also, what determined the benefits to outweigh the negatives on using this for communication?

*6. How long was the process to gain a favorable audience for a pro-social media strategy?*

The goal for this question was to determine how long it took to persuade or win over the senior ranking service members to actively seek a social media strategy for the U.S. Military. Also, to provide a timeframe for how long the process took for the U.S. Military to accept this new media.

*7. Were the results immediate after switching to social media?*

The last sub-question under question one was designed to determine how long it took for the social media strategy to be seen as a major contributor to effective communication. Basically, how long before social media became the primary means for communicating goals and objectives with its target audience.

The second questions was:

II. *What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's social media plan?*

The focus of this particular question is on current policies and methods used for managing the use of social media. The desired information to be obtained from this questions was asked by using the six sub-questions below, to identify any current trends and cross examine them with the five trends identified during the literature review. This is to see if the U.S. Military is following the most current trends while communicating through social media.

1. *What are the current goals or objectives for the social media strategy?*

The goal behind asking this questions is to determine what the current practices are from managing social media in the U.S. Military. Are there specific methods or platforms used for communication, depending on the mission, goals and target audience?

2. *What are the restrictions put in place to manage social media?*

The information desired from this question is to know what are the U.S. Military's rules and regulations for organizations within the military for managing social media. An example would be, what can be said or not said, or what information is not able to be released on the internet.

3. *What are the rules and regulations put in place for individual service members when using social media?*

When someone joins the U.S. Military, they are held to higher standards of free speech and the type of information they are allowed to discuss. This questions is designed to find out

what information service members are allowed to share and not to share while utilizing their personal social media platforms.

*4. What is the biggest benefit of using social media in today's military?*

The goal of this question is to find out what makes social media the primary platform for communication in the U.S. Military. Also, to find out what are the impacts of this benefit and is it measurable?

*5. What is the biggest challenge of using social media in today's military?*

With the restrictions sanctioned by the U.S. Military on social media, what becomes the biggest challenge for communication? Also, are there any challenges with connecting with specific audiences or the measurability of the effectiveness of communication?

*6. How much effort is placed into managing social media on a daily basis?*

The desired information to be obtained is in a normal work day, how much time is being spent on communication through social media? Is there anyone designated to monitor and manage traffic, especially in a crisis scenario?

The third question was:

*III. Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan?*

After the U.S. Military implemented a social media strategy, with many lessons learned, what are the key takeaways to improve communication in the future? Not only looking back at the benefits and weaknesses of social media, what does the future look like for using social media to better connect with its target audience? Also, to identify trends foreseen for the

future of public affairs in the U.S. Military and public relations in the civilian sector. All this is answered with the four sub-questions below.

*1. How much emphasis is being placed on social media for managing future communication?*

Most branches of the U.S. Military are known for working long hours, most normal days consist of 12 hours, not to mention the hours placed when not in the office. The military has a saying that it is a lifestyle not just a nine-to-five job. That being said, on average how much time is placed into managing an organizations social media platforms?

*2. Has the military learned any lessons to implement for better communication in the future?*

The U.S. Military, like public relations, places great emphasis on lessons learned and evaluations. The only way to improve on past mistakes or making good things great is to measure what was the desired outcome and what actually happened. The goal of this question was to learn some past mistakes that are being improved to enhance the future of communication through social media.

*3. In the future, who will be responsible for managing social media with the implementation of the new Cyber branch?*

The U.S. Military has just created a new technical field focused on cyber security and the protection of U.S. Government platforms on the internet. It was designed to prevent hackers and enemies of the U.S. from being able to access government information with the focus of preventing threats before they happen. With the implementation of cyber branch, the question is designed to find out who will be monitoring and managing social media platforms for U.S. Military organizations in the future?

4. *If you had the ability to effect change, how would you direct the future use of social media for the U.S. Military?*

This question is a more personal question for the PAOs, to generate ideas of how the U.S. Military could better its communication through social media. Also, this question is designed to see if there are any trends in the comments made to better develop a possible solutions to continue effective communication in the future.

### **3.3 Participants**

The population of interest is public affairs officers from all five branches of the U.S. Military. There is not a published list of all the PAOs in the U.S. Military, since each specific branch manages its own officers. However, all PAOs were recruited through a contact at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, MD. An initial email was sent to each potential interviewee containing an opening statement about who I was, the research being conducted and the IRB consent form.

The U.S. Military Public Affairs Officer's (PAO) primary responsibilities are to assess the public affairs situation, advise senior leaders on public affairs issues and assist them in making well-informed decisions and translate the decisions into effective public affairs operations. PAOs plan and execute communication strategies to achieve desired objectives and evaluate the effectiveness of the programs. The PAO analyzes the situation, anticipates issues, assesses implications and develops comprehensive operations to meet the news and information needs of internal and external audiences. The PAO also facilitates media relations with domestic and international news media. The PAO supervises photojournalists and broadcasters who create information for print, broadcast and digital media (goarmy.com, 2016).

In this research, 20 public affairs officers from all five branches of the U.S. Military were interviewed to gather information. The ranks of these officers range from O3-O5, providing a combined average of 200 years of public affairs knowledge and practice serving in the U.S. Military. Individually each public affairs officer averaged 10 years of service in the U.S. Military.

Profile of Participants in the Study

PAO Participant	Branch of Service	Years of exp. in Public Affairs	Years of exp. in social media
1	U.S. Army	18 more	8
2	U.S. Army	15 more	5
3	U.S. Army	15 more	6
4	U.S. Army	12 more	4
5	U.S. Army	12 more	4
6	U.S. Air Force	18 more	10
7	U.S. Air Force	18 more	10
8	U.S. Air Force	8 more	8
9	U.S. Coast Guard	12 more	10
10	U.S. Coast Guard	10 more	10
11	U.S. Coast Guard	10 more	10
12	U.S. Navy	18 more	10
13	U.S. Navy	15 more	10
14	U.S. Navy	15 more	10
15	U.S. Navy	12 more	10
16	U.S. Navy	12 more	10
17	U.S. Navy	8 more	8
18	U.S. Marine Corps	15 more	10
19	U.S. Marine Corps	15 more	10
20	U.S. Marine Corps	8 more	8

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

All the answers provided during the interview process were cross examined with the literature and provided research questions. To establish the effectiveness of the responses provided, all answers were examined to determine if the responses were positive, negative or neutral to the question they were correlated too. To finalize the results, the most informative answers were chosen to represent the overall outcome to the proposed questions.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **4.1 Participant Profile**

The answers to the study's research questions will be discussed and analyzed based on the responses from the PAOs during the interview process. Each question will be approached by stating the question and the average response of those interviewed. This is to gather a means for a consolidated answer, based on experience and personal interpretation from all the PAOs. All PAOs will be jointly representing the U.S. Military's ability to use social media for effective communication.

