

# Danger, comfort, and silence at the home front: Mediating soldiers' wives

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## Abstract

This article explores how the experiences of soldiers' wives are mediated in the context of militarised popular culture and following two ultimately unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We show how audiences, representation (in two senses) and gender *matter* in a qualitative research project with soldiers, soldiers' wives and veterans, which explores their perceptions of contemporary media representations of British soldiering, and their social media use. In the summer of 2014, we interviewed 31 participants in 5 focus groups for a British Academy funded project. Participants were veterans, veteran support groups, family members (all 'wives') and those directly involved with the promotion of the armed forces in various media (the Joint Information Activities Group, Media Operations Team). The focus groups explored media representations of contemporary soldiering across a range of media and genres (TV documentaries, reality TV, drama, newspapers) but also social media use – practices of self-representation. In this article, we focus on interview data from the wives' groups (as they identify themselves) and find four emergent and overlapping themes: ridicule, comfort, danger and silence. We argue that the mediation of soldier's wives is an area of pronounced contradiction: one that is important in and of itself for what it tells us about the experience of that group of women and equally important for what it tells us about representation, practice and gender and the ways in which these are entwined in digital culture.

## Keywords

Audience, digital culture, gender, militarisation, representation

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## Introduction

In this article, we suggest that the mediation of soldiers' wives is an area of pronounced contradiction and one that is important in and of itself for what it tells us about the experience of that group of women and equally important for what it tells us about representation, practice and gender and the ways these are entwined in digital culture. At this particular historical juncture, following two ultimately unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at a time when civilian–military relations have become a concern for both military advocacy groups and charities, the military wife occupies a sometimes uncomfortable liminal position: uncomfortable both for the women who straddle both civilian and military identities, and for the authorities whose efforts to manage the visibility of such women have been unsettled by the rapid uptake in use of digital media technologies. As others have observed, the potent political symbol of the military nuclear family and the home front as representing the nation's mothers has a long history, which only intensified during the 9/11 interventions from 2001 onwards (Basham and Catignani, 2018; Cowen and Gilbert, 2008; Dowler, 2012; Lutz, 2001). We think it is important to explore reception *and* representation in order to understand the positionality of soldiers' wives in processes of militarisation taking place today.

The space of media representation encompasses mainstream, traditional content such as TV drama, documentary and news and, at the same time, social media content of a multitude of kinds, found across a range of social media platforms. It is important to consider these myriad spaces together in order to understand the meanings of representations in particular everyday lives. As audience studies have long established, while the possibilities for interpretation and construction of meaning are not endless, representations are received differently by different audiences. Consequently, we speculated that representations of military lives and wives would have particular meanings for actual military wives. Drawing on group interviews we explore the range of ways in which representations of military lives and military wives are received by a particular group of women: UK military wives. We refer to 'wives' throughout because all of the people we spoke to were married and all were women, and this is a designation they used in their conversations.

From looking at the image of the military wife and military life, *through* audience research with military wives, we suggest that there is a dominant image of the figure of the 'military wife' and the home front that does not adequately represent the women who find themselves in that position. Moreover, we suggest that the spaces (platforms) in which women might counter the problematic representations of mainstream media are felt to be dangerous (Livingstone, 2008). And at the same time, and despite both this inadequacy and this danger, we find that the space of media representation also provides both comfort and pleasure to our participants. Finally, the space of representation is, for these women, a space of silences – so much goes unrepresented in popular media forms *and* in social media practice. We conclude that the space of representation is at the same time dangerous, comforting *and* replete with silences.

## Representing the military in the new media age

Questions of gender are pertinent when considering traditionally hierarchical military institutions and the (oft-noted) loss of control over the mediated words and imagery of those within their ranks. And while our research complements the important perspectives and debates in feminist international relations and critical military studies, we want to locate this article and its focus on the very particular group that is ‘military wives’ (in the United Kingdom at this current time) within the history of feminist media studies and the assertion of the real-world importance of image-making, as well as voice, in gendered power struggles. We are informed by the turn to practice in research on media reception and use (Couldry, 2004) and we find this step logical in the context of proliferating media images, messages, platforms and their embeddedness in people’s everyday lives (e.g. Bird, 2003; Woodstock, 2016). Nevertheless, we want to make an argument for the retention of the concept of representation for making sense of women’s mediated lives, media practices and for making space for and sense of women’s voices in audience research. That is, we want to *still* take account of specific representations in specific contexts. We argue, with Barker et al. (2018) that in contemporary digital culture where scholars rightly explore material, social and technical practices, representations still matter *and* audiences still matter *and they matter together*.

