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Editorial: The Media and the Military

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Abstract

This editorial provides a brief overview of the wide range of work on media-military relations from different disciplinary areas internationally and indicates a number of prominent themes together with those needing further attention. It locates issues of media technology, form and use within the contexts of the political and public framing of military activities. Before introducing the contributing articles, it notes how different factors of change both inside and outside the institutions of the armed forces are shifting the terms of visibility, legitimacy and accountability.

Keywords

Technology, Defence, Combat, Militarisation, Veteran, Military-Media Relations, Militainment

This issue uses the idea of ‘the military’, rather than ‘war’ or ‘conflict’ (both of which have been the organising terms for a developing literature of media research) in order to place a focus on the activities and forms of mediation of a key range of institutions internationally. These institutions are primarily the armed forces of a nation and those departments of state charged with managing their affairs and their public representation.

In ways which we discuss below, a military involvement in, and use of, media flows, including forms of social media, has developed significantly in the last decades. Coverage of military activity, often in relation to conflicts and their aftermath, has developed too, if with significant national variations, drawing on new

resources of visualisation and testimony. The shifts in what can be said and shown in situations of intensified interest and of political dispute has had consequences both for military-political and military-civilian relations. New lines of visibility, emphasis and sometimes contradiction have emerged alongside continuing strands of the invisible or the marginalised. Military mediations have always had a strong element of the covert and the deceptive about them and the new conditions of media circulation have modified their forms rather than significantly changed underlying motives. However, in many instances a more complex relationship with publics has emerged, one in which a relatively simple acceptance both of the need for military action (or preparation for it) in specific instances and of the scale, nature and management of this action, is less often found. Instead, there is a more anxious, questioning element to public perspectives, an interest in knowing more about the background to ‘success’ and ‘failure’ than was often previously thought useful or desirable.

Notwithstanding a new tendency to question, we would also want to note the continuing potency of military mediations both in versions of ‘the national’ and in the symbolism of manhood. Scenarios of ‘combat’, narratives of skill-at-arms, have not only retained but extended their imaginative allure in films and games and areas of popular cultural life (for instance, fitness training) intensifying their immersive offer.

Among the range of questions we wanted to pursue in this issue were those about how vernacular expressions of recent military experience (e.g. in social media, memoirs, forums) challenge or complement official accounts. We were interested in how national histories are variously put to work or displaced in the mediation of contemporary military action and in how ‘costs’ (diplomatic, economic and human, including forms of mental and physical injury) are variously calculated in relation to the mediation of military activity. Related to these questions are two more

fundamental ones. First, about the connections ‘downwards’, so to speak, about the ways in which public perceptions of the military are constructed and about the tensions at work in that construction and its shifts of evaluation. Secondly, about the connections sideways and ‘upwards’, about the manner in which unfolding narratives concerning the military sphere and its activities become interconnected with questions of foreign policy and with wider political debates.

This is an ambitious agenda albeit also a selective one to which other pressing issues might be added. Whatever the scope for fresh theoretical reflections, we wanted exploration of it to proceed principally by grounded accounts.

Before introducing the articles in the issue we want to briefly develop (and contextualise) a number of the above points, in order to sketch an outline of what we see to be the main lines of inquiry already opened up into aspects of media-military relations and to note some lines that deserve either fresh attention or are as yet unexplored.

Taking the military rather than war as our focus brings into play an interest in the institutional dynamics and identity work carried out through media technologies and communication practices. It is worth noting that a good deal of the research at the intersection of military and the media emerges not from the field of media and communication but from scholars who position themselves broadly speaking in sub-disciplines or fields such as security studies, war studies, popular geopolitics, military sociology, critical military studies or feminist international relations (IR) (Woodward and Jenkins, 2011; Basham et al., 2015). The work in this area is also sometimes considered at the periphery of traditional disciplines (politics and IR, sociology, geography) and is notably influenced by a series of ‘cultural turns’ across social sciences and humanities – aesthetic, affective, performative, visual – which have

reoriented research focuses and methodologies and in which narratives, symbols and images are considered important elements for analysis (Bleiker, 2001; Caso and Hamilton, 2015). We would especially draw attention to the body of work influenced by the traditions of feminist IR and with an interest in the gendered nature of warfare and military culture.