The reason for consolidating all the PAOs responses is to find a common ground for all the communicators to ultimately answer the proposed theory that the U.S. Military is or is not using social media to effectively communicate with its target audience. When approaching strengths, weaknesses and future recommendations, individual responses will be considered to show what differences are seen for the future of social media use within the U.S. Military.

## **4.2 Results**

During the process of analyzing the responses from the interviews all questions were answered to the best knowledge and ability of those interviewed. Over the next several pages each question will be re-addressed along with the best responses, based on the most knowledgeable response to each question. There will be various quotes from those interviewed to highlight the answers desired to determine how effective the U.S. Military is using social media to communicate with its target audience.

### **4.2.1 RQ1: Pro-Social Media Strategy**

The first main question asked was “Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication? Under this question were seven sub-questions to find out the past best practices for public affairs in the U.S. Military. Below are the findings to these sub-questions.

#### **4.2.1.1 Communication Before Social Media**

When asking what methods were used for communication before social media, a U.S. Army PAO said,

“Prior to social media, the primary communication was print, live, and recorded video. Then, with the evolution of the internet, it was using those products for command information, utilizing websites. Then, it evolved, knowing those products would have a wider bandwidth, to the development of pushing products to different social media avenues, and then the army actually creating its own. A big part of that was the ability of the army to create, manage, and set-up the support structure to be able to manage its own social media channels.”

When asking the same question to a U.S. Navy PAO they responded with,

“Before social media, you had to do a lot more, I don't want to say legwork exactly, but you would end up calling people more, you'd have a lot more printed

media. You'd have to rely a lot more on doing press releases and then following up with people and actually talking to them, instead of putting things up on social media and then letting that be the way you're going to respond to a thing.”

Another PAO from the U.S. Marine Corps said,

“Beforehand there were a lot of the traditional communication channels such as working through the media, trying to get messages and information out that way. We also ran base newspapers. We had an internal communication channels that we ran with our own correspondents, getting them to develop content and push it out through that. Of course we're the military and we used all sorts of measures to get everyone together in the base theater. We still prefer face-to-face but we recognize that social media is where many of the troops are communicating on and we needed to be engaged there.”

The last quote for this question is from a U.S. Coast Guard PAO, and they said,

“Before social media, the old days, it was the fax machine. You would rely on external media to get your message out, or there would be newsletters, called family-grams. You're on a ship, they would put together a newsletter, and then actually mail them out to family members. Then computers came around, and then email was the preferred form. Then websites came out, and websites seemed pretty good way to get your message out, until it was discovered that a website was a portal into your server and a risk. Very shortly after that there were a lot of regulations and a lot of rules that hampered one's ability to use the website effectively. That is what we used before social media.”

After analyzing all the responses to the first question, it seems prior to social media all information was published through press releases, fax machines and phone conversations. This was to disseminate information and gain a favorable audience for each branch of services stories. Measuring success on the old ways was based on the amount of press coverage and attendance by local media at scheduled press conferences.

#### **4.2.1.2 Effectiveness of Communication**

When asking how effective communication before using social media was, the following responses were given. The first response is from a U.S. Army PAO, and they said,

“I guess when we say "effective," when you look at measures of effectiveness you have to look at what you were trying to measure by putting out information. I think overall, post-Vietnam, when you look at the profession of arms and service in the military remaining in the high nineties of approval rating, that that somehow means that the information put out, whether what we could consider in the public affairs world effective or not, people were still influenced for what we said had validity. That matters. I think the question gets at how effective ... Was there a need to go to social media? Social media is just a different avenue to do the same thing we were doing before.”

Another response to the same question came from a U.S. Air Force PAO, who said,

“I would say it really varied on the command and the leadership. We've all been part of units where you felt like you didn't know was going on and we've also felt in units where the leadership was engaged and we knew the direction. So it's hard for me to make a blanket statement that said without social media, communication was ineffective, prior to 2006, whatever or 2004. I don't think that's the case. Whether you're using social media or town hall, your communication skills and your message is important.”

“I think the best leaders recognize that social media is another way to communicate and honestly a preferred method and channels these days and that they need to be on it.”

The best response to this questions came from a U.S Navy PAO who said,

“It was much slower. I would say it was still effective, but you lacked the speed, so there was a lot more focus on the message. More time with the message in order to craft it, but then you were relying on the media to get that out. Back then it was 3 channels, evening news, and at some point CNN.”

When looking over all the responses to this question, it seems evident that communication was still effective before social media. While the response time to press releases and news stories was much slower, the message itself was still communicated. This would have actually made it easier in times of crisis for the situation to develop before people were posting pictures and stories on social media.

#### 4.2.1.3 First Reaction to Social Media

The third sub-question asked was, “What was the military’s first reaction to social media?”

The first response comes from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO. They said,

“I think it's probably, it's more like I'm pretty confident or comfortable speaking for the military as a whole, social media kind of flies in the face of our hierarchical chain of command. It is initially very scary to a lot of leaders, where it worked when you just get up in front of everyone and deliver your message or information and you guys walk away. You get that instantaneous feedback and you can get people saying things that run contrary to your policy or position and you have to be more comfortable with being able to hear that.”

“It gave service members a venue to express their perspectives and positions on things that they didn't have before. I think it's scary for a lot of military leaders. I think there's still some of that lingering fear although they see it as beneficial now because you can have a better sense of what your troops are care about, thinking, etc.”

The best response to summarize this question came from a U.S. Army PAO, who responded with,

“The first reaction, and how we did it and what not, any time you introduce a new system, new TTPs based off lessons learned or you're going for a new innovation, you're still going to have a period of friction in the beginning. One, to understand the doctrine, to be able to keep it, life cycle it, and have it to be a growing organism. The first reaction we graft to everything we do is, "Is do we institutionalize it?" The first decision was, "Are we going to use it?" I would say the military overall was slow, but individual branches were quicker. Because they were quicker when it first started, they still reaped some of the benefits.”

The best way to summarize all the responses to this question is that anything new will be approached with caution. Especially, when you are now giving a voice to your audience that in times past had a very limited one. With this came a revision of communication doctrine in order to manage how social media would be used to communicate. This was also to include what was and what was not acceptable to be posted on the various social media platforms.

