
War reporting and Australian defence public relations, an exchange

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This case study presents an evaluation of the relationship between the Australian Defence Force public relations department and Australian political and specialist defence media during the Iraq conflict in 2003.

An adaptation of Grunig's (2002) qualitative approach was used and found to be flexible to describing and conceptualising the relationship between the media and defence. One-to-one interviews were conducted with defence and media personnel to gather data, this method enabled difficult topics to be broached, articulated, and explored with frank discussion.

The media were less satisfied than defence with the defence-media relationship during the Iraqi conflict, and there were mixed levels of trust felt by both parties. Each party was committed to what they described as an important relationship, and interviewees were unanimous in describing the relationship as 'exchange', rather than communal.

The research process and insights helped to clearly identify gaps and problems in the relationship between the two parties, and helped the military public relations department to change strategy, structure and policy.

Introduction to the research and position of researchers

A tense relationship developed between the Australian Defence Force's Military Public Affairs Branch (ADF MPA) and the Australian political and specialist defence media during the 2003 Iraq war. Unlike other international media, Australian journalists did not have access to embedding with Australian forces or to Australian troops on the ground in Iraq. As one

media participant in the study reported here said:

There was a blanket of secrecy from day one and we were the only country that seemed to have this. It was just unacceptable to the media and a complete contrast to the Americans who had embedding and everything else.

According to the ADF, the reasons for the restrictions were based on strategic and national security issues. Many in the Australian media, however, believed they had been significantly disadvantaged by the ADF and that the organisation was overly secretive, manipulative and out of touch with media needs. Reflecting on their experiences with MPA during the conflict, a journalist interviewed for this study said MPA was mostly unhelpful and uncomprehending: "... assistance is limited, it's arse covering and it's spinning (which you can understand from a PR organisation), but it's spinning to arse cover. It's late. It's unhelpful."

ADF's MPA recognised that they had come out "a bit bruised in terms of reputation" (MPA interviewee) with the media from the war in Iraq and commissioned research to examine the state of its relationship with the media. This paper reports research conducted to explore that relationship, and reports on Grunig's (2002) model for evaluating relationships.

One of the authors designed, conducted and reported the field study for ADF public affairs management between November 2003 and March 2004. Both authors have contracted to the Australian Defence Forces since 2000, developing and delivering postgraduate public affairs and communication training for military

officers. While the authors have attempted to interview, analyse and report from a perspective of neutrality, they commenced the study with a pre-existing relationship with the ADF, and with the intention of reporting the findings to the ADF in a way that would further ADF understanding of its own and the media's expectations of the relationship. All participants in the research were advised as part of the information and consent process that the research was both for Defence planning and for academic research and publication.

Context for this study – defence and media

The relationship between ADF and the Australian political and specialist defence media has always been fraught with difficulties and reflects the underlying tension that exists generally between the media and many public relations practitioners. According to Shin and Cameron, the conflict is "... rooted in the source-reporter relationship." They say that journalists depend on public relations practitioners for gathering news but "...mistrust the power that PR plays in the newsgathering process because they value their role of defenders of the public's right to unbiased and balanced news stories" (2003, p. 583). The conflict involves self-interest, and the search for accurate reporting. The high stakes involved in wars exaggerate this natural tension.

The relationship between the media and the military, and the concept of news management, has evolved since the growth of the mass media and the advent of the war correspondent (Stewart & Carruthers, 1996; Allen, 1996; Halliday, 1999). The relationship is now one of interdependency (Allen, 1996) reflecting the military's belief in the power of the media to determine the success or failure of military actions. In modern society it has become an organisational imperative for the military to convey their version of the war (Knightly cited in Loustarinen, 1991; Heibert, 1993), or else risk other groups setting the agenda.

In the 2003 war in Iraq, 24-hour blanket coverage was delivered by western media of the

"shock and awe" (Holmes, 2003) campaign, and live reports from the more than 800 embedded journalists (those positioned within military units) provided a glut of visual information to viewers in their homes. For the first time, media instantly reported from the front line providing news seemingly free of military censorship. While such technology provided journalists with greater capabilities, real time reporting created new challenges for the military who remain continually concerned for troop safety, operational security, and domestic and international perceptions. Instant reporting has placed greater tensions on the media/military relationship.

Limits on Australian media coverage

The Australian media wanted to provide more coverage of the war than they were permitted. The Australian Government and ADF placed limits on media access to Australian troops and on operations involving Australians and the majority of the coverage of the 2003 Iraq War seen by Australians was provided by international media (Starr, 2004).

