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The Progression of Communications:

The lifeline between deployed military personnel and their families

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Introduction

When a person joins the military they accept that with the military comes periods of separation and isolation from family members. This is not an uncommon epiphany. Geographic mobility, stress of the unknown and long deployments in sometimes hostile regions can bring about separation from family (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006). To bridge this separation has always been a challenge for the family member that serves in the military, and also the ones left behind. Many scholars (Putt, 2013) strive to determine if communication between these two groups has improved with advancement in technology (Carter & Renshaw, 2016). In the last century communication with military family members deployed overseas was regulated to letters, phone calls, telegrams, audio and videotapes and possibly the Military Auxiliary Radio System or MARS line when available. However, today communication has vastly advanced allowing people to communicate in real-time or near real-time by utilizing communication tools such as: email, Skype, FaceTime, Hangouts and Facebook (Putt, 2013). In this paper we will examine the concept of utilizing different channels as mentioned in the communication theory, and their effects on communicating between military families and their deployed service personnel. Regardless of the technology, communication method or application utilized encouraging family members and providing a means to communicate is one of the most important factors in having a successful deployment.

In order to understand how far communication between deployed personnel and their families has progressed we have to first examine the history of communication. We will take a look at the types of methods used to communicate, the impact on the service member and their families and provide an analysis for the need and impact for better communication between family members and their deployed service members. This will include the method of

communications, the time period and the need for more advanced technology required to lessen the burden on families while their service member is deployed. By investigating these factors we will determine if there is a connection between the communication theory in reference to channels, and how those communication channels have changed over the course of time to those deployed, along with the positive and negative aspects of those channels in reference to communicating to deployed personnel.

Literature Review

As technology has advanced communication to those deployed has changed over the course of time. This literature review will examine the history of communication between deployed military personnel and their families, and the positive and negative aspects of each form of communication through channels. According to the Department of Public Administration “the classic definition of a communication channel characterizes it as the technical (or formal) side of the communication process that allows us to transfer information from sender to receiver and vice versa” (Sanina, Balashov, Rubtcova, & Satinsky, 2017). The overall effectiveness of channels can depend on various things such as: high efficiency, reliability and the speed of communication. During the Roman Empire era communication was conducted via the utilization of a courier on horseback or using a homing pigeon to deliver a written note. Both of these types of communications could have taken weeks or even months to get information back and forth to someone as important as the leader of the Roman Empire let alone to get information back and forth to family members. Although the military often exploited the use of signaling tools such as: flags, fire or even smoke signals to communicate to each other their families were not allowed such luxuries. In 1860 the Pony Express was begun as a mail delivery service that could deliver letters in the United States from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic coast within a ten day time

period. In the late 1800s Samuel Morse developed Morse code which utilized a series of electrical impulses to be sent over long distances via telegraph wire in order to communicate across vast miles (National Academy of Sciences - National Research Council, Washington, DC, 1997, p. 15).

The most common form of communication throughout the ages has been through written correspondence or letters. Letters are also one of the slowest forms of communication which often leaves both the family and service member waiting for weeks or even months for answers to questions that may never come. The stress and lack of immediate answers that letters bring is one of the hardest things for all family members to deal with. Most letters are written over several hours or even days after a mission or a long watch, after hours of boredom with no enemy engagement commonly referred to as “down time”. Letters allow the writer to examine what has been written to determine if edits need to be made in order to ensure the correct intent of the letter is conveyed (Peters, 2008). Letters may be emotional, but they may not express the level of desired emotion since the reader of the letter is normally not in the same frame of mind as the writer. Letters can provide a great deal of detail of where a service member is currently stationed if deployed, and the conditions that the service member is currently dealing with provided the letter adheres to certain standards provided by the Commander’s concerning unit Communications Security or COMSEC. They are still considered the cheapest way to communicate, and they are also a keepsake for all time. However letters do not provide instant feedback from the reader, and they can be read from a completely different perspective than the writer intended to convey. In addition letters can take weeks or even months to be delivered and an additional several weeks or months to get a reply from the family member. The emotional

stress and anticipation can be gut wrenching for both the family and the deployed service member.

