



Media Cycle in Military Exercises

by Paola CASOLI

Once a civilian is asked to work in a military environment he has to take into account that his professionalism represents a surplus value not only for military units he is embedded in, but also for the entire military environment requiring his skills. It therefore becomes clear how important it is to have a thoroughly professional performance during a military training phase, particularly when deployed on the ground. The use of civilian embeds in military training and exercises has become more and more intensive during recent years. It represents an innovative way to approach a new perspective into real life issues, not normally conducted by military personnel. Moreover, it has rapidly been confirmed as a successful way of cooperation as demonstrated by the increasing number of civilians involved in military exercises and operations.

Among the civilians required by the military for their professional skills, media experts represent an important source. Since the information environment is nowadays very different than it was in the last decades of the 20th century, media experts and journalists are to be considered useful to address a complex world.

Internet, blogs and social-networks on one side, and extremely versatile mobile phones on the other, specialists sides, are changing the traditional communication system. Information is released in real time today, from anywhere in the world, by anyone who wants to release a specific message or communicate detailed information. Technology is so widely affordable and so largely available that any reporter whether well experienced or not can broadcast live images, audio or video from the most remote regions in the world. The impact on public opinion can have significant consequences.

New media and NATO

This new era of journalism is characterised by high-speed communication procedure made possible by current technologies. The entire world is now facing a particular situation that probably has never happened before and on such large scale. We are now experiencing a challenging condition: not only journalists can broadcast, but also novice reporters or citizen-journalists who can reach the world wide web and contribute to forums and debates.

No matter if a media representative has been accredited to an event, no matter if a journalist is a blogger or a defence analyst: everyone can release their own message on the web and everyone can get access to that message. NATO cannot ignore this fundamental issue. Military commanders need to have a deep understanding of the role played by news media, so they are able to release an effective message about what they are doing. At the same time they need to better decipher the news, the media environment and its language, its rhythm and its particular behavior. Media operators work under the pressure of deadlines and think ahead to headlines, sometimes giving personal punch-lines and opinions.

They walk along a line and can't afford to lose their thread. In other words, they need to get informed quickly, clearly and precisely. The media's usual questions are no more than seven: what, who, when, where, how, why and - possibly - with the help of what. Believe it or not, journalists need to know descriptions, people, time aspects, geographic details, activities, arguments and resources. They run the risk of looking like old gossips, but they need to report on accurate information.

If journalists are not able to find specific information, they will probably look for it in any way they can and with every mean available. Considering that the majority of journalists use the internet to search for, whoever can imagine how relevant the risk of misinformation is. Further, to this, we must think about the use of internet related to the processing and producing phases of information: anyone can broadcast with no delay, often during a press conference or a media meeting while being comfortably seated among the general public.

NATO has already grabbed the opportunity to develop homepages and databases to facilitate journalists' work, so media can access relevant information immediately while surfing specific websites such as ISAF or KFOR ones.



Therefore NATO and other institutional authorities have not lost the chance to meet the public on the wide web arena. The question is: how is it possible to give a clear message immediately releasable during a crisis or in the middle of a military operation? As a matter of fact, the media are keen to obtain statements from senior officials and to have access to those actively involved in managing the crisis. Thus those selected for interviews should be prepared as to how the interview will proceed and how journalists operate. It is vital for a person with little press experience to get a specific education and training.

Media and Public information in exercises

Assuming that the new era of war implicates a full-spectrum scenario – more recently defined as hybrid conflict - media skills are without doubt, a part of the whole structure. Thus a journalist working in a military exercise has to bear in mind that his capability in handling the news represents a fundamental contribution to obtain a perfect replication of the real operational theatre. Hence the importance of preparing carefully the training audience. NATO has already defined a particular doctrine introducing fundamental changes in Public information. Relations with local and international media, as well as internal communication, are specific functions attributed to Public Affairs (PA), that have the responsibility to “promote NATO’s military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance” (MC0497/1). Since a statement’s meaning is derived not only from its literal content but also from the method of communication (i.e. gestures, intonation, choice of words), it becomes even more understandable how important a specific educational programme has become. “The commander [...] must embrace the Public information mission as it relates to support of news media into the planning for and execution of operations, as well as in the training leading up to actual operations” (Final Decision on MC0458/1). Before assessing the opportunities offered by media in exercises, let’s remind ourselves that PA is a command responsibility and commanders are the primary spokesperson of their units supported by PA personnel. They are the principal points of contact with the media for their respective commands. For any other additional information about PAO training policy it is important to refer to specific publications.



Meet the media in the capacity of Simpress

The exercise is a key element in the preparation of troops for forthcoming operations. This is crucial for those who are acting as journalists have an important role, which is to provide the units they are embedded with an opportunity learn and practice the art of facilitating embedded journalists to achieve the maximum media effect in support of a specific operation, as well as communicating effectively and quickly. Media operators on exercise are better defined as simulated press (Simpress). Simpress consists of journalists, media experts, audio-video technicians. Simpress personnel are mainly composed of civilians. Its purpose is to produce a media cycle, in other words Simpress is supposed to create a media

environment both at local and international level. The aim of Simpress is to train PA personnel by releasing news updates on the basis of the exercise scenario.

The simulated press is often provoking and challenging, by involving the training audience in audio/video interviews, reports, rebuttals and denials. By asking for details of military movements, composition of the force, tactics, operational orders, camouflage methods, names of prisoners of war and casualties or nationalities of dead soldiers. By challenging a commander asking his personal opinion regarding friendly-fire, collateral damage, ethnic discrimination or the meaning of the war. Simpress can add realism and pressure. This will allow PAO and trainees to understand how to deal with the impertinent journalists! Simpress has to act as in real life. Simpress action follows the main event list/master incident list (MEL/MIL) development system inside the storyboard related to the specific scenario. Working on events occurring on the ground and on reactions deriving from the sequence of events. Simpress injects actions and situations, by sending messages and releasing news to the PAOs who are playing the role of primary training audience. The result will lead to the enabling of all training objectives in the PA domain, in order to prepare troops for their forthcoming duties and operations.