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# Employee Newspapers and Mixed Messages: A Case Study of Discordant Culture Production

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*This research employs a narrative analysis to examine potentially troublesome mixed messages implicit in an Air Force installation newspaper over time. The author demonstrates how such internal information products create meaning at two levels: through the intended messages in the newspaper's discursive content, and through the discourses implicit in the social performance of the newspaper as it reflects organizational culture. The case study demonstrates that these impulses are not necessarily harmonious. Accordingly, it identifies a problematic situation in which the newspapers overtly emphasize values of "mission," "team," and "quality," yet implicitly enact discourses related to hierarchy and control.*

## Introduction

Employee newspapers and newsletters long have been recognized as a vital part of strategic communication programs. Whether print or electronic, these internal information products represent a primary management tool to inform employees. Accordingly, two broader strands of research have addressed the relationship between such newspapers and an organization's strategic communication objectives. One perspective focuses on the effective use employee newspapers, while the other strand examines how these newspapers reflect organizational culture.

The former line of research generally emphasizes one of two pragmatic concerns: First, assorted studies examine the relationship among public relations practice, other staff functions, and various management responsibilities (Crevocoure, 1986; Wright, 1995; Seelame, 1997; Abbott, 1999, Sommerville, Wood & Gillham, 2007). Second, articles in both professional and scholarly journals identify strategies for more effectively utilizing employee news products (Waltman, Golen & Steven, 1989; Dozier & Ehling. 1992; Howard, 1996; Matthis, 1996; Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996). In contrast to this pragmatic orientation, a divergent body of research addresses the relationship between employee news products and organizational culture. This research addresses the ways in which such news products represent key organizational artifacts that reflect vital cultural discourses (or rhetorics). Such studies examine how newsletters perpetuate these discourses as part of broader efforts to fortify cultural politics and situate an organization's members (Cheney, 1983; Cameron and McCollum, 1993; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Boyd, 2003; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2005).

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The present study seeks to inform both lines of inquiry by demonstrating how these respective impulses can come into conflict. This perspective posits that employee newspapers create meaning at several levels simultaneously, sometimes in ways that are not harmonious. At the most visible level, newspapers present discursive (or formal) content that seeks to promote an organization's strategic objectives. This explicit content typically takes the form of formal stories, variants of exposition, or arguments. Yet at the same time, as Cheney and Boyd demonstrate, employee newspapers also reflect embedded discourses that perpetuate a particular, institutionalized way of thinking. These discourses create meaning implicitly by positioning cultural politics within the newspaper's thematic structure and through its application of news values. Whether explicitly stated or implicit in the newspaper content, each level of meaning is accessible to readers who have been socialized into an organization's culture.

The latter viewpoint focuses attention on both those who produce such newspapers and those who read them. It contends that newspaper content reflects levels of meaning that sometimes are manifest beyond the conscious awareness of those who produce and consume it. Yet, in accordance with dialogical theories of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002), this view also posits that audiences coproduce meaning by appropriately interpreting and performing the cultural politics implicit in a newspaper's content. To the degree that these dynamics—and in some cases schisms—are not acknowledged, it can represent troublesome ramifications at multiple levels. Most significantly it portrays a situation in which strategic communicators naively can create internal information products that produce unintended consequences.

To better edify these dynamics, this research provides a critical (i.e., interpretive) analysis of the mixed messages implicit in an Air Force installation newspaper over time. The case study illustrates how employee newspaper content can perpetuate cultural discord in ways that scholarship, thus far, has not adequately addressed. Further, analysis demonstrates how these dynamics can result in a paradoxical situation, one in which internal information products appear to undermine the very interests management seeks to advance. Given the acknowledged importance of these information products, both strategic communication professionals and students of organizational culture will benefit by better understanding the interrelated nature of these issues. Such insights promote keener awareness of the manner in which employee newspapers reflect broader organizational conditions. This awareness, in turn, not only informs a better understanding of organizational culture, it also can promote more realistic, more informed, and ergo more effective internal information strategies.

*Research Problem*

This research positions its analysis in the context of long-standing and well-documented problems related to discordant culture production in military settings. For at least the past five decades numerous studies have documented an enigmatic—and occasionally disastrous—schism between the military's mission and military culture production. A few of these myriad studies include Sullivan, Queen, and Patrick, (1958),

Dixon (1976), Segal (1981), Winslow (1998), Aylwin-Foster (2005), and Harrison (2006). The sheer scope of these studies, both thematically and over time, illustrates the nature and pervasiveness of this situation.

The oldest study (Sullivan, Queen, and Patrick, 1958) documents how an Air Force basic military training program unintentionally taught students to violate the very values it was seeking to instill. In this study, basic training officials sought to teach time management skills by denying trainees adequate time to complete required tasks. Ultimately, however, these efforts produced two undesirable consequences: They tacitly promoted disrespect for proper procedures, and they undermined key cultural values such as honesty and loyalty. Dixon presents a sweeping historical study of military incompetence (i.e., debacles that realistically need not have occurred) that primarily addresses problems with the British military. He frames the problem in terms of a deep-seated psychological schism between mission and culture production (e.g., a fixation with order as it inherently conflicts with a dynamic battlefield environment). As a variation on this theme, Segal addresses similar—albeit less dramatic—dynamics. Segal argues that the military treats the concept of leadership as fundamental to its existence; yet, all branches of the military resist clearly defining “military leadership” to avoid undermining romantic conceptions of the military profession.