Taking the above into account it is perhaps not surprising that the normalisation of military values as a public good and the permeation of the military presence in civilian life receives a good deal of critical scrutiny (Enloe, 1983; Jackson, 2016). In revealing the pervasive power and appeal of militarisation, critics address the material processes, i.e. the magnitude of state-funded defence resources and military-related industries, but also the ideological processes involved. For our immediate purposes it is chiefly the latter that are directly relevant: those studies which evaluate how producers of media and popular culture are co-opted into the efforts, not merely to cast military preparedness as a 'common sense' necessity, but to engender an emotional connection between fighting forces and the public (Paris, 2000; Kelly, 2013). The prominence of forms of 'terrorism' as an issue in many parts of the world, together with Government accounts of the levels and direction of 'threat', have reworked the relationship between the foreign and the domestic and fed into both economic and ethical accounting.

In recognition of the complexities of the concept of militarisation, along with its relationship to ideologies of gender, racism and nationalism, it is particularly welcome to note projects such as the DUN (Defence, Uncertainty, and 'Now Media') project led by Sarah Maltby at Sussex University and the 'Militarization 2.0' project led by Susan Jackson at Stockholm University (with partner institutions in the UK and Germany). Amongst other concerns, such projects enable extended interrogations of

the ambiguous promise of social media for the military, both in terms of the potential risks for the defence sector but also the promotional and marketing opportunities for the wider arms industry. Jackson argues that it is via (digital) popular cultural artefacts such as YouTube videos that the ‘good, natural and necessary’ role of the military and arms industry are promoted and maintained (2016: 69). There are encouraging signs, then, that interdisciplinary military-focused projects that take seriously the role of media, communication and popular culture are able to attract international funding and recognition. There are a number of interconnected areas where we note particularly rich scholarship.

The military-entertainment-complex. The close relationship between the military and the entertainment genres that celebrate their values has led to various coinages including the ‘military-entertainment complex’ (Lenoir, 2000), ‘military-industrial-media-entertainment network’ (Der Derian, 2001), and ‘militainment.inc’ (Stahl, 2010). Such studies vary in their chosen sites and methods for inquiry, whether on the design of video games as recruitment tools, the pleasures of playing or watching war, or the companies who benefit financially from selling both weaponry and media. For Stahl, such militarised entertainment recruits audiences as ‘virtual-citizen soldiers’ and so encourages a blurring of the lines between real and virtual warfare. Whilst the dominant concern here is the way in which the military invade the domestic sphere and promote militaristic pleasures through popular culture, crucially the potential for resistance and even activism is also being explored (e.g. Robinson, 2012).

Imaging and sharing technologies. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq coincided with a rapid evolution in media technologies. The use of digital cameras, mobile phones and later helmet cameras in the battlefield, combined with public

sharing on social media platforms, have transformed the way military experience is mediated. New media practices and uses have disrupted both the traditional operational security concerns of the military hierarchy and the established codes and aesthetics of war reporting. Much has been written on the sometimes controversial imaging of war from the soldiers' perspective and the paradoxically connective and exclusionary qualities offered through such images and videos (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2009; Kennedy, 2009). In addition to the assorted communicative functions of publicly shared material, the uses of social media within the military and their families has received attention (Silvestri, 2015), with Maltby and Thornham (2016) recently exploring in this journal the social media and digital mobile cultures of service personnel through the concept of the 'digital mundane in military life'. The shift to explore how media technologies intersect with the mundanity of military experience is notable across such scholarship along with the questioning of how such media practices and rituals are implicated in the performance of individual and institutional identities.

War and the body. The turn to the affective or sensorial is particularly evident in the interdisciplinary collections on the embodied nature of military experience (Maltby and McSorley, 2012; McSorley, 2013). Placing the 'body at war' at the centre of scholarly inquiry seeks to challenge the 'techno-strategic discourse' (McSorley, 2013) that works to rationalise warfare and keep at a distance the injury and death of both civilians and combatants. Specific to soldiering, such an approach opens up the space to explore how not-so-stable militarised masculinities are actually felt and experienced, as somewhere between vulnerability and resilience, exhilaration and trauma.

Personalisation of soldiers and veterans. Another cross-cutting theme is the more personal or intimate relationship with military personnel as individuals, enabled by the vernacular digital media discussed above, but also older forms of memoir, literature, obituary and ‘media of the self’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2015: 1325; Woodward and Jenkins, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2016). As Anthony King (2010) writes in relation to his study on obituaries from Afghanistan, the elevation of the human interest angle and expression of loss through the imagined grief of a family member has political implications; altering the way in which military institutions communicate their legitimacy to the public.

One key overarching scholarly interest is in the ways in which military identities are negotiated and constituted through communicative practices – both those of producers and consumers. There is often an implicit logic of ‘military-cultural capital’ driving the performances and reception of such practices. Both within the military community and beyond, it is noticeable, as we observed above, how the credibility and even allure of the soldier or veteran is carried across media genres, through recognisable but ever adapting tropes and symbols. How exactly do the notably more intimate and emotionally-driven encounters with the military correlate with (the perpetuation of) established ideologies of masculinist militarism?

