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A STUDY OF THE ARMY HOMETOWN NEWS CENTER

Background

The Army Hometown News Center (AHTNC) was established in 1951. It is a centralized processing point for news items about an individual from the unit/post to the news media servicing that individual's home area. The mission of the AHTNC is to improve, supervise and control the flow of informational material to hometown news media. It is designed to receive, evaluate, and edit all hometown news and feature stories in order to obtain the maximum hometown interest and to insure that each release is appropriate as to style and content. It receives hometown news from all Army units worldwide and handles the time-consuming details required for each hometown news story, e.g., writing, duplication, media selection, addressing and mailing. The work of the AHTNC is based on the assumptions that hometown news material fills a real need to inform the people back home of the accomplishments of a local soldier, and that timely, newsworthy, well written releases will be printed by the hometown newspapers.¹ → (cont on p. 3)

The system is activated by a public affairs officer providing a DA Form 1526, Information for Home Town News Release, to a soldier involved in some event (typically a promotion, school graduation, award, participation in major exercise, arrival at new assignment or reenlistment). The soldier is asked to complete the form and to sign it, thus releasing the information. The form is reviewed by a member of the local Office of Public Affairs and forwarded to AHTNC. There it is reviewed again for completeness, internal consistency and adherence to guidelines published in DA Pamphlet 360-3, Manual for the Preparation of Army Hometown News Material. If the form meets the above criteria, it is developed into an article in the appropriate news story format. For routine articles, standard formats, programmed into the computer at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, are used. The computer prints the

¹DA Pamphlet 360-3, Manual for the Preparation of Army Hometown News Material. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C. 22 February 1974.

story and addresses it to newspapers servicing the soldier's home area. These newspapers are selected based on the ZIP codes of the home addresses of the soldier and of his relatives. The addressee list is updated annually by canvassing news media within the United States and its territories to determine if they desire Army hometown news release service.

Objective

This study was done to determine the amount of news usage, evaluate readership reaction and recommend alternative means of mission accomplishment should it be found economically indefensible to continue to release hometown news by central control.

Two previous studies attempted to evaluate acceptance of military news releases. One was limited to the State of Texas. It surveyed 533 publishers and editors of newspapers and clipped military news materials from 533 Texas newspapers during a two-week period in 1975. Only 90 editors responded to the survey. This low response rate makes any analysis of the replies questionable. The clippings included 565 Army news items, of which 220 (39 percent) came from the AHTNC. Since there was no attempt to determine how many news items had been released by AHTNC immediately prior to the clipping period, no inferences can be made as to the amount of usage of AHTNC releases.²

The second study was a survey conducted jointly by AHTNC and Army Recruiting Command over a three-week period in 1975. Five District Recruiting Commands were furnished copies of AHTNC releases sent to newspapers in their districts and were asked to clip articles based on these releases. Two hundred fifty four DA Forms 1526 were received and processed into 952 releases for the five areas sampled. Only 32 stories based on the 952 releases were published during the survey period, a usage rate of 3.36 percent. Commander, AHTNC questioned the validity of this survey, because of responses to the annual poll of

²Letter, Director of Information, Headquarters, Air Training Command, Department of the Air Force. Subject: Evaluation of Military News Releases. 12 May 1975.

newspapers, and discussions with newspaper editors and indications that some newspaper editors accumulated releases and publish them in bulk with a significant time delay between release and publication.³

cont. fr p. 1
This study was designed to: (1)

- a. Determine if the number of news and photo stories used by civilian newspapers is an acceptable level of return in relation to the cost of releasing the material. (2)
- b. Evaluate, by means of a telephone survey, readership reaction to hometown news releases. and (3)
- c. Provide recommendations of the most cost effective means of providing the service after exploring and comparing alternative methods with those used by the AHTNC.

Methodology

Upon initiation of the study, a visit was made to AHTNC to receive an orientation, collect cost data and arrange for the collection of data on releases.

Cost data were derived by listing the Annual Operating Budget, Military Salaries, Building Rental and Mailing Costs, multiplying each by the percent devoted to the Editorial Branch and summing the results. The costs of processing and distributing hometown news releases to AHTNC for FY76 were:

Category	Expense	Percent Devoted to Editorial Branch ⁴	Cost
a. Annual Operating Budget	\$372,000	62.5	\$232,500
b. Military Salaries	260,000	45.0	117,000
c. Building Rental	72,000	62.5	45,000
d. Mail	16,000	81.0	12,960
Total	<u>\$720,000</u>		<u>\$407,460</u>

³Letter, AHTNC. Subject: DRC Report of Hometown Survey, 26 January 1976.

