FOSTERING A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

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WITH LESS THAN one half of one percent of the U.S. population in the Armed Forces, it is not surprising that many Americans know little about their military or the sacrifices military members and their families make for the Nation. The professional military is often viewed as a breed apart, a closed hierarchal organization resembling a monastic order.[1] Indeed, some scholars have identified not just a cloister wall, but a growing chasm between the military and American society as a whole.[2] Meanwhile, the necessity for operations security and an institutional penchant for controlling information flow do little to bridge gaps or break down walls. Recent incidents ranging from the Jessica Lynch saga to the Abu Ghraib scandal indicate just how vulnerable that flow is to miscalculation and mismanagement. Whatever the reason or rationale, impairments to information dissemination can easily damage the Army's reputation and estrange the American public from one of its most trusted institutions.[3] Since neither of these developments bodes well for the future of the U.S. Army, "job one" in the communications arena should be to keep Americans informed and connected with their Armed Forces. For this and other reasons, the Army must embrace a "culture of engagement" that actively seeks to tear down barriers and build sustainable relationships with the American public.

The Evolution of Media-Military Relations

The U.S. military and the primary instrument for engagement, the media, have been joined at the hip in an up-and-down relationship that dates at

PHOTO: CPT Andrew Schoenmaker, with the 5th Marine Regiment, talks with leaders at a meeting in the Nawa District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 15 July 2009.

least to the first half of the 19th century. Since that time, the military-media relationship has moved through four distinct periods: censorship, openness, controlled access, and cooperation. As we peer into a less than a certain future, the changing contemporary mediascape and its significance in an era of "persistent conflict" demand that the military embrace a fifth period: "engagement."[4]

The first modern media coverage of an American conflict occurred during the Mexican War (1846–1848). The advent of a new technology—the telegraph—made communication near instantaneous and according to at least one scholar, enabled reporters to scoop the president.[5] Little more than a decade later, during the Civil War, widespread complaints over violation of what we now call operational security surfaced. Consequently, War Secretary Edwin Stanton, "seized newspapers that were too liberal with military information, while manipulating others into publishing false reports."[6] The conflict also saw various forms of military censorship, a mainstay for dealing with the media that would persist for the next century.

During the Spanish-American War, the U.S. Navy censored cable communiqués in an effort to maintain operational security.[7] Restrictions became more draconian during World War I. The Espionage Act, adopted in 1917, "prohibited the

A "peace rumor" in New York on 7 November 1918 was not true, but a government report of that fact did not stop celebrations spawned by the error.

publication of any information that could even remotely be considered to aid the enemy."[8] A year later, the Sedition Act made criticism of the war itself illegal. These two acts ushered in an era of prior restraint that imposed broad limits on how journalists could report during times of war. Two legal cases, *Schenk v. U.S.* and *Near v. Minnesota,* "recognized national security interests as justification for prior restraint."[9]

Media docility probably hit its zenith during World War II. Journalists voluntarily accepted censorship and accreditation rules in return for access to the battlefield. The price for access was high—sanitized reporting meant little or no bad news, so items about setbacks such as the failed raid on Dieppe rarely made the headlines. As Philip Knightly has pointed out, "A Reuters correspondent admitted that journalists were simply propagandists for their government, mere cheerleaders: 'It wasn't good journalism,' he [the correspondent] said. 'It wasn't journalism at all.'"[10]

The forced harmony rooted in media docility began to break down during the Korean War, and then simply evaporated during the Vietnam War. Initially, the Korean conflict featured no censorship. However, reporters themselves volunteered for censorship, fearing they might inadvertently compromise operational security. By the end of the conflict, the military-media relationship soured, setting the stage for outright mutual antagonism in Vietnam, a decade later.[11]

In contrast with Korea and World War II, American involvement in Vietnam grew gradually, and no one initially saw the need to muzzle the press. Thanks in part to slow entanglement, media coverage of the war was characterized by an openness perhaps unparalleled in earlier conflicts. As the historian Douglas Porch has observed, "Journalists were allowed practically unrestricted access, accompanying units and freely filing stories."[12] Journalists were no longer accustomed to forced-feeding, and they soon grew skeptical of exaggerated claims for American military success. Against this backdrop, General William Westmoreland added to already suspect expectations during a public relations tour in late 1967 when he famously spoke about light at the end of the tunnel. The Tet offensive the following year shattered the illusion that victory was just around the corner.

