

*Speech dr. Joyce Sylvester*  
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Launch of Social Media Guide

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Ladies and gentlemen,

What is the significance of social media in our society in general? And, more specifically, what can be their significance for the Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces?

The focus today is on the use of social media by Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces. This will give us the chance to discuss the question in greater depth.

Personally, I hope that the Ombuds Institutions will be able to take steps to improve our use of social media.

You may conclude from this I attach considerable importance to the use of social media and, if so, you would be quite right. In today's world, social media are having a huge impact on society, and this impact will extend to our field if Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces make greater use of them.

Let me explain why I believe this to be so important.

For eight years I served as mayor of a Dutch town. As such, I was closely involved in setting up foundations for local military veterans. These are bodies that organise annual Veterans' Day events in Dutch municipalities and arrange get-togethers for veterans. I soon realised that there is no such thing as a stereotypical veteran. As Dutch military personnel are still being sent on foreign missions, military veterans are a highly diverse group. They differ in terms of age, the countries where they have served, and so on. This meant that it wasn't easy to devise activities of interest to them all. Even so, the meetings we organised were

always very well attended.

I believe that social media are an important tool for linking generations together. But I have noticed that older veterans who are active on social media tend to use Facebook, whereas younger veterans and kids use Instagram and Twitter. It would be good if the different generations could be brought closer together through social media.

We also tried to find ways to create links between veterans and young people. The number of older veterans is steadily shrinking, and I think it is important that the stories they can tell continue to be passed on to young people. The younger generation needs to realise how people have fought to preserve the freedom we now enjoy in our country and how, even today, the military is struggling to preserve peace and freedom elsewhere in the world.

Bringing generations together is important, and social media play a major role in this.

As we all know, social media are able to disseminate information at lightning speed. So why should the Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces too not capitalise on this strength of the social media? This could simply be in order to communicate information about veterans' affairs more effectively, whether or not accompanied by photos! The information could be about missions and postings, about the return of veterans after missions and about what is or is not going well. About veterans' reintegration at home and into society, and about contacts with the authorities and fellow veterans.

Social media can give us and others a better understanding of veterans both as a group and as individuals. We can share knowledge and experiences and inspire one another. This will foster understanding and generate support for any change of policy that may be necessary. This will therefore be important if Ombuds Institutions decide to perform their duties across a broader field. After all, why should we not assist Parliament in deciding whether or not to proceed with a mission? And why should we not be involved in evaluating policy and play an active role in integrating lessons learned into that policy. We gain knowledge and experience from handling complaints. Here social media can sometimes act as a catalyst. We wish not only to be response-oriented, dealing with the cases referred to us, but also to be able to put questions to veterans and their relations.

I hope, therefore, that this 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces will allow us to identify ways of bringing generations closer together through social media. By continuing to pass on veterans' stories, we can preserve their experiences and share our own. And the use of social media may also make it easier for Ombuds Institutions to communicate with their target groups, for example, to publicise the outcomes of complaints.

As not all the effects of social media are necessarily positive, we should also reflect on the downsides. In this respect, DCAF's Social Media Guide is a first step in the right direction.

So let's now engage with one another!

Thank you.