In this article, we purposefully invoke the two meanings of the term representation: first, political representation in the sense of speaking for others (who speaks for (which) women and where and how?), and second, cultural representation in the sense of ‘signifying practices’ (Hall, 1997), that is, in this case, the wider symbolic representation of women. When we talk to women about their reception of TV programmes featuring military (and military wives/home front) storylines and their social media use, we encounter both senses of the term representation. In exploring the mediation of the experience of soldiers’ wives we highlight the importance of taking representation into account, to contribute to scholarly understanding of the contemporary media landscape and its gendered meanings.

First, let us turn to the question of representing the military before turning to representing military women and soldiers’ wives more specifically. We are using Cynthia Enloe’s (2000) influential definition of militarisation as ‘the step-by-step process by which something *becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from* the military as an institution or militaristic criteria’ (p. 281, emphasis in original). As Enloe has argued, social institutions other than the military promote militarisation, especially in masculine-dominated societies, and it is the everyday activities of those not necessarily considered ‘in’ the military that often work to naturalise military values and logics.

It is important to remember that there is a global context to any study of how militarisation plays out in a particular setting – in the case of our study – the United Kingdom. Within the ‘profoundly and unequally militarized world’ (Cohler, 2017c: xii), scholars from a wide range of fields have established that there is an ongoing process of militarisation of societies in the current time, not only in the public realm but in everyday and domestic spaces (Dowler, 2012; Tidy, 2015). Thus, for example, a process of militarisation of schooling in the United Kingdom and Australia has been observed, as evidenced by how the ‘boot camp’ has been positioned as a legitimate solution to the ‘problem of

troubled youth' (Mills and Pini, 2015: 270), wherein any 'troubles' are understood as individual and not as structural and where, moreover, the individual problem can be solved by military-like discipline and values. This context of militarisation, then, is the setting within which representations – of the military and of the home front, of soldiers and of their wives – are produced and consumed – and to which they contribute.

At the same time as specific notions of military/home front are normalised across the culture, representing the military has become a more complex phenomenon. In the digital age the story of the military is harder than ever before for the military institutions and national governments to contain and control. The once (more easily) dominant singular narrative is contestable and contested by a proliferation of perspectives and voices which have unprecedented routes to expression within digital culture. Thus, the dominant story of the military – the popular culture narrative of heroism and sacrifice in service to the nation (Paris, 2000) – is leaky and vulnerable to challenge today. Mirrlees (2015) shows, in relation to the United States and Canada, how an ongoing struggle for control of the stories told means we should understand YouTube as itself a military battleground. It is in this context, he notes, that we see the deployment of techniques such as the checking of soldiers' videos before any uploading is allowed and military-hosted YouTube channels such as in the case of CAF (Canadian Armed Forces Channel) – all in order to try to control the narrative. Several publications have traced the initially slow response of military authorities to cope with soldier-produced videos and photographs, as they offered the public 'uncensored insights into the mundane, violent, and even depraved faces of warfare' (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009: 25, see also Christensen, 2008; Kennedy, 2009; Kuntsman and Stein, 2015; Parry, 2018).

Mirrlees (2015) argues that the digital space is a site of contest over meaning. Furthermore, he notes that a particular (well-resourced) message constructed by the military effectively pushes traffic to sites like YouTube, thus producing economic benefit for those sites. However, importantly, Mirrlees also emphasises that understanding digital spaces as a battleground highlights a situation in which there *are* other voices getting through, and other stories told and other kinds of representation circulating. From this it is clear that meanings of war, home front and military endeavour, for example, are contested in media representations in ways they were not before social media.

Digital culture is a very unequal space where the dominant tone is of normalisation of ongoing wars and militarisation of societies. Nevertheless, digital media spaces *are* sites of contestation over constructed meanings of war, the experience of war and the experience of the home front. What is more, scholars of militarisation and media make clear that this is an entirely gendered terrain (Cree, 2020; Silvestri, 2013; Welland, 2021; Woodward and Winter, 2007).

