



**MASTER'S THESIS PROPOSAL**

by

**ANTHONY D. ROAKE**

**INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND THE INFLUENCE OF  
MILITARY PUBLIC AFFAIRS ON THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER**

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**University of Georgia**

**22 June 1994**

## **INFORMATION SUBSIDIES AND THE INFLUENCE OF MILITARY PUBLIC AFFAIRS ON THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER**

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Agenda setting theory suggests that the media sets the public agenda. Research has indicated that the media appears to have the ability to focus society attention on particular issues (Turk, 1985; Severin & Tankard, 1992). But, what or who sets the media agenda? This is a question that the concept of information subsidies addresses.

Information has a value placed on it by the users and providers of information. This value is determined by the perceived utility of the information. The information source controls the information and determines when and where to release it. The journalist accepts the information subsidy from the information source when that source is determined to be credible and reliable and the information cannot be acquired by and easier, more economical method. So, in providing an information subsidy, the cost of gathering and interpreting the information is born by the source, therefore reducing the cost of the information to the mass media and the end users of the information.

There have been few studies which have examined the concept of information subsidies. Of these studies, those which focused on the information source examined relationships the state government

and the White House have with the media (Turk & Franklin, 1987).

The concept of information subsidies needs to be tested on a more local level to see if its theoretical value holds up in the day-to-day relationships among local newspapers and their sources.

What part does the availability of newspaper resources play in this relationship? The concept of information subsidies suggests that resource rich newspapers would rely less on the subsidies distributed by public relations practitioners. Newspapers have journalists who cover regular "beats" such as the courts, the business community or the military community. Does having the resource of a beat reporter make a difference in the amount and type of subsidies accepted from a particular beat community?

Journalists have many pressures on them as they attempt to cover the daily news in a local community. In addition to pressure from the editor and publisher, journalists are pressured by public relations personnel to make the PR agenda their agenda and to accept the subsidies they send out every day. How do relationships between journalist and PR practitioner and between newspaper and organization play in this daily dance to the agenda-setting beat?

My study will look at the relationship between a prominent organization in the local community and the local newspaper. The study will look at the impact the relationship has on the acceptance of information subsidies by the local newspaper.

I decided to choose military installations as the prominent organization because military bases tend to be a large, visible presence in a city or town. They are often the largest employer in

the area and are sometimes the only federal government presence in the area.

People tend to be concerned about the influence of the government on their lives. This study would have possible social value in determining if military bases have a large impact on the media agenda and therefore possibly on the public agenda.

This study could also have practical implications for public relations personnel who try to get their subsidies accepted. It could possibly shed additional light on why subsidies are accepted or rejected. Military public affairs officers (PAOs) spend a large amount of time sending unsolicited subsidies to the media. Perhaps this study might give some indication of the value of this effort.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW/JUSTIFICATION OF HYPOTHESIS**

Oscar H. Gandy (1982) defines an information subsidy as "an attempt to produce influence over the actions of others by controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions. This information is characterized as a subsidy because the source of that information causes it to be made available at something less than the cost a user would face in the absence of the subsidy" (p. 61).

For example, if a media outlet cannot acquire government information on its own due to the excessive cost of gathering that information (in manpower, time, etc.), then the outlet would be more likely to accept information subsidies from government public information officers.

I have found that some newspapers with a very large military presence in their readership area have a dedicated military journalist/editor. Such a newspaper in a Gandy scenario of information subsidies would be more apt to personally gather military related information and would not use as many military related subsidies as a newspaper without a military beat reporter. This difference in resources means that military related information from the base public affairs office is more valuable to the newspaper without a military affairs writer. A newspaper without a military beat journalist would more likely not spend as much time in gathering military related information and would rely more on information subsidies from the base public affairs office.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Newspapers without a military affairs journalist accept more information subsidies per military installation than newspapers with a military affairs journalist.

Empirical research indicates that factors other than information economics may come into play in the media's decision of what information to use. Turk (1986) found that in newspapers, newsworthiness of the information far outweighs information economics in determining whether the information subsidy was used. However, her study focused on state level government agencies. Newspapers studied which were not in the state capitol used state agency subsidies less than the capitol city newspaper which

considered state news local news.