According to a 2004 Rand report, *Reporters on the Battlefield*, "Tet clearly exposed the falsehood of administration claims and pushed many reporters from skepticism to outright mistrust of the military."[13] Beyond the immediate fallout, mutual recriminations and mutual distrust between the media and the military left a lasting impression on the way the military perceived its relationship with the media.

As a result, the Pentagon's treatment of the media during the 1980s sought to limit its access and to employ a press pool system to control the message. Thus, during the Gulf War in 1990–1991, with the exception of the U.S. Marine Corps, very few media embedded with military units. In fact, some of the most crucial battles of the entire war were almost lost to history because there was no press coverage.[14]

After several humanitarian missions went awry in the 1990s, the military decided it needed a better way to relate to the media. Operations in Somalia and Haiti witnessed greater latitude for media coverage, but true cooperation did not become the dominant leitmotif until the Balkan intervention at the end of the millennium and the subsequent onset of the War on Terrorism. Operation Iraqi Freedom witnessed the wholesale adoption of media embeds. This departure from previous practice stemmed in large part from the realization that the advent of the new media had made controlling access to the battlefield almost impossible. However, there were also other forces at work, as is evident in the assertions of a former U.S. Army officer about the goals of the embed program:

> We wanted to neutralize the disinformation efforts of our adversaries. We wanted to build and maintain support for U.S. policy as well as the global war on terrorism. We wanted to take offensive action to achieve information dominance. We wanted to be able to demonstrate the professionalism of the U.S. military. And we wanted to build and maintain support, of course, for the war fighter out there on the ground.[15]

If sheer numbers indicate success, then the embed program more than fulfilled expectations. More than 700 members of the media embedded with combat units during the initial drive to topple Saddam Hussein.[16]

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The New Mediascape: Potentially Chaotic but Overflowing with Opportunity

Much as the telegraph revolutionized the speed of communication, recent technological advancements have engendered their own revolution—ubiquity. The media are nearly everywhere in today's modern information environment. Rapidity of transmission remains important, but accessibility and variety of means for distribution have emerged as characteristics with which to reckon. The impact of these and related developments means that absolute control over access to real and metaphorical battlefields is now impractical, if not nearly impossible. An individual with a satellite uplink and computer can instantly transmit images and words around the world. Consider, for example, the role new media played in protests over the recent Iranian elections. Traditional media were nearly shut out. However, social media, or "Web 2.0," became an organizational enabler and an important vehicle for dissemination of protestors' messages around the world.[17] The blunt fact is that social networking sites have created virtual communities larger in membership than the population of many countries.[18] If for no other reason, the inherent dynamism in the contemporary media environment demands the Army rethink its media strategy to foster a culture of engagement.

Consider only a few recent changes to the mediascape. In 2008 alone, the top 50 Internet news sites recorded a 27 percent jump in visitors.[19] During the last two years, newspaper advertising revenues have fallen 23 percent. As major traditional newspapers like the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* fold their tents, and as the *Detroit Free Press* limits delivery to three days per week, other hybrid types of reporting are emerging. For example, the NBC television network has created a position called "digital correspondent" that features a young journalist who "[combines] video, photographs and blogs to tell stories more completely

and creatively."[20] This style of reporting enables a single correspondent to report a story across multiple platforms with little of the production costs historically associated with such endeavors.

Just as the craft itself continues to evolve, so does the type of stories that appear to merit coverage. In 2007, Iraq War coverage dominated the headlines in both print and broadcast venues. During much of 2008, however, a hotly contested U.S. political race and an international economic meltdown eclipsed Iraq coverage by 75 percent in comparison with the previous year.[21] The debate over war policy and strategy in the news declined from eight percent of the so-called "news hole" in 2007 to just one percent in 2008.[22] As more and more Americans lost their jobs and as the government bailed out both the financial sector and the ailing domestic auto industry, coverage of Iraq became the proverbial "hard sell." Although important in itself, the burgeoning economic crisis decisively diminished other coverage that was also serious on its own merits: the military's need to tell its own story in Iraq and elsewhere during a time when the nation was at war.