⁴Note from Major Tom Malloy, XO, AHTNC, October 1976.

Costs for FY77⁵ were projected as:

Category	Expense	Percent Devoted to Editorial Branch	Cost
a. Annual Operating Budget	\$372,100	62.5	\$232,562
b. Military Salaries	272,558	45.0	122,651
c. Building Rental	72,000	62.5	45,000
d. Mail	16,000	81.0	12,960
Total	<u>\$733,116</u>		<u>\$413,173</u>

Note that of the above costs, only the Annual Operating Budget is directly chargeable to AHTNC. Military salaries, building rental and mail are paid out of other funds and are indirect costs of the operation.

Statistical data on editorial and photo releases⁶ mailed during FY76 were provided by AHTNC. Arrangements were made to furnish the contractor a random four percent sample of releases sent out by AHTNC for October 1976. Tabulations were made of the number of releases, number of stories, average number of lines, percentage of releases with photos, percent of releases dealing with promotions, graduations, changes of assignments, awards, participation in major field exercises, reenlistments and "other" topics, average number of lines per type and percentage of each story per type. Tabulations for selected dates are presented in Table 1.

The number of releases sent to each newspaper for the 30-day period ending 12 October 1976 was also furnished by AHTNC. From this, the contractor selected a systematic random sample of 490 newspapers that had received five or more releases. AHTNC furnished a copy of all releases sent to these newspapers for the month of November. A national clipping service clipped articles based on AHTNC releases for one week in November. From these data, the following weekly averages for November were determined for the sample of 490 newspapers.

	Sent	Printed	Percentage Printed
Number of releases	1,382	119	8.6
Number of column inches	3,572	268	7.5

⁵Conversation with Mr. Skahan, AHTNC, January 1977.

⁶Throughout this report, "release" refers to one item sent to a newspaper. A single story may be sent to several newspapers. If one story is sent to five newspapers, this counts as five releases.

TABLE 1. AVERAGE NUMBER OF RELEASES DAILY

	10/8	10/12	10/15	10/18	10/19	10/20	10/21	10/22	10/26	10/27	10/28
Total Number of Releases	66	92	48	212	63	58	31	57	75	48	89
Total Number of Stories	19	28	15	71	21	22	11	28	20	24	28
Average Number of Lines	14	10	13	10	11	9	12	11	11	10	10
Percent of Releases with Photos	0	0	0	0	14	0	9	36	0	4	0
Percent of Releases which Deal with:											
(1) Promotion Stories	5	21	0	18	24	27	9	11	0	4	7
(2) Graduation Stories	63	14	67	21	47	27	46	57	55	46	39
(3) Change of Assignment	0	36	7	49	14	41	0	32	40	38	36
(4) Award Stories	0	4	13	3	10	5	18	0	5	13	11
(5) Exercise Stories	31	11	7	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
(6) "Other" topics	0	14	7	4	0	0	9	0	0	0	0
(7) Reenlistment	0	0	0	4	0	0	18	0	0	0	7
The Average Number of Lines in:											
(1) Promotion Stories	7	7	0	7	7	7	7	8	0	9	7
(2) Graduation Stories	11	12	13	12	13	11	12	13	13	13	13
(3) Change of Assignment	0	8	5	9	5	7	0	7	7	6	7
(4) Award Stories	0	19	12	12	12	15	16	0	12	13	13
(5) Exercise Stories	21	20	21	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	0
(6) "Other" topics	0	12	25	12	0	0	10	0	0	0	0
(7) Reenlistment	0	0	0	8	0	0	10	0	0	0	6
The Percent of Each Story Type Which have Photos:											
(1) Promotion Stories	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(2) Graduation Stories	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	63	0	9	0
(3) Change of Assignment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(4) Award Stories	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	0	0	0	0
(5) Exercise Stories	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
(6) "Other" topics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(7) Reenlistment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Circulation data and advertising rates for a subsample of 50 newspapers which actually published an AHTNC release were taken from the *Ayer Directory of Publications* (Ayer Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1975), the standard reference for these data.

Average circulation was 27,300.

Average advertising rate was \$3.72 per column inch.

Finally, a telephone survey was conducted to gauge the public's reaction to a sample of releases. A random sample of 95 relatives of soldiers who had been written about were called. A 90 percent response rate was secured through a maximum of two callbacks. Ten questions were asked in this survey.

