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War correspondents and public affairs officers – cooperation or necessity

In the 21st century, the role of the media and their influence on public consciousness in the majority of political, economic, and cultural aspects of life is significant. The image of reality created and broadcasted by media on events about which most viewers can only find out via the media, can, at times, be one sided or incomplete, but it is not always a result of journalists' negligence or lack of specialist knowledge. This can be the case with reports from military conflicts or any types of peace keeping operations. Such areas are often difficult to access. Therefore, information on the situation taking place can only be provided by war correspondents. We should think about the role played by journalists during military conflicts. Of course, they should search for the truth, justice and objective presentation of facts. Information broadcasted by media should be reliable, objective, and without manipulation¹. Unfortunately, this is an ideal situation which has little to do with reality. There are various reasons for that. Journalists often do not have access to information because it is withheld from them, for security, political or propaganda reasons. In other cases, the media may be subject to political propaganda in a country they represent (when media are tied to a country's political apparatus, i.e. in Serbia during the Balkan crisis²) or it may be as a result of the necessity to create a "well selling product" ("Western" media), serving a professional and interesting dose of emotions, not always based on facts³. The third case, which will not be the subject of this analysis, is *embedded journalism*⁴. This is when journalists are attached to the military during military conflict. This way they are guaranteed more access to what is going on. On the other hand, they are only given information which the military wishes to spread

¹ Most media reporting on the Balkan war were ideologically biased. Foreign press and television were not impartial. Numerous foreign media (including Parisian "Le Monde" or American "Washington Post") did not just report on the events taking place, but carried out propaganda campaigns. They spread out false or simplified reasons for war (putting the sole blame on the Serbs fighting for the creation of Great Serbia) and broadcasted a one sided and biased take on the events. All sides were guilty of war crimes, but those carried out by the Serbs were reported on. This is an example of a very intensive media campaign in countries which had an influence on what was happening in Yugoslavia.

² This was because of the time in which the war was taking place. Most media were dependent on those in power. They forced people to define their ethnicity, without giving them a choice. Those journalists who did not comply lost their jobs. For more on media activity during the war in Kosovo, see P. Goff, B. Trionfi (eds.), *The Kosovo news and propaganda war*, Vienna 1999.

³ The Balkan tragedy, with its complicated history and ambiguous rights, presented in an objective way would not be an attractive media product. Demonizing the Serbs, manipulation of broadcast, a black and white portrayal of events took place once again during the crisis in Kosovo and during NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999. The conflict between Serbs and Albanians was made international and attracted public attention due to media which focused on selected information, simplified for mass audience.

⁴The article is largely based on research carried out among Polish war correspondents and military spokesmen. In Poland, so far, embedded journalism is not practised.

out. Agreeing to such terms, means acceptance of certain imposed limitations. For the military, embedded journalists are an element of information war, a powerful tool which, to a large degree, can determine the outcome of the conflict. This type of journalism developed dynamically in the US during the Iraqi war in 2003⁵.

There are, of course, general rules among which objectivity and an absolute ban on taking part in the events are the most imperative. However, sticking to these rules, in extreme military conditions, may be, at times, difficult. There is a conflict of interest between the necessity to obey international regulation (to credibly inform the public opinion) and people's emotions when relaying human tragedy which, in many cases, may be indissoluble⁶. To report about the death or to help the dying? To write about the whole truth or to omit inconvenient facts? To film public executions knowing that it entices aggression or to stay away? To move around the battlefield with the army or independently? To support one of the sides or to remain neutral? There are no simple answers to the above questions. Each reporter has to, on his own and often on the battlefield, make these decisions which may influence his life or that of others taking part in action. On the other hand, we need to remember that war correspondents are often witness to the clash of two worlds – the chaotic and the liberal, which they know, with hierarchical and closed in military where you must obey rules which you sometimes do not understand or which are contrary to journalists' code of conduct⁷. Reporters go through training lead by the military to prepare them for the mission. They need to pass complicated accreditation procedures which they are not used to (specificity of work in conflict regions). Journalists and press officers need to learn how to mutually understand and respect each other as well as the character and specificity of the work of the "other" side⁸.

We should also consider the kind and quality of relations between journalists and military press officers, taking into consideration the specificity of the work (feeling threatened but obeying safety regulations, both personal as well as regarding confidential information). Research carried out among Polish war correspondents⁹ allowed to come to many interesting conclusions as far as the work of press officers, their tasks, the role they play in the mission and the rules of cooperation and relations with media representatives.