#### **4.2.1.4 Benefits of Social Media**

The fourth sub-question was, “What were the initial benefits seen for implementing a social media strategy?” After reviewing all the responses to this question, two were chosen to represent all of the PAOs that were interviewed. The first response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who said,

“Well, I think because of the metrics that you can gain from social media, it lets you know who your audience is and how well you're communicating with that audience. That is the most important thing, because everything else has been real ethereal. You do a press release and you can measure how many people showed up or how many people read it. We lie to ourselves with these garrison newspapers that we put our stories in and say, "Hey, our circulation is this much," but really they throw a newspaper out in front of everybody's yard that lives on post, but those all go straight to the recycling bin. We don't really know who was reading our stuff with that. With social media, we do, and we can tailor our content to what they want to read.”

The second response that helped to summarize this questions came from a U.S. Air Force PAO that stated,

“Well, from an internal standpoint, social media is a great way to get information out to your troops. Externally it's also where you can engage the larger American public and those veteran’s service organizations, people who are interested in the military and they want to serve or have family members who want to continue to know about the military. It's just ... You can reach millions and millions of people directly and you don't have to just send out a press release and hope for the best with the coverage of it in the media.”

After reviewing all the responses to this question, it is undoubtedly confirmed that the biggest benefit from social media was measurability. Now all PAOs could see how their messages were being received and how to better connect with their audience. Social media would also help with the speed of communication and provide a voice to the military’s audience to increase their relationship.

#### **4.2.1.5 Resistance to Social Media**

The fifth question was, “Was there any resistance to social media and why?” Three responses were chosen to represent the best answers to this question. The first comes from a U.S Coast Guard PAO who said,

“Yeah, when you want to add a new technology to anything military, it's going to be a fist-fight with your IT guys and your communication guys. That's ongoing. To be honest. Most of the people feel like it's a huge security risk and they don't want to deal with that at all.”

Even if you were able to point out, maybe your command is using it in an effective way that's measurable, than you can actually convince someone of its legitimacy.”

The next response came from a U.S. Army PAO, who summarized it best by saying,

“There's still resistance to social media. We have a commander right now that is basically going against what we have issued as guidance at the division level. They delete comments from the page if they're negative, and we don't think that's the right thing to do, because that makes that a very one-sided conversation. It's no longer social at that point, it's just kind of saying your message in a vacuum again. He's trying to backtrack where his unit is at from having a conversation with the audience, and is really censoring that. I think that's unfortunate.”

The information gathered from all the responses to this question show that there is still a sizable resistance to social media in the U.S. Military. This can be approached from multiple angles to include loss of operational security (OPSEC), giving your troops an unwanted voice and lack of wanting to participate in two way communication.

It is believed by many PAOs, that it will take some time before social media is completely accepted by the U.S. Military. Some say when the younger generations reach a higher level of authority social media will become the norm. Ultimately, social

media's emphasis on communication and how much resistance is placed on it is at the discretion of the unit commanders.

#### **4.2.1.6 Process to Gain Favor**

The sixth question is, "How long was the process to gain a favorable audience for a pro-social media strategy?" After reviewing all the responses to this question two were chosen to best represent the majority of U.S. Military PAOs. The first response comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who states,

"There was a lot of fear about it, but I think once the spouses got Facebook accounts, it began to change things. With my CO, his first Facebook account was when he became a commanding officer. I suspect that his family urged him on, and for the life of him, I don't think he really knew how to use it, or log on right, or comment, but he knew how to look at it, and read the comments. In the end we had a really strong social media program. Twitter, Facebook, and then the website, even though the website is a nightmare to run, we've still got to have it."

The second chosen response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who summarized all the responses by stating,

"I think it is still occurring. I can't really put a time frame on it, but whenever you look at senior leaders that are very active on social media it helps. When people's senior leaders are out in that environment, that lets people know that it's okay to do it themselves. I think that is how this thing is going to change. These senior leaders show how to use it properly, and they can go and really lead the way in showing that it's okay to do."

The results of the process to gain a favorable audience for a pro-social media strategy appears to have taken a little bit of time. With regards to the intent of how social media would be utilized and managed took some time to figure out. However, the military knew it was the way of communication for the future, and it wasn't going to be left behind.

#### **4.2.1.7 Results of Social Media**

The last sub-question asked to complete the first main questions was, “Were the results immediate after switching to social media?” The two chosen responses come from a U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army PAO. The U.S. Army PAO stated,

“The results switching to social media is it immediately opens your aperture to a younger audience, which goes back to why I think the Marines are a great case study, why they knew that they needed to be on social, and why the Army then followed along. You saw an immediate bigger following from a younger audience in the military.”

The U.S. Marine Corps PAO followed this statement by confirming,

“I think it is immediate, because I think social lets us be much more effective when communicating our story when it's used correctly.”

In response to if the results were immediate after switching to social media, the answer is yes. The fact that using social media is fast, effective and measureable all adds to its validity. For the first time in U.S. Military history, communication with its audience was now measureable.

As far as past strategies and the initial process of embracing social media, all past procedures for communication were effective. The process of switching to social media was not completely embraced by everyone in the beginning. However, the fact that social media provided fast, effective two-way communication and it was measurable has allowed social media to now become a common means of communication for the U.S. Military.

Many of the current trends were still applied in the past to include having a message and strategy, managing your reputation, crisis plan and building trust with local media.

Social media just made it much easier to already do what the U.S. Military was doing to communicate.

#### **4.2.2 RQ2: Current Social Media Management**

The second main question asked was “What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military’s social media plan? Under this question were six sub-questions to dig deeper into finding out what the current best practices are for effective communication in the U.S. Military. Below are the findings to these sub-questions.

##### **4.2.2.1 Current Goals for Social Media**

When asking what the current goals and objectives for the U.S. Military’s social media strategy three PAOs answered the best to summarize what all PAOs were saying. The first answer comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who said,

“I think, as far as I can tell, the current goal and objective is communicate with everyone, all the time, on all the platforms. That's clearly neither sustainable nor doable. I don't know if we had a goal other than just to communicate!”

The second response comes from a U.S. Army PAO that stated,

“Each procedure is different in each branch. I would say that we're still in a time of refinement. I think the Army, as of last winter, was on fifteen different social media sites and they were looking to diverge, because what you find is you can do one thing really well, but as you spread out you kind of lose it. If you want to get to young people, they're on multiple sites, so if you think you're gaining followers but you're just gaining the same people on a different site, that's not really a strategy.”

The third response to this question comes from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO who says,

“In the Marine Corp, for our digital engagement team, I can say that with everything that we post, we hope is going to inform them, influence them or entertain them. We want people to generally understand the mission and role of the Marine Corp. What the current priorities are given the security landscape, everything going on across the world. We let them know how the Marine Corp fits in that big picture.”

