Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting: A Qualitative Analysis of Civil Public Relations and Military Public Affairs through Professional Construct

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Abstract

This exploratory study evaluates the U.S. Army's public affairs and corporate public relations communities in an attempt to determine where organizational and institutional communicators place in terms of formal recognition and trust among society through the construct of profession building. Findings suggest that though there is a desire for both work communities to be viewed as professions, neither are there yet according to parameters traditionally associated with such societal standing over the past two centuries. According to traditional attributes of the formal profession, military communicators appear closer to achieving professional legitimacy—in a technical sense—than those who work in public relations. However, those who work in public relations appear to perform public engagement work more effectively than their military counterparts.

Keywords: profession, professionalism, military, public relations, public affairs

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Executive Summary

Why This Research Matters to the Public Relations Profession

If a work community is to aspire to become a profession, it is important to have a realistic concept of what a profession is and the role of the professional in responsibly stewarding it. This is especially important for those who work in the realms of public influence, as societies around the world are holding their governments and institutions in lower regard. Organizational and institutional communicators practice roles that come with tremendous responsibility to serve the public and yet advocate on behalf of the interests that sign their paychecks. To successfully walk this line requires a deep commitment to the truth, morally-informed ethics, and a deep well of personal courage.

Societies cease to be stable when their institutions fail the test of public trust. Those who communicate for organizations, institutions and governments share in the success or failure of those entities. Their actions, or inactions, can contribute to the resilience of a society, or play a role in undermining it. According to traditional understandings of what it means to be a profession or professional, those who endeavor to ascribe such status are more likely to understand and appreciate the weight and responsibility of their role in representative society than those who do not.

Key Findings

Findings suggest that the duties of military public affairs practitioners generally reflect a closer representation of meeting the requirements of a formal profession—defined by specified attributes specified in the context of institutional theory—as compared to their civil counterparts in non-military, public-facing organizational and institutional communication settings. It also appears that non-military communicators are more effective at their work of engagement than their military counterparts. However, there is an element of comparing apples to oranges in comparing professional models of military communication to non-military organizational and institutional communication. Military public affairs officials arrive at some attributes of professionalism by coincidence of being subject to standardized training regimens, and being under governance of an institutional code of law and regulation to which their civil counterparts are not. Yet communities of organizational and institutional communication lack a shared model of what constitutes a profession of organizational and institutional communicators, leaving the definition and aspirations of the concept largely imaginative.

Implications for Public Relations Practice

To build toward a common understanding of communication professionalism requires a shared understanding of how civil and military communities of organizational and institutional communicators understand the relevant attributes that constitute professions in historical context. Public relations scholarship consulted for this study concentrates primarily on areas of ethics and education, with the focus assigned to other criteria generally associated with profession building as a secondary emphasis. This paper is an attempt to build toward a bridge between public relations research and the wider body of scholarship pertaining to professionalism. This line of inquiry intends to offer a starting point for those who work in public-facing communication on behalf of client, corporation, or institution to reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of their work and consider how to advance the role of communication as a vocational community of strategic impact.

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Introduction

On November 6, 2020 the U.S. Army released the *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Committee*, an investigation commissioned by then Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy to investigate the command climate at a major military installation that experienced a crisis in trust following high profile incidents of sexual assault and deaths associated with the base. The report noted eight separate findings, among them that Fort Hood's public affairs capabilities were inadequate to the task of managing public engagement through a crisis of national proportions, due to an inadequate number of available public affairs staff and lack of relationship with nearby communities (Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020). The Fort Hood report is a rare institutional acknowledgement that the Army lacks effective public engagement capabilities that are critical for navigating institutional crisis. This is a documented issue and not an infrequent topic of conversation among those who observe how the military manages public affairs (Britzky, 2021; Carr, 1996; Esper, 2019; Gercken, 2007; Jones, et al. 2009; Means, 2005; Nye, 2002; Opperman, 2012).

Crisis management is a skill that those who work in organizational communication must master, both with respect to helping an organization through a crisis, and even more importantly how to prevent a crisis to begin with by exerting ethical influence over organizational decision-making (Scanlon, 2017). With the confluence of traditional mediums of mass communication, and the democratization of information reach enabled by social media and mobile technology, how a person or organization communicates can be associated with levels of risk on par with issues handled in years past mainly by members of the formally recognized professions, such as medicine, law, and the clergy. Those who practice in these fields have widely been acknowledged to be members of professions since the industrial age (Fischer, 2000).

Defining Professions

At the 2019 U.S. Army Public Affairs Forum, then Secretary of the Army, Dr. Mark Esper referred to public affairs officers (PAO), those charged with the military institution's public engagement, as "communication professionals" (Esper, 2019). Fields of work that are afforded the status of *profession* "are set apart from other career paths by their status and public respect which allow them a proportionate degree of autonomy" (Meyer & Leonard, 2013, p. 376). To be part of such vocational community enables a certain status. Sowell (1995) would refer to those afforded such status as 'The Anointed,' members of society who hold special standing based on their affiliation with professions or institutions. Attributes traditionally associated with fields of professional work include vocations that: provide a public service, rely on unique knowledge, control access to the work community, and hold members to ethical standards (Ingesson, 2018; Nuciari 1994). More specifically, the criteria that set vocational fields apart as professions generally includes the following:

> (1)The occupation is a full-time and stable job, serving continuing societal needs; (2) the occupation is regarded as a lifetime calling by the practitioners, who identify themselves personally with their job subculture; (3) the occupation is organized to control performance standards and recruitment; (4) the occupation requires formal, theoretical education; (5) the occupation has a service orientation in which loyalty to standards of competence and loyalty to clients' needs are paramount; and (6) the occupation is granted

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> a great deal of collective autonomy by the society it serves, presumably because the practitioners have proven their high ethical standards and trustworthiness (Millett, 1977, p. 2).

Despite the traditional attributes associated with professions, terminology associated with them are used in much broader applications in current societal discourse than is indicated in historical understandings. "There has been a shift in the literature from a largely uncontested understanding of the concepts of profession, professionalisation and professionalism in functionalist writing to a far more unstable and ambiguous framing of these concepts due to contemporary theorising where for each idea there are several possible definitions" (Reed, 2013, p. 44).