## Representing military wives matters

Along with arguments about the importance of symbolic representation in general (Hall, 1997), feminist studies of representation have established irrefutably that the representation of women was always of vital political significance and, moreover, that it continues to be. We can look back to seminal 1970s works on women and representation, such as by Berger, Mulvey and Tuchman (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975; Tuchman, 2000), through

to critical accounts of ‘enlightened sexism’ and ‘post feminism’ (Dobson, 2015; Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and most recently, ‘popular feminism’ and ‘everyday feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, Press and Tripodi, 2021) to see how and why representing women continues to matter. As we noted in our Introduction, above, we can find work that draws on a conception of representation as signifying practice (Hall and colleagues, 1997, 2013) but also (and often in the same work) the concept of representation invokes the question of who is pictured and who they are claimed to be representing: which women are pictured in media spaces and *how*; and who is excluded and *why*. And here we find the increasing attention to the argument that representation should be considered through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989); that is, how do class and race and sexuality intersect with gender in popular culture representation in terms of who is represented and how? Into this vast and contested arena, then, we want to contribute to a body of work that considers the representation of military women as important both in and of itself, and for what it contributes to the critical understanding of the contemporary representation of women more generally. For when our subjects – soldiers’ wives – are represented on screens and when they encounter and produce representations in their everyday lives, they are always both women and military women. What can a critical analysis of some of their reception of popular representations of military wives in the United Kingdom in the contemporary moment tell us about the contemporary space of representation and practice. Relatedly, what can this analysis of the myriad spaces of representation tell us about their militarised lives?

The ‘Homefront’ is a key idea in the battle for meaning over ongoing wars (Lutz, 2001). Mirrlees (2015) explores some of the frames employed in the CAF YouTube channel, asking what work these representations are doing. One such frame focuses on ‘homecoming’ and Mirrlees highlights the importance of the construction of the home and the feminine to ongoing wars. Critical scholars agree with Cowen and Gilbert that, ‘Metaphors like “homeland” and “family” are not benign gestures, but rather are central to the production of political space’ (Cowen and Gilbert 2008: 269, cited in Cohler, 2017a: 75). And the political space in question is one which justifies invasive, imperialist wars in the Middle East. In a study of *American Sniper* and *American Wife*, Cohler (2017a) shows how the renowned couple’s portrayal bolsters these ideas of home front as crucial to the militarisation of society. In this way, we can see how the representation of women (in this case Chris – the American wife) located at, and standing in for, home, is central to shoring up the broader political argument in favour of war in Iraq (Cohler, 2017a). Cohler (2017a) notes that the representation of Chris, the army wife, does more than one kind of work: ‘She looks like a war widow, rhetorically assumes the position of a veteran or soldier, and raises funds like a military contractor’ (p. 89). Cree’s (2020) ethnographic research with the women featured in the UK’s *The Choir: Military Wives* (BBC, 2011) revealed their deep discomfort with how they were represented on screen, with stories crafted to promote a certain ‘appropriate’ and nostalgic form of femininity: ‘there was always a cameraman “sitting on the sidelines waiting for someone to cry”’ (p. 232).

Overall, research suggests that representations of wives and home fronts in the West serve to normalise ongoing wars around the world. Scholars note the unending nature of 21st-century wars, and representations have a key role in justifying, explaining

and normalising that situation via the story of the home front and the wife among other stories. And at the same time, we know that representations are complex and multilayered. Audience research tells us that audiences are not passive receptors of dominant narratives, rather, we know that meaning-making remains a space for contradiction and contestation and opposition – at least to some extent. Moreover, we know that the proliferating space of representation in digital culture means that different, and oppositional stories do get told. The question then becomes how often do we attend to other kinds of stories that problematise ongoing wars in diverse ways? Cohler (2017a) suggests not very often:

The roles of military spouse as caregiver and of veteran as wounded warrior remain in place long after combat in the contemporary moment in many US military families. The neoliberal labor of military caregiving on homefronts is not only amplified but often decreasingly visible in public culture. (p. 92)

Torres and Gurevich (2018) go even further in their view of where the balance of power in meaning-making in digital culture lies; for them, there is little actual contestation of the state-sanctioned dominant representations which buttress ongoing wars and militarisation:

