

Follow-up Media Coverage | "Rating" of Reporters by the Rendon Group
As of 1830

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Coverage on the reported "rating" of embedded correspondents was light Saturday, but discussed an array of topics, including the military's relationship with the media, the Pentagon's denial of reporter "ratings," and a few editorials criticizing the profiling of journalists. NPR's On the Media conducted interviews with Stars and Stripes Senior Editor Howard Witt and Lt. Cmdr. Christine Sidenstricker, military spokesperson for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Witt condemned the program, saying "things don't seem to be quite as innocent as the Pentagon is saying that they are." He also read from parts of two Rendon reports on journalists that he said pointed to the military's attempt to manipulate journalists. Lt. Commander Sidenstricker denied the allegations, saying that the military is not using the "positive, negative, neutral" labeling to influence reporters and it is not Department of Defense policy. She added "I think if you look at many of the reporters we've embedded, many, many of them are very critical of operations, and commanders, and the administration. The facts just do not support the idea that we are denying access as a matter of policy based on past coverage."

Full Text ArticlesReport Card – 8/29

NPR, On the Media 4:00 PM EST | Bob Garfield

Garfield: The news from Afghanistan this week was grim. With the deaths of 4 U.S. soldiers in a bombing incident, 2009 became the bloodiest year for NATO forces since Afghanistan operations began in late 2001. The resurgence of the Taliban and escalating violence led Joint Chiefs Chairman Michael Mullen to characterize the security situation as "serious and deteriorating." The Pentagon meanwhile persists in its attempts to have 2 wars portrayed in the best possible light. Stars and Stripes, the editorially independent newspaper serving the armed forces worldwide reported this week that the military is in effect screening journalists who wish to embed with troops, triggered in part by an interview on this program Stars and Stripes confirmed that a Washington PR firm has provided evaluations of reporters' relative degrees of positivity. Howard Witt is Sr. managing editor of Stars and Stripes and he joins me now. Howard, welcome to the show.

Witt: Thank you so much for having me.

Garfield: Summarize please the story you printed this week.

Witt: We ourselves have run into problems with the embed system. A couple of months ago one our reporters was barred from an embed in Mosul in Iraq and the stated reason from the Army Public Affairs people was because he failed to highlight good news and then with some further investigation last week and this week we came to find out that there is actual profiles that are commissioned of every reporter who is assigned or seeks to be embedded with the military. These profiles are done by this Washington based PR firm called the Rendon Group. And so these profiles basically look at a reporter's past work whether it's positive, negative, or neutral they lay it all out on a pie chart, give the reporter a rating, and then they also give some very specific recommendations as how best to manipulate that reporter's coverage in terms of the kind of places you might imbed that reporter. So it seems like a pretty dramatic attempt on the part of the military to steer this process.

Garfield: Now the military has told you that you are misunderstanding the role of the Randon Group, that it's simply to help commanders on the ground accommodate the needs of reporters. Do you buy that?

Witt: I know that's what they say but we're in possession of several of these profiles and they seem to go a lot further than that. They say things like "in light of so and so's past interest in covering the soldiers view of stories providing him the opportunity to cover the positive work of a successful operation could result in favorable coverage." Then they also said about a reporter from one of America's most preeminent newspapers they said, "the sentiment of his articles is generally neutral to positive. Given that neutral to positive sentiment one can expect so and so to produce coverage that is at least neutral in

sentiment and representative of the military point of view of events." They said the possible negative coverage that this reporter might provide "could possibly be neutralized by providing military official quotes about the topic..." So these things don't seem to be quite as innocent as the Pentagon is saying that they are.

Garfield: I want to get back to the experience that Stars and Stripes had with its own reporter Heath Druzin who had been embedded with a unit in Iraq and reapplied for another embed tour and was denied amidst some fairly nasty allegations by the Army.

Witt: They came up with a whole bunch of allegations. Many weeks after the fact no complaint about his coverage was ever raised with us at the time the stories were written but when he reapplied for an embed several months later with the same unit he was denied and when he and we pressed for an explanation we were given a whole bunch of different reasons. They ranged from he tried to use a computer when he wasn't authorized, he attempted to report on the names some dead soldiers before they were officially released by the Pentagon, he failed to highlight the good news about the unit's activities. We summarily and vigorously denied the basis of all these claims. For instance, it's our policy to never report the name of a deceased soldier before next of kin and the Army is officially made its announcement. We do that as matter of policy and also as a matter of morality. The idea that he failed to highlight good news, the specifics of that allegation as they were relayed to us was that he dared to talk to some actual Iraqis in Mosul and get their impression about whether they thought the American troops were a helpful presence there and he collected a whole bunch of quotes from people who said no they didn't think they were. And that infuriated the army commanders and appears to have been the real basis for why they denied the embed. And again we completely reject that the army has the right to do that and we wrote about it.

