

Media Coverage | "Rating" of Reporters by the Rendon Group

As of 1545

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Mainstream media and new media sources overwhelmingly cited and linked to reports by Stars and Stripes. It was commonly reported that Pentagon officials confirmed that Rendon compiled profiles on reporters who wanted to embed with troops, but "denied claims" that profiles were used to determine embed requests.

Overall, reports characterized the Rendon Group as "controversial" and suggested the Pentagon "contracted" or "commissioned" the group. Mr. Bryan Whitman was frequently quoted saying, "There is no policy that stipulates that embedding should be based in any way on a person's work... The only measure or standard around here is whether an article is accurate."

"Reporter profiling" is under review, according to today's report by Stars and Stripes. While Mr. Whitman was cited as inquiring about the matter, no formal inquiry has been launched.

The Pentagon "acknowledged" a contractor has been rating reporters' war coverage, said Foxnews.com, but the rating system does not influence granting media outlets' requests to embed with U.S. forces. Examples reportedly obtained by Foxnews.com show that "the effort has continued through this month."

A Macedonian outlet posted an item on its website, which did not appear to contain original reporting, but rather a compilation of information from mainstream media sources. RawStory.com headlined "Pentagon caught lying about profiling journalists," and wrote that Pentagon officials were caught "spreading disinformation."

Televised coverage as of this report's deadline has been limited to one report on CNN and one on a Fox affiliate in Louisiana.

Highlights

AFP: The Pentagon has hired a private firm to investigate reporters seeking to embed with US troops in Afghanistan in order to find out how best to influence their coverage, a report said Wednesday.

AFP: One file on a journalist seen by Stars and Stripes describes his coverage as "neutral to positive," but adds that negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" if he were given quotes from military officials.

AP: Aidan White, general secretary of The International Federation of Journalists, "This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media."

CNN Newsroom: Rendon says it does grade how a subject is broadly covered by multiple media outlets and the Pentagon says commanders don't reject requests from reporters because their prior military reporting may have been negative. But here is what they don't say. Commanders take those marching orders from the PR firm. The question is, why is a PR firm beholden to a big client ultimately deciding what gets reported from the war?

Foxnews.com: The analysis said one newspaper reporter's negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" by giving him different quotes from officials. Another said a TV reporter's coverage was "subjective" and suggested guiding him toward "the positive work of a successful operation," according to the article.

Stars and Stripes: But those claims run counter to the actual media profiles, the existence of which Stars and Stripes revealed earlier this week. The profiles contain ratings and pie charts purporting to depict whether an individual reporter's work is "positive," "negative" or "neutral," as well as advice on how best to place a reporter with a military unit to ensure positive coverage and "neutralize" negative stories.

Stars and Stripes: One Pentagon correspondent who requested and received her profile on Thursday said it included her current work up through July.

Headlines

Pentagon profiling Afghan embed journalists: report - 8/26

AFP ...unattributed

Group: US is monitoring journalists in Afghanistan - 8/26

AP ...unattributed

Military denies media is graded for embeds - 8/25

ArmyTimes.com ... William H. McMichael

BBC Monitoring: Fears of US 'Propaganda' After Afghanistan Profiling Revelations - 8/27

SAP20090827950065 Caversham BBC Monitoring in English

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Files prove Pentagon is profiling reporters - 8/27

Stars and Stripes ... Charlie Reed, Kevin Baron, Leo Shane III

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Pentagon profiling Afghan embed journalists: report - 8/26

AFP ...unattributed

WASHINGTON - The Pentagon has hired a private firm to investigate reporters seeking to embed with US troops in Afghanistan in order to find out how best to influence their coverage, a report said Wednesday.

Stars and Stripes, a military journal partly funded by the Pentagon but editorially independent, said private contractors had been brought in by the US Defense Department to evaluate journalists.

The Rendon Group rates reporters' previous work as "positive," "negative," or "neutral," and offers advice on how their coverage might be influenced, the report said.

One file on a journalist seen by Stars and Stripes describes his coverage as "neutral to positive," but adds that negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" if he were given quotes from military officials.

Another file describes a television reporter as taking a "subjective angle," but advises that steering him towards "the positive work of a successful operation" could "result in favorable coverage."

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman insisted that the Defense Department does not rate journalists based on the favorability of their coverage.

"We are not doing that here," he told AFP.

On Monday, in response to a first, less detailed, Stars and Stripes article about the program, Whitman said "I can tell you that the way in which the Department of Defense evaluates an article is its accuracy," he said.

"It's a good article if it's accurate. It's a bad article if it's inaccurate. That's the only measurement that we use here," he told the newspaper.

The report comes as Washington worries about the increasing unpopularity of the war in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban is inflicting rising casualties on U.S. and coalition troops.

According to a recent poll, 51 percent of Americans now say the war is not worth fighting.