In television, Berkowitz (1989) found that local relevance in addition to a visually oriented news event were the keys to subsidy acceptance. In another television study, Blount (1992) found that with video news releases, factors such as length of the release and size of the newshole were prominent factors. So, factors other than information subsidies appear to influence decisions on what is used as news.

Personal and organizational relationships are other factors which can influence subsidy acceptance.

Gans' (1979) study of national television networks and newsmagazines suggested that the personal, symbiotic relationship that develops between journalist and source does indeed affect the positive or negative tone of stories about the agency covered and the way news is gathered. Gans suggests that local journalists move within a relatively small and narrow aggregate of sources with whom they interact regularly.

This close relationship brings about a pressure on journalists to deal with sources in a way that will preserve the relationship. In addition to this pressure, the beat journalist may experience pressure from an editor to fill a certain amount of white space with stories from his beat.

Also, local newspaper support for a military base is likely to be situational based on the newspaper's involvement in local political issues. This level of support may have an impact on the amount of subsidies a newspaper accepts.



Hawthorne (1993) points out that in many towns, the local newspaper and editor are an integral part of the local community economic development effort. His study of an Iowa economic development effort showed the large, conscious, active part the press played in the economic development campaign.

A combination of these factors could produce a situation that runs contrary to Gandy's economic concept of information subsidies. Therefore, an alternative to Hypothesis 1a is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Newspapers with a military affairs journalist accept more information subsidies than newspapers without a military affairs journalist.

Previous research which looked at newspaper and television media has shown that between one-half and one-quarter of the information subsidies received by the media is used (Turk & Franklin, 1987; Berkowitz, 1989). There is some debate on whether government organizations are more successful in the amount of acceptance of subsidies than other types of organizations (Turk, 1986; Berkowitz, 1989).

My second hypothesis reflects the fact that most military bases are one of the largest employers in their area and are often the only federal military presence in the area. A military installation may have a stronger influence on the press than other organizations in the area.

**Hypothesis 2:** Newspapers near a military installation accept - more often than they reject - the information subsidies from the military public affairs office.

A related third hypothesis goes a step further in reflecting the close relationship discussed by Gans (1979) which can form between journalist and source.

**Hypothesis 3:** A local newspaper which has a positive relationship with the local military installation uses more information subsidies from the base public affairs office than it rejects.

An assumption of the information subsidies concept is that the source of information can influence the public agenda by controlled release of information through the media (Gandy, 1982).

Previous research has shown newspaper stories that use information subsidies seem to more accurately reflect the source's agenda than the more general group of stories written about the source agency (Turk, 1986).

Turk found that information sources transmit issue salience, or the importance of an issue, as well as raw information, but only when they are successful in getting media to use their information subsidies. Newspaper stories which use information subsidies from state government public information officers more accurately reflect the source's agenda than general information stories about

the source.

I anticipate the same results in my study, especially since most military bases are a large economical and political influence in their geographical areas.

*Hypothesis 4:* The agenda of issues presented in information subsidies from military public affairs offices (military agenda) influences the agenda of issues portrayed in local media content (media agenda). The media will reflect the priorities exhibited by the military public affairs offices.

I've mentioned many factors found in previous research which determine the subsidies that journalists accept or reject. In my brief literature review, I've not found discussion of a factor which I believe may also influence subsidy acceptance or rejection.

Military public affairs offices send out daily releases which contain what I consider routine, non-controversial information. These periods of routine information are punctuated by issues which are seen as negative and potentially damaging to the base by the public affairs office. The base responds to the controversial issue by sending out polemical subsidies with the base's position on the issue.

Do journalists accept polemical subsidies more than non-controversial information or do they treat them with more suspicion? The symbiotic relationship described by Gans (1979) between national television and newsmagazine beat journalists and

national level sources gives an insight into how a journalist at that level may respond. Gans suggests that beat reporters, being on the inside of an agency, must often concentrate on stories which please their sources, since angering them may endanger their rapport.