Garfield: Now, in a moment we're going to speak to a public affairs spokesman for the Army in Afghanistan and I have no doubt that she will say the fact that so much bad news has emanated from both Iraq and Afghanistan in stories by embedded reporters is proof that the military has only the best interests of reporters in mind, putting aside a couple of tempests in a tea pot. Is this a tempest in a tea pot?

Witt: You might say that reason that all that news got out might have been in spite of the military's attempts to suppress it but no, this is not a tempest in a tea pot. These profiles are being compiled apparently on every reporter who embeds. This morning over at the Pentagon all the military reporters were demanding to see their own profiles and told that for instance CNN's pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr got hers and was incensed. This is a systematic effort or at least has been on the part of the military to monitor and attempt to manipulate what reporters are doing.

Garfield: Now I think the general public may often misunderstand Stars and Stripes relationship with the military, that it is some sort of propaganda mouth piece, not understanding that it's editorially independent. Do you think the Pentagon itself sometimes doesn't understand that Stars and Stripes is not a house organ?

Witt: They absolutely misunderstand that. We're constantly getting complaints from commanders that we're some how not towing the party line and our polite but firm answer is no we're not and we never will. That is not our job. Our job is to be an independent source of news for the men and women who are risking their lives for America over seas.

Garfield: Howard, I appreciate your time. Thank you.

Witt: Thank you.

Garfield: Howard Witt is Senior Managing Editor of Stars and Stripes. Lt. Commander Christine Sidenstricker is spokesperson for the U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Lt. Commander welcome to the show.

Lt. Cmdr: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Garfield: The military told Stars and Stripes it hasn't vetted or graded reporters for at least a year. Stars and Stripes has documents that shows that the Rendon Group was grading reporters at least as recently as May. What's true?

Lt. Cmdr: There's actually a couple of things to correct even right there. We've never graded reporters and the information we get from Rendon doesn't do so. The information we contracted them to provide is basic biographical details and the past stories reporters have done. Now sometimes those do include a positive, negative, or neutral rating, which we do get. Frankly we don't use that information. One of the

premises of the Stars and Stripes story was that we take this information and then decide whether or not to embed or discover operations and that is flat out incorrect. That has never been Department of Defense policy and it has never been U.S. Forces in Afghanistan policy. And any time there have been incidents of individual public affairs officers making that mistake that has been corrected immediately.

Garfield: You know, if it's not meant to grade a reporter on how friendly he is potentially, or her, to the unit why pay an outside PR firm to create neutral, negative, and positive sentiment ratings to begin with?

Lt. Cmdr: That is a piece of information that they included in those reports but it's not the primary thing we asked for from Rendon. They are analyzing media coverage trends and that's not individual reporters, that's overall what's being reported on giving issues. Measuring the effectiveness of our own communications and also measuring the effectiveness of our events by tracking, which are covered by news media and which aren't. It also includes whether media reporting is accurate. That information we're much more interested in. The positive, neutral and negative I can tell you I've never actually seen used for anything here.

Garfield: Well, then let me ask you about the Heath Druzin case. He is the Stars and Stripe's reporter who covered operations of the first calvary division's third heavy brigade combat team in February and March, but was not permitted to rejoin the unit for another reporting tour because "according to his dossier, despite the opportunity to visit areas of the city where Iraqi Army leaders, soldiers, national police, and Iraqi police displayed commitment to partnership Mr. Druzin refused to highlight any of this news.

Lt. Cmdr: That was in Iraq, correct?

Garfield: That was in Iraq and it was from a public affairs officer. Is that not a smoking gun? That demonstrates the military is seeking to manipulate coverage.

Lt. Cmdr: Absolutely not, let me say that. DOD policy is absolutely not to try to shape coverage by denying access to reporters who don't portray operations favorably. I can tell you in every instance that I've seen like that has happened the command has said that is not how we operate. We are not here to evaluate past coverage and deny or grant access based on that.

Garfield: Lt. Commander, if the commanders were not expected to act on the information provided by Rendon Group, then why are they giving the information to begin with? It would seem to me that the commanders in the field have wars to fight and should have nothing to do with the embedded reporters other than protecting operational security. Why do they have any kind of PR mission at all?

