

once a solid professional relationship is developed, the possibility of a personal relationship is likely. However, in order for this to be successful, the elements of trust and understanding must be present. This is based on Altman and Taylor's (1973) statement that closeness grows only if individuals proceed in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange as a function of both immediate and forecast outcomes. Altman and Taylor used the analogy of a layered onion to explain this phenomenon. They wrote that the outer layer represents the public self, while the inner core represents one's private domain. In this sense, self-disclosure takes place as the layers are peeled away.

Self-disclosure has two types of layers, breadth and depth. Breadth is the array of variety of topics that have been incorporated into an individual's life. Depth represents the amount of information available on each topic (Littlejohn, 1996). Basically, superficial items are shared more frequently and earlier than information that is more personal. Usually this type of disclosure is a give-and-take relationship, especially in the early stages of a relation. Altman and Taylor (1973) concluded that penetration is rapid at the start of a relationship, but slows down quickly as the more tightly wrapped layers are reached. The reason for this is that societal norms prevent too much self-disclosure and most relationships stall before intimate exchange is established. However, when a genuine intimate exchange is achieved, relationships become meaningful and enduring (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

There are four stages when relationships develop: orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Orientation consists of impersonal communication, in which one discloses with only very public information about oneself. The next stage is the exploratory affective, in which initial expansion of information and movement to a deeper level of disclosure takes place. The third stage, affective

exchange, focuses on evaluative and critical feelings at a deeper level. This will not be entered into unless the partners perceived substantial rewards relative to costs in earlier stages. The last stage is stable exchange, which is highly intimate and allows people to predict each other's actions and responses well (Altman & Taylor, 1973)

For many years, social penetration theory was viewed as a direct, continuous penetration from public to private person. However, VanLear (1991) explained that social penetration as a cyclical and dialectical process. This explanation stated that it was cyclical because it proceeds in back-and-forth cycles, and it is dialectical because it involves the management of the tension between opposites. In short, social penetration relationships have normal ebbs and flows. Relationships do not automatically get better as the participants learn more and more about each other. Rather, the participants have to work through the tensions of the relations (the dialectic) while they learn and group themselves in the relationship. This proposal posits that these cycles occur throughout the life of the relationship as the persons try to balance their needs for privacy and an open relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Knowing this, we can apply social penetration to our study of the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and the media. Given that military public affairs practitioners link the media to the military community, and because most news media organizations assign one or two journalists to military beats, military public affairs practitioners are going to engage in the development of a relationship with the journalists who work with them. We assert that from the first time the two meet, the conversations are going to be typically professional in nature and this is akin to superficial information. However, over time, as the two parties continue to work together, the possibility for deepening the relationship from professional to personal exists, and that social penetration theory would predict that should this occur, the relationship

will develop and deepen. While this occurs, the levels of trust and understanding between the two parties will increase.

Collectively, the above-mentioned studies reveal that credibility and perception are variables affecting communication between public relations practitioners and the news media. However, based on the idea that self-disclosure can aid in the coorientation between the two, we predict that:

H1: As journalists and military public affairs practitioners become more familiar with one another, journalists' perceptions of trust and competence will increase.

Methods

Subjects

We surveyed 48 newspaper and 23 television broadcast journalists from metropolitan areas throughout the United States during the period May 4 to May 11, 2004. We randomly selected cities from regions where there are multiple military bases in order to get a sample of journalists who have a high probability of working with the military. We also randomly selected cities that are located in regions where there are no significant military bases within their coverage areas in order to get a sample of journalists who are not likely to work with the military. By using this selection process, we aimed to gather results from reporters who were likely to be familiar with military public affairs practitioners and from journalists who were not likely to be familiar with military public affairs practitioners.

Procedures

News editorial staff and assignment editors at newspapers and television stations throughout the nation were contacted via telephone and e-mail and asked to complete an online survey hosted on the University of Oklahoma's Web site. To maximize data, each editor was

asked to inform fellow reporters in their newsrooms about the survey in order to create a snowball sample effect. To ensure subjects' impartiality, we did not identify ourselves as military members. Instead, we stated that we were communications graduate students at the University of Oklahoma studying the media's perception of military public affairs practitioners. Subjects completed a 31-question survey designed to measure their attitudes and knowledge about military public affairs practitioners, as well as to collect socio-demographic data from each respondent.