Group: US is monitoring journalists in Afghanistan – 8/26

AP ...unattributed

BRUSSELS – The International Federation of Journalists complained Wednesday that news people covering the war in Afghanistan are being monitored by the U.S. military to see if they are sympathetic to the American cause.

The federation said journalists seeking to travel under the protection of U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan may be screened first by an American public relations firm to see if their coverage portrays the military in a positive light.

"This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media," Aidan White, general secretary of the Brussels-based federation, said in a statement.

"It strips away any pretense that the army is interested in helping journalists to work freely," the federation statement said.

The complaint followed the publication Aug. 24 of an article in the Stars and Stripes, an independent daily covering the U.S. military, reporting that journalists were being screened by The Rendon Group, a Washington-based public relations company.

The article said the company "gained notoriety" before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq "for collaborating with the Iraqi National Congress," an opposition group "reportedly funded by the CIA (that) furnished much of the false information about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction used by the Bush administration to justify the invasion."

A U.S. military spokeswoman in Kabul said the Rendon reports were only used to ascertain what a journalist's specific interests might be.

"What is important to note is that we do not deny access to journalists wishing to cover operations in Afghanistan based on the tenor of their reporting," said Lt. Cmdr. Christine Sidenstricker. "That has never been (Pentagon) policy; in fact it's the exact opposite."

"Whether their coverage in the past has been positive or negative is a non-factor," Sidenstricker said in a telephone interview.

American affiliates of the international journalists federation joined in protesting the screening.

Roberta Reardon, President of the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, whose members include broadcast journalists said: "If the military pre-approves only certain journalists to report a specific point of view or agenda, our decisions cannot be made independently or freely, and that threatens our democracy."

Bernie Lunzer, president of the Newspaper Guild, called the screening of journalists "over the line" and said it erodes "the ability to report the truth objectively and without government censorship."

The International Federation of Journalists represents over 600,000 journalists in 123 countries.

Military denies media is graded for embeds - 8/25

ArmyTimes.com ... William H. McMichael

The U.S. command in Afghanistan has denied a published report that suggests it grades stories by journalists seeking embed opportunities with military units and denies access for those that portray the U.S. effort in Afghanistan in a less-than-favorable light.

"We don't operate that way," said Wayne Shanks, chief of public affairs for International Security Assistance Forces-Afghanistan. "We see what reporters want, try to accommodate them and see what they publish — good and bad. ... The information is not used to determine whether an embed will be granted."

Shanks confirmed in an e-mailed response to questions that a contractor, public relations firm The Rendon Group, performs background profiles on reporters seeking embeds — as was reported Aug. 24 by the editorially independent Defense Department newspaper Stars and Stripes. But he said the information gathered is not used to determine whether an embed will be granted.

"This is simple research that anyone would use to prepare for an important meeting," Shanks said.

Controversy swirls around The Rendon Group, which, as Stars and Stripes noted, helped create the Iraqi National Congress, an opposition group reportedly funded by the CIA that furnished much false information about Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. That information fueled the Bush administration's argument for war but subsequently was widely debunked by investigators, including the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Defense officials acknowledge that they sometimes have to choose one reporter over another given space limitations at a particular time. That call, said Air Force Lt. Col. Edward Sholtis, public affairs adviser to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, is typically made in favor of larger news organizations but also reporters who have a reputation for accuracy.

But the so-called "positive" or "negative" bent of a given story or body of work is not a consideration in granting access, said Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman, who as deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs provides media policy guidance for the Defense Department's worldwide public affairs community.

"There is no policy that stipulates that embedding should be based in any way on a person's work," Whitman said. "The only measure or standard around here is whether an article is accurate."

Space considerations aside, no one is summarily excluded from embedding, whether they work for an accredited news organization or for themselves. Said Shanks, "We accredit all reporters, bloggers included."

"Officially, Headquarters ISAF supports transparency in its operations and does not deny embed or other opportunities to reporters as a result of biographical information beyond simple judgments on professional qualifications," Sholtis said in a separate e-mail. "I think that you will find in his first two months of command that Gen. McChrystal has been both frank and accessible to the press, and he inculcates this attitude among his subordinate commanders within the necessary constraints of operational security and specific national policies."

Whitman said it was his understanding that the U.S. command in Afghanistan formerly graded stories but that the practice ended when the new U.S. Forces Afghanistan organization was stood up in October.

Shanks said simply, "No such policy exists," adding that he was unaware of whether a previous such policy existed.

Sholtis said that from a public affairs perspective, it's important to understand where a reporter is coming from when preparing for a visit or interview.

Like reporters, "good [public affairs officers] don't walk into a media engagement blind," Sholtis said in his e-mail response. "Some level of research is prudent and, when done properly, benefits both the military (by making personnel feel more prepared and thus comfortable with an open conversation) and reporters (by pitching the conversation to their known background and experience)."

