

# US Marine Corps renews ban on social networking sites

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In another attempt by the Pentagon to control all information coming from the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Marine Corps has renewed its ban on popular online social networking sites (SNS), chief among them Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

The ban had already been in place on military networks, but as Marine Corps spokesman Lieutenant Craig Thomas told the Associated Press, the renewal comes with “a more detailed order defining which sites are out of bounds.” All three SNS’s are known to have members registered in the millions, with Facebook registering its 250 millionth user on July 15.

“These Internet sites in general are a proven haven for malicious actors and content and are particularly high-risk due to information exposure, user-generated content and targeting by adversaries,” the Marine Corps said on its web site. “The very nature of SNS’s creates a larger attack and exploitation window, exposes unnecessary information to adversaries and provides an easy conduit for information leakage that puts operational security, communications security ... at an elevated risk of compromise.”

The order to ban these SNS’s is a response to a warning from the US Strategic Command, one of ten unified military commands under the Department of Defense (DOD). Strategic Command had told the rest of the military that it was considering a DOD-wide ban on SNS’s, forcing the rather abrupt ban on the part of the US Marine Corps.

The ban is itself part of a larger Pentagon review of SNS’s, due to be completed by the end of August. “We’re addressing the challenges from a security standpoint, but also the impact and value that [SNS’s] have to the department to be able to communicate in a 21st-century environment,” Pentagon spokesman Bryan

Whitman told the American Forces Press Service.

While the Marine Corps’ ban only affects government-owned computers, it “is still likely to cut off communication channels that family and friends were using with active duty personnel overseas,” said John H. Sawyer, a senior security engineer on the IT Security Team at the University of Florida in Gainesville. “We need this outlet,” US soldier Richard Foreman said. “Sometimes this is the only way for friends or family to find out how we are doing on a deployment.”

Morale among US troops on the battlefields—already low due to factors ranging from the harmful psychological effects of counterinsurgency warfare, to confusion over the reasons for war in the first place—will likely be adversely impacted, Sawyer said.

While publicly expressing dismay, prominent SNS’s will acquiesce quietly, mirroring their counterparts in the corporate-controlled media to manifestations of military censorship.

“Obviously, we’re disappointed and a little surprised, in that they’re making a decision based on security, but they haven’t asked us for any kind of briefing” on existing security measures, said Facebook spokesman Barry Schnitt. “No one would suggest cutting off postal service to men and women overseas, but what they’re proposing is the 21st-century equivalent.” Representatives from MySpace and Twitter have not responded to requests for comment.

The ban comes in the wake of a recent campaign of heavy promotion of SNS’s by the US military, which saw it as a way of increasing its depleted membership rolls. Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has, as a matter of fact, 4,501 Twitter followers, who receive notification of his blog entries as they are published in real time. “Obviously, we need

to find the right balance between security and transparency,” Mullen said on Twitter. “We are working on that. But am I still going to tweet? You bet.”

The British military, chief allies of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, is pursuing a seemingly less draconian policy with regards to SNS censorship.

The British Ministry of Defense (MoD) said August 6 that British personnel would no longer have to seek the permission of their chain of command before discussing their work online. The MoD has also agreed to sponsor individual service personnel who volunteer for regular blogs. According to the *Guardian*, military staff “will have their own guidelines and will be asked to use their common sense and not give away operational secrets.” While seemingly at odds with US policy, the essence remains the same. “Upbeat comments about the conflict there will no doubt be welcomed,” the *Guardian* said. “Criticism less so.”

The Pentagon’s transparent attempt to keep the American people in the dark about its brutal, neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are a measure of the growing nervousness and fears within the ruling establishment over the state of these interventions.

It follows an already well documented pattern of censorship of forces on the ground, whether they are independent journalists, foreign contractors, or even its own troops. Worried that reports might reach relatives and friends back home of some of the war crimes being carried out in these countries, as well as the brutalizing conditions that soldiers are forced to endure, producing negative backlash and radicalization, the Pentagon would rather that word not get out at all.



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