

## **Professional Standards Advisory PS-5 (January 2005)**

### **TELLING THE TRUTH, ESPECIALLY IN WAR TIME**

*All PRSA members pledge adherence to the Society's Member Code of Ethics. As issues arise relating to the practice of public relations, the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) is charged with providing guidance on such issues within the framework of the Code provisions. The PRSA Board of Directors then announces these guidelines through this series of professional standards advisories. The PRSA Member Code of Ethics may be found online at [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org).*

**ISSUE:** Telling the truth, especially in war time.

**BACKGROUND:** There are great dilemmas in wartime communication. Accurate public reporting of military activities is a crucial tool for military communicators to gain and maintain support from civilian leadership for military operations. This is especially true in an era when virtually every part of the battlefield can be covered in real time by embedded journalists, monitored electronically and observed by many parties representing a spectrum of interests, concerns and motivations. It is also true that military personnel and civilians can die as the result of careless communication.

Institutions and individuals can lose public respect and confidence when people or institutions deceive, misinform or obfuscate. Public policy decisions may suffer if military credibility is called into question.

Among the environmental considerations that may complicate communications in a war zone are these:

- Every military commander is responsible to protect and preserve the lives of not only those who serve in their commands, but also noncombatants and civilians through any legal means available to them, including disinformation and deception.
- During wartime, there may well be times when deceiving the enemy will save lives, prevent further damage or simply deter bloody confrontations.
- A military communicator accused of allowing deceptive information to get into news channels may create serious credibility concerns that may need correction or clarification.
- Military commanders and communicators should separate Public Affairs (PA) and Military Information Operations (IO). The former's function is to inform truthfully, widely and understandably; the latter's intent is to influence. Public Affairs' mission is global. Information Operations' activities are directed at an adversary. Deception of adversaries is one of the functions of IO. (There is an armed services-wide discussion and debate on the relationship between PA and IO now underway that may change or create new relationships and rules in the future.)

**RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE:** At least three Code Provisions and three Professional Values relate to this issue.

#### **Code Provisions**

**Free Flow of Information.** Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential. A member shall aid informed decision-making. Be honest and accurate in all communications. And act promptly to correct erroneous information for which the practitioner is responsible.

**Disclosure of Information.** Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democracy. A member shall act promptly to correct erroneous information for which the practitioner is responsible. And avoid deceptive practices.

**Enhancing the Profession.** Professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession. A member shall decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code. Counsel subordinates in proper ethical decision-making. And report practices not in compliance with the Code, whether committed by PRSA members or not, to an appropriate authority.

#### **Professional Values**

**Honesty.** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

**Independence.** We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.

**Loyalty.** We are faithful to those we represent while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

## EXAMPLES:

- Ethical military communicators have an affirmative obligation to seek the truth and disclose or expose misleading, false or deceptive information or behavior to appropriate authorities.

**Example 1:** If a PA officer(s) determines that they are being asked to or somehow actually being included in an operation or situation that could be misleading, false or deceptive to the news media, they have an affirmative obligation to avoid this by first confronting the order-issuing authority then, if necessary, reporting within the command structure to have such orders, actions or activities stopped.

- Communicators must strictly adhere to all Department of Defense (DOD) policies and regulations. Present policies specifically separate PA activities from those of IO.

**Example 2:** See "[Policy on Public Affairs Relationship to Information Operations](#)" memorandum of September 27, 2004 from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

- Military commanders who attempt to use PA activities as a means of deception or misinformation should be reported up the chain of command.

**Example 3:** Very similar to "Best Practice" number one, military commanders know that if deception is a part of their military communications strategy, they must not use PA officers for this purpose. The PA officer who is aware this is going on, as in example number one, needs to first confront the commander to clarify the DOD orders for separation. If that effort fails, the officer(s) need to go further up the chain until they find an officer who can rectify the situation.

- Military PA practitioners should promptly take every step necessary to correct and clarify false, misleading, or deceptive information or actions. PA officers may not participate in deceptive operations, although they must know about them.

**Example 4:** During the first Gulf War in 1991, time was spent helping reporters understand various aspects of military operations in the theatre where the battle was about to begin. Among the information shared was a briefing on amphibious landing operations.

A reporter or reporters assumed, completely on their own, that amphibious operations were therefore going to be a part of subsequent military action by coalition forces. News stories began circulating about the amphibious component of coalition force battle plans.

Military commanders, who had virtually no plans for any operations of this nature, chose to ignore these stories and simply told reporters when asked, "Comments on future military operations are off limits," thereby neither confirming nor denying the reports of amphibious landing plans. As it turned out, the net effect of these stories was that Saddam Hussein kept large numbers of forces near potential landing points to defend against amphibious operations.

This story illustrates a dilemma increasingly facing commanders and communicators on and off the battlefield. Even when deceptive stories develop spontaneously, regardless of their source, an affirmative decision-making process is required to allow the deception to persist.

The PA officer, through coordination with IO, would be obligated to refrain from correcting and clarifying erroneous information of this type as well as information known to be the result of IO directed to our adversaries.

**Commander's Dilemma:** The reporters, through a routine briefing process, thought they learned something newsworthy, acted on that belief and created a situation that, in many respects, facilitated one of the most dramatic military movements of the war the sweeping Marine drive behind the Republican Guard troops across the country, effectively cutting them off from the rest of their forces. Does a commander or a PA officer have an obligation to correct, clarify or otherwise intervene when reporters create a falsehood based on something they heard, which gave them something they thought they knew, which in turn created a situation they thought they needed to talk about?

**Public Affairs Officer's Dilemma:** If asked by a reporter, "Are you planning an amphibious invasion?" the PA officer knows that this is not being planned, but also knows two other things: this story has now become a functioning part of the IO strategy, and further, that comments about future plans regarding proposed or identified military strategies are off the table for discussion. What does s/he tell the reporter, the parents, the Congressman, the Allied commander, or anyone else who asks such questions?

**RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE**. To reduce the confusion inherent in wartime communication, there must be a firewall separation between IO and PA and a mechanism based on disclosure, exposure and public discussion to reestablish a basis of truth and trust when situations of honesty, clarity and truthfulness have been breached. Coordination between PA and IO is essential to maintain the firewall. See examples of proper practices above.