|bfbs|Creative

The Information Environment: Rethinking Defence Communications

Why Audience Understanding is Essential to Effective Defence

02/2026

Introduction

Military recruitment now takes place in an information environment that is crowded, contested, and shaped more by peers and platforms than by official messaging. This report examines the information environment and sets out the implications for UK armed forces recruitment strategy, with the aim of helping communicators allocate effort and resources more effectively. It is written for practitioners and decision-makers responsible for designing, commissioning, and evaluating recruitment communications.

What is the information environment?

The information environment is the constantly evolving ecosystem of messages, narratives, and stimuli that surrounds people and shapes how they perceive institutions, opportunities, and risks.

Key components include:

- Channels and platforms where content is produced, distributed, and discovered (e.g. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, news sites).

- Narratives and storylines that frame how events and institutions are interpreted (e.g. "military as opportunity", "military as exploitative").

- Actors and voices who create and circulate content, from official accounts to influencers, peers, and anonymous users.

Key effects on audiences include:

- Attention: what content is seen at all, given algorithmic feeds and in tense competition for time.

- Trust: which voices and sources are believed, questioned, or dismissed altogether.

- Behaviour: how perceptions of the armed forces influence decisions to seek information, engage with recruiters, or apply.

The information environment is an ocean that audiences swim through every day. The currents (algorithms, peer conversations, and dominant narratives) pull them in particular directions, often without them noticing. For recruitment, this means that by the time a young person encounters an official advert or visits a careers website, their views have already been shaped by prior stories, scandals, jokes, and peer experiences circulating in this ocean.

In the old broadcast era, organisations could largely control both the message and the channels through which information travelled. Today, the same recruitment message may appear alongside critical commentary, memes, or viral scandal content that dwarf its reach and reshape its meaning. Understanding the information environment is therefore not optional context but a prerequisite for any realistic recruitment strategy.

By exploring how young people encounter and respond to military messaging, we can understand the broader dynamics that shape institutional communications today.

I. The Information Environment

The Paradigm Shift in Communications

For much of the twentieth century, military recruitment communications operated within a relatively stable paradigm. Recruitment campaigns focused on:

- Craft compelling narratives about service, honour, and opportunity.
- Secure placements in trusted media channels (television, radio, print).
- Measure success through application volumes and conversion rates.

The information environment was characterised by scarcity: limited channels, high barriers to content creation, and gatekeepers (editors, producers, advertisers) who determined what reached audiences.

That world no longer exists. The contemporary information environment is characterised by abundance, not scarcity. Every individual with a smartphone is simultaneously content creator, distributor, and curator, while platforms algorithmically promote content based on engagement, not editorial judgment.

For recruitment, this means young people encounter official messaging embedded within a stream of peer commentary, counter-narratives, memes, influencer opinions, news coverage, and viral scandals, all competing for attention at the same time. A single highly emotive negative short-form video can achieve more visibility among target audiences than months of carefully planned recruitment advertising.

So What?

For armed forces recruiters, misunderstanding this environment leads directly to wasted spend, weaker results, and increased reputational risk. The issue is not only what is said in campaigns, but how those messages collide with existing narratives and peer conversations.

When organisations fail to understand their information environment, several problems follow:

- Misallocated spend

  - Investing heavily in high-budget television or video campaigns with out considering how they will be clipped, reframed, or mocked on social platforms.
  - For recruitment, this might look like a glossy TV spot being reposted on X as evidence of "PR spin" or "waste", reinforcing cynicism rather than interest.

- Reinforcing negative narratives

  - Launching campaigns that ignore existing stories about bullying, misconduct, or poor welfare, which then prompts audiences to resurface those stories in response.
  - For recruitment, a campaign emphasising "we look after our people" may trigger a wave of user-generated content highlighting cases where the institution appears to have failed to do so.

- Misleading metrics and false confidence

  - Focusing on impressions, reach, or view counts while ignoring sentiment, narrative trends, and how content is being discussed.
  - For recruitment, a campaign may appear successful on paper while the dominant online conversation is increasingly negative or sceptical.

