

Talking with the American Public
Blogs, FaceBook, and YouTube; and Public Affairs

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Public affairs (PA) is about more than talking to and working with the media. However, the Department of Defense's (DOD) policy on interactive internet activities limits public affairs officers (PAOs) to engagement with traditional media organizations and "individuals and websites ... [that] have become recognized news sources for large audiences..."¹ Blogs, Facebook, and YouTube are largely off limits to PAOs. Consequently, they cannot communicate directly with hundreds of thousands of Americans on the internet. This policy unnecessarily detracts from PA's effectiveness in communicating with the Marine Corps' most engaged and most essential audience. To communicate with the public, the current limitations must be removed to allow the use of interactive internet tools².

Mission: Communication and the Public

"Marine Corps Public Affairs serves as a link between Marines and the public, and must facilitate the instantaneous flow of information that is generated through the 24-hour news cycle, the Internet and cellular communications."³ The "link between Marines and the public," is based on communication.

Communication is a two-way process. Effective communication

¹ U.S. Department of Defense. *Policy for Department of Defense (DoD) Interactive Internet Activities*, Jun 8, 2007. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007).

² Interactive Internet, a.k.a. "new media," or "web 2.0" is any web-based function that supports near-natural conversation between individuals with customizable formatting and content management.

³ Division of Public Affairs, Headquarters Marine Corps, Official Website. <http://www.marines.mil/units/hqmc/divpa/Pages/default.aspx>

involves not only sending a message, but also ensuring it is received and understood. Both sender and receiver may have differing opinions or relevant points to add to the discussion. The receiving individual may need questions answered, misunderstandings made clear, and additional information or explanation. PAO's are responsible for conversing with the public as directly as possible, in order to communicate the Marine Corps story as effectively as possible and to understand what is important to a particular audience.

The public should be the focus of everything PA does, not the media. The Marine Corps' most engaged and interested audience is Marines, and their families and friends. The United States' elected and appointed leaders determine the policies Marines will be tasked to enforce; these policies will be judged by the public at-large based on the actions of the Marines. Thus, the public's understanding and knowledge of what Marines are doing (and why) may impact their support for elected officials, which affects those officials' decisions regarding Marines (i.e.: budgets, military actions, event approval, etc.) The American public is a diverse group with varying degrees of interest in the Marine Corps. Other audiences around the world are interested in what Marines do as well-allied leaders and their people, and indigenous civilians in Marine areas of operation, for example.

Furthermore, every establishing document, from the Declaration of Independence to the Marine Corps order on PA, identifies the American public as the key audience. The Secretary of the Navy's guidance with respect to PA, states two important points up front. First, that "An important aspect of [the successful ability to deter attacks, prevent war and respond to aggression] is the ability to communicate effectively to the American public and the international audience ..." Second, "In our republic, public servants are obliged to inform the citizens about the full scope of governmental activity, consistent with national security and privacy concerns."⁴

Citing a DOD directive⁵, the SECNAVINST goes on to state, "Accurate and timely information will be made available to the public, the Congress and the news media to help analysis and understanding of defense strategy and national security issues." The Freedom of Information Act⁶ further suggests that government information shall be released to the *public* in all cases (particularly when requested) with only a few specific exceptions. By all measures, the Marine Corps has an obligation to inform the public.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of the Navy Instruction (SECNAVINST) 5720.44B: Department of the Navy Public Affairs Policy and Regulations*, 01 Nov 2005, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2005).

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *DOD Directive 5400.13*, Jan. 9, 1996 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1996).

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Directorate for Freedom of Information and Security Review, *DOD Freedom of Information Act Handbook*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO).

Furthermore, as General Victor H. Krulak wrote to then-commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Randolph Pate in 1957, "... the United States does not *need* a Marine Corps. However, for good reasons which completely transcend cold logic, the United States *wants* a Marine Corps."⁷ Throughout history, the Marine Corps has learned that it benefits from a well informed public. Public affairs is mandated to ensure the public knows why they are justified in this desire, and why they should continue to support the existence of Marines.

Of arguably equal importance to Americans is their First Amendment right to a freely operating press. While the media is the public's primary source of news and information, they are not the only source.

Current Limitations

The public increasingly gets its news and information via the internet. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 37 percent of the American population regularly gets their news from the internet (up from 13 percent in 1998).⁸ More importantly, is the demographics of this active online population.

The study broke news consumers into three main groups:

⁷ Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*. (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1988), Preface XV.

⁸ Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey. "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources." Aug. 17, 2008.

traditionalist, integrators, and net-newsters.

Table 1: Identifying Core News Audience Segments*⁹

<p>Traditionalists (46%) Name a traditional source when asked about their main news source. Rarely go online for news (< 3 days a week).</p> <p>Integrators (23%) Name a traditional source as their main source, but also are frequent consumers of online news (3+ days a week).</p> <p>Net-Newsters (13%) Point to the internet as their main news source and consume online news frequently (3+ days/week).</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Who are the Disengaged?</p> <p>Disengaged (14%) Do not closely follow <i>any</i> of the following: local, national, international, or business and finance news.</p>

*Core news audience segments include those who very closely or somewhat closely follow at least one of the following types of news: business and finance news, local government news, national political news, or international news.