More recently, Winslow adds to observations that military efforts to promote group cohesion, ironically, result in excessive group interest (Janowitz, 1974), a factor that often conflicts with mission requirements. Winslow demonstrates how such intense bonding resulted in misplaced loyalties that impeded the investigation of criminal activities in peacekeeping operations. Similarly, Harrison, as part of efforts to explore military responses to spouse abuse, describes a culture that is reflexively prone to hypervigilant reaction. She contrasts this response to the sort of introspection and proactive efforts necessary to truly prevent such problems. In terms of direct operational concerns, Aylwin-Foster, a senior British officer with the coalition forces in Iraq, argues that the U. S. Army in Iraq is “weighed down by bureaucracy, a stiflingly hierarchical outlook . . . and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head-on." He claims these factors are exemplified by a prevalent “can do” attitude that paradoxically results in “damaging optimism” (p. 3).

Several common factors conjoin these studies. First, each depicts a pervasive, enigmatic situation that relates to a schism between the military culture and its mission. In each case, the authors also portray these conflicts as being manifest largely beyond the conscious awareness of cultural members. Further, at some level, each study relates the problem to the manner in which a specialized occupational culture uses rituals and symbol systems to construct itself. Thus, the military culture, because of this well-documented tension between mission and culture production, is well suited for evaluating the issues outlined at the outset. However, unlike the previously cited studies, the present research does not address this situation primarily in terms of manifest problems. Rather, it examines how such discord is constructed and

perpetuated through employee newspapers that serve a seemingly healthy military organization.

*Research Subject*

The Ogden Air Logistics Center, which comprises a combined civil service, military, and contractor workforce of 23,500, is the largest employer in Utah. It is responsible for worldwide logistics support for some of the Air Force's most well known and technologically sophisticated weapon systems including the Minuteman and Peacekeeper missiles; the F-16 fighter and the A-10 attack and forward control aircraft; the C-130 short-range transport aircraft; and the KC-135 air-refueling tankers. The center is commanded by an Air Force major general (two stars) who is supervised by the commander of the Air Force Materiel Command (four stars). The OO-ALC commander is the senior official on Hill AFB; he or she directs all center activities and indirectly oversees base services. This study addresses the center's public affairs office, a key agency that was a part of the commander's staff throughout the duration of the study. The multi-functioned staff office was responsible for producing the primary weekly installation newspaper, the *Hilltop Times*.

To meet the overarching research objectives, the research applies a multi-textual strategy (Barry, 2006) that employs two somewhat divergent methods in hopes of creating a synergistic effect. The first approach employs a narrative analysis of the formal content and the corresponding discourses implicit in the *Hilltop Times*. This strategy utilizes theories of narrative to inform a close textual analysis of the newspaper's explicit and implicit content. The second method includes formal interviews that were designed to gauge the perceptions of those most responsible for the editorial content of the *Hilltop Times*. The analysis, then, compares the results of this dual-tracked analysis to better gauge the relationship between the *Hilltop Times'* discursive content and the discourses implicit its structure and performance.

## Method

A well-established critical research method, narrative analysis represents an array of theories that have been articulated differently by various authors. For the purposes of this research, narrative analyses not only examine formal narratives, the methodology also addresses manner in which the broader force of narrativity shapes social performance. In this context, narrativity can be understood as the complex relationship among narrative meaning, narrative structures, and subjective human response (Abbott, 1999, pp. 22-23). This latter perspective not only comprises many formally articulated theories of narrative, but it also includes social performance-oriented theories including Dramatism (Burke, 1967); Dramaturgy (Goffman, 1974; Gronbeck, 1980); the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1987); Fantasy Theme Analysis (Bormann, 1972, 1983); and Processual Social Drama (Turner, 1982).

Czarniawska-Jeorges (1998, p. 20) argues that this dual perspective is necessary to fully account for the impact of narrative in organizations: "Every novel contains a potential script; every narrative waits to be enacted. Organizational narratives are both inscriptions of past performances and scripts and staging instructions for future performances." This view holds that organizations not only create formal narratives to stabilize meaning, organizational culture also is enacted as an ongoing saga. The latter perspective views organizational culture as a "lived story," one in which cultural performance is enacted as an epic that employs narrative devices to delineate events, characters, and values—yet it does not provide a sense of an ending (Boje & Rosile, 2003; Czarniawska-Jeorges; Pearce & Cronnen, 1980; Kermode, 1967). These theories contend that scholarship should view narrative not merely as a discursive form (i.e., formal stories), but also as being manifest all along a form-to-enactment continuum. For these reasons, a narrative analysis offers an instrumental framework for examining the sorts of conflicting levels of meaning that this study addresses.