Alongside the many new constituents of media-military relations, there has been a continuation of the mainstream channels of portrayal produced by the defence correspondents and the war reporters of newspapers, radio and television. However, their work – the connections they make and the language and images they use – has been changed by many of the factors we have noted. These have affected the situation ‘on the ground’, the political frames in play around journalistic story-telling and, of course, the expectations of readers and audiences positioned rather differently to

military activity, its justifications and its realities, than the media audiences of the past (Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Matheson and Allan, 2009).

We would argue that a concern for the contexts, modes and effects of militarisation should include the interrogation of moments of destabilisation and resistance. Research with media audiences is particularly welcomed in this endeavour. As Daniel Bos has observed in relation to military video games, players are ‘capable of critically reflecting on the games, as well as the geopolitical and militarised content’ (2015: 103). When military scandals break (e.g. prisoner mistreatment or killing, sexual violence, criminal activity) it is not just the initial news coverage but the mediated public debates ignited by such events which offer key moments to explore the delineations of exceptionality, transgression, national identity, separateness and belonging in such expressions. When there is a crack in the armour of the military’s institutional identity as a ‘public good’, how do various actors respond, and what do their responses reveal?

We are especially alert to the need to keep examining the ever-evolving negotiations of military legitimacy and authority actively sought out via rapidly changing media technologies and the practices that both shape and follow them. One example here would be the profile of official announcements and media reportage around drone warfare. In a growing literature of analysis and ethical debate, Chamayou (2015) among others has done much to bring attention to modes of surveillance and targeting, along with the military psychology and political implications of this new mode of ‘killing-at-a-distance’.

The summary above is by no means exhaustive of course and we now draw out some of the themes specific to the issue in a brief overview of the articles it contains.

The articles

The first item engages with two deeply topical issues of our times: the mass migration of people to Europe, hoping to escape war and poverty; and the re-articulation of western military service as a humanitarian endeavour. For Pierluigi Musarò, the Italian Navy's Mare Nostrum operation in the Mediterranean cast the military personnel as 'rescuers' in a 'humanitarian battlefield' via the intense production and circulation of photographs, documentaries and other digital artefacts. Musarò explores the ways in which the military imagery plays down the logic of border protection in favour of a humanitarian logic.

Katy Parry and Nancy Thumim place their emphasis on the terms of audience engagement with, and response to, media accounts. They work with a distinctive grouping - their analysis develops from sessions which include veterans, forces family members and those involved in armed forces promotion. At the heart of their approach are issues concerning the relation between representation and experience and between positive and negative alignments to the very idea of the military and military action. Among the questions they ask are how do the new range of media channels and forms shift these relations, affecting the broader play-off between the 'official' and the 'unofficial'?

The next three articles extend this consideration of how military identity is mediated, with particular emphasis on the performance of masculinity and national identity within a range of media genres and representational practices. Jenna Pitchford-Hyde analyses the changing nature of media visibility for US veterans, especially those with manifest serious injuries. By examining veteran appearances in both a reality talent show and a photography project, Pitchford-Hyde argues that such media offerings can be perceived as positive shifts, not only countering the

conception of the 'broken' and marginalised veteran but also raising questions about the politics of visibility for disabled veterans. However, media narratives can also work to align combat injuries with commitment to the state and so position the disabled veteran as the ultimate American hero.

Taking a Korean TV reality show which focuses on replicating aspects of military life, Ji Hoon Park and his co-authors examine the male audience responses to it posted on an online bulletin board. They position their analysis in the context both of the place conscripted military service has in Korean national life and its importance as a point of focus for ideas of masculinity in a situation of changing gender relations both in the home and in the workplace. Just how anxieties and contradictions around masculinity inform an engagement with the show provides the core of their discussion.

Shifting the focus to military videogames, the next article explores how hegemonic representations of US military dominance are re-appropriated by those supportive of ISIS and Hezbollah in the form of video game interventions and modifications. Dima Saber and Nick Webber discuss how the recognisable visual design and alternative rhetorical address of 'resistant' videogames offer a counterfactual history for those supportive of 'jihad'. However, whilst the producer's aim is to challenge dominant political frameworks, the authors argue that the design limitations of the games can actually work to undermine perception of the real possibilities for resistance and thus unintentionally reinforce these frames.

Alex McConville and his co-authors seek to explore rituals of commemoration, the placing of military activity in the context of national history. By looking at the way in which Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) day is reported in a particular New Zealand community they highlight the selective and

strategic manner in which it works to confirm particular versions of national identity, excluