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The Media's Perceptions of

Military Public Affairs Practitioners

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Abstract

This paper investigates the levels of trust and credibility that civilian journalists perceive about military public affairs practitioners in relation to how much contact various journalists have with the military. This paper also examines the overall knowledge that journalists have of the job of military public affairs practitioners. Based on a literature review of previous studies and 49 collective years of military public affairs service, the researchers posited that the relationships public relations practitioners have with journalists closely resemble those of military public affairs practitioners and journalists. Researchers employed organizational culture, expectancy violation, social penetration, and coorientation theory as the logical basis for hypotheses. To assess predictions, researchers conducted a random survey of different news media organizations that were geographically separated from, and geographically near, major military installations. Multiple regression results revealed that journalists' contact with military public affairs predicted greater perceptions of character of military public affairs practitioners. Qualitative results suggested that character is the most important point of contention as practicing journalists view the military public affairs function

The Media's Perceptions of Military Public Affairs Practitioners

For the past several decades, journalists and military public affairs practitioners have shared a dynamic relationship that is sometimes problematic. Both the media and the military rely on this relationship to accomplish their shared goal of providing accurate and timely information to the public. For example, military public affairs practitioners rely on journalists to get their messages to the public, while journalists rely on military public affairs practitioners to provide them with access to information and sources for stories they feel are of public interest. Defense Department policy mandates that military public affairs practitioners be involved when journalists want official statements or access to military installations or property. Additionally, military public affairs practitioners control the release information and images to the media for publication. In the past, this position of control has caused strain on the relationship between the two, particularly with regards to the issue of journalists perceiving military public affairs practitioners as uniformed public relations practitioners. Research into journalists' perceptions of civilian public relations personnel suggests the media does not generally view public relations practitioners as high in trust and credibility

If journalists lack a sense of trust and credibility in military public affairs practitioners, there is potential that the relationships between the two will suffer because they both rely on each other for the distribution of timely and accurate information. This investigation seeks to discover whether there is a relationship between the familiarity of journalists and military public affairs, and perceptions of trust and credibility that journalists have of military public affairs. However, there is a lack of research specifically dealing with journalists' perceptions of trust and credibility toward military public affairs practitioners. Due to this lack of research, this investigation will draw inferences from research into journalists' perceptions of trust and credibility toward commercial public relations.

Since the rise of public relations in the 1920s news reporters and public relations practitioners have been contemplating each other's roles and trying to define the boundaries of their relationships. The relationship of the public relations practitioner and the news media has been tenuous at best with information turnover, mistrust, and misunderstanding being prevalent themes. According to Feldman (1961), much of the literature concerning the newsman-practitioner relationship centers around two main topics--communications skills (such as news judgment and writing) and ethical issues (such as fairness and openness).

Another study by Stegall and Sanders (1986) recognized the relationship between reporters and public relations practitioners as one that needs to be vastly improved and more cooperative. They also examined the role of stereotyping in the relationship. A survey was completed by 19 newspaper journalists and 10 reporters from Missouri asking questions of news value, job status, and cooperativeness vs. adversarialism. The study determined that public relations practitioners tended to see their jobs as equal in status, while the journalists saw themselves in a higher status. Furthermore, a majority of the reporters surveyed agreed with the statement that "reporters tended to look down their noses at PR people" (p344), while the reporters reported that they see their relationship as more cooperative vice adversarial.

Overall, the problem between news reporters and public relations practitioners consists of two issues: credibility, and perceived expectations. Credibility is embedded in the hearts and minds of journalists from day one. According to Aronoff (1975), without source credibility there cannot be successful communication. Aronoff conducted a study of a sample of Texas newspaper journalists and public relations practitioners. The study looked at three factors that would affect communication: (1) journalists' attitudes toward public relations practitioners, (2) journalists perceptions of similarity in news value, and (3) journalists' perceptions of occupational status between themselves and public relations practitioners.

The results showed that the journalists held public relations practitioners in lower occupational esteem. It also showed a greater deal of hetrophily, or the differences in theology and what was considered news value items. According to McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner (1974), communicators who were more homophilous with each other tended to have a much more persuasive conversation. In concurrence was Platt (1964), who found that members of his study attributed more credibility to those who held similar views as themselves. Thus, Platt concluded public relations sources would be believable to the extent that they hold like beliefs and values as the journalists themselves. However, the study showed that while public affairs practitioners ranked journalists third out of 16 occupations, with only doctors and artists higher, the journalists ranked public relations practitioners 16th, at the bottom.