An additional consideration for armed forces recruitment is gain–loss framing. Research shows that messages emphasising concrete benefits and positive outcomes are often more persuasive than those focused on threats or avoidance, but only when they feel relevant and credible to the audience's lived experience. In recruitment, benefit-focused calls to action ("join", "apply", "start your career") are effective only if they align with what young people already believe is plausible about pay, conditions, and culture.

This is where understanding the information environment becomes critical. If the prevailing narrative in a young person's feed is that military careers are exploitative or unsafe, unqualified promises about opportunity and adventure can feel disconnected or even dishonest. Without visibility of existing narratives and peer experiences, well-intentioned campaigns risk amplifying the very scepticism they aim to counter.

Implications for recruitment communications:

- Treat social listening and narrative mapping as core planning inputs, not optional add-ons.
- Stress-test campaign ideas against real online narratives and peer conversations before launch.
- Build KPIs around sentiment and narrative shift, not just impressions, views, or clicks.

By aligning recruitment communications with the realities of the information environment and the expectations and experiences of young audiences, communications can reduce wasted effort and build credibility over time, rather than trying to overpower negative currents with more volume.

II. The Virality Problem

Quantifying the Disproportion

2025

UK Armed Forces careers content

0.12%

66 mentions of scandals

45%

**390,000** of social shares generated

Social listening analysis of UK Armed Forces careers discourse across major platforms in 2025 shows a striking imbalance between the volume of scandal-related content and its visibility. Specific mentions of scandals represented just 0.12% of total conversation volume (66 out of more than 54,000 mentions) but generated around 45% of all social shares, approximately 390,000 in total. This means scandal-related content achieved roughly 365 times more spread through networks than standard recruitment or careers content.

In practice, a single scandal story can reach more young people in the target demographic than months of standard recruitment communications. Because visibility compounds through further sharing, this small subset of highly emotive posts disproportionately shapes how the broader audience encounters and interprets information about military service.

The Psychology of Emotional Amplification

The disproportionate spread of negative content reflects how algorithms interact with human psychology. Emotionally charged content, particularly content provoking anger, spreads at significantly higher rates than neutral or even positive content. Algorithms are optimised to promote such high-engagement content, often pushing it beyond what users deliberately choose to follow or want to see.

What drives content spread is emotional intensity rather than accuracy or quality. Both positive high arousal emotions (awe, inspiration, pride) and negative ones (anger, fear, outrage) generate far more engagement than calm, informational content. This creates a structural disadvantage for conventional institutional messaging, which is often cautious in tone and designed to minimise risk rather than maximise emotional impact.

This creates a fundamental challenge for institutional communications: the emotional intensity needed for organic reach often conflicts with the measured, credible tone needed to build trust. A carefully crafted recruitment message highlighting genuine opportunities typically generates minimal engagement, while controversy spreads exponentially. There are opportunities to harness high arousal positive emotions within recruitment campaigns:

- Awe at capability, mission, and technology, shown through real operations, training, and teamwork.
- Pride in belonging, achievement, and progression, grounded in specific, verifiable stories from serving personnel.
- Admiration for professionalism, resilience, and service under pressure, illustrated through authentic, unscripted accounts.