To summarize the findings for this question, it appears that the U.S. Military's main goal for using social media is to communicate. This should come as no surprise to the public relations realm, however, it appears other than communicating with its audience a clearly defined goal is up for debate. Some branches of the military seem to be more aware of its communication strategy for social media than others. In the end, if communication is its goal than the U.S. Military is still effectively communicating with its audience.

#### **4.2.2.2 Restrictions on Social Media**

The next question was are there any restrictions put in place to manage social media?

When asking this question, the desired information to find out is what restrictions the individual branches place on the PAOs managing their unit's social media platforms.

The first response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who said,

“We don't put any dollars toward anything we do. It's all got to be organic. With the algorithms that Twitter and Facebook use, and nobody really knows what they are, and they change every day on a whim, it really challenges you to track how you communicate and what you're trying to say and watch, whether it's stills, story, video, infographic, those kind of things, to really track what is being effective at any given time and be prepared to change it once that is no longer effective in the algorithm, to get through to your audience.”

The next response provided comes from a U.S. Navy PAO that stated,

“Usually what they'll say is okay you guys can have a Facebook account, but only within the lifeline. Meaning only stuff inside your ship. The day and the life, award ceremonies, things like that. Any sort of operational stuff, that has to get cleared through a public affairs officer.”

The final response to restricts put in place at the unit level for social media comes from a U.S. Air Force PAO who comments,

“There's obviously concern with the Public Affairs Officer in the military we realize we're obviously balancing the need to get information out about our

activities with number one, security and number two, privacy. You got to makes sure we're not going to put anyone's life at risk and we've got to protect people's personal information. Of course social media, from the security aspect, if you're not thinking about how adversaries could track information ... You've really got to make sure your service members understand that the content that they post can be an intelligence report for the enemy. You've also got to think ... As a social media manager, you're going to have access to a lot of people's information and you don't want to inadvertently disclose the wrong information.”

In closing to this question on the unit level restriction, it appears there are a few restrictions put in place. Even though the restrictions are few, the weight of these restrictions come with severe consequences if they are broken. The most important two restrictions are: Not violating OPSEC and not disclosing any service member’s personal information that would put them or their families at risk.

#### **4.2.2.3 Rules and Regulations**

The next question is similar to the last one, however, it is focused on the rules and regulations put in place for individual service members when using social media. This question is best summarized by two responses during the interview process. The first one comes from a U.S. Coast Guard PAO who says,

“There's a lot of education that is going on right now with service members, by the fact that the enemy is out there, right. If you put too much information out there, you could become a target. That's the big thing. Just safe habits. How to set your privacy features on Facebook, most people don't know how to do that.”

The next response is from a U.S. Navy PAO that comments,

“Service members are encouraged and allowed to maintain private and personal social media sites. Really we want them to share their stories and their experiences about their service. That gets to their families and people better understand what we do in the military.”

This question seems to be one that the U.S. Military is constantly trying to improve. Service members are allowed to have personal social media sites and allowed to tell their stories. However, they are strongly encouraged to not voice personal opinions that are not in compliance with the message of their higher headquarters. Service members are held to a higher standard when using social media, compared to civilians, but not many are being punished if they do not follow these policies. There are too many service members and too many social media platforms to monitor these individuals on a daily basis.

#### **4.2.2.4 Current Benefits of Social Media**

The next question asked was concerning what the biggest benefit is of using social media in today's military? The goal was to ask the PAOs out of the many benefits of using social media, which one or two had the most influence. The first response came from a U.S. Army PAO who stated,

“It's speed and telling your story. If you're on a twenty-four hour news cycle, it's a thirty-second news cycle. If you're not in the media space immediately, then no matter how much you try to take back a story, it's no longer yours. You've got to be the first one into the media space with a story, or at least responding in that presence and not waiting for someone else to tell your story on their platform, edited through their filter.”

A U.S. Marine Corps PAO also commented saying,

“Social media, given its popularity and wide reach, presents an engagement opportunity that we would be foolish to ignore and to not devote a lot of time and energy to. We think we're going to just send out, release this, and do media interviews. I mean how many people like read a newspaper today? They get their articles in Facebook.”

The last response used for this sub-question comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who replied to the question by saying,

“There's something to be said for reaching a lot of people very quickly with information. If, fingers crossed, all those people are the people you want to be reaching.”

In review of all the responses to this question, it seems there are two benefits to social media. In today's fast paced social media environment it appears the same trends and best practices are the same for PR professionals and Military PAOs alike. Those two benefits are speed and being able to tell the military's story.

#### **4.2.2.5 Current challenges of Social Media**

The fifth sub-question asked in this section was, “What is the biggest challenge of using social media in today's military? The goal here is to find a couple of big obstacles PAOs have to encounter on a daily basis. Many of these obstacles being something PAOs would like to see improved in the future. The first response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who says,

It's how we maintain information initiative with the American people to keep them informed of why this is important and why the number of casualties are what they are. I think social media is the way to do that, because we will immediately be in the space, just like the Israeli Defense Force has done. They're like, "Okay, this thing is happening right now. We don't have all the details, but yes, it's happening and we will provide more details as we can. Hey, look here for more information."

Another response that helps to summarize the answer to this question also comes from a U.S. Army PAO who states,

“You could do that whole women in combat roles, and the posts on Facebook and how many were negative. There's people who thought those things anyway. Now they have an outlet to say those things. They think they level of anonymity to be able to do it. You can look at it as, "Look at all of this negative stuff that's now on a Facebook page. Now I need more people to monitor and take those things away." You can look at it like that, or you can just understand where

people are coming from and that some people are negative. It depends how open to information that you want to be is how I look at it.”

The last comment on this question comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who brings up a great point by saying,

“The threat is one that's out there. All it takes is one post to go viral, and if it's the wrong post, the wrong message, and there's many examples in the military of that. You can quickly lose the message that you want to have out there. Also, there'll be a point where you might not have access to social media. How do you communicate then?”

After reviewing all the interviews and the responses to this question it appears there are a few big challenges for the military when using social media. First is being willing to accept unwanted or negative feedback when you have a broad audience, and how does your current chain of command respond. Secondly, using social media to tell people what is actually going on even if it is bad news, but more importantly how will the military communicate in the absence of social media. Which raises another question to be answered in the future, “Has the U.S. Military become too dependent on social media as a method of communication?”

