

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 09-02-2004	2. REPORT TYPE FINAL	3. DATES COVERED (From - To)		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Embedded Media and the Operational Commander			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Patrick Robert Lehman, LCDR, USN Paper Advisor (if Any): Professor Doug Hime			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.				
14. ABSTRACT Embedded media, effectively employed, can be an operational commander's most effective means to gain American public support and counter enemy propaganda. By employing embedded media, an operational commander is not only carrying out an assigned task from higher authority, but also making use of a powerful asset. Embedded media have proven to be extremely successful in widely distributing information. This same information is the major source of news most Americans use to form their opinions concerning the nation's conflicts. Since public opinion has considerable leverage on leadership and national decision makers, overall mission success is critically linked to an operational commander's ability to accurately inform the public of current military actions.				
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15. SUBJECT TERMS <u>Embedded, embed, media, operational commander, public opinion, public support, propaganda</u>				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED		b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED	17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES
				21

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Embedded Media and the Operational Commander

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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09 February, 2004

Abstract

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Embedded media have become considerably more potent in recent years, partly due to increased access to military operations and partly due to advances in technology. Live media coverage is now available from even some of the most remote locations in the world. Operation Iraqi Freedom will be used as an illustrative example to outline the operational commander's benefits of employing the embedded media to gain public support and counter enemy propaganda. This paper will sequentially show that embedded media have a significant impact on the operational commander, that embedded media can provide a valuable service for the operational commander, and that the embedded media program is the most effective asset available for both increasing public support and countering enemy propaganda. Proper employment and cautious treatment of embedded media can yield a powerful return for minimal investment, while failure to devote sufficient attention to embedded media may result in detrimental press coverage that ultimately affects the accomplishment of an operational commander's objectives.

Introduction

The Pentagon has placed embedded media in theaters of conflict.¹ For an operational level commander in one of those theaters, this is:

- A. A pain in the neck
- B. Of no concern; it is an issue for the public affairs officer
- C. An opportunity to be seized

“C” is the correct answer. Embedded media, effectively employed, can be an operational commander’s most effective means to gain American public support and counter enemy propaganda. Four simple reasons suggest that an operational commander should be concerned with these issues. First, the evolution of American warfare shows that public opinion has considerable leverage on leadership and national decision makers, even if American public opinion is not regarded as the center of gravity, or source of power, for a particular conflict. As General Eisenhower once told a meeting of American newspaper editors, “Public opinion wins war.”² Second, as will be shown later, operational commanders are tasked with employing the media to gain public support of current actions and counter enemy propaganda. Third, the fact is that once assigned to operational theaters, embedded media must be dealt with in some fashion. Finally, embedded media have proven to be a potent weapon in widely distributing information. An operational commander should not underestimate the importance of this vehicle of information dissemination.

This paper will examine the issue of why embedded media are important to an operational commander, focusing on American embedded media sources and their ability to influence American public opinion. Enemy propaganda will be referenced, but not covered in depth. Specific enemy use of the media is not within the scope of this paper. Likewise, international public opinion, with its potential leverage being similar to American public opinion

(although typically more difficult to influence, particularly Islamic opinion), will not be investigated. Last, this paper will concentrate on the importance of embedded media to the operational commander, instead of whether or not the embedded media program should exist. The embedded media program does exist, and by its creation offers a valuable service to the military.

For purposes of this paper, five terms will be specifically defined. “Embedded media” and “embeds” refer to American embedded media sources actually assigned to specific military units, vice the pool of reporters at theater headquarters.³ “Public opinion” encompasses American public opinion, the will of the American people, and the resulting political leverage against top American leadership, administrations, and Congress. “Public support” means positive public opinion, favorable to American forces and in agreement with their actions. “News” refers to, “New information about a subject of some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public.”⁴

The single key assumption used in this paper is that media supplies the major core source of news most Americans use to form their opinions concerning the nation’s conflicts. These opinions are influenced by friends, family, and co-workers who also receive the majority of their information from the media. Books, after-action reports, and any other hindsight sources cannot affect public opinion on current and immediate issues.

Is embedding media a new concept? Certainly not. Over 500 reporters were embedded during the Vietnam war more than three decades ago. Embedded media have become considerably more potent in recent years. Part of this resulted from the increased access they have been given to military bases, units, and conflicts. Technology has also improved the capabilities of embedded media. Smaller, more portable equipment and increased satellite

coverage allow increased connectivity, immediate reporting, and live coverage from even some of the most remote locations in the world. This fairly recent ability to instantly relay news is much to the reporters' satisfaction and solves the problem of news "spoiling" rapidly.⁵ Finally, the nation's current infatuation with extreme, real-life, and extravagant television programming embraces embedded media footage as the ultimate reality show.

