

DEFENCE REPORTING IN INDIA: GIVE THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY MUST HAVE

A study of changing trends of information disbursement by Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, Government of India post Kargil Operation.

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Introduction:

In an age of instant global communication, governments have refined their public diplomacy; particularly in the way defence issues are covered in the media, to market their version of events effectively to their domestic as well as the international public. Indeed, ignorance and misinformation are far more dangerous for the military than is informed reporting, however critical in tone. But the media need help here. Because the press is fragmented, competitive, sometimes ignorant of military realities, and constantly whiplashed between the demands of the market and those of journalistic ethics, the quality of coverage of military events is inevitably uneven at best. The tendency of unprepared reporters, charging from crisis to crisis, unaware of the issues at stake or of how the military functions, is to frame complex matters in simplistic ways. For its part, the military owes access to information both to media and the Indian people. Furthermore, it needs to get its story out—for the military will be competing with other groups, and enemies, eager to put their “spin” on events. To do this, it needs the media.

Abstract:

This study examined the coverage of matters relating to defence in Indian press and the influence of the changing trends in information disbursement by Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, Government of India. The timeline taken is post Kargil operation which means 1999 July to 2010.

The focus was on the of the information given by Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry Of Defence, Government of India and its stations at various formations from all parts of the country, on the Indian English press coverage of matters related to defence of the nation.

The study brought to light the role played by reportage in communicating peace time activities of the defence forces and analyse the effect of ministry statements on controversial and routine subjects covered by the magazines. It also reinforced the theory that a picture

speaks more than a thousand words, by analysing the pictures released by the DPR and the PROs functioning under the directorate.

The use of graphics in conveying the message in a defence story is also very important in today’s defence journalism and how often stories are assisted by charts, graphs, sketched re-creations in the newspapers and magazines under study, was also a focus of research .

Statement of need:

In an era when defence not only makes headlines but also takes away the majority chunk of the annual budget of the country, government announces the mother of all deals, ever volatile borders and not-so-friendly neighbours, defence cannot remain a holy cow. Matters military matter to every citizen of the country and is the right of the ex-chequer to know how his taxed income is spent on keeping the nation secure. The message is important but so is the messenger. And thus it is essential to study how this message is formed by the messenger and what influences the content of the message. In this research study the message is the defence coverage, messengers are the four newspapers and magazines chosen and the source of this message is the Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, Government of India. It is the influence of DPR which needed to be studied and understood, as the basis of maximum defence reportage are the MOD press releases, events, exercises and press conferences.

The influence of defence coverages in these national news media is visible many a times on defence relations between two nations, sale and purchase of arms, ammunition and equipment, policy decisions, R&D in defence, international polity and security operations. Hence in the current era this makes the defence coverage in these magazines all the more important and the influence of the primary source of information a very important study. Hence the study is very timely.

Objectives:

- To identify the subjects, formations and activities covered by DPR in peace and war times.
- To analyse the levels of the disbursement of official press releases and informations in other formats by the DPR, MOD, GOI.

Research questions:

- What is the best way to collect the DPR releases?
- What is the right methodology to analyse these releases?

Hypothesis:

- Post Kargil years have seen a gallop in DPRs activity.
- Too much importance is being given to official defence information.

Methodology:**1. Content analysis**

This was the main methodology of research in this study. To study the content data had to be collected from various sources as explained below.

2. Data Collection Techniques

- Clippings files and web coverages of the DPR, PROs of Army, Navy, Airforce and DRDO
- Interviews of defence journalists, Senior defence officials posted in DPR
- Press and photo releases of Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, Government of India which are archived with the Press Information Bureau.
- Past coverages of events covered by DPR taken from their stock with permission.

3. Research Design:

Research design for this study is quasi-experimental. It is a mix of quantitative and qualitative content analysis after data collection and preparation.

It is a mixture of explorative, descriptive and diagnostic research. Different aspects of the problem are considered and eventually one arrived at the suitable design which minimizes biases and maximizes the reliability of the data collected.