Analysis

Cost Effectiveness

In evaluating the cost effectiveness of the AHTNC, one must keep in mind the hidden costs of the system. The costs given in the preceding section are only those involved in the operations of AHTNC. There are many costs that are incurred by the Army before a story arrives at AHTNC. These include the time taken by the soldier to complete the DA Form 1526, the time used by the local Public Affairs office to distribute, collect and screen the forms, and the mailing costs from Army posts worldwide to AHTNC. The sum of these hidden costs to the Army cannot be calculated.

The first cost calculated was the cost of processing the stories from the arrival of the DA Forms 1526 to the time the releases are mailed from AHTNC. In FY76, 346,191 releases were mailed by AHTNC at a cost of \$407,460. This is an average cost of \$1.18 per release. There are no data available on how many releases were actually printed.

For FY77, there is, of course, no complete data yet on total number of releases. Data do exist on November releases, on FY77 costs and on clippings from a one-week sample taken in November. Weekly averages for cost, cost per release and cost per release printed can then be derived.

Weekly average cost of AHTNC devoted to hometown news releases = $\$413,173 \div 52 = \$7,945$.

Total releases for November = 25,642.

Weekly average of releases, November = $25,642 \div 4 = 6,410$.

Average cost per release sent out = $\$7,945 \div 6,410 = \1.24 .

Weekly proportion of stories printed to stories released, based on random sample of 490 newspapers = 8.6%.

Projected number of stories printed (weekly average of releases times percent printed) = $6,410 \times 8.6\% = 551$.

Projected average cost per story printed = $\$7,945 \div 551 = \14.42 .

A comparison of AHTNC releases and stories printed is shown below. The releases column shows weekly averages for the month of November 1976 from the sample of 490 newspapers. The stories column depicts those clipped during the week of 14-20 November 1976. The third column compares the number of stories printed to the number released.

Category by Type of News	Releases		Stories		Percent Stories/Releases
	No.	Percent of Total	No.	Percent of Total	
Promotion	190	13.8	29	24.4	15.3
Graduation	549	39.7	32	26.9	5.8
Change of Assignment	428	31.0	20	16.8	4.7
Award	74	5.4	19	16.0	25.7
Exercise	91	6.6	9	7.6	9.9
Reenlistment	19	1.4	2	1.7	10.5
Other	31	2.2	8	6.7	25.8
Total	1,382	100.0	119	100.0	8.6

Average Length in Column Inches

Category	Release	Story*
Promotion	2.0	1.5
Graduation	3.25	2.5
Change of Assignment	1.75	2.0
Award	3.0	2.25
Exercise	3.5	2.75
Reenlistment	1.75	1.75
Other	2.75	4.25
Overall	2.5	2.25

*Includes headline when story is not printed in column devoted exclusively to "military news."

Use of Photographs

Total number of releases with photos	= 224
Weekly average of releases with photos	= 56
Number of stories printed with photos	= 9
Percentage of releases with photos	= $56 \div 1,382 = 4.0\%$
Percentage of stories printed with photos	= $9 \div 119 = 7.6\%$

By comparing the percentage of stories printed to those released by type of news, one can sense what types of stories are deemed most newsworthy by the newspaper editors. It would appear that positive, nonroutine accomplishments of soldiers, e.g., awards, promotions, other, are printed more frequently than routine aspects of military life, e.g., graduation, change of assignment, participation in field exercises. The average length of the printed story does not vary greatly from that of the release except in the "other" category.

Another way of looking at the cost effectiveness of hometown news releases is to compute the cost of an equivalent amount of column inches of advertising. This method must be used with more than a grain of salt, as the comparison is not truly valid. The audience for a hometown news release is limited to the relatives and friends of the subject of that release. A person with no knowledge of the soldier mentioned in the release may not read the story. An advertisement would have a wider audience. On the other hand, an advertisement would have other costs of preparation and placement.

Keeping the above *caveats* in mind, a comparison of release cost, cost per printed story, and cost of an advertisement of equivalent size shows:

Average cost to AHTNC per release:	\$ 1.24
Average cost to AHTNC per story printed:	\$14.42
Average length (column inches) per story printed:	2.25
Average cost of a column inch per story printed:	\$ 6.40
Average cost per column inch of an advertisement:	\$ 3.72

Readership Reaction

The hometown news release is based on the assumption that it fills the need of relatives to see in print stories about the accomplishments of soldiers, AHTNC attempts to insure that its releases are sent to all newspapers that cover the areas defined by the ZIP codes of the soldier and his/her parents, spouse and in-laws. This coverage is limited, however, by two factors. AHTNC only sends releases to newspapers that agree to receive the releases. After the releases are sent, it is still the local editor who decides whether or not to print the releases.