As Czarniawska-Jeorges explains, an array of contemporary research addresses the integral relationship among narrative, narrativity, and organizational culture. Although scholars have presented many different perspectives of these relationships, most studies share some basic precepts and assumptions. Most notably, as Sommers (1994) explains, narrative provides the spatial and temporal context necessary to create meaning within situated relationships. Narratives also reflect highly political processes through which an author gains the authority to select which events are meaningful, to define characters, and to arrange them in ways that advance particular interests. Gilpin (2008) assimilates many such theories of narrative and organizational culture to explain how such theories enhance the understanding of public relations practices. In particular, she illustrates the manner in which narrative theories better portray public relations as a ritual, dialogical process. In this respect, public relations products and processes create meaning, not so much by transmitting information from a source to a target, but by facilitating the coproduction of meaning through a network of situated relationships among stakeholders.

The present study applies narrative analysis as a form of hermeneutic empiricism, an approach that views human behavior as "a symbolic expression that demands interpretation rather than simple observation" (Anderson, 1996, p. 136). To gain this perspective, the analysis invokes an amalgam of the hermeneutic methods including: Burke (1945, 1967), Bormann (1972, 1983), and Fisher (1987) as refined by Vasquez (1993). Despite some differences, each approach addresses communicative motives as revealed in the values, situations, strategies, and narrative structures that are implicit and explicit in a culture's use of narrative in its communication rituals (Sillars, pp. 169-172). A narrative analysis, thus, allows a critic to address the dialogic dimensions of public relations practice across the entire form-to-enactment continuum that narrative comprises. As such, this approach also allows the critic to identify enigmatic issues that can escape the net of a quantitative content analysis. This sort of narrative analysis is conducted at two levels: Initially it examines a text's discursive content (i.e., formal stories and explicit thematic structure and values), the analysis then examines the

discourses implicit in the manner in which narrativity structures social performance (Conquergood, 1983, p. 191; Gronbeck, 1980, p. 329). To the degree that cultural members identify (Burke, 1969) with these implicit themes, values and subject positions (i.e., by coherently engaging particular cultural artifacts) the culture is enacting these particular discourses.

*Applied Methodology*

This research examines twelve issues of the *Hilltop Times* (two each from March/April 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005) for its respective formal and implicit narrative content. Initially, the analysis evaluates the structure, form, and dominant patterns of the newspaper's discursive content to determine narrative content patterns and explicitly articulated themes and values. After determining these patterns, the analysis then evaluates the newspapers' implicit narrative structure. This effort focuses on the discourses implicit in the enacted qualities of organizational narratives, thus it accounts for "'latent meanings' produced not so much by what is said, as in the act of saying'" (Gronbeck, 329). As reflective of its multi-textual orientation, the study then compares insights gained from its narrative analysis with the results of formal interviews of four Air Force officials who, during the time frame in question, were responsible for developing or monitoring the *Hilltop Times*' content during the duration of the study. To meet this objective, the study employs respondent interviews, a well-established research genre that "elicits open-ended responses to a series of directed questions" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 171). During the time frame that the analysis examined, the officials in each of the following positions played a key role in influencing the *Hilltop Times'* content.

*The Hilltop Times editor.* This position was filled by a GS-11 (mid-level) career Department of the Air Force civilian. The editor was responsible for both assembling all editorial content and meeting all publication deadlines of the newspaper and its identical online equivalent. Although the editor assembled the *Hilltop Times'* content, he had little direct content with senior center officials who set the center's agenda and, hence, influenced the newspapers' content. The editor received most of this information second-hand from his supervisor, the Director of Public Affairs.

*The OO-ALC Director of Public Affairs (OO-ALC PAO).* During the period of this analysis, this position represented the primary interface among the center's senior staff and headquarters AFMC. As such, the OO-ALC PAO was keenly aware of the center politics that affect newspaper content. Additionally, because the OO-ALC PAO transferred shortly after the interview, the OO-ALC deputy PAO also was interviewed in the same session with the PAO. Throughout the six years that this study addresses, the OO-ALC public affairs office was located literally a few feet down the hall from the OO-ALC command section. This proximity was not accidental. The OO-ALC PAO regularly met the center commander to discuss the full spectrum of information-related issues that affect the center.

*The Deputy Director of Public Affairs, headquarters Air Force Materiel Command.* The senior civilian public affairs officer in AFMC was a GS-14, who at the time of the interviews ranked second only to the full colonel who directed the command public affairs program. Unlike military positions, the deputy's position did not rotate. Consequently, this person represented the primary source of continuity in overseeing command public affairs policies. Also, this position was responsible for monitoring day-to-day operations among the headquarters public affairs staff (approximately 25 military and civilian members).