Of Information to the News Organisations By Department Of Public Relations, Ministry Of Defence, Government Of India

News releases issued by DPR from 1999 to 2010

Year	No. of press releases
1999	10 to 14 in a fortnight
2000	6 to 8 in a fortnight
2001	4 to 5 in a fortnight
2002	4 to 5 in a fortnight
2003	4 to 6 in a fortnight
2004	5 to 7 in a fortnight
2005	5 to 8 in a fortnight
2006	6 to 8 in a fortnight
2007	7 to 9 in a fortnight
2008	8 to 9 in a fortnight
2009	9 to 10 in a fortnight
2010	9 to 10 in a fortnight

Pictures released by DPR from 1999 to 2010

Year	No. of photo releases
1999	1 to 2 in a fortnight
2000	1 to 2 in a fortnight
2001	2 to 3 in a fortnight
2002	2 to 3 in a fortnight
2003	2 to 4 in a fortnight
2004	3 to 4 in a fortnight
2005	3 to 5 in a fortnight
2006	4 to 6 in a fortnight
2007	4 to 7 in a fortnight
2008	5 to 7 in a fortnight
2009	6 to 8 in a fortnight
2010	6 to 8 in a fortnight

Press conferences organized by DPR from 1999 to 2010

Year	No. of Press conferences
1999	12
2000	10
2001	9
2002	9
2003	9
2004	9
2005	9
2006	9
2007	10
2008	10
2009	11
2010	11

Coverages of special days and events by DPR

Year	No. of special days and events
1999	27
2000	22
2001	24
2002	26
2003	25
2004	26
2005	28
2006	31
2007	29
2008	32
2009	36
2010	38

One to one interviews scheduled by DPR

Year	No. of interviews
1999	23
2000	16
2001	18
2002	15
2003	19
2004	21
2005	18
2006	22
2007	17
2008	19
2009	24
2010	28

Media Visits organised by DPR to cover exercises, formations and installations

Year	No. of Visits
1999	17
2000	13
2001	11
2002	14
2003	12
2004	15
2005	14
2006	12
2007	11
2008	14
2009	15
2010	14

DPR Sourced Information In News Organisations Studied: A Content Analysis

1. News releases issued by DPR from 1999 to 2010: The number of press releases issued every fortnight by DPR sees a sudden fall in 2000 from 1999 and then again a fall in 2001. And then a steady rise from 2002 to 2010.

2. Pictures released by DPR from 1999 to 2010: Photo release sees a rise but not very steep as plateaus exist in them for every two years till 2002. And thenceforth it sees a steady rise. The minimum number of pictures released remains same for a couple of years and then an increase in number is seen in the third year.

3. Press conferences organized by DPR from 1999 to 2010: The number of press conferences organized takes a fall in 2000 and again in 2001. Henceforth it remains steady till 2006. From 2007 it again increases but in a slow and steady manner.

4. Coverages of special days and events by DPR: After a fall in the number of special events covered in 2000 there is a steady but slow increase visible right upto 2011.

5. One to one interviews scheduled by DPR: A steep fall in the number of interviews organized by DPR was visible in 2000. And since then it has been a story of a little less and a little more every year making it stable requirement by the media.

6. Media Visits organised by DPR to cover exercises, formations and installations: A steep fall in the number of media visits organized by DPR was visible in 2000. And since then it has been a nearly stable number with no steady rise.

7. Streams covered by DPR in its content disbursement :DPR through its releases covers the Army, Navy, Air force, Defence Research & Development Organisation(DRDO), Joint Service training establishments , Academies like National Defence Academy, Pune, Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, Air force Academy, Hyderabad, Indian Naval Academy, Ezhimala, Officers Training Academy, Chennai and many other such establishments run by the armed forces. These releases also cover all the non-classified activities of the Ministry of Defence, Minister of Defence, Minister of Defence for State, the offices of the three

chiefs, Secretary of Defence , Secretary of Defence Production and Scientific Advisor to Minister of Defence. Also the major coverage include activities of the various formations starting from the battalions to the different commands.

8. Subjects covered by DPR in its releases: The releases issued by DPR cover statements of ministers, chiefs and diplomats, raising days of combatant formations, non-combatant units and higher establishments, acquisitions, procurement of arms and ammunition, floating of Request for Information and Request for Proposal in deals, visits of foreign military delegations, visits of Indian military delegations to friendly countries, action at the borders, discoveries and inventions by DRDO, individual service exercises, joint-services exercises, Indian forces' participation in international and bilateral exercises. Appointments, change of guard, announcements , welcomes and farewell are also covered in these releases. Aid-to-civil authorities in times of natural calamities and man made disasters, adventure and sports activities, attachment of the services formations to United Nations and other such important bodies are also talked about in DPR releases.