While these results were not overwhelmingly lopsided, they did show a tendency for judgments of news stories to be negatively influenced when they were attributed to a public relations writer versus a reporter. Aronoff (1975) also found results that inferred nearly 80 percent of reporters perceived their relationship with public relations practitioners as competitive in nature. The issue of perception also contributes to the tenuous relationship between the two groups, as it clearly plays a role in the way public relations practitioners communicate with journalists. In 1997, Jeffers examined perceived expectations between public relations practitioners and journalists. In other words, Jeffers wanted to find out whether familiarity influenced the perception of one another's job. To conduct his study, Jeffers held 96 personal interviews with 51 reporters and 45 public relations practitioners in five Ohio cities during April and May of 1976 The interviews yielded three main areas of interest First, the public relations practitioners gave a slight edge to their own occupation over the reporters they worked with as far as ethics and writing skills However, the practitioners held higher expectations of the reporters as far as ethics and skills, more so than that of their own profession Jeffers concluded that reporters who actually knew a public relations practitioner rated them higher than practitioners in general On the other hand, practitioners rated the ethics of specific reporters significantly lower than reporters in general Additionally, Jeffers found that reporters perceived their relationships with public relations practitioners as only slightly cooperative, while practitioners saw it as much more cooperative Finally, Jeffers established the relationship of the reporters and the practitioner as non-competitive However, those who do find it competitive view the practitioner as low in ethics and skill Given the predominance of credibility and perception as issues influencing the communication between military public affairs practitioners and journalists, if journalists perceive problems in their relationships with military public affairs practitioners, we ask:

RQ1: What do practicing journalists think military public affairs practitioners can do to improve their relationships with the media?

Hypothesis

In addition to a predominance of credibility and trust perception issues, as researchers we must also look at how organizational cultural differences affect the relationship, as so often cultural clashes, which develop out of ignorance, can produce significant obstacles in the development of effective communication However, it can also be argued that it is not enough to look at these issues from the broad organizational cultural perspective and that because the relationship is dyadic, interpersonal communicative issues come into play Therefore, this investigation includes social penetration, coorientation, and expectancy violation dimensions to determine how they effect the perceptions held by journalists toward military public affairs practitioners. We believe, that by including these dimensions into this investigation and coupling them with evidence that there is some correlation between more familiarity and more positive credibility and trust perceptions that we will find support that states:

Understanding the organizational culture of both groups is necessary in order to learn more about differences in credibility and perceptions. The term organizational culture is a relatively new way of examining organizations. The term was made popular in the early 1980s by researchers Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982, 1983) as a metaphor to describe how members of various organizations assimilate and come together to accomplish group tasks. In their research into organizational behavior, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo recognized certain themes and patterns that resembled cultural behavior. By using qualitative research methods like interviews, recordings, and observation, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo examined organizations as anthropologists might examine culture (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997). Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) posited that researchers can uncover an organization's cultural reality by examining such items as the organization's vocabulary, stories, rites, and rituals. Martin (2002) concluded that the four dimensions of organizational culture consist of stories, language, rituals, and symbols.

Storytelling contributes to culture building by providing a means to propagate values, ideology, and the "unwritten rules" that guide an organization's members in their everyday tasks. According to Robbins (1992), stories "anchor the present in the past and provide explanations and legitimacy for current practices" (p265). Storytelling also contributes to the enculturation of an organization by helping members define what works and what doesn't work in a particular organization. Although most storytelling occurs as a type of entertainment for those involved, it also serves to motivate or caution organizational members about certain behavior.

Language, as it pertains to organizational culture, refers not only to the shared spoken code that enables members to interact, it also includes the latent content found in jargon and metaphors. These two aspects of language help organizational members communicate with each other contextually. Additionally, familiarity with an organization's language allows members to identify themselves as insiders of that culture. According to Clark (1998), jargon is the unique language of a culture that only those who belong can truly understand.

According to Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983), organizational culture is "constituted in the various rituals which members regularly or occasionally perform" (p135). Rituals orient and synchronize an organization's focus and regulate its members. Other researchers indicate that rituals help members of an organization structure their social reality (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). For the most part, rituals in organizational culture serve to help members accomplish their day-to-day activities while demonstrating their understood organizational values.

Organizational symbols are material things that represent the various aspects of the organization. From the structure of the building and office décor to executive privileges and employee dress, symbols in culture communicate status, values, and ideology. Symbols are often powerful clues into organizational culture because they are easily visible (Martin, 2002).

According to Robbins (1992), "Symbols convey to employees who is important, the degree of egalitarianism desired by top management, and the kinds of behavior (for example, risk taking, conservative, authoritarian, participative, individualistic, social) that are appropriate" (p266). Although most researchers allude only to material things as symbols, Alvesson (2002) includes words or statements in the definition

A look at each of the four dimensions described above can help one understand or at least observe culture in military organizations. The stories, language, rituals, and symbols shared among members of military units can provide insight into how members assimilate into the organizations. When examined under a cultural microscope these aspects develop a picture of the organization.