⁵ Interesting monograph on the subject, see B. Katovsky, T. Carlson (eds.), *Embedded: the media at war in Iraq*, Guilford 2003.

⁶ H. Evans, *War Stories. Reporting in the Time of Conflict*, Charlestown 2003.

⁷ For more on public informing during military conflict and media propaganda, see Y. Kamalipour, N. Snow (eds.), *War, media, and propaganda: a global perspective*, Lanham 2004 and S. Carruthers, *The media at war: communication and conflict in the twentieth century*, New York 2000.

⁸ For more see J. Czermiński, *Żołnierze prawdy*, "Polska Zbrojna" 2008, nr 7.

⁹ The majority of surveyed were men (72%) between 31–35 (57%). All of them have higher humanistic education, majoring in journalism or similar subject, some of them have post graduate degrees (or others) in journalism or public affairs. The majority (60%) are employed as journalists, others – as reporters or foreign correspondents. For more on the 2008 and 2009 research results see A. Antczak, *Współpraca oficerów prasowych z dziennikarzami podczas operacji poza granicami kraju*, "Media – Kultura – Społeczeństwo" 2009 (in print).

The surveyed journalists were present in places where Polish military contingents were stationed: “Iraqi Freedom” (International Division Centre-South) – all, ISAF – over 70%, KFOR – over 40%, EUFOR Chad – nearly 20%, UNIFIL, EUFOR Bosnia and Herzegovina and UNDOF Syria – nearly 15% and EUFOR Congo – 10%, which is illustrated in chart 1¹⁰.

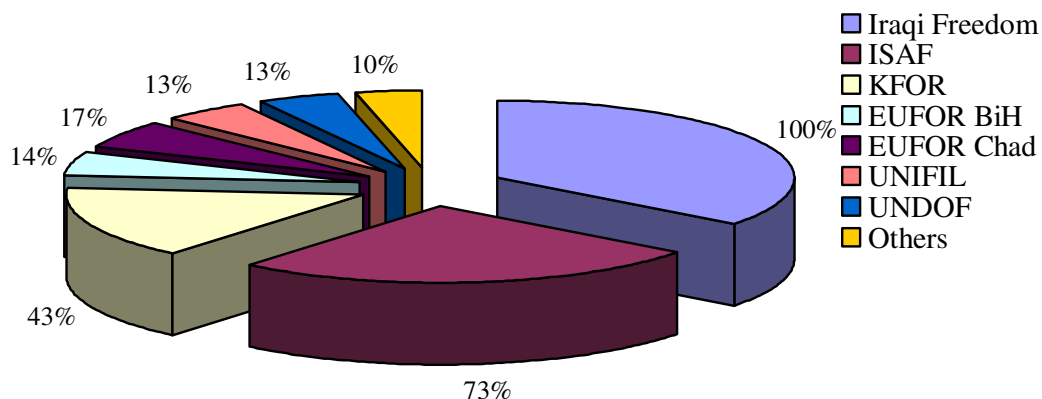


Chart 1. Percentage of journalists taking part in missions

Attention: The percentages do not add up to 100 because correspondents could participate in more than one mission.

Before leaving (or right after arrival), all journalists are familiarized with safety regulations in effect. Depending on what type of media they represent (TV, radio, press, information agency) and their personality, they may have had different priorities during the mission. This may account for some of the small differences in the way they assessed press officers and the resulting contacts. Journalists, due to their work, were focused on obtaining specific information on an interesting, at that time, subject, contact with Polish, other contingents’ or international headquarters, contact with local people and finding out the mission’s priorities. To a lesser degree they were interested in interviewing as many soldiers as possible or contacting other contingents. Journalists counted on taking part in patrols and convoys, and presenting a broader context of the mission and situation in the country they were in; the living conditions and the threats awaiting as well as doing material not connected to the military, i.e. the children’s situation, humanitarian organizations, the infrastructure, etc.

¹⁰ ISAF – International Security Assistance Force, KFOR – Kosovo Force, EUFOR – European Union Force, UNIFIL – United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNDOF – United Nations Disengagement Observer Force.

The priorities are illustrated in chart 2. We can conclude that regarding most tasks, journalists needed and counted on the help of press officers who could facilitate contacts with different people or groups, arrange meetings or provide the necessary information.