Email is considered by many military families and deployed personnel as the most widely used form of communication available (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010). Since email is a formal means of communication in the service military personnel have greater access to this form of communication. The ease of access to email provides the greatest form of flexibility in an environment that often limits communication due to location or policy. Emails can be virtually sent over any wave form of communication conduit such as: fiber optic cable, Internet, satellite and wireless. Email accounts can be set up with no cost to the user and can provide some form of anonymity from the public. All military personnel have an official email address, and most military units allow personal emails to be sent to their .mil address. Emails have improved over the years, and they are no longer just text. Most email programs now allow a user to insert emojis in order to help the writer convey the emotional feelings the writer intended to convey. A user can attach a picture or even a video file if the command allows such content. Email is a convenient way to communicate even on a mobile platform such as a cell phone; however, email cannot replace the ability to look at your family member in a real-time video call. Emails cannot convey a writer's tone or voice inflection without utilizing other clues such as emojis. Emojis are an important aspect of email that enhances the writer's ability to emphasize certain emotional aspects of the intended message (Stark & Crawford, 2015). On the downside emails are limited by the service member's ability to connect to some sort of communication network. So when service members are deployed to remote locations they may not have the ability to connect to the outside world via email unless they have access to satellite communications which is normally reserved for "official" message traffic only. Overall, it is

noted that the Department of Defense does understand the emotional lifeline and the stabilizing effect for both parts of the family. So many deployed units have email and a video call capability available during certain hours of the day.

As deployments became longer and more frequent the Department of Defense quickly came to the realization that they needed to provide service members a more advanced real-time or near real-time video calling capability. Google Hangouts is a communication platform that provides a user with the ability to send messages, video chat and text while featuring Voice Over Internet Protocol or VOIP capability. Hangouts provides users with the ability to conduct video calls and even group video calls allowing up to ten people to be included on one group video call (MFAM, 2014). This allows deployed personnel to video call multiple family members or friends on a party line type video call. The great benefit is a caller can call anywhere in the world to another Hangout member, and the call is free. Hangouts works on any Android or iOS phone or via the web. Since Hangouts is compatible with virtually every type of mobile device it is growing rapidly in popularity with service members and their families. This application even has the ability to leave users a message that they can retrieve later when they are online. Hangouts is integrated into an individual's Google account which makes it easy to join if you have a Gmail account (Youngkin, 2015). In addition, Hangouts has a simple interface to other commonly used applications such as YouTube. On the other hand, if you do not have a Gmail or Google account you cannot use Hangouts. The other limitation is your Internet connection must be fast enough to support video, or the user will see a poor picture. Although Hangouts can allow you to talk to up to ten people at a time it still does not allow you that ability to disseminate information to hundreds of followers as several of the major social media sites do.

Facetime has become one of the most popular applications on the iOS platform and is exclusively an Apple product. Although Facetime is a very capable real-time or near real-time video chatting application it does not hurt that it comes on one of the world's most popular lines of communication devices: the iPhone, the iPad and the iPod Touch. Apple has been an industry leader in the telecommunications market since they introduced their "i" series of devices that have seamlessly integrate into the Mac series of computers (Epstein, Sherman, Blackman, & Sinkin, 2015). This application is simply a tool for users, but when paired with a social media site such as Facebook it gives deployed military personnel and their families a formidable means of communication that is state of the art. Eyman noted that this type of technological advancement is a good example of what "Slack Miller and Doak described as the communication theory based on the Shannon-Weaver model as the transmission view of communication because it was developed as a technological schema for transmitting a message from one point to another using telecommunication devices" (Eyman, 2015). The communication theory contains the concept of channels which are used by those deployed to communicate with loved ones back home. The various types of communication used to communicate back and forth is all different forms of channels.

