

U.S. Army Leaders Embrace Social Media

An interview with Lt. Col. Winston Porter, director, Online and Social Media, U.S. Army



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Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey is one of the military leaders who have embraced social media as a communications tool. DoD photo

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On March 1, 2013, U.S. Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, employed social media to [tweet](#):

“Now that sequestration has occurred, it’s important that our force communicates with each other.”

Dempsey included a link [to his Facebook page](#) where his 20,131 [Twitter](#) followers could watch a video message he crafted, explaining simply his plans to “lead” through the difficult fiscal challenge of sequestration. The Twitter message was short but effective, reflecting Dempsey’s desire to stay in touch with soldiers and other interested parties, and to ask for their input. The link to [Facebook](#) further amplified the short message, generating 316 comments.



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey is one of the U.S. Army generals who have embraced social media.

Few vehicles offer a better channel through which to receive input than social media. Military leaders routinely drown in voluminous reports on everything from acquisition efforts to morale, welfare and recreation. The simultaneous informality, intimacy, and yet detached character of social media qualify it as a valuable communications medium – based in real-time.

The U.S. Army’s leadership has recognized this value more thoroughly than its sister

services. While all the services now have [dedicated oversight](#), [guidelines](#), and [command pages](#), more individual Army general officers are on Twitter, for example, than those of any other branch. A look at Gen. Dempsey’s Twitter account reveals significant audiences among the domestic and foreign media, prior military individuals, military spouses/family and the defense/industrial community

Coordinating the Army’s social media activity and defining its guidelines is a five-person team based in the Pentagon led by [Lt. Col. Winston Porter](#), Director, Online & Social Media. We asked him about the logic of Army leaders’ Twitter activity, its advantages, and its pitfalls.



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Eric Tegler: How many Army general officers are currently on Twitter?

“Lt. Col. Vinston Porter: Based on our [Social Media registry](#), there are nine general officers currently registered with an official presence on Twitter. There are likely more out there, so it’s an ongoing process to inform the force about registering their official unit or key leader social media platform presences with us at the Online and Social Media Division.

Are the Tweets theirs or are they the work of a staff member with approval from the general in question?

I can’t speak for every general officer, but this likely varies from general to general. It depends on that officer’s comfort level with the platform.

Who is the most active general on Twitter? Who has the most followers?

Based on the registered Twitter accounts, [Gen.Odierno](#) has tweeted the most, but Gen. Dempsey has more followers.

Has Army leadership recognized Twitter as a direct medium to communicate with soldiers as well as the public? Why do more Army leaders appear to be on Twitter than their other service counterparts?

The general officers I’ve talked to or heard talking about Twitter see the platform as another means for telling the soldiers’ story. They also realize that more and more soldiers and family members get their news from social media platforms like Twitter. As for the other services, I don’t track their leadership involvement on Twitter, so I can’t give you an answer to the second part of your question.



Col. Thomas Brittain, Joint Base Lewis-McChord commander, watches his base’s Facebook news feed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., March 1, 2012. “Social media has clearly become the environment in which our service members and families communicate,” Brittain said. U.S. Army photo by Scott Hansen

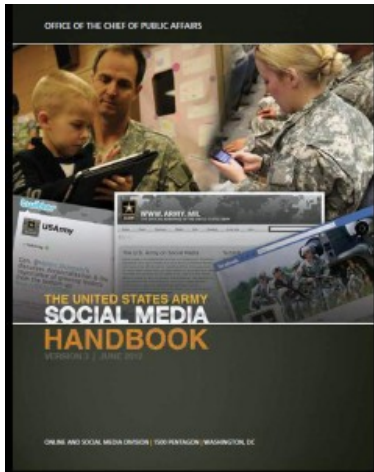
What does the Army perceive as the risks/benefits of Twitter?

“The leaders I’ve talked to in the past see Twitter as a benefit because of the immediacy with which one can amplify a story or article as well as helping the leader to be more personable with his or her followers. The risk with Twitter is just like with other platforms – understanding there will sometimes be negative feedback or comments in response to a previous tweet.

Are there guidelines for Army officers’ (general/non-general) individual Twitter usage?

The Online and Social Media Division has put together a handbook to address many of the issues related to social media. The [U.S. Army Social Media Handbook](#) discusses and offers tips for issues such as operation security as well as ‘DOs and DON’Ts’ with using a social media platform. Version 1 came out in January 2011, and we are currently on Version 3.1, which came out in mid-January of this year. We also put out a bi-weekly presentation called the [Social Media Roundup](#). This is another tool we use to educate social media managers in the Army, and one of the presentations deals with proper individual and leader conduct on a social media platform.

Given the demands on their time, do general officers typically find Twitter to be an efficient means of messaging or a burden?



The U.S. Army's Social Media Handbook that was released in June 2012. It provides a guide to Army leaders about the ins and outs of social media. U.S. Army photo

I can only speak about the experiences I had with a couple of general officers. The general officers I've dealt with like the idea of writing a short comment and attaching the link to a story to help amplify it. It also has appeal as a means for not only recognizing a soldier's good work but also being able to tell a larger audience about it as well.

Does the Army record and/or track Tweets from its leadership/officer corps? What about other social media interaction?

[Response provided by Staff Sgt. Dale Sweetman of the Online & Social Media Division]

Twitter is about conversation and information. The Army often watches the Tweets from the Army's senior leaders and occasionally retweets them. It's important to take their messages and push them out to the larger Twitter audience from the [Army's Twitter](#) accounts. We don't record the Tweets, because we can look up older Tweets simply by going to the individual's Twitter

account.


As far as other Social Media interaction, each time the Army mentions an Army leader in a Facebook post, we make sure to tag that leader's Facebook Page in the post. We're also sure to provide links to the Army senior leader Page (<http://www.army.mil/leaders/>) when we have the chance. If the senior leader has a social media presence, you can find it by clicking on the senior leader's Page.

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