In modern parlance, a wide host of vocational fields refer to themselves as *professions*. While there are generally agreed-upon parameters for what constitutes *professions*, what amounts to a *professional* seems up for grabs. Writing from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the historic epicenter of developing professional officers for entry into the U.S. Army, Col. Matthew Moten noted that even "the toilet paper dispenser in the latrine near my office proudly declares that it is a 'Kimberly-Clark Professional'" (Moten, 2011, p. 14), a sentiment I found to be humorously familiar upon a recent trip to Fort Knox, Kentucky during which I likewise encountered a "Kimberly-Clark Professional" paper towel dispenser. Though this example is far fetched, a lack of definitions regarding what constitutes a *profession* adds to the challenge of studying this topic. Subsequent questions arise for what attributes constitute a *professional*. Is one a *professional* because he or she has a job title that aligns with a formal profession? Can one be a *professional* while working in a vocation that is not generally thought of as being a *profession*? This is open for debate partly because "there is a lack of clarity over the use of the terms" related to study of professional construct, leaving the topic "under-theorized" (Reed, p. 70).

Webster's Dictionary defines a *profession* as "a career or occupation," "An occupation such as law that requires considerable training and specialized study," or "the body of qualified persons of a specific occupation or field" (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005, p. 903). These definitions all share a focus on expertise as a qualifier. An academic sociology perspective characterizes members of a profession by those who know how to use their skills to accomplish a higher good for society, which relies on a combination of theory and skills operating in concert; "It is this ability to know how to make and act upon prudent judgements in context that is particularly relevant for the professions" (Roennfeldt, 2019, p. 65). Bowman & Hendy write that professional practice stands apart from non-professional lines of work by the ability of practitioners to holistically integrate theoretical models with practical concepts (2019).

Because one claims to be a professional does not make it so, even if society were to agree on a formal definition. It is beyond the scope of this piece to formally define *professionals*. Neither will this essay attempt to analyze the identity frame of whether civil or military communicators should consider themselves to be *professionals*. Rather, it will attempt to offer a framework for organizational and institutional communicators to consider how their shared work traditions might fit in societal perspective and vocational hierarchy by adding to the conversation about how society defines *professions*. This is an area in which the literature is lacking (Reed, 2013). The aim of this line of inquiry is to contribute to understanding of the role that discursive and perceptual practices play in shaping the occupational vocational identities of those who work in civil public relations and governmental public affairs.

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Professions in History

The term *profession* is often defined largely in the eye of the beholder. Fortunately, we have a long lineage of tradition and literature that help to point us in a direction toward separating fields of work that align with the attributes of a *profession*, from those that do not. Evidence suggests that the initial concept of the profession is based on communities of work that relied on distinct education, starting during the Greek and Roman empires (Ahern, 1971). The terminology associated with *professions* first appeared during the medieval period to describe fields of study for those whose work required deep thinking. Out of this scholastic approach (Barrett, 2015) came the classical *professions*, which includes the practices of law, medicine, professors, and members of the clergy—the members of which were expected to complete a rigorous liberal arts education, in addition to specific vocation training (Burns, 2014; Dzur, 2019; Leight & Fennell, 2008; Merckle, 2019). These classical professions are rooted in antiquity. The Biblical prophet Ezra is viewed as the forerunner to those who specialized in teaching law in the sixth century B.C. (Hendricksen, 1976). The age of enlightenment brought about a different way of thinking about who could enter the professions. "From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward, the emerging professional disciplines increasingly took charge of the complex processes by which individuals are made into objects of study" (Fischer, 2000, p. 25). The class of professionals was the domain of the societal elite, set apart from those who worked in vocations that were entered through some form of apprenticeship, such as blacksmithing or candle making.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare wrote that "There is a tide in the affairs of men" (Shakespeare, 1988). The tide of the formalized profession—as is most commonly debated today—appears to have come in with the Industrial Revolution. The theory of contemporary professions, as are generally accepted in current parlance, began to take shape in the early 19th century, with members earning affiliation mostly through social class status and governmental recognition (Burns, 2014). Through most of the 18th century in America, practitioners of law and medicine worked in these *profession*-bound capacities part-time, having developed the requisite skills through apprenticeships (Skelton, 1992). The mid-20th century brought about the initiation of a taxonomic discourse, with the intent of formally defining the parameters of professionalism (Saks, 2012). A push to professionalize certain vocations in the United States started in the late 19th century as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association came into being (Hacket, 1962; Moten, 2011). As time marched on, so grew the number of work fields discussed as professions. This included "other abstract workers and symbolic analysts such as accountants, pharmacists, engineer, and scientists" (Leicht & Fennell, 2008, pp. 431-432). The latter 20th century saw a move away from a strict institutional view of the professions that relied on fixed requirements, or trait theories, "such as credentials, codes of ethics, and knowledge mastery in the late 1960s and 1970s," into a construct in which occupational communities became accepted as among the professions by claiming to stand among them (Leicht & Fennell, 2008, p. 432). Effective public relations practices exercised on behalf of these communities were key to establishing norms in which the professional class gained a sense of regulatory independence (Crain, 2020).

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The Debate over Professional Relevance

Across the history of professions, their members have wielded powers of social influence (Reed, 2013), and have been held to a form of accountability for that influence (Browning, 2018). The public is familiar with terms like "doctor knows best," or "seek legal advice" because in the most critical moments of life, people prefer to obtain services from those who can be trusted, whose credibility is backed by an institutional community. "The concepts of profession, professionalisation and professionalism remain powerful and carry a strongly positive value" (Reed, 2013, p. 44). The high perception of such bodies brings with it public expectations of service in line with values and morality that are associated with the credentials earned by established communities of practitioners (Palmer, Biggard and Dick, 2008). These "scientific and rationalistic professionals and associations generate highly rationalized and universalized pictures of natural and social environments calling for expanded rational actorhood of states, organizations, and individuals" (Meyer, 2008, p. 804). By instituting standard practices, members of professions earn a perception of higher legitimacy to operate from (Palmer, Biggart and Dick, 2008, p. 745).