Social media sites provide the user a platform to communicate to hundreds or even thousands of friends with the least amount of effort for the user. Facebook is one of the largest social media platforms in the world. Since it was launched in 2004 Facebook has captivated the public's desire to communicate and stay involved in the lives of their friends and families. Facebook has a relatively easy setup that allows users to post opinions, pictures and videos in order to allow an individual's network of friends and family to stay in touch with what is important in a person's life. Facebook allows the user to control who is in one's network of

friends, and what information those individuals can share with them. It allows users to join groups with other people with similar interests or join certain organizations such as disabled veterans. Facebook does allow considerable parental control; so children's activities can be monitored by a responsible adult. On the bad side Facebook can be addicting to the point that it can consume your life. Most people post way too much information about themselves (Spinelli, 2010), and based on recent news reports Facebook's third party software vendors have been harvesting and selling that information to criminals on the dark web (Romano, 2018). At this time Facebook's security has no method to verify the information in a profile or even the picture associated with a profile. Finally, because it is accessible on any platform most users feel they can say anything to anybody regardless of how it makes other people feel, and also that person can hide behind their First Amendment rights of freedom of speech with little or no regard to common courtesy.

Analysis

During World War I and World War II military families sent letters to their deployed service members. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century letters were censored to ensure that service members were not sending home information to their families that could be used by the enemy if intercepted. This caused the military to put policies in place for service members and their families to ensure Operational Security or OPSEC was maintained for national security reasons. The military has always had a problem in the delivery of written correspondence whether it be care packages or just a quick note. Letters to the military deployed overseas can take up to two weeks or more to be delivered. Today family members do not have to rely just on these two forms of communication. They now have online communication through technologies such as the cell phone or computer. These relatively new technologies have made

communication so much more readily accessible. No longer do you have to wait by the post office box to receive a letter or sit by the phone awaiting a call from the MARS line (Ponder & Aguirre, 2010) at a pre-determined time and handled via a Ham radio operator. Service men and women now have several ways to communicate with their families thanks to the onslaught of digital technologies available to consumers.

Communication with family members while service personnel were deployed remained limited to letters and phone calls until a breakthrough in technology occurred called the Internet. The development of the Internet allowed both service personnel and their families to start emailing each other, and email as a result grew in popularity thanks to companies such as: AOL, Yahoo and CompuServe. The ability to email families members saw an immediate impact in morale, reduction of boredom and a reduced feeling of isolationism for the service member (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010, p. 747). This new communication capability provided the service personnel and their families with the ability to communicate 24 hours a day to all but the most remote places in the world.

Communication today is instantaneous. Technically a military service member can dial up a family member even in a war zone. It might be a little hard to hear, but it is still a possibility. Most people today in the United States have access to such technologies as a cell phone or a computer allowing them to have access to many social media platforms. Popular social media applications are: Skype, Hangouts, WhatsApp, Facebook, SnapChat and Twitter. Also emails can be utilized in order to send valuable information to service members. Many military members have turned to these social media accounts because if their family member has access to an Internet connection in his/her room then they can communicate real-time and have direct verbal responses.

Skype became very popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century with many people using the software application to communicate with family members and friends living overseas. It provided users with an instant chat capability, and if both users had a fast enough Internet connection it provided a video chat capability that was free to all users. This made the program very popular for college students studying abroad; as well as military personnel that could access the Internet on and off military facilities. Skype remained very flexible as it transitioned from platform to platform and operating system to operating system, and it continues to grow in popularity with service members and their families (Mapes, 2010). Skype was purchased by Microsoft in 2011 and is currently working to provide additional capabilities in order to catch up to one of its rival applications, Google Hangouts.

Google also has introduced people to a new social media platform called Google+ Hangouts. Hangouts allows up to ten users to conduct a video conference and is a free service that people can customize. It is integrated with Google drive and YouTube; so an individual can easily share different media types with everyone within their circle of friends (Youngkin, 2015). Applications like Google Hangouts are prompting the United States Department of Defense to look at the utility of such applications, and how they impact the moral and mental health of the service members as well as their families. Google continues to improve their customer base by adding additional new capabilities in hopes of catching the world's biggest social media giant Facebook.

Facebook is considered by many people to be the first real social media application that has grown into a social networking service. As of the beginning of 2018 Facebook had over 2.3 billion users, of which 1.4 billion are active daily users (Noyes, 2018). Facebook is one of the most successful social networking applications that provides a comprehensive communication

capability, and it allows the user to customize who can be their Facebook friend, which in turn determines which friends are allowed to follow a person on a daily basis. Facebook has become so popular that most military units have their own Facebook page in order to allow families to see what their loved ones are participating in while on deployment. When a service member posts on a unit's Facebook page it allows military leaders to monitor and control the type of media content that is posted; thereby maintaining COMSEC to ensure that military personnel do not disclose any information that the enemy could use against the United States military services. Facebook may be the global leader in social media, but Apple's dominance in the cellular market provides them a platform to host any application. In addition, Apple's FaceTime application gives Apple a proprietary capability second to none.