#### **4.2.2.6 Managing Social Media**

The last sub-question asked to answer main question number two was, “How much effort is placed into managing social media on a daily basis? Communication through social media is just one of many duties assigned to a U.S. Military PAO. The idea here is to find out how much time a PAO is spending monitoring and managing communication through social media.

The first response comes from a U.S. Air Force PAO who comments,

“Well the good thing is, it's so easy to use, it's not so bad. Last night I was able to go home and upload photos from my home computer. I think, more and more, I like the traditional press release through email, I don't think anyone has

announced something major yet, through social media. I think that day is coming, if it hasn't happened already.”

Another PAO from the U.S. Army comments,

“It varies on who you talk to. Those people who are confident in what they're posting and know why they post, it's actually not a whole lot. Once you know your priorities and you have a messaging plan, it's just another part of your communications plan. The effort is based on the understanding. The best thing about social media that I would say social brought is the analytic side to it. If you know what you're looking for and you're not waiting for it be analytics or something, but you're predictive of what you want them to say, then you can more rapidly make decisions in your social media.”

The last response to this question is from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO who answers it by saying,

“I think we're over the fear of it and now it's the resourcing to run effective social media campaigns. You've got to have people who are dedicated to work on this. You have the skills ... have the creativity and adaptability to stay current with social media because it's something that's always evolving and we should expect it to continually evolve. With our training cycles, We've got to let people become experts in this and work on this.”

To summarize the responses from all those interviewed, there is not a clearly defined answer to how much time a PAO spends on social media. It is dependent on the emphasis each command has on using social media. Also, a person's ability to learn the platforms and what goal your command has plays a vital role into how much time is spent on social media. Lastly, a recommendation for the future is to make a job solely for an individual to manage social media. This would help to make communication more timely and effective dependent on the current strategy.

In closing to main question number two, concerning the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's social media strategy, it is evident that not every branch or unit has the same goals for social media. It is completely dependent on your unit's chain of

command how much social media will be utilized. What is similar in all branches are the restriction put in place to protect OPSEC, service members and their families.

Lastly, when concerning trends and best practices, public relations and military public affairs are the same. This also goes for any of the weakness associated with providing a voice to your audience, and being willing to address good and negative comments a like. At the end of the day the primary goal is communicating with your target audience and telling your organizations story. U.S. Military PAOs are following all the same trends as the civilian PR teams working in corporations and agencies.

### **4.2.3 RQ3: Future Social Media Engagement Strategy**

The third main question is the last question that was asked during the interview process. This question is the most important out of all the three questions. The questions asked “Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military’s social media plan? Under this question were four sub-questions to focus on finding out what the future best practices will be for effective communication in the U.S. Military.

Along with those interviewed providing insight on what the future might hold, the intent was to provide all PAOs a chance to make their own recommendations on how social media could be better used to enhance communication through social media. Below are the findings to these sub-questions.

#### **4.2.3.1 Future Emphasis on Social Media**

When asking how much emphasis is being placed on social media for managing future communication four PAOs answered the best to summarize what all PAOs were saying. The first answer comes from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO who said,

“I would say a great deal of emphasis is being placed on it. In the school house, we're very focused on it. Down at the Marine Corp, all of our units have very robust unit level Facebook pages that help out with internal communications.”

Another PAO from the U.S. Army stated,

“I think what we see is that the future of the plan is to ensure that the content is sharable, and not just sharable down to the individual like and user, but more sharable to a larger strategic engagement strategy. As I said, you can do something for recruiting and reach a ton of people that aren't recruitable and have great stats. That's good, but you can also communicate about the professionalism of the force to industry that will then hire vets. I think you're going to see that ... That word "effects" becomes important. The initial realm of social media is how do we get effects and likes for a bigger audience? We can have a million people pick it up, but if we were really looking for 50 Fortune 500 companies, then guess what? Maybe we missed the mark. Maybe we were a little too broad in our approach and we need to be a little more refined, executive level.”

The next comment is from a U.S. Army PAO who replied to the question by saying,

“I think we're looking at it, and it is becoming more and more important, but it is too often an afterthought. ‘Okay, we're going to have a communications plan. Okay, we'll sprinkle some social media on it,’ with a lot of our peers and a lot of our senior public affairs people.

“I think you have to look at Israel and the way that they do social media as the future for armed forces using social media, because if you are not being that proactive, and you're not communicating with a purpose, you're just kind of shouting into nothingness and no one's going to listen to you.”

The last comment to this question is from a U.S. Air Force PAO who states,

“There's a lot of emphasis being placed on it. It's not going away any time soon. There's a lot of people a lot smarter than me looking at the most effective way to communicate using social media. In fact you're doing your research paper on it. There's a lot of analytics that are going on. I mean something as simple as Twitter, you see in the presidential election how wildly effective that is.”

To summarize all the responses to this question of how much emphasis is being placed on social media, it's a lot. While there is still a lot to learn on how to use social media better to reap all the benefits, the U.S. Military is aware that it is a major communication function. The best place to start is by educating all communicators on the various platforms, and then they can in turn train their units on the best practices to have effective communication through social media.

#### **4.2.3.2 Lessons Learned for Communication**

The second sub-question asked was, "Has the military learned any lessons to implement for better communication in the future? The goal here is to get some personal insights on some personal situations that using social media went well, or how it went wrong. The first response was from a U.S. Navy PAO who commented,

"I'm thinking, on carriers, when they've announced something that's happened, like there's been an aircraft accident/mishap and people start winnowing down who it could be, even though you're not announcing next of kin or anything like that, things might be under investigation, but because the internet is so fast, families can figure out who was on duty that day or who might have been flying, and they'll know from process of elimination, faster than you can legally tell them, who was involved.

I think, we've learned some lessons from that perspective certainly. The internet moves faster than you can. Maybe you want to be careful about that."

The next PAO response came from a U.S. Coast Guard PAO who says,

"There's lessons to be learned, with every exercise, every application. The potential adversaries have gotten very good at social media as well, so often that's your battleground. In communicating the correct message. Countering the potential adversaries' message. I think there's been a lot of emphasis on it."

Another comment that stands out from the interview process comes from a U.S. Air Force PAO who says,

“We need to remember how much time is required to manage it, how quickly you need to manage it, things like that, and how quickly it can get out of control, if it is not managed correctly.”

The last response to any lessons learned from social media comes from a U.S. Army PAO who states,

“What we have learned from social is the importance in our recruitment and our integration that we have lifetime spokespersons for military service. That's important. The Army, if you look at the Soldier for Life Program, although it looks as if and focuses money on transition, because transition is a pretty big deal, it has a huge emphasis on when a soldier comes in letting them know the history and traditions, which is really a morphing of the Army values and education. I think that is our biggest lesson learned. It's something that we're instituting in this organization. We understand that, for our organization, the younger we can educate the better.”

