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Winning Essay Shows the Power of Social Media and 'Virtual Friends'

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Maj. Christopher Ford, a Judge Advocate with the U.S. Army, looked no farther than the popular social media of the day to write the winning entry for the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) 2010 essay contest.

Ford made a case that Web 2.0 technology such as Facebook and Twitter could be applied to the United States’ homeland security system in his essay titled "Twitter, Facebook and the Ten Red Balloons: Social Network Problem Solving and Homeland Security." His essay was chosen out of 145 entries in the third annual contest.

The purpose of the essay competition is to promote creative thinking, innovative ideas and discussion and debate in the arena of homeland security.

"Mr. Ford’s essay touched on a topic of increasing relevance in homeland security," CHDS Director Glen Woodbury said.

"Emergency managers and first responders are beginning to realize the potential social media has in helping them meet their missions and are grappling with how to effectively apply this technology. The winning essay offered a glimpse into the possibilities Web 2.0 holds for homeland security use."

The question for the third annual, “How can, or should, the United States make homeland security a more layered, networked, and resilient endeavor involving all citizens?”

Ford’s paper argued that social media shows potential to be just that kind of endeavor.

"Plainly, this approach to problem solving is both revolutionary and expansive," Ford wrote. "Indeed, the tool is so broad and powerful, that it is difficult to pigeonhole individual uses. Suffice to say, the potential application extends to any defined, discrete issue/problem."

In supporting his contention, the writer cited two examples centered on social networking. The first was a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency competition in which, ultimately, 10 eight-foot balloons were floated in eight states and the teams were challenged to locate them.

After reading about this contest, Ford was inspired to write about it.

"I’d read a piece about the competition and I found it interesting," Ford said. "It was a fascinating experiment they ran."

A five-student team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used part of the promised prize money to motivate supporters and established a website and social network to help both track the wayward balloons and to thwart misinformation. The team, which learned of the event only two days before it began, won the contest by locating the balloons in nine hours.
"It is pretty amazing what they did and the amount of people they got involved with some minor incentives," For said during a brief phone interview.

A second example known as the "Vanishing Contest" was a competition in which Wired Magazine writer Evan Ratliff would go missing for 30 days while off the grid – without a cell phone, no credit cards or contact with family — challenging people to locate him. A team found him in New Orleans 25 days into the contest. Numerous teams self-organized around social media tools for the hunt.

The lesson, says Ford, is that this kind of social media and some incentive, either monetary or even just applying to a basic sense of patriotism, can be an efficient, effective and economical tool. Such a system may not be suited to nabbing wanted persons, he argues, but it could be used to assist in securing physical sites, borders, cyberspace and infrastructure.

Ford will receive a $1,500 cash award and an invitation to travel to CHDS to present his essay to faculty, staff and officials participating in the CHDS master's degree program.

Finalists in the contest include:


Mark Bejarano, Hyattsville, Md., graduate student in Emergency and Disaster Management at American Public University/American Military Institute; "Examining the Effective Use of Unaffiliated Volunteers."

Jessica Bylsma, Lafayette, Ind., C-130 pilot and aeronautical engineer, U.S. Coast Guard, "Unacceptable Gaps: Community Grassroots Involvement in Homeland Security."

Andrew Hicks, Evans, Ga., Intelligence Specialist, Department of Defense, "Homeland Bureaucracy – How to reshape American Homeland Security policy to better engage its Intelligence professionals through a layered, networked and resilient attack upon terrorism at home and abroad."

Links to the Essays

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