BBC Monitoring: Fears of US 'Propaganda' After Afghanistan Profiling Revelations – 8/27

SAP20090827950065 Caversham BBC Monitoring in English

Journalists seeking permission to embed with US forces engaged in escalating military operations in Afghanistan are having their articles evaluated by a controversial Washington-based public relations firm contracted by the Pentagon, according to the Stars and Stripes, an editorially independent daily that covers US military news.

The revelations have raised concerns among media freedom watchdogs about government censorship and propaganda.

A leading international journalists' group warned that profiling of journalists compromised the independence of the media.

Screening

Despite denials by Pentagon officials earlier this week that they were rating the work of embedded journalists in Afghanistan, the Stars and Stripes said on 27 August it had obtained documents that proved that reporters' coverage was being graded as "positive," "neutral" or "negative" by the Rendon Group.

Rendon, a Washington-based public relations organization, gained notoriety in the run-up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq for its work helping to create the Iraqi National Congress. That opposition group, reportedly funded by the CIA, was discredited after it transpired that much of the information it provided about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction was false.

"The documents - recent confidential profiles of the work of individual reporters prepared by a Pentagon contractor - indicate that the ratings are intended to help Pentagon image-makers manipulate the types of stories that reporters produce while they are embedded with US troops in Afghanistan," Stars and Stripes said.

The Rendon Group "examines individual reporters' recent work and determines whether the coverage was 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral' compared to mission objectives," the paper cited Rendon officials as saying.

US army officials in Iraq engaged in similar vetting practices two months ago, when they barred a Stars and Stripes reporter from embedding with a unit of the 1st Cavalry Division because the reporter "refused to highlight" good news that military commanders wanted to emphasize, Stars and Stripes recalled.

Denials

Pentagon officials confirmed that Rendon was compiling background profiles on reporters who wanted to embed with troops. But they denied claims that US army commanders in Afghanistan were rejecting requests from reporters because their prior coverage was considered to be negative.

A US military spokeswoman in Kabul told international news agencies that the Rendon reports were only used to ascertain what a journalist's specific interests might be.

"What is important to note is that we do not deny access to journalists wishing to cover operations in Afghanistan based on the tenor of their reporting," said Lt-Cdr Christine Sidenstricker. "Whether their coverage in the past has been positive or negative is a non-factor."

And the US website airforcetimes.com quoted Wayne Shanks, chief of public affairs for International Security Assistance Forces-Afghanistan, as saying: "We don't operate that way... We see what reporters want, try to accommodate them and see what they publish - good and bad... The information is not used to determine whether an embed will be granted."

Rendon, for its part, has said it does not rate work performed by individual reporters, nor make recommendations about whether individual journalists should be allowed to embed.

Warnings

American professional organizations representing journalists have criticized the Pentagon's reported screening of reporters.

"The whole concept of doing profiles on reporters who are going to embed with the military is alarming," said Ron Martz, president of the Military Reporters and Editors organization. "It speaks to this whole issue of trying to shape the message and that's not something the military should be involved with," he said.

Roberta Reardon, president of the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, whose members include broadcast journalists said: "If the military pre-approves only certain journalists to report a specific point of view or agenda, our decisions cannot be made independently or freely, and that threatens our democracy."

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) expressed criticism too.

"This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media," said Aidan White, IFJ general secretary. "It strips away any pretence that the army is interested in helping journalists to work freely. It suggests they are more interested in propaganda than honest reporting."

AFTRA Joins Outcry Over Allegations Of Pentagon Embed Vetting – 8/26

Broadcasting & Cable ...John Eggerton

Report says journalists may be screened to determine their portrayal of the military

The American Federation of Radio & Television Artists Wednesday joined the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and other groups to condemn what they say was the U.S. Military's vetting of journalists seeking military protection to cover the war in Afghanistan.

Stars & Stripes reports that PR firm, The Rendon Group, may be screening those journalists to see whether they plan to portray the military positively, saying one of its reporters was refused an embed because he would not "highlight" good news.

The paper says it has obtained documents that "prove" the Pentagon is grading coverage as positive, neutral or negative to help "manipulate the type of stories that reporters produce while embedded."

"This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media," said Aidan White, IFJ general secretary, in a statement. "It strips away any pretence that the army is interested in helping journalists to work freely. It suggests they are more interested in propaganda than honest reporting."

"Many Americans rely on the unbiased information that journalists report to understand what is happening in the world and to make critical decisions," said AFTRA President Roberta Reardon. "If the military pre-approves only certain journalists to report a specific point-of-view or agenda, our decisions cannot be made independently or freely and that threatens our democracy. I am deeply disturbed by this assault on quality broadcast journalism and on our freedom."

A Pentagon press officer had not returned a call for comment at press time.