We contacted approximately 950 journalists via e-mail and approximately 200 by telephone. During the data collection period, we received 85 surveys. Of those, 10 were thrown out because they were submitted by the same person, and another four were thrown out for being incomplete. We cannot figure an exact response rate because we did not track the number of people we contacted.

Socio-demographic Variables

Nine variables functioned to collect information about the respondents and to help determine how familiar each respondent was with military public affairs practitioners: gender, age, employment location, employment organization, education, past experience as an embedded journalist, past experience working with military public affairs practitioners, military experience, military experience in the family. Gender was determined by asking the respondent to indicate male or female. Age was determined with an open-ended question. Employment location was determined with an open-ended question requesting city and state. Employment organization was determined by requesting respondent to indicate whether he or she worked at a daily newspaper, a weekly newspaper, or a television station. Education was determined by requesting respondent to indicate one of the following: some high school, high school graduate, associate's degree,

bachelor's degree, master's degree, or M D , Ph D , J D , etc. Past experience as an embedded journalist was determined by asking respondent whether or not he or she was ever embedded with a military unit. If respondent indicated that he or she was embedded, then respondent was further asked to indicate approximate dates of his or her embed experience with an open-ended question. Past experience working with military public affairs practitioners was determined by requesting respondent to indicate whether or not he or she has ever worked directly with a military public affairs practitioner. If respondent indicated affirmation to this question, he or she was asked to indicate if this contact was daily, weekly, monthly, or every other month. Military experience was determined by asking respondent to indicate whether or not he or she has ever served in the military. Lastly, respondents indicated whether or not they ever had immediate family members in the military. The data for these variables was collected by self report in the demographic section of the survey.

Dependent Variables

The military public affairs practitioner's credibility was measured using two components of McCroskey's (1966) source credibility scale. The survey measured the components of competence and character. Each of these components was measured using three seven-point semantic differentials. Competence was exacted using the terms expert-inexpert, unintelligent-intelligent, and intellectual-narrow. Character was measured with the semantics dishonest-honest, unsympathetic-sympathetic, and good-bad. McCroskey's measure has proven to be highly reliable in past research (Rubin & Sypher, 1993).

Knowledge of the function of military public affairs practitioners was assessed by eight true-false-don't know questions. This set of questions was an adaptation of the work done by Jeffers (1977) and Kopenhaver, Martinson, and Ryan (1984) in regards to the perceptions that

the news media has about corporate public relations personnel. We believe these questions were relevant because of the similar relationship public relations practitioners have with public affairs practitioners. Items were summed to reflect overall knowledge of military public affairs.

Results

This research explores whether an increase in perception of character and competence will occur as civilian journalists and military public affairs practitioners become more familiar with one another. In addition to quantitative research studying perception of character, competence, and familiarity, qualitative research complimented the study by researching the opinions of what practicing journalists think military public affairs practitioners can do to improve their relationships with the media by asking two open-ended questions

Hypothesis 1 (H1) posited that an increase in a journalists' perception of character and competence in military public affairs practitioners will occur the more familiar they become with each other. Data collected from the survey analyzed the perceptions of competence and character that media have of military public affairs practitioners. To test this hypothesis, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used. Socio-demographic variables, which served as controls, were entered in the first block. The amount of contact with the military public affairs practitioner was entered in the second block. Regression analysis was performed on the dependent variables of journalists' perceptions to military public affairs practitioners' competence and character.

The regression results revealed no significant predictors of practitioner competence. However, the results indicated that familiarity was positively associated with more positive perceptions of character. No socio-demographic predictors were significant. The data revealed that more contact between journalists and military affairs practitioners predicted positive perceptions of character of military affairs practitioners ($t=0.11, p<.05$).

Two open-ended questions were included on the survey to form the basis of the study's qualitative analysis of research question 1 (R1). Results from these questions were categorized as to the predominant theme of the response. These themes were ranked by the number of times the response occurred. For the first question, what can the military public affairs practitioner do to improve working relationships with journalists, of the 71 respondents to the survey, 25% replied that public affairs practitioners should be more open and honest on all issues including negative ones. The next most common response to the question, at 23%, was military public affairs practitioners should be faster and timelier with information and responses. The third most common result to the question, held by 10% of the respondents stated that military public affairs practitioners should train with media to gain more understanding and knowledge of journalists and the media.