It needs to be noted that journalists, on the one hand, are perceived as “society watchmen”¹¹ but, on the other, they must also deliver viewers a certain dose of entertainment if they want to be promoted or earn good money. They are, hence, mostly interested in sensational information which evokes emotions, not necessarily positive ones. They generally do not possess extensive military knowledge which means that they need support from military spokesperson. This is a starting point for establishing contacts and strengthening cooperation¹². Modern media are corporations with enormous capital and, what goes with it, they can select the kind of information and the way it is presented to viewers. They create, this way, their own information policy, decide what viewers are informed about and how. This way, the media have vast influence on present and future military activity. In this context, we should remember that image is most significant (according to Confucius, “one picture means more than a thousand words”) and its influence is irreversible, it stays in human memory forever¹³.

¹¹ Taking care of society having access to information and “truth”.

¹² Based on a training seminar, “Public Affairs Mobile Training Team Seminar”, presentation entitled “The Basics of NATO Public Affairs”, prepared by comm. 2nd lieutenant Stephen Chaston from Public Affairs Office of United Forces in Napoli, Zagreb, October 15–19, 2007.

¹³ Many example could be Cite, however, in human memory remain image which evoke extreme, generally negative emotions; shocking, terrifying, surprising or incomprehensible, ie. in Somalia a mother carrying her starved child, examples of NATO’s tragic errors when Afghan civilians die, publicised by media, or the one and only case when Serbs shot down the “invisible” F-117.

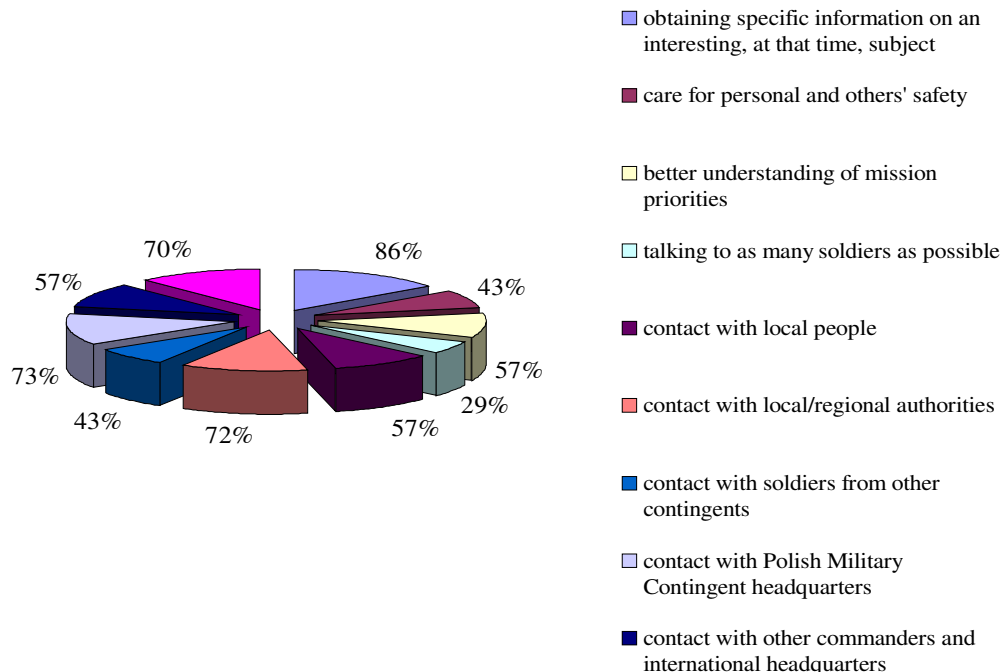


Chart 2. Journalist priorities on mission (in %)

Attention: Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents could choose more than one option.

What journalists value most in press officers is credibility, trust, speed in taking action, competence, organizational skills and availability. Communicativeness is also highly valued. Considered less significant is clarity of statements and quality of prepared materials (see chart 3). It seems that most essential are “human” factors which determine the quality of contacts, trust building and professionalism.