The interviews were conducted in three separate sessions in 2002, with a follow-up interview with the AMFC deputy PAO in 2006 (the command PAO position was civilianized in 2007 and the deputy was promoted into the new slot) to address personality or policy-related changes in the center and the command since the initial interviews. During each initial interview, respondents were asked to answer—and in some cases elaborate upon—21 standard questions (see appendix). The questions were designed to address key issues involving the procedures and politics that determine the content of the *Hilltop Times*. The respondents' answers clarify the extent to which the newspapers' themes and values (both explicit and implicit) represent conscious decisions or unstated cultural discourses. The binary nature of this analysis, thus, better illuminates the multiple levels of meaning implicit in employee newspapers.

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Discursive Content*

The ensuing analysis provides examples of the sort of latent discord this article describes at the outset. By reading the *Hilltop Times* in terms of narrative's interrelated formal and performative qualities, the nature of these mixed messages become more apparent. Consistent with the issues outlined as the research problem, much of this discord in the *Hilltop Times* reflects a tension between mission and culture production. This situation is manifest as discordant thematic content, values, language usage, and characterization strategies. Also of note, even as the respondent interviews consistently indicated that the newspaper's discursive content was carefully constructed, the respondents seemed unaware of any mixed messages. The potential reasons for these findings will be addressed in more detail later.

The *Hilltop Times* editor said the fundamental purpose (i.e., as part of the center's overarching mission) of the newspaper was to articulate "military news" and both "command values" and "Air Force values" to the *Hilltop Times* readers. He noted that the newspaper's content was designed to inform readers of programs and policies on Hill AFB. Both the OO-ALC deputy PAO and PAO articulated similar views of the newspaper's purpose: to inform readers of base programs and policies. However, both respondents viewed the newspaper content more strategically than did the editor. They said that the newsworthiness of a particular policy or program related to how well it corresponded to broader themes and objectives.

The AFMC deputy PAO concurred with the latter perspective. He said the primary purpose of installation/unit newspapers is to articulate broader command themes and objectives to a diverse workforce:

> Many of our editors tend to want to downplay the corporate (command) themes because they are not 'news.' Our editors tend to see themselves more as journalists and not an extension of a corporate communication arm. But that's our own fault for teaching them to be editors versus strategic communicators.

Higher levels of command (beginning with the Department of Defense or the Department of the Air Force) develop and formally articulate themes and values then transmit them through command channels to subordinate units. The OO-ALC deputy PAO explained that the well-stated Air Force communication objective is "one voice, many messengers." The AFMC deputy PAO said that developing and emphasizing these themes and values is a well-thought-out, conscious process: "While specific themes may be somewhat subtle versus overt, hit-you-over-the-head themes, they do fall closely in line with command-wide themes, and coverage often is closely coordinated with command headquarters to ensure consistent message delivery."

*Themes and Values, Programs and Policies*

The narrative analysis confirms that, indeed, the newspapers' discursive content emphasized a distinct hierarchy of command themes and values. Of these, the most dominant themes and values (i.e., those that structured other discursive themes), included: teamwork, morale, and quality. Each sampled newspaper conspicuously emphasized each of these themes, most often as part of stories that addressed various center or command programs. Such program stories so dominated the discursive content of the sampled newspapers to the extent that, of the more than 300 full-scale stories in these issues, nearly half represented stories that featured official programs. Additionally, the *Hilltop Times* regularly featured two accumulations of news briefs, which almost exclusively emphasized programs.

In addition to story content, the newspapers also highlighted news items through its physical placement in the newspaper (and on the corresponding website). Each respondent acknowledged that this strategy was intentional and it complemented the close relationship among values and story content. Thus, in the eyes of both editors and readers, the placement of a story directly affects its perceived significance. In this respect, placement toward the front of the newspaper—particularly in the upper half of the tabloid-sized page (above the fold)—indicates greater significance. Consistent with this observation, the most prominently displayed news items tended to feature center programs.

These highly visible program stories also complemented the command value hierarchy by emphasizing mission-related values including: improvement, teamwork, charity, fitness, combat readiness, progress, success, family, self-improvement,

environmental awareness, and quality. Further, these stories either assert or imply that programs benefit the audience in some way. The sample newspapers featured an array of program stories including: a program that provided a special parking space for pregnant base hospital patrons; the ongoing Black History Month program; a software upgrade program that greatly enhanced the efficiency of a major center directorate; an environmental awareness program; annual charity programs; recurring inspection programs; employee suggestion programs; Hispanic employment programs; and education programs.

Policy stories appeared less frequently, but they were displayed with equal prominence as program stories. Policy stories, however, addressed values in a less overt manner. As reflective of this distinction, respondents spoke of policy stories in terms of their "informational value." Policy stories informed readers of various requirements; they either introduced new policies or explained or highlighted changes in established policies. Some policy stories were featured as the lead story on the newspaper's front page. For example, one of the earlier sample newspapers featured a lead, front-page story about a Department of Defense moratorium that prohibited civilian visitors from operating military equipment. Two years later, a similarly placed front-page policy story briefly announced a series of mandatory "Commander's Call" sessions in which the center commander addresses the entire workforce.

