

Social media in the armed forces

The risks and benefits of social media use in the armed forces need to be identified by senior staff and policymakers, to develop effective guidance and secure best practice.

Policy implications

- The use of social media in the armed forces should be explored to identify risky practices. Discussion between junior and senior ranks on security and social media should be facilitated to help develop guidelines and best practice.
- Clear principles for social media should be incorporated into basic military training, similar to fire-safety and first-aid guidelines. Training needs to be regularly updated, using recent case studies.
- Policymakers should consider providing better technical infrastructure to support social media, not least to reduce security risks.
- An audit of current arrangements for social media management should be developed and carried out, with the aim of developing more responsive and flexible management models.
- A culture of risk aversion may be impacting on the effective and safe delivery of digital defence communications initiatives; more research evidence in this area is needed.
- More information is needed on how armed forces families use social media – not only to identify training and risk management needs, but to explore potential benefits in overcoming isolation for family members and reintegration for veterans.

- A robust method of measuring negative and positive impacts of social media use should be developed.

About the research

Social media has become increasingly important as a communication channel, not only in civilian society but also in the military sector. It can be used as a platform for information and recruitment purposes, fulfil a welfare function for personnel keeping in touch with family and friends, and as a strategic communication tool for opinion-forming and psychological operations.

However, social media also carry risks, particularly in terms of security breaches and accidental disclosure of sensitive information.

A workshop convened by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (PaCCS) explored the impact of new technologies on the defence and security sectors. This included findings from two research projects investigating the use of social media in the armed forces.

The research shows that digital technologies have rapidly spread through the British Armed Forces, impacting on operations, morale and security. A significant finding of the research is that there is a generation gap between younger personnel who are familiar with social media and senior staff and policymakers who are struggling to take on board the full implications – both positive and negative. This has important implications for the efficiency and effectiveness of military operations and defence policymaking.

Key findings

- There is a disconnection between military policy and social media use, with a clear generation gap in the use and understanding of social media.
- The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has a limited understanding of the role of social media for armed forces and their families. Policymakers overlook its importance to service personnel and their families, and its emerging role in operational practice.
- Access to social media influences the emotional and physical wellbeing of military staff. Enhanced contact with family can strengthen relationships and feelings of intimacy, but personnel may also be distracted by the concerns of family and loved ones.
- Social media can cause anxiety and stress for military personnel and their families; for instance, research uncovered examples of rumour-mongering and bullying.
- On the other hand, social media can also help veterans to reintegrate and reduce feelings of isolation among military spouses.
- Disciplinary policy regarding misuse or careless use of social media is inadequate considering the potential risks to personal safety or loss of sensitive information.
- MoD reticence to engage in social media debate about military policy leaves the field open for others to define the terms of the defence debate.
- Loss of connectivity (for instance at sea) have both positive and negative knock-on effects. Personnel are adept at finding alternative channels when connectivity is limited, but this increases security risks.
- Assessing the effectiveness of social media use in terms of concrete outcomes is very difficult, and at odds with a culture which needs demonstrable outcomes to justify funding.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The policy briefing *Social media and the armed forces* outlines the insights from a workshop convened by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (PaCCS), including policymakers, engineers, technologists, practitioners and representatives from industry and non-governmental organisations. The workshop explored the impact of new technologies on the defence and security sectors, focusing on questions of governance, ethics and the law.

Web: www.paccsresearch.org.uk/policy-briefings/social-media-armed-forces

FURTHER INFORMATION

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The Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research aims to deliver high-quality and cutting-edge research to help improve our understanding of current and future global security challenges. It is an initiative of Research Councils UK, with ESRC as one of the core members along with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.
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