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Will you run it? A gatekeeping experiment examining credibility, branding, and affiliation within information subsidies^{☆,☆☆,★}R. David Hecht^a, Fred Martin^a, Theresa Donnelly^a, Michael Larson^a,
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ABSTRACT

Information subsidies from military and civilian public relations practitioners receive varying degrees of acceptance by media gatekeepers. Using an experimental design, this study examined organizational affiliation within media gatekeeping. Television news decision-makers were randomly assigned one of five mock live news reports with only the reporter's clothing and on-air title manipulated. Results indicated affiliation did not affect gatekeeper use. Higher credibility was attributed to spokespersons with no organizational affiliation, and to military practitioners over civilians.

1. Introduction

When a train accident claimed the life of 50 people in October 1906, railroad publicist Ivy Lee did something most public relations practitioners today take for granted; Lee issued the very first press release. Lee used the newspapers to his advantage by telling the railroad's side of the story in his own words. The New York Times printed the press release word for word.

Ever since that day, public relations practitioners have used this strategy in an attempt to leverage the media to increase awareness and sway opinions. According to [McCombs \(2004\)](#), half of all news stories are “substantially based on news releases and other direct information subsidies” (p. 161). [Lewin's gatekeeping theory \(1947\)](#) provided an early framework for understanding the newspaper editorial decision-making process, and despite massive changes to the media landscape over the decades, this process remains much the same.

The tactics and tools used by PR practitioners have changed over the years, jumping from paper to videotape in the 1980s with the appearance of Video News Releases (VNRs). “Having started as oftentimes amateurish promotional video on three-quarter inch tape, the VNR has since evolved into a slick public relations tool” ([Pavlik, 2006, p. 17](#)). Also working to the benefit of practitioners, the late 1990s saw a decrease in newsroom staff size as the need for content only increased. [Lordan and Saint John \(2009\)](#) found that during this same time the number of VNRs increased as did their use by media outlets. VNRs today remain relevant, as [Broaddus, Harmon, and Mounts \(2011\)](#) noted TV news stations received dozens of such releases daily. Giving new life to VNRs, [Newell, Blevins, and](#)

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Bugeja (2009) asserted that as newsroom resources decrease the attractiveness of prepackaged content could create a dilemma for media struggling to fill a broadcast with fewer people to research, shoot, edit, and contribute to the storytelling. According to a survey conducted by the *Newsmarket* (2016), “offering multimedia content, especially video, for news distribution is now an expected and necessary offer online newsrooms to not only drive press to your site but to encourage them to tell your story” (pg. 2).

As such, multimedia (often video-heavy) packages are still supplied to journalists by public relations professionals as information subsidies, even as the industry and scholars tended to move away from the term VNR. For the heuristic purposes of connecting the current study to the rich scholarly work in VNR research, this study will still use the term even though the concept has obviously evolved due to technology and dissemination methods.

Today’s version of the VNR is conceptually very similar to its predecessor. That is, both contain multimedia content produced from a public relations perspective and are targeted to the journalist or media organization. To put it simply for comparison sake, both contain “video” and are “news releases.” That said, today’s media environment allows for a much richer dimension for these evolved information subsidies in that public relations professionals can better offer more tailored products, interactive products, and even live products less expensively than before. The importance of broadcast-quality information subsidies remains important today, as it did when VNRs first became a standard public relations tactic, but achieving that quality has become much more accessible for a wider variety of organizations due to the advances in technology. Furthermore, the dissemination changed as organizations moved to online newsrooms which are also accessible by the general public, thereby muddying the target audience of the information subsidy due to technology advancement.

Similar to organizations with corporate communication departments, the U.S. military has its own public information outreach mechanism known as public affairs. The military is required to release information on activities and programs without censorship or propaganda to the American public (Joint Publication 1-02, 2010). At times when locations are difficult or unsafe for civilian media to access, public affairs facilitate this mandate through the release of information in the form of a modern-day VNR. These video products are posted in an online newsroom by all four branches of the military on a single website for use by civilian media outlets. On a daily basis, more than 50 VNRs are uploaded to the site (K. Durand-Garlock, personal communication, January 26, 2016). Research suggested, however, that few modern-day VNRs were used in their original context and are often reedited and rewritten by civilian media before making the news (Cameron & Blount, 1996).

Even with the downsizing of news departments and increasing popularity of video content as a public relations tool, there are noted ethical concerns surrounding VNRs. Though public relations and journalism research alike substantiates the finding that a large percentage of news in independent news outlets come from public relations-produced information subsidies (Harmon & White, 2001), the VNR is accompanied with greater ethical and credibility concerns. In 2007 the Federal Communications Commission questioned Comcast Corporation’s use of VNRs and fined the news agency (Fees, 2008), citing the use of these public relations products as deceptive to audiences. Protected under free speech and legally secure in that news organizations are not paid for using VNR content, the threat of penalties for using VNRs have lessened. While some may contend the VNR is an antiquated technique, a Harmon and White (2001) study used tracking data coupled with self-report surveys of news directors and found VNRs are actually used at a much higher rate than the news industry admitted. The reliance on the modern-day VNR was reinforced in a survey published in 2016 of journalists that reported journalists visit public relations online newsrooms, some daily, looking for quality content to repurpose for their own work (Newsmarket, 2016).

