Leveraging Web 2.0 for the 21st century

BY CPT Jonathan Pan

Web 2.0 has already redefined business, politics and society. Consider Google, Iran's elections and Facebook. National security is next according to James Jay Carafano, who wrote "Social Networking and National Security: How to Harness Web 2.0 to Protect the Country," in Backgrounder, No. 2273 (2009)

Wikipedia defines Web 2.0 as "a second generation of web development and design that facilitates communication, secures information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration on the World Wide Web." I call it people connecting with people. This article reveals the steps that my unit, 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, Stryker Brigade Combat Team (5/2 ID), has already taken in this emerging environment and the outcomes of Web 2.0 in a garrison environment.

Finally, I will introduce you to combat collaboration, the term that describes the use of Web 2.0 in combat.

During National Training Center rotation 09-04, 5/2 ID's electronic think tank officer in charge sent me a request for information about getting an accurate assessment of wage levels in southern Afghanistan. The ETT is a reach back cell that 5/2 ID uses to answer RFIs from the battalions with the help of many subject matter experts in our database. Within 48 hours, I obtained information that was briefed within the same time frame to the secretary of defense. This demonstrates the speed and accuracy achievable through Web 2.0.

In the first 24 hours of my search, I passed off the RFI to the Stryker's warfighter forum at Fort Lewis, searched for wages on Google and also looked on the State Department's Provincial Reconstruction Team SharePoint. Most of the results I obtained were data from the 1990's. Dissatisfied with this information, I searched my own personal network of experts that I've been building for the ETT while I've been studying Entrepreneurship at the University of Washington. One name — Barnett Rubin, surfaced in almost every query. I sent an e-mail message and found that he had a 1459 person group on Yahoo. I passed off the RFI to him and his Yahoo group. Within 24 hours, I received too much information to keep up with.

Other recent notable examples include MG Michael Oate's blog entry at http://www.taskforcemountain. com/mountain-sound-off, which asked, "What is the stupidest rule or policy you have seen in the Army?" Whether or not any of these rules or policies is affected isn't the issue. I believe that the pure act of venting frustrations or even having the option to do so to their commander, a division commander at that, opened another channel of communication that senior leaders didn't have at their hands 10 years ago. There are only so many Soldiers you can talk to and only so much time to spare as a senior leader, but with one sentence and a click of a button he received 93 responses.

I want to caution these examples with a trend that I've been noticing. On April 17, 2009, Ashton Kutcher, a 31-year-old actor, beat CNN in garnering one million followers first. See the Web site http://www.cnn.com/2009/ TECH/04/17/ashton.cnn.twitter.battle/index.html .

Every major news network has a Twitter and a Facebook site, not to mention the U.S. Central Command. Although it's been great that everyone has been willing to adopt Web 2.0, I believe that we haven't been fully utilizing it correctly. I have yet to see an active and collaborative SharePoint at the Brigade Combat Team or higher level. I find the same level of activity on the State Department's PRT SharePoint as well. James J. Carafano of the Heritage Foundation writes in "Social Networking and National Security: How to Harness Web 2.0 to Protect the Country," Backgrounder, No. 2273 (2009):

A 21st-century government must be able to adapt 21st-century instruments to keep the nation safe, free, and prosperous. Concerning Web 2.0, Washington's best efforts are lagging. Steps are needed now to make the government a leader, rather than a follower, in using these new technologies to both strengthen and safeguard American society. Although my efforts fall far short of strengthening and safeguarding American society, I would like to share them because they serve as a starting point of how to manipulate and exploit Web 2.0.

The greatest success we've had so far is with the eArmy Family Messaging System. The eAFMS is an alert system which works just like Twitter but in my opinion it better serves the needs of a BCT. The Brigade Special Troops Battalion of 5/2 ID did a test run during our NTC rotation. Before the battalion left for Ft. Irwin, I collected names of family members who wanted to be contacted with updates through their cell phones or emails. During the first week of NTC, the Department of Defense announced a mission change for 5/2 ID from Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation Enduring Freedom. My battalion commander sent me a message he'd like for the families to see and we send that message out via Short Message Service text message, email, and text-to-speech phone call. Within minutes I had a graph that showed me how many recipients received the message directly (Human: 22), how many recipients did not receive the message at all (Unreachable: 3), etc.

The reason we used the eAFMS over Twitter was because of the administrative difficulties in teaching family members how to sign up for Twitter, follow our battalion account, and activate text messaging. With eAFMS, we collect alpha rosters of willing participants and upload the database or input the participants manually.

Future uses for eAFMS that I would like to see include post-wide emergency alert rosters. In the winter of 2008, I Corps of Fort Lewis determined that there were days that roads would be too icy to drive on and that only mission essential Soldiers should drive to work. However, the dissemination of that message would rarely reach every soldier in the traditional manner: phone alert rosters. Imagine that every Major Subordinate Command under I Corps had eAFMS setup and had their alpha rosters loaded in, every Soldier would be immediately alerted should the Post Commander or Commanding General decide that the roads posed a substantial safety issue. All they would have to do is click a button.