The stories military members share with each other are often historical in nature and act to motivate members to train. For example, according to Soeters (2000), a main goal of basic military training is to facilitate "the recruits' transition into new social roles and statuses" (p477). Those in the military are famous for using lingo and jargon when communicating with other members of their organization. Often, military jargon serves to simplify communication, as when acronyms replace lengthy titles and/or names Other times, however, language is used by members of specific military organizations to indicate cultural boundaries (Martin, 2002)

The third dimension, rituals, is probably the most recognizable aspect of military organizational culture. Various rituals that occur within the military today have deep historical roots and remain, for the most part, unchanged over time. Symbols in military organizations are also very visible and important aspects of military culture. For example, Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) suggest military uniforms communicate organizational exclusivity and hierarchy. The general public interprets authority from the symbol of military uniforms, while to fellow comrades-in-arms uniforms communicate status, qualification, and achievement (Soeters, 2000)

In comparison, there is limited research into civilian newsroom culture as it pertains to the four dimensions described above. However, Northwestern University's Readership Institute

(2000) conducted an in-depth study examining the collective attitudes of newspaper cultures. The study identified two basic types of cultures that newspapers can fit into: constructive and defensive. Constructive cultures are outward-looking, have good internal communication, and produce more satisfied customers. Defensive cultures, on the other hand, resist change, are more individualistic, and do not adapt well to changing customer needs. According to the study, 80 percent of the newspapers they examined were classified as having defensive cultures.

Within the defensive culture type, newspapers were categorized into three subsets: Aggressive-Defensive, Passive-Defensive, or Passive-Aggressive. Journalists who work in an Aggressive-Defensive newspaper cultures learn to approach everyday jobs in dynamic ways to protect their positions, but are expected to attain unrealistic goals. Those who work in Passive-Defensive cultures avoid interpersonal conflict, follow rules well, and are often micromanaged. The third type, Passive-Aggressive, contains a mixture of both previously discussed types. Of the newspapers that had defensive cultures, a majority of them were further categorized as Aggressive-Defensive. In addition to the aforementioned, this type of newspaper culture breeds perfectionism as journalists feel they must avoid mistakes and put in overtime to meet deadlines. Although the study recognizes these traits as important in the field of journalism, it suggests overemphasizing them can lead newspaper members to lose sight of goals and possibly fall victim to stress (Readership Institute, 2000). In addition to being perfectionists, journalists who belong to Aggressive-Defensive newspaper cultures also tend to be oppositional. The study describes highly oppositional cultures can be more prone to unnecessary conflict and poor problem-solving abilities.

Organization culture applies to this study based on an understanding of the definitions just outlined. Specifically, with an understanding of the predominate newsroom culture of aggressive-defensive versus the authoritative perspective civilians have of military members in newsrooms, the possibility for mistrust and poor credibility between professionals in these organizations is likely Furthermore, behavioral expectations between members of various organizations can be further described by examining them as they relate to expectancy violation theory

Burgoon and Jones (1976) first presented expectancy violation theory, though Burgoon and Hale (1988) conducted its seminal study. Expectancy violation theory is based on the concept that individuals have expectations about how interactions should be, and though normally not aware of those expectations, when they are violated, individuals become aware of their existence (Miller, 2002). Miller discovered that expectations are "not defined in an absolute sense but instead operate within a range" (p147).

Only when behavior leaves that range does the individual recognize the action as violating an expectation, and it results in arousal. If the behavior stays within that range, it is simply tolerated (Miller, 2002). The arousal created when an expectation is violated directs attention away from the interaction and toward the cause of the arousal. Miller also suggests that when the expectation violation occurs, the extent of the impact of the violation depends on the evaluation of the violation and the assessment of the person who committed the violation

Expectancy violation theory began with intensive research into nonverbal behavior, but it was used in other assorted research, including research with stereotypes. Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch (1987) studied expectancy violation theory and propose, "Different processes underlie the impact of background information on evaluations of in-group and out-group members" (p536).

Expectancy violation theory examines the way in which stereotypes provide information about an individual's personal characteristics, and the impact of how actual characteristics violate stereotyped expectations. Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch suggest that those evaluations should become more "extreme in the direction of the expectancy violation" (p537). For instance, individuals who possess more favorable characteristics than expected will be evaluated more positively. In their study, the researchers looked at how white people evaluated both white and black job applicants, while some members from each group were asked to speak "nonstandard" and some "standard" English. Additionally, the two groups were divided so that each would have individuals dressed to appear either upper or lower class.

The researchers predicted, via expectancy violation theory, that white Americans' expectations would be positively violated by upper-class-appearing African Americans and negatively violated by nonstandard-English-speaking white Americans (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). The study's findings only partially supported their hypotheses. However, as predicted, the upper-class-appearing, standard-English-speaking African American applicant was rated significantly more favorably than the similar white applicant; and the upper-class-appearing, standard-English-speaking African American applicant was rated higher than their white counterpart.

Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch concluded that stereotypes influence evaluations of individual members of in- and out-groups in complex ways, though expectancy violation theory did predict and prove the assumption that stereotypes led only to favorably biased perceptions of in-group members.

In another study examining the involvement of stereotypes and expectancy violation, Jussim, Fleming, Coleman, and Kohberger (1996) looked at how stereotypes influenced perceptions of individuals in- and out-groups, with a focus on social judgment. Again, with the study working with job applicants, expectancy violation theory predicted that the individual whose characteristics violate the perceiver's stereotypes would be more extreme on the evaluation continuum

The results of the study, again, confirmed that black Americans would be evaluated more favorably than similar white Americans when being evaluated by white Americans While studying ethnicity in the expectancy violation theory, the results of the study replicated the pattern of results from the 1987 study.

The idea that individuals have expectations about interaction is relevant to this study because it suggests members of the news media might expect military public affairs practitioners to act according to whatever stereotypes they might have about military members. However, to gain further understanding, we must also consider the process of how people orient themselves to one another. Coorientation theory was first developed by Newcomb in 1953 as a model to explain the relational analysis of dyadic pairs. The model explains that as two communicators (a and b) communicate, a simultaneous process of orientation toward some other object of communication (x) takes place In addition, the communicators themselves also orient themselves toward his or her communicative partner. This process of orientation increases with time and includes attitudes, behaviors, attraction, and a natural balance in understanding between the two communicators. According to Newcomb, the more people talked, the more they gravitate toward each other's views

Although a viable model, nearly two decades passed without much research going into Newcomb's coorientation model However, McLeod and Chaffee (1972) took the idea of coorientation to its next level of development, when they said that the communicator's communication style and content with the receiver depends on the communicator's perspective of the attitudes and perspectives held by the other communicator. This led them to conclude that the effectiveness of the communication process is a function of the correctness of the predictions McLeod and Chaffee also explained that coorientation Theory measures the degree of agreement, accuracy, and congruency between individuals and can be applied to groups in terms of their perceptions. These three variables are the backbone of the theory, affording a framework to researchers interested in examining how and to what degree individuals or groups orient themselves to each other and stimuli. McLeod and Chaffee suggest agreement indicates the degree to which each of the two groups' beliefs actually agree with the other. Accuracy is the extent to which one group's cognition equals what the other group thinks. Perceived disagreement or agreement on the issue is congruency

Another way of looking at these variables is in terms of perceptions on behalf of the communicators In this manner, they can be defined as accuracy, agreement, and congruence. Accuracy refers to the extent to which one group can predict the response of the other group. Agreement refers to the similarity in attitudes between the individuals of groups. Congruency refers to the extent to which one groups' own beliefs and attitudes correspond to the responses they predict for the other group (Connelly & Knuth, 2002)

Taking into account the three variables and the model as an explanation of how the dyadic relationship works as a process, one can clearly see that coorientation theory emphasizes two-way communication. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1994), coorientation not only furthers understanding, but also helps identify three problems that can occur in the communication process: (1) communicators may hold different definitions of an object; (2) one communicator's perceptions of another's views of an object does not necessarily always match the second communicator's actual views; and (3) one communicator may hold inaccurate perceptions of another communicator's belief on an object of mutual concern.

We can see that from it's beginnings in 1953 as a model for examining what occurs relationally in dyadic situation, coorientation theory has evolved into a process that applies not only on an individual level, but also on a group level, and that it inherently provides a frame work for understanding the degree in which communicators relate to one another We applied coorientation theory to this study in order to explore what the perceptions are between military public affairs practitioners and journalists, to explain how the perceptions were formed, and to offer ways to improve the shortcomings that may exist within those relationships. However, if no shortcomings are apparent, then the use of coorientation theory will serve as reinforcement to the current policies and procedures used by the military public affairs practitioners.

One way relationships might develop passed perceptions is though self-disclosure Altman and Taylor developed social penetration theory in 1973 as a way to explain how people interact with others in the interpersonal communication genre. The theory states that as relationships develop, communication moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels to more personal ones. The assumption is that this theory makes the statement that if self-disclosure is high, then a relationship will develop. This "if-then" statement makes this a scientific theory. It does not allow free will because people can choose whether to self-disclose based on time and manner. Axiologically, this theory suggests that this behavior will take place regardless of values (Altman & Taylor). The heart of social penetration theory is about a social exchange in communication, meaning that relationships are sustained when they are relatively rewarding, and discontinued when they are relatively costly (Roloff, 1981).

If social penetration occurs between public relations practitioners and the media, then social penetration theory has value in terms of shedding light on the relationships developed between public relations practitioners, their clients, and the media. In the public relations field,