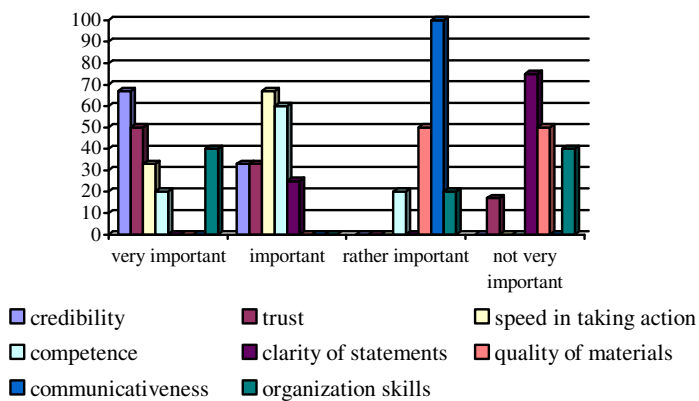


Chart 3. Characteristics valued by journalists (in %)

On mission, cooperation with press officers mostly regards facilitating contact with soldiers, command headquarters and local people as well as movement outside the base or between bases (Afghanistan, Iraq). Spokesmen are the main source of information about what goes on in the contingent. From them, journalists could obtain “first hand” information or verify what they attained from other sources. Spokesmen also choose competent people to provide information on topics interesting to journalists. It means that spokesmen are for journalists first people for daily and current contacts. That is why mutual trust and reliability are so imperative as well as mutual understanding of the ‘other’ side’s priorities.

All journalists confirmed that they had direct access and opportunity to freely talk with soldiers. This debunks the myth that the military blocks reporters from contacting ‘ordinary’ soldiers. Journalists also noted that soldiers are increasingly becoming more open toward the media and are not afraid to talk about matters they are responsible for. Many journalists stated that the fact that they had no obstacles in contacting soldiers was the best trust guarantee.

Journalists were most interested in the daily matters and problems in the area of the operation, and they wanted to obtain different view points. All contacts were provided or facilitated by spokesmen, to a degree they were themselves prepared (depending on who they already contacted). Interviews or conversations with media representatives generally regarded issues imperative to the given region, cooperation with the military but also social issues such as the women’s situation or living conditions, which were discussed with local people. In these cases, journalists often organized themselves. They would go with CIMIC groups¹⁴ and talk to beneficiaries of aid provided or to random people. TV journalists, in particular, searched for ‘human’ stories; showing the life of individual people, their feelings and accounts of events, or local heroes. They attempted to talk about all kinds of matters, also including those which are difficult or sensitive such as supplies, opinions on old and new authorities (Iraq), the presence of foreign troops, democracy (Iraq), state of economy, expectations (also from the army), needs, etc. As far as contacts with representatives of local media, Polish journalists were interested in reaching informers (source of obtaining further contacts), understanding their point of view and comments, and learning the specificity of their work (visits to local agencies). They also organized trainings for local journalists (Iraq). From Polish contingent’s commanders journalists received information during briefings and individual conversations on military activity in the area of operation, equipment, location of troops, comments on past events and possible future scenarios. Journalists stressed that there were not any problems with arranging meetings with commanders, which were effective and

¹⁴ CIMIC – Civil-Military Cooperation.

efficient. Practically unlimited access to soldiers (although with the approval of press officers) enabled journalists to talk about practically everything – conditions of living, tasks, equipment, projects carried out by CIMIC groups or anti-terrorist action by manoeuvre groups. Journalists also pointed out the friendly contacts they established, which turned out to be lasting ones, which is valuable both to journalists (source of knowledge about the military) and the army (possibility to transmit information about their work).

We can conclude that the role played by press officers on mission, aiding journalists in establishing contacts with different people, is significant. However, in many cases media representatives were able to make their own contacts. This is when they already had some contacts and did not need help or when press officers were not prepared enough to help. That is why it is imperative that both spokesmen and press officers have as many contacts as possible both among contingent soldiers and “outside” – with local people, representatives of local authorities and media. In crisis situations or when there is need for cooperation on a given matter, earlier established contacts are key to success. Equally important is the role of press officers in spreading “media consciousness” among soldiers.

