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## Research Article

### Relevance of Coast Guard Public Affairs Service: Basis for Development of Officer's Course Instructional Guide

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#### ABSTRACT

With the rapid change of information environment, this study explored the relevance of the Coast Guard Public Affairs Service (CGPAS) in executing the functions of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG). The research highlights the essential skills of Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) in these areas: Media Relations, Public Information Dissemination, and Social Media Management in promoting a positive image of the PCG.

The study utilized survey and interview to gather data from 40 PAOs, majority with the rank of Ensigns, with at least six months PAO experience; 84 Heads of Offices (HOs), who were mostly Captains; and four Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in Public Affairs, Education, and Training, all from the PCG. Results revealed that PAOs, HOs and SMEs concurred on the crucial role of CGPAS in the execution of PCG functions, particularly in crisis communication and public image promotion. In terms of skill levels of PAOs, the overall scenario-based exam results coincided with the overall HO's perception. Both were equivalent to Competent, based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition. The study also identified challenges faced by PAOs, including role overload from multiple designations and inadequate resources such as office space, trained spokesperson and PA equipment.

Recommendations included providing better equipment, comprehensive trainings on crisis communication, news writing and cybersecurity, fostering organizational collaboration, and recruiting specialists. Finally, a Course Instructional Guide for Public Affairs Officers was developed and proposed for adoption and implementation to hone their effectiveness in promoting the PCG's mission and functions.

**Keywords:** *Coast Guard Public Affairs Service, Instructional Guide, PCG, Public Affairs*

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## **Introduction**

The concept of Public Affairs (PA) or Public Relations (PR) traces back to ancient Greece, where scholars like Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates explored rhetoric's role in governance (Yannas & Triantafillidou, 2024). However, the structured discipline recognized today, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the US, due to industrialization's complexities (Schechter, 2023).

During the 20th century, especially during wars and political turmoil, PA played a pivotal role. Governments used propaganda extensively in World Wars I and II, while the Cold War era saw significant public diplomacy efforts and information warfare between superpowers (Tanabe, 2022).

In today's information landscape, effective PA is crucial. It is exemplified in the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) through Coast Guard Public Affairs Service (CGPAS) as it defends PCG against vulnerabilities and shapes public narrative (Balilo, personal communication, March 26, 2024).

The CGPAS is responsible for sharing to the public about PCG operations and achievements, particularly in marine environmental protection, maritime safety, search and rescue, and law enforcement (Philippine Coast Guard Law, 2009). According to Ona, et al. (2021), as the PCG expands its roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening its Public Affairs functions becomes increasingly important to garner support from the government and the public in fulfilling its mandated tasks.

The CGPAS has been instrumental in maintaining the PCG's public image focused on quality service and establishing connections with stakeholders locally and internationally. This is achieved through reliable Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) who serve as spokespersons, handle media relations, and share information in various social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok), as well as through mainstream media channels like television, newspapers, and radio. These platforms serve as avenues for sharing announcements and activities, expanding audience reach, and building public trust and confidence.

The surge in social media usage globally, particularly in the Philippines, transforms

communication patterns (Tus, 2021). This highlights the significance of PA within the evolving landscape of technology and information. It is no longer solely about transmitting information but has become a strategic component in facilitating the effective execution of government initiatives (Lani and Handayani, 2021).

Without the CGPAS, it would result in the oversight of PCG's endeavors. Thus, there is a need for well-trained PAOs who can keep up with the latest communication media and technology trends to be more effective in sharing information (Balilo, personal communication, March 26, 2024).

With all the dynamic challenges in the maritime sector, Lani and Handayani (2021) emphasized the necessity to enhance the proactive role of Public Relations in packaging information, addressing emerging issues within society, and presenting them with accuracy, balance, and proportionality to prevent negative perceptions of the government.

However, despite its crucial role, the CGPAS faces challenges in providing comprehensive training for its officers and men. While the service offers short seminars on topics like Social Media Management, Media Relations and Basic Photography, there is a lack of standardized training programs for future PAOs.

