



*“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness....” — Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities*

By Steve Leonard and Joe Byerly

Imagine, if you will, two influencers. One, young and brash, with a dedicated following of millions on social media, the other maybe a little older and more seasoned, working diligently to keep a [leadership blog afloat](#) with a few thousand equally dedicated followers. One can post a video on TikTok and generate a reaction felt around the world. The other can write a meaningful post with broad implications for the profession of arms and it generates a modest response.

Both are social media influencers; both have a significant influence on the profession of arms.

By now, just about everyone with access to any form of social media knows about [the second lieutenant from Fort Stewart and the backlash from his anti-Semitic TikTok post](#). It's not every day that a social media post generated by an Army officer garners the attention of the

Auschwitz Museum. The video, which was viewed nearly 600,000 times before being removed, spurred responses - and outrage - from every corner of social media.

At the same time, on a blog probably not unfamiliar to you, a leader posts a short piece on [developing a culture of honesty in organizations](#). The post - a mix of insights he gleaned from his Army-funded education and his own experiences in units- generates a modest amount of traffic, two comments, and is shared widely across multiple social media platforms by followers. It even catches the attention of [senior leaders from as far away as Australia](#).

Influence achieved.

Even though social media has been around for over a decade, it's still like the Wild West. The norms and rules of the road aren't as established as they are in the real world. When one platform gets crowded, a group [will move onto the next one](#), and when that gets crowded... well, you get the idea. There's also opportunities for people to make fortunes [as influencers](#), receiving money and perks for posting their pictures and videos showing off the latest products... or themselves.

But, unlike the Wild West, we still have a foot planted in civilization - this is especially true for service members. Whether we recognize it or not, we are all ambassadors of a brand. And that brand maintains the trust and support of the American people. That brand is an apolitical military that adheres to codes and values.

Between the two of us, we've been around more than a decade on platforms to include Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and [we were even friends with Tom on MySpace](#). So, we've come up with some rules of the road for young service members to remember when they wear the uniform while tweeting, TikToking, and snap chatting. You don't have to follow these rules, but like any endeavor in life, if you decide to play silly games, you may find yourself winning silly prizes.

**1- You already have a brand - and it matters.** If you're in uniform, you're already representing a brand. A brand with a unique culture and a fixed set of values. If you represent yourself as a member of the profession of arms, what you say, what you post, how you conduct yourself, and how you interact with others matters. Why? Because your actions reflect an established brand. Subtle differences are to be expected, but wide gulfs between institutional norms and your online brand may create potentially disastrous consequences. Be authentic; be you. But, set a positive example for others to follow.

**2- The Formation Rule.** Everyone who has served in the military has stood in some kind of military formation. And where you find a formation of soldiers, you will find someone standing in front of it. If you are that guy or gal in front of the formation, and had the opportunity to speak a few words, what would you say? What words, pithy comments, or off color jokes would you avoid? This should be your guide on what to post on social media, not an influencer who gets [punished by Youtube](#) for pushing the boundaries of his content. If you lack the formation filter, well... it's going to be a long, hard road.

**3- We get older and mature, but our old posts don't.** We may forget the off-color drunken social media post we made about our senior leader as lieutenant, [but the internet doesn't](#). And if you don't believe us, [ask comedian Kevin Hart about old tweets](#). There are no "take-backs" on social media. You can delete that post about keying someone's car because they didn't answer your texts, but there's a [good chance someone saw it and archived it](#). We get older, mature, and the things we thought were funny or cool in our twenties may not be as funny or helpful when we're applying for a nominative assignment or a job in the private sector and [our past comes back to haunt us](#).

**4- Maintain the "moral high ground."** The more divided we become as a society, the easier it is to find yourself dragged into a debate with someone who pushes your buttons. Don't. Arguing with a troll on social media is like wrestling a pig; you end up covered in mud and the pig likes it. Step away from the keyboard and give yourself time to process what's happening before responding.

**5- Mentos and Coke.** Think of your high school friends and your professional friends as mentos and coke. Both are great by themselves, but when you mix them together you might have a recipe for disaster or a [really good TikTok challenge](#). Again, mixing the two isn't necessarily a bad thing, but you might avoid starting a "Comment with how you met me thread" when both are following you. Do you really want the guy who bought you beer in high school swapping stories about you with your future brigade commander? Probably not.

**6- Stranger danger.** As much as we like to think of the benefits of engaging others on social media, we have to remember the rules our parents taught us as kids about getting into vans for candy. There's a dark side to social media, and everyone from foreign governments [recruiting spies](#) or [spreading disinformation](#) to [prisoners catfishing soldiers](#) are taking advantage of it.

It's worth thinking about approaching your online social network and the people you interact with as you would your Labor Day Weekend party. You may invite people you don't know that well, but you at least know who you are inviting.

**7- Check your sources.** One of the two fastest ways to be written off as irrelevant is to post “news” that is either poorly sourced or flat wrong (the other is to violate Rule No. 8). Those memes you find so compelling? They’re distributed by Russian state media. That breaking news story about the unexpected death of a celebrity? It’s from two years ago. The announcement that Oscar Mayer is hiring a new driver for the Weiner Mobile? Well, okay, that’s true. If you want to be taken seriously, invest the effort necessary to ensure that you’re not alienating the people in your network with ridiculous posts.

**8- The Gambler’s Code.** Any good poker player knows when to hold, when to fold, and when to walk away. The same code applies to social media: never post when you’re tired, angry, drunk, or otherwise compromised. It’s called gambling for a reason; if you break the code, you might find yourself in a world of hurt. Better to step away from the keyboard now before you wake up broke, unemployed, or alone.

**9- One more thing.** As leaders who have maintained some form of social media brand for most of the past 15 years, we’ve come to understand that there is one final rule worth mentioning. We call it “**the anonymity rule.**” If you choose to establish an anonymous (or semi-anonymous) presence on social media, be wary about sharing too much identifying information, especially if you use your platform in a manner that might run counter to your institutional values, policies, or regulations.

There is an entire sub-species of social media dweller that exists solely to [doxx people who mistakenly believe that they’re more anonymous than they truly are](#). If you’re engaging in any way that’s remotely controversial, you can be sure that you’ll anger one of them along the way. Don’t give them an excuse to bare your true identity in a way that has damaging personal or professional effects.

We’ve both been around a bit and have cut our teeth on growing brands on social media. [Doctrine Man](#) has over 200k followers and [Joe](#) and his [green notebook](#) has, well his mom follows him on social media. We have also made a lot of mistakes along the way, so we’re not perfect. At the time of this writing, Joe claims to have made more mistakes than Steve, a claim that Steve disputes openly. But, we digress. There’s an allure to followers, likes, retweets, and online popularity. But, we have to remember that if we’re wearing a military uniform, and we say we wear one on social media, we represent something greater than ourselves.

Thank you for coming to our TED talk.

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