ADF MPA explained the limited access to Australian troops as a consequence of the specific logistical challenges of the 2003 Iraq War. As a minor partner in the 'Coalition of the Willing', Australia had relatively small numbers of troops in Iraq, mostly in niche capabilities (such as Special Forces and commandoes) that made them inappropriate for embedding media. They were mostly located in countries with which Australia had signed international agreements. These agreements negotiated by the Australian Government, allowed Australian troops to mount operations from those countries on the strict condition that their location remained secret. With the advent of instant reporting, ADF believed it could only guarantee this secrecy by denying access to all media (Hibbert & Starr, 2004).

Divided support for the war among Australians also had important implications for how the ADF managed its troops and information. The Australian government and

the ADF believed that public opinion would be very sensitive to casualties to Australian troops, so very specific rules were enforced, including concealing the names and home towns of troops serving in the war, discouraging troop fraternisation with media, and only authorising key personnel to speak to the media. This particular issue placed tension on the relationship, with one journalist explaining, “I did many reports which promoted the images of Australian soldiers in the Iraq war but at times I did it despite the role of the ADF, not due to their help” (Starr, 2004, p. 110).

Sixty three Australian media reported the war from the Central Media Centre (CMC) in Qatar or in Kuwait (PAC-A, 2004). A few media were embedded with the US Army while others chose to remain independent, travelling without any military protection or sanction. The rest remained in Australia. As Hibbert and Starr (2004) noted, “For the media based in or near Iraq, little information came from the ADF because there was little its MPA staff could talk about, hence the heavy reliance on international media.”

Public relations (PR) and relationships

This project focused on the “relationship” between the ADF MPA and various sections of the Australian media, reflecting increasing industry (IPR DTI, 2003) and academic understanding of public relations as the management of strategic long-term relations. Over the past two decades an important shift has occurred “... away from the manipulation of public opinion and toward a focus on building, nurturing, and maintaining organization-public relationships” (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, p.158). The conceptualisation of public relations as the management of relationships with publics has appeal to both practitioners and scholars because it focuses the purpose of the practice of public relations on mutual, rather than just organisational, benefit (Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004) and because relationships may provide a focus for an industry which, knowing that it deals with wide ranging

objectives and methods, has struggled with ways to define itself and its value.

Hon and Grunig (1999) contend that the effectiveness of organisations is connected to their ability to select goals that are valued both by the organisation and strategic publics. They argue that organisations need relationships to understand their publics in order to set appropriate goals: “Effective organisations choose and achieve appropriate goals because they develop relationships with their constituencies, which public relations practitioners typically call publics” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 8).

Problem, research questions and methodology

The relationship between ADF MPA and the Australian media who covered the war in Iraq was poorly understood, relying on myth and storytelling to perpetuate stereotypes.

The project aimed to investigate the interaction between ADF MPA and the Australian media during the war in Iraq. It sought to explore perceptions of trust, cooperation and influence/responsiveness on both ‘sides’ of the relationship.

The specific research questions reflected Hon and Grunig’s relationship model of four relationship indicators, and a “fifth pair of relationship indicators – exchange vs. communal relationships” (1999, p.20):

1. Control mutuality - To what extent are the parties satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship?
2. Trust - Do the parties trust each other to be open, based on their belief in the other party’s competence, integrity and dependability?
3. Commitment – Do the parties feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain and promote?
4. Satisfaction – Are the parties satisfied with the current state of the relationship?

5. Is the relationship perceived to be one based on expected benefits (exchange) or concern for the other party without expected benefit (communal)?

Grunig's (2002) guide to qualitative evaluation of relationships was selected for the study because it provided a framework for conceptualising and describing the relationship, each dimension of the framework was deemed relevant to this study, and it enabled flexibility and reflexivity in the gathering of data. Grunig argues that a qualitative approach might be preferred where more insight is required into the nature and origins of publics' attitudes to the relationship, to develop a closer relationship with the research participant or for certain groups such as activists or journalists who might not respond to a survey (2002). He says that relationships '...cannot always be reduced to a few fixed-response items on a questionnaire' (2002, p. 3). The flexibility of the method turned out to be important because the interviews were held in different circumstances with different time constraints, and the interviewer had to adjust the interviews to suit the situation.

It is important to note that this particular case study used Grunig's model as a guide only – the actual interview questions were modified for the 'publics' here and the structure of the interview process was slightly different to that advocated by Grunig. The variations in method grew out of the specific nature of the publics interviewed and it is likely that the model would have to be adapted to meet the requirements of any new situation. That it is flexible to adaptation is a strength of the approach.