[. . .] when oppositional frames are encountered, statecraft is used to entangle the user in the perpetual emotional turmoil of the digital space, often leading to outrage exhaustion, disillusionment, and loss of hope. Whatever the mechanism, the process of statecraft utilizes the digital space to sculpt users' perceptions and direct their behavior toward largely symbolic actions that do little to disrupt the power differential within the militarized culture. (p. 141)

While this argument does important work in highlighting that there is careful work going into promoting and normalising a specific militarised view of society, it does not allow for the fact that representations only take on meaning in specific people's specific readings. That is, an audience-studies perspective suggests attending to reception *in order* to understand the operations of power in this context (Morley, 2006). Focusing on a symbolically important population; military wives, we turn to audience research to explore meaning and contestation of dominant modes of representation in digital culture and social media practices. First, we develop our discussion of the importance of research on specific audiences and practices in the context of wider militarisation of society.

## **Audience research, new media practice/use research and militarisation**

In the UK, the dominant image of the 'military wife' appears in TV drama and documentary, such as *Homefront*, ITV miniseries, 2012 and *Our War* (BBC3, Factual series, 2011–2014), feature films such as *Military Wives* (2019) but also in user generated material such as that which appears on the Facebook pages of the Military Wives Choirs. More complicated still, user generated material forms part of the mainstream – such as in the footage filmed by cameras worn on the helmets of frontline soldiers which is



shown within programmes such as *Taking Fire* (2016 Discovery Channel). Writing of the US show, *Army Wives*, Cohler (2017b) notes,

[I]n these spaces of narrative contemplation and formal lack of resolution, *Army Wives* creates possibilities for oppositional readings and engagement with the dilemmas of war and militarism that exceed tropes of nationalist motherhood by utilizing their representational histories and narrative power. (p. 14)

With this notion of oppositional reading, from Hall (1973), and the audience-studies perspective in general, we can build on the important work which establishes the ways in which government agencies like CAF (Mirrlees, 2015) dominate digital space, to also consider meaning making in everyday life. Audience research has long shown the importance of gender in structuring technology use and reception in terms of what to watch but also, what meanings are made (e.g. Ang, 1985; Lull, 1989; Seiter, 1999) and so ultimately how media representations come to matter/mean what they do in gendered societies. The intersection of audience research and feminism continues as audience researchers respond to the changing media environment with studies that explore new media practice and reception in combination (Press and Tripodi, 2021). Within this context, our findings echo other research on contemporary media practice and use and at the same time highlight the specificity of the case of military women.

In discussing the mundanity of certain gendered digital media practices, Maltby and Thornham (2016) note that their findings echo what we know about the mundanity of gendered media practices in the general population. Thus, for example, they note the continued importance of gender to forming any understanding of media practice in the context of soldiers' wives but also of the infrastructures within which such practices take place. Maltby and Thornham (2016) suggest that in their research with military personnel and their families, media content does not matter as much as practice to their participants: 'This serves to remind us that the content of social media should not be elevated above or outside the practices of social media use while also noting that the content was also discussed in mundane and normative terms' (p. 1161).

As we turn to our analysis of the reception and practice of representation by and of soldier's wives, we note that there is continuity between the mundanity of digital technologies and practices embedded in the lives of military populations and those of the wider population. Second, we take note of the argument that the digital mundane is profoundly gendered both within and outside of the military context. We, however, want to ask about the link between representation and practice. For us, the research discussed above on representation of the home front suggests that the content of representations really does matter. It seems to us that gender might become an even more heightened meaning-maker in the context of representations by and of military personnel and their families and military life itself (Cree, 2020). The scholarship cited above establishes how the discursive construct of the home front works to shore up the militarisation of Western societies in general and the accompanying dehumanisation of the women whose homes are designated as *not* home fronts, but war zones. We think that representation and practice must remain linked. We suggest that we still need to understand representations,

across media spaces including social media ones, but that we can only make sense of those by exploring practice. To do this, we turn to an audience study which engages with specific representations and specific practices.