To analyze the importance of this resurrected and fortified embedded media program to the operational commander, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) will be used as an illustrative example. Three incremental discussions will outline the operational commander's benefits of employing embedded media to gain public support and counter enemy propaganda. The first discussion will show that embeds have a significant impact on the operational commander. The second will demonstrate that the embedded media program can provide a service to the operational commander. Finally, this paper will conclude through counter-arguments that the embedded media program is the most effective asset available to both gain public support and counter enemy propaganda.

Embedded Media Have an Impact on the Operational Commander

Embedded media have invaded the theater of operations, watching everything, and reporting anything that would make a "customer" tune-in. This is a potential danger in itself to the operational commander, especially in light of the fact that the reporter's loyalty is not to the military. Essentially, uncensored events are being recorded and relayed in real-time, often before reporters have an opportunity to verify their "facts" or place the story in context of the overall situation.⁶ Pentagon guidelines concerning embedded media in OIF stipulated that military commanders would not censor media material and that the embed program was not intended to prevent disparaging or uncomplimentary information from being broadcast.⁷

Knowing that this freedom has been given to embedded media can tack on one more issue to consider when operational commanders make key decisions. The question of “How is this going to look in the press?” can affect a commander’s selection of a course of action. The influential power of the press is best summarized in the Joint Chiefs of Staff doctrine for information operations as, “The news media and other information networks’ increasing availability to society’s leadership, population, and infrastructure can have significant impact on national will, political direction, and national security objectives and policy.”⁸

An OIF example best illustrates this issue of how actions are going to look when reported by the media. More than 700 reporters were embedded, mostly in tactical combat units. The “Deck of Cards” man-hunt required quick response to sometimes questionable information, as human intelligence sometimes provides. Operational commanders periodically faced the dilemma of whether or not to attack a target when the intelligence gathered was not conclusive. If the attack caused collateral damage, yet failed to capture or kill the intended individual because he was not there, how would that look to the millions of Americans watching from home who may not understand the bigger picture that criminals at-large increase the danger to friendly forces? On the other hand, if attacks are only ordered on absolutely convincing intelligence, how much longer will the overall conflict be extended? This is not to say that commanders would take bigger risks or choose more reckless options if embedded media were not present. This example merely highlights that having media embedded does affect an operational commander.

Perhaps the easiest way to discern the importance of embedded media is to look at the effects when they depart the theater, typically at the termination of major combat operations. In OIF, only one-fourth of the embeds remained in theater three weeks after the fall of

Baghdad.⁹ Often dangerous voids develop that could decrease public support in three potential ways. First, in a sense, the operational commander loses information superiority over the public. The “sexy” part of the conflict is over; winning battles sells news. Not many traditional battles are won while rebuilding governments, providing humanitarian assistance, and transitioning to a stable peacetime environment. No longer is the news dominated by embedded reporters, relaying information from areas in which the operational commander placed the reporters, and thereby exercised some degree of information superiority by the military. Second, with less coverage, the conflict becomes “out of sight, out of mind,” suggesting that the struggle is over. Misperceptions of termination can lead to undue political pressure about why troops are still deployed, resulting in decreased public support during the sometimes protracted yet critical post-conflict stage. Third, the information that does continue to be reported may be less favorable to the military. The remaining reporters (non-embeds) have fewer personal relationships with the military units. Oftentimes these reporters do not have the same understanding of the situation that the embeds did, which can result in stories being published based on appearance, rather than in the context of the overall situation.

Looking to OIF, for example, shows that decreased coverage of the war after the embeds withdrew resulted in less positive coverage. The remaining coverage predominantly centered on the insurgency rather than on the overall progress being accomplished in Iraq. Stories focused on the latest bombings and a running death-toll. This coverage generally had a negative tone and was perceived by many Americans as “something gone wrong” with the war, which inherently decreases public support--something operational commanders never want to happen. Most Americans did not foresee the impending drop in positive coverage

that typically accompanies the post-hostilities phase of a conflict. Right or wrong, embedded reporters made a significant impact on the OIF operational commanders by not preparing the public for the ensuing lack of glamorous news before withdrawing from theater.

Embedded media have an impact on the operational commander not only because the embeds are reporting practically everything that happens and because of the dangerous information void that can develop when they depart, but also because employing embedded media is a tasking from higher headquarters, whether it is a specified or implied tasking. Two OIF examples apply. First, hosting embedded media was not specified as a strategic goal or military objective by the Secretary of Defense, but instead was an implied task derived from joint doctrine.¹⁰ U.S. Central Command recognized this implied task and created a thorough media and public affairs plan.