But what about the local newspaper reporter? The PAO may not have much influence over the reporter since the newspaper more than likely has no competitor in town. A threat of withholding information has the negative effect of not getting the PAOs agenda represented.

Journalists wave the objectivity banner religiously and would say that they present both sides of an issue. My past experience tends to agree with this. But on polemical issues, a written subsidy (news release, fact sheet, etc.) is scrutinized more and usually results in a request from the reporter for in-depth interviews with sources seen more credible on the particular issue than the base PAO.

*Hypothesis 5:* Newspapers, with or without a military beat journalist, use subsidies concerning polemical issues as much as they use non-controversial information subsidies.

My past experience also suggests a related hypothesis concerning the initiator of non-controversial versus polemical subsidies.

A major function of public relations personnel in all sectors

of business and government is to distribute information concerning the positive aspects of their organizations. When controversy arises, carefully selected words that reflect the organization's position are cautiously distributed to the media.

often it is the media which brings the controversy to the public relations practitioner's attention. The PAO is then placed in a reactive mode by responding to media queries.

**Hypothesis 6:** Subsidies of non-controversial information are initiated most often by the PAO whereas subsidies of polemical issues are initiated most often by the journalist.

#### **VARIABLES AND CONCEPTS**

##### **Independent Variables:**

*Newspaper with a military affairs journalist.* (Hypothesis 1a, 1b, 5) A newspaper with a military affairs journalist is a daily newspaper which employs a reporter whose main task is to write military related news articles. A newspaper with such a focused journalist would probably be located in a city with more than one military installation in the paper's service area.

A daily newspaper without a military affairs journalist assigns any reporter on it's staff at any particular time to cover news from the local military installation. Such a newspaper would probably be located in a city with only one military installation.

Possible confounding factors such as differences in the

physical size of the newspapers, the size of the military bases, and newspaper competition will be minimized by the newspaper selection process. Similar newspapers will be selected based on the average number of pages of the weekday editions. The newspapers will also be chosen based on similar sized military installations in the newspaper's service area. Newspapers will be selected which have no competition from another daily newspaper. The possible confounding factors will be reduced so that the data will be a measurement of the difference in the existence of a military affairs journalist.

*Newspaper near a military installation.* (Hypothesis 2)  
Operationally defined as a newspaper which has at least one military installation in its readership area.

*Newspaper with a positive relationship with a local military installation.* (Hypothesis 3) This relationship is a subjective variable that will be determined by the researcher after conducting intensive interviews with the base public affairs officers and the military beat journalist and editors.

*Military agenda.* (Hypothesis 4) Military agenda is operationally defined as the content of information subsidies provided to the newspapers. Since public and organizational issues are constantly changing, this content will be separated into issue categories that will be identified prior to the eight week data gathering period (see Research Methods section).

*Public affairs officer and journalist.* (Hypothesis 6) PAO is operationally defined as the senior public affairs officer on the

base. The senior PAO has responsibility for all information put out by the base public affairs office.

Journalist is operationally defined as any military beat or general reporter who writes stories about military issues.

**Dependent Variables:**

*Acceptance/use of information subsidies.* (Hypothesis 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 5, 6) Acceptance or use of information subsidies is defined as those subsidies that are used by the media in news articles, feature stories, editorials and columns published within an eight week measurement period. If all or part of the information from a subsidy is used in a published article, then the subsidy will be said to be accepted by the newspaper.

Non-acceptance is defined as information subsidies that are discarded or not used in the eight week period.

Information subsidies are operationally defined as written and oral information provided to journalists. Written information includes: press releases, copies of documents or reports, written answers to journalist questions, fact sheets, pre-prepared press kits, brochures of the installation and memoranda from public affairs offices to journalists. Oral subsidies include information given by telephone or through face-to-face conversations with journalists as recorded in logbooks.

*Media Agenda.* (Hypothesis 4) Media agenda is operationally defined as the editorial content of the newspapers which includes the news articles, feature stories, editorials and columns. This content will be separated into the same categories as the

independent variable at the time of coding.

*Polemical subsidies and non-controversial subsidies.*

(Hypothesis 5 and 6) Polemical and non-controversial subsidies are determined by the base PAO since the base responds with polemical subsidies to what it perceives to be a controversial issue.

