



By Kristy Bell

Social media has blurred the lines between our private and professional lives in an unprecedented way, and has also, in some ways, eroded the idea of a “non-partisan military” that [shores up our democratic ideals](#).

This came to the forefront recently when several senior [military leaders engaged](#) with Fox News host Tucker Carlson over [Carlson's comments](#) about women in the military. The subsequent dust-up prompted [some to decry](#) the loss of the customary apolitical stance American citizens have come to expect from its military professionals.

While the example above involves senior leaders, potential pitfalls within the social media landscape run a continuum, and can impact users at all levels. Perhaps the most visible recent representative of poor judgment on social media was U.S. Army Second Lieutenant

Nathan Friehofer. Friehofer posted an anti-Semitic joke to his three million TikTok followers back in August, and a backlash ensued that, as of January, resulted in his notification of the Army's [intent to separate him](#).

Military Twitter, in particular, is full of military leaders sharing opinions, sometimes aligned with official policy, and sometimes not. While an individual doesn't give up the right to freedom of speech by putting on the uniform, there's a lot to be said for discretion. If I put on the uniform every morning and live the service core values while wearing it, but don't during my off-time, am I really living the core values? If I support my chain of command in uniform but I'm critical of it on social media, am I sending the right message to my troops, who may be reading my posts?

For several years, I managed social media content for a Virginia state government agency that coordinated responses to emergencies and disasters. While it was a challenging scene to navigate, the benefits outweighed the risks. It gave us opportunities: to provide official, vetted information to counter rumors and disinformation, to engage citizens in helping us help them, and to inspire confidence in the government's response. Nature abhors a vacuum and, absent credible information about a topic, people will turn to less-credible information. So it was also crucial, when time was of the essence, to broadcast information on channels where people looked for it.

So in this vein, and in the spirit of professional development and community-building, it's appropriate, arguably even desirable, for military leaders to curate a personal presence on social media. The question is, how do leaders give themselves the maximum chance of effective engagement and a minimal chance of damage to civil-military relations?

Based on my experience as a military officer, and in public information and communicative skills instructor roles as a civilian, I put together some recommendations:

**Limit your "hot takes."** Your position on issues, your take on the implications of policy

decisions, will almost certainly evolve with the perspective that comes with time and seniority. Your past social media posts will not. The Army's catch phrase is "Think, Type, Post." I would argue you need to do more than that. Try to understand the root cause of the issue, research the opposing viewpoint(s), and/or talk with an expert before you send a post out.

**Disagree agreeably.** Social media can be almost Socratic, in that it exposes us to viewpoints and questions we wouldn't otherwise see. At its best, it challenges our thinking and forces us to sharpen our arguments. The other side of that coin is that we frequently have NO idea who we are engaging with. It's best to assume it's someone important, and act accordingly.

**The operating environment is politically charged.** When you respond directly to a public figure, @ them on Twitter, or engage with a post on their feed, there's a possibility you'll go viral, and not always in a good way. Be prepared for the blowback, both fair and unfair. Do you know you're on the right side of the nonpartisan custom of the military? Are you able to dispassionately explain why or how? If you're not comfortable with these areas, it's good practice to avoid heavy engagement with public figures, especially polarizing ones.

**You represent the military.** "All opinions are mine" disclaimers notwithstanding, if you use your identity as a military leader as part of your bio, it's disingenuous to claim that what you post doesn't reflect ON the military. For some following your account, you may be their only personal experience with a military member. Choose what you say in an electronic forum at least as carefully as you choose what you say to your troops in-person.

**Know your left and right limits as a service member.** Read your installation and/or echelon commander's [social media policy](#). They're not just for official account social media managers. Be familiar with the [Army's Social Media Guide](#) and the [Hatch Act Guidance on](#)

[Social Media](#). Consider taking some of DoD's [social media education and training](#).

**Don't feed the trolls.** If you have a following of any size at all, you will likely have some people who engage with you, who entertain themselves by poking at the military, or at your specific experience. Keep your posts and responses consistently professional and don't take the bait of making it personal.

**The best corrections are often crowd-sourced.** Going with the above, when the troll's goal is to contradict what you say, or make you or the military look bad, sometimes the best defense is to simply let others who know chime in and correct, based on their experience.

**Remember, outrage sells.** Prominent infotainment figures routinely make provocative statements and argue controversial positions, because doing so inflames passions, which drives engagement, which makes money. They may or may not even believe what they're saying. Don't unwittingly become part of their business model.

**Add value to the conversation and your profession.** Get your information from reliable sources and cross-check with other reliable sources where possible. Talk about things that matter to you and your peers. This is where it gets tricky. Military leaders should be able to debate policy. We should not criticize decisions our leaders have made that we may not have the perspective to fully understand. The time to debate is before the decision is made, just as it is in real life.

Social media is a powerful tool. It can carry a message, bring new ideas, and engage the apathetic. It can broaden your influence and make you a smarter, more compassionate leader. It can get your good ideas in front of the right people with unprecedented speed. With some discretion and consideration, you can harness its power for the greater good.

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