There are some operational level commanders who would have chosen either answer “A”- a pain, or “B”- a public affairs issue at the opening of this paper. The second OIF example of higher headquarters’ instruction is more tangible. The Commander of the USS Lincoln (CVN-72) Strike Group created his own set of more stringent guidelines for embedded media to follow, essentially negating their purpose in embedding. After a quick e-mail campaign to Pentagon officials,¹¹ the strike group commander’s superiors gave him “clarified instructions” on the application of the Pentagon guidelines authorizing embeds essentially uninhibited access and reporting freedom. Clearly, embedded media has an impact on the operational commander, if for no other reason than the boss says it is an important issue.

Embedded Media Can Provide a Service to the Operational Commander

Employing embedded media can yield powerful results for an operational commander. To begin with, most combat forces consist of young troops whose morale skyrockets with the

thought of being shown on television across their nation. It is a boost not only to the troops and their units but also to associated friends, families, and local communities back home, possibly increasing public support.¹² Moreover, intelligence can be collected from all open sources--commercial world contacts, local nationals, and academia, as well as the media--for use in offensive information operations against the enemy.¹³ Operational commanders can further benefit from the real-time reporting capabilities of embedded media and the resultant immediacy of effects. Keeping friendly forces informed of the current situation, showing them the bigger picture, and illustrating how they are contributing to the greater cause is one of the advantages of instant news. Information often travels faster through the media than the chain of command, as demonstrated in an OIF media interview where Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was shown a videotape of U. S. prisoners of war that he apparently did not know about before the interview.¹⁴ As 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner Stanley Karnow suggests, wars that go on long enough inconclusively are likely to breed criticism of the military and the administration.¹⁵ Embedded media can prevent or delay this source of criticism by routinely showing the public conclusive results of distant conflicts.

OIF demonstrated other benefits that embedded media can provide to an operational commander. Following a suggested method in joint doctrine to inform an adversary about the friendly force's capability, the Third Infantry Division's "Thunder Run" through Baghdad was quickly televised, showing Iraqi leaders a recent coalition success story, as well as the eye-opening power projected into a fortified position.¹⁶ Daily live broadcasts from front-line combat units showed the world the professionalism of the coalition soldier. Contrary to enemy propaganda, which claimed inhumane actions from coalition forces, Americans were seeing real-time footage of Iraqi forces surrendering and either being taken

into custody, in accordance with Enemy Prisoner of War provisions, or simply passed up by coalition forces pressing forward. Video and audio recordings of combat units shifting to other targets or holding fire to prevent collateral damage and casualties to non-combatants told a story different from the rumors. Live coverage of coalition forces receiving cheers and hugs from Iraqi citizens countered the perception that the Iraqi people did not want foreign assistance.

Embedded media can aid an operational commander in keeping the public informed of current actions, but permitting embeds to randomly roam the battlespace does not automatically make them beneficial to the friendly cause. Prudently placing embeds in particular units not only ensures that they will see and report on actions representing the overall situation, but also ensures that the embeds will have an opportunity to report on the type of action their parent companies sent them to cover. Knowledge about the particular embeds is critical to maximize productive results when deciding where to place reporters, if given the opportunity. For instance, when choosing an embed to accompany a unit tasked with occupying and policing a recently captured city, a vocally anti-war embed may be more likely to highlight minor anti-American demonstrations and a handful of civilian casualties rather than the overall good being accomplished by the operational commander's forces. In any case, placing reporters in combat units where the embed relies on that unit for food, protection, shelter, information, and companionship can build personal bonds that may benefit the forces later as well as give those reporters a better understanding of the conflict from the viewpoint of the unit they are covering.

A pneumatic nail gun is very proficient in sinking nails into the material in front of it, but can be dangerous if not handled cautiously. Embedded media can be likened to high-tech

and powerful tools in a variety of ways. First, the use of most tools that have the capability to significantly affect their environment is governed by some type of guidelines or rules. For OIF embedded media, these guidelines were established at the national level.¹⁷ In conflicts where embedded media lack strategic guidelines, the operational commander should determine the rules for employment in his theater. The second similarity can be seen in the care and maintenance required for most high-tech tools. In the case of embedded media, this maintenance comes in the form of a delicately balanced relationship with the military, referred to as a “healthy tension” by Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke.¹⁸ Employed wisely, the embedded media program can be a success for both the media and the military, as well as improve the relationship between the two--which historically has not been exceedingly friendly.¹⁹ The operational commander should continuously monitor this dynamic situation and encourage a relationship between the reporters’ loyalty to the media and the needs of the military. Promoting patriotism, as seen in the following example, is one way to help build such a relationship. Thanks partially to a “patriotism pays” mentality with the media and partially to a lesson learned in the Vietnam war, during OIF many would-be critics, media included, voiced support for the troops, even if they opposed the conflict itself.²⁰ This balance and compromise indicates the level of difficulty required to bring opposing interests together for a common goal.

