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Military PAOs and the Media: Conflicting Systems of Ethics

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Both the military and the media have strong programs for training their practitioners in ethics and both have a justifiable pride in their ethical conduct. However each profession treats its ethical obligations regarding information differently. The military ethical obligation focuses on protecting useful information and denying access to information to any potential enemy. The media ethical obligation focuses on acquiring information and distributing it to the widest possible audience.

This paper explores the reasons why ethical obligations regarding how information is handled create conflict between the media and the military. The objective of this discussion is to identify areas of compromise or cooperation; or to decide if and when that conflict is ethically appropriate. By way of answering the question, the authors explore each side's assumptions about ethical communication, the exchange of information, and the ethical principles underlying their occupational roles. Finally, the paper presents recommendations for how a special practitioner, the public affairs officer (PAO), may act as the arbiter between the military and the media, balancing each side's competing interests.

The authors include a military ethics educator, a media ethics educator, a journalist, and former public affairs officers from the Air Force, Army and Navy. In this paper they first present the media's perspective on the public's right to know and its reaction to withholding information. They then describe the military's perspective on the public's right to know and explain why, within the military ethical framework, it may be

necessary to deny information to a journalist. The paper then describes the extent of ethics training for both military and media practitioners so that the reader may understand the depth of commitment each profession has to its standards of appropriate conduct. Finally, the authors present recommendations that focus on the unique role of the PAO and how that officer may help resolve some conflicts between the media and the military.

Introduction to the Problem - A Media Perspective on the Public's Right to Know

In 2009, Thomas Ricks, a former Pulitzer Prize winning reporter for the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post, posted a two-paragraph entry on his blog The Best Defense under the headline “The Same Old Public Affairs Crap.”

Central Command, the U.S. military headquarters for operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, released its report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan's Farah Province at 4:52 on Friday afternoon -- and in the summer. That is typical of military public affairs -- in fact, I once heard an Army PA officer boast about [how] good they were at using late Friday to disclose embarrassing information. Among other things, the late hour makes it difficult for reporters to find outside experts who have read the report and can comment on it.

Stunts like these are not cute. They undermine the credibility of the military and increase public suspicion of its statements. If General Petraeus is serious about improving strategic communications in his command, he'll tell his subordinates to stop throwing the bad news out the back door late on Fridays. (Ricks, 2009, n.p.)

For Ricks the episode was just another of the internecine battles journalists covering the military have with public affairs officers to obtain accurate and timely information. In the parlance of journalists covering the federal government, however, it was operation status quo – better known as the “Friday afternoon dump” when most people who would normally be asked to comment on a given topic have left for the weekend and when the public is least likely to pay attention.

Ricks comments are grounded in the public’s right to know – a principal laid out in the American Society of Newspaper Editors Canons of Journalism that gained legal status with the passage of the federal Freedom of Information Act in 1966. Adopted in 1922, the ASNE canons served as the first journalists’ code of ethics. Those canons were subsequently adopted in 1926 by the forerunner to the Society for

Professional Journalists. In 1973, SPJ revised the canons to more directly fit the role of the journalist. The opening statement of that code has remained unchanged since that writing—Journalists should “seek the truth and report it.” It goes on to say “Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” Journalists are reminded later in the code that they “should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.”

Exacerbating this commitment to the public's right to know is the belief among most journalists that they have a social or legal obligation, as the "fourth estate" to provide the public with all information needed to make decisions. Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840) said "...there are "three estates in Parliament; but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all." This statement, through many years and multiple interpretations, began a conviction among many journalists that they have an ethical obligation to provide voters all information that may help them evaluate our government, including the military. Simply put, the media's ethical obligation is to gather and to make public all information.

Military public affairs officers operate in a more nuanced arena. For many commanders in the wake of Vietnam War, the media was viewed at best as an impediment to their mission and at worst as an enemy. Public affairs' mission was to keep the dogs away. According to Kenneth Payne (2005), in the wake of the end of the “Cold War” the media increasingly are being viewed as an “instrument of war” rather than just a conduit through which bad news flows.

The media, in the modern era, are indisputably an instrument of war. This is because winning modern wars is as much dependent on carrying domestic and international public opinion as it is on defeating the enemy on the battlefield. And it remains true regardless of the aspirations of many journalists to give an impartial and balanced assessment of conflict.