In recent years, many legacy *professions* have begun to suffer a loss of public trust in line with government, business and informational media (Edelman, 2022). A contrarian view suggests that rather than acting in the public interest, *professions* use secretive or highly technical tools of the trades to avoid social responsibilities. Motives include standing apart from working class citizens (Raelin, 2020), enhancing influence, power and wealth (Fischer, 2000; Meyer J. W., 2008), avoiding governmental oversight (Crain, 2020), and dispersing power and "social control away from the formal centers of governance" (Fischer, 2000, p. 25). These tensions have increased over the past two years in light of fierce public debate over contradictory governmental and institutional policies created in response to COVID-19. "The whole 'professions as plots against the body politic' scheme runs into the problem that the picture of the profession as a rational self-interested actor requires the assumption that the general population is naïve and foolish" (Meyer J. W., 2008, p. 800).

Approaches to Professionalism

There are many perspectives on how *professional* standing is earned, recognized, or granted. Yet much of the scholarship on this topic approaches it using institutional theory, which explores the criteria that organizations must meet in order to receive *professional* legitimacy from the public (Lammers & Garcia, 2017; Leicht & Fennell, 2008, p. 431). Such standing brings with it exclusive jurisdictional autonomy to conduct work that is essential to the functioning of society (Reed, 2013; Roennfeldt, 2019). Leight & Fennell offer a rather comprehensive vision by which to recognize a profession.

> We define professional work as occupational incumbents: (a) whose work is defined by the application of theoretical and scientific knowledge to tasks tied to core societal values (health, justice, financial status, etc.), (b) where the terms and conditions of work traditionally command considerable autonomy and freedom from oversight, except by peer representatives of the professional occupation, and (c) where claims to exclusive or nearly exclusive control over a task domain are linked to the application of the

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knowledge imparted to professionals as part of their training" (Leicht & Fennell, 2008, p. 431).

Theirs is not the only measure. The *social trustee* perspective argues that professional standing belongs to those who work in vocations that provide critical societal services (Dzur, 2019). In similar fashion, an *interactionist approach* views professional status as one granted by the public through social contract (Brick, 2018; Galvin, 2011; Saks, 2012). In contrast, Cameron, Sallot & Weaver Lariscy (1996) write that professions receive their status from bodies of practitioners that define what constitutes excellence in certain vocational fields. Another perspective offers that professional legitimacy is conferred by stakeholders who rely on the services offered by those whose work practice requires a high level of precision skill (Bowman & Hendy, 2016; Johnson, 2018). Yet another perspective theorizes that the difference between those who work in occupations and those who practice in professions is based on the level of autonomy granted by workplace supervisors, thus tying professional membership to formal rank and length of time served in a specific career field (Sorenson, 1994).

Definitions of the professions can differ based on region and culture. A European perspective posits that professional status can be based on a variety of factors, including occupational communities that hold distinction based on unique knowledge, licensing, and standards of conduct (Reed, 2013), as well as the role of the worker, type of employment, level of education, enforced ethical standards, and organization (Aydınalp, 2013). The *neo-Weberian* model retains the early European roots of *professions* as existing solely because of governmental recognition, regulation, and licensing (Burns, 2014; Fisher, 2000; Parkinson & Parkinson, 2003; Saks, 2012). Noordegrafff theorizes that it will become more difficult to define *professions* in the future due to increased complexity in the world and resulting adaptations among fields of work and practice (2016). In that light, Bowman & Hendy (2019) make the case for a model of public relations as a liquid *profession*, this view allowing for flexibility in how the *professions* are defined.

Theory of the Military as Profession

As the human elements that comprised the ancestors of the current U.S. Army began to take shape in the decades up through the end of the 18th century, efforts to bring a sort of uniformity of practice among them was at a "quasi-professional" level (Skelton, 1992, p. 88). The push to formally professionalize military officers gained steam during the period between the U.S. Civil War and the First World War, following a wider movement begun in the late 1800s to humanize war through the first modern laws of warfare. These laws were "formulated during the Conventions in Brussels in 1874, and then at The Hague in 1899 and 1907" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 25).

At his farewell address on May 12, 1962, General Douglass MacArthur charged the corps of cadets at West Point, saying "Yours is the profession of arms," a charge still held by the Army today (Department of the Army, 2015). Yet military scholarship is not in agreement on this topic. Some argue that military members naturally reflect *professional* characteristics (Battaglia, 2011; Brick, 2018; Galvin, 2011). Nuciari (1994) writes that military officers—the white-collar aide of the institution—are professionals because their service adheres to the *Career Strategist Interactionist Model*, which includes a code of ethics based on service to others, a high level of self-inflicted expectations, and long-term career aspirations. Sorenson (1994) takes it farther,

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writing that military officers work on an *extra-professional* level in their duties advising government officials. Yet other scholarship argues that military professionalism is not a universal status for those in uniform (Ingesson, 2018; Moten, 2011), that it is instead tied to ethical maturity, specifically noted by the ability to make the right decision, even when it contradicts tradition, policy (Denny, 2018), or public opinion (Brick, 2018).

Military service would appear to fit within Gee's framework of *helping professions.* "We think of people in helping professions as obligated to help people who need help if their need falls into the domain of the professional's skills. Thus, we think that priests, doctors, nurses, and teachers are there to help people and are professionally and morally obligated to help people in need" (Gee, 2014, p. 121). Whether military service equates to the professions or not, service members want to identify as professionals (Wayne, 2015). The appearance of being a *professional institution* is critical to retaining public trust in the military to wield the tools of managed violence on behalf of the state in a moral fashion. The public's perception of the military as a *profession* is key to the deference granted it to use lethal force abroad, and carry out its own justice system on the citizens who fill the ranks.

Theory of Communication Professionalism

The history of public relations breaking ranks from journalism to theoretically focus on "the dissemination of truthful and accurate information to the public" is rumored to have begun in the early 1900s (Browning, 2018). Discussions on whether to formally professionalize those who work in organizational communication dates back at least to 1946 in the United Kingdom, when a group of 12 government communication officers gathered for a meeting that evolved into the Staging Conference of Public Relations Officers (Reed, 2013). In the U.S., the Public Relations Society of America published its first code of professional ethics for organizational communicators in 1950 (Meyer & Leonard, 2013; The Arthur W. Page Center), around the time that the public relations community realized the importance of being a proactive player in policy matters of client organizations (Browning, 2018). Yet seven decades later, there remains disagreement among scholars as to whether or not public relations is a *profession*. Bowman & Hendy note that while the field of public relations scholarship is rich, it suffers from confusion on terminology (2019). Some studies allude to public relations as a *profession*, (Bartlett, Tywoniak & Hatcher, 2007; Browning, 2018; Falkheimer, et al., 2017; Fijan & Milas, 2016; Gregory, 2011; Powell & Pieczka, 2016; Pribadi & Nasation, 2021), albeit one that is not necessarily demonstrating confidence in that status (Manley, 2014), an *industry* or *practice* in pursuit of professionalization (Bivens, 1993; Sha, 2011; Wakefield, Plowman, & Curry, 2014; Yang & Taylor, 2014), or a *field* (Abel and Tampere, 2013). In this context, *practice* is defined as "The interconnection and embeddedness of action, actor and institution" and practitioner as "those actors active in the domain" (Carrol, Levy, & Richmond, 2008, p. 366).