According to the University of Minnesota (2016), challenges in providing comprehensive training persist, necessitating tailored programs, especially for PAOs. Hence, it is important for organizational leaders to understand the role that training and development plays in improving the ever-evolving roles of its personnel and their performance to help the organization succeed (Walters & Rodriguez, 2019).

The researcher discovered limited studies on the training of Public Affairs Officers in uniformed services and maritime institutions. Santiago (2016) supports this, noting that while PAOs use social media effectively, more research is needed to evaluate and improve their training. Similarly, this prompted a study to develop a Course Instructional Guide (CIG) tailored to CG PAOs' needs such as continuous trainings for knowledge and skill mastery.

In essence, developing and implementing standardized training for future PAOs enables them to handle crises proficiently and foster positive relationships with stakeholders, the public, and media partners.

## **Methods**

This study employed a mixed-method research design of both qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with SMEs and quantitative research through survey with PAOs and HOs, to determine the relevance of Coast Guard Public Affairs Service.

The researcher used Concurrent Triangulation, a method done to validate, cross-validate, or corroborate study. Here, data collection was done simultaneously for both qualitative and quantitative aspects of a single study. The intention of this kind of research is to confirm the results produced by each approach using proof that the other has produced (Hassan, 2022).

The variables considered in this study are the following: Relevance of Coast Guard Public Affairs Service, Public Affairs Officers' Skills in Media Relations, Public Information Dissemination and Social Media Management, as well as the challenges they encountered in the performance of their duties and responsibilities as PAO and training recommendations. These variables were evaluated by employing statistical analysis of data collected through survey questionnaires. It was supported with thematic analysis based on the interview with SMEs to gauge the overall relevance of CGPAS as basis in crafting the Public Affairs Officer's Course Instructional Guide.

The study involved 40 Public Affairs Officers from the PCG, representing majority of the 47 officers in the population. They were purposely selected based on inclusion criteria, having at least six months of experience and are currently or previously assigned in CGPAS or performing PA duties in PCG Functional Commands; Coast Guard Districts; Administrative Support Commands, Operational Support Commands, Technical Service Commands and Special Service Commands.

Furthermore, another set of respondents were the 84 Heads of Offices or Senior Officers. Total enumeration was employed covering the entire population from various branches of the

PCG, including the Flag Office, Central Staff, Functional Commands, and their sub-units, Coast Guard Districts, and other relevant commands. These individuals were selected for their strategic mindset and ability to recognize the importance of Public Affairs in their respective roles, leveraging their expertise and experience.

Finally, four Subject Matter Experts were selected for interviews, including the former and Acting Commander of CGPAS, the current Development Management Officer of CGPAS who previously served as a Communications Officer in the Department of Transportation, and the Deputy Chief of Coast Guard Staff for Training and Education, CG-12. These experts were selected using purposive quota sampling due to their specialization in Public Affairs, Training and Education, ensuring the reliability and accuracy of their responses.

Purposive quota sampling refers to a collection of non-probability sampling procedures where units are selected based on the characteristics that the researcher's sample needs. Particularly, purposive quota sampling selects units "on purpose" and is also known as the judgmental sampling since it focuses on the researcher's judgment when determining and choosing the people, cases, or events that can supply the most information to meet the study's goals (Nikolopoulou, 2022).

In total, the research has 128 respondents and participants, ensuring ample data for this study.

## **Result and Discussion**

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals that most PAOs hold the rank of Ensign, have one to five years of experience, and are college graduates, primarily with Education-related degrees. In contrast, the majority of HOs are Captains, predominantly assigned to Central Staff and Flag Office. The SMEs interviewed include the former Commander of the Coast Guard Public Information Office, the Acting Commander of CGPAS, a Development Management Officer of CGPAS and former Communications Officer from the Department of Transportation, and the Deputy Chief of Coast Guard Staff for Training and Education, CG-12.