In the telephone survey of relatives of soldiers who had been subjects of printed releases, only 62.8 percent of the respondents said they had seen such an article. Those who had seen the article were then asked if they had clipped the article, if they had obtained extra copies of the article and if they had known of the event before seeing the article. Eighty-seven percent said they had clipped the article, 35 percent said they had obtained extra copies and 67 percent said they had had some previous knowledge of the event. These items are presented in tabular form below.

Question 1. "Did you see the article?" (n = 86)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	54	62.8%
No	32	37.2%

Question 2. "If you saw the article, did you clip the article out of the paper?" (n = 54)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	19	35.2%
No	34	63.0%
No Answer	1	1.8%

Question 3: "If you saw the article, did you obtain any extra copies?" (n = 54)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	19	35.2%
No	34	63.0%
No Answer	1	1.8%

Question 4: "If you saw the article, did you already know of the event?" (n = 54)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	36	66.7%
No	17	31.5%
No Answer	1	1.8%

The fifth question, asked of all respondents, asked whether or not friends had mentioned the article. Fifty-four percent said yes. This 54 percent were then asked if a friend had sent a copy of the clipping from the respondent, if they had mentioned the *article* to friends, if

they had mentioned the *event*, but not the *article*, to friends, and which one of seven sorts of events was most like the one covered in the article. Thirty-six percent said they had received clippings from friends, 57 percent said they had mentioned the article to friends. Seventy-two percent said they had mentioned the event to friends.

The largest single category (40 percent) of stories was "promotion." The next largest category (19 percent) was change of assignment. Questions 5 through 9 are presented in tabular form below.

Question 5: "Did any friends mention the article to you?" (n = 86)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	47	54.7%
No	39	45.3%

Question 6: "If friends mentioned the article to you, did you receive clippings from friends?" (n = 47)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	17	36.5%
No	30	63.8%

Question 7: "Did you mention the article to any of your friends?" (n = 47)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	27	57.4%
No	20	42.6%

Question 8: "Did you mention the event that the article was about (not the article) to any of your friends?" (n = 47)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	34	72.3%
No	13	27.7%

Question 9: "Which of the following phrases best describes the event?" (n = 47)

Category	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Promotion	19	40.4%
Change of Assignment	9	19.1%
Military Exercise	1	2.1%
Graduation	5	10.6%
Award	3	6.4%
Reenlistment	0	-
Other	6	12.9%
No Answer	4	8.5%

A final question, asked of all respondents, was whether or not the Army should continue such articles. Ninety-two percent said yes.

Question 10: "Should the Army continue such articles?" (n = 86)

Response	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	79	91.9%
No	4	4.6%
No Answer	3	3.5%

The overwhelming support of continuation of the Hometown News Program supports the assumption that relatives need to see in print stories about the accomplishments of soldiers. On the other hand, readership of the articles that were printed was only 62.8 percent. This would indicate that the article may have been printed in a newspaper that was not purchased

by the relatives or that the article was not noticed. Two-thirds of those who saw the article already knew of the event. This indicates that the articles are not really "news," and that most of the soldiers do communicate with their relatives events in their military lives by mail, telephone calls or other means. Members of the community other than relatives do show interest in the articles.

Alternatives to Increase Cost Effectiveness

After analyzing the data, it appears that AHTNC is not accomplishing its mission of disseminating news coverage of the individual achievements and activities of soldiers in a cost-effective manner. The following alternatives for increasing cost-effectiveness are presented:

Alternative 1: Eliminate the Hometown News Service

Advantage

Eliminates all costs.

Disadvantage

Substantial reduction of contact with and release of information to the numerically large grass roots segment of the news media—the weekly and small- to medium-size daily newspapers and miscellaneous organizational publications. The following may be anticipated:

- a. A strong negative reaction to the loss of this news input by the grass roots media, whose principal appeal to the local populace is "local names in the news." Reaction could take the form of editorials and political pressure. The negative effect on soldiers' morale and on the attitudes of relatives and friends toward the Army probably would be stressed.
- b. Personal recognition provided by the program enhances morale and career orientation of soldiers. Feedback from relatives and friends to soldiers based on hometown articles would be lost.

- c. Any effect on recruiting based on one person's desire to emulate another person's apparent success and status would be lost.
- d. The opportunity offered by the program to announce and explain various Army activities to the general public would not exist.

Alternative 2: Decentralize Program to Post Level

Advantage

Eliminate costs unique to centralized operation, i.e.:

- a. Separate real property facility and associated operation and maintenance expenses.
- b. Automated specialized equipment, supplies and specialized operators.
- c. Central management and support personnel.
- d. Hidden costs of mailing forms to AHTNC.