Built on work of Harmon and colleagues (Harmon & White, 2001; Broaddus et al., 2011) which supports the more-than-you-would-think use of VNRs by news organizations, the purpose of this study is to determine if there is a negative bias against military-produced information subsidies by broadcast media outlets. Lewin’s gatekeeping theory (1947) and other literature on source credibility and branding will guide this research. Gatekeeping theory examines the decision-making process used by television news producers and assignment editors. Source credibility determines who newsroom decision-makers view as a credible source of information and branding determines how organizations maintain the qualities associated with its brand.

2. Literature review

This study is grounded in gatekeeping theory with emphasis on source credibility and branding. Previous research has not directly analyzed the decision-making process for broadcast media in their use or rejection of information subsidies containing any uniformed public relations spokespeople. However, gatekeeping and credibility literature can provide insight on how organizational affiliation through a uniformed spokesperson might be viewed and treated by the broadcast news media. The available literature offers a foundation for this first formal exploratory study that examines how media gatekeepers perceive military-produced VNRs and uniformed spokespeople.

2.1. Gatekeeping theory

Lewin (1947) first conceptualized the theory of gatekeeping within mediated communication and suggested that news items pass through a series of “gates,” on their pathway from initiation to transmission. Gates act as decision points where items can be discarded or passed along through sources, journalists, editors, and through the editing process itself (Lewin, 1947). White (1950) continued this line of thought and suggested that journalists and editors serve as the terminal “gate” for news, using their experiences, attitudes, and expectations as a basis for selecting or rejecting information (p. 390). Shoemaker, Eicholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2001) later defined gatekeeping as a decision-making process “by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media” (p. 233).

A great deal of potential news and messages presented to the media is subsidized information from outside organizations (Berkowitz, 1990; Berkowitz & Adams 1989). Gandy (1982) coined the term information subsidies, which are provisions generated by these organizations with the intent to obtain time and space within the news media to convey their messages. Journalists routinely rely on these information subsidies as they provide a greater selection of news stories, and are inexpensive for media outlets that often experience staff and resource constraints (Berkowitz & Adams, 1989; Cameron & Blount, 1996).

Sallot and Johnson (2006) suggested that information subsidies can influence 25% to 80% of news content presented to the public, while other studies have suggested that only one-quarter of all information subsidies ever make it into the news marketplace (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997). With so much content competition, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) stated that gatekeeping is a central media function for “people rely on mediators to transform information about billions of events into a manageable subset of media messages” (pg. 1).

Information subsidies can encounter many gates, whether individuals (e.g., journalists, producers, editors), or organizational routines (editorial rounds, policies). Each gate has a number of forces that can determine whether to halt the item or let it continue on for transmission to the public as news. These forces can be journalist perceptions of credibility and newsworthiness, journalist obligations to be independent and autonomous as members of the fourth estate, economic constraints of the news media, and media outlet brand identity and image (Berkowitz & Adams, 1989; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Oyediji, 2010; Shoemaker et al., 2001).

Cameron and Blount (1996) asserted that credibility and objectivity are central to media’s legitimacy and allow media gatekeepers autonomy in selecting and shaping the countless information subsidies they receive. With a predisposition to mistrust public relations (Cameron et al., 1997), journalists usually corroborate, edit, or reshape subsidies to the meet journalistic standards as well as the tastes of media audiences (Berkowitz & Adams, 1989; Shaver & Shaver, 2008). According to Lewin’s theory, gatekeepers prefer this neutral standpoint to avoid being a mouthpiece for outside organizations (Cameron & Blount, 1996; Curtin, 1999; Shoemaker et al., 2001). This directly supports Turk (1985, 1986a, 1986b), who studied PR information subsidies and found that journalists preferred information they had sought and obtained of their own accord.

PR practitioners wanting to inform and position their organization in a favorable light face a major hurdle in media gatekeepers (Hallahan, 1999). From a PR perspective, the question can be raised as to why traditional media is still important with its low success rate when there is a direct-to-consumer option in social media. Social media can allow PR practitioners to easily bypass the gates of the traditional media and deliver direct, unfiltered, and favorable frames and messages beyond the media to their consumers (Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011). However, Ha and Fang (2012) found that the breadth of television news audiences overlaps significantly with the internet as a news medium and that niche viewers desire the accuracy and credibility that traditional news content provides. Organizations whose existence depends on these niche audiences must use traditional media to reach them, even though they must yield some control over to a gatekeeper’s judgment as to what is newsworthy (Croft, 2008; ; Ha & Fang, 2011). Once through the gates though, PR practitioners can then attribute “the strength and purity of third-party credibility” to their favorable messages that appear in the media (Croft, 2008, p. 16).

While there may be many forces acting on the gatekeeping process, there is a certain consistency that journalist perceptions of an item’s credibility, objectivity, and newsworthiness are some of the greater forces in influencing gatekeeper decisions (Shoemaker et al., 2001). The proverbial keys to these gates – the journalistic influences of source credibility, and brand identity esteemed by media gatekeepers and their organizations – are essential for this study in addressing the broadcast viability of uniformed PR practitioners.

2.2. Source credibility

A key criterion for PR practitioners to obtain media time and space for their information subsidies is to have the perception of credibility with media professionals. Powers and Fico (1994) and Reich (2011) indicated source credibility is one of the most influential personal values among journalists in news selection. As a central journalistic value, Yoon (2005) defined source credibility as information perceived as accurate and unbiased by a journalist. In other words, news must be truthful (believable) and objective (without slant).