In a statement on its Web site, The Rendon Group says it provides media analysis as part of a 2009 contract in support of US military public affairs in Afghanistan, including, as required by the contract, a "relational analysis of news content specifically focused on themes of critical importance defined as US interests -- stability and security, counter insurgency, operational results."

But it also says it does not rank reporters, and that the information it gleans "quantifying" themes and topics "is not provided as the basis for accepting or rejecting a specific journalist's inquiries."

International Journo Groups and Guild Protest Afghan War 'Vetting' of Reporters - 8/27

Editor & Publisher ...unattributed

CHICAGO The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), including The Newspaper Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, on Thursday condemned what they said was "vetting" of journalists covering the Afghanistan war to gauge whether their coverage will portray American and NATO forces positively.

Stars and Stripes reported recently that journalists seeking to be embedded with Western forces in Afghanistan may be vetted by The Rendon Group, a Washington-based public relations firm commissioned by the Pentagon, the IFJ said. "to determine whether media coverage portrays the U.S. military in a positive light." The military denied the charge, and the newspaper then returned with a report on documents it said proved its claims.

IFJ General Secretary Aidan White said this "profiling" of journalists strips away any pretense that the Army is interested in helping journalists to work freely. It suggests they are more interested in propaganda than honest reporting."

Newspaper Guild President Bernie Lunzer the vetting undermines the news media's "core value, the ability to report the truth objectively and without government censorship."

Roberta Reardon, president of the the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, whose members include broadcast journalists, said the practice undermines democracy itself.

"If the military pre-approves only certain journalists to report a specific point of view or agenda, our decisions cannot be made independently or freely and that threatens our democracy," she said. "I am deeply disturbed by this assault on quality broadcast journalism and on our freedom."

Pentagon Acknowledges Effort to Rate Reporters' War Coverage - 8/27

Foxnews.com ... Jennifer Griffin, Justin Fishel contributed to this report

The acknowledgment of a ratings system on reporters comes at a time when public support for the Afghanistan war is falling, even as President Obama escalates the U.S. presence there -- an escalation that has coincided with rising casualties.

The Pentagon on Thursday acknowledged that a contractor has been rating reporters' war coverage, but insisted that the rating system is not used to determine whether to grant media outlets' requests to embed journalists with U.S. forces.

In a lengthy statement, the Pentagon also said that the practice is not used to "rate" individual reporters or news outlets themselves, but to "help assess performance in communicating information effectively to the public."

The acknowledgment comes at a time when public support for the Afghanistan war is falling, even as President Obama escalates the U.S. presence there -- an escalation that has coincided with rising casualties.

The military statement said the contract with The Rendon Group, a Washington-based media monitoring firm, tasks the company with analyzing "media trends" and measuring the "effectiveness" of communications and events by tracking subsequent coverage.

"The Rendon contract provides several analytic reports, to include characterization of specific topical stories/events as positive, negative or neutral, as well as whether media reporting is an accurate portrayal of the facts as we know them," the statement said.

The response came after Stars and Stripes first reported that the contractor had been recently updating "confidential profiles" of journalists' work.

According to examples obtained by FOX News, the effort has continued through this month. In one Rendon PowerPoint presentation, a couple dozen headlines are arranged based on the nationality of the news outlet. U.S. outlets include The Washington Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, USA Today, The Associated Press and The New York Times.

Each headline is rated with a plus sign, a negative sign or a capital "N," presumably for neutral.

The Stars and Stripes article cited examples that suggest the military might try to influence coverage deemed as negative.

The analysis said one newspaper reporter's negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" by giving him different quotes from officials. Another said a TV reporter's coverage was "subjective" and suggested guiding him toward "the positive work of a successful operation," according to the article.

The military statement Thursday said the contractor is not keeping dossiers on reporters, aside from basic biographical information and a "snapshot" of recent coverage topics.

A spokesman for Central Command told FOX News that the program was used only for "background information" on reporters and not considered when embed requests were made.

The Rendon Group also released a statement defending its practices.

"The information and analysis we generate is developed by quantifying these themes and topics and not by ranking of reporters. The analysis is not provided as the basis for accepting or rejecting a specific journalist's inquiries and TRG does not make recommendations as to who the military should or should not interview," the statement said.

But Stars and Stripes reported that the military was screening reporters for embed assignments based on past coverage. And an Aug. 14 memo from Rendon showed that past coverage is at least taken into account during the process. The memo, obtained by FOX News, included an analysis of an unidentified reporter's coverage as part of an effort to assess "expectations" for the embed. In this reporter's case, the coverage was deemed "straightforward," with an emphasis on military strategy and human-interest angles.

The military statement Thursday said the contract "provides a range of services" beyond the analysis of news reports. The contract covers the writing of press releases, speeches, briefing materials and other forms of communication.