Among the community of organizational communicators, there is a growing desire to be perceived as trustworthy professionals in light of the growing role that organizational communication plays in business strategy (Cameron, Sallot & Weaver Lariscy, 1996; Parsons, 2016; Zerfass and Simon, 2013), and to be recognized as a profession—with the career status that entails (Bowman & Hendy, 2019). Zerfass and Simon (2013), however, believe that efforts to put the public relations community on par with physicians, attorneys and members of the clergy have failed. "It is left to individual practitioners to discharge what they believe to be a

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tacit obligation to society" (Bivens, 1993, p. 126). Gregory counters, saying that the public relations "profession is a bellweather of profound societal change as organisations themselves come to terms with a dynamic and increasingly unpredictable environment and a changing, demanding stakeholder community who are holding them to account in new and immediate ways" (Gregory, 2011, p. 102).

According to the Department of Defense *Principles of Information*, the responsibilities of public affairs officials are first and foremost to public service, to ensure military accountability to the U.S. public (Department of Defense, 2000). The U.S. Army's public affairs regulation specifically notes the PAO's responsibility as being to the public first, then the Army, mission and command (Department of the Army, 2020). Yet the literature is at odds on whether military public affairs officers can claim profession member status, specific to their role as organizational communicators. Stephens reported that those who work in military public affairs historically demonstrate less communication professionalism than their civilian counterparts because of requirements that divert time and attention from practicing the communication arts and sciences (1981), a perspective in line with Pribadi & Nasution's observation four decades later that governmental public affairs efforts offer a lesser communication service than civil public relations (2021). A U.S. Army War College report also noted this tendency, saying "we have created a climate in which 'doing certain jobs' takes precedence over developing expertise" (U.S. Army War College, 1970). In 2007 then Brig. Gen. Mari K. Eder acknowledged "A great deal of frustration centers on the existing capability of current public affairs communications structures to deliver the nebulous benefits of 'strategic communications'" (Eder, 2007, p. 235). However, other research contends that military public affairs officers are among the world's best communicators (Bedford, 2016). Eder (2007) blames the inadequacies of military public affairs as a field on a lack of leadership at the Pentagon's Joint level, and senior Army leadership that fails to properly resource the field (2007). Other challenges that Army PAOs face include "a lack of trust in public affairs and overwhelming red tape" (Britzky, 2021). Eder reserves her criticism of public affairs for the military institutional trappings, and describes the individual U.S. Army public affairs officer as a pentathlete who

> "can provide a broad range of communications capabilities to a commander. The PAO typically manages a portfolio that spans the full spectrum of information delivery, from internal product development, to staff participation in the military decision-making process, to outreach innovation, legislative liaison, crisis communications, speech/testimony writing and communications operations, as well as strategic communications planning" (Eder, 2007, 243).

Specific to the military public affairs force, research suggests that professionalism can be measured by experience, training and judgement (Carr, 1996) as well as work routines that include conducting evaluation research and counseling senior leaders (Stephens 1981). How institutional members and authorities communicate carries the potential of great risk or reward for the associated organization, as well as affiliated members and stakeholders. Organizational communicators wield tremendous powers of public influence. Their counsel can lower or amplify the tone of crisis events with strategic consequences, and become points of persuasion echoed by large swaths of the public.

The public relations community faces reputational challenges because of practices that use social sciences to manipulate public behavior on behalf of clients (Browning, 2018; Coombs and Holladay 2007; Fijan & Milas, 2018; Parsons 2016; Stauber and Rampton, 1995), a

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perception that goes back to the field's origins of aiding in U.S. Government propaganda efforts during the World Wars (Browning, 2018; L'Etang, 2004). Such practice is traced back at least to the early 1700s in the United States, when colonial governors made use of advance men to influence early Americans (Lamme, 2014). The military public affairs community is not immune from similar incidents that do not live up to governmental transparency, nor basic ethical, requirements (Ames, 2016; Arendt, 1971; Britzky, 2021; Carlson, Cuiller & Turkoff, 2012; Hasson, 2019; House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2008; Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Defense, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Machamer, 1991; McMaster, 1997; Mogelson, 2020; Nye, 2002; Paladino, 2019; Payne, 2005; Ricks, 2009; Seligman, 2019). These reputational concerns increase risk for both the represented clients, and the community of organizational communicators (Fijan & Milas, 2018).

No work community is perfect, even among the recognized professions. The medical, legal and ministerial communities offer examples of practitioners who do not uphold professional standards of conduct. Consider attorneys for example. Though workers in law are among the earliest recognized members of a *profession*, lawyers are often a favored topic of unfavorable critique in popular culture. The field of public relations likewise has a mixed reputation, with terms such as 'spin doctor' being applied to practitioners by critics. Similarly, more than once when I introduced myself to a fellow military leader as a public affairs officer, a variation on "so you're the paid liar" was spoken in response.

This discussion matters because it goes beyond a matter of simple semantics. "The reputation of a profession is not only a set of abstract ideas, but a reflection and indicator of the actual state in the profession," which can factor into the quality of work life for its members and their ability to effectively accurately portray clients to the public (Fijan & Milas, 2018, p. 31). If terms of specific meaning devolve to take on nebulous or subjective definitions, then individuals and institutions can claim whatever identities they want, independent from reality. Such condition opens wide the door for confusion and imposters. A disconnect between an actor's perception, and reality, creates a blind spot that risks contributing to the collapse in effectiveness of that actor, whether it be an individual, group, or institution.