Non-controversial subsidies will be those subsidies that contain what the PAO considers routine information. Polemical subsidies are those subsidies that are issued in response to a controversial issue or to head off an emerging controversial issue.

As the base PAO fills out the subsidy log during data gathering, he/she will identify whether the subsidy is polemical or non-controversial.

#### **RESEARCH METHODS**

Two newspapers will be selected. One newspaper will be located in a city with military base X. The other newspaper will be located in a city with at least two military bases: Y and Z.

Data will be gathered in two stages, one quantitative and one qualitative.

First, a content analysis will be accomplished of all information subsidies and newspaper content over an eight week period. The eight week time frame was chosen because a similar previous study found that this time period provided a volume of information large enough for statistically significant analysis (Turk, 1986). Two coders will be employed to accomplish the content analysis.



*Information subsidies.* The senior public affairs officer at military bases X, Y and Z will be asked to make a duplicate copy of each information subsidy provided to journalists within the eight week measurement period. Each senior officer will also be asked to keep a log of all information subsidies provided to journalists within the eight week measurement period. The log will record the following information:

1. Date of subsidy.
2. Which newspaper and journalist received the subsidy.
3. Method of subsidy transmission (phone, faxed or mailed news release, news conference, mailed or faxed document).
4. Whether subsidy was initiated by the public affairs office or by the journalist.
5. The topic or issue of the subsidy. Prior to the measurement period, each base senior public affairs officer will be surveyed to determine the most prominent national and local military related issues at the time. This survey will be used to compile a list of issue/topic categories.
6. Whether the subsidy is polemical or non-controversial.

The coders will code each subsidy on a seven-point scale with favorable and unfavorable at the extremes. This scale will then be reconciled to determine if each subsidy is favorable, neutral or unfavorable towards the military.

*Newspaper content.* The coders will examine news articles, feature stories, editorials and columns for military related content and will identify the issue addressed in each military

related newspaper item. The same list of issue/topic categories mentioned above will be used. Newspaper items will be coded with the same seven-point scale used to measure the subsidies and then reconciled to determine if the item is favorable, neutral or unfavorable towards the military.

To increase coder reliability, the coders will be trained before the actual measurement begins. The coders will be pretested for the percentage of agreement between them and their ability to reconcile differences.

After the eight week content analysis period, intensive interviews will be conducted with the public affairs officer of each military base, with the military affairs journalist, and with the editors of each newspaper. These interviews will be conducted in person if possible, otherwise they will be conducted via phone. The interviews will be used to supplement the quantitative data and possibly explain the results of the content analysis.

## **ANALYSIS**

Acceptance rates for information subsidies will be compared between the newspaper with a dedicated military writer and the newspaper without (See Dummy Table 1).

Acceptance rates for subsidies distributed by the military installations will be compared (See Dummy Table 2). Information gained from the intensive interviews will be used along with the acceptance rates to determine what role a positive relationship has in influencing acceptance rates.

Issue categories of subsidies sent and subsidies used will be compared to determine if the military public affairs agenda is reflected in the media agenda.

The data will also be examined to see how successful military installations are in getting subsidies accepted by media. The number of subsidies initiated by the public affairs office and the number initiated by journalists will be compared with the amount accepted (See Dummy Tables 2 & 3).

Polemical and non-controversial subsidy acceptance rates and initiation rates will be examined to determine their role in subsidy acceptance (See Dummy Table 4).

All of the results will be compared to results from previous studies which looked at state and federal level government agencies (Turk, 1986). These results will be useful in evaluating the theoretical value of the concept of information subsidies.

Transcripts of the intensive interviews will be examined for common themes or topics which give an insight into the journalist/PAO relationship and how that relationship influences subsidy rejection/acceptance.