Lt. Cmdr: There is no PR mission. The Public Affairs mission for the Department of Defense is to facilitate access to information to the extent that we can do so without compromising security. If we truly had a policy of not embedding reporters with a history of negative coverage, you wouldn't see the coverage you see. I think if you look at many of the reporters we've embedded, many, many of them are very critical of operations, and commanders, and the administration. The facts just do not support the idea that we are denying access as a matter of policy based on past coverage.

Garfield: Except when the facts do support that idea.

Lt. Cmdr: I don't think the facts ever support that idea.

Garfield: So my final question for you is this, then, If the Rendon Group is providing information on reporters including their historical accuracy in theater and if mistakes have happened, do you not see a direct connection between the availability of these dossiers and the tendency for public affairs officers and operational commanders to act against the written policy?

Lt. Cmdr: I don't. It really...the facts just don't support that. We as a matter of course provide great field access to reporters wishing to embed and the policy is very clear. Public Affairs officers are definitely aware of it; when mistakes are made they are dealt with.

Garfield: Alright. Lt. Commander, thank you very much.

Lt. Cmdr: Thank you.

Garfield: Lt. Commander Christine Sidenstricker is a spokesperson for the U.S. forces in Afghanistan. We spoke to her from Kabul. As of Friday, according to the Pentagon, the reporter profiling program was "under review, no formal inquiry into the program has been launched."

Pentagon: A flack attack on independent coverage – 8/28
Boston Globe Editorial

The American public is sacrificing billions of dollars and an increasing number of its young people's lives in the war in Afghanistan. It deserves to be kept informed about the conflict through the work of the best journalists the media can assign there - not just reporters who pass muster with the Department of Defense.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates should end forthwith the Pentagon's contract with a public relations firm that grades reporters seeking to be embedded with US forces on how positive or negative their previous dispatches on the military have been. A spokesman for the Defense Department said the reviews were not used to exclude journalists. But, according to the Stars and Stripes newspaper, the military denied a request to work with an Army unit in Iraq by one of its correspondents who had "refused to highlight" good news on which commanders wanted to focus.

The Washington-based firm that does the reviews, The Rendon Group, was instrumental during the Bush administration in building public support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As part of a \$1.5 million contract, The Rendon Group now grades reporters on the good-news quotient in their stories.

Journalism in a war zone is difficult enough without having to worry about being ranked by highly paid PR flacks back in Washington. In Gates's laudable effort to curb wasteful defense spending, this outlay should be the easiest cut of all.

US Military In Afghanistan Denies Rating Reporters – 8/28
Reuters Alan Elsner

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. military in Afghanistan defended itself 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 "neutralise" negative stories and generate favourable 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 under a \$1.5 million (921,330 pound) one-year contract, 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 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 pretence 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.

US military acknowledges keeping tabs on reporters' work 8/28
AFP

WASHINGTON — The US Army in Afghanistan admitted Thursday to keeping files on journalists and classifying reporting on the war as positive, negative and neutral, but insisted reporters had never been denied access on the basis of past reporting.

The Pentagon distanced itself from the practices revealed by the newspaper Stars and Stripes.

"A tool like this serves no purpose and for me doesn't provide any value," said Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman. "As I've said before, the metric we use at the Department of Defense to rate a story is based on whether or not the story is accurate."

US forces in Afghanistan acknowledged in a statement that it uses public relations group Rendon for "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."

"These reports do not 'rate' reporters or news outlets themselves, nor do we keep any reports on individual reporters other than personal information used in the accreditation process, i.e. name, passport or ID number, media outlet, etc....," a military statement said.

Stars and Stripes, a publication funded by the Pentagon but with an independent editorial mandate, said the files on journalists were aimed at determining how to influence their reporting while embedded with a military unit.

"We have used background information, which typically includes basic biographical information about the reporter and a snapshot of what they have been covering recently, to prepare leaders for interviews as any public affairs office might prepare for any media engagement," the army said.

But it said the army "has never denied access to any reporter based upon their past stories."

The news comes against the backdrop of an increasingly unpopular war in Afghanistan. A recent survey found that 51 percent of those Americans surveyed did not believe the war was worth fighting.

Military Screens Journalists Before Granting Interviews, – 8/28
Tapped | Tara McKelvey

In recent articles, a *Stars and Stripes* reporter has claimed that officials screen reporters before allowing them to interview people in the military or embed with a unit in Iraq or Afghanistan, and that they have been accepting or rejecting journalists' requests based on whether or not their previous coverage has been favorable to the military.

Defense and military officials acknowledge that they use assessments provided by a private contractor, the Rendon Group, to learn more about a reporter's background. Finding out about a journalist, and reading their previous work, before they come for an interview is simply doing due diligence, and that is something that journalists expect. Nevertheless, as *The Washington Post* reports, some people have claimed that the military has turned reporters down because of stories they have written.