Pentagon profiling Afghan embed journalists: report - 8/27

Macedonian Radio Television

The Pentagon has hired a private firm to investigate reporters seeking to embed with US troops in Afghanistan in order to find out how best to influence their coverage, a report said.

Stars and Stripes, a military newspaper partly funded by the Pentagon but editorially independent, said private contractors had been brought in by the US Defense Department to evaluate journalists, AFP reports.

The Rendon Group rates reporters' previous work as "positive," "negative" or "neutral," and offers advice on how their coverage might be influenced, the report said.

One file on a journalist seen by Stars and Stripes describes his coverage as "neutral to positive," but adds that negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" if he were given quotes from military officials.

Another file describes a television reporter as taking a "subjective angle," but advises that steering him towards "the positive work of a successful operation" could "result in favorable coverage."

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman insisted that the Defense Department does not rate journalists based on the favorability of their coverage.

The report comes as Washington worries about the increasing unpopularity of the war in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban is inflicting rising casualties on US and coalition troops.

According to a recent poll, 51 percent of Americans now say the war is not worth fighting.

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on Wednesday condemned the military's practices and said such embed screening "strips away any pretence that the army is interested in helping journalists to work freely."

"This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media," IFJ general secretary Aidan White said in a statement.

Pentagon caught lying about profiling journalists (updated Aug. 28) - 8/27

RawStory.com ...Ron Brynaert

The official newspaper for the Armed Forces has caught Pentagon officials spreading disinformation regarding reports on how they have allowed a private contractor to rate and profile embedded journalists.

As Raw Story reported on Monday, a public relations firm that organized the opposition to Saddam Hussein during the 1990s and "coerced" journalists during the run-up to the Iraq war is now vetting at least some embedded journalists in war zones to keep out those who have a history of writing negative stories about the US military.

"Any reporter seeking to embed with US forces is subject to a background profile by The Rendon Group, which gained notoriety in the run-up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq for its work helping to create the Iraqi National Congress," the military newspaper Stars & Stripes reported Monday.

The military journal partly funded by the Pentagon but editorially independent, is now reporting in a follow-up story, "Contrary to the insistence of Pentagon officials this week that they are not rating the work of reporters covering U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Stars and Stripes has obtained documents that prove that reporters' coverage is being graded as 'positive,' 'neutral' or 'negative.'"

One file on a journalist, who is on "the staff of one of America's pre-eminent newspapers" describes his coverage as "neutral to positive," but adds that negative stories "could possibly be neutralized" if he were given quotes from military officials.

Another file describes a television reporter as taking a "subjective angle," but advises that steering him towards "the positive work of a successful operation" could "result in favorable coverage."

However, neither journalist was outed by Stars and Stripes.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman insisted that the Defense Department does not rate journalists based on the favorability of their coverage.

"We are not doing that here," he told AFP.

More from the latest Stars and Stripes report:

"They are not doing that [rating reporters], that's not been a practice for some time - actually since the creation of U.S. Forces -Afghanistan" in October 2008, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters Monday. "I can tell you that the way in which the Department of Defense evaluates an article is

its accuracy. It's a good article if it's accurate. It's a bad article if it's inaccurate. That's the only measurement that we use here at the Defense Department."

In a statement e-mailed to Stars and Stripes, Rear Adm. Greg Smith, director of communications for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, wrote: "To imply journalists embedded with our forces only serve to highlight positive aspects of our mission slights the professional journalists who regularly embed with our forces and report what they experience, both good and bad."

But the Rendon profiles reviewed by Stars and Stripes prove otherwise. One of the profiles evaluates work published as recently as May, indicating that the rating practice did not in fact cease last October as Whitman stated.

And the explicit suggestions contained in the Rendon profiles detailing how best to manipulate reporters' coverage during their embeds directly contradict the Pentagon's stated policies governing the embed process.

Stars & Stripes has already experienced government censorship of war coverage first-hand. In June the paper was barred from embedding a report with the 1st Cavalry Unit in Mosul, Iraq, because it "'refused to highlight' good news in Iraq that the US military wanted to emphasize," the paper reported.

That news was met with condemnation from media watchdogs.

The report comes as Washington worries about the increasing unpopularity of the war in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban is inflicting rising casualties on US and coalition troops.

According to a recent poll, 51 percent of Americans now say the war is not worth fighting. (with AFP report)

US military in Afghanistan denies rating reporters – 8/27

Reuters ... Andrew Gray

* Newspaper says documents prove reporters being profiled

* Journalists' group protests, firm denies charge

WASHINGTON - The U.S. military in Afghanistan defended itself on Thursday against accusations that a company it employs was rating the work of reporters and suggesting ways to make their war coverage more positive.

Stars and Stripes, a newspaper for U.S. troops, said it had obtained documents prepared for the U.S. military by the Rendon Group, a Washington-based communications firm that graded journalists' work as "positive", "neutral" or "negative".

