

The military and the media

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Relations internationales

The military fact, whether it is operational, sociological, equipment or budget-related, only appears occasionally in the media, especially when a dramatic event affects the armed forces. This interest in armies is sincere, but too sporadic. How can the military respond to this sudden expectation, but above all ensure a certain permanence of interest in the military fact? Moreover, this interest from the public and the media is combined with a fear, or rather a mistrust, of the military towards them. How can the media-military relationship be made more peaceful? These are the two questions I will try to answer. To do so, I will draw on my experience as a media worker, an experience that has led me to be often called on television and radio for several years now.

The media use three channels for subjects relating to military matters: the institutional, "specialised" journalists or occasional "specialists".

The institutional channel aims to provide reliable information on events or subjects of interest related to defence. To this end, it has a communications directorate and communications officers in the headquarters, who disseminate information to accredited journalists or set up officers to provide information directly, particularly to television and radio stations. With regard to the latter aspect, it should be noted that, for the first time, during the events in Mali on 25 November 2019, the army general staff appointed officers, who went out in uniform to represent the armies very effectively on television. The information provided was factual and fully responded to the media's need for technical and tactical elements. This change of attitude in the communication of the armies is to be welcomed but, given the number of officers required, can only correspond to a crisis plan.

The "defence specialist" journalists meet the need for permanent monitoring of issues related to this field. They are generally well-informed and have the time needed to do their job. However, being journalists (some of them are reservists), they cannot fully

reflect both the internal vision of the armed forces and the practical aspects of the profession of arms. They are observers who deliver personal messages but who, through their journalistic work, are closer to the editorial staff and politicians than to the military.

Between these two categories of observers, journalists and active soldiers, there is a third category of observers, generally chosen by the media on the basis of random criteria: retired soldiers known as "defence specialists". This is where my personal experience allows me to illustrate my point. These are occasional speakers, but whose closeness to the armed forces and freedom of tone are qualities that are appreciated.

In this category, the "second-section generals" hold a special place given their long experience and the reference given by the rank of general. The selection criteria are very diverse, but can be summarized as follows: to be close to the studios (therefore Parisian), to be informed and responsive, to be able to work in a wide range of fields (land, air, sea, geopolitics, defence) and to be able to take his place on the set alongside the usual speakers

The big advantage of these players is that they do not cost anything, neither to the media nor to armies. The big disadvantage is that it relies solely on the goodwill of the speaker and his or her ability to keep informed. On the latter point, efforts have recently been made by the armed forces to set up a network disseminating digital information on a daily basis and a reactive point of contact within the staff.

However, this volunteerism requires a definite effort to stay informed and available. Indeed, when an event occurs, the response time on a channel is measured in minutes (radio), hours (television), rarely days (special topics). It is therefore the commitment and dedication to the profession of arms that characterizes this type of intervener. In a very practical way, his intervention is essentially based on the distribution of his mobile phone number among journalists who "subscribe" to their defence specialist.

In view of the criteria mentioned, this type of person must have operational experience and have served at a sufficient level of synthesis in the staffs. In my particular case, my successive assignments in NEW YORK with the Security Council have been a major asset, not only in summing up my credibility in intervening ("..."), but also in providing me with the opportunity to work with the Security Council. former head of the French military mission to the UN"), but also given the extent of the geopolitical subjects I had to deal with, which became a real passion. The practice of the English language is an additional asset that allows me to intervene on English-speaking channels (BBC, CNN, Sky News, France24 ...).

Back to civilian life, the speaker generally has a professional activity allowing him to live in Paris. However, in order to be effective vis-à-vis the media, a capacity of presence is required, which is not negligible and must be accepted by the employer. Indeed, during crises, I have been present on six channels during the day with schedules ranging from 6 am to 11 pm, which is a real marathon. For my part, I select the channels according to the quality of the program and the journalist, but also according to the audience. Thus, alongside the purely French channels (BFM, LCI, CNews, Public Sénat, la 5, M6...), I appreciate France 24 for its African audience, Russia Today and Sputnik for the Russian audience, CNN and Sky News for the English-speaking audience and 124 News for the

Israelis.

Why continue to intervene like this when this voluntary mission takes a lot of time, sometimes puts me on the razor's edge and can therefore get me very aggressive criticism? Three reasons guide me. First of all, the possibility of delivering messages to a large audience in support of the armies and, more generally, of France's role in the world. Secondly, the intellectual enrichment that this brings me through contact on the sets with real specialists, which allows me to learn a lot. Finally, I must also mention the support I receive from my comrades and from a large audience who let me know that my contributions are appreciated. At the end of the day, I feel that I am always serving.

My experience tells me that today's armies enjoy an enviable public aura and that every opportunity must be used to keep them in the news. This shows that the commitment of the military is there, not only to ensure the defence of the country and its citizens, but also, more generally, to participate in the cohesion of the Nation through involvement in the media. The presence of general officers on the plateaus to deal with topics related to defence, but also geopolitics, contributes to the positive image of these servants of the State. I often say to journalists: "I am a general, therefore a generalist, not a specialist! ». The institution should encourage this type of volunteering and for this reason it should be better introduced into the journalistic environment through accreditation and regular briefings.

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