Having surveyed theories of profession, we now turn to the research question: are current operational models of civil and military organizational communicators operating as a formal communication profession? My working hypothesis entering into this line of inquiry was that neither the military, nor civil, community of communication practitioners operate at a level equivalent to formal *professions*, and that the community of civil communicators are likely closer to that mark.

Methods

This qualitative study uses an interpretivist lens to study this subject through a *phronetic* approach that "promotes mixed-methods, problem-driven, contextualized studies that relate to specific issues" (Schram, 2014, p. 98). Such an approach does not purport to mathematically test a hypothesis and show direct causality (Pribadi & Nasation, 2021), but is instead highly individualized and "especially well suited for accessing tacit, taken-for-granted, intuitive understandings of a culture" to help people "understand the world, their culture, and its institutions" (Tracy, 2020, p. 7). Military scholarship on theories of professionalism largely holds to the industrial age concept of *professions*, thus why I measure this topic against the criteria

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associated with that tradition. Through a multi-method exploration using literature review and autoethnography, I attempt to define and apply specific tests of professional standing to the communities of civil and military communicators. I survey recent literature on the topic of military public affairs, civil public relations, military professionalism, and communication professionalism to identify the most commonly accepted professional attributes and identify how military and civil communicators measure against them. Due to a lack of literature in the scholarly realm speaking to military public affairs and its intersection with professionalism, a heavy emphasis is put on studies originating from military educational institutions. Using the criteria of professions identified through trade, academic, and military literature, this paper evaluates where the U.S. Army's public affairs career field, and the public relations industry, stand according to professional criteria, in an attempt to add context to the ongoing debate about whether organizational and institutional communicators can, or should, claim *professional* legitimacy in their work roles.

I first conducted a search for scholarly and professional articles related to public affairs and public relations as professions using google, google scholar and an R1 research institution library electronic catalogue service using a combination of the keywords *profession*, *professional*, *military*, *public relations*, and *public affairs*, in search of peer-reviewed articles pertaining to public relations and military public affairs professionalism. In addition, I consulted recent book chapters that revisit the concept of military professionalism, as well as research projects conducted at the U.S. Army War College and the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College to add the most recently published perspective on the military approach to defining professions. This provided the framework to organize a definition for, and attributes of, professions, as well as to generalize where literature indicates civil public relations and military public affairs practitioners fit accordingly. Literature reviewed for this study could not provide insights as to where these vocational communities fit according to all attributes. Therefore insights garnered through autoethnographic reflection over 19 years of experience as a career communicator was used as a supporting method to assist with additional limited insight where the literature lacks conclusive findings, as well as to add context where appropriate.

Limitations

The first challenge of qualitative research of this kind is its subjectivity. It is not the 'hard science' methodology that is more frequently used for communication studies, owing more to a *scholarly* rather than *research* tradition. Interpretive methods are not necessarily replicable because they make room to acknowledge how experience and perspective informs analysis based on perspective and experience that is unique to the scholar. "There are no 'brute data' whose meaning is beyond dispute. Dispassionate, rigorous science is possible—but not the neutral, objective science stipulated by traditional analytic methods" (Yanow, 2011, p. 5). Yet such methods can help to increase understanding on topics where study is lacking, such as the topic of whether or not Army Public Affairs constitutes a *profession* within the military institution.

Discussion of the state of military public affairs elicits strong emotions among both the service members and civilians who work in the field, military officials in other job specialties, and journalists. There is a variety of competing perspectives pertaining to military public affairs practices. "The fact that words are open to interpretation means that while we may think we understand one another, there may in fact be a wide gap in interpretation of which we may not be

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aware" (Eisenburg, Goodall, & Tretheway, 2013, p. 100). Military public affairs is a field wrought with *tension* points, which are "the fault lines that phronetic researchers seek out; this is where researchers hit existing practices to make them come apart and create space for new and better ones" (Flybjerg, 2012, p. 100).

The second challenge is that organizational research is complex, as it deals with entities that include individuals and groups, these entities yet larger than the sum of associated actors—and simultaneously dependent on their efforts (Wilhoit, 2017). The way in which stakeholders perceive and react to commentary about institutional issues, that they align with personal identity and value, is much in the eye of the beholder and can be affected by the amount of personal investment made on the topic under discussion.

Another limitation of this line of inquiry is that the field of civil communicators is extremely diverse, encompassing those who work in corporate or public communication on behalf of non-governmental organizations, healthcare, transportation, energy, non-profit, etc. Because those who work in public relations operate across a wide, heterogeneous, spectrum (Fijan & Milas, 2018), it is challenging to measure them as a generalized work community. Organizational and institutional communicators across the full span of global work options use similar tools, but may do so for entirely different purposes. Those who work in journalism, advertising, or marketing have different roles and goals than those who work in public relations or community relations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to compare and contrast levels of professionalism across each of these individual subsets of communication practice. Yet it is helpful to have a non-military benchmark to compare military communicators against. Thus this paper attempts to generalize all who work in non-governmental, industry-specific communication together in its analysis, acknowledging that it does so in limited fashion.

Finally, though the personal perspectives attained through 19 years of experience working as an institutional communicator is an asset to informing this study, it can also open the door to questions about the reliability given the inclusion of first-person experience in the evaluation process (Jamison, 2019; Jensen, et al., 2020). I respond that sense-making is not something that only happens when distant from the subject. "We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because 'we' are *of* the world" (Barad, 2003, p. 829). Concerns about author bias toward military communication should consider that my previous writings have critiqued how the U.S. Army conducts public affairs in an authentic manner—an approach that has come with impact to my social standing in the career field, ongoing harassment, local attempts at censorship, and risk to my career advancement as a military officer. Though an enthusiastic practitioner, I strive to make sense of realities impacting the practice honestly, in hopes of advancing innovative thought for the benefit of future institutional communicators.

Role of Organizational Communicators in Society

The military public affairs force is composed of enlisted members, officers and civilians. For simplicity, from here forward this paper will make a distinction between those who work in military public affairs as *military communicators*, and refer to those who work in public relations, or non-military organizational and institutional communication, as *civil communicators*. Ideally, those who work in both fields hold certain levels of accountability to their organizations, and the public, to responsibly manage organizational communication

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programs that are focused on a commitment to multi-directional engagement, institutional culture-shaping and preserving public trust (Harrison and Muhlberg, 2014).