Data gathering

Data was gathered using one-to-one semi structured in-depth interviews between January and March in 2004. Interviews were held in venues chosen by the interviewee, mostly the interviewee's workplace or in public venues such as coffee shops. Each interview started with researcher assurances and undertakings concerning confidentiality. The main

undertaking was that participants' names were never written down and would not be disclosed or included in reports in any way. All participants received an ethics committee-approved information letter that stated the following: "This research has two purposes. Firstly it will act as a planning tool for the development of future ADF MPA doctrine. The second is academic research, with the results to be published in an academic journal. The administrative costs of the research are being met by ADF MPA."

There were then two stages within the interviews. In the first and longest stage, interviewees were asked semi-structured, open ended questions about their role in the war, their experiences generally of the war and specifically of the other public. Questions were also asked about the nature of the public affairs/media interface.

In the second stage the interviewer used Grunig's relationship components to guide exploration of the characteristics of the relationship. These direct relationship questions prompted new answers and words which were consistent with, and helped to organize, previous comments by the participants. The second stage of the interview served both to organize and, to some extent, triangulate data obtained in the first stage.

Most interviews lasted for more than one hour. The longest was three and a half hours and the shortest was twenty minutes.

Sample

Interviews were held with 22 participants. Nine participants were from the media, all of whom had reported on the war. The media sample were identified and selected in different ways. Some were identified by their profile as defence correspondents or through published and broadcast stories, and then approached. Others were then obtained by a snowball method, using recommendations from the early media participants. Fifteen journalists were approached. Two refused to participate and four

were unable to participate for logistical reasons. A spread of media representation was obtained from television, newspaper and radio, and from public and commercial media. Electronic news reporters were not included in the sample.

There were 13 participants from ADF MPA. Access to the ADF MPA sample was provided by ADF. The names and positions of people who had had close involvement in public affairs activity in the 2003 Iraq war were provided to the researcher. The researcher selected and contacted a sample that included representatives from military and civilian personnel, higher and lower seniority, and involvement on operation or in Australia. Because the ADF had “sanctioned” the list and provided access, the researcher guaranteed interviewees confidentiality about their agreement to participate as well as their responses.

In this article the media participants’ responses are collectively referred to as ‘the media sample’, and MPA participants’ responses referred to as ‘MPA’. The authors recognise that the research sample, of the media in particular, is small and specialised. The authors are not aware of any characteristics or attributes of the sample that might make them unrepresentative, in terms of their experiences of, and attitudes towards, the media-MPA relationship.

The results

The research revealed the relationship to be highly functional, despite the many problems identified relating to mutual suspicion and disparate control. The functionality of the relationship can be linked to the acknowledged recognition of the necessity of the relationship to each party – they must maintain the relationship no matter the dissatisfaction because each needs the other in order to conduct their work.

In summary, the research revealed that the media sample believed MPA has control in the relationship. While the media sample trusted MPA to treat them fairly, media were less

convinced of MPA reliability and competence. The media sample were reasonably satisfied with the relationship overall, although not at all satisfied with operations in Iraq. The media sample remained committed to an ongoing relationship with MPA but felt it was the ADF’s role to facilitate that process.

In contrast, MPA personnel were mixed in their understanding of control, with only a few feeling it rests with them. MPA personnel trusted the media to treat them fairly, but had mixed feelings about media reliability and competence. MPA was reasonably satisfied with the relationship and unanimously said that the relationship needed to be maintained and encouraged. All felt that media weren’t doing anything to facilitate this process.

To further investigate the relationship, Grunig’s model proved to be a highly useful diagnostic tool. It provided a systematic way of thinking about the relationship, allowing for comparison of the thoughts of the two stakeholder groups, and was effective at describing the “intangibles” of the relationship, providing names that could be used to explain more about the relationship. An examination of each of Grunig’s dimensions provides greater insight and detail, and highlights the value of the structure.

1. Control mutuality - To what extent are the parties satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship?

The control mutuality dimension provided some surprising insights into the relationship. When asked, the media sample said that ADF MPA held the control in the relationship and felt relatively powerless to influence that control unless they could gain access to information:

I see the media as powerful once it gets hold of information and how we choose to use it, which is why there is such a sensitive rub between the two organisations. But I think who holds the power is the one who holds the information (media respondent).

MPA also shares this concept of power, as one participant stated: “Oh we have the control! We have the information and we release it if we want ... at the end of the day we’re the experts and we hold the information and that really gives us the more powerful position” (media respondent). However, across the cohort, ADF MPA participants believed that neither ADF nor media held the power in the relationship – rather, it was held by a third party, the Federal Government. MPA participants believed that the Government’s ability to place controls on access and information availability limited MPA’s ability to accommodate journalists’ requests which cast a long shadow over their relationship with the media.