Reich (2011) stated that perceptions can be ascribed to individuals and institutions alike. For the purpose of this study, institutional gatekeeper credibility refers to the objectivity, newsworthiness, and trustworthiness of an organization or an organization’s spokesperson as perceived by media gatekeeper.

Sources have varying degrees of institutional gatekeeper credibility, and accusations of bias are not uncommon. For example, Sallot (1993) found that journalists consider most public relations materials as slanted, and Curtin (1999) found that editors credited government practitioners and their subsidies as suspect for only reporters provide a neutral standpoint. Now, the neutrality of reporters can apply to all information subsidies, however, even with great expertise, PR practitioners can be perceived as being inherently prone to bias and representing only favorable ideas about their organization (Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012). This in turn devalues the newsworthiness of an information subsidy, a key news value for journalists (Curtin, 1999).

In 2017, media mocked White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer after delivering what the administration labeled “alternative facts” during a press briefing (Kessler, 2017). In this example, the credibility of the content delivered as an information subsidy created question about the credibility of the source itself (Kessler, 2017).

Institutional gatekeeper credibility is a primary gatekeeping factor (Powers & Fico, 1994) that encompasses journalist perceptions of an institution, as well as that institution’s individual spokespeople (Reich, 2011). Journalists often see their goals of objectivity incompatible with a PR practitioner’s desire for favorable coverage, and can interpret that motive as an interference on the news

process (Cameron et al., 1997). Journalists and editors most certainly scrutinize, and often view with suspicion, the motives of institutions and their practitioners despite how newsworthy or accurate they are (Curtin, 1999).

From an audience perspective, Broaddus et al. (2011) examined whether audiences could detect content had been provided via a modern-day VNR and the potential deception that such content was produced by the media rather than as a public relations information subsidy. Their experiment found that audiences rarely thought about the originating source for content in the news, and the researchers contend there was a likelihood that audiences were deceived when VNRs were used by the media. Their study was similar to the work that recently emerged on native advertising, a print media version of sponsored content made to appear as if it was news (Sweetser, Ahn, Golan, & Hochman, 2016). Having examined the audience's ability to determine if native advertising was sponsored content, Sweetser et al. (2016) found participants in that experiment indeed had enough media literacy to understand and recognize when content was sponsored.

Credibility and trust in the information industry continues to be a key issue. For more than 17 years, the international public relations agency Edelman has annually conducted their institutional trust survey called the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2017). In 2003, they reported that earned media appeared to be more credible than advertising. Two years later in 2005 the international survey reported a shift from people trusting authorities to putting more emphasis on peers, later followed by the finding that "a person like me" was a credible spokesman. From 2016–2017, the Trust Barometer reported a decline in trust of media by 5 points and a 1-point decline in trust in government (Edelman, 2017).

2.3. Use of information subsidies

Newsworthy products provide organizations the chance for favorable media coverage, while providing cost savings to media outlets as they inform their audiences (Curtin, 1999). Relying on information subsidies helps relieve economic constraints and hastens publication times, especially when the products are presented in news style for easier incorporation into news broadcasts (Jacobs, 1999). Government and nonprofits organizations specifically take advantage of this exchange and have been found to provide the majority of information subsidies (Turk, 1986a, 1986b), with proportionality of topics within in a newscast favoring government issues above most others (Gant & Dimmick, 2000). Furthermore, general studies on news selection have delivered contrary findings as to the acceptance and rejection rates of these subsidies. Of note, Berkowitz (1990) while interviewing broadcast gatekeepers found that 78% of all potential stories were discarded on any given day. In addition, Cameron and Blount (1996) indicated the majority of VNRs aired are heavily truncated and edited. However, they also found that as long as a story resembles something the news outlet could have produced, it stands a reasonable chance of getting used (Cameron & Blount, 1996). This means media outlets continuously monitor potential news for anything inconsistent with the values and qualities in which their audiences are accustomed (Siegert, Gerth, & Rademacher, 2011). In other words, media outlets prefer to frame their own story vice using a PR practitioner's intended message to maintain the perception they stay consistent with their values, to include objectivity, completeness, and trustworthiness (Cameron & Blount, 1996).

2.4. Branding

Another gatekeeping factor aside from journalistic news values may be a media outlet's brand identity, and how it interacts with the branding of other organizations through information subsidies (Oyedeji, 2010). Oyedeji stated: "The primary purpose of branding is to communicate the tangible and intangible aspects of a brand to its consumers" (p. 89). In particular, this study used similar definition ascribed by Siegert (2008), in that branding was a promise to a particular kind of quality and aimed to differentiate an organization, service, or product from another.

An important promise that many news media organizations associate their brand identity with is quality specifically derived from journalistic news values (McManus, 1995), as in the ones previously discussed. Many media organizations promote trustworthiness, objectivity, credibility, and completeness as the fundamental qualities of their brand (Siegert et al., 2011). According to Oyedeji (2010), there have been concerted efforts by news outlets to define their brands and solidify perceptions of these qualities in the minds of consumers through branding campaigns, such as CNN's "The most trusted name in news." In her study of 250 h of broadcast television, Siegert (2008) found more than 2700 instances of TV stations self-promoting the character and qualities of certain programming, to include news shows and products, outside the airing of those programs. This type of repetitive branding exposure can build cognitive links and associations among audiences positioning a news program or product as competent, credible, and even leader-like (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2007; Siegert, 2008). In a study of adult news consumers, McDowell (2004) found a majority of respondents positively associated credibility, trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, and unbiased content among different news brands. Supporting this, Oyedeji's (2010) study of college-aged news consumers found that they assigned credibility of the news based on their perceptions of the credibility of the news outlet responsible for the message more than the message itself (p. 96).