For the second question, what do journalists perceive to be the biggest communication problem in the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and journalists, the most common response at 8% was public affairs practitioners steered information to serve military purposes. The next three most common responses to the question each had five respondents, or 7%, quoting each issue as what they perceived as the biggest communication problem in the relationship. Secrecy, especially when it's not needed, public affairs practitioners' negative perception of media intent and confusion to who the military point-of-contact actually is, were the three other common responses to this question. The rest of the responses averaged 4% or less in terms of reoccurrence.

Discussion

This study's examination of the media's perception of public affairs practitioners' competence and character found the relationship between the news media and the public affairs

practitioner was quantitatively significant with regard to character and familiarity. In the data, familiarity positively predicted positive perception of character, and that finding, partially supports the hypotheses that familiarity produces positive perceptions of military public affairs practitioners.

In addition to quantitatively examining competence and character perception issues, we approached the issue qualitatively by asking two open-ended questions. First was what do practicing journalists think military public affairs practitioners can do to improve their relationships with the media. Secondly, we asked what can be done to improve the working relationship between the media and military public affairs practitioners. Via the stratified random sample, the subjects provided common answers, which are in direct response and applicable to answering R1. The predominant themes of the responses were categorized and then ranked by the number of times the response occurred.

To the first question the most common response was, public affairs practitioners should be more open and honest on all issues including negative ones. This result may be due to a misunderstanding of the true mission and policies governing military public affairs practitioners about the release of information. For example, while the Department of Defense policy on the release of information is “maximum disclosure, minimum delay,” each of the branches of service has extensive regulations and instructions governing what kind of information is releasable at any given time. The reasons why these regulations and instructions exist are as varied as the regulations themselves. For example, there are DOD regulations pertaining to the release of information pertaining to formal military investigations of wrongdoing. Some of the reasons why these regulations exist are to protect those being investigated from unfavorable public opinion during the investigation, and to protect the investigation itself from prejudice resulting from

public opinion. While this may appear to a journalist as being closed, or untruthful toward a potentially negative issue, there are solid reasons for not providing that information. However, for military public affairs practitioners to be more open and honest on all issues, they could proactively explain to the media the reasons why they release information the way they do, and hopefully eliminate any misperceptions of withholding or dodging of the issues.

The next most common response to the question was, military public affairs practitioners should be faster and timelier with information and responses. Again, the reasons for this response are varied. However, military public affairs practitioners may overcome issues of timeliness in response rates several ways. First, military public affairs practitioners may seek out training by the media to gain better knowledge of how media organizations work and what it is like to be a journalist under deadline. This would afford the military public affairs practitioner a better understanding of the media's needs, and may in turn serve as a self-motivator to provide better service to the media. Another way to overcome this issue would be again for the military public affairs practitioner to educate the media. Military public affairs practitioners could educate the media on what constraints the military has in getting approval for the release of information and why the military chain of command exists and how it works, thus educating them on the military public affairs practitioners need for time. By both sides learning more about each other's needs, the idea of being slow and untimely would fade.

The third most common result to the first question was military public affairs practitioners should train with media to gain more understanding and knowledge of journalists and the media. Although this was addressed in the proceeding paragraph, it brings to light a need for better knowledge of the roles the military public affairs practitioner and the media have. By educating each group on the operations of the other, each side would experience less confusion,

more tolerance, and less adversarial relationships. The more knowledge gained between the two could also lead to more agreement and accuracy of information between the two when stories arise. To do this would be simple if both parties would be willing and able. In fact the DOD has already taken steps in this direction, when during the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003 it trained more than 250 national and international journalists in contingency operations as part of an effort to prepare journalists possibly embedding with military forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Results from that training, while not officially concluded, indicate that the training was successful in educating journalists in why the military operates as it does, and educating journalists how and why the military handles information the way they do. Training media and military public affairs practitioners would provide more understanding and better footing for more positive working relationships.