OIF provided many examples of benefits to the friendly cause, both direct and indirect, as a result of media being embedded. Indirect effects of the media can be seen in the inadvertent deception of Iraqi leaders concerning Turkey and the northern force. So much media attention was directed at Turkey’s decision to not allow over-flight or through-passage of the Fourth Infantry Division that Iraqi leadership mistakenly assumed the coalition

northern force was critical for success.²¹ Operational commanders did not correct this misperception, nor employ the northern force media elsewhere. Instead, media coverage continued and military forces were left near Turkey for nearly three weeks after Turkey's decision to deny passage, strengthening Iraqi leadership's misperception that a coalition attack could not begin yet. More directly assisting the friendly cause were embedded media broadcasts of American forces under enemy fire. This turned out to be a win-win situation for both the military and the media. The media had a story to sell that was packed with first-rate action, while the military gained public support from that same story.

In his keynote address during the "Media and War" symposium held at the University at Buffalo in November 2003, Bruce Jackson says, "All governments in all wars have used all the means at their disposal to put their own motives, decisions and actions, and the actions of their military forces, in the best possible light. . . . For governments at war, the media is an instrument of war."²² The morality of employing embedded media as a means of assisting in the accomplishment of military goals needs to be examined, since America prides itself on ethical and moral behavior. Responsibilities, loyalties, and working relationships will be used to examine this issue. Operational commanders have well-defined responsibilities: accomplish assigned operational objectives and contribute to strategic objectives. OIF strategic objectives that relate to the media include countering the negative spin of enemy propaganda as well as gaining and maintaining public support of coalition actions. Loyalty falls exactly in line with the military chain of command. Embedded media responsibilities, whether adhered to or not, include reporting information objectively and contributing to the financial success of the parent media company. Loyalty is to the media company, a point

worth remembering for an operational commander. In many cases, however, embedding often has the result of developing or enhancing loyalty to the assigned unit.

The working relationship between the military and embedded media is mutually understood and sometimes mutually beneficial. Neither “side” owes the other anything. Each will work toward fulfilling its responsibilities while maintaining institutional loyalty. Common sense warrants both sides to work with and assist the other when able, in order to build credibility with each other, especially in light of inevitable future conflict where a cooperative relationship will help both. Exceptions to this view will be unavoidable at times. For instance, while joint doctrine specifically states a goal of keeping the public informed, the military may choose to withhold information from the media in order to protect national interests or to ensure operational security (OPSEC).²³ A November 2001 poll taken by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found strong public support for government control of news when demanded for national security.²⁴ Embedded media will have exceptions to the goal of cohesion as well, particularly whenever reports portray military actions as less than ideal. Broadcasting unfavorable information when military actions have gone wrong, sensationalizing stories in order to make them more marketable, and the perception of reporting filtered information that subjectively supports alleged political agendas are common burrs in the military-media relationship. Despite the diverse responsibilities and loyalties of embedded media versus military commanders, OIF was an example of a symbiotic relationship. The Pentagon did not force any media companies to supply embedded reporters. Though individual reporters may have declined embed opportunities to be elsewhere in the conflict, the media companies did not pass up the

Pentagon's offer or refuse any quotas. The military gained a powerful asset for minimal cost, while the media received a top-selling story that endured for months.

Employing Embedded Media is the Most Effective Way to Both

Gain Public Support and Counter Enemy Propaganda

The effectiveness of embedded media to both influence public support in favor of the military and counter enemy propaganda can best be seen by comparing the embedded media to other assets available to the operational commander and discussing the counter-arguments. To begin with, the basic arguments of, "Why should the operational commander be concerned with enemy propaganda?" and "How much damage can enemy propaganda do?" are easily answered in two OIF words: Baghdad Bob. Also known as Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, the Iraqi Minister of Information had tremendous dispersion of his propaganda throughout the world. His suspect credibility was shattered by embedded media as they broadcast live footage of coalition forces invading the very areas the Information Minister concurrently reported as being Iraqi-controlled and impenetrable.²⁵ On the other hand, there remains widespread perception that the Bush administration has been manipulating the media to win public support for re-election, conduct information operations, and broadcast propaganda of its own.²⁶ The truth of each of these allegations is beyond the scope of this paper, but the lessons learned from these perceptions are appropriate to discuss. First, simply put, perception is reality. There is little difference between something that is true and something that is perceived as being true. A recent Program on International Policy Attitudes study showed that during OIF, roughly two-thirds of Americans held a number of misperceptions that played a key role in public approval of the decision to go to war.²⁷ Second, when employing an asset like embedded media which may raise public suspicion of