Attention Scarcity and the Competitive Landscape
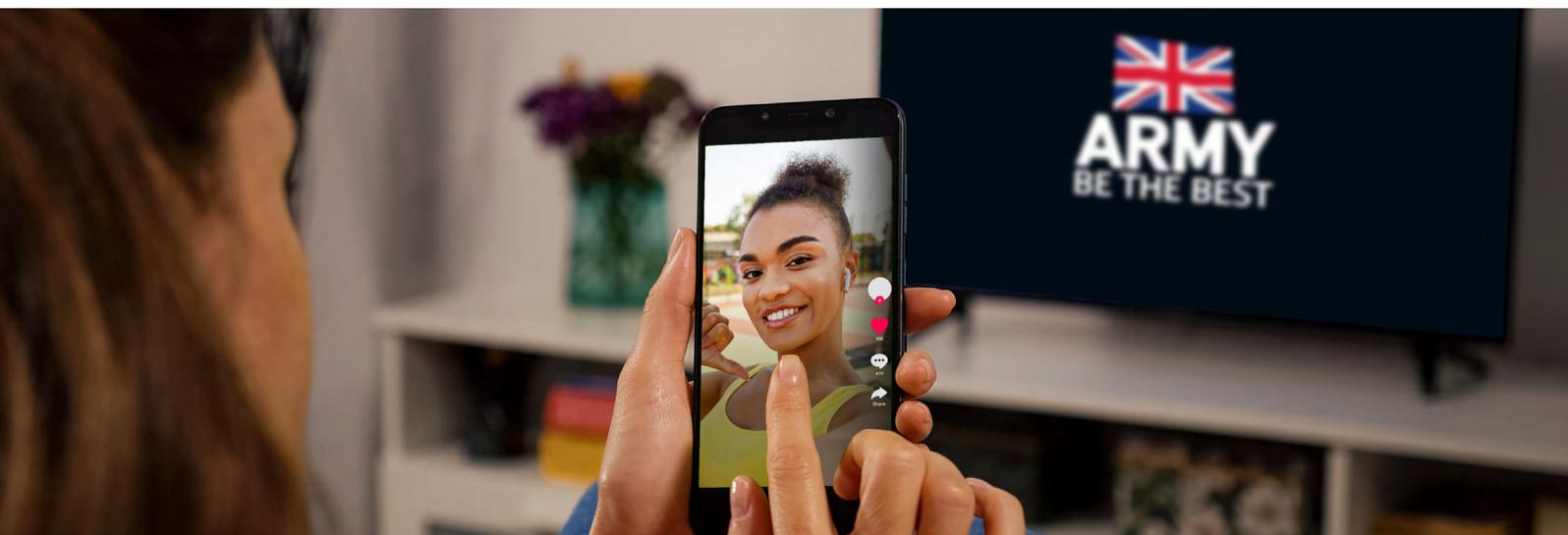
The virality disproportion becomes even more critical when compounded with fragmented attention in digital environments. Users now encounter exponentially more content than in previous years, creating an environment of constant information overload where individual pieces compete for scarce attention.

For younger audiences specifically, this fragmentation is particularly pronounced. This cohort switches rapidly between apps and content, often engaging with content within seconds of encountering it. They frequently multitask across multiple platforms simultaneously, giving individual pieces of content only brief consideration before moving on.

Short-form content significantly outperforms longer formats in terms of engagement, though this increased engagement doesn't necessarily translate to brand recall or message retention. The information environment rewards brevity and immediate impact, creating a challenging landscape for organisations seeking to communicate complex messages or build sustained understanding of their value proposition. In this environment of extreme attention scarcity and amplification advantage of emotional content it has never been more difficult for governments and traditional institutions to cut through.

In this environment, institutions cannot achieve visibility through volume alone. For armed forces recruitment, continually increasing the number of neutral, low-impact posts is likely to add to the noise and interact with pre-existing scepticism, rather than meaningfully shifting perceptions. Fewer, sharper, emotionally resonant pieces that are designed to work with peer networks and narrative currents, rather than high-frequency, low-salience updates will likely have greater impact with target audiences.

Implications for Recruitment Campaigns

For recruitment communications, the attention and virality problem has several direct implications:

- Scandals will routinely "out-compete" official campaigns on reach and emotional intensity; this is a structural feature, not a temporary anomaly.
- Campaigns must be designed with the expectation that messages will be interpreted alongside highly emotive negative content.
- High-arousal positive emotions should be deliberately integrated into creative briefs, anchored in authentic service experiences rather than abstract slogans.
- Success metrics should extend beyond impressions and click-throughs to include sentiment, narrative trends, and how recruitment messages are being reframed by audiences.

By recognising the virality and attention problems as inherent characteristics of the information environment, armed forces recruitment can move away from attempting to out-shout scandals and instead focus on building resilient, emotionally compelling narratives that stand up in a hostile and highly amplified context.

III. The Trust, Anxiety and Media Literacy

The Institutional Trust Crisis

In addition to the unique information environment military recruitment communications also competes with the backdrop of deepening institutional scepticism among young people. People aged 12–26 exhibit the lowest trust levels in traditional institutions, with fewer than one in six reporting significant trust in Parliament, traditional media, government, or major technology companies.

In the UK, Gen Z also exhibits lower confidence in the armed forces compared to older generations, a gap that has widened following high-profile misconduct and welfare scandals. A single authentic story of bullying, harassment, or poor support can appear more credible, and will spread further, than months of recruitment campaigns asserting "values" or "duty of care".