The experience of the US military in the post-Cold War world demonstrates that victory on the battlefield is seldom as simple as defeating the enemy by force of arms. From Somalia and Haiti through Kosovo and Afghanistan, success has been defined in political, rather than military, terms.

He goes on to suggest (p. 81) that their role is to “control the media and shaping their output.” Payne is not just a casual commenter on the mission of the military commander and by extension the military public affairs officer. His 2005 paper is now

included in the reading lists at the military colleges for the U.S. Army, Air Force and the U.S. Homeland Security Department.

Increasingly many journalists are now encountering a profession in which the public affairs officers have a story that they want to sell to the American public as opposed to the story that the journalists want to tell.

The military's new mission to tell their story rather than the story is now exacerbating the conflict that existed before the end of the Cold War when the media was considered an enemy. Reporters are trained to be impartial observers, to be objective, to get the truth and to test the accuracy of the information from all sources to avoid inadvertent error. The struggle increases once journalists become embedded with a military unit. This became evident during Operation Iraqi Freedom when more than 700 journalists were embedded with Allied units. In many cases journalists, because of contracts they signed to not report certain events, just were reporting stories the military wanted told.

Reporters now must decide if the story that the military is telling is accurate or propaganda. And once imbedded they then lack the ability to test the accuracy of the information they have gathered from all sources – including the enemy.

If, as Payne says that the media are seen as a “instrument of war” then the issue of propaganda looms large for the journalists and – by extension – for public affairs officers.

Introduction to the Problem - A Military Perspective on the Public's Right to Know

Despite what journalists may think about how ethically the military handles the release of information, the majority of the American Public Believes the military is the most trustworthy and ethical of our government entities (Leal, 2005).

As an example of the military's approach to the ethics of information sharing, we describe the strategic plan of Task Force 134 at Camp Victory in Iraq in 2008 (Strategic Plan, 2008). That plan included the term “transparency” as one of its operating goals. Public Affairs Officers, under that plan, tried to be as transparent as possible while

complying with operational security, the Geneva Convention for the treatment of detainees and their own rules of engagement or status of forces agreement with the Government of Iraq.

In a sense they operated within competing strictures. Their interpretation of the public's right to know was based on an interpretation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." (Bill of Rights, 1789). The key phrase here is *freedom of speech, or of the press*. The general concept traces back to 1689 with England's Bill of Rights. In Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, from the United Nations states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression... and to receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers. "However, the public's right to know is not necessarily enabling freedom of speech, at times the media may suppress information (Sanders, 2003). Also, the public's right to know might not limit the right to privacy. This is a *gray area* when the military and the media are involved because publication of future military operations in Iraq and the privacy of detainees threatened the safety and lives of both the coalition forces and Iraqi detainees. For example, some of the rules of engagement for detainees included no video or still pictures were to be taken by the media that revealed the faces or identity of those detainees. Such identification imperiled the lives of detainees whose allegiances to various factions in Iraq, as in Sunni or Shia, were under observation by their particular opposing factions. The Geneva Convention also mandates certain

humane treatment of detainees. Although these requirements generally apply to a uniformed enemy and not to civilian forces, the coalition forces still complied with those requirements as much as possible. Since Task Force 134 was the successor unit to those units working with detainees during the Abu Ghraib scandal of mistreatment of prisoners, there was high media and international human rights interest in how these detainees were being treated in 2008. The International Red Cross, because it agreed to comply with the Geneva Convention was allowed full access to the detainees. However, the Human Rights Commission from the United Nations was not allowed access because it did not agree to the requirements of the Geneva Convention. This situation led to periodic criticism of Task Force 134 for not being open or transparent, and each time its personnel explained the delicate balance they were required to follow that involved requirements from the sources mentioned above, and its own mission statement.

That relationship could be compared to norms between public relations and the media. Public relations ethics requires service to the media and other key stakeholders or publics, but at the same time public relations is an advocate for the organizations they represent. So, there is always, as with military public affairs, a *Catch 22*, where public relations can be a mediator and serves both the organizations it represents as well as the media. From the media side, its ethical principles call for it to be a *watch dog* of government -- to serve the public as an unbiased third party and provide information to the public for adequate discussion and decision-making in the public arena. That is the market place of ideas if you will about issues in general society.

Public affairs at Task Force 134 through its higher headquarters also approved credentials for all media to visit its detainee facilities and provided armed escort for Pan

Arab, Iraqi and western media. This was done for the safety and security of the media at that time. For the Pan Arab, and Iraqi media, there was often no transportation of their own available to them to visit our facilities. Also, this security situation allowed for public affairs officers to review materials of the media to ensure compliance with the detainee rules of engagement.

A number of the media relied on local Iraqi personnel or *stringers* to gather their news. One private video crew from Los Angeles was hired by National Public Radio to do an in-depth story of the internment of Iraqi citizens for terrorist activities. Good journalism seeks to present balanced stories from a variety of perspectives. The video crew, as all the media were, expected to follow those ethical guidelines.

According to the strategic plan for Task Force 134 (2008), its mission was “In accordance with the United Nation’s Security Council Resolutions, Task Force 134 detains persons deemed to be Imperative Risks to Iraqi security, assesses and engages internees, and releases those no longer considered a threat...” Strategic communications or public affairs in this case, had three phases of operation , and the relevant goals for each were through the first phase:

Command messages for this phase are 1) to Iraqi audiences, that Coalition detention operations are fair, transparent and temporary while the Government of Iraq builds the capability to assume this function 2) to US and international audiences, that Coalition detention operations are fully transparent and in conformity with international law and norms...

For the second phase, that: Command messages for this phase are 1) to Iraqi audiences, that a) detainees were able to exercise their constitutional right to vote during provincial elections and b) Coalition detention operations are fair, transparent and temporary while the Government of Iraq builds the capability to assume this function 2) to US and international audiences, that the Government of Iraq is increasingly capable of conducting detention operations with Coalition assistance

For the third: Command messages for this phase are 1) to Iraqi audiences, that Coalition detention operations are decreasing as quickly as Government of Iraq

capabilities come on line 2) to US and international audiences, that the Government of Iraq will soon be fully capable of conducting detention operations with minimal Coalition advisory capability 3) to the Government of Iraq that Task Force 134 seeks to advise and assist the sovereign Government of Iraq in conducting transparent corrections operations in accordance with internationally accepted norms ...

Note then, the emphasis was on compliance with United Nations resolutions, the fair, transparent and temporary nature of the military operation to both international and Iraqi audiences while turning over operations as soon as possible to the Government of Iraq. Military public affairs in Iraq, and in much of public relations, worked to develop a mutually beneficial relationship to satisfy its key publics whether foreign or domestic, and worked with the media to accomplish that task.

Resolving or Compounding the Problem -- Military Training in Ethics

In order to explain how military officers in the United States are trained in ethics we have chosen to focus on one model -- ethics training at the United States Air Force Academy. This model is similar to that used at the sister academies (U.S. Military Academy, U.S. Naval Academy and U.S. Coast Guard Academy) and may best be understood in the context of the gap between the military and the rest of society.

The job of at the military academies is to take typical young citizens and make them military officers. That entails an act of persuasion, some might say coercion or brainwashing, but this is an all-volunteer force, so the cadets who are subject to this persuasion are self-selected. In the simplest of terms the task of the academies is to persuade cadets to buy into or internalize the military ethos. Each service and its academy will translate that ethos in its own way, based on the types of missions and operations it carries out, but a review of the core values of each service, reveals some common themes:

Army – loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage

Navy and USMC– honor, courage, commitment

Air Force – integrity, service before self, excellence in all we do

Coast Guard – honor, respect, devotion to duty

So these words and the clusters of meanings around them give some idea of the military ethos. It's not an all-inclusive list; there are other virtues that should be explored. But these concepts provide a good summary of the objectives of military ethical training. The academies' attempts to persuade young people to buy into this military ethos, includes having them embody these values. That's the task of the military academies. Now we will explore how those ethical values are taught.

At USAFA the curriculum specifies development of cadets in terms of the head, heart, and hand. They have three mission elements: the Dean of Faculty (academics), the Cadet Wing (military training), and the Athletic Department. The Dean of Faculty and Athletic Director closely parallel their counterparts in civilian universities, if one were to assume all students in a civilian university were also athletes. The Cadet Wing is unique to a military academy. The Cadet Wing is responsible for the daily operation of the wing, military training (including basic training), honor education, and, through the Center for Character and Leadership Development, a focused effort on the education and training that develops leaders with a strong moral fiber.

It seems appropriate to think of the Dean of Faculty as serving the head, the Athletic Director as serving the hand or the body and the Cadet Wing as the bridge between the two and serving as the locus of practical application, the heart. So when it comes to persuading cadets to internalize the military ethos and to embody the targeted values, the three elements work together by providing the academic background (DF), the practical application (CW) and, as Gen MacArthur put it, "the fields of friendly strife" (AD) where we sow "the seeds that on other days and other fields will bear the fruits of victory." It's an integrated approach whose goal is developing leaders of character. This goal cannot be reached in a classroom, on an athletic field or through military training; it takes all three of those areas and more. The entire function of the service academies is ethical training.

As part of this "persuasion" cadets are given an opportunity to practice what they learn, to lead each other, follow each other, train each other, work together as a team, and most importantly, to fail. In fact, one of the unique features of the military academies is

that each will deliberately push its students to his or her own personal limit; not as a sadistic training exercise, but rather, in the hopes that each future officer will learn what his or her limits are, and work to improve. That in itself is an important ethical lesson.

And that goes to the crux of how military academies teach ethics: to help their students internalize targeted values, they put what they learn in the classroom, in military training and on the athletic field into practice in their daily lives. We have the benefit of creating the experiences they live. Think of the way civilian institutions offer courses featuring experiential learning or service learning. In the academies' model, the experiences they create emulate a military environment; a military culture deliberately geared toward shaping character and developing cadets into what they should become. And that environment is often enhanced, making it more military than the “real” military, so their students get to practice their adaptation intensively. Cadets often describe graduating and joining the “real” Air Force is something of a relief.

Four years at a service academy can make for a pretty intense experience. When one compares the time spent at service academies to that at ROTC and other commissioning sources, there's a substantial difference. Cadets change over the course of their time at the academy, and if the academy has done its job properly, it's a positive change overall. But... you can also imagine the effect on a young person after they've gone through their time at an academy, and even during that time, you can imagine how the outside world will slowly seem different to them. Of course, they're the ones that change; the world is always just the world. Cadets often report how they feel more focused and centered and disciplined than their peers back home, maybe even than their family members. This is a common experience for many military members, not just cadets.

What is being described here is the emergence of the gap between the military and the society it serves. Thomas Ricks described this phenomenon in "The Widening Gap between the Military and Society" (1997). In the article he describes following a group of newly minted Marines back home after basic training. They experienced the same feeling of dislocation, a dissonance of having feelings of both familiar and alien attach to the same people or places. And just as Ricks described for the Marines, when this sense begins to form for the cadets, it's real and tangible, because even when they go home on

leave – especially then – the academy expects them to adhere to its values, and there may be penalties for those who don't. The academy's imposition into their personal lives extends deeper and broader even as they leave the academy itself.

While the entire academy experience is designed to internalize ethical values, there are specific courses in ethics both in the academic curriculum and in the Cadet Wing training. One such core ethics class includes several writing assignments. The first assignment in one such course requires the cadets to read George F. Will's Forrester Lecture, delivered to Naval Academy midshipmen in January of 2001. Then they write an essay titled "Why I'm Here," (here being USAFA), by responding to two prompts: first, whether Mr. Will is on track with his assessment of America, and second, whether they believe they'll acquire moral superiority over the rest of society as a cadet.

For those unfamiliar with George Will's writing and politics, he has a considered, conservative point of view; more Buckleyesque than our current talk-radio types. In the lecture, he rails against individualism and materialism in American society, and his message to the midshipmen can be summed up by the following excerpt:

... as American society becomes more individualistic, more self-absorbed, more whiney, in a sense, more of a crybaby nation, as I am bound to say on occasion, it becomes doubly important that the gap between the military and society remain substantial (Will, 2011)

That idea of a gap between the military and its society is an ancient one; Will didn't invent it. Those familiar with Plato's *Republic* may recall the important role Guardians played in the life of the ideal city; so important that the Guardians were to be selected to serve based on merit and ability, and then, having established that first cohort of the best men – and women – in the city, the best of the best were to be bred, their offspring solidifying the Guardian class, from which the city's rulers would ultimately be chosen (so in a very short span of *The Republic* you have the seeds of feminism, classism and eugenics, as well as this early argument for creation of the civilian-military gap). Will is pro-gap, obviously, and closely tracks Socrates' argument when he tells the midshipmen that, while it may be unwelcome to say so in today's climate of inclusiveness and political correctness, "some Americans are morally superior to others

and, frankly, that is why you're here." Will believes the gap is good and cadets should acquire moral superiority over their peers in society by virtue of their service.

Thomas Ricks takes the opposite view; warning that today's military is becoming increasingly insular and alienated from society.

Comparing cadet responses to this assignment from the 2002-2004 academic years to the current term they have remained consistent. Of more than 300 students, their responses to the prompts have remained consistent – 90% agree with Will that society is on the wrong track; and they are nearly evenly split on whether or not they see themselves as moral exemplars. There are certainly different ways to interpret these non-scientific results but there are a few observations we might find useful to our discussion.

First, a gap exists and that is not an accident; part of culture building at the academies involves getting across to cadets and new recruits that they will be held to a higher standard than they would have been in civilian society. They are deliberately set apart. The academies deliberately point to those we serve and say, "don't be that." And it's working, at least in the opinions of Americans. Gallup's Honesty and Ethics List for various professions consistently rank military officers in the top 3 of some two-dozen professions listed. Nurses have been ranked first for several years; newspaper and TV journalists are consistently ranked lower.

Second, you might think results like these would indicate that military professionals find themselves to be morally superior to civilians, yet the cadets are ambivalent with an almost 50-50 split. There definitely are those in the military who equate high professional standards with moral superiority, but many military professionals recognize that they fundamentally reflect society's values, both good and bad.

And this goes to the third observation: individuals don't come to the military as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate that needs to be "filled in" with doctrine and the military ethos. They are moral beings, fully formed, when they join. That's why the word persuasion was used to describe the academies' mission. Cadets' shared view of society and divided view of themselves points back to that basic task of the military academies, and any military accession point for that matter, to take increasingly diverse recruits from every

conceivable background and ask them: “how far will you buy into this?” “How much of this can you make your own?”

Fourth and finally, an observation about the military and the media: to help illustrate the task of military training in ethics, we have used columnists, polls and stories from media. In the ethics courses at USAFA they use a blog that links mostly to media pieces on the web that cover the military, ethics, various defense policies, and current public debates over moral questions. Simply put, the academies rely on the media every day to help do their job, to motivate cadets to think now about the challenges they will face as military officers. The relationship between the media and the military is inescapable even at the professional level. Also, we should not forget about the media’s power: to inform individuals and help them shape their view of the world. That’s a personal relationship, and whether it is a cadet taking a break from writing a term paper at 3 am to catch the latest news online, or a soldier in Afghanistan looking at the same story at the same time to stay in touch with what’s going on at home, the personal relationship with media impacts and shapes our professional relations. When a military academy asks a cadet: “how far will you buy into this?” or “how much of this can you make your own?” One cannot help but wonder, how much of their answer will rely on what they’ve learned from the media?

Resolving or Compounding the Problem -- Media Training in Ethics

The average media practitioner has far less academic training in either ethics or philosophy than does a military academy graduate. One possible reason for this disparity is the limitations imposed by accreditation standards. The Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications sets the standards for training for media professionals in the United States. Those standards include a required curriculum that contains only limited training in ethics and law. ACEJMC standards dictate that most of an accredited program in media be devoted to liberal arts and language training. After other requirements are met, the average accredited program in journalism or media only includes one or two courses in law and ethics (ACEJMC, 2003). Further, the

majority of lessons in those courses focus on the laws of libel, slander and First Amendment issues. In large part because of these accrediting standards, the average media practitioner has had very little exposure to philosophical principles associated with ethics. In their professional coursework, they have however been exposed to the conventional wisdom of many journalism professors who believe the First Amendment gives them a right to access information (Parkinson & Parkinson, 2006).

Here we focus on analysis of that component of media ethics education that applies specifically to the military public affairs officer. For the most part, media professionals, including both journalists and public relations practitioners receive similar training in ethics. This section of the paper explores how many public relations students and professionals, including future PAOs, are trained in ethics. It is also relevant to explore how much of their time of study is devoted to dealing with potential conflicts with other professionals such as journalists, the legal profession, or the military. PAOs may have degrees in public relations, but does that education prepare them to face the ethical conflicts that inevitably arise between the military and journalists?

The answer to these questions is complex. Ethical education is usually sparse or completely lacking in public relations. Research (Bowen, et al, 2006) on ethics in public relations shows that ethical education, either in college or as continuing education or employer training, is extremely low. That study included a sample of 1,827 public relations professionals around the world. A full 30.4% of the international sample of those working in public relations said they had never studied ethics, either academically or on the job. Another 40.3% of that sample said they had only a few lectures or readings on ethics. Combined, that is a 70.7% of public relations professionals who had little or no ethics training. Only 7.7% of respondents had many readings on ethics, 17.9% had an ethics course, and 3.7% had studied ethics in more than one course.

These findings (Bowen, et al, 2006) show that the 70.7% of public relations professionals who had little or no ethics training are a majority of the field, and thus may become a PAO and must deal with the ethical issues involved in many conflicting ethical demands. The data showed that the 29.3% reporting higher study of ethics were likely to have a graduate or advanced degree.

Other studies have found inadequate attention to ethics in public relations education. For example, Pratt and Rentner (1989) reported a lack of teaching about ethical behavior in all of the major public relations texts. Although codes of ethics do exist in the texts, based on public relations professional societies, codes of ethics alone are not enough to guide the ethical understanding and development of future PAOs. Scholars argue that codes of ethics are too weak, vague, or lack the applicability they would need to be helpful in ethical analyses (Sims & Brinkman, 2003) or lack usefulness due to their contradictory or voluntary nature (Parkinson, 2001) or unenforceable standards (Wright, 1993). A recent study (Stacks, DiStaso, Botan, 2007) of the standards in public relations education argued that ethics was one of the top three concerns for the field, concluding: “particularly ethics training as public relations practitioners and managers continue to fill more and more important strategic roles” (p. 12).

Researchers also find inadequate attention to ethics as reported by public relations professionals (Wright & Turk, 2007). In their daily practice, many professionals do not consider the ethics of their activities, or if they do it is in a superficial manner (Pratt, 1991). Wright’s study showed that although age is positively related to moral development, the higher forms of moral development are under-represented among public relations professionals (Wright, 1985). These studies show that moral education or on the job ethics training is all too infrequent. Other studies have found that public relations professionals rely on a basic enlightened self-interest approach to ethics that fails to offer any real analysis or insight into complex problems, thus failing to suffice as an ethical guideline for the field (Martinson, 1994).

Public relations is not the only major that should be considered when examining the ethical training of PAOs. Many schools do not have a separate major in public relations but rely on journalism or mass communication degrees with a sequence, track, or specialization in public relations. Therefore, journalism and mass communication programs also train both future journalists and future PAOs, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Of those programs around the country, research (Plaisance, 2009) shows us that about 30% of them have a combined law and ethics course. A survey by Moore (1994) found that those combined law and ethics courses resulted in ethics being given 10% or less of the course time. Combining law and ethics into one course is not,

then, an effective solution to train future public relations officers and PAOs. Combined law and ethics courses do not have an adequate time or amount of instruction necessary to confront and analyze the complex moral dilemmas that arise in a field with a plethora of ethical questions and divided loyalties. On the other side of that equation, journalists usually study a modicum of ethics that amounts to objective reporting and freedom of the press, also leaving them with a deficit of complex moral deliberation ability (Plaisance, 2009). Both sides of this relationship – PAOs and journalists – can benefit from not only moral education but also from the reflexivity that comes from understanding the values and ethical position of the other.

The attention in public relations given to ethics is inconsistent (Simmons & Walsh, 2010). Despite the inattention to ethics that the literature referenced above revealed, ethical instruction is argued to be important by many in the field who argue that public relations acts as the facilitator of truth in the marketplace of ideas (Heath, 2001) or as a corporate conscience (Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Bowen, 2008). These higher-level ethical responsibilities necessitate study of ethics, in some manner. Some ethics courses take a case study approach; others base ethical study on professionalism; whereas, more thorough and rigorous approaches delve into the realm of moral philosophy. The most effective format is argued to be based on a philosophical approach in which ethics is studied both normatively and positively (Cooper, 2009). For public relations students (and one can infer, for future PAOs) an approach base in moral philosophy was shown to provide a more critical and autonomous analysis of the industry than one based in professionalism or code of ethics (Erzikova, 2010).

At the undergraduate level, programs can submit for a voluntary accreditation from AEJMC (the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication), PRSA (the Public Relations Society of America), or other international bodies. However, there are not universal accreditation standards, and the requirements for ethics education vary greatly. The CPRE (Commission on Education in Public Relations) has issued two reports on undergraduate education, offering general guidelines: *The Professional Bond* (2006) and a *Port of Entry* (1999). Although these reports offer guidelines on public relations education, ethics is one requirement among many, and no specific advice about the form or nature of ethics education in public relations is offered.

At the graduate level, a new report by the CPRE, using a survey of public relations educators, found that ethics was the most pressing concern. In response to the ranking statement by public relations educators and professionals: “Knowledge that should be included in a master’s degree program in public relations/communication management” at 6.41 agreement on a 1 to 7 scale, followed by social media at 6.3 and crisis management at 6.25 (CPRE, in press, p. 27). Despite the importance of ethics education as rated by those in public relations, as well as the importance it holds due to the often inherently contentious objectives of the PAO and journalist in their necessary relationship, little is being done to advance ethical education of either the journalist or the public relations professional.

The PAO as Ethics Mediator and other Recommendation

The Public Affairs Officer (PAO) is by function and responsibility the mediator in conflicts between the military and the media. As has been stated before, the media believe themselves, indeed are taught in most journalism schools, to be the Fourth Estate, the watch dogs of government and by extension, the military. On the other hand, as you’ve also heard, the military highly values operational security and will error on the side of caution and withhold release of information to protect its secrets.

In this environment, the PAO serves three principle mediation roles: 1) facilitate access; 2) facilitate release of information; and 3) facilitate education.

Reporters need access in order to tell a story. The military is almost always the keeper of that access and has the ability to grant or deny the media a physical presence. Historically, military commanders have had a tendency to immediately and persistently answer “no” to these requests. This reluctance to grant access negatively impacts the reporter’s ability to tell the story, often to the detriment of the command. The PAO is in the right position to help facilitate access to events, places and people, within reason, thus enabling the reporter to tell a better story and allowing society to make better, informed decisions. From a command perspective, the impact of a PAO who is able to successfully advocate for open access for the reporter is often a much more positive portrayal of the command and/or situation than would otherwise be the case.

The demand for information can often be a sticking point between the two entities, particularly in times of crisis. Reporters want the information now, they want it fast and they want it accurately. The PAO typically has to go through a labyrinth and multiple layers in order to get the information. Even then, sometimes answers won't be known for weeks or months (i.e., the final accident investigation report). To overcome these obstacles, the PAO has to do all in his/her power to know where the information resides within the staff and build those relationships that enable the PAO to quickly get the information to the reporter that helps them tell the story. The PAO also has to know inside and out the legalities of the release of information and often must make the case that releasing the information is in the best interests of the command and national security. At the same time, the PAO must be able to clearly articulate why gaps and delays in getting information to the reporter exist lest the relationship become more adversarial or fail altogether.

Finally, the PAO must excel at facilitating the education of both the media and the military. Newsrooms used to have a military reporter even in mid-sized towns, particularly those close to a military installation. As bases have closed and newsrooms shrunk the military beat reporter is a luxury that can no longer be afforded. This creates a challenge, because there is little time for a reporter to do a lot of research before arriving on the scene, yet they are required to make sense out of something that's very, very complicated. So the PAO must take the time to not only provide information, but to educate the reporter and help them understand not only the answers, but also the context of the answers and often the culture of the organization.

On the other hand, the PAO must educate the commander and his/her staff on the role of the media and the requirements contained in the Department of Defense Principles of Information to release timely and accurate information. S/he must be an ethical advocate for the media, helping the commander and the command understand the need to embrace transparency and the advantages of doing so.

As in the civilian world, the application of ethics to the practice of Public Affairs is critical to successfully fulfilling the PAO's duties and responsibilities, especially as mediator. The DoD Principles of Information provide an excellent framework for the ethical conduct of all military Public Affairs activities.

It is Department of Defense policy to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, the Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. Requests for information from organizations and private citizens shall be answered quickly. In carrying out that DoD policy, the following principles of information shall apply: Information shall be made fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by national security constraints or valid statutory mandates or exceptions. The [Freedom of Information Act](#) will be supported in both letter and spirit.

A free flow of general and military information shall be made available, without censorship or propaganda, to the men and women of the Armed Forces and their dependents.

Information will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the Government from criticism or embarrassment.

"Information shall be withheld when disclosure would adversely affect national security, threaten the safety or privacy of U.S. Government personnel or their families, violate the privacy of the citizens of the United States, or be contrary to law.

The Department of Defense's obligation to provide the public with information on DoD major programs may require detailed Public Affairs (PA) planning and coordination in the Department of Defense and with the other Government Agencies. Such activity is to expedite the flow of information to the public; propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs (Department of Defense, 2008)

Note the provisions that information be “fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by national security constraints or valid statutory mandates or exceptions” and that information “will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the Government from criticism or embarrassment.” The DoD Principles make it clear that transparency should be the rule rather than the exception (Department of Defense, 2008)

Besides the DoD Principles of Information, the PAO also has the ethical framework of the Public Relations Society of America’s Code of Ethics to help steer a course through the shoal waters of mediation. The four general ethical principles underlying public relations practice are: 1.) Act in the public interest; 2.) use honesty as your guide; 3.) ensure accuracy and truth; and 4.) deal fairly with the public. Among the more specific principles defining how public relations is practiced are “maintaining the integrity of communication channels” (ensuring transparency with all audiences, from

employees to publics) and not damaging the reputation of others by sticking with the facts and avoiding gossip.

The ultimate hallmark of the public relations professional is Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). This voluntary certification program, administered by the Universal Accreditation Board, a consortium of nine leading industry organizations, identifies those who have demonstrated broad knowledge, experience and professional judgment. The APR designation signifies a high professional level of experience and competence and tests detailed knowledge, skills and abilities in 10 areas, including ethics and law.

In May of 2010, a new credentialing effort called Accreditation in Public Relations + Military Communication (APR+M), was created that provides public affairs and communication certification for military, contractor and Department of Defense public communication professionals. This program is a joint effort between the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB), Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE), and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). An APR+M Advisory Council established by the UAB oversees and manages the new program, while the UAB grants APR +M.

The APR+M is awarded to candidates who master the APR KSAs plus joint public affairs relevant topics. This includes demonstrated knowledge of Article 19, United Nations Charter, Law of Armed Conflict, including Rules of Engagement, and the 1913 Gillette Amendment and other acts that govern military public affairs operations, such as the UCMJ and Goldwater-Nichols. APR+M signifies someone who meets all the qualifications of Accreditation in Public Relations (APR), PLUS a rigorous course of study surrounding military public affairs in joint operations.

The PAO as mediator can be a thankless job, but it is perhaps more important today than at any time in our military history. It is a job that demands the courage to staunchly defend the First Amendment, DoD Principles of Information and the ethical practice of public relations to a senior officer, while defending equally as vigorously the protection of national security and personnel privacy to a person who buys ink by the barrel and paper by the ton or who has the keys to the transmitter.

It is a job that requires not just excellence in implementing the skill sets of good communication and superior judgment, but an unflinching, uncompromising commitment to the truth. More than anything, it requires the enduring trust of the commander and his/her staff. For without that trust, the PAO can have no credibility with either his/her colleagues or the media. Trust is also the central component to the PAO's successful, satisfactory relationships inside and outside the organization. The key to gaining that trust is consistent, ethical actions on the part of the PAO.

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