Though the vocational entry point for civil communicators requires no formal training, those who advance to corporate chief communication roles typically spend many years developing communication expertise by working through the ranks from entry-level practitioner to management, under the supervision of senior communicators and organizational executives. Many hold membership in professional communication associations such as the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communicators, or the Arthur W. Page Society, associations that place heavy emphasis on excellence in practice, continuing education and developing best practices. These groups spell out the ethical nature of member responsibilities in formal codes of professional ethics. However, these codes are only enforceable on members.

U.S. Code, Title 10 establishes the requirement for military public affairs programs (Government Printing Office, 2011). Unlike the civil model of developing organizational communicators, public affairs officers in the U.S. Army begin their careers through the traditional career branches such as infantry, armor, engineering, human resources, etc. After approximately four years of military service, U.S. Army officers usually have the opportunity to compete for transfer out of their 'basic branch' into a 'functional area,' such as public affairs. The reasoning for this model is that it grounds public affairs officers "in the operational Army through a base career as a soldier and a leader, commander and staff officer" (Eder, 2007, 243).

Officers selected to become PAOs are not required to have a communication-related degree, nor any prior experience in organizational communication. They attend a nine-week qualification course at the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, MD and are then assigned to a communication director role at a military unit or agency. Determinations about whether to take additional communication-specific education, join communication associations or pursue credentialing are voluntary, and do not play a role in promotion consideration. The communication-specific ethical nature of the public affairs officer's duties is spelled out in Defense Department public affairs policy but is not formally enforced by an official representation of the public affairs community. Unlike public affairs officers, enlisted public affairs members and military public affairs civilians enter service specifically to work in military communication. These military communicators also complete job qualification courses at the Defense Information School.

Results

A review of literature identified 10 predominant attributes of professionalism from scholarship specific to the military, public relations, military public affairs and the study of professions (Table 1). These criteria were originally taken from a synthesis of published writings from military doctrine, public-relations scholarship, and military-specific literature (Aydınalp 2013; Brick 2018; Brodie, 1973; Department of the Army, 2015; Ingesson 2018; Moten, 2011; Nuciari 1994; Reed, 2013; Roenfeldt, 2019; Sorenson, 1994). Subsequent readings on institutionalism further reinforced the 10 attributes of professionalism noted.

Attribute 1: Professions Operate with a High Degree of Autonomy

The attribute of autonomy holds that professions enjoy a wide leeway of operation with minimal supervision from officials outside their respective areas of expertise. The available public affairs literature indicates that U.S. Army military communicators do not consistently operate with a high degree of autonomy across the force. Individual military communicators share different experiences in this regard. Based on observations during the author's military career, certain commanders grant high levels of autonomy to public affairs officials, while others do not. There are anecdotal incidents of public affairs officers being placed under the supervision of the unit chief of operations (more commonly known as the S-3, G-3, or J-3 in military terminology), the Information Operations Officer, or the fires coordination officer (both of whom work subordinate to the chief of operations). In most cases, public affairs officers work under the supervision and direction of the unit executive officer or chief of staff. a departure from U.S. Army regulation that places the public affairs officer under the direct supervision of the unit commander as a member of the *special* or *personal* staff (Department of the Army, 2020).

Levels of autonomy are dependent on variables that include the commander's leadership style, unit mission and individual capability of the military communicator. Carr (1996) and Gercken (2007) note overall deficiencies in equipment and organizational structure common to the public affairs force, indicating that a representative segment of the field lacks the same standing of peer staff directorates (Britzky, 2021; Eder, 2007), a challenge likewise shared in segments of the public relations industry (Kirat, 2006). This challenge has been acknowledged by a small number of U.S. Army PAOs through social media discussion in recent years. Examined public relations literature speaks to a growing influence of chief communication officers, but indicates similar challenges of influence and resourcing faced by low and mid-level civil communicators.

Attribute 2: Self-Policing to a Vocational Code of Ethics

This attribute holds that professions hold their members accountable through a formal process unique to the body of expertise. Traditionally, public affairs officials cite the Department of Defense *Principles of Information* as a guiding ethic (Department of Defense, 2000). In 2020, the U.S. Army published an updated public affairs regulation that includes a code of professional ethics (Department of the Army, 2020). As of the time of this writing, that code is not enforced in any practical sense. The reviewed literature reports instances in which military communicators did not uphold industry communication ethics and the *Principles of Information*. Instances of communication practices that met established ethical standards, and examples that did not, have been likewise observed during the author's time in practice. Violations of ethical communication frameworks are not a punishable offense within current military regulations. Uniformed military personnel are subject to other specific standards of duty performance and personal behavior by the *Uniform Code of Military Justice.* In this way, U.S. Army military communicators are 'technically' closer to fitting the parameters of being members of communication professions than their civilian counterparts, because of being subject to military law. However, this is separate from the concept of formal accountability to the public affairs community for adhering to ethical standards of excellence in communication practices.

Military communicators who do not adhere to ethical public affairs principles are not generally subject to an investigation of malpractice by an agency of the military public affairs community, nor any other office within the military institution. Unlike in the medical, legal or ministerial communities, there is not an association from which organizational communicators

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draw a license or credential to practice that can be revoked for misconduct or malpractice. Neither the U.S. Army's Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, nor the Army Public Affairs Center, holds any authority for action to self-police public affairs officers around the force. This is because the Army is built on a command-centric operating process through which local unit or agency commanders exercise sole disciplinary oversight of uniformed members assigned to their commands. The only exception is those officers such as attorneys, physicians and chaplains, who can also face disciplinary action from their accrediting agencies. When military communicators are found to have used deceptive practices in their public communication work, they do not usually face any kind of negative consequence (Spears, 2021). Unlike physicians, attorneys and members of the clergy, those who work in civil or governmental communication are not required to be members of a credentialing body, nor are they formally subject to compulsory accountability to a communication body. Browning argues that public relations is policed by employees, corporate leaders, communities, and consumers. Even where it appears that communicators are making efforts to perform ethically, it is often motivated more "by pragmatism than a desire to behave morally" (Browning, 2018). Data from a sample of individuals who work in public relations is split on whether members of the work community are apt to violate ethical standards (Fijan & Milas, 2018).