The newspaper, partly funded by the Pentagon but editorially independent, said the journalists' profiles included suggestions on how to "neutralize" negative stories and generate favorable coverage.

It published a pie chart which it said came from a Rendon report on the coverage of a reporter for an unidentified major U.S. newspaper until mid-May, judging it to be 83.33 percent neutral and 16.67 percent negative with respect to the military's goals.

The U.S. military command in Afghanistan said the Rendon Group provided a range of services including analysis of news coverage -- but it did not grade journalists.

"I've been here since June and we have never used any product from Rendon to rate specific journalists or to try and influence their reporting," said Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, director of communications for U.S. Forces Afghanistan.

The command said it compiled background information on journalists, including biographical details and recent topics they have covered, to prepare leaders for interviews.

It supplied a sample profile which included bullet-point summaries under headings such as "Background", "Coverage" and "Perspective, Style and Tone".

But it said it had never used such information to determine whether a reporter was granted the opportunity to embed with a military unit or interview a commander.

The Stars and Stripes report, published on Wednesday, sparked condemnation from organizations representing U.S. and international journalists.

"This profiling of journalists further compromises the independence of media," said Aidan White, general secretary of the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists.

"It strips away any pretense that the army is interested in helping journalists to work freely. It suggests they are more interested in propaganda than honest reporting."

Rendon said references to positive, negative or neutral coverage in its analysis referred to how the content affected military objectives. "Neutral to Negative" coverage could include reports of kidnappings and suicide bombings, it said.

"The information and analysis we generate is developed by quantifying these themes and topics and not by ranking of reporters," it said in a statement posted on its website. (Editing by Alan Elsner)

Pentagon: Reporter profiling under review – 8/28

Stars and Stripes, Mideast edition ... Kevin Baron

ARLINGTON, Va. — Under fire following revelations that a military command in Afghanistan is compiling profiles of reporters covering U.S. military operations, Pentagon officials acknowledged Thursday that they were reviewing the practice even as they maintained that they were not making use of "positive," "negative" and "neutral" grades assigned to reporters' work by a Pentagon contractor.

"For me, a tool like this serves no purpose and it doesn't serve me with any value," Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters as some of the affected war correspondents began demanding to see their secret military profiles.

Whitman told Pentagon reporters that he was inquiring about the issue, but he added that the Pentagon is not launching any formal inquiry to the matter.

"I haven't seen anything that violates any policies, but again, I'm learning about aspects of this as I question our folks in Afghanistan," Whitman said. "If I find something that is inconsistent with Defense Department values and policies, you can be sure I will address it."

Meanwhile, officials with U.S. Forces-Afghanistan acknowledged Thursday that the media profiles do exist, but they maintained that no favorability ratings are compiled.

"USFOR-A has only used this information to in part help assess performance in communicating information effectively to the public," USFOR-A spokesman Col. Wayne Shanks told Stars and Stripes in an e-mailed statement. "These reports do not 'rate' reporters or news outlets themselves, nor do we keep any reports on individual reporters other than personal information

name, passport or ID number, media outlet, etc. . . ."

Shanks also contended that the compiling of the reporters' profiles was halted in May of this year.

But those claims run counter to the actual media profiles, the existence of which Stars and Stripes revealed earlier this week. The profiles contain ratings and pie charts purporting to depict whether an individual reporter's work is "positive," "negative" or "neutral," as well as advice on how best to place a reporter with a military unit to ensure positive coverage and "neutralize" negative stories.

One Pentagon correspondent who requested and received her profile on Thursday said it included her current work up through July.

Whitman said he was continuing to inquire about the issue with media affairs operations downrange in Afghanistan and said that his team has never requested such profiles of reporters.

Stars and Stripes first reported on Monday about the existence of the reporter profiles, which are being compiled under a \$1.5 million Pentagon contract granted to The Rendon Group, a controversial Washington, D.C.-based public relations firm that previously helped the Bush administration make its case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Whitman has said repeatedly since Monday that the Rendon profiles were never used to determine whether a journalist's request to embed with U.S. forces would be approved or denied. But it remains unclear whether military commanders in Afghanistan have ever acted on Rendon's suggestions about how best to steer journalists toward "positive" coverage.

Military officials have also said that the Rendon profiles are only used to measure a reporter's accuracy. None of the actual profiles reviewed by Stars and Stripes, however, address questions of accuracy.

Files prove Pentagon is profiling reporters - 8/27

Stars and Stripes, Mideast edition ... Charlie Reed, Kevin Baron, Leo Shane III

WASHINGTON — Contrary to the insistence of Pentagon officials this week that they are not rating the work of reporters covering U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Stars and Stripes has obtained documents that prove that reporters' coverage is being graded as "positive," "neutral" or "negative."