Disadvantage

- a. Need to provide story-writing and addressing programs to each post computer.
- b. Continued need for central office to update list of newspapers that desire hometown news service.
- c. Need for additional public affairs specialists at post level. Post public affairs offices are not now staffed for the hometown news workload.

- d. Newspapers may react negatively because of reduced service and because of the receipt of releases from many sources instead of one envelope containing releases from AHTNC. Before the services centralized hometown news operations, many newspapers published strong negative editorials and complained to Congressmen about the workload caused by multiple mailings and about the added postal costs to the taxpayers.

Alternative 3: Decentralize Program to Major Commands

Advantage

Same as Alternative 2. In addition, a higher quantity and quality of news releases may occur due to command supervision.

Disadvantage

Same as Alternative 2, plus:

- a. No saving in hidden cost of mailing forms from posts to other locations.
- b. Hometown news support of non-major command (tenant) units would have to be assigned to specific major commands.

Alternative 4: Reduction of the Scope of the Program to Include Only Those Releases with a High Probability of Publication

Analysis of the types of stories printed *versus* the types of stories released indicates that award and promotion stories have the highest probabilities of being printed. These two categories made up 19 percent of releases from AHTNC and 41 percent of stories printed. The high rate of printing of these stories indicates greater editorial interest in positive accomplishments of the soldier rather than in routine military actions such as change of assignment, participation in field exercises or graduation from a training course.

Advantage

Reduces number of releases and increases probability of publication. Reduces work force, computer usage and mailing costs.

Disadvantage

Loss of information to the public about the nature of training courses and of the objectives of field exercises.

Alternative 5: Continuation of Present Program with all Civil Service Staff

Advantages

- a. Release of military personnel to other assignments.
- b. Elimination of military personnel support costs.
- c. Greater stability of work force.

Disadvantages

Loss of military knowledge and understanding of various activities.

Alternative 6: Centralize All Home Town News Centers into a Joint Operation with Navy and Air Force.

Advantage

Cost savings in:

- a. **Personnel:** Supervisory, administrative and supply support, computer programmer, mail clerk and media liaison personnel spaces would be combined, thus effecting an overall reduction.

- b. Equipment, computer facilities, mailing equipment would be combined.
- c. Real property.
- d. Postal costs.

Disadvantages

- a. Cost of physical relocation and acquisition and preparation of larger centralized facilities could be of sufficient magnitude to offset operational saving.
- b. No one service would have control over its own program.

Alternative 7: Contract Home Town News Service Operations

In view of the personnel support and fringe benefit costs of military and civil service staffing of AHTNC, it may be possible to economize by hiring a civilian contractor. Whether there are any qualified civilian contractors in this field and whether any such contractor could effectively perform AHTNC functions at a lower cost would require research outside the scope of this study.

Recommendations

The fastest way to increase cost effectiveness without major organizational change would be to adopt Alternative 4. Decisions on which categories of releases should or should not be continued require more detailed research. The categories indicated by the project are based on one week's clippings compared to one month's releases. A larger sample, e.g., three months, should be taken before final decisions are made. In addition, a sample of newspaper editors should be polled to determine their preferences as to categories of stories.

A minor change in procedure may increase the proportion of stories printed to those released. The data on releases in November show that releases were issued in bursts (Table 2). There were 21 working days in November, yet releases were made only on 11 days. On two of these 11 days, less than 1,000 releases were sent out. On four days, over 2,000 releases were made. This sporadic method of releasing stories may lead to temporary overloading of releases to newspapers followed by periods of no loading at all. If a large number of releases arrives at one newspaper simultaneously, the editor does not have the time to review each release carefully. In addition, he only has a limited number of column inches available for news, so some releases may not be printed due to lack of space. The editor may file some releases for later printing, but such releases tend to be forgotten. A more even mailing of releases would improve the chances of a given release being printed. In addition to spreading releases throughout the month, a method should be devised to preclude sending too many releases to any single newspaper in one day.

In the longer run, other research efforts may produce even more cost effective results. A comparative study of the hometown news service operations of all three services may point out techniques that lead to higher publication rates of releases. Such a study could also be used to determine the advisability and feasibility of combining all the service hometown news center operations into one centralized facility.

TABLE 2.
HTNC NOVEMBER RELEASES

Date	Release*	Photo
November 1	1,664	
5	5,454	
9	3,970	83
11	2,458	
15	26	114
16	1,599	430
17	773	72
18	1,379	
19	1,761	
29	1,258	107
30	4,494	
	24,836	806

*Total Media Count