The control mutuality dimension clearly demonstrates the model’s value as a way of organising ideas and data. Until the specific questions relating to control were asked, the media described dissatisfaction with the relationship specifically in terms of access to information and troops. However, once the word ‘control’ was raised it was identified as a central cause of the problems. The model provided a label for generalised feelings of dissatisfaction and powerlessness. Similarly, the role of the Australian Federal government may not have been articulated without specific discussion about control.

This dimension provided useful labels which helped participants articulate their concerns. This proved beneficial when analysing data too, because the model reduced qualitative data to similar terms. Examination of each stakeholder’s responses illustrated the gaps in understanding and expectations, and perceptions of power balance.

2. Trust - Do the parties trust each other to be open, based on their belief in the other party’s competence, integrity and dependability?

This exploration was interesting for its insight into the notions of trust. For example, MPA personnel considered that most media

were reliable and competent. However, very few MPA personnel felt that they could “trust” the media. Further probing of this issue, using questions much broader than those suggested by Grunig allowed this apparent contradiction to be investigated. The central cause of this contradiction was that most MPA personnel didn’t consider that judgments could be made about the media as a ‘collective’, rather they were a bunch of individuals, some of whom were extremely trustworthy, and others who were highly untrustworthy.

In contrast, the media sample considered that MPA treated them fairly and justly and were mostly reliable and competent. Of interest is that the media sample said they believed MPA generally told the truth. This trust was, however, qualified by statements that suggested MPA sometimes withheld information. For example, one media participant said:

I would not say they were dishonest but sometimes the trick is what they leave out rather than what they say. I don’t think they’d say ‘the cat is black’ if it is white. They’d just say, ‘There was a cat’. Yes there is a cat. What colour is the cat? ‘Well the cat could be many colours!!’

The media sample suspected that ADF MPA was least trustworthy when they believed the sources of the messages came from government. As one media participant observed: “(MPA) would just be told to be as ‘courteous and unhelpful as possible’. Which is what happened. They became strategically unhelpful.”

MPA were less able to generalise about reporters and their trustworthiness than they could for some of the other dimensions. Respondents generally distinguished between integrity and other aspects of ‘trust’, competence and dependability. MPA were inclined to place a higher emphasis, relative to the media responses, on the importance of ‘integrity’.

3. Commitment – Do the parties feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain and promote?

This research question revealed a jointly held belief that the relationship was important and worth ongoing investment, but a disparity in the level of effort made to maintain and enhance the relationship. Both parties said that Defence managed and tried to build the relationship. Equally, both parties felt that the media contributed little towards building or maintaining the relationship, an outcome that was often pointed to by MPA as an example of the thanklessness of engaging with the media.

It may be that the media sample's perceptions of their own inability to influence Defence leaves them feeling there is little point investing in an inevitably unbalanced relationship.

4. Satisfaction – Are the parties satisfied with the current state of the relationship?

It is very clear from the research that the media sample was deeply dissatisfied with the relationship in the Iraq war. Satisfaction with the 'relationship' was largely determined by factors discussed above, such as lack of access to information and personnel for the purposes of reporting 'news' during the conflict. When the question was expanded to examine satisfaction during other times there was an equal distribution of positive and negative responses. MPA also expressed ambivalence to the relationship with just over half 'satisfied' with the relationship. Their satisfaction was largely determined by personal interaction experiences, and integrity and dependability issues mentioned previously. Other sentiments expressed were frustration and 'don't care'. One MPA participant expressed their opinion of the relationship as follows: "At the end of the day, love them or hate them, we need them."

5. Is the relationship perceived to be one based on expected benefits (exchange) or concern for the other party without expected benefit (communal)?

While on the surface this dimension demonstrated rare unanimity between both parties, it also highlighted the complexity of this relationship. All participants agreed that the relationship between MPA and the media sample was an exchange relationship, that is, cooperation existed only because of an expected return. Neither party considered that the other provided anything within the relationship without an expected benefit. Very little prompting was, however, required to get either side to provide caveats to those comments. For example, the media sample made several comments about feeling an empathy with the 'troops' and desire to help them in any way they could. The media sample seemed able to separate this 'communality' with the troops from their relationship with ADF MPA. Similarly, MPA provided many humanitarian and security services to media with little thought of the potential benefit. An example of this is the way ADF personnel assisted ABC reporter Eric Campbell who was injured in a suicide bombing which killed his colleague cameraman, in 2003 (M. E. Elliott, personal communication, February 3, 2004). These acts of 'kindness' were seen to be external to the relationship and part of the 'service' that ADF provides to all Australian citizens, and therefore, apparently external to the MPA/media relationship. It is here that the distinction between ADF generally and ADF as a hand of government, in the form of MPA, is raised again. In almost all areas where media suspect ADF MPA is acting on behalf of a government agenda, the media reverts to exchange in preference to communality.