9. Language used by DPR releases: The language used by DPR for writing its releases is simple but the use of defence terminology is extensive. So this makes it imminent for the defence journalists to be adept in defence usage and have a thorough understanding of the armed forces and defence organisations.

10. Analysis of the defence information conveyed: The theory of give the people what they must have is followed extensively by the DPR in writing its releases. No classified information is made available to the media via these releases. MOD, Government of India believes in self-censorship and disburses only that information which it feels is safe for nation security to circulate.

11. Analysis of pictures : Pictures are all high resolution and apart from sending some as a part of releases most of these are archived in the photo section of the Press Information Bureau website www.pib.nic.in date wise. These pictures are taken by the official photographers of the DPR and the Photo Division of the MOD.

12. Analysis of graphics: Very few graphics have been issued by the DPR over the years except in of sheer indispensability. From 1999 to 2010 such graphics is-

sued have been the design of the indigenous submarine Arihant, maps during 1999 of the Kargil Operation Vijay and some tables and charts of defence budget distribution every year.

Inference:

1. News releases issued by DPR from 1999 to 2010: Operation Vijay more popularly called the Kargil war in 1999 saw the DPR in its maximum activity. Despite the fact that the daily briefings were done by MEA , DPR had its briefings and press releases issued during the operation constantly. Once the war was over the frequency of these releases decreased and kept doing so till 2001 . The reason for this could be a sudden dip in military action at the borders and not very much peace time activity. Then a steady rise in issuing of press releases from 2002 to 2010 is proof that activity of the peace time defence forces in India saw an increase and all the information had to be given to the masses and hence had to be disbursed to the media.

2. Pictures released by DPR from 1999 to 2010: Photo releases should have been in good number during the Kargil war but since the non-digital technology did not permit a lot of pictures to be developed not many photo releases were issued. This continued till digital photography came and DPR started taking pictures of events regularly and started releasing them to the press a higher frequency. Hence a steady rise is seen in the photo disbursement from 2002 onwards.

3. Press conferences organized by DPR from 1999 to 2010: The Kargil war year saw press conferences being held in quite a few numbers. Then the reasons to break information to the press took a fall in both 2000 and 2001. Then from 2002 onwards there was a steady rise in occasions when press was invited to share. These events remained practically same every year till 2006. But sudden splurge in activity was seen in MOD and the armed forces and DPR wanted the press to cover them. This saw a steady increase in the press conferences organized till 2010.

4. Coverages of special days and events by DPR: Once more Kargil year saw a good number of special days and events covered by the press on invitation from the DPR. A sudden increase in efforts towards developing a strong military-media relationship seemed evident and it started becoming obvious that the ministry wanted to keep the press in the loop of its general and non-classified activities.

5. One to one interviews scheduled by DPR: 1999 saw the press seeking interviews of the three chiefs, ministers of defence, soldiers fighting at the borders and officials of the MOD. Post Kargil war the requirement for interviews lessened and later on became a staple requirement for special days and events only.

6. Media Visits organised by DPR to cover exercises, formations and installations: Operation Vijay saw media being ferried to the war zone in groups and special permission was given to journalists and cameramen to cover the war. Once the war ended such trip lessened in number and this drop became a standard and stable figure. Now media is taken to see special exercises a number of times in the year by DPR but this is neither very frequent nor very regular.

Conclusions:

The Directorate of Public Relations (DPR) acts as the gatekeeper of information. It is the only authorised channel of communication for disseminating information about the programmes, policies and activities of the Ministry of Defence and all establishments of the MoD including the armed forces.

Currently, the Directorate of Public Relations (Defence) a part of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) interacts with the media on matters related to defence forces. Through its civilian and defence services officers spread out through-out the country, it indulges in PR exercises during peacetime. However, although its raison d'etre is the defence forces, the representation of the defence forces is only at the Lieutenant Colonel/ Major and equivalent level; no specific corps/regiment/branch for these officers exists and they could be from any branch, service or arm. In contrast to their junior ranks, the Directorate is headed by an officer from the Indian Information Service who is of the rank of Director (equivalent to a Brigadier in the Army or a Director in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS)). However, the current incumbent is of the rank of additional Principal Information Officer (equivalent to a Major General of the Indian Army or a Joint Secretary of the IAS). Within the MOD, the Directorate comes under the Joint Secretary (P&C). In short, the bureaucracy has a complete and unquestionable hold over the organisation for handling of the media on military affairs.