## Research design and methods

In what follows we show how audiences, representation (in two senses) and gender *matter* in the case of a British Academy-funded research project in which we conducted qualitative research with soldiers, soldiers' wives, and veterans to explore their perceptions of contemporary media representations of British soldiering, and their social media use. We talked to people associated with the military in various ways (wives, veterans and a media operations unit in several UK locations). In the summer of 2014, we interviewed 31 participants in 5 focus groups. Participants were veterans, veteran support groups, family members (all 'wives') and those directly involved with the promotion of the armed forces in various media (the Joint Information Activities Group, Media Operations Team). The focus groups explored media representations of contemporary soldiering across a range of media and genres (TV documentaries, reality TV, drama, newspapers) but also social media use – practices of self-representation (Thumim, 2012; 2017). We looked at clips of *Homefront*, a ITV mini-series broadcast in 2012, BBC3's BAFTA-winning *Our War* (2011, Episode 1, *Ambushed*), based on soldiers' own footage from Afghanistan, and also *Life After War: Haunted by Helmand* (BBC3, 2013), a one-off documentary including interviews with surviving members of an attack which killed five of their platoon. We also looked at the Facebook page of the Military Wives Choirs – performing choirs of military wives and family members who have released CDs and become known to a wider public (Parry and Thumim 2016, 2017). Here we focus on interview data from the wives' groups, both of which were conducted on-site, in locations familiar to the participants.

We show how an audience-centred approach highlights the limits and simultaneous power of representation of military life, which is itself an entrenched part of our contemporary media culture *and* a key dimension of the ongoing militarisation of society. In this research, we aimed to tread the line between a critical account of militarisation *and* actively listening to a group of people who are relatively voiceless albeit occupying an immeasurably more powerful position than the voiceless women in the domestic zones of the warzones such as in Iraq (see Cohler, 2017a, above). Following Skeggs et al. (2008), we are interested in 'the *form* as well as the *content* of our participants' responses', and so pay attention to humour, emotional intensities and self-reflexivity in addition to identifying themes (p. 5). We hope to bring insights from an audience-studies approach, to understand how the power of representation works in this case, and in order to understand how other kinds of representation (stories from other angles, voices and places) might challenge the dominant story of the military wife. Our focus group analysis, explored below, is intended to open this space for continued critical attention. Other than naming the Media Operations group here (with their permission), we have anonymised the group interview data and any names referred to by participants below are pseudonyms.



## Ridicule, comfort, silence and danger: representation and soldiers' wives

Turning to our focus group discussions of representations of military wives, we show how a focus on everyday reception *and* practice reveals a complex picture of the work of representation across a range of forms and platforms. Focusing on the question of cultural representation – signifying practices, recalling Hall (1997) – we can identify a broad consensus emerging from our focus group interviews with soldiers' wives about their reception of images of 'the military wife' and the military life *and* their production of images of the 'military wife' via their own practices of self-representation.

The consensus among all the women we spoke to was that there are always various kinds of inadequacy in the representation of the home front and in the practices of mediated communication and self-representation in which they themselves engaged. The women treated this inadequacy in four distinct, and even contradictory, ways. We will now turn to the four emergent and overlapping themes: ridicule, comfort, danger and silence.

The women in our focus groups took a lot of pleasure in ridiculing *Homefront*, ITV miniseries, 2012 for what they saw as its unrealistic portrayal of life as an army wife:

F3: One thing that got me and my husband about that is there's like video conversations between the corporal, and you can't do that.

F4: They were on Skype, weren't they?

F2: Oh God, no!

F3: It's phone calls, you don't see them face-to-face!

F5: I was like Face Time, are you taking the piss? I can't even get a phone call!

F1: And that phone call's crackly and you're like this.

F2: We're only allowed so many minutes a week.

F3: 30 minutes per week.

F5: That's all they get, all they're allowed, and I think prisoners get more minutes a week than soldiers do.

(Catterick wives focus group)

The women were talking here about a scene from *Homefront* that we watched in our focus groups in which the husband's character is away in another country on operations. What is notable, to us, is how our participants emphasised what they perceived as the unrealistic portrayal of rules such as this one about communication between home front and warzone, or in another instance, the furnishings and wallpaper in military housing. In focusing on ridiculing the lack of realism in the portrayal of communications between soldiers and their families in this way, our focus group participants *managed to avoid* talking about the emotional storylines we had just all watched together. The women we

spoke to did not seem to want to talk about extramarital affairs, or isolation or anger – the overt themes of the scene. This was striking. Thus, we want to note, silences seeped into our focus group interviews themselves – we return to this theme, below.