After examining all the responses to this question on lessons learned from using social media, there are four key points. First is knowing how quickly information is processed over social media. Second is knowing family and friends are not the only ones monitoring U.S. Military social media, the enemy has social platforms as well. Third is managing social media is a twenty-four hour a day job that requires constant supervision. Lastly, taking social media to the next level to help recruit and train future service members on the history and prestige that goes along with being in the U.S. Military.

#### **4.2.3.3 Future Responsibility of Social Media**

The third sub-question asked was, “In the future, who will be responsible for managing social media with the implementation of the new cyber branch? U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) plans, coordinates, integrates, synchronizes and conducts activities to: direct the operations and defense of specified Department of Defense information networks and; prepare to, and when directed, conduct full spectrum military cyberspace operations in order to enable actions in all domains, ensure US/Allied freedom of action in cyberspace and deny the

same to our adversaries (U.S. Cyber Command). The is to find out how big of a role cyber command will have in the future with managing what messages and themes are portrayed over social media. The first response to this question comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who says,

“The good thing about social media is that it's, the server is not connected to the military. We're using a commercial server right, so that door into our world is not there. There is phishing that is rampant. We talk about educating sailors on proper use of social media, it's making them aware of the bad guys out there, are going to try to get to you, through social media. I know that their emphasis right now is on the proper use of the internet, right, because these cyber intrusions that are happening, the majority of them is because somebody clicked something that they shouldn't have. A phishing attempt, or they friended somebody that they shouldn't have.”

The next response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who states,

“With cyber, you really look at security and you look at operational effects on the battle field. If you ask me how the social media play in there I would say it could be both, but when you look at who does that, that is not a fusion with public affairs.”

Another comment that stood out came from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO who said,

“I think it should definitely be in the Public Affairs Officer's lane. Of course he's working with cyber folks, information assurance folks, IO folks. You're going to have to have maybe some sort of working groups to avoid that disclosures ... Problems with the privacy. But it needs to be the Public Affairs Officer I think. Our Public Affairs Officer is the counselor, advisor, when it comes to all matters of communication for the boss. If they're not in charge of social media platforms, something is horribly wrong.”

The last response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who brought up a great point by stating,

“I think it's still stories. I think the army's going to recognize that. Its implementation will still be a public affairs function, but we are going to be governed by our cyber overlords on what we're allowed to say, on what platforms. Implementation is going to stay public affairs for the foreseeable future.”

In closing to this sub-question, it seems evident all PAOs are confident that social media will remain a public affairs function. However, what is not known at this time is how much influence cyber command will have on the strategic goals and type of information that is

communicated over social media. Cyber is a necessary governing function in today's online arena, but for today public affairs will continue to be the managers of all communication functions.

#### **4.2.3.4 Future Direction of Social Media**

The last sub-question asked for main question number three was, "If you had the ability to effect change, how would you direct the future use of social media for the U.S. Military? For this question, a PAO response from each branch was chosen to represent what recommendations each branch has for future social media management. The first response comes from a U.S. Navy PAO who says,

"I mean the biggest challenge for me is in my world, probably in your world too, we already work in a communications restricted environment. In today's communication it's all about the video, right, and the photos, but more importantly the video. As PAOs, we're pretty good communicators, but on the technical side of it, we talk about the cyber side of it, we're not that good. An acquisition on development of software/hardware, which meets the stringent demands of the cyber security folks. We need to be able to get videos out faster to get the press coverage that we need. Finding a solution to streamline the release of information to make news more instant."

Another response comes from a U.S. Army PAO who comments,

"I think the future use, to be able to measure your measures of effectiveness, your ability to produce quality products, I think you'll see a divergence from everything to a few key things that define our target audience. Then, we'll message better along priorities. That's where I would direct if I was in charge of the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs. One thing that I'm keen on, and I don't know if it goes for this discussion, I would use our veterans on social media left and right. They have some of the biggest organizations and groups. It's the easiest way to give back and reach. It goes along with the Social for Life adage that your service matters."

The next comment is from a U.S. Coast Guard PAO who says,

"Sometimes, we struggle with not having enough product and get hassled. 'You need to create more product! We need to see more Coasties doing things with stuff and ... Bob over there takes better photos than your MC!' Because my MC is

off doing firefighting drills or something. Maybe we start using everyone who is in, is a content provider, we just aggregate the best of it.”

The fourth comment is from a U.S. Marine Corps PAO who states,

“I would continue in the direction that we are headed but make the capability and resourcing for it greater and more robust. I think we've got some momentum now. We have huge audiences. You should do some comparison to corporate social media platforms, and the DOD is doing a lot of good things in terms of engaging its public on social media. We just need to get that down into lower levels. Not just at the top level, enterprise, institution site. Get those best practices down through out.”

The last response is from a U.S. Air Force PAO who comments,

“The way people collect their news now ... There's not a journalist in the world, I don't think, that's not on Twitter anymore. The number that aren't on Twitter, they're missing the boat, if they're not on Twitter right now. If you want to reach journalists, then you have to be on Twitter. If you are providing content on Twitter, the journalists are going to find you. They're at least going to look at your content, and they may disagree with it, but seven times out of ten, they're going to use a piece of it, because of the deadlines and how few journalists there are in the world now, they're going to use that content almost verbatim. It's going to get passed to their editors, and your story in your words is going to get out there. I think that's how it has to work.”

To summarize this last sub-question, it appears each branch of U.S. Military service has its own recommendation for the future of social media. While these are just recommendations from the interviewed PAOs, these are all great ideas for the future. Making service members the content providers, allowing faster distribution of shareable content, producing higher quality products, making messages more measurable and finding a better way to connect with today's journalists. These are all great ideas that only time will tell if the U.S. Military takes these modifications into consideration. These recommendations would only help to enhance communication on an already effective social media strategy for the U.S. Military and its target audience.

In closing to main question number three, learning from a decade of communication through social media and the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan. It is evident that every branch has its own lessons learned and recommendations for future management. What is similar in all branches is that PAOs are to remain the sole managers of communication and effective communication is a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. We will have to see as new trends are developed for communicating and managing social media, how long it will take for U.S. Military PAOs to learn and follow the same trends.