Attribute 3: Promulgates a Sense of Corporateness among the Community of Practitioners

This attribute holds that professions create and maintain bodies that promote expertise and a sense of community among those who practice the craft. The public affairs force lacks a general sense of corporateness. Military communicators work for, and are evaluated by, the units they are assigned to rather by senior ranking members of the public affairs career field. There are instances of informal networks among military communicators who share best practices and attempt to enhance the field of work. These come about based on factors including existing relationship among group members, personality of discussants, and shared perspectives on the status and potential of the career field.

Literature surveyed did not speak to the corporateness of the civil communication community. Personal experience and observation from networking events, award programs, and a variety of ongoing professional development series facilitated by chapters of the International Association of Business Communicators and the American Marketing Association provide a sense that making community is a priority among many who work in civil communication.

Attribute 4: Provides a Public Service that is Essential to Society

The public service attribute is based on achieving a perception that a type of work is essential to the proper functioning of society. Among the mission of the U.S. Army public affairs program is to retain the trust and confidence of the U.S. public in the nation's military (Department of the Army, 2020). The recruiting crisis of 2022 (Wormuth & McConville, 2022) and the recent drop of public trust in the military (Ronald Reagan Institute, 2021) allow for questions on whether that mission is being accomplished. The services that military communicators perform are critical to facilitating connection between the public and its military forces, and public accountability for military activities. Military public affairs officials theoretically serve as the bridge between civil publics and military units by coordinating all official community and media interaction. The information reviewed during this study is inadequate to make a determination on this attribute for civil communication workers.

Attribute 5: Regarded as a Life-Long Calling by its Members

This attribute holds that members of professions commit to them as long-term vocations

and identify with developing expertise in their chosen fields as a personal value. Research on this topic shows that most chief communication officers in the top industry firms are long-term career communicators; in contrast the majority of U.S. Army chiefs of public affairs come to the job from working in other military career fields (Spears, 2019). Literature reviewed for this study did not offer generalizable findings on whether entry and mid-level communication practitioners identify with organizational communication work as a life-long calling. A notable portion of U.S. Army military communicators typically stay in that specialty through the remainder of their military careers, with many going on to careers in civil or governmental communication roles after concluding their time in uniform. A sizeable portion of civilians who work in military communication jobs started in the field as uniformed military communicators, and perform these jobs as a continuance of their public affairs careers.

Attribute 6: Upholds Standards through Professional Development

This attribute holds that professions promulgate excellence in work practices by facilitating ongoing training, certification and informational events to enhance the professional body's ability to better serve the public. Though U.S. Army military communicators are required to complete military education requirements throughout their careers, most are not required or expected to complete ongoing communication-specific training beyond their initial job qualification course at the Defense Information School. Additional communication-specific training and professional development is available through optional advanced Defense Information School coursework. The U.S. Army offers its public affairs officers the chance to compete for 'broadening programs' to enhance their skills. These are competitive opportunities to participate in a fully-funded master's degree program in public relations and corporate communication at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., or to work in a large company or public relations firm for one year as a 'training with industry' experience. It is up to individual military communicators on whether to pursue these, or other, educational and professional development opportunities. In the author's career experience, individual military unit leadership and culture either actively encourage or discourage ongoing communication-specific training. There is a certain institutional stigma to these programs, because participating officers do not receive officer evaluation reports while in these broadening programs. The reports are needed in order for military communicators to remain competitive for promotion.

Cultural perception of the value of knowledge gained through public affairs broadening experiences is debated across the career field. At my promotion ceremony to the rank of Major, the presiding officer affirmed the value of broadening programs, saying that such programs allow U.S. Army officers to share some of their 'green'—as in Army green—experiences with the civilian world, while absorbing civilian expertise to bring back into the military as a tool of innovation. Within a few weeks of that moment, an Army PAO who outranked me shared his negative perception of time spent in broadening programs. This officer advised that after graduation, I should put the schoolbooks in a box, put the box in the garage, and get back to soldiering. Likewise, a training with industry alum once expressed to me feeling a need to purge the civilian mindset gained from this time working in a civilian setting in favor of getting back to thinking as the Army expects. Based on personal encounters with Army PAOs on this topic, sentiment appears split on whether pursuing Army-funded, full-time graduate study in public relations is good for the public affairs career field. Some believe that the expertise gained is profitable. Others contend that it is detrimental because it takes officers away from routine Army duties for a period of approximately 18 months.

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From 2016 through 2021, the Army Public Affairs Center required public affairs officers in residence at Georgetown University to work a 'fellowship,' with the primary venues being the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, or the Army Public Affairs Center. This additional duty requirement competed with the purpose of the broadening program to fully immerse selected public affairs officers in a civilian paradigm. Such practice was indicative of a paradox between institutional intent and practice when it comes to developing strategic communication talent in the U.S. Army. Literature reviewed in this study did not inform expectation for members of the civil communication community to participate in ongoing professional development.

Attribute 7: Full-Time, Non-Manual Occupation

This attribute separates professions from other lines of work, based on levels of physical labor performed in certain vocational communities as compared to levels of specialty skill and intellectual capacity theoretically required to operate within the professions. Those who work in military and civil communication are both in full-time, non-manual occupations. Though military service members are required to maintain a certain level of physical fitness, and to be tested for fitness and body size standards compliance, most military public affairs duties take place in an office setting, not unlike the environments that civil communicators work in.

Attribute 8: Certification and Specialized Training Controls Access to the Profession

The specialty attribute holds that professions require specific training and certification for members to complete in order to gain entry. Every member of the U.S. armed services must complete a job-specific training regimen in order to work in that primary specialty. Military public affairs officials certify for the career field through standard military training required to wear the uniform, and by completing the nine-week Public Affairs Qualification Course at the Defense Information School. Many civil communicators hold communication-related degrees, and seek further education as their careers progress. However, their field generally does not require communication-specific credentialing for entry, as do the mainline professions such as medicine, law and ministry. Civil communicators enter the field with a wide array of experiences and educational backgrounds, often unrelated to communication studies. Recent research indicates that those who work in public relations believe that a communication-related university education should be a job requirement (Fijan & Milas, 2018).