As a news outlet's brand conveys certain qualities, likewise, outside organizations convey the qualities associated with their brands in their information subsidies. Whether the two brands have compatible values or not, often PR practitioners are seeking a credible broadcaster of their messages in order to share the credibility of the news organization (McManus, 1995; Siegert et al., 2011). According to Oyedeji and Duncan (2006), a majority of news consumers surveyed in his study associated their news brand loyalty to the media outlet's commitment to news quality and maintaining objectivity, accuracy, and fairness in their news reports.

The branding process provides the assurance that the newsgathering and the packaging of the news product represents the quality of reporting that media audiences have been promised by the outlet's branding campaign (Shaver & Shaver, 2008). When an information subsidy contains a fronted spokesperson identified either by title or uniform as a member of an outside organization, it may

not permit the news agency to apply its routine news gathering techniques or branding opportunities to ensure that the subsidy possesses its brand qualities of objectivity and credibility.

As [Harmon and White \(2001\)](#) stated, viewers assumed that they were watching the station's own newsgathering and independent judgment. Gatekeepers may attribute poor institutional gatekeeper credibility to uniformed spokespeople because they perceive the content as being slanted, one-sided, or self-serving in nature ([Cohen, 2008](#); [Curtin, 1999](#)). Gatekeepers may choose to reject or heavily edit these subsidies in order to avoid taking a perceived branding risk of falling short of objective, complete, and trustworthy reporting.

Every day, organizations such as the military, businesses, and nonprofits provide newsworthy information to news organizations through VNRs. While many VNRs might only be 90 s long, they often include extra sound bites, b-roll, and a suggested script that the reporter can read during the broadcast ([Harmon & White, 2001](#); [United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2011](#)).

Some may argue that in today's digital media landscape, VNRs are no longer relevant. A 2016 Cision state of the media report noted the changing media environment, but also recognized multimedia journalists were growing in numbers and video is one of the top three most important media trends (Cision, n.d.). According to their report, nearly half of all journalists say they use video products in their work and only 10% claim they "never" use video (Cision, n.d.). These findings were confirmed by another industry report ([Newsmarket, 2016](#)).

These trends in journalism open up opportunities for public relations to serve both traditional media and their target audiences at the same time. Because of a direct-to-consumer environment via social media, an organization does have the ability to communicate with an audience without using traditional media sources. To this point, [Hackl \(2016\)](#) celebrated the use of live video as a public relations tactic and focuses the ability of social media to offer that content directly to target audiences. Many corporations such as Procter & Gamble, Best Buy, MasterCard, and Coldwell Banker are now creating their own content and uploading directly to YouTube, bypassing long-established media gates ([Bush, 2009](#)). But communication firms are not abandoning mainstream media all together for digital/internet marketing only, instead they are adding social media to add to an overall promotional mix, which also includes advertising, sales, and public relations ([Belch & Belch, 2015](#)).

This modern-day VNR can aid resource-constrained media outlets by providing broadcast quality footage for events that a reporter could not travel to cover, saving time and money ([Cameron & Blount, 1996](#); [Sayres, 2006](#)). As for companies, the modern-day VNRs can help the organization come across as more trustworthy and credible than could be achieved from a paid advertisement ([Owen & Karrh, 1996](#)). Additionally, many PR practitioners reported VNRs were a way to fill a news hole for underreported "good news" stories ([Patterson & Wilkins, 1994, p. 64](#)).

Another reason these modern-day VNRs continued being used by television newsrooms was because media organizations were cutting staffing, doing less reporting, and granting less overtime because of budget constraints ([Cameron & Blount, 1996](#)). [Sayres \(2006\)](#) noted the most successful VNRs were those that provided content the journalist would otherwise not have access to, either because of resources or location.

The reported use of modern-day VNRs by newsrooms varies widely ([Harmon & White, 2001](#)). In a poll by the A.C. Nelson company, 78% of all television news companies used parts of VNRs at least once a week, but 48% edited their own story, and 75% preferred to have B-roll and sound bites accompany the package (as cited in [Cameron & Blount, 1996](#)). Even though many modern-day VNRs are meant for television, some media gatekeepers see them as a PR promotional tool disguised as news ([Harmon & White, 2001](#)). [Barstow and Stein \(2005\)](#) found through interviews with at least a dozen news directors that several expressed disdain and perceived a propaganda feel for prepackaged segments from special interest groups, corporations, and government agencies (p. 1). This sentiment raised potentially important ethical concerns among gatekeepers if a modern-day VNR should be used at all in news reporting.

As an alternative to modern-day VNRs, public relations organizations could provide news agencies a live talk-back. A live talk-back is defined as a public relations spokesperson telling the story to the studio anchorperson at the scene of action. Since many newsrooms have decreased producing their own live shots, a public relations produced live talk-back could fill a news gap. Little to no research currently exists to support a specific bias against a live talk-back by a PR spokesperson. However, the overall negative predisposition toward VNRs ([Berkowitz & Adams, 1989](#)), could affect a broadcast agency's willingness to use a public relations representative in a live talk-back.