Included in the qualitative research was a second open-ended question; what do journalists perceive to be the biggest communication problem in the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and journalists. In this second question, the most common response was, public affairs practitioners steered information to serve military purposes. The problem may result from military public affairs practitioners being similar to public relations individuals and attempting to put out “talking points,” or, information that highlights the command, especially when divulging more negative information requested by the journalists. While public affairs practitioners should ethically provide factually information, they never claimed to be an entirely objective entity like a police chief or a doctor releasing patient information. Though respondents collectively claimed their biggest issue was with information being steered to serve military purpose, “talking points” are a necessary tool for military public affairs practitioners to highlight positive information when releasing negative information, and

perhaps the best way to improve this obstacle in the relationship would be to limit “talking points” to some extent and in certain circumstances; for instance, to limit “talking points” to a percentage of the conversation or to limit them to stories on a certain level, such as local, regional or national

The next three most common responses were, secrecy, especially when it is not needed; public affairs practitioners’ negative perception of media intent; and confusion as to whom is the military point-of-contact. The belief that public affairs practitioners are being overly secret is a large concern to both journalists and the military. In recent years, military public affairs practitioners have refrained from statements such as, “no comment,” or “I can neither confirm nor deny...,” in an effort to improve that perception. While historically the military has a reputation of being overly secret, and while it may still be necessary for operational security, the military has made an effort in recent years to release negative information, such as a major accident, as quickly as possible to relieve any thought that the military would be holding something back from the media.

In addition, in many cases, the military does release its information in a timely manner to reinforce the fact that there wasn’t anything suspicious about an incident, however, with the rapid release of such information, there is often not enough time for the public affairs practitioner, especially a junior one, to clarify exactly what information is secret and what is releasable. In this case, it is common for what could be perceived as high secrecy to be presented to the journalists. In these instances, the best solution would be to heavily train public affairs practitioners to clarify to the media that it is not being secret, but simply making sure the release of the information would not endanger anyone or anything, and that a quick release of the information, pending its classification, would happen. The public affairs practitioner should also

ensure that the information is quickly released pending its classification, as timeliness should help alleviate the belief that the military is being overly secret.

The journalists' belief that public affairs practitioners have a negative perception of their intent would need to be further studied to identify if, in fact, public affairs practitioners do have a negative perception of journalists' intent, or if the respondents who wrote this as what they believed to be the biggest communication problem in the relationship, are simply misunderstanding the communication directed towards them. With a positive identification that public affairs practitioners have a negative perception of journalists' intent, further research could be done to clarify why that perception is in place, such as mistrust with new relationships or bad past experience. By studying why that perception was there, research could dictate how to best improve the relationship.

Confusion as to who is the military point-of-contact is a problem that should easily be solved to help the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and journalists. The respondents to the survey were unsure of whom to contact at the base or within the public affairs office, and that confusion may have been instigated by several factors such as, the public affairs practitioners rotational transfers, having been transferred to several individuals when previously contacting the public affairs office or confusion when having been transferred from the public affairs office to a subject matter expert at the base.

This confusion could and should be easily handled on the local level. Public affairs officers should have regular (annual or biannual) meetings with representatives from local media to have face-to-face contact and during those meetings should pass on contact information to distribute at their offices. All media should contact the military through the public affairs office, and there should be a designated media officer in the shop that they should contact. The

respondents who described this as the biggest problem in the relationship with military public affairs practitioners seemed to have unfortunately suffered a miscommunication that could and should be easily clarified. All of the above mentioned methods of improvement, while not definitely provable are linked to the fact that the only proven method, by this study, to increase the perception of trust is by increasing the amount of familiarity which would in turn increase the perception of character. When coupling these results from the qualitative research with the quantitative results, we clearly see that no other variable but character was directly linked to trust by means of familiarity.

In addition, from these responses and their possible applications, we concluded that the most common results could be further categorized into three dimensions: openness, truthfulness, and education. These dimensions are related to the theoretical approaches used in this study, in that organizational culture is related to further education between the groups; expectancy violation is related to education in terms of the groups' understanding of common behaviors within each culture; coorientation theory is related to truthfulness with regards to accuracy and agreement of information presented by each group; and lastly social penetration theory is directly related to openness in that as the more the two groups disclose, the more likely they are to perceive each other's character positively.

The limitations that were faced during this research were concentrated in the data-gathering area of the study. Originally, the study intended to look at eight United States metropolitan areas, with four of the cities being within 50 miles of at least one major military installation and the other four cities beyond 50 miles of any major military installation. The initial concept was to make direct telephone contact with news media leadership at newspapers and television stations with the intent of having that individual distribute the link to the on-line

survey within their organization. After four days, there had been approximately 25 respondents. We then decided to expand the study to 20 additional metropolitan areas, using the same data-gathering methods. Of the 20 cities, there were 10 located near a military installation and 10 were located far from a military installation.