In addition to prominent placement in the news section of the *Hilltop Times*, other policy stories appeared in what respondents described as one of the most well-read sections of the newspaper: "The Action Line." In this regular feature, which typical runs on inside pages, the base commander (a colonel who monitors base services for the center commander) responded to policy concerns that readers contributed via a dedicated telephone answering machine. Other policy stories, such as one that addressed the status of the Air Force physical fitness-testing program, were run as discrete feature stories inside the newspaper. In general, though, policy stories differ from program stories in that policy stories emphasize requirements and program stories more directly highlight values. Consequently, each represented a different tone, and each perpetuated various discourses in ways that will be addressed later.

The *Hilltop Times* editorial page represented the most explicitly value-laden section in the newspaper. Unlike conventional editorial pages, which featured a variety of opinions and letters to the editor, the editorial page included only sanctioned perspectives on select issues. For this reason, the OO-ALC PAO observed that this section was his greatest concern. In most cases, the AFMC or ALC commander authored the editorial commentaries in this section. Additionally, various base officials wrote commentaries or, in some cases, the newspaper ran topical editorials from various official military wire services.

News features represented another pervasive platform for highlighting command themes and values in the *Hilltop Times*. News features emphasize news that is not based on discrete events; rather, they highlight interrelated issues and trends. As

compared to the inverted-pyramid template that structures event-based news, news features tend to be written in a more compelling style, one that more naturally reflects values. News features addressed an array of subject matter above and beyond command programs, but they also tended to be thematically consistent with broader public affairs objectives. For example, "heritage" represented a dominant value that was expressed thematically in this manner. Such heritage-themed stories included a feature about area veterans who returned to their World War II battle site on Guam; assorted features about on-going military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (which often were presented in the context of heritage); and a story about an historic base building that was named for a former AFMC commander. Similarly, throughout each of the sampled newspapers, news features also presented "safety" as another dominant value. During this period, the *Hilltop Times* averaged approximately two comparatively large safety stories in each issue. These stories included articles that addressed road rage, barbecue safety, smoke detector batteries, the cat-borne disease Toxoplasmosis, cooking safety, and computer crime.

*Latent Discourses*

As noted previously, the *Hilltop Times* reflects assorted discourses that that are latent in the newspaper's content (i.e., they are implicit in what is written and how it is displayed). These implicit messages reflect the on-going performance of the center's culture, and, as such, they are accessible to a culturally situated audience—although often times below the threshold of conscious awareness. In ways that will be noted, these latent messages were discordant with the newspaper's discursive content.

In contrast to the value hierarchy that shaped the newspapers' discursive content, the most dominant discourse implicit in the *Hilltop Times* (i.e., as it ranges from news construction to audience reception) served to legitimize and fortify the command hierarchy. This factor was manifest in several ways, but was most accessible to readers via assorted strategies to define cultural roles and ideals. These strategies included the use of implicit narrative devices such as character delineation and emplotment devices (e.g., beginnings and endings), but they also were revealed through the ways in which newspaper content structured values to reflect a hierarchy of cultural virtues and vices. Again, this implied value hierarchy was not always harmonious with the more explicit value hierarchy in the newspaper's discursive content.

Even as the discursive content of the *Hilltop Times* did not mention hierarchy explicitly, it both implicitly and continuously enacted hierarchy as a discourse. In most cases, it realized this objective by glorifying members of the military hierarchy throughout all newspaper content. The newspapers employed two distinct strategies to realize this purpose: Most notably, they presented the command hierarchy as authority figures whose position and knowledge were beyond reproach; additionally, they portrayed these figures as the heroic embodiment of cultural virtues. These strategies remained constant in each sample issue of the *Hilltop Times*, a six-year span that comprised the tenures of three ALC commanders and several changes among the OO-

ALC public affairs staff. In this regard, the *Hilltop Times* employed several techniques for positioning the ALC commander as an all-important authority figure vested in the military hierarchy. Most conspicuously, all sample newspapers prominently placed the commander amid the newspaper's physical content—to the extent that each edition quoted the ALC commander in almost every major story. To complement this strategy, the sample newspapers also consistently cast each commander in heroic, powerful roles—typically as these roles related to the various beneficent command programs.

Nearly all stories involving large-scale programs featured the commander's quoted acknowledgment or endorsement. In this regard, it would seem reasonable that the commander would acknowledge large-scale programs—if for no other reason than to put the involved issues in the broader context of the command's overall mission. Throughout the six years in question, however, *Hilltop Times* program stories did not provide such context. Instead, the commanders' comments consistently appeared as platitudes. For example, a story that outlines a major management review for the center's critical F-16 program quoted the ALC commander in the second paragraph: "The F-16 is big business at Hill and we want to do it right." In the same story, the commander also observed: "communication is key to success." In addition to such continual deference to the ALC commander, the newspaper underscored hierarchical discourses by conferring authority status to other members of the military hierarchy. In this regard, the newspapers' most prominent stories often mention the AFMC commander—even if the stories did not quote him. One sample issue, for example, cited the AFMC commander in four different stories in the first three pages. Additionally, each time an AFMC commander visited the center, the visit represented the premier story for that week.