Lastly, when asked about influencing change for future management of social media, all PAOs had great recommendations. All of the recommendations are feasible in nature, that these changes would only make communication more effective. Once again, in the end regardless of future recommendations, the U.S. Military's communication through social media is a great success.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

During the course of the literature review, interview process and reviewing all the findings to answer if social media has enhanced the U.S. Military's communication with its target audience, it is apparent that the U.S. Military is using social media to enhance its ability to effectively communicate with its target audience. Effective communication is defined as- Effective communication is communication that is clearly and successfully delivered, received and understood. Learning the skills of effective communication can help people to resolve differences while building trust and respect. Many of the trends from the literature review section are being utilized in the U.S. Military, similar to many of the successful PR practitioners in the civilian workforce. These trends once again are: speed is key in modern communications, know

your message and strategy, word of mouth can make or break your reputation, having an effective crisis plan and building trust with your target audience.

While there is still room for improvement for the military to more effectively engage its audience through social media, there are many things that are being done successfully. The success of the U.S. Military's communication is attributed to the education, responsiveness and professionalism of its public affairs teams. Public affairs in the U.S. Military is truly comprised of some of the most talented communicators in the world. In the sub sections below, an after action review will be conducted to highlight the strengths, weaknesses to each of the proposed research questions as it pertains to the five PR trends in the literature review.

## **5.1 Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication?**

### **5.1.1 Strengths**

The only real strength on past communication was, the U.S. Military was following all the traditional methods which were proven to be effective at that time. For instance, past communication that was effective was press releases, media engagements and news releases pertaining to the specific unit. Which are still used today, however, with email and social media the traditional methods are much more effective in the present.

### **5.1.2 Weaknesses**

The first weakness is the older traditional methods were not quick ones. There was much more of a process and time involved to release information. This is not following the current trend of speed is key, and it was sometimes a shot in the dark to try to find media to pitch your story to get coverage.

The last weakness is there was little to no measurability on the effectiveness of your communication. Today you can monitor your effectiveness through social media by measuring the number of likes, posts, tweets and so on. This is not providing your audience a voice to help with the trend of word of mouth to build your reputation.

## **5.2 What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's social media plan?**

### **5.2.1 Strengths**

The first strength is how PAOs are using the speed of social media to better connect and tell the military's story. In today's fast-paced communication, PAOs are responding to service members, families and the media faster than ever imagined. This is a great tool to enhance communication, especially in times of crisis.

The second strength is how PAOs are connecting to a wider audience through social media. The trends followed here is knowing your message, who your audience is and utilizing the best social media platform to connect with that specific audience. As more social media platforms are developed, a more skilled communicator is required that understands all these platforms. The U.S. Military PAO is consistently learning, continuing education and training to meet the high demands to remain the most effective and trusted communicators in their field.

### **5.2.2 Weaknesses**

The first weakness was the restrictions put in place when using social media to communicate. There are restrictions put in place to protect operational security and service members from having personal information released on the internet. These restrictions are a necessary evil to protect the U.S. Military, service members and their families. However, to a

communicator, this is a daily challenge on how to update the media and tell their unit's story when potential content cannot be released over social media. These restrictions can make the speed at which you need to communicate a daily challenge.

The second weakness is social media is not a secure network, which means if we can see it so can the enemy. With that being said, service members need better training and awareness of the growing concern of the enemies of the U.S. having a presence on social media. This requires units and service members to have more strict privacy settings and to a degree prevents them from being social on social media. Which requires PAOs to know what the strategy for communication is and not release the wrong information.

### **5.3 Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan?**

#### **5.3.1 Strengths**

The first strength seen for the future is that PAOs will remain responsible for social media management. This follows the trend of building trust with your audience, due to having the best communicators performing these duties for your organization. Along with knowing your strategy and message, PAOs are communication professionals whose sole purpose is to nest the current communication strategy with the commander's goals for the unit.

The next strength for the future is new social media friendly commanders. As more service members are promoted to higher levels of leadership and responsibility, more of these leaders will be social media savvy. This will be a new opportunity for PAOs to utilize social media more freely to operate as communicators who know the overall strategy for the organization.

### **5.3.2 Weaknesses**

The first weakness for the future is the U.S. Military is slower when transitioning to new ideas. This being said the military will always be a step behind civilian organizations when it comes to new methods of communication. This will play a big part when utilizing speed when communicating with its audience.

The second weakness is the current downsizing of the U.S. Military, along with public affairs jobs in all branches. This not only means the U.S. Military is currently losing qualified professionals, but it is losing years of experience these communicators would have gained for the future. This will make it hard to build trust with an audience if underqualified service members or contracted civilians are performing duties they are not trained to perform.

### **5.4 Recommendations**

In conclusion to the findings, with influence from the PAOs interviewed during this research paper, a short list of recommendations has been established. The recommendations listed are not a representation of the whole U.S. Military, just those PAOs interviewed during the research for this study. Many of these recommendations might not be completely feasible given the current mission and operational environment of the U.S. Military. However, in a perfect world, where enhancing communication is an attainable goal, the following recommendations are given to the U.S. Military.

First, take the time to look at long-term goals for social media and the desired effects to be attained by using it. Does it align with the current strategy for communication? Is there a defined strategy other than just communicating? Once a better strategy is developed with measurable mile markers, it will be easier to establish what the standards are and if your

communication goals are being met. If the goal is “Likes”, “Shares” and “Posts” establish how many need to be met in order for it to be considered a successful trade in two-way communication.

Second, is the U.S. Military should continue its practice of empowering PAOs as the managers of social media. In today’s operational environment, where the risk of enemy activity on government networks is real, cyber command should play a minimal role in influencing U.S. Military social media. Efforts should be focused on educating all service members of the risk of using social media and how to effectively tell their stories without violating operational security. The best educated and trained individuals to instill this practice in our service members are the unit level PAOs.

Lastly, consider how much time and effort goes into effectively managing social media. Perhaps, this could become a military occupational specialty (MOS) for service members to ease the burden on an already busy PAO? With this comes civilian certifications like Hootsuite, Sysomos and Google Analytics to keep the U.S. Military at the cutting edge of social media management. It is important to have the knowledge and ability to manage social media comparatively to PR agencies and corporate teams. These certifications would give public affairs teams a new skill of using analytics to enhance their ability to measure the effectiveness of their communication.

## **5.5 Limitations of Research**

This study has led to a lot of interesting findings on how the U.S. Military uses social media to communicate, however, it has limitations. First, the goal of this study was to gather information from the PAOs perspective, not their target audience. The reason for this is the U.S.

Military has many audience types and it would have been too broad to interview a selected sample of their target audience. Also, most communication with the U.S. Military is informative in nature and not two-way like many civilian organizations. This would make measuring the effectiveness of the U.S. Military's communication near impossible from the stand point of the target audience.