However, after four additional days and approximately 15 more respondents, we decided to switch the data-gathering methods to include directly soliciting journalists' participation via publicly available e-mail address on their company's websites. After contacting more than 800 additional journalists via e-mail, we obtained enough data to draw conclusive results. The lack of willingness to participate was the limiting factor in this study.

Conclusion

This research study looked at an important topic in the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and journalists. The research used quantitative methods to study the dependent variables of attitude, competence, knowledge, and character in relationship to the sociodemographic independent variable. Although no correlation was found between attitude, competence, knowledge, and sociodemographic variables, a significant result was found in the relationship between familiarity and character. This indicated that as familiarity increased, so did positive perception of character. This study also examined a related issue, how to fix negative perceptions between the groups qualitatively, by asking two open-ended questions. The results were ranked ordinally in terms of the amount of repeated responses. The findings indicate that there needs to be more openness, truthfulness, and education cooperatively between the groups, to further a more positive relationship.

The outcome of this study indicates the possibility for future research into how military public affairs practitioners perceive journalists on the same issues of competence and character.

Additionally, this research could specifically clarify the negative perception that media indicated in the qualitative portion of the analysis as to the military public affairs practitioners' perceptions. Another possible avenue of study could be to research how distance from major military installations is a factor in familiarity and issues of competence and character, along with the length of time spent in developing relationships between journalists and military public affairs practitioners they worked with

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Appendix

Media Survey

Researchers in the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma want to learn more about the relationship between journalists and military public affairs practitioners. We appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. We ask that you read each set of instructions carefully, and respond to each of the survey items as accurately as possible. All of your responses to this study will be treated confidentially.

1. Your gender (mark only one): ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Your age: _____
3. Employment location: City: _____ State: _____
4. Employment Organization: ☐ Daily newspaper
☐ Weekly newspaper
☐ Television Station
5. Education: ☐ Some high school
☐ High school grad
☐ Associate's degree
☐ Bachelor's degree
☐ Master's degree
☐ M.D./Ph.D./J.D./Etc
6. Have you ever been embedded with a military unit? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, please indicate approximate dates: _____
7. Have you ever worked directly with a military public affairs practitioner? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please indicate how much contact you had with the military public affairs practitioner:

_____ Daily _____ Weekly _____ Monthly _____ Every other month

8. Have you ever served in the military? _____ Yes _____ No

9. Has anyone in your immediate family served in the military? _____ Yes _____ No

The first item is designed to determine your attitude of military public affairs practitioners. Items consist of pairs of adjective opposites. Each of the pairs of adjective opposites is separated by the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Read each of the adjective opposite pairs, and then circle a number that best describes your attitude toward military public affairs practitioners.

My perception of military public affairs practitioners.

10. Negative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Positive

[Where 1 is the most negative and 7 the most positive.]

11. Bad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Good
12. Unfavorable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Favorable
13. Unacceptable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Acceptable
14. Foolish	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Wise
15. Wrong	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Right
16. Expert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Inexpert
17. Unintelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Intelligent
18. Intellectual	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Narrow
19. Dishonest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Honest
20. Unsympathetic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sympathetic
21. Good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bad

Next, we are interested in finding out what you know about the job of military public affairs practitioners. Based on your knowledge of the role of military public affairs practitioners please indicate if the following statements are true or false.

22. Military public affairs practitioners and journalists are partners in the dissemination of information

☐ True

☐ False

23. Military public affairs practitioners serve as an effective extension of the news staff, covering the military for which he/she is responsible.

☐ True

☐ False

24. Intentionally or not, when journalists use material supplied by military public affairs practitioners they are helping the military public affairs practitioners improve the image of the military.

☐ True

☐ False

25. Military public affairs practitioners often aid the journalist by serving as a “legman” for him/her, gathering information that the journalist may or may not eventually use in a story

☐ True

☐ False

26. Journalists often help military public affairs practitioners inform the public about issues and programs that are important to the military

☐ True

☐ False

27. Military public affairs practitioners help journalists obtain accurate, complete and timely news

☐ True

☐ False

28 Military public affairs practitioners typically issue news releases or statements on matters of genuine news value and public interest.

☐ True

☐ False

29 The primary function of military public affairs practitioners is to get publicity for the military

☐ True

☐ False

Finally, please answer the following questions.

30 In your opinion, what can military public affairs do to improve working relationships with journalists?

31 In your opinion, what is the biggest communication problem in the relationship between military public affairs practitioners and journalists?