The release of modern-day VNR products can occur directly from the organization itself, or through a distribution platform. For example, PR Newswire offers its clients video release options ([Newswire, n.d.](#)), and lists several case studies on their website as examples where multimedia releases earned media for its clients. More than a decade ago the military invested in a joint distribution hub for their multimedia content. The web-based Defense Video Imagery Distribution System describes itself as:

DVIDS is a state-of-the art, 24/7 operation owned by DMA (Defense Media Activity) that provides a timely, accurate and reliable connection between the media around the world and the military serving at home and abroad. Through a network of portable Ku-band satellite transmitters located in-theater, robust IP connections, and a distribution hub DVIDS makes available real-time broadcast-quality video, still images and print products as well as immediate interview opportunities with service members, commanders and subject matter experts ([DVIDS, n.d.](#)).

2.5. Military public affairs

Television news producers routinely reject most military information subsidies perceiving them as nothing more than military propaganda ([Cohen, 2008](#)). This directly supports [Gandy \(1982\)](#), which suggested the military is the most publicity conscious within the government and that its information is largely viewed by the media as self-promotional.

There has been fluctuating tension between the news media and the military since World War II (Brogan, 2006). According to Brogan, media interaction with the military has adapted from conflict to conflict, such as very permissive media access to operations (causing high tension for the military), restrictive access (causing tension and distrust in the media), and mixed levels of each (causing tension on both sides, and arguably amplifying the tension of both). Findings from several studies have indicated the reasons for this relationship strain are the media's desire for unfettered access and the military's desire for control and restrictions on that access (Brogan, 2006; Cohen, 2008; Combelles & Siegel, 1996). Furthermore, Hsia (2011) stated that successful military operations demand the element of surprise and require secrecy, while the media seeks transparency in reporting. While this tension creates distrust between the two organizations, Brogan (2006) concluded that it is possible they may reach a compromise, but never reach actual cooperation.

News organizations want to present objective, concrete news. With objectivity being a main journalistic ideology, Shoemaker and Reese (2011) mirrored Brogan's conclusions by attributing the authoritarian, one-sided nature of government sources as detractors to their use.

Government-affiliated subsidies may have poor institutional gatekeeper credibility and may not be chosen due to the tension between the media and the military and the media's perception they present less than objective material.

Based on the literature explored above, the research questions are:

RQ1A: Does organizational branding have an impact on the gatekeeping process?

RQ1B: Does organizational affiliation have an impact on the gatekeeping process?

RQ2A: Does organizational branding have an impact on credibility?

RQ2B: Does organizational affiliation have an impact on credibility?

3. Method

This exploratory study empirically examines the perception of credibility and likelihood of gatekeeper use of video news releases containing a uniformed spokesperson. This study used a post-test only experimental design with a control group ($N = 217$) to empirically examine the effect of institutional gatekeeper credibility and branding within the context of the use of information subsidies. The independent variables manipulated are branding opportunity through organizational clothing (uniforms) and identity, which may impact gatekeeper credibility through organizational affiliation.

3.1. Procedure and design

The research instrument was sent via a link in an email to a list of media contacts obtained through VOCUS, as well as an email to the members of a professional society of media professionals, called the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), in a weekly newsletter with the cooperation of that organization. The instrument contained consent and screening questions to ensure only data from participants fitting selection criteria were analyzed.

Participants of the experiment were randomly exposed to one of five videos (including a control group video). The videos were representative of a live report about a fire onboard a cruise-line ship which was aided by a U.S. naval vessel while at sea. The same individual, script, and b-roll footage was used in all five videos.

The experimental cells were manipulated as follows:

- Navy/Uniform ($n = 44$) – The reporter is wearing a military uniform (low branding opportunities for news media) and identified as a U.S. Navy petty officer (low institutional credibility).
- Navy/No-uniform ($n = 43$) – The reporter is wearing civilian clothes (low threat to branding opportunities) and identified as a U.S. Navy petty officer (low institutional credibility).
- Cruise Line/Uniform ($n = 46$) – The reporter is wearing a cruise line uniform (low branding opportunities for news media) and identified as a Carnival Cruise Line safety officer (increased institutional credibility).
- Cruise Line/No-uniform ($n = 46$) – The reporter is wearing civilian clothes (low threat to branding opportunities) and identified as a Carnival Cruise Line safety officer (increased institutional credibility).
- Control – ($n = 38$) This is the control group video. It featured a man in civilian clothes (no branding conflict) and identified by name only, without any military or cruise line title (no institutional credibility concern).

3.2. Sample

A mixed method of recruitment was employed in cooperation with RTDNA. The researchers solicited participation in the study via the regular RTDNA newsletter. This pool of participants spanned all positions in radio and television newsrooms that make editorial decisions on content for news programming (news directors, producers, assignment editors). Once potential participants clicked the link in the newsletter, they were taken directly to the consent form that acted as the gateway to the study. The sample was further drawn through the VOCUS distribution list. The members of this list were sent direct links to the study by email.

All participants were adult professionals working in the media field (e.g., journalists). Only professional media industry personnel

Table 1
Gatekeeping and Credibility Indices.