Secondly, studying how the U.S. Military uses social media is a new case study and has little to no previous research conducted to provide a framework for the future of this topic, which coincides with the time constraints on this particular study. Future recommendations would be to set specific goals to be measured over time, identify a refined target audience to allow for more quantifiable results not just qualitative results from an interview process.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: IRB Approval and Consent Form



#### SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY Institutional Review Board MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Hua Jiang  
**DATE:** March 2, 2016  
**SUBJECT:** **Determination of Exemption from Regulations IRB #:** 16-042  
**TITLE:** *Social Media: Enhancing the U.S Military's Communication with Its Target Audience*

The above referenced application, submitted for consideration as exempt from federal regulations as defined in 45 C.F.R. 46, has been evaluated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the following:

1. determination that it falls within the one or more of the five exempt categories allowed by the organization;
2. determination that the research meets the organization's ethical standards.

It has been determined by the IRB this protocol qualifies for exemption and has been assigned to category

2. This authorization will remain active for a period of five years from **March 1, 2016** until **February 28, 2021**.

**CHANGES TO PROTOCOL:** Proposed changes to this protocol during the period for which IRB authorization has already been given, cannot be initiated without additional IRB review. If there is a change in your research, you should notify the IRB immediately to determine whether your research protocol continues to qualify for exemption or if submission of an expedited or full board IRB protocol is required. Information about the University's human participants protection program can be found at: <http://orip.syr.edu/human-research/human-research-irb.html> Protocol changes are requested on an amendment application available on the IRB web site; please reference your IRB number and attach any documents that are being amended.

**STUDY COMPLETION:** Study completion is when all research activities are complete or when a study is closed to enrollment and only data analysis remains on data that have been de-identified. A Study Closure Form should be completed and submitted to the IRB for review ([Study Closure Form](#)).

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of

people participating in research are protected.



Tracy Cromp,  
M.S.W. Director

**DEPT:** Public Relations, Newhouse – 215 University Place

**STUDENT:** Lloyd Bedford

**Office of Research Integrity and  
Protections** 121 Bowne Hall Syracuse, New  
York 13244-1200 (Phone) 315.443.3013 ♦ (Fax)  
315.443.9889  
orip@syr.edu ♦ www.orip.syr.edu



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Syracuse University  
215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13210

Department of Public Relations  
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications  
Syracuse University  
215 University Pl, Syracuse, NY 13244

**Project Title:** How social media has enhanced the U.S. Military's communication with its target audience.

Hello! My name is Hua Jiang, an assistant professor at Department of Public Relations, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. We are conducting an interview project to explore how social media has enhanced the U.S. Military's communication with its target audience. You are invited to participate in this interview because your responses to our questions demonstrate that you are exemplar and the best in your industry.

Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose not to participate in it. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. We will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

As you know, the main purpose of this research study is to understand practices of communication used by the U.S. Military. This research protocol calls for a single step method approach to get to the heart of our research questions. Through interviewing, we will be able to gain a better understanding of current practices which will enable a comprehensive action plan for future endeavors in communication and inclusion practices and aid in implementing/enhancing other programs with a similar aim.

This interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. All information will be kept confidential. This means that your name and your organization's name will not appear anywhere and your specific answers will not be linked to your identity in any way.

If you give us your permission, we will audio-record the interview. If you don't agree that we do so, your interview will NOT be recorded in any means.

The purpose for the recording is that we want to have an accurate and complete record of information that you will share with us in the interview. The interview will be transcribed



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verbatim for data analysis. Moreover, in our written report and/or oral presentations of our findings at academic and professional conferences and workshops, the text version of the transcribed interview may be quoted. Confidentiality will be highly respected. While we use the text version of the transcribed interview in any occasions, your affiliation and your organization's identity will NOT be revealed unless you give us permission to do so. The audio version of your interview will NEVER be shared with anyone in any occasions. Only the principal investigator Hua Jiang and our student research assistant Lloyd Bedford will have access to the recording and its transcribed text version. When the study is complete, both the recording and its transcribed text version will be destroyed.

The results of your interview will help public relations scholars and practitioners understand how social media can not only enhance communication for corporations and agencies, but for government organizations as well.

The risks to you of participating in this study are that the researchers (interviewers) know who the participants are. It is not anonymous. But your personal information will be kept strictly confidential. All your contact information will NOT be linked to your answers in our report unless you give us permission to do so.

Confidentiality will be strictly respected in this study. Interviewing data and results will be stored as digital files in PI (Principal Investigator) Hua Jiang's encrypted personal laptop. Only the researcher and the graduate student assistant Lloyd Bedford will have access to the data.

If you do not want to take part, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time, without penalty.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, contact Dr. Hua Jiang at [hjiang07@syr.edu](mailto:hjiang07@syr.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to



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someone other than the investigator or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study. I understand I can print a copy for my own record.

Participant's Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Recording Statement (Please select one):

Yes, I agree to be audio-recorded in the interview.

No, I DO NOT agree to be audio-recorded. I understand since I don't give permission to the investigator to do so, my interview will NOT be recorded in ANY means.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

- I. Why did the U.S. Military change its strategy on using social media to manage communication?
  1. What methods were used for communication before social media?
  2. How effective was communication before using social media?
  3. What was the military's first reaction to social media?
  4. What were the initial benefits seen for implementing a social media strategy?
  5. Was there any resistance to social media and why?
  6. How long was the process to gain a favorable audience for a pro-social media strategy?
  7. Were the results immediate after switching to social media?
- II. What are the current procedures, practices and issues with the U.S. Military's social media plan?
  1. What are the current goals or objectives for the social media strategy?
  2. What are the restrictions put in place to manage social media?
  3. What are the rules and regulations put in place for individual service members when using social media?
  4. What is the biggest benefit of using social media in today's military?
  5. What is the biggest challenge of using social media in today's military?
  6. How much effort is placed into managing social media on a daily basis?
- III. Learning from a decade of communication through social media, what is the future of the U.S. Military's social media plan?
  1. How much emphasis is being placed on social media for managing future communication?
  2. Has the military learned any lessons to implement for better communication in the future?
  3. In the future, who will be responsible for managing social media with the implementation of the new Cyber branch?
  4. If you had the ability to effect change, how would you direct the future use of social media for the U.S. Military?

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## **Vita**

Lloyd Bedford III is from Warner Robins, GA. After completing his Bachelor of Arts degree in Graphic Design from Georgia Southern University in December 2005, he commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. After 10 years of service deploying in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom along with other assignments he entered the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University as a master's candidate in public relations.