



By: L.M. Hughes

In the wake of [#AUSADigital2019](#), one of the most brilliant conversations I've seen on effective leader engagement on social media, led by *From the Green Notebook's* very own Megan Jantos, I kept noticing how panelists and commentators alike remarked that it was "one of the most packed panels they've ever seen at an AUSA event." A good sign to be sure, but there was something I could not shake about the environment. A few hours later, while I was driving home, it dawned on me that things may not have been as optimistic as the stage set it up to be.

As varied as the experience of each of the panelist was, the collective message was the same: leaders timid about social media engagement take their finger off the pulse of the organizations they lead, be it at the company level, the Army level, or any echelon between the two. But what happens when one of those levels between actively disengages itself from social media? What happens when a senior leader not only fails to value the immense power at their literal fingertips, but also works to undermine that engagement by not being present for the discussion? Has #milTwitter, and subsequently that entire ballroom, become an echo chamber for what we want to hear about our own leader engagement, and does not necessarily represent an accurate sample for our current leader engagement?

When I worked at the battalion level as a lieutenant, my chain of command selected me to serve as the battalion PAO. A largely ceremonial title for someone whose only real requirements were to post about our change of command ceremonies and photos from when the battalion would provide support to elementary school project day. The only time I witnessed my Battalion Commander or Command Sergeant Major care about our online footprint or engage in any meaningful way with it was when we deployed; aside from that, they never used social outside their own personal Facebook pages.

But the captains I worked with at the time understood the value our presence could have, and we worked to involve social media outreach as a substep in our training model (reviewing training and communicating the story of our organization to both our parent unit and the civilian / veteran community that followed our page). We fought immensely to build our footprint, but we never could grow further than what our command would support. Commander's Q&A on recent developments in our training cycle? Denied. Digital town hall for Soldiers and the Families while on deployment? "There's no value, they'll message us if they have a question." What we continually saw from our command was an attitude that if they weren't able to engage with Soldiers directly to their face, they did not want to engage at all.

And while every junior military officer I've spoken with deals in more shade of grey when it comes to solving issues and how they resource their solutions, our more senior field grade officers/senior NCOs still practice an inflexibility to the moving tide of digital media management, so much so they stifle the conversation entirely.

How do we elevate the discussion we have in small circles on social media into actionable culture change to greater profession? Moreover, how do we communicate that capability to our current and future commanders that they aren't so reluctant to build that footprint and live within it? How are we fortifying our lessons learned about the value of social media into our senior leader education system?

Well, just like how every organization has a Professional Reading List, every organization needs to start off with a Professional *Dialogue* List. It should be a living document that encompasses the wide breathe of our professional (and sometimes the not-so-professional) minds and pushes us to challenge our very best assumptions about our organizations.

General Robert Abrams (@DogFacedSoldier), Brigadier General Pat Donahoe (@PatDonahoeArmy), and Colonel Jason T. Williams (@jtw_ngc98) are leaders spearheading this very concept, instinctively understanding the need to not only interact with junior and senior members of our organization, but to also promote these members in the public discourse as valid perspectives that add to our wealth of professional lexicon. Now it is time

for organizations to institutionalize this practice by interacting and promoting these same voices in an official capacity.

There is an inherent risk to social media engagement; in the Information Age, adversaries aggregate knowledge with unprecedented speed and accuracy and target high value individuals in an attempt to gain the upper hand. Risky online behavior is intrinsically linked to how steadfast we are to acting within our military's values and our understanding of operational security. The reward outweighs the risk in this case, so long as our physical and digital footprints mirror one another and we treat both with the same level of professional caution we take in our daily lives.

Look, I don't think every senior leader needs to have their own social media page, but they do need a direct way to be able to access it, learn from it, and to engage with it. They also need to be cognizant that if their Professional Discourse List resembles most Professional reading lists Army Leader already publish, with little variety and only on the discussion of history, tactics, or strategy, without engaging the wealth of diversity currently generating #milTwitters main discussions, then they risk succumbing to their own echo chamber and not benefiting from the larger conversation.

As BG Pat Donahoe pointed out during the #AUSADigital2019 discussion: social media serves as an organic reading list of sorts that keeps us in tuned with the current discourse and the effect our decisions have on the rest of the forces. If you're not engaging with these perspectives, your relevancy is diminishing in the conversation with every passing tweet.

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