Trust issues show up directly at recruitment touchpoints:

- Scepticism toward official websites and adverts, which are often assumed to present an overly polished or selective picture.
- Suspicion of recruiter incentives, including beliefs that recruiters may downplay risks or oversell benefits to hit targets.
- Preference for anonymous peer reviews and forums (e.g. Reddit threads, Discord servers, private group chats) when seeking "real" information about life in service.

The Trust Paradox

Alongside low institutional trust, Gen Z experiences high information anxiety. They report low confidence in the reliability of the information they encounter and concern about data privacy, yet still rely heavily on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat as primary sources of news and career insight.

For this cohort, credibility does not flow from institutional status but from perceived authenticity, consistency with lived reality, and peer validation. A carefully produced campaign film may be treated as "PR" or "propaganda", while an unscripted "day in the life" video from a junior soldier on YouTube or TikTok can feel more truthful and relevant.

MOD / Crown Copyright

Consider a typical decision journey: a young person sees an official advert promising travel, skills, and camaraderie, then immediately searches online and finds a mix of service vlogs, complaint threads, and news reports. A single video showing cramped accommodation or describing poor leadership can outweigh the impression left by the advert, because it appears grounded in lived experience and is endorsed through likes, comments, and shares. This means that institutional campaigns must assume they will be cross-checked against peer-generated material and should be designed to hold up under that scrutiny.

Gen Z's Paradoxical Media Literacy

Alongside low institutional trust, Gen Z's media literacy presents its own paradox. Young people are highly aware that misinformation, manipulation, and low-quality content are widespread, yet they are exposed to such a volume of material each day that rigorous fact-checking of every claim is impossible. Instead of systematically verifying information, they rely on shortcuts such as source familiarity, peer endorsement (likes, comments, shares), and emotional resonance to decide what feels credible.

For recruitment, this means traditional "myth-busting" or heavily fact-laden content is unlikely to land as intended, because it assumes a level of time and motivation that most young people simply do not have in their everyday scrolling. More effective communications acknowledge the reality of information overload, show how content spreads and why certain stories go viral, and use authentic peer voices and concrete examples to demonstrate credibility rather than just asserting it.

IV. Narrative Strategy

Understanding Narrative

Narratives function differently than traditional messaging. Rather than simply conveying information, they shape how audiences experience and interpret information. A strong narrative acts as strategic infrastructure, connecting organisational strategy to stakeholder understanding and providing a framework through which specific communications are interpreted.

For armed forces recruitment, a simple narrative framework might focus on four core pillars the institution wants to own:

Competence	Care	Purpose	Opportunity
The forces are highly skilled, well-trained, and effective.	People are looked after, with serious commitment to welfare and families.	Service contributes to something larger and meaningful.	Recruits gain skills, experience, and progression they could not get elsewhere.

Every recruitment communication should be traceable to one or more of these pillars, and campaigns should be assessed on whether they reinforce these narratives consistently over time. Audiences encounter recruitment messaging within existing narratives, so any post is evaluated through the framework they already hold. For example, if the prevailing narrative is about sexual assault and misconduct in the armed forces, a recruitment post about care or opportunity is likely to be received with the same negativity as the wider misconduct content.

Research shows that organisations are more resilient when they clarify their position within these broader narratives instead of broadcasting isolated, context-free messages. This requires identifying the critical narratives that resonate with target audiences and deliberately positioning communications within that context, rather than assuming each new campaign starts with a blank slate.

The Importance of Consistency and Authenticity

The credibility of any narrative depends on its alignment with observable reality. To avoid dissonance, each recruitment story can be tested against a simple authenticity checklist:

- Does this acknowledge known concerns or risks, rather than pretending they do not exist?
- Is there a real person at the centre of the story, with specific detail rather than generic claims?
- Is the claim observable or verifiable online (e.g. through visible conditions, policies, or corroborating accounts)?

Stories that pass this test are more likely to withstand exposure to negative peer content and hostile narratives. Those that fail risk being "called out" and used as evidence that the institution is detached from reality.