Ridicule at the inaccuracies also related to a serious point about the perceived failure of representation to capture their experience – despite the proliferation of military storylines we had all been discussing:

F5: I do think there should be documentaries and things asking wives what it's like from our point of view.

F1: Yeah.

F5: It's all about the soldiers and what they do.

F3: And children, I think they should do the children as well.

F5: But nobody understands, and it's never ever been, or not that I am aware of, documented what it's like for a wife, what it's like for those seven months your husband's away, that you're looking after your children 24-hours a day, seven days a week. You wait for the phone to ring and every time you pick it up hoping it's them.

F1: And they're like, 'Get off the line!'

F5: Yeah, or you dread the door knocking. You literally want to kill somebody knocking on your door trying to sell you something. 'Do you know what that knock on the door does to me every time you knock on my door for something stupid?' And it's things like that and nobody will ever know what you go through.

F3: That's my worst experience, when I had that knock on the door.

F5: I've had that knock on the door. I remember I was waiting for the television man to come and pick the TV up, and I remember looking out the front window and seeing a man across the road, and I saw one of our welfare guys pointing over towards my direction, and I remember standing there thinking, 'God help that person. Somebody's getting a knock on the door'. And then the next minute my door went. And well my heart sunk to the pit of my stomach. And you open that door and he shows you his pass and you're thinking, shit. And the first thing that goes through your head is, 'Is he still alive?' Nobody will ever know the emotions you go through, it's just unbelievable.

(Catterick wives focus group)

And, discussing the documentary, *Haunted by Helmand*, the same lack of representation came up, again mentioning the lack of children's perspectives, as well as wives':

F2: I think they should also interview the wives, because obviously they go through half of it as well, to see their opinion and what they go through as well, as well as the men, but just to get a better understanding of it, and the children.

(Catterick wives focus group)

Television is ridiculed for its poor attempts to represent, but this ridicule allowed our participants to avoid talking about the painful storylines we had all just watched together. And yet, our participants also turned to discuss their painful experience in the context of saying it's never portrayed: 'Nobody will ever know. . .'. Paradoxically, they also did not think anyone would care about wives and girlfriends' perspectives:

F2: I'm sure one of my friends invited me to join an RAF wives and girlfriends' site on Facebook. And I'm part of the one about exchanging war stories.

F1: I would see it as uncool to tell our story, because at the end of the day, all we do is we tend to complain about, 'My husband's away for such a long time and he's doing this and I've got to stay at home and look after the kids'.

F3: I don't understand why anyone would find it interesting.

F1: I think we're more likely to just get soldier on and just get on with it, rather than go on Facebook and talk about it.

At the same time, in our focus groups, there was also a feeling that many of the recent spate of reality TV/documentary exploring military life on the frontline was actually *helpful and comforting* to the women at home:

F2: I think it's for a better understanding, because whenever Ben's been away and he comes home, he doesn't actually talk much about his experience, and neither do I want to say too much. I'll let him say what he wants to say rather than me ask and ask. So that is good for me for an understanding from a different perspective, and not one that's so close to home. It's still meaningful, but yeah.

(RAF Halton Wives Group (after *Haunted by Helmand*))

F4: That's much better and it probably helps people to talk about their personal experiences, although not everyone would. When was the Iraq War? 2003 he went. So, Tom was born by the time Steve started telling me about anything that really happened that was remotely dangerous, so it took him five years, basically. But I wish I knew more about my grandfather's experience.

(RAF Halton Wives Group (after *Our War*))

F5: I'd watch it. I like things like this and they're likely to be more realistic, and also, I always like to know what my husband's going through. When he's in Afghanistan it's like our world/his world, I don't know what he does, what he gets up to, but that kind of helps me think, 'That's what he does and that's what he feels like', because you don't know what they go through, what they see, nothing, whereas that gives you a little bit of insight into their life, what they've done and how they lived.