	M	SD
Gatekeeping Index (alpha = .97)	11.47	7.65
Willingness to use the live shot		
– Not all likely – Very likely	2.82	1.99
– Not all probable – Very probable	2.86	1.98
– Not at all possible – Very possible	3.04	2.08
– Definitely would not use – Definitely would use	2.71	1.87
Credibility Index (alpha = .96)	30.33	12.54
Credibility of the live shot:		
-Insincere – Sincere	4.40	1.92
-Dishonest – Honest	4.67	1.84
-Not trustworthy – Trustworthy	4.20	2.01
-Not credible – Credible	4.09	2.08
-Biased – Not biased	3.88	2.08
-Not believable – Believable	4.48	2.02
-Disreputable – Reputable	4.37	1.97

Note. Items were measured on a 7-point semantic differential.

were targeted. Because this study focuses on what professionals in the media industry do with packaged news content provided to them, this demographic is key in determining what aspects of that packaged content is attractive. All participants were adults aged 18 or older.

3.3. Instrument

All participants completed the same post-test questions.

Gatekeeper use of a product was measured with an index of a 7-point, 4-item semantic-differential scale (Homer, 1995); ($\alpha = 0.97$). The scale asked participants to indicate their willingness to use the product on a scale between two extremes of a concept, See Table 1 for item details.

Source credibility was measured with an index of a 7-point semantic differential scale with seven items (Tripp, Jenson, & Carlson, 1994); ($\alpha = 0.96$). The scale asked how credible the participant found the news story between two antonyms. See Table 1 for details.

Participants then responded to a series of questions regarding prior use of information subsidies, a manipulation check, and demographic information, including prior military service and information on their newsroom. See Table 2 for details.

A manipulation check was employed after each video to measure how the participants identified the organizational affiliation of the individual as well as the type of clothing the individual was wearing in the video. Results indicate that the manipulation for affiliation, $\chi^2 = 185.74$, d.f. = 12, $p < 0.01$, and clothing, $\chi^2 = 82.72$, d.f. = 8, $p < 0.01$ were successful.

4. Results

This study employed a four-cell plus control group post-test only experimental design fielded nationally to broadcast news and

Table 2
Use Of Information Subsidies.

	Frequency	Valid%
Used products from outside organization	136	62.7%
- As b-roll/or sound bites	116	89.2%
- Edited with own reporter's voice-over	91	71.7%
- Unedited/original format	48	38.1%
Used military subsidies in a newscast	84	61.8%
- As b-roll/or sound bites	75	94.9%
- Edited with own reporter's voice-over	52	67.5%
- Unedited/original format	20	26.3%
Reasons for not using original military subsidy		
- Network need for reporter presence (branding)	38	66.7%
- Length	36	62.1%
- Perception of bias/slant/"spin" of the product	37	61.7%
- Production quality	23	39.7%
- Technical quality/format problem	22	37.9%
- Always used these products in original form	3	5.5%
- Other	1	7.7%

media professionals. The two distribution lists (RTNDA, VOCUS) provided participants from large, mid-size, and small media markets and news outlets across the United States. The experiment included but was not limited to reporters, anchors, editors, producers, directors, hosts, and network owners. After excluding invalid email addresses, 3500 news media professionals were contacted as the final list of participants. A total of 217 participants responded resulting in a 6.2% response rate. Out of the 217 responses, 160 (73.8%) participants completed the experiment in full. Data was collected in early 2016.

While this is a low response rate for a national sample, previously published research has indicated internet surveys of journalists generally yield low results due to the workload and time constraints of their professional lives (Crown & Stevens, 2012; Du & Lo, 2014). Additionally, Schonlau, Fricker, and Elliot (2001) in their study of internet-based studies found in general that email surveys can produce response rates less than 10% and as low as 6%. Indeed, one published study of journalists and one of photojournalists reported a response rate of 9.59% (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2015) and 4.09% (Neal, 2008), indicating the particular response rate of this study may be acceptable.

The media professionals sampled were 52.5% ($n = 114$) male, 40.6% ($n = 88$) female, and 0.5% ($n = 1$) identified as other. A majority of participants identified as White (74.7%, $n = 162$) followed by Hispanic/Latino (8.8%, $n = 19$), Asian (4.6%, $n = 10$), Black or African American (4.1%, $n = 9$), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1.8%, $n = 4$). The average age was reported as 44.5 years ($SD = 12.23$). A majority indicated they had earned a bachelor's degree (57.6%, $n = 125$), while 19.4% ($n = 42$) had earned a master's degree, and 2.8% ($n = 6$) a doctorate degree. A majority of respondents stated they worked in television broadcast (44.7%, $n = 97$) with the next largest industries reported as print (20.3%, $n = 44$) and Internet/electronic media (17.1%, $n = 37$). Regarding former U.S. military members, 8.3% ($n = 18$) indicated they had once served in the U.S. military.

4.1. Use of information subsidies

A majority of participants (62.7%, $n = 136$) indicated their media organization had used information subsidies from outside organizations. Consistent with Cameron and Blount (1996) who stated most VNR's are heavily edited or truncated, a majority of participants indicated they preferred to edit subsidies using b-roll and sound bites (89.2%, $n = 116$) and their own reporter's voice-over narration (71.7%, $n = 91$). Only 38.1% ($n = 48$) responded having used information subsidies unedited in the original submitted format.

Investigating participants' use of military information subsidies, a majority (61.8%, $n = 84$) said they had used military subsidies within their newscasts. Of these participants, 94.9% ($n = 75$) used b-roll and sound bites and 61.8% ($n = 52$) used their own reporter for voice-over narration. Only 26.3% ($n = 20$) had ever used a military subsidy unedited in its original submitted format.