To further underscore this strategy, various senior members of the ALC staff authored most *Hilltop Times* editorials. Similarly, most center special events featured speakers who were key members of the Air Force hierarchy (general officers or chief master sergeants). In one sample issue the editorial page presented two commentaries in which senior center staff members discussed leadership. In accordance with Segal's previous observations, these editorials portrayed leadership not as a process of social influence, but as a value-imbued virtue implicit in hierarchical positions. Correspondingly, the editorials implied that the authors were qualified to address leadership based entirely on their hierarchical positions. None of the editorialists, for example, demonstrated expertise in theories of social influence, nor did they even discuss leadership in terms of social influence. It should be reemphasized that the interview respondents indicated no awareness of these implicit strategies. Yet it also is noteworthy that the respondents seamlessly enacted these strategies through culturally situated acts related to the appropriate application of news values and newspaper content.

*Cultural Roles*. The *Hilltop Times* also underscored discourses related to hierarchy by positioning heroes and villains within its narrative structure. In addition to identifying senior members of the military hierarchy as heroic figures in the ways noted

previously, the newspapers also addressed less senior cultural members in terms of heroic characterizations. The sample newspapers reflected this strategy through various achievement-oriented stories that included both event-based stories and news features. In this context, the newspapers portrayed achievements as cultural virtues, which become embodied when heroic figures skillfully perform their prescribed roles in the center hierarchy. Examples of this strategy include stories that feature employees who earned promotions; who were honor graduates of various schools; who had won awards for excellence; or who had initiated various efficiencies or cost savings.

Such stories implicitly situated members of the OO-ALC workforce within a value hierarchy: achievement represented the primary virtue, violating performance standards represented the corresponding vice. The *Hilltop Times* also consistently enacted this strategy by positioning less-than-virtuous cultural members as counterpoint to the moral of various stories. For example, a leadership editorial referenced nameless officials who, in contrast to heroic leaders, had ignored their employees or had not properly served as mentors. Safety stories alluded to people who, through their carelessness, had caused a fire or some other tragedy. Editorials that addressed military retention focused on regret-filled former Air Force members who were encountering hardships as civilians.

*Absence of problems*. Internal information newspapers or newsletters often are referred to as "house organs." In reading the *Hilltop Times*, it appears that throughout the six years in question, there were few, if any, problems in the commander's house. In some respects, it would seem reasonable that house organs would not emphasize negative news. However, the *Hilltop Times* reflected an elaborate series of symbolic contortions designed to avoid acknowledging problems at all—particularly problems that would reflect negatively on the military hierarchy.

The sample newspapers tended to either ignore problems, or they addressed problems only after they had been fixed. For example, a major front-page news feature highlighted new software that enhanced the repair of landing gear. The story emphasized the extent to which skillful management practices had resulted in much more "efficient and productive" operations. Of interest, the article noted that prior to these improvements, the Technical Repair Center "had been likened to a sausage factory." The story references a not-so-distant situation in which aircraft had to be "cannibalized" for parts; thus, it took "10 B-52 landing gear to deliver five B-52 landing gear to customers." Additionally, prior to this intervention, the Technical Repair Center's on-time delivery rate was only 15 percent. Clearly, this success story represented a significant news story for the center. It also naturally raises the question of how many similar large-scale problems exist that cannot be addressed publicly. Such articles suggest significant management problems, but because these problems cannot be addressed, one is never sure how bad things are—or how good they are.

Similarly, articles regularly highlighted major cost savings that result from individual efforts or from a program. For example, one article discussed how an employee suggestion program resulted in more than $5 million in savings during the

previous year. Again, such stories raised the questions: What was wrong to begin with? And, how endemic are such problems now? As a related matter, the newspapers' liberal use of euphemisms raises similar questions. The newspaper sample included a story about a major F-16 "supportability review" that ostensibly studied the "wellness" of the program. Thus, this vital program did not encounter "problems," instead it reflected degrees of "wellness." Other newspaper content suggests that this situation appeared to reflect the military culture in general and not the OO-ALC culture in particular. In one sample issue, a front-page, above-the-fold news story from a Department of Defense News Service outlined a new policy that limited the extent to which civilians could interface with military equipment during orientation tours (i.e., they can ride on equipment, or observe it, but not operate it). The eight-paragraph front-page story went into great detail about what constitutes military equipment and who constitutes a civilian visitor, but the article did not address the reason for this moratorium. In fact, the Department of Defense issued the moratorium because of a well-publicized collision between a U. S. Navy submarine and a Japanese fishing boat. The collision, in which nine Japanese fishermen died, allegedly occurred when civilian visitors were sitting at the submarine's controls.