It is worth noting that soldiers and journalists’ aims are quite different. Reporters look for information which sells well while the army cares about national goals and carrying out their mission. Military institutions are suspicious of media but they are also aware that media are a valuable ally, especially when its goal is to obtain public support and understanding for military operations. It generally determines the operation’s success. This is why the role of public affairs officers in modern military missions is growing. It needs to be noted that official military press spokesmen are not considered very credible. The selection of information transmitted outside may be criticised, but as is commonly known public support for military missions abroad is extremely important. Cultural clashes between military circles and media representatives are because of conflict of interest – obtaining information versus mission’s security where tactical information has strategic meaning. However, lack of proper information on military activity can have negative results and hinder attainment of mission goals¹⁵. That is why it is essential to establish effective cooperation with media representatives, which must be coordinated with other activities on all levels of command. In NATO circles, cooperation with media must take place with the knowledge and participation of the head of the press office. During NATO missions, Allied strategy in the area of public affairs is above the national one. The key to success is proper planning of public information strategy, individual for every mission. Generally, some military operations, for security reasons, are confidential. Commanders are, at times, dismissive toward media representatives,

¹⁵ A good example is NATO activity in the Balkans. Limited and selective information which was publicised, as a result of an information blockade by NATO, influenced the public understanding of reasons for the outbreak of the war, for military activity there and the role of international community in solving the crisis.

fearing that journalists will have the last word and they will be treated as suspects, feeling constant pressure from media. On the other hand, American general Perry Smith, a special CNN expert on the military, noted that this station has become the predominant communication channel, “leaders make statements to each other which are transmitted not through ambassadors but directly through CNN, sure that they will be heard and respond just the same way”¹⁶. The role of the channel has become so important that it can be paraphrased this way, “we do not win until CNN says so”. Both of the above situations are extreme but, nevertheless, the media should neither be dismissed nor should their role be overestimated.

The media’s greatest success on mission is considered finding out what the real conditions are as well as obtaining unique, not stereotypical materials regarding these types of operations. Equally important are materials on the life of local people and their hopes as well as reports on the “human” side of the military. War correspondents also care about gaining the soldiers’ trust, so that they can look at them as ordinary people to talk to, who are not just there to get material for their reports. What journalists valued most were materials obtained during their individual trips, without the escort or help of the army.

War correspondents highly valued effectiveness of cooperation and relations with soldiers on mission (very good opinions – 70% and good – 30%). Opinions on the quality of cooperation with the commander and the press section were also positive (70%). The lowest ratings regarded cooperation with representatives of the local media (60% considered it not very good), however, it was not rated entirely negatively. The percentages are illustrated in more detail in chart 4. Majority of positive opinions for all groups show that positive relations were built between journalists and mission participants. It is interesting that soldiers and commanders were rated higher than official spokesmen and press officers. It means that some improvement would be welcome in this area. In general, reporters said that it was very difficult to assess spokesmen, even though they had most contacts with them, that the assessment will always be unreliable. There were outstanding, satisfactory and mediocre personalities. A lot depended on professional preparation and earlier established experience of press officers. Similar opinions were provided regarding contacts with commanders – they largely depended on their attitude toward media, openness and understanding of the role media play in public communication.

¹⁶ See: A. Toffler, H. Toffler, *Wojna i antywojna*, Warszawa 1997, p. 251–252.

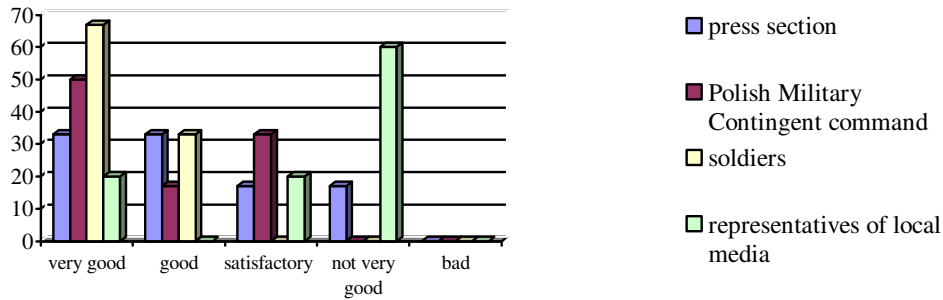


Chart 4. Assessment of journalist cooperation with different groups (in %)

As far as soldier assessment of journalists' presence, it was mostly positive (80%). It was manifested in different ways, from joking around to help and protection offers. Initial treatment with reserve was overcome as a result of experiencing the same problems. Soldiers were persuaded that journalists' presence will make people more familiar with their work. Soldiers were generally willing to take journalists on patrols (with commander's permission) and to talk about their experiences. There were some cases (about 10%) in which soldiers refused to cooperate or were reluctant to participate in photo or film sessions. Reserve toward reporters could be explained by their lack of knowledge regarding what they can share with the media or the commander's reaction. This is where the role of spokesmen is of key importance. They should have training sessions for soldiers on the rules of cooperation with media. Reporters also noticed that they were treated differently if they were in the military base for a longer period of time or if they returned once again; they were trusted and liked more. One other aspect of their presence was appreciated – they were a source of information about the soldiers' home country and an escape from tevery day base life.