(Catterick (after *Haunted by Helmand*))

The women's responses here refer to how they are kept on the outside, at least until many years later, with distinctions such as 'our world/his world' chiming with Cynthia Enloe's

(1983, 2000) insights that women cannot qualify for the 'inner sanctum' of combat experience, despite the ways their lives are 'manoeuvred' in service of the military. As has been observed in research on reception, audiences' experience of the topic at hand shapes their response to its representation. Here, the women trusted a portrayal of life for a soldier in a similar war context to those occupied by their husbands. And yet, this is a representation; as such it is doing political work and these are active audiences, not passive dupes. Thus, at the same time as they find the representations somewhat informative and even comforting, the women also repeatedly emphasised the *limits and absences* of the available representations. That is, how much *more* the representations could or should do:

F5: There are probably things that have happened that's made them worse, things they won't be able to tell you. So, there's probably underlying things that have happened, but politically, and because they can't tell you, because that will make the Army look bad or the government look bad, whatever, so mentally, they know things that have happened that have made them so frustrated, so angry, whatever, because of what's happened, but they won't be able to tell you that. So that will be one thing.

(Catterick (after *Haunted by Helmand*))

F5: There's nothing, documentary wise, about the wives. It's all drama, and now everybody thinks we go around singing everywhere, and no we don't! I don't go to choir and I don't go around singing and I don't go around doing all these concerts in lovely black dresses. It doesn't happen like that, I'm sorry! I scream at my children, I shout, I don't sing! (laughter).

(Catterick, Talking about the WAGs Choir)

Here we see an overarching theme emerging from these focus group interviews of *purposeful* silences due to the military subject matter *and* we see an entwining of political representation, who speaks for who, with cultural representation, signifying practices.

In this focus group material, we also see this theme of silences as *self-censorship*, whereby the women feel in their own communication practices/practices of self-representation they must speak for 'military wives' and the military, more broadly. This theme emerged as the conversation turned to using Facebook:

F4: Yeah, and to be private, I'd rather talk face-to-face with someone if I was going through any troubles or anything like that. You don't know how secure these sites are. It would just be a no for me for anything like that.

F1: And I think we're supposed to be seen as being strong for our partners being away and going on something like this to me would be a bit weird.

F3: I would go for that kind of thing if I wanted information about somewhere – and not those particularly because I've never heard of them – but if I was being posted somewhere else and I wanted information on that, I would look for that kind of network, but not a 'woe is me', kind of story, not for that.

(RAF Halton Wives focus group)

And yet, as has long been found in research on social media use and the practice and representation of self in social media, the findings highlight contradictions in audience practice and their reception of representations (Livingstone, 2008). In this way, we find a powerful reliance on Facebook among our focus group participants:

F5: I wouldn't have been able to cope without Facebook. Facebook is the only way I got out and got to find out about things, and other than that I would not have known, because we were marched in and left there, and that was it. [. . .] And it's all things that the wives have done. This is nothing official that the Army's done to make things better for us, it's what wives have done.

(Catterick Wives focus group)

F6: Because my husband's injured, I've just joined the Band of Sisters, and Band of Sisters actually have like a private, it's like a Facebook page that only people that are actually on it can see it.

(Catterick Wives focus group)

F2: . . . and with having our Facebook page and everything, we can get to meet people prior to moving, so there's already somebody there. Whereas sometimes moving can be very, very difficult and you do feel isolated, and if somebody knocks on your door and says, 'Oh hi, how are you?'

(RAF Halton Wives focus group)

For these women, Facebook is both a dangerous space of potential exposure *and at the same time* a much-appreciated, important and comforting space of community. It is worth stressing just how isolating these women's lives can be. These are often women from working-class backgrounds who have married young and moved away from families to be with their husbands. While not living abroad due to their husbands' job postings, they nevertheless experience the 'dis-location' of a necessarily mobile life required as a military wife (Hyde, 2017). The circumstances of their lives are something that tends to be swept under the carpet. Thus, and not by accident, in discussing social networking in general and Facebook in particular, privacy and privacy settings were emphasised by our focus group participants and this preoccupation with privacy was linked to the need to ensure they were not revealing anything they should not as military wives. This was in *the same* conversations in which they showed that their comfort and community, a sense of safety in a lonely world, even, was fundamentally linked to, and reliant on, Facebook:

F1: I think it's just one of those things that you only get if you're a wife, so it's really nice to keep it with the wives and we all relate to it, where it's really hard for somebody out of that to understand what you are going through unless you're put in that position, so I think it is quite tricky. Because we don't have all the guns and everything, it's not exciting, it's not going to be on the front page of the news, so you just get on with it!