Moreover, the documents — recent confidential profiles of the work of individual reporters prepared by a Pentagon contractor — indicate that the ratings are intended to help Pentagon image-makers manipulate the types of stories that reporters produce while they are embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

This pie chart was extracted from a report by The Rendon Group, evaluating the focus of coverage by a reporter for a major U.S. newspaper. It indicates the firm's conclusion that the reporter's coverage was 83.33 percent neutral and 16.67 percent negative in relation to the military's mission objectives.

One reporter on the staff of one of America's pre-eminent newspapers is rated in a Pentagon report as "neutral to positive" in his coverage of the U.S. military. Any negative stories he writes "could possibly be neutralized" by feeding him mitigating quotes from military officials.

Another reporter, from a TV station, provides coverage from a "subjective angle," according to his Pentagon profile. Steering him toward covering "the positive work of a successful operation" could "result in favorable coverage."

The new revelations of the Pentagon's attempts to shape war coverage come as senior Defense Department officials are acknowledging increasing concern over recent opinion polls showing declining popular American support for the Afghan war.

"The purpose of this memo is to provide an assessment of [a reporter from a major U.S. newspaper] ... in order to gauge the expected sentiment of his work while on an embed mission in Afghanistan," reads the preamble to one of the reporter profiles prepared for the Pentagon by The Rendon Group, a controversial Washington-based public relations firm.

Stars and Stripes reported on Monday that the Pentagon was screening reporters embedding with U.S. forces to determine whether their past coverage had portrayed the military in a positive light. The story included denials by U.S. military officials that they were using the reporters' profiles to determine whether to approve embed requests.

In the wake of that story, officials of both the Defense Department and Rendon went further, denying that the rating system exists.

"They are not doing that [rating reporters], that's not been a practice for some time - - actually since the creation of U.S. Forces - Afghanistan" in October 2008, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters Monday. "I can tell you that the way in which the Department of Defense evaluates an article is its accuracy. It's a good article if it's accurate. It's a bad article if it's inaccurate. That's the only measurement that we use here at the Defense Department."

In a statement e-mailed to Stars and Stripes, Rear Adm. Greg Smith, director of communications for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, wrote: "To imply journalists embedded with our forces only serve to highlight positive aspects of our mission slights the professional journalists who regularly embed with our forces and report what they experience, both good and bad."

The Rendon Group declared in a statement that "the information and analysis we generate is developed ... not by ranking of reporters."

But the Rendon profiles reviewed by Stars and Stripes prove otherwise. One of the profiles evaluates work published as recently as May, indicating that the rating practice did not in fact cease last October as Whitman stated.

And the explicit suggestions contained in the Rendon profiles detailing how best to manipulate reporters' coverage during their embeds directly contradict the Pentagon's stated policies governing the embed process.

"These ground rules recognize the inherent right of the media to cover combat operations and are in no way intended to prevent release of embarrassing, negative or derogatory information," reads the "News Media Ground Rules" issued by U.S. military officials for embedded reporters in Iraq.

Several professional journalists' groups as well as media ethicists criticized the Pentagon's attempts to rate and manipulate reporters. And at least one military official with knowledge of the profiling system has also begun to raise objections.

"It's troubling that the military is contracting a private PR firm, paid with U.S. taxpayer dollars, to profile individual reporters," said one servicemember who declined to be identified for fear of official retribution. "It shows utter contempt for the Constitution, which we in the service pledge our lives to defend."

Broadcast

CNN, Newsroom, 08/26/2009 14:52:28

Host: So you are a reporter and you want to be embedded with the military to show how America's blood and money are being spent. You have got to get past a PR firm first. One of their criteria wreaks more of George Orwell than George Washington. How much good news have you written about the military lately? Apparently that's part of how Rendon analyzes the media for its big five-sided client outside of DC. Rendon Group came under fire around the start of the Iraq war. Critics claim the Pentagon hired the firm to basically gin up support for the war. Rendon says it does grade how a subject is broadly covered by multiple media outlets and the Pentagon says commanders don't reject requests from reporters because their prior military reporting may have been negative. But here is what they don't say. Commanders take those marching orders from the PR firm. The question is, why is a PR firm beholden to a big client ultimately deciding what gets reported from the war?

WVUE-NO (FOX) - New Orleans, LA, 8/24/2009 9:19:57 PM

Host: The U.S. military denies it's allowing reporters access in Afghanistan based on whether their past reporting has been negative. The Stars and Stripes reported that a Washington public relations firm is screening journalists who want to embed with American troops. The newspaper says the Rendon group then gives the reporters a rating of negative, positive, or neutral. Rendon denies it grades individual reporters and the pentagon says there is no policy that stipulates that a reporter gets access based on what he or she wrote in the past.