With respect to news and information pertaining to the Marine Corps, the most engaged publics—Marines, their families and friends, and American leaders—fall into one of the two increasingly internet-savvy portions of the population.

⁹ Ibid.

Table 2: Demographic Portrait of Audience Segments¹⁰

Total	100%	Tradition alists (46%)	Integrat ors (23%)	Net- Newsers (13%)	Disengaged (14%)
18-24	13	9	11	19	22
25-34	17	12	18	28	19
35-49	27	23	32	33	28
50-64	25	28	30	16	18
65+	16	25	8	3	10
Post-grad	11	7	18	21	5
College grad	17	12	27	31	6
Some college	24	20	27	31	19
HS or less	48	60	28	16	69
N=	3615	1770	848	455	402

* Includes the 4% of the public that is not part of the segment classification.

An increasing percentage of Americans consult online "news" sources in addition to traditional media. These Integrators are not only the fastest growing portions of the population, but are also the most likely to be interested in and engaged with news concerning Marines.

News sources are not limited to news websites though. Personal websites, web logs (blogs), and social networking sites are managed by individual citizens for various reasons. These interactive Web 2.0 tools provide a forum for public discourse similar to the village square or local pub of eighteenth century America.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Interactive Internet

Today, community interaction with Marines (community relations) is formally managed by PA. Interactive internet broadens the definition of community, but the function remains the same: direct interaction and communication between the public and Marines.

Telephone, the classic children's game, is a simple example of indirect, one-way communication. The fewer people in the chain, the clearer the message. Community relations events, key volunteer networks, and unit newsletters, websites and newspapers are ways the Marine Corps communicates directly with their audience and eliminates middleman interference from public communication.

Additionally, if each person in telephone were able to ask questions and clarify what was said, the message would be almost guaranteed to come through clear and unaltered. In this respect, interactive internet may be even more efficient. Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, social networking sites, and web-article comments are conversations; they are an effective way for PA to ensure the American public knows, understands, and appreciates its Marines. By combining direct communication, with the potential for feedback, virtual community relations events are created.

According to social information processing theory, while the relationships developed over the internet may take longer to

develop, they can be equally as strong as relationships developed in person.¹¹ Similar to community relations, Marines (in this case, the PAO) can develop a relationship with an interested audience based solely on a conversation. Any conversation represents the development of a relationship, whether in person, or by phone, email, or blog chat. The entire purpose of such a relationship is to foster interaction, which in turn fosters understanding of Marines and the American people whom they represent and defend.

Community relations is all about engaging and working with the public in their community. This should include online communities. Key volunteer networks and Marine families are online. Public representatives and the media run their own websites and monitor public sentiment on the internet. PA must incorporate interactive internet tools into already existing official Marine Corps websites to better communicate with these communities in particular. These tools are a digital representation of what PA already does-communicate. Furthermore, PA must be able to engage the public directly wherever the public converses, whether that is on the phone, in the town square, or over the internet. The traditional news media is not the only way.

Counterargument: Unnecessary DOD Limitations

¹¹ Em Griffin. *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 7th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2009), Ch. 11 Abstract.

Some senior officials seek to control the flow of DOD information and manage the messages communicated by PAOs over the internet. This overlooks two points. First, they do not recognize interactive internet tools as analogous to the village square or old pub of colonial America (similar to the one in which the Marine Corps was founded). Secondly, while PAOs may be currently restricted from utilizing these tools, the image of the Marine Corps is affected by Marines every day, as they shop, play and socialize in their communities. Their actions (or inactions) determine how others view the Marine Corps. And Marines do the same thing on the internet.

Furthermore, the DOD interactive internet policy unnecessarily limits PAOs to *media* affairs. "Media affairs" is not a military occupational specialty; it is one aspect of PA. While communicating with the traditional media is certainly important, it is only one means to communicate to the public. Furthermore, while this policy attempts to control the flow of information, presumably to manage the affect that information will have, PAOs have even less control over information released to the media. Reporter understanding, perception, and bias, editing, and the presentation of that information are additional variables between the information sender (PAO) and receiver (American audience).

Lastly, some would argue that internet sources of information are unverifiable, that they mix rumors, conspiracy theories & speculation with truth. While this may be true, that does not make them any less real to those that hear/believe what they read. This is not a new problem, as one ancient historian points out: "Most people, in fact, will not take the trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear."¹² And similar accusations have been made against traditional media, whom PAOs are authorized to engage. A direct, one-on-one conversation is the most effective means communicating the truth, whether for the first time or to correct the record.

Conclusion

Public affairs must use every tool and opportunity to tell the American people what Marines do and why they do it; and understand the public's questions and thoughts about the Marine Corps. Increasingly, the public gets its news and information from a variety of sources, including the internet. More importantly, they get it not only from traditional news media sites, but also from social networking sites where ideas, perspectives and opinions are openly discussed. In this respect, the internet is a high-speed, modern version of the village

¹² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

square, the traditional home of Marine Corps community relations. Whether by conversation, email, or blogging, PA is about communicating with the public, particularly Americans, not only because of legal obligation but also because the mutually ensured survival of the U.S. Marine Corps and the American public depend on it. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."¹³

1,996 words

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to Charles Jarvis, Sept. 28, 1820, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed., ed. by John Bartlett and Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 344.

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