For participants who chose to edit military subsidies, the most reported reason was the network need for reporter presence (branding) at 66.7% ($n = 38$) followed by the subsidy's length (62.1%, $n = 36$), perception of bias (61.7%, $n = 37$), and production quality issues (39.7%, $n = 23$).

4.2. Branding impact on gatekeeping

RQ1A focused on whether organizational branding has an impact on the gatekeeping process. In the examination, the strength of the likelihood and willingness of media gatekeepers to use the stimulus was tested based on the five experimental cells. An initial ANOVA was conducted but resulted in no statistically significant relationships between branding and gatekeeper use of information subsidies. RQ1A was answered in that branding does not appear to impact the gatekeeping process.

4.3. Affiliation impact on gatekeeping

RQ1B asked how affiliation might correlate with the likelihood of gatekeepers to use information subsidies. To answer this, the credibility index (perceived credibility of the affiliation in each cell) was correlated with the likelihood index. A correlation between credibility and likely gatekeeper use of an information subsidy was significant and positive ($r = 0.51$, $p \leq 0.001$). RQ1B is answered in that credibility and gatekeeping have a positive, moderate relationship.

4.4. Branding impact on credibility

Next, RQ2A asked if branding impacts institutional gatekeeper credibility. An ANOVA examined this relationship and showed a difference in how participants assessed credibility based on experimental cell, $F(4, 182) = 5.75$, $p \leq 0.001$. A follow-up Bonferroni post-hoc analysis revealed that the highest credibility assessment belonged to the Navy/Uniform cell when compared to the Civilian/Uniform cell ($M = 11.13$; $SD = 2.67$; $p \leq 0.001$), followed by the Navy/No uniform cell as also compared to the Civilian/Uniform cell ($M = 9.16$; $SD = 2.71$; $p = 0.009$). Additionally, higher credibility was also assessed to the Navy/Uniform cell as compared to the Civilian/No uniform cell ($M = 17.92$; $SD = 2.70$; $p = 0.038$). Thus, RQ2A is answered in that participants assigned different levels of credibility for the organizations presented. That is, there was greater credibility attributed to the Navy spokesperson in and out of uniform than the civilian in and out of uniform. This indicates that a government spokesperson – regardless of uniform – is seen as credible sources.

4.5. Affiliation impact on credibility

To further analyze credibility assessment based on affiliation, data from the Navy/Uniform and Navy/No uniform cells were combined, as were the Civilian/Uniform and the Civilian/No uniform cells. An ANOVA was then conducted on these new variables to examine their relationship to credibility which showed yet another difference, $F(2, 184) = 10.50, p \leq 0.001$. A Bonferroni post-hoc analysis revealed that more credibility was assessed to the Navy experimental cells ($M = 8.61; SD = 1.91; p \leq 0.001$) and control cell ($M = 6.28; SD = 2.53; p \leq 0.001$) than the civilian experimental cells. As such, RQ2 B is answered in that participants assigned different levels of credibility based on the spokesperson's affiliation. These results indicate military spokespeople have more credibility than civilian spokespeople.

4.5.1. Post-hoc qualitative analysis

After the formal research questions for the study were answered, a post-hoc qualitative assessment of an open-ended question on the post-test provided further understanding of the news media's perception of VNRs, the spokespeople, and credibility.

Of the 217 participants, 132 (61%) gave feedback when asked at the end of the post-test if they had any "additional thoughts on what factors influence their decision to use or not use products/information subsidies from outside organizations, specifically and including the U.S. military." This qualitative question sought to further delve into the issues earlier addressed by [Harmon and White \(2001\)](#) from the military public relations perspective as to the attractiveness or the resistance of VNRs.

Noting how the participants expressed particular thoughts toward an information subsidy, most of the comments fell under four general categories. Some participants expressed more than one of these general sentiments in their comments. The categorizations of gatekeepers' use of a military information subsidy included:

1. Use only under certain circumstances, such as to supplement news-produced package, take B-roll, sound-bites, etc. ($n = 27$; 12.4%).
2. Would never use an information subsidy ($n = 24$; 11%).
3. Stimulus was a poor production ($n = 22$; 10.1%).
4. Information subsidies (considered propaganda) unethical to use ($n = 13$; 5.9%).

One participant did mention a preference for an information subsidy only from the military. Four participants thought the video was a quality production.

5. Discussion

This exploratory study built on the much-supported research that journalists still rely on practitioner-provided subsidies, often as multimedia packages here conceptualized as a modern-day VNR, and therefore sought to understand which elements of those subsidies would appeal to journalists. The experiment bore out that there were no statistically significant differences in gatekeeper likelihood to use these modern-day VNR products. Even so, the experiment yielded strong results in terms of credibility, with newsroom decision-makers considering military public affairs professionals more credible than their civilian counterparts.

Though the Edelman Trust Barometer reports trust in the military has decreased ([Edelman, 2017](#)), the findings here suggest that amongst news media, public affairs products from the military were more credible than civilian corporate products. Somewhat surprising to the researchers, more than half (61.8%) of these media personnel reported using military information subsidies in their newscasts. These results echoed findings from earlier studies ([Cision, n.d.](#); [Newsmarket, 2016](#)), and supported the relevance and even reliance of modern-day VNRs. The high use of military subsidies could be because a number of military stories are not easily accessible to media (with base locations being geographically isolated or closed base access) or due to the work of the DVIDS organization in marketing their military content to journalists. Interestingly, the qualitative comments hit on desirability or acceptability of using military information subsidies are mixed with some journalists reporting that they would *only* use public relations content from the military to those which said they would *never* consider using military content in fear of losing the perception of objectivity.