*Narrative Voice*

A narrative analysis can help reveal organizational discourses by analyzing how a communication artifact uses narrative voice to position the author and the audience (Strine and Pacanowski, 1986). When viewed in this manner, a communicative text reflects this relationship via an implied authorial persona (or voice) that seeks to define the situation in terms of a purpose and social roles. This dialogic process is reflected through the tone of the discursive presentation, and, it is realized as discourse when audiences identify with this tone and enact attendant subject positions. Most conspicuously, the sample newspapers employed the authorial voice of authority to present information to its audiences. The practice, which serves to fortify the military hierarchy, is reflected through the standard practice of presenting newspaper content as a non-problematic (virtually unquestioned) representation of reality. Thus, the sample newspapers utilized very few qualifying statements, qualifying clauses, or qualifying adjectives.

Further, the newspapers consistently utilized narrative voice to skirt the perception of problems within the organization. This practice can be noted by comparing program stories with policy stories. As noted previously, program stories inherently represent good news stories—even if the programs address troublesome issues. Programs are the agents through which the hierarchy provides for its subjects' well being. As such, *Hilltop Times* articles predominantly used active voice to address this beneficent relationship. Thus, "The Cryogenic Element of the Fuels Management Flight *is responsible for* (a series of effective measures);" "The Air Force Assistance Fund Campaign *enters* its second week;" "Air Force Services *is conducting* its fifth annual club membership scholarship program;" "The Hill AFB Recycling Program *is sponsoring*

Recycling Awareness Week;" Hill's Air Force Sergeant's Association *is collecting* personnel (sic) hygiene summer supplies for the homeless."

Conversely, policies tend to reflect a negative relationship between the hierarchy and its subjects; policies usually are directive or restrictive. By their nature, policies more clearly reflect hierarchical efforts to control the workforce in terms of a dominant-subordinate relationship. In this respect, articulating policy in the newspaper can imply a heavy-handedness that might not appear comely in a public forum. To avoid this perception, nearly 90 percent of the policy stories that appeared in the sample issues were written in passive voice, a grammatical strategy that inherently utilizes voice to distance a subject from an object. The consistency with which policy stories are written in passive voice reveals cultural motives that do not seem accidental. Yet, this practice also seems consistent with the previously noted premise that organizations often enact such discourses without conscious intent.

In the latter regard, it is noteworthy that interview respondents indicated no awareness of such inconsistent use of language. In each instance, respondents observed that passive voice is not considered acceptable newspaper style, and they attributed any instances of passive voice to editing oversights. Yet the sample issues of the *Hilltop Times* provide abundant examples of passive voice in policy stories: "Commanders Call sessions, *will be held* … *attendance is mandatory*;" "No exception to the regular leave rules *has been made* for the (2002 Winter) Olympics;" "Base military members *are now scheduled* for their annual Air Force fitness assessments." As a related matter, the analysis identified only two stories that explicitly addressed negative center news. One was a legally mandated article that notified the base population about discrepancies in the base's monthly drinking well monitoring program. The other article, which was taken from the oldest sample newspapers, represented a now-defunct punitive actions summary. Both articles were short, cryptic, and written in passive voice.

In similar fashion to parents who apply more veiled discipline to their children when guests are present, the center provided more veiled discipline to its workforce in its newspaper. In comparison to the ubiquitous warning signs that can be found throughout Hill AFB—most of which begin with "By order of the commander"—policies that appear in the *Hilltop Times* are stated less bluntly. None of the interview respondents implicitly acknowledged these dynamics [They were not asked to address them specifically because the purpose of the interviews was, in part, to gauge conscious intent as part of a broader assessment of implicit versus explicit messages].

Of note, the AFMC deputy PAO confirmed that, during the six-year period in question, the OO-ALC public affairs office did not encounter trouble with its newspaper content. However, he could recall situations in the past—at other ALCs—in which commanders "fired" PAOs for various problems including the installation newspaper. Consequently, for most of these six years, the OO-ALC public affairs staff represented a successful, well-developed system for perpetuating organizational culture through the

unit newspaper. The OO-ALC PAO reported receiving only positive feedback on the newspaper. In fact, both the PAO and the deputy PAO said the commander, on several occasions, praised the paper and its staff in public. As the PAO explains, "It (success) is a matter of knowing expectations . . . and ensuring that there aren't any surprises."

**Conclusion**

The preceding analysis reveals the nature of the discord between the OO-ALC's perceived mission requirements (as reflected by the discursive content of the newspaper) and its need to socialize members to perform their respective roles in the center's hierarchy. Although hierarchy and mission certainly are not always incompatible, the analysis documents the extent to which cultural politics impelled the *Hilltop Times* to rationalize this tenuous relationship. Such problematic strategies in this regard include: a propensity to ignore bureaucratic problems that may implicate the center hierarchy; inconsistent use of narrative voice as a means of fortifying—and in some cases insulating—senior officials; and the excessive use of platitudes and other ambiguous language. This study demonstrates how the OO-ALC culture, as a representative military culture, envisions itself in terms of "mission," "team," "morale," and "quality," yet implicitly enacts itself through discourses related to hierarchy and the need for control. To the extent that any conflict arises among these values, hierarchy consistently emerges as the paramount value in the newspaper.