"

Army racism apology to black 'poster girl' soldier

MoD admits RAF 'made mistakes' during diversity recruitment drive

"

V. Peer Influence and Decentralised Authority

The Rise of the Micro-Influencer

The shift away from broadcast has flattened traditional hierarchies. Users are no longer just audiences, they're content creators and distributors in their own right. Influence has become increasingly decentralised, with networks of smaller accounts carrying seemingly authentic messages more effectively than traditional gatekeepers. For institutional communicators, it's likely that the voices that matter most are often ones you've never heard of.

Why Peers Beat Institutions

	Micro Influencers	Macro Influencers
Follower Count & Reach	1K-100K Followers	Up to 1M Followers
Engagement & Trust	More Likes & Comments	More Views
Audience Demographics	Usually With Same Interest	More Mixed Audiences
Content Quality	More Natural, Relatable Stuff	More Polished, Professional Content
Cost & Budget Fit	Cost-Effective	Expensive
Availability & Exclusivity	Easier to Find & More Flexible	Harder to Book & More Exclusive

This decentralisation points to something deeper. Peer-based communication consistently outperforms top-down institutional messaging when it comes to changing behaviour. The features that make social platforms addictive (commenting, messaging, groups, sharing) aren't just engagement tools. They create seemingly authentic peer support structures that institutional communications simply can't replicate and becoming increasingly addictive for some.

Among young adults, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. Social media hasn't diminished peer influence, it's supercharged it. Peer networks now operate globally. Status indicators are quantified and visible. Peer interactions are permanent and searchable, amplifying their effect long after the original exchange.

For recruitment, this means that for young audiences weighing up whether to join the Armed Forces are more likely to be influenced by friends and peers discussing service than by official campaigns. Not because peers have better information, but because peer sources feel more authentic and aligned with their own values.

Harnessing Peer Influence

The challenge is not to replace peer influence (impossible) but to understand and work within it. The strategic question should be "how can the armed forces work with existing peer networks to shift social norms around military service?" This requires identifying authentic service members with credibility within peer networks, empowering them to share genuine experiences, and allowing organic peer communication to spread positive narratives.

This differs fundamentally from influencer marketing. Instead of paying public figures to promote products, it means identifying service members naturally embedded in peer networks and providing platforms and support for them to share authentic narratives.

Different platforms host different communities with different norms and influential voices. TikTok peer networks operate differently than Instagram or Reddit communities. Strategic peer influence requires platform-specific understanding of where influential voices operate and how authentic service member voices can enter those networks.

VI. What This Means for Comms Strategy

The question facing military recruitment communications is no longer "how do we reach young audiences?" but "how do we earn credibility with young audiences?". That shift demands a different way of planning and judging communications, not just more spend or higher production values.

To translate this into practice, future recruitment communications should focus on how stories are chosen, told, and evaluated:

Design for emotionally powerful truth, not neutral reassurance

- Use positive high-arousal emotions (awe, inspiration, pride, admiration) grounded in real experiences rather than abstract slogans. Authentic service member stories that show challenge, risk, and reward will travel further and feel more believable than generic claims about "opportunity" or "values".

Put credible peers at the centre of storytelling

- Identify serving personnel and small teams who already carry trust in their own networks and support them to share their experiences in their own words. Accept that these voices will never be perfectly scripted; the slight messiness is exactly what makes them convincing.

Make transparency a non-negotiable principle

- Treat scandals and failures as moments to demonstrate integrity, not just reputational threats. Address problems openly, acknowledge fault where it exists, and show what is changing in ways that are visible to both service personnel and the public. This creates credible stories that peers can share when they are asked, "What really happens when things go wrong?".

Speak to immediate relevance, not distant abstractions

- Frame messages around what matters to young people now (finances, belonging, skills they can use quickly, impact they can see) rather than only long-term career promises or high-level values. Show clear, concrete pathways from their current situation into meaningful service.

Treat information environment awareness as a permanent capability

- Build routine analysis of platforms, narratives, and influential voices into business-as-usual, not as a one-off research exercise. Assume the information environment will look different in six months and plan to update strategy as narratives and platforms shift.

Taken together, this approach reframes recruitment communications as an ongoing effort to earn and sustain credibility in a hostile, fast-moving information environment. The organisations that succeed will not be those with the most polished adverts, but those that understand how their audiences encounter information, how peer narratives spread, and how trust is built through consistent, transparent action amplified by authentic voices.