This further highlights the decades of tension and distrust between the media and the military, as noted by [Combelles-Siegel \(1996\)](#). It is possible that efforts since the end of the first Gulf War, however, have strengthened the relationship between the military and media. To that point, participants responded to an open-ended question with several comments on their willingness to use military information subsidies:

'I have used news releases in the past from the U.S. military and would not hesitate to use them again.'

"We use information from outside organizations all the time. You just have to make sure it is accurate. The U.S. military like any other source has a point of view. So you have to balance that with other sources."

These qualitative comments from the journalists in this study taken in the context of the 2017 "alternative facts" scandal from the White House press secretary showed the importance of public relations professionals actively managing their own credibility through honest and accurate interactions with the media. Even with the current media backlash against the White House Communications Office, industry coverage of journalists' reactions do not yet appear to have let that interaction degrade their relationship and trust in other government public affairs officials, though that is a possibility.

Certainly, journalists are paid to be skeptical, so distrust of military produced products still exists. But as trust gains a foothold between the military and the media, the relationship between the media and civilian public relations practitioners remains one of “friendly adversaries” (Berkowitz & Adams, 1989, p. 724). As shown in the significantly higher perceptions of bias from the cruise line videos, there is clearly a difference between how products from different organizations are perceived:

“It’s a video news release, written, produced and packaged by the cruise line. We don’t use video news releases because they are not objective. They share only the cruise line talking points. We prefer using our own reporters to research the story.”

“This was clearly a PR piece so no, I would never use anything like this in a story.”

“It is our corporate policy to not use VNRs, with the exception of the military.”

When asked if their television station uses information subsidies in their newscast, 62% of the participants said yes. This is 16% lower than findings by Cameron and Blount (1996) who found that “78% of all television stations use edited materials from VNRs at least once per week” (p. 891).

The apparent decrease in the use of information subsidies could be attributed to a resurgence in newsroom staff sizes which have been steadily growing since 2003 (Pew, 2007). The more journalists you have at your disposal, the less dependent you are on external sources for informational products. With a majority (89%) of participants who said they’ve used an informational subsidy in a newscast, most have also scavenged them for video and sound bites, or rewrote the story in their own words. As such, this data from the current experiment were congruent with other studies (Cision, n.d.; Newsmarket, 2016), with the participants in this study reporting a slightly larger reliance on video products. By editing an information subsidy, it allowed the networks to address concerns of bias, put their own brand onto a story, and include information gathered from other sources. Using information from other sources also appeared to be a preferred option when possible.

5.1. Future research

Given the reported use of information subsidies by journalists, these studies in modern-day VNRs continue to be as ripe with opportunity as they were when the concept first emerged. The term VNR was used here for heuristic value, but whatever the content is labeled it appeared that there were a number of elements journalists considered when reviewing a subsidy. Carrying out a similar study with public participation, rather than news media, would potentially provide interesting insight into any differences between news media and public perceptions. Furthermore, a similar study architecture with different video subsidy products, such as b-roll footage, may provide further insight into what video products media outlets would be particularly interested in using.

Finally, a co-orientation examination of news media and public relations (and in particular, military public relations) practitioners could provide interesting data – the authors of this paper believe it is likely there are some misunderstandings between the two on what is desired on the part of the media, and what the intentions are on the part of the PR practitioners.

5.2. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The study had a relatively low response rate, which is common for studies involving journalists (Crown & Stevens, 2012; Du & Lo, 2014). It is possible additional relationships could become apparent with a larger sample. In addition, it is possible the specific video story produced was less appealing to media than others could have been, which could have skewed gatekeeper use.

5.3. Practical implications

The results of this study provide insight on the reception and perception of information subsidies by gatekeepers as a whole. It is evident based on previous research (Broaddus et al., 2011; Cision, n.d.; Newsmarket, 2016; Sayres, 2006), as well as the high number of journalist here who reported having used subsidies, that indeed subsidies (especially video) continue to be in demand. That said, it is clear that not all content is created as equal. The qualitative remarks from the gatekeepers indicated that an overly “messed” public relations information subsidy was less attractive, as was one with low production quality.

This suggests that practitioners should focus their modern-day VNR efforts on trying to replicate, as close as possible, the journalistic standard. Similar to the guidelines promoted by the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (2011) for their external publics, public relations practitioners should mirror production techniques and avoid an overly one-sided presentation of the organization message that might be categorized as “PR fluff” or “spin.”

When possible, practitioners should emphasize the uniqueness of content to media gatekeepers in releasing the information subsidy. That is, highlight the inaccessibility of the site or story, or the resources of effort the journalist would otherwise have to expend in order to tell the story organically. By showcasing the value the information subsidy brings to the journalist, it makes the information subsidy more attractive for gatekeepers’ edited use.

6. Conclusion

Media gatekeepers remain the door through which PR practitioners must operate if they are to utilize conventional mass media as a communication channel. Our research has shown the impact organizational affiliation of spokespersons can have on gatekeeper’s

perceptions of credibility. Awareness of the factors that impact use of information subsidies is critical for PR practitioners to have so they can produce credible products. This research provided the basis for revived exploration of the factors impacting gatekeeper decision-making as our concept of the modern-day VNR and other information subdivides continues to evolve.

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