U. S. intentions, an accompanying tactful and prudent explanation is critical. Finally, the news that gets reported determines the story that gets told. In much the same way as a jury still hears the testimony that the judge may later direct them to disregard, if embedded media are broadcasting a message favorable to an operational commander, the message is still being heard despite criticism of the employed embeds.

The associated risk is a strong argument against the overall benefit and effectiveness of the embedded media program. Two types of risk predominantly cause concern: OPSEC and the report of information unfavorable for the military. The latter is a calculated and accepted risk when using embeds. For example, if live footage shows a friendly force destroying an enemy tank, but later it is discovered that the tank was actually a friendly tank, this follow-on information will certainly be broadcast as well. This type of risk is inherent in embedding media, and is accepted when the decision is made to allow embeds.²⁸ An operational commander's best method of minimizing that type of risk is to ensure that all forces thoroughly understand and follow the rules of engagement. The second best method is to encourage the bonding of embeds with their assigned forces while promoting patriotism. Recent history illustrated just how minute OPSEC risk was with embedded media. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Bryan Whitman summarized that embedded media were not an OPSEC problem in OIF.²⁹ In fact, non-embeds were perceived as a bigger threat to OPSEC, less responsible, and less knowledgeable than embedded reporters.³⁰

Further arguments claim that the media is exploitable by the enemy. While this is true, the fact is that the media does exist and may be exploited by the enemy whether or not the operational commander chooses to employ embeds. The commander's most productive

counter to enemy exploitation is to openly employ embedded media, ensuring that the friendly side of the story is told. Coalition forces hosted over 700 embeds during OIF, each of whom signed an agreement prohibiting the interview of persons taken into custody by coalition forces.³¹ This effectively placed the 700 most prominent information sources for Americans in the shoes of coalition soldiers, with expulsion from the theater being the cost of publicizing a captured enemy soldier's viewpoint.

The effectiveness of other assets available to the operational commander show the true value of embedded media in both countering enemy propaganda and gaining public support. Techniques and tactics, such as dropping leaflets, various forms of deception, and radio or television broadcasts into enemy territory are all fairly effective tools to counter enemy propaganda. None of these, however, had the same extinguishing impact on enemy propaganda as the previously-mentioned broadcasts of Baghdad Bob denying coalition presence and nearly simultaneous live footage of coalition forces entering Baghdad. Additionally, none of these other counter-propaganda tools have an impact on American public support comparable to the embedded media impact.

Other assets that may heavily influence public opinion have only minimal countering effects to enemy propaganda. Conventional, or non-embedded, media is one of these assets. Another is the recently coined “reverse embeds” who are often retired or former high-level military personnel now acting as media war correspondents, tactics experts, and plans analysts for news stations. While both of these assets may be capable of influencing public opinion, neither are easily guided by the military and both are difficult for operational commanders to employ effectively. During OIF, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff condemned the reverse embeds for publicly criticizing war plans.³² The OPSEC risk is fairly

high with reverse embeds, since current military techniques and strategies are being publicly dissected for private company profit by people the American public perceives to be knowledgeable of current plans.

Conclusion

The embedded media program is indeed an asset available to the operational commander, and when compared with other assets available, is overall more efficient, has lower risk, is more versatile, and has lower cost. Employing embeds is the most effective means of both gaining public support and countering enemy propaganda. This is not to say that other assets should not be used as well, but instead highlights the value in focusing attention on embedded media in an operational commander's area of responsibility.

There are some beneficial points to keep in mind when considering embedded media. First, the embedded media program is approved at the national level, and operational level commanders are tasked with employment of this asset. Second, proper employment and cautious treatment of embedded media can yield a powerful return of investment, while failure to devote sufficient effort may result in detrimental press coverage. Third, the importance of embedded media is shown by both the dangerous void created when they withdraw from theater and also by their versatility in aiding in the accomplishment of more than one major task for the operational commander. The media is no longer just a distraction to be passed off to the public affairs officer, but instead a powerful asset for minimal cost. Finally, embedded media widely distribute the information that most Americans use to form their opinions concerning the nation's conflicts. Due to the leverage of public opinion on leadership and national decision makers, overall mission success is critically linked to an operational commander's ability to accurately inform the public of current military actions.

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