Another success story is our Virtual Family Readiness Group website (vFRG). The key to a successful vFRG or website is having active information. Both my brigade family readiness support assistant and my battalion commander

are great at keeping up with updates to keep the site from going stale. I've augmented the vFRG with three key outside components: surveys, PhotoBucket, and online forms. For surveys, I used WebQ, which is part of the Catalyst Web Tools of the University of Washington. You can use SurveyMonkey or any other free survey site listed on Google. Surveys are a powerful assessment tool for commanders. In the near future, I would like to see command climate surveys conducted online on the BCT's website instead of transporting companies or battalions to designated areas.

As for PhotoBucket, the reason I used that instead of the vFRG's own data storage is because of the ease and data capacity of PhotoBucket over vFRG. I recommend every BCT open a free account on PhotoBucket, Flickr, or any other similar site, because of the large nature of media files these days. Online forms are nothing new but I wanted to mention how we are using them. We created "Spouse Leave Forms" which spouses can fill out online and they are automatically forwarded to the Rear-Detachment commander, first sergeant, and brigade family readiness support assistant. This way, the rear-detachment can keep their database up to date and contact spouses in case of emergencies.

Utilizing Web 2.0 in garrison has been a success but I'd like to match that success in combat. Combat Collaboration exists in one form or another but I would like to see it in the form of Company Command or Platoon Leader. Both of these sites run off of Tomoye Ecco and it would be a boon to have a Company Command on the unclassified or classified network. Imagine having company commanders, or even team leaders, collaborate for a few brief minutes after every patrol and the amount of data that would be generated if that became part of their standard operating procedures. Now imagine collaborating with the Marines, the Brits, the Canadians, and all other elements of Regional Command South on building Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures free from the bureaucratic channels in each of their units. This would truly be connecting with the right minds on the right issues at the right time.

The measure of power in warfare or business today is connectedness. This is a common feature in every application or website that has been mentioned thus far: gathering wage levels in southern Afghanistan with 5/2 ID's Electronic Think Tank and Barnett Rubin's Yahoo Group, the 10th Mountain Division Commander's blogs, Twitter, alerting families with eAFMS, timely updates on the unit with vFRG, Catalyst Tools, PhotoBucket, Flikr, and Combat Collaboration with Tomoye Ecco (Company Command). Anne-Marie Slaughter writes in "America's Edge" Foreign Affairs, Vol. 88, No.1 (2009).

Consider the experience of Li and Fung, the world's largest and most successful export sourcing company. Its clients are retailers of virtually every kind of product known to man, or at least made by man. The job of Li and Fung is to identify suppliers from over 40 countries around the world and connect them in order to fill specific orders. The resulting networks must be fast, flexible, and able to work to a common high standard. According to William and Victor Fung, two of the current owners of the family business, the secret of sourcing is 'orchestrating networks.' It is the managerial equivalent of creating a system in which one can select a destination on a Paris metro map and see a possible route light up with a connecting web of differently colored lines -- except, of course, that riders at each station might have their own ideas about how best to travel.

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency made the Internet. It is only right that the Department of Defense should be the first to properly exploit it. Let's apply to national security the lessons learned from Web 2.0's effect on business and politics. It's a different kind of fight but we are up to the undertaking. West Point recently had a cyberwar games that was detailed in an article by Corey Kilgannon and Noam Cohen "Cadets Trade the Trenches for Firewalls" New York Times, May 11th 2009. In the exercise cadets defended their network from hackers from the National Security Agency. The secretary of defense recently ordered the creation of a cyber command. I challenge leaders from the platoon to the BCT level to understand, engage and leverage Web 2.0.
Update from the Field

This article was originally written in April 2009. Nine months later, I've actually had the pleasure of seeing Web 2.0 used both in the rear-detachment as well as in combat. In the rear, every battalion family readiness support assistant has done a wonderful job of updating battalion vFRG sites. The biggest success has been the eAFMS which has over 3,000 registered users (over 60% of the Brigade) and 150 messages sent since its inception.

As far as combat collaboration, the Battle Command Knowledge System has since implemented Tomoye Ecco on both the unclassified and classified networks. 5/2 ID is currently implementing a February Collaboration Session on the classified side. LTC Patrick Gaydon, Brigade Special Troops Battalion commander, writes: "Task Force Stryker (5/2 ID) is a thinking, learning, and adapting organization. After operating for over six months in combat in southern Afghanistan, Soldiers of TF Stryker have gained a tremendous level of experience. Soldiers know which tactics, techniques, and procedures work, which do not work, and have ideas about TTPs that might work. For the entire month of February 2010, Task Force Stryker will conduct an online collaboration session to develop innovative TTPs. Based on available resources, some of the resulting innovative TTPs generated during the Jam session will be implemented across the formation during the second half of our deployment."

Soldiers want to voice their concerns and this is an opportunity to voice their concerns directly to the Brigade Commander, who has directed that every idea will be explored regardless of perceived possibility.

CPT Jonathan Pan is the economic development officer for Task Force Stryker, 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. He is responsible for stabilization efforts and economic development of Kandahar and Zabul provinces in Regional Command South, Afghanistan.