Reflection on the relationship model and method

The reductionist nature of Grunig's model dimensions (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Grunig, 2002) is both its strength and weakness. The model provided a useful guide to the research and analysis at the points of planning, exploring, labelling and reporting the relationship. Initially the model (control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and communality and exchange) helped the researchers to

conceptualise and operationalise the abstract phenomenon, 'relationship'. The dimensions also provided a guide to questions and language for participants' to apply to the relationship in the latter part of the interviews. Participants frequently indicated that the language of the dimensions helped them to articulate their thoughts. For example the subdimensions of 'trust' – integrity, dependability and competence – were useful distinctions. The researcher was able to organise interview data to help describe and then report the relationship, and in this case the dimensions helped to present the culture of MPA back to MPA.

It is not clear from this study whether the model used would have performed differently to other PR or interpersonal relationship models, or how closely the five dimensions align to the unprompted thoughts about their experiences of the other party in the relationship. Participants said that 'control' and the dimensions of 'trust' articulated their feelings, but dialectics of data gathered before and after the introduction of the Hon and Grunig (1999) terminology within the interviews were not compared. Future researchers can further explore the utility of Grunig's model as a framework for 'scaffolding' the attitudes of relationship partners, examining the extent to which the model's dimensions faithfully represent the thoughts of participants. This might be achieved by comparison of the products of different data coding approaches to similar data sets.

The most obvious limits to the model's ability to account for the relationship relate to its bilateral focus on what occurs between an organisation and a public, when the real influences on the situation and relationship are more complex. Stakeholders are normally groups of individuals, and 'relationships' are influenced by the interaction and experiences of individuals who comprise stakeholder groups. This was observed by some of the interviewees who felt unable to generalise about their own varying experiences with individuals from the stakeholder group. A bilateral concept of relationships oversimplifies the complex interaction of multiple stakeholders and their

interests. This was illustrated clearly by the importance of a third party, the MPA's overarching master the Federal Government, to the relationship under study.

MPA considered that Grunig's model alone was 'insufficiently sensitive' because Defence's "relationship with the media is only part of a wider network of relationships that include the Government and the intelligence, security, operational staffs" (Hannan, 2005, p. 2). This may be overcome by endeavouring to interview multiple parties, although this still may not be sufficient to account for the complexities of multiple, hierarchical relationships.

The integration of Grunig's semi-structured, long interview approach, however, provides opportunities to more fully explore different influences on the relationship, such as other stakeholders, cultural norms and constraints.

Future users of the Grunig model should expect to adapt the wording of questions for their own situation, especially those relating to trust. In some cases the wording is awkward and participants regularly sought clarification, resulting in the researcher providing her own interpretation. This might be partly because an American model was used here in Australia, but in several cases the questions would demand some change in any circumstance.

The qualitative in-depth one-to-one interviews approach of the Grunig model provided flexibility to probe and explore the tensions in the relationship between MPA and the media sample. When discussing their relationship with the other stakeholder party, participants provided rich accounts and explanations of the context and interactions with many individuals in the stakeholder group. The responses and anecdotes enabled insights into the nature and origins of the relationship that would not have been captured in fixed response item style data gathering.

Feedback from ADF MPA indicates that the qualitative data and findings provided useful information. MPA stated the research has had a

“...significant influence on the thinking of key MPA staff. As a consequence, it has directly influenced the structure of the MPA organisation, the training of MPA people and the organisation’s business processes. Over recent months, MPA has been totally restructured and reorganised” (Hannan, 2005, p. 2).

Conclusions

This case study provides a clear example of research providing insights and information to aid the conduct of an important relationship. For ADF MPA, the research “provided a key leveraging-tool in negotiating organisational change” (Hannan, 2005, p.1). Change occurred in approaches to its external relationship with the media, and the way information and processes were managed internally. The ability of the research to so strongly and pointedly articulate the feelings of a key stakeholder group back to MPA enabled a focus on the professional exchange with media. However, it was the ability of the research model to record and collate and give a voice to the feelings and frustrations of MPA personnel that provided the most powerful revelation and will have the longest term impact on the organisation.

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