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Several years ago, I discovered the [power of social media](#) and its potential impacts on the military profession and us as individuals. From sharing articles and ideas to connecting with those who are miles and oceans removed from our social and professional circles, mediums such as Twitter and Facebook afford us developmental opportunities that weren't available over a decade ago. While many of the rising leaders in the national security community are making great use of these tools, I've seen very few senior leaders in the military follow suit. Several have opened public affairs type accounts, with a team controlling all tweets and posts, but the engagement is almost always one-sided and comes across as inauthentic.

One of the few senior leaders who have taken advantage of the numerous opportunities that social media offers is [Brigadier Mick Ryan](#), the commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the Australian Army. He recently shared his thoughts with me on using social media as a senior leader in his military.

### **1.) What made you decide to open an account on Twitter?**

Mainly it was curiosity about a new way of communicating with a range of different audiences, in a local to global context. I had my own personal account for a couple of years as an experiment. Before I assumed command I decided we would have a 1st Brigade Facebook page (for local and interstate families as well as the local community and broader Army and media) and I would have a personal commander's Twitter feed, as a tripwire for our Facebook but also to tweet interesting professional education articles and blog pieces

## **2) Can you briefly describe how you use social media?**

For me primarily it is a medium to communicate the breadth and depth of talent possessed by the 3000+ great young Australians that make up this Brigade. A secondary aim has been to disseminate interesting professional development and education articles, which support our Brigade professional education program. We have a Brigade Facebook page, which has rapidly grown. When I assumed command last October, I mandated that each of the seven battalions in the Brigade start and maintain a unit Facebook page. I also made it mandatory for each of my unit commanding officers to maintain a Twitter account.

This isn't some science experiment; the reason for this is that the vast majority of my soldiers are Gen Y. Using various social media is how they communicate; whether it is Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc., it is important that the Brigade command team (my Commanding Officers and I) possess an understanding of social media if we are to best communicate with our soldiers. That is not to say it is a mechanism for transmitting orders - it isn't. But understanding social media gives good leaders insights into more effective leadership in the digital age.

Our use of social media is a part of a broader brigade public affairs and engagement approach. We have found local media, local schools and community groups we support, as well as our members' families and friends, have responded very positively to our approach. We have a rule of 'three pics, three paragraphs' for any event; this product can then be harvested for use on Twitter, Facebook, the Army Facebook page (which drastically increases reach) and the Army Newspaper. I also have a rule whereby a soldier in the brigade who gets their picture in the news for something positive gets a day off.

I am the sole user of my Twitter account. My whole intention was to have a means to personally communicate with interested people using this medium, and I couldn't do that by having others tweet on my behalf. I also decided early on to have a 'lane' when using Twitter, and to have the discipline to stick to it. For me, my lane is the activities of this great Brigade I command, and stimulating articles about land warfare that I share to push the Brigade intellectually. Anything that is outside that, I stay away from regardless of how personally I might be fascinated by a topic.

Finally, I am very fortunate to have a public affairs officer (who was formerly a journalist before joining the Army) who is highly energetic in getting out and educating the units in the Brigade about social media. We have a Brigade social media policy, which she oversees. She also coordinates much of the content we produce across the Brigade, and runs our Brigade Facebook page and its accompanying analytics (while I jealously guard my Twitter

feed). She has built outstanding relations with local TV and newspapers, and is a source of very effective advice on public affairs and use of social media. If we experience success with our approach to social media, most of the credit is hers.

I know that isn't brief. But I think effective use of social media requires planning, great content, dedicated people and discipline; just like any military operation.

**3) What advice would you give to other senior military leaders who are thinking about opening a social media account?**

I don't think us Gen Xers will understand fully how to best lead the Gen Y soldiers (which will be shortly followed by Gen Z), who are now the majority of our forces, without understanding social media. To understand social media, you need to participate. I reckon I spend about five to ten minutes per day tweeting (on average about three tweets per day). It is time well invested for any leader who wants to have in their arsenal a broad range of communication tools to command their troops.

**4) Do you think your presence on social media benefits the larger Australian Defence Force?**

I would like to think so. We need to be careful not to divest all public affairs to public affairs 'specialists'. Senior commanders have many years invested in their institutions and possess a superior ability to describe what is good about their organisations in social media. Also, I hope I might provide a small example to those who might naturally shy away from social media because of security concerns, misunderstanding or ignorance. There are far more positives than negatives - embrace it.

**5) What have you gained professionally from your personal use of Twitter?**

It's another ecological niche in the various ways I try to keep abreast of our profession. It is not the only mechanism to do so, but it is a crucial tripwire for great professional education content and more importantly, a large community of dedicated professionals who care deeply about our profession of arms.

**6) Do you think the U.S. Army is really "Army Strong" without serving vegemite in our dining facilities?**

No. Absolutely not. Having worked with many U.S. Army (and U.S. Marine Corps) officers and soldiers over the past 15 years, I know for a fact that they are some of the most

courageous people on the face of the planet. But when it comes to Vegemite, that courage seems to disappear for some reason.

**7) How many times have other leaders in the Australian Defence Force asked you what a hashtag is?**

I hate to admit this, but zero. It's never happened to me.

**8) What are five accounts on social media that you would recommend military leaders follow for professional development? Don't worry, @JByerly81 is a freebie and doesn't count towards your five.**

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**9) What would you say to the military professionals who don't see any value in opening a Twitter account?**

They are missing out on participating in a large online debate on the future of our profession. They are missing a rich source of groups of people who want to debate military and security issues. And they are forgoing the opportunity to learn more about how many of their soldiers - and the wider community that we serve - communicate and interact in the digital age.

**10) My blog is called [From the Green Notebook](#), which is where we capture all of our reflections and lessons learned in the U.S. Army. What is the greatest lesson you've learned in your military career?**

Over the course of a career, we all learn many things. But I would have to say the largest part of my journey in learning to be a better leader in the last decade has been focused on being a much better listener. I don't think our officer training, particularly referring to its early years, is very effective at this. And us men are particularly bad at listening. But, becoming a better listener (and continuing to work on it) has profoundly changed how I see

leadership because it enables me to embrace a broader variety of views and insights than I might have had earlier in my career. I believe embracing variety - in all its forms - is a key skill of a 21st century leader in any field. And it is underpinned by being a better listener. As an aside, I now try to use my ears and mouth at a ratio of ten to one!

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