Blogs

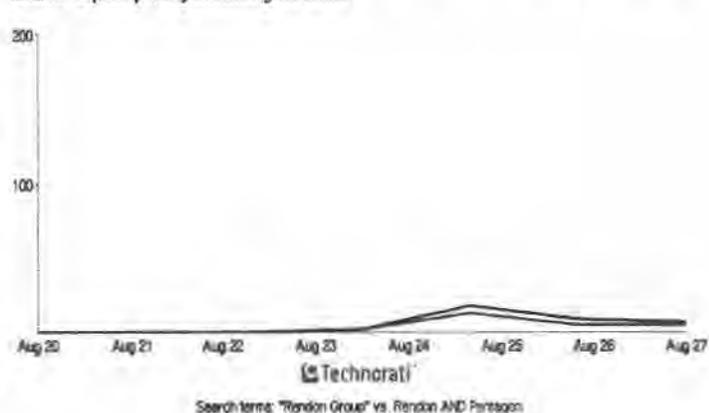
The Pentagon's Journalist-Vetting Program - 8/27

Washington Independent ... Spencer Ackerman

For years, reporters who embedded with the U.S. military in Iraq have traded rumors that the embed office had a blacklist for journalists whose work was unflattering. It generally takes months to work out embeds, a process that involves the submission of clips from the outset. Sometimes embeds fall through, leading to cynical grumbling and arched eyebrows. But no one ever proved that such a thing existed, and the talk remained at the level of bar-stool venting.

Then on Monday, Stars and Stripes reported that the Pentagon contracted the Rendon Group — a public relations firm that had made millions from the CIA by "creat[ing] the conditions for the removal of Hussein from power" in the media, according to an award-winning Rolling Stone profile — to vet embed-seeking journalists for "positive," "negative" or "neutral" coverage according to "mission objectives."

Number of posts per day containing the terms:



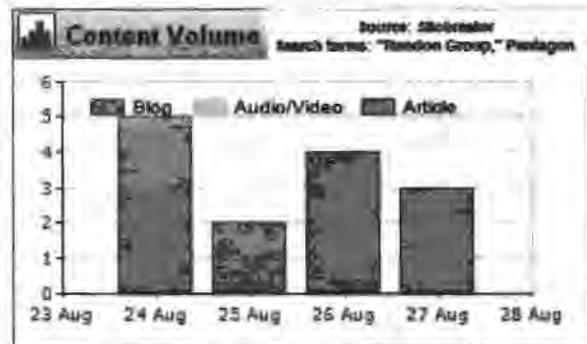
Pentagon Reporter-Screening Crisis Deepens – 8/26

Danger Room ... David Axe

The Pentagon denied that the ratings were used to screen embeds. Besides, the military stopped using the “positive,” “negative” and “neutral” labels in October, according to Pentagon spokesman Brian Whitman.

Now the Pentagon simply looks for accuracy in reporters’ stories, said Capt. Elizabeth Mathias, a military media handler in Kabul. “It’s so we know who we’re working with,” Mathias said.

Today Stars & Stripes fired back, quoting from leaked documents that show the military continues to use the “positive,” “negative” and “neutral” system. “One of the profiles [in the leaked documents] evaluates work published as recently as May, indicating that the rating practice did not in fact cease last October as Whitman stated,” the newspaper revealed.



PR firm screening reporters for Afghanistan embedding

On Deadline (USA Today blog) ... unattributed

Stars and Stripes reports that a U.S. public relations company involved with a discredited Iraqi exile group will screen journalists headed to Afghanistan to decide whether past coverage has portrayed the military positively.

Embeds: The Good, The Bad, and The Accurate – 8/24

The Kicker (Columbia Journalism Review blog) ... Liz Cox Barrett

According to the officer, no one has “been denied access to anyone because of what may or may not come out of their biography,” though, as Stars and Stripes’ Reed notes, “U.S. Army officials ... barred a Stars and Stripes reporter from embedding with a unit of the 1st Cavalry Division [in Iraq in June] because the reporter “refused to highlight” good news that military commanders wanted to emphasize.”

Twitter

Tweet: The Rendon Group is shameless. Dumped by the CIA under a cloud, yet DoD continues to shovel \$ to them. – 8/28

Tweet: Go ahead and ask the Rendon Group why they're "vetting" journalists for work in Afghaniscam. They do this for the Pentagon. – 8/28

Tweet: Notorious Rendon Group helping US military profile journalists before letting them embed – 8/28

Tweet: The Rendon Group is back, rating reporters' stories for the Pentagon with an eye towards manipulating coverage - Stars & Stripes reports. – 8/28

Tweet: Hope Pentagon is not vetting journalists via Rendon Group, which in past has defended practice as "commercial grade media analysis." – 8/28

Tweet: Military hires Rendon Group to find reporters that will portray military in a "positive light" – 8/25

Tweet: Obama considers that to be CHANGE? The Rendon Group would be a war advocacy group cause they get their big contracts in wartime. – 8/24