

Defense Information School Hosts Journalists, Students Gain Media Perspective

Defense Information School Public Affairs Leadership Department Staff

FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. – A media discussion panel with three national and international journalists was held here April 30 to give students the chance to better understand key elements of effective media relations.

Students in the Public Affairs Qualification Course were able to devote an entire morning of training to discussions with Fernando Pizarro from Univision, Hugh Sykes from BBC, and Doug Waller, author and former military correspondent with both Time and Newsweek magazines.

Sykes opened the morning's events with a presentation featuring his experiences as an embedded reporter with both the U.S. and British militaries. "Being an embed gives me good stories," he said. He first went to Iraq in April 2003, two days after the fall of Sadaam Hussein, and has made numerous trips back for continued coverage of events there.

When media representatives embed with a unit they live and work with troops who are on deployment. "You need to have a clear idea of what the unit does," Sykes said. Reporters learn first-hand the nuances of military life and culture, which enables them to better understand the issues they report on.

The international nature of the panel was enhanced with Pizarro's experience as a freelance correspondent for CNN en Español and producer for Associated Press Television. He has also been the U.S. correspondent for National Television of Chile, and sports anchor at ESPN International, NBC Latin America, Telefuturo and Pan American Sports Network.

Waller's experience as a diplomatic correspondent throughout Europe, Asia and the Middle East, coupled with his nearly two decades as a Washington journalist covering the Pentagon, Congress, State Department, White House and CIA added to the mix to make for a lively, educational exchange for the students and faculty.

The panel fielded questions from the 60 students ranging from the nature of truth in media reporting to how Public Affairs Officers can best support media requests for information and interviews.

Commenting on the nature of the news cycle both journalists and PAOs are faced with, Pizarro said "24-hour media is a monster you have to feed." Journalists are facing competition from other networks and sources, as well as from within their own organizations. Sykes urged PAOs to be aware of this aspect as they approach media relations, and to "keep in mind what the product is."

Since he first worked as a reporter, said Sykes, he has approached journalism as a profession with "universal skepticism." He urges his colleagues to "challenge accepted truth."

“War is all about the will to fight, clearly the nation’s will to fight is shaped by what citizens see in the media. While skepticism is valuable, this constant drum beat of skepticism by the media will have its effect,” said U.S. Army Maj. John Alderman IV. “How does this impact how we achieve [the DINFOS motto] Strength through Truth?”

There are almost always different truths, said Waller. PAOs need to be mindful of this as they arrange for media access and interviews he added.

The exchange gave students the opportunity to examine the notion of objective truth and public opinions in media reporting as time ran out for the panel.

“This was a great event,” said Ana Allen, a PAQC student assigned to the Soldiers Media Center in Crystal City, Va. “This is exactly the type of interaction I was hoping to get out of DINFOS.”

For more information on the Defense Information School, go to <http://www.dinfos.osd.mil/>