Attribute 9: Operates According to a Body of Theory

This attribute holds that a profession is grounded in unique knowledge specific to the practice. Both military and civil communicators operate according to theories of communication—backed in research, case studies, and lessons learned from ongoing experiences—to inform a practical body of theory that guides work practices. The extent of how this theory is applied varies widely across both the civil and military bodies of communication practice.

Attribute 10: Acknowledged by the Public as Meeting the Requirements of a Profession

This attribute states that professions must be granted this standing through a sort of social contract with the public. The literature does not offer insight on whether the public in general perceives the communities of military and civil communicators to be professions in this sense. Though public opinion polling consistently reported high public trust in the military institution through 2021, the author could not locate polling data that measured public perceptions of military nor civil communicators. Literature and experience related to this attribute reflect a generally negative perception of both military public affairs and civil public relations.

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Table 1.
Attributes of Professions

Evaluation Criteria	Military Communication	Civil Communication
Operates with a High Degree of Autonomy	Unable to Determine	Unable to Determine
Self-policing to a Vocational Code of Ethics	No	No
Promulgates a Sense of Corporateness across the Community of Practitioners	No	Yes
Provides a Public Service that is Essential to Society	Yes	Unable to Determine
Regarded as a Life-Long Calling by Members	Yes	Unable to Determine
Upholds Standards through Professional Development	No	Unable to Determine
Full-Time, Non-Manual Occupation	Yes	Yes
Certification Controls Access	Yes	No
Operates according to a Body of Theory	Yes	Yes
Acknowledged by the Public as Meeting the Requirements of a Profession	Unable to Determine	Unable to Determine
Summary of Professional Attributes	Meets Criteria: 5 Does not Meet Criteria: 3 Unable to Determine: 2	Meets Criteria: 3 Does not Meet Criteria: 2 Unable to Determine: 5

Source: Created by author.

Language shifts over time, yet meanings remain ever relevant. As organizational and institutional communicators continue building fields that are still relatively young—historically speaking—now is a good time to reflect on what is meant when describing who might a member of a *profession* among them. Insights reviewed in this study indicate that neither military or civil communicators fully meet formal criteria according to an institutional framework. My hope is that scholarship of this type will offer a potential roadmap for communicators, and communication associations, who aspire to heightened relevance among their organizations, institutions, formalized professions and society.

Conclusion

Heeding the call to create scholarship based on real-world applications (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008), this paper suggests that military communicators align to criteria associated with professions in more ways than their civilian counterparts—in a strictly technical sense—when weighed against the traditional attributes against which fields of work have been evaluated to make that determination. That said, there is work to do in both fields when it comes to enhancing the craft of organizational communication to play a productive and healthy role in society. Though this paper hypothesizes that military communicators technically meet a higher number of professional attributes than their peers in civil communication, military public affairs practices are yet criticized for being less effective than those of civil communicators (Bedford,

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2016; Felix, 2015).

Future research could enhance understanding of this topic by first polling both corporate executive officers and senior military commanders to determine their perceptions of communicators in their organizations. Second, researchers can shed more light on this topic through opinion polling specific to public perception of civil and military communicators. I also recommend an update to research conducted by Stephens (1981) that surveyed U.S. Army public affairs officers on self-perception of value placed in their capabilities by the military institution. This line of inquiry should extend to those who work in civil communication as well, to offer insight on the similarities and differences in how military and civil communicators believe their roles are perceived by executive leadership.

Being recognized as a profession does not guarantee high public approval for workers within. Raelin (2007) argues that box checks to achieve a sense of vocational professionalism across a work community does not necessarily enhance practice. Yet, if an institutional field desires to achieve the trust that has been associated with professional legitimacy among the public over the course of the past two centuries, it should become acquainted with the attributes associated with that kind of public standing. Organizational leaders need their communicators to be trusted. This requires practitioners who hold themselves, and their peers, accountable to standards of practice that are in line with traditional expectations among the professions. It also requires executives who will underwrite those efforts.

I do not intend to make the argument that work communities that are regarded as professions can by that very perceptual moniker be relied on to work in morally proper fashion, as all institutions naturally tend toward a state of corruption, especially when allowed to control the applicable regulatory and investigative powers to which they are subject. Yet the ideals of professional identity call for practices that are inherently tied to a morally-informed ethical posture. "If a link between ethics and professionalization exists, a more accurate history of the professionalization of public relations would lead to a better understanding of public relations' professional ethics" (Browning, 2018, p. 145).

This topic is especially relevant in the present, as a growing number among the recognized professions are suffering similar losses of trust to what government and big business have experienced in recent years (Edelman, 2022). The U.S. military is encountering this same trend (Ronald Reagan Institute, 2021). Those who work in civil public relations and military public affairs were present with their client organizations throughout the periods and events that set conditions for currently reduced public trust and increased polarization across society. If they could not, or would not, serve as the needed ethical counsel to prevent this trend, serious doubt can be credibly imagined toward those charged with such ethical duties of counsel and performance going forward. Trusted institutions are a requirement for stable societies. In this age of societal discord, how did civil and military communicators perform? Did they fail to prevent this slide in public sentiment because of being excluded from the strategic decision-making that contributed to public skepticism, or did they contribute to these conditions through malpractice? Did they play no role at all, falling victim to conditions beyond their scope to influence? If so, how do they move forward to prevent a repeat of that sequence?

Communication and civil-military scholars would do well to explore this subject further. Very little among public relations literature speaks to specific attributes of professions, professionalism, and professionals. Communication-focused studies that reference public relations as a *profession* and its members as *professionals*, generally do so without an

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explanation of what those identity terms mean. This subject should hold a place of high importance among military commanders, who will likely face challenges unparalleled in history with the manner in which modern technology enables dis/misinformation to impact national security efforts. The national defense apparatus needs communicators who can think strategically and engage proactively, communicators who understand the array of human and technological factors at play in the public trust equation.

Though with potentially less life-critical implications, corporate executives also need communicators who possess the same kind of strategic skill. Developing a model to reference on how to better develop that skill among organizational and institutional communicators could be of great use to communities of communicators and senior executives going forward, in an effort to develop the right talent, and to get it in the right position at the right time for the best positive impact. Moving toward a model of developing communication leaders who seek out professional legitimacy could play a substantive role in preparing communicators who can master the challenges of today and have the mental agility and institutional freedom to creatively posture their employers for the evolving variation of challenge sets to come in a world that continues to grow in complexity.

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