This study revealed that both PAOs and HOs recognized the high relevance of CGPAS in promoting the PCG's functions, particularly in public information dissemination during times of uncertainty, projecting a positive image of the PCG, handling fake news and issuing accurate press statements. Meanwhile, both PAOs and HOs acknowledged that among all the PAO's roles, handling social activities as masters of ceremonies was of the lowest relevance.

Based on the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition, in terms of skill levels in Media Relations, PAOs demonstrated on their exam results as Proficient, while HOs perceived them as Competent. For Public Information Dissemination, PAOs were categorized as Advanced Beginners based on their exam results, whereas HOs perceived them as Competent. In Social Media Management, PAOs performed at a Proficient level according to their exam scores. Conversely, HOs perceived them as Competent. Overall, the exam results of PAOs and the perception of HOs are both equivalent to Competent.

This study also identified that the greatest challenge faced by PCG PAOs is holding multiple designations, as concurred by both PAOs and HOs. However, disparities emerged regarding the sufficiency of PAOs specialized in Media Relations and Social Media Management, and the availability of essential resources such as training facilities, budget allocations, and equipment like cameras and laptops. PAOs expressed dissatisfaction with these resources, while HOs perceived them as adequate. Notably, PAOs emphasized concerns over limited office space, the need for trained spokespersons for media interviews, and challenges in procuring and maintaining PA equipment, all crucial for effective operations.

Recommendations to address these challenges included providing quality equipment and comprehensive training programs, endorsed by a significant majority of both PAOs and HOs. Additionally, fostering collaboration within the organization and recruiting specialists were suggested to enhance resource sharing and support. While some training areas like cybersecurity, crisis communication, and news writing were prioritized, others such as drone operation and transparency in public service,

although less endorsed, remain pertinent for specific tasks and organizational integrity.

Lastly, Coast Guard Public Affairs Officer's Course emerged as the top recommended training to be developed followed by Mass Communication Fundamentals – Visual Documentation and Public Affairs and Communication Strategy Qualification Course. Accordingly, this study produced the Course Instructional Guide for Public Affairs Officers based on these insights.

## Conclusion

The respondents of the study were primarily PAOs with the rank of Ensigns. It reflects that majority of officers tasked with Public Affairs responsibilities are junior officers due to the scarcity of senior officers having Public Affairs expertise. In terms of educational background, most of the respondents are college graduates with degrees unrelated to Public Affairs which has led to shortage of PA specialists in the PCG. Further, majority of the HOs are with the rank of Captains whose experience and insights are significant in identifying the relevance of PA in the PCG.

The study revealed the high relevance of Coast Guard Public Affairs Service (CGPAS) as indicated by strong consensus among PAOs, HOs and SMEs in various aspects especially in information dissemination during crises and in promoting a positive image of the PCG to the public. This was highly evident due to the rapidly evolving information landscape and technological advancements where adversaries tend to manipulate the truth. Thus, there is an increasing demand for competent and reliable PAOs to counter them and educate the public.

Possessing knowledge and skills in Media Relations, Public Information Dissemination and Social Media Management is crucial to be an effective PAO. In this study, the overall PAO ratings based on their exams and HOs' perception coincide as Competent. These results highlight PAOs' capacity to handle the PA responsibilities effectively. However, there are areas for improvement which can be addressed through providing instructional guides, continuous trainings and support from the Command.

Like other officers in the PCG, significant challenges are encountered by PAOs, the

greatest among all these is holding multiple designations, leading to confusion of roles and work overload. PAOs also expressed dissatisfaction with the sufficiency of Public Affairs specialists and essential resources despite the adequate perception of HOs. In addressing these gaps, the evolving media landscape, ground experience and immediate needs of PAOs should be taken into consideration. This is to ensure that PAOs are fully equipped to perform their duties effectively.

In general, the study revealed valuable insights into the role, skills, challenges, and recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of PAOs within the PCG. By implementing the recommendations and addressing the identified challenges, the PCG can strengthen its PA activities, foster transparency and accountability, and uphold its reputation as a maritime service committed to serving the public interest.

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