**DUMMY TABLE #1**

**Subsidy use by newspaper**

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Subsidy Use</i>		<i>Totals</i>
	<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Rejected</i>	
A	70 (23.3%)	30 (10%)	100 (33.3%)
B	110 (36.6%)	90 (30%)	200 (66.6%)
<b>Totals</b>	<u>180 (60%)</u>	<u>120 (40%)</u>	<u>300</u>

**DUMMY TABLE #2**

**Subsidy use by military installation**

<i>Military Base</i>	<i>Subsidy Use</i>		<i>Totals</i>
	<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Rejected</i>	
X	70 (23.3%)	30 (10%)	100 (33.3%)
Y	55 (18.3%)	45 (15%)	100 (33.3%)
Z	55 (18.3%)	45 (15%)	100 (33.3%)
<b>Totals</b>	<u>180 (60%)</u>	<u>120 (40%)</u>	<u>300</u>

**DUMMY TABLE #3**

**Subsidy Information by Initiator for Total Subsidies  
from Military Base X, Military Base Y and Military Base Z**

(There will be similar tables showing individual results for  
Bases X, Y and Z.)

<i>Initiator of Subsidy</i>	<i>Implications of subsidy</i>		
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Military PAO	150 (79%)	5 (3%)	35 (18%)
Journalist	65 (59%)	5 (5%)	40 (36%)
Totals	<u>215 (72%)</u>	<u>10 (3%)</u>	<u>75 (25%)</u>

**DUMMY TABLE #4**

**Use of polemical and non-controversial subsidies**

Total subsidies: 300

<i>Type of Subsidy</i>	<i>Journalist Initiated</i>		<i>PAO Initiated</i>	
	<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Rejected</i>	<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Rejected</i>
Polemical				
Non-controversial				
Totals	<hr/>		<hr/>	

Percentage of polemical subsidies accepted:

Percentage of non-controversial subsidies accepted:

## CALENDAR

- Jun 24: Thesis proposal approval by advisory committee
- Jun 27 - Jul 8: Select newspapers and military bases/contact PAOs at bases
- Jul 5 - Aug 5: Write literature review section of thesis, begin writing method section
- Jul 11 - Jul 22: Brief PAOs on data gathering instruments
- Jul 11 - Jul 22: Select and train coders
- Jul 25 - Sep 16: Eight week period of data gathering
- Aug 1 - Sep 30: Coding of quantitative data
- Sep 19 - Sep 30: Intensive interviews
- Oct 3 - Oct 14: Analysis of results
- Oct 10 - Oct 28: Write method, results and discussion sections of thesis
- Oct 31 - Nov 2: Finalize thesis
- Nov 3 - Nov 4: Printing and binding of thesis
- Nov 4: Thesis to advisory committee members
- Nov 14 - Nov 18: Thesis approval meeting with advisory committee during this week
- Nov 18: Signed thesis submitted to graduate school

**PROJECTED COSTS**

One coder at \$5.00 per hour. 20 hrs a week x 8 weeks = \$800.00

Initial trip to two separate cities with military bases to brief PAOs on subsidy log procedures:

Per city (in southeast area)

Gas: \$60.00  
Lodging: \$50.00 (One night)  
Meals: \$20.00 x 2 = \$40.00

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Sub-total: \$150.00  
                  x 2 cities

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Total: \$300.00

Trip to two separate cities to conduct intensive interviews with PAOs, military writer and editor:

Per city (in southeast area)

Gas: \$60.00  
Lodging: \$100.00 (Two nights)  
Meals: \$20.00 x 3 = \$60.00

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Sub-total: \$220.00  
                  x 2 cities

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Total: \$440.00

Postage costs: \$10.00

Thesis printing and binding: \$160.00

**TOTAL OF ALL PROJECTED COSTS: \$1710.00**

## PROJECTED OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

- I. Introduction
- II. Literature Review
- III. Methodology
- IV. Results and Analysis
- V. Discussion
- VI. Bibliography

## GRADUATE COURSE WORK

Course #	Title	Grade
JRL 800	Proseminar in Mass Communication	A
STA 621	Statistical Methods I	A
JRL 810	Seminar in Communication Research	A
JRL 814D	Problems in Mass Comm - Public Relations	A
JRL 791	Public Relations Administration	A
JRL 817	Mass Communication Theory	A
JRL 809	Mass Communication in Contemporary Society	A
POL 672	Public Management I	A

No other course work is planned. Only Master's Thesis hours are scheduled for the Fall 94 quarter.



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