Journalists also rated the attitude of press officers, commanders and soldiers towards media representatives (chart 5). Very good and good evaluation means that commanders as well as soldiers are conscious of the role media play. Also military spokesmen, due to the specificity of their work, should understand media work and not treat it as "necessary evil". Relations are appropriate when press officers are properly educated and prepared for their work, have experience and, most of all, like their job. The role of spokesperson is to arouse consciousness in commanders and soldiers of the role and tasks which modern media are facing, so that they can use media mediation and achieve, through them, their goals – that of the mission. It is essential that spokespersons convince soldiers that gaining public approval for the military and their activity on mission is directly related to their success and security.

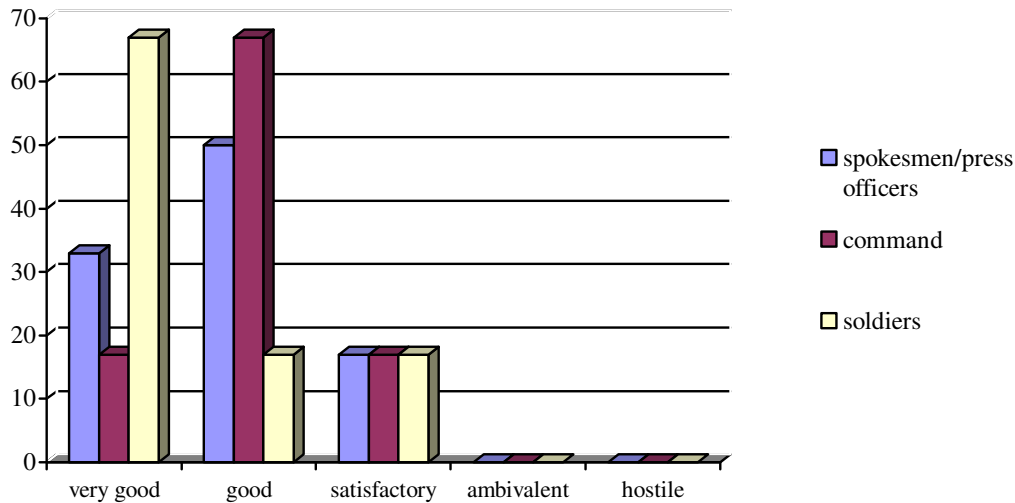


Chart 5. Relations of the military toward journalists on mission (in %)

Most of all, journalists count on press officers' help in obtaining information on current events, statistics, facilitating contact with commanders, experts and combat units, organization of excursions with soldiers as well as meetings with local authorities and citizens, verifying information from international press agencies and, most importantly, appropriate (mostly speedy) reactions in crisis situations. Respondents rated that such aid was provided in 80%. It is a rather high percentage, in view of the fact that it consists of numerous elements (spokesmen' credibility and professionalism as well as personal relations with journalists, etc.).

Research shows that press officers' effectiveness largely depends on their professional, social and mental competences as well as personal characteristics¹⁷. Assessment of their work also indirectly depends on the relations with commanders and soldiers, and their support. All these elements are key for building a solid base for cooperation with media representatives, based on a certain dose of mutual trust. It is equally important that press officers establish credibility among journalists. Surely, not combining the INFOPS and PSYOPS with press offices into one organizational structure was beneficial. Any attempts (or accusations) of manipulation were negatively assessed by media representatives, making the building of trust and credibility at times impossible. Honesty and mutual respect, built through frequent contacts between press officers and journalists, lead to understanding and even support in

¹⁷ An appropriate choice of press officers to carry out tasks during missions outside the country is essential. What should be taken into consideration is their education, training, experience and understanding of modern media rules as well as the role which press agencies and media representatives play during such operations.

crisis situations. This is essential, taking into consideration the specificity of the work. Safety and image of the military depend on these relations as well as support for the mission. One of the most important issues is the ability to establish appropriate rules of cooperation based on mutual respect and trust, acceptable to both, the military and the media. Generally, such scenarios are difficult to achieve, regarding the conflict of interests between the two groups. Reality shows that quality of relations and professionalism are often verified in crisis situations.