Even as such discord appears to provide fertile ground for an assortment of dysfunctional situations, it remains unclear exactly how this situation impacts the OO-ALC and its command structure. The OO-ALC was selected as a research subject precisely because of its reputation as a healthy organization, and this study did not find conspicuous evidence to contradict this perception. However, in the context of the pervasive, longstanding issues that were framed as the research problem, this observation is not necessarily positive. The messages implicit in the newspapers' ubiquitous "success" stories imply that these successes reversed large-scale inefficiencies. Such findings indicate that inefficient or ineffective processes may be common in such organizations; however, these problems are not acknowledged openly and possibly not addressed forthrightly. This reality tends to support the view that, despite the longstanding protestations of its senior officials (Fogleman, 1996), the Air Force might be enacting itself as a one-mistake culture. Or, in accordance with allegations associated with the firing of both the Secretary of the Air Force and the Air Force Chief of Staff in 2008 (Shanker, 2008), the findings also suggests a culture that promotes a sense of entitlement among its senior members and a somewhat muddled sense of core values. In this respect, the findings imply a myopic cultural orientation, one that seems ripe for the oft-cited bureaucratic quandary in which "doing things right" equates to doing the wrong things well (i.e., performing hierarchy versus executing a mission).

The analysis, thus, implicates the center newspaper as a reflector of a hierarchically hidebound organization, one that in many ways is a prisoner of its own

devices. These factors ultimately shape the content of the *Hilltop Times* in manners that, paradoxically, undermine its effectiveness and its credibility, and possibly breed cynicism among its readers (although this study did not seek to measure this perception). Further, the newspapers perpetuate an organizational culture that has constructed a self-limiting symbolic framework, one that positions leaders as all-powerful, yet implicitly restricts their means of agency to policies and programs. This arrangement not only limits agents of change, it limits visions of change. Thus, it could be expected that if this sort of symbolic discord could be linked to pragmatic cultural problems (to the extent that they would be acknowledged at all), command officials would seek to develop policies and programs to address these problems. The situation implies an endless cycle, one that deeply implicates strategic information processes and products.

Such insights can benefit both strategic communication professionals and the students of organizational culture. This perspective helps practitioners more clearly understand the nuanced, overlapping relationship between strategic communication and organizational culture. This awareness can enhance public relations practice by informing better management counsel and more realistic, better-targeted internal communication strategies. Most notably, the findings suggest the need for greater sensitivity to language usage in all internal information products. As such, the analysis underscores the axiom that effective communication should emphasize concrete language forms and avoid abstractions—particularly as means of articulating organizational values. Similarly, the findings demonstrate the ways in which passive voice, platitudes, and other glittering generalities reflect more than ineffective language forms: They also can serve as red flags to strategic communicators, vital warning signs that can imply deeper-seated cultural politics that may be problematic in the ways this article has described.

By documenting specific instances of discordant cultural production in a specialized occupational setting, this research also extends well-established lines of inquiry into ambiguity as a strategy in organizational communication (Eisenberg, 1984, 2007). Even as these broader concerns are far-reaching and complex, this research has helped situate a facet of this issue as it relates to employee news products. Additionally, although not a primary research objective, the study also demonstrates the value of examining the discursive aspects of military culture, a perspective that can address some of the enigmatic issues that elude the prevailing sociological approach to such inquiry. Finally, even as such discord appears endemic in military organizations, it seems unlikely that this study describes a uniquely military problem; future research needs to address this situation in other settings and better trace discordant culture production to specific organizational problems. In each case, the attendant insights will enhance the understanding of complex issues that significantly impact both organizational theory and strategic communication practice.

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## Appendix

1. From your perspective, does this paper consciously emphasize particular themes? If so, what are they?
2. Please explain how the content of the Hilltop Times is determined?
3. How does the physical placement of an article in the Hilltop Times represent its importance to the OO-ALC?
4. What sorts of issues are directed as "must runs" from the OO-ALC commander or Headquarters AFMC?
5. To what extent does the workforce determine the Hilltop Times content?
6. To what extent does the OL-ALC commander determine newspaper content?

7. How do you address the seeming disparate interests of a mixed civilian-military work force?
8. How would you characterize the difference between news and entertainment content in the Hilltop Times?
9. What sort of "legitimate" topics would be considered "taboo" for a base newspaper?
10. If newspaper content were to cause trouble for you personally, with whom would it be with and what would be the ramifications as you see it?
11. What is the relationship between employee unions and the base paper?
12. Describe the nature of the feedback you receive from readers?
13. Do you ever deal with irate readers? Is there any pattern among their concerns?
14. How would you characterize the dominant themes in the Hilltop Times?
15. Which values do you think are most dominant in the Hilltop Times?
16. What sort of newspaper content issues do you worry about potentially causing trouble for you personally?
17. What would you say is the most effective element/aspect of the newspaper?
18. What sort of newspaper content has brought you the most praise?
19. How does graphics content relate to the newspaper's overall editorial content?
20. What sorts of material have you chosen not to run, and why?
21. Are there any content-related issues that stand out in your mind that you'd like to address?

2007 Follow-up Question

1. Have any situations changed in ways that alter or invalidate the answers provided in the 2002 interviews?