With Apple's dominance in the cellular device industry a large segment of society has started to utilize FaceTime more often to communicate with one another in live time. Apple users have a pre-installed app on their phone called FaceTime. The application is a proprietary video telephone product that allows users to choose between an audio call or video calling. The rhetorical method of ethos is put into effect when service men and women are utilizing FaceTime to correspond with their loved ones back home (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). When these military men and women are able to see their loved one's faces in live time it has an emotional effect on them (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011). Video calls through FaceTime allows the service members to feel as if they are sharing precious moments with their loved ones as they are happening. Applications such as these have had a profound effect on these service men and women in a positive aspect. Other applications such as Skype provides a video chat capability that contains similar functions to FaceTime but without the need for an Apple product. FaceTime still remains one of the favorite applications for family members and

deployed personnel because it provides such a boost to morale because service members can have real-time or near real-time communication with their families or friends.

Morale is the number one inhibitor in whether or not a service member has a successful deployment. There are even departments in each branch of service that put emphasis directly on morale. When a military service member has the means to connect with their loved ones back home they are reminded why they are fighting the good fight. All deployed service members want to know that they are missed, that their family back home supports his or her decision to be in the military and that they are proud of them. The only way that this can successfully be accomplished is through communication.

This communication is not just beneficial to encouraging the service member that is deployed but also serves to encourage and support the loved ones left behind. "Advancements in technology have allowed Sailors to have an impact on their child's life even while at sea" (Abler, 2011). Through programs such as United Through Reading Sailors can stay connected with their children by the Sailor signing up for this program and being offered the opportunity to go into a private room and read a children's book aloud while being video recorded. After the video production is complete the Sailor can forward the video on to their child. This form of communication is a form of reinforcement that the service member still loves his/her child; however, because of military commitments they cannot be with them at this time. The child in turn gets to see his or her mom or dad and gets to hear his or her voice which in turn offers comfort and caring during this very strenuous time of isolation from them. The service member can intimately share this moment with their child and create a memory; whereas they can share a childhood book that was important to him or her during their young childhood. It is in those

moments that service members get to have active face to face time with their family back home (Adler, 2011).

When service members are deployed they have little to no time for rest. While those deployed are fulfilling their military requirements back at home their absence is made apparent throughout everyday life (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011). Popular social media sites such as Facebook can be utilized in various ways to communicate to military members. Facebook allows users the option to communicate via video calling and Instant Messenger, along with tagging individuals both in posts or comments. According to Online Fathering, written by Kathleen A. Schachman a military member stationed in Okinawa, Japan “describes how his wife expanded her personal profile to include photos and amusing anecdotes about his daughter” (Schachman, 2010, p. 13). Thanks to the advancement in technology and user input applications, developers are continually adding new capabilities in order to get users, such as military families, to use their applications to communicate with deployed family members. Just ask any military member, and they will tell you that we have come a long way from the old days of just writing letters and waiting.

Conclusion

Communication has been the key and will continue to be essential to successful deployments. The concept of different channels as mentioned in the communication theory is important to communicate with those deployed. By communicating through different channels you allow yourself to receive messages through different forms. Communicating with those back home, thanks to advancement in technology, contributes to the overall everyday success of a healthy military service member and their family. The ability to communicate through channels, and the means at which families can communicate to their deployed service member has made

great strides in the last one hundred years. Technology and software applications have allowed families the access to communicate in real-time or near real-time during deployments. Although the advancement in technology has improved communication it is important to maintain communication through various types of media. When those who are deployed share their journey the type of communication used can play a role in what they are wanting to share with their families back home. I know about this first-hand since I am one of those military family members who has watch communications improve over time while my father was deployed. Today, complex forms of communication have more meaning behind the words and are augmented with additional tools that allow the writer to express more of an emotional aspect in their message. This adds ethos or creditability to all parties involved ensuring that good communication is developed and maintained throughout the stressful time of a military deployment.

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