Officials, however, deny that "the analysis has been used to exclude journalists from embedding with U.S. military units in combat zones or to bar them from interviewing military personnel." In fact, officials *have* told journalists they could not interview certain people in the military – I know, because it happened to me. Last September, I was planning to visit Fort Huachuca, Arizona, and interview people who were learning how to become interrogators, and I spoke with **Tanja Linton**, a media relations officer in the Fort Huachuca Public Affairs Office, about the visit. I was very much looking forward to it.

Then, not long before I was scheduled to leave Washington, I got an email from Linton: The subject heading said the following: "Visit to Fort Huachuca cancelled." In her email, dated September 15, 2008, she wrote: "In preparing for your visit to Fort Huachuca, we had the opportunity to do some more research and learned that you authored *Monsterring: Inside America's Policy of Secret Interrogations and Torture in the Terror War* and edited *One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers*. This raised concerns about how our Soldiers would be portrayed and caused us to take a closer look at your original request."

I was surprised – and disappointed. I had thought that the fact that I had an understanding of the subject of U.S. interrogations and had written about them in my book *Monsterring* -- which chronicles the Abu Ghraib scandal, received a full-page review on *The New York Times Book Review*, and was praised by one of the Pentagon's top public-affairs officials on Amazon -- would have put me in a strong position for the interviews that I had planned on doing. Instead, I was barred. I'm not sure what was said between Linton and the other people at Fort Huachuca about my upcoming visit, but the conversations did not go very well, at least from my point of view, because of the cancellation. I also wondered who was involved in the

decision, particularly since Maj. Gen. **Barbara Fast**, who was the top intelligence officer in Iraq during the Abu Ghraib scandal, serves as an intelligence commander at Fort Huachuca.

Ultimately, the decision that the Fort Huachuca officials made to cancel the visit seemed very small-town-official-like: We don't like something you wrote, and so we won't talk to you. It also seemed below the Army. Most of the people whom I have worked with in the public-affairs offices have been extraordinarily professional and helpful, and I have learned a great deal about the military from them. My experience with the public-affairs office of Fort Huachuca, however, only confirms the accusations against the military, showing that it attempts to choose only those journalists who will write positive stories about them.

Pentagon: Reporter profiling under review 8/27
Stars and Stripes | 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.

Army focuses on often stormy media-military ties - 8/27

The Associated Press / John Milburn

FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan. — A reporter died with George Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn, but the days of such a close kinship between journalists and military officers seem long gone.

The media-military relationship is often contentious enough that the Army's war college devoted three days this week to consider and discuss ways to improve it even though no official military doctrine exists to foster good working relationships.

"We're not enemies, but we're not exactly allies, either," two-time Pulitzer Prize winner John Burns of The New York Times said Wednesday during one of the sessions hosted by the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

It was the seventh symposium by the institute, but the first to focus on media relations.

Burns, the Times' former Baghdad bureau chief, said war correspondents depend on the military to give the access to the front lines. There's potential for the relationship to go bad, but the military is within its rights to question a reporter's motives.

"We need you guys. We can't cover these wars without your help," Burns said.

That relationship has increasingly been a rocky one. The three-day symposium comes as the U.S. military in Afghanistan has acknowledged that it pays a private company to produce profiles on journalists covering the war. Recent stories in the Stars and Stripes newspaper said journalists were being screened by Washington-based public relations firm, The Rendon Group, under a \$1.5 million contract with the military.

Military officials have denied that the information is used to decide which media members travel with military units. But the International Federation of Journalists and others have complained about the policy saying it compromises the independence of media.

Tom Curley, chief executive of The Associated Press, has criticized the military for imposing tough restrictions on journalists seeking to give the public truthful reports about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Curley, who did not attend the Fort Leavenworth symposium, met with Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV, a former U.S. military spokesman in Iraq, earlier this year before giving a speech at the University of Kansas where he said the news industry must negotiate a new set of rules for covering war.

Since then, the AP has had several meetings and exchanges with top Army leaders, Curley said.

"We have found common ground on major points and are looking at a range of specific situations involving access-to-battlefield events," Curley said Friday. "The conversations have been both enlightening and encouraging."

Many in the audience at the symposium were majors at the Army's Command and General Staff College, where officers are required to improve their media acumen before they graduate by writing blog postings and conducting interviews.

Caldwell instituted the requirements as a means to change the post-Vietnam era culture toward the media and build stronger relationships shortly after he took command of the college in 2007.

"Ultimately, we each have a responsibility to the American people," Caldwell said. "We can work with the media to reach each of our objectives. They're not opposites, they are one in the same."