F3: That's the thing, there's not much about us as wives and what we do.

(RAF Halton Wives focus group)

Their husbands' sense of belonging to the military community is shaped by their training and an institutional emphasis on camaraderie and military identities constructed through notions of toughness or resilience. Yet the wives are 'left there' to craft their own sense of belonging through unofficial channels – with attendant risk.

Comfort and danger are thus entwined in these women's everyday life practices of reception, communication and self-representation – on and off Facebook – on and offline – as the following words about the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby and how it impacted them:

F2: Yeah, like in Hounslow, where the Welsh Guards currently are, they're going over to Pirbright and you're not allowed to wear anything that resembles the military down there at the moment. We've been told that you can't go out with like stickers on the car saying, 'I support my soldier' and stuff like that. 'Proud Army Wife', I got a hoodie that says, 'Army Wife' and I wouldn't be allowed to wear that out down there. [ . . . ] So, when you're outside the camp and by ourselves, especially after what happened to Lee Rigby, you're not allowed to wear military items [ . . . ].

(Catterick wives group)

Fusilier Lee Rigby had been murdered in the street in May 2013, with his killers asking passers-by to film them justifying their actions to avenge the killing of Muslim people. The nature of the murder, in which Rigby was run down by a car and subjected to an attempted beheading, made headline news in the United Kingdom. Rigby's name was mentioned without prompting in all our groups, with other participants talking about defying orders by posting images of themselves on social media in military uniform to express their solidarity, and refusal to be cowed – itself a performance of military manliness. Representation, then, is not limited to screens, whether mobile or fixed in place. In the above comment, the women's cars and clothes, and even their own bodies themselves operate as a site of representation of military wifehood and of military messages to the civilian population. As such, they are themselves the site of risk and danger.

## Conclusion

Military wives' voices, we have argued, highlight problems of representation, power and gender that speak both to the particularities of the case at hand and the wider (acutely gendered) context we all inhabit. What emerges confirms what we already know about the embeddedness of social media and highlights the usefulness of rich, qualitative material to consider meaning-making and to remind us *to keep complicated any* understanding of mediated meaning. Our study reinforces Barker et al.'s (2018) argument about mediated intimacy:

Of course, these sites are not outside of power relations and there is much research on trolling, cyber-bullying and e-bile (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Powell and Henry, 2017; Jane, 2014; Vickery and Everbach, 2018), but they are also spaces for intense, close and supportive interactions. It seems important to hold onto a sense of 'both and' - both stratified and scarred by power and inequalities yet also the site of pleasure, support and intimacy. (p. 26)



We suggest that the content – the representation of women – matters as much as it ever did, or, even, more. Mattering or not to participants does not equal mattering or not per se (cf. Mirrlees, above). We agree with Maltby and Thornham (2016) that there is a need to engage with the mundanity of media practices in the lives of soldiers and their families. At the same time, we suggest that this very mundanity provokes questions about the *work* of the stories told about war and the military, and the role of the family and the wife in solidifying powerful ideas of home front which help to justify ongoing wars. For when mundane and taken for granted, ideas are normatively prescribing how and what is imaginable (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022). And, moreover, such mundanity raises questions about whether stories – representations – can ever trouble dominant ideas about home fronts, soldiers' wives and ongoing wars.

When representing themselves to each other on social media *and* when discussing media representations of soldiers and soldiers' wives, the women in our focus groups encounter opportunities to break silences, but these opportunities *are always only partial because of the particular strictures to which* military families are subject. The breaking of silences also emerges as our research participants represent themselves to *us* – the researchers – echoing an element of social research discussed in so much previous feminist scholarship wherein social research itself becomes an opportunity for a voice that then presents the researcher with ethical challenges as well as 'findings' (e.g. Skeggs et al., 2008).

Finally, we want to note that, at the same time as being army wives, this very particular group of women is also a group of women; as such we can think about the ways in which their experience chimes with other research on women media users/audiences more generally. That is, we end by asking of the material we have presented in this article: to what extent are these experiences about media and being an army wife and to what extent are they about gender and media more generally?

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