DPR prepares and operates contingency plans for publicity during operations and emergencies. It also

provides feedback on the reaction in the media to the programmes, policies and activities of the ministry and armed forces, and analyse the various angles of the stories. DPR acts as media advisor to the Ministry of Defence including the armed forces.

Limitations & recommendations:

Besides this attitudinal reform, a major revamp of the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), which acts as a link between the services and the media, is a must. It has to become a genuine and dynamic public relations organisation and not remain content with issuing 'bland' handouts riddled with officialese and conduct media parties to ceremonial functions. It has to acquire the ability and resources for gauging public opinion, conducting opinion research and taking proper anticipatory action.

The status of the Director of Public Relations is extremely relevant, as he/she should be a person of sufficient standing and seniority to have sat in important decision-making meetings, so that what the spokesperson says is convincing and authentic. The Director is an officer of the Indian Information Service and his rank was recently upgraded to the equivalent of a Joint Secretary in the IAS or Maj Gen in the Army. Despite this elevation, the DPR still comes under the control of JS (G) in the Ministry of Defence who has powers to overrule all or any proposals emanating from the DPR. The Director has not been authorised to give briefings on operations in J&K, and disturbed areas of northeastern states. Nor can he give any information to the press regarding procurements, DRDO projects or developments in the neighbourhood like missile tests by Pakistan. Thus the very purpose of the elevation is being nullified.

The authority of the DPR should be matching that of the JS who heads the External Publicity Division. He has two Director level officers working under him. He also sits on important policy meetings and thus can conduct briefings with authority on subjects like armament acquisitions, missile tests, strategic relationships with major powers and so on. A fairly definitive indication of JS(XP)'s authority was evident during the Kargil conflict when he was allowed to hold daily briefings for the media alongwith an official each from the Air Force and the Army.

Another problem is that of selection of PROs, who work under the DPR. Uptil 1992, there was a three

member committee, comprising JS (G), Principal Information Officer and the DPR, which selected officers for posting to the directorate. This practice has been abandoned and postings are made on an ad hoc basis and changes often take place without giving notice to the press. This selection committee needs to be revived because far from posting experienced and knowledgeable persons from the Army, Navy and Air Force, the respective HQs preferred to send officers with virtually no knowledge or flair for PR or no thorough understanding of the Services themselves. These postings carried no value in the career chart of the deputed officers, who stood little or no chance of getting promotion.

Previously, PROs, before postings, were given the benefit of familiarization training of about six weeks, which included attachment with news agencies or leading newspapers. There used to be a curriculum for such exposures. This practice, which has been fading out over the years, should be imparted a new impetus with the would-be PROs being given insights into the working of the media, understanding their needs and operational compulsions and so on, besides being given media orientation courses at institutions like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

In some concerned prominent quarters the suggestion has been made that the directorate, which is currently a wing of the MoD, should be placed under the respective chiefs of staff. Till independence the DPR was under the Army. It is argued that with the DPR once again becoming a part of the services, there would be smoother execution of the media projection policies.

An innovation since 1996 is the establishment of the Army Liaison Cell which has virtually taken over the task of providing information on operational matters. It is headed by a Brigadier at Army HQ in South Block who functions directly under the Vice Chief of Army Staff and hence enjoys better access to all formation commands in the country, which the DPR does not have. In a way it is an encouraging development, but the protocol between the Cell and the media should be clearly defined in the larger interest of defence media coverage.²⁴ Also, the Cell needs to be relocated as it is housed in a prohibited area to which the media has no easy access.

Devolution of information dissemination system should be the key to the military's interaction with the media.

At present there is little interaction between the staff and the media at the command, corps and divisional level. Any press release which has to be issued is required to be cleared by successively higher authorities. It may come as a surprise to many that even at formation/unit level one is not clear as to whose staff function it is to deal with the media—General Staff (GS) Branch or Adjutant's (A) Branch. Thus when it comes to ceremonial occasions such as raising days, it is the A Branch which issues press releases, and when it is an operational matter it is the GS Branch. There is therefore a need to designate an official army spokesman at the level of command, corps, divisional and independent brigade headquarters. These spokesmen will act as a single-window agency for military-media interaction.

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