A Casualty Of War: MySpace
U.S. Military Blocks Popular Web Sites, Cutting Ties to Home

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Tuesday, May 15, 2007; A01

The Defense Department began blocking access on its computers to YouTube, MySpace and 11 other Web sites yesterday, severing some of the most popular ties linking U.S. troops in combat areas to their far-flung relatives and friends, and depriving soldiers of a favorite diversion from the boredom of overseas duty.

The banned Web sites include some of the Internet's most popular destinations for social networking and sharing photographs, videos and audio recordings. Soldiers and their families frequent the sites to exchange notes, swap pictures and share recorded messages -- a form of digital communication that, along with e-mail, has largely replaced the much-anticipated mail call of previous wars.

Senior officers said they enacted the worldwide ban out of concern that the rapidly increasing use of these sites threatened to overwhelm the military's private Internet network and risk the disclosure of combat-sensitive material.

"The idea behind it is to have the bandwidth available to mission-critical areas," said Navy Lt. Denver Applehans, a spokesman for U.S. Strategic Command, which oversees the task force that designed the restrictions.

In a memorandum to troops dated Friday, Gen. B.B. Bell, commander of U.S. forces in South Korea, said the task force had noted "a significant increase in the use of DoD network resources tied up by individuals visiting certain recreational Internet sites," he said. Bell added that the traffic poses "a significant operational security challenge."

In computer rooms on bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, soldiers crowd around rows of monitors, lining up for a chance to glimpse the latest news from home or leave their distinctive boot print in cyberspace. Some postings on YouTube are grainy battle videos shot with small cameras recording the brilliant flare of roadside explosions and crackle of gunfire set to rock music. Others are more melancholy depictions of loss, showing struggling medics and fallen comrades. Entries on MySpace pages are often more personal, running from reflective to vulgar.

Mitchell Millican of Trafford, Ala., said he had relied on MySpace, a popular social networking site, to stay in touch with his son Pfc. Jonathan M. Millican until he was killed Jan. 20 in an attack on his compound in Karbala, Iraq. "If it wasn't for the Internet, I wouldn't have been able to talk to him three days before he died," Millican said.
Under the policy, troops will still be allowed to access the sites from non-military computers. But few soldiers in combat areas carry private computers. They will continue to have access to the sites through Internet cafes that are not on the military computer network, officers said.

Though soldiers are already barred from posting classified material on public Web sites, these sites also offer an uncensored venue for airing homesickness, frustration with the war in Iraq and anger at the military. But a mid-level Army infantry officer who is headed back to Iraq stressed, "It's a practical matter, not a civil rights matter."

He explained he might have trouble if the network is dragged down by soldiers watching YouTube videos. But the officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, added that access to the Web sites could be important for morale.

"I am pretty sure the point of MySpace is to hook up with chicks, and the Joes probably get a lot of mileage off being deployed, so I would be more hesitant to take that away," he said.

Lewis Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute, acknowledged that the military has legitimate concerns about broadband availability but said that the Pentagon could have rationed Web access rather than cut it off entirely.

"It is an unnecessary hardship on people who already have more hardships than they should have to deal with," said Maltby, an Army veteran.

Julie Supan, a YouTube spokeswoman, said executives at her Web site wanted to meet Defense officials to discuss the restrictions.

"We certainly don't want YouTube to be used to share sensitive security information or put anyone in harm's way," she said in a statement. "The vast majority of videos on YouTube posted by soldiers, their families and friends are personal messages, original songs, tributes and video letters."

Executives at several of the affected Web sites said they had not been notified of the restrictions by Defense officials.

"It was definitely a surprise to us," said Benjamin Sun, chief executive of BlackPlanet, a social networking site popular with African Americans. He said he plans to contact the Pentagon to learn more about the reasons behind the decision and address any concerns.

N. Mark Lam, chief executive of the radio-streaming site Live365, said he, too, had not been notified by Defense officials and planned to ask them why they chose to curtail access to some sites and not to dozens of others providing similar services. He acknowledged that his site requires a large amount of bandwidth.

The Defense Department barred access to the Web sites even as the military has stepped up its campaign to upload official videos to the Web, including on YouTube, to help portray U.S. combat efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan in a favorable light. In the past two months, for instance, the military has posted YouTube videos showing troops engaged in a gun battle in Baghdad, destroying chemical factories, attacking insurgent mortar positions and rescuing a kidnap victim.

Lt. Col. Christopher Garver, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, said these offerings would not be
affected by the restrictions because they aren't posted through the military's network. Though many U.S. forces would no longer be able to view these videos, Garver added, "They don't need to. They live them every day."

The Defense Department Web site policy comes one month after the Army issued a regulation barring soldiers from posting entries on blogs, participating in online discussion groups or sending personal e-mail unless the content is cleared by an superior officer. Within days of Wired magazine reporting that regulation, the Army issued a fact sheet clarifying that soldiers' postings would not be subjected to review. But military bloggers continued to warn that the regulation could have a chilling effect on their writing.

Staff writers Ann Scott Tyson and Terissa Schor contributed to this report.