Even as the type of dominant news stories changed in 2008, "durability," a measure of the staying power for particular news stories, did not. Throughout 2008, the durability index continued to display the "one-week wonder" effect. For example, both Russia's invasion of Georgia and the whiff of scandal surrounding New York Governor Eliot Spitzer garnered about 25 percent of the news hole during a single week in late summer. In the weeks immediately following breaking headlines, coverage for each story declined precipitously.[23]

For the military, this phenomenon is a challenge and an opportunity. Although coverage of ongoing conflicts may not persist, bad news stories seem to display less than traditional staying power. It appears plausible to argue, therefore, that military engagement in the new media sphere, where control of information after dissemination remains almost impossible, now involves less risk. That is, at least for the present, it seems less likely that a particular event of a less than positive nature will trigger a lasting scandal or backlash against the military, particularly in the fast-changing new media world.

The same fast pace of change seems inexorably to give rise to fragmentation, whether in coverage, durability, audience, or attention span. This characteristic of the new media sphere garners additional reinforcement from the rise of citizen journalism. Now, virtually anyone with access to the Internet and a cell phone can make an impact on the news cycle. An acute observer of the phenomenon, Dan Gillmore, has written that grassroots media is part of a "formidable truth squad." In the contemporary media environment, Gilmore holds that "information no longer leaks, it gushes through firewalls and other barriers. . . what gushes can take on a life of its own, even if it's not true."[24] Recent experiences indicate that this assertion, made in 2004, perhaps retains even greater validity today.

New means and a shifting landscape argue that the Army can no longer stand pat or stand still in the face of rapid change within the media realm. For the first time in history, we are witnessing the onset of a truly democratic media permitting nearly anyone to publish nearly anything with sometimes profound results. To contend with this phenomenon, the Army must get beyond "business as usual" to embrace a culture of engagement. At the same time, however there is the realization that novel things rarely come without requirements. This culture comes with its own emphases and tenets.

Foundations of a Culture of Engagement

Although Army doctrine does not define "culture of engagement," the phrase frequently appears in business and human resource models to describe productive working relationships among employees, corporate leaders, and stakeholders. In the U.S. Army context, the same kinds of relationships find their origins in a common set of beliefs, behaviors, and values, including a sense of devotion to the importance of sharing the Army experience with both the public and the media. The present argument holds that the Army's version of a "culture of engagement" must bear certain hallmarks to fulfill its promise. To be effective, the culture must be proactive, innovative, adaptive, leader driven, and sustainable.

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Proactive. To be proactive means to seize the initiative, to be agile in engaging with the media. Being proactive means anticipating news stories and addressing information requirements associated with stories by identifying the relevance of one's own organization to a given news story. The capacity to be proactive enables leaders to "get out front," to communicate their perspectives and experiences on newsworthy topics. To retain the initiative, leaders must build strong working relationships for outreach, beginning with the local media and extending to international outlets. The intent is to establish trust, confidence, and mutual understanding.

A good case in point occurred in May 2008, when a Soldier assigned to Multi-National Corps-Iraq used a Koran for target practice at a range west of Baghdad. Recognizing the potential strategic impact of this Soldier's actions on coalition efforts in Iraq, senior leaders seized the initiative by consciously choosing to "go public" with the incident. Major General Jeffrey Hammond wasted little time in meeting with community leaders and issuing a formal apology. His message was forthright: "I come before you here seeking your forgiveness. In the most humble manner I look in your eyes today and I say please forgive me and my Soldiers."

This announcement, accompanied by a written apology from the Soldier, received broad media coverage. Other senior leaders met with various media outlets, while General Hammond's public affairs staff worked to keep both the Iraqi leadership and the media informed of the ensuing investigation and command actions.[25]

Consider another example. During January 2007, Multi-National Corps-Iraq recognized a gross imbalance in reporting on Iraq between major Arabic television networks and mostly Western-based news outlets. Two major Arab news stations, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, had only rudimentary reporting capacities in Iraq. Therefore, the U.S. military resolved to take the story to the consumer. The U.S. Central Command and Arabic media outreach teams in Dubai and Qatar began working with representatives from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya to provide updates on conditions in Iraq and to give voice to the United States and coalition concerns. Joint studio sessions became fruitful opportunities for mutual learning and the fostering of stronger working relationships. In turn, these relationships with Arab media executives led to later strategic opportunities for live satellite broadcasts of critical events.

There are many ways to encourage a proactive mind-set at the installation and tactical levels. One of the more effective techniques is the frequent hosting of media roundtables or luncheons with local press, editors, producers, bloggers, commanders, and leaders. These events afford opportunities for relaxed information sharing, and such recurring informal contacts go far in building trust and mutual understanding between the media and organizational leadership. The same kind of initiatives can provide commanders with a better understanding of and insight into the media during times of crisis. For its part, the media benefits from the opportunity to gain additional perspective and appreciation for the demands of leadership and the rigors of military operations.

Responsiveness is another important element within a proactive posture. Both the competitive nature of the media business and the insatiable demand for news guarantee an incessant media search for fresh stories. Yesterday's news is proverbially today's fish wrapper. Therefore, Army leaders must ensure that appropriate personnel within their organizations are at least abreast of the news curve, while remaining sensitive and responsive to the fast-breaking requirements of media organizations. To be responsive also means to remain in instant readiness to counter inaccurate news stories or misinformation. Whatever the requirement, responsiveness mandates that the Army provide timely and transparent information proactively. All too often, the most common media complaint is lack of response from military leaders and public affairs professionals.

At the local level, responsiveness is especially important. Many local media outlets operate on limited budgets and resources. If an unfolding news story involves local installations, we must inform the local media, even if being proactive requires frequent updates before all the facts are available. Responsiveness coupled with transparency ensures that media outlets receive as much information as

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possible, as rapidly as possible, with sufficient context to make sense of a developing story. Context facilitates accuracy and balance.

Innovative. To be innovative means to exercise ingenuity in seeking new and more effective ways to communicate. However, the ability to innovate relies on more than just raw creative thinking. To innovate requires an understanding of the characteristics and capabilities of the new media, along with an understanding of the pace of change. The sheer ubiquity of the new media affords near-boundless opportunities for the Army to share its story with a wide range of publics. Like everyone else in this new world, the military now has the ability to generate its own content. As former Army Secretary Pete Geren once pointedly noted, "We have more reach than NBC had 20 years ago."[26]

Such potential notwithstanding, some institutions shun the innovative promise inherent in the Internet and Web 2.0. Various versions of institutional rigidity often confront local commanders in pursuit of Web-based initiatives with a mind-boggling web of restrictions, including information security precautions, overly prescriptive organizational regulations and policies, and stifling home-grown information management and information assurance directives. Overly restrictive policies can hamper the best efforts at innovation and creativity within garrisons and in the field.[27]

A prime example of self-defeating restrictiveness was Multi-National Corps-Iraq's battle to employ YouTube. In early February 2007, two young civilian employees floated the idea of building a YouTube channel to display video footage of coalition forces in Iraq. Recognizing the immense potential for this powerful video sharing tool, the command immediately authorized measures to build an MNF-I channel. Unfortunately, network restrictions prohibited even senior leaders from accessing YouTube on DOD-based computer systems. Meanwhile, extremist groups in Iraq were routinely using YouTube to post disinformation, propaganda, and graphic images of attacks against civilians and coalition forces. Nonetheless, Multi-National Corps-Iraq senior leaders and communication specialists could neither access the extremist videos nor air the coalition's own story.

Exceptions to policy and interventions at the highest levels finally yielded a YouTube channel. The site was activated on 7 March 2007, and within the first 10 days of operation, it logged more than 15,000 channel views and surpassed 39,000 total views.[28] The channel now has more than 8,000 subscribers with nearly 1,000 videos, all the while counting more than half-a-million channel views. A whole audience lay in waiting, but it might have lain there forever had it not been for the persistence of leaders and their willingness to entertain "work-arounds" and technological solutions to the obstacles created by blind adherence to requirements for network security.

Yet, innovation is more than blowing holes through obstacles and embracing new media and various Web 2.0 platforms. Innovation also means finding new ways to employ more traditional assets in communicating with members of the media or other audiences. For example, installation commanders and local television news producers constantly wrestle with the challenge of covering on-site activities with assets limited by location, time, or resources. Innovators might mitigate some shortfalls with television studios equipped to support satellite-capable access through the Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System. This broadcast option comes as a public service
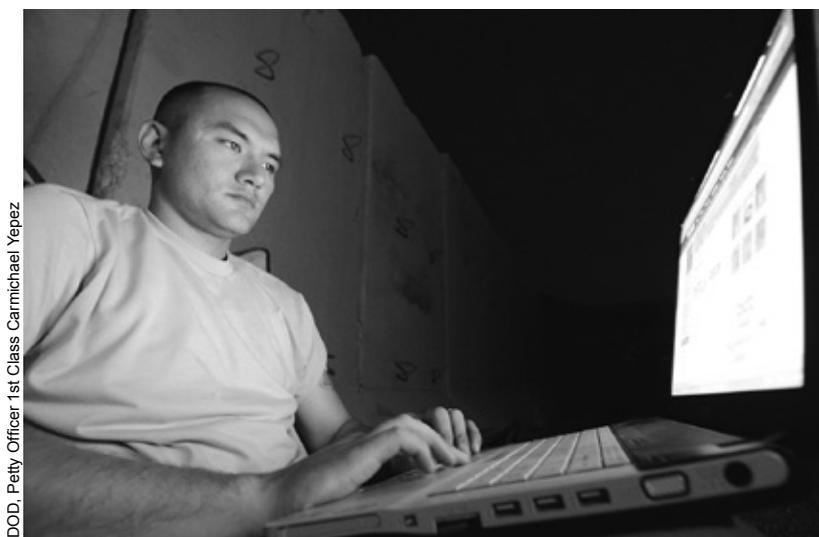
DOD, Petty Officer 1st Class Carmichael Yepez

SGT Steven Richardson uses a wireless Internet service at Forward Operating Base Marez in Mosul, Iraq, on 5 July 2009.

from Third Army/U.S. Army Component of U.S. Central Command on behalf of the Department of the Army.[29] With the Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System, leaders might post videos of newsworthy events or use the system as a hub for live satellite broadcast and link ups with both local and international news outlets.

Adaptive. Modern media thrive in a fast-evolving, instantaneous, and interconnected information environment that presents enormous challenges to rigid and inflexible organizations. The key to success in this environment is adaptability, the ability to adjust to changing circumstances on the run. If an organization is agile and adaptive, it has the capability to avail itself of the myriad opportunities the Internet affords to media organizations and bloggers. These opportunities constitute leverage for engaging ever broader audiences.

Several years ago, the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center recognized the importance of engaging the blogosphere for both organizational outreach and direct educational purposes. The Combined Arms Center launched one of the Army's first blogs on a "mil" domain in mid-2008, even though the center was neither equipped nor manned for this effort. It hired a new media strategist—a position requiring a Web-savvy individual who could also write, moderate, and market the blog site. Realizing new media is synonymous with "now" media, the center adapted its policy for moderating all comments prior to posting. In addition, the Combined Arms Center empowered its subordinate organizations to start and manage their own blogs. Without adaptation in blog policy and management, little would have been possible. With an emphasis on adaptation, however, the Combined Arms Center accorded blog users and subordinate organizations a tremendous amount of freedom, and it also assumed risk.

In retrospect, the rewards appear to have justified the risk. Various adaptive decisions facilitated rapid postings for blog users and leaders, increased blog participation, and stimulated greater intellectual exchange among virtually all participants. Today, the Combined Arms Center manages more than 40 different blogs ranging from a student blog to a blog dedicated to counterinsurgency and security force assistance. The site attracts more than 120,000 visitors a month. The website has also grown in viewership from 98,000 monthly in June 2008 to more than 300,000 recently. The redesigned website now showcases video and provides links to other new media sites CAC utilizes.

Leader driven. Just as leaders the world over are responsible for imparting purpose, priorities, and objectives to their organizations, Army leaders must confront modern media realities by fostering a culture of engagement in their subordinates and commands. Without leadership to instill focus and function, no climate for constructive media engagement is likely to emerge and persist. Leadership is key, followed by dedicated resources, manpower, and time.

These assertions assume that leaders must first embrace the importance of the media and the role it plays in winning wars and keeping the American public informed.[30] Of equal importance, these assertions take for granted the willingness of leaders to embrace an attitude that actively seeks opportunities to communicate an organization's mission and its Soldiers' stories. The culture of engagement is highly leader driven, but it always remains Soldier-centric. Some leaders might perceive active pursuit of the media as self-serving, but they should temper such perceptions with an understanding that a leader's duty is to inform and educate the American public about its Army and the men and women who serve in it.

Leaders must also establish a culture that is transparent and welcoming to the media. Culture speaks volumes, especially with regard to the importance of open and timely communication with the media, regardless of the situation. Leaders must share their vision of desired outcomes from media engagements and understand communications strategies, both internal and external.

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Leaders set the command climate by making themselves available to the media, especially during times of crisis. Leaders provide context and clarity during developing news stories. General Max Thurman, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, reputedly once said, "When in charge, take charge." This maxim applies to the "take-charge" attitude leaders must display when confronting crises or negative news stories. The media wants to hear directly from decisive organizational leadership, not a spokesperson.

Sustainable. The final significant hallmark for a culture of engagement is sustainability, perhaps the most overlooked and the most difficult characteristic for leaders to implement. To be sustainable means having the material prerequisites for staying power, the ability to persist.

Sustainability requires dedicated resources and manpower to build enduring capabilities to enable a culture of engagement. The various hallmarks or attributes of this culture, including the abilities to be proactive, innovative, and responsive, require hiring or committing a full-time work force to perform vital media functions. The subject matter expertise required for dealing with various forms of media, both traditional and Web-based, exceeds the knowledge of most public affairs officers and their staffs. Contractor positions can meet work force requirements for the near-term, but building an enduring capability requires authorizing permanent positions capable of institutional memory.

Contending with the modern media revolution is an integral part of the larger doctrinal picture concerning information. General Martin Dempsey, Commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, has highlighted the importance of information: "I would like to see us adopt it as a war-fighting function as a Nation, or as a military, because it will cause us to resource it and to clarify its use in a way that we're still blurring. We're setting up firewalls, and we're just not as agile as we need to be. And generally, those that use it well are probably violating some particular form of policy. So we've got to get after that."[31]

His comments, echoed by other senior Army leaders, underscore the necessity for building a sustainable capability for dealing with information, including older and newer media in the struggle for information superiority during an era of persistent conflict.

In the end, sustainability requires an entire organization's support for a culture of engagement. Everyone within an organization must embrace a philosophy for openness and transparency. For the Army, officers and Soldiers must see themselves as important parts of the whole for implementing this culture. This culture begins with leader development for both uniformed personnel and civilians. The values and advantages inherent in a culture of engagement must permeate the workplace.

Fulfilling the Nation's Mission

Dwight Eisenhower once remarked, "public opinion wins wars."[32] This statement is as true now as when he uttered it as Supreme Allied Commander Europe in 1944. America's adversaries have proven adept at utilizing many mediums to convey their messages. Cumbersome regulations regarding the use of new media tools only hinder the Army's ability to share its story with the American public and ultimately allow adversaries to fill the vacuum with their version of events. More than 20 years ago, the Army adopted the slogan, "Be all you can be." As the Army adapts to a changing mediascape and embraces a "culture of engagement," it will continue to be all it can be in the eyes of the Nation. **MR**

CPT Jeff Fuller, with 25th Infantry Division, is interviewed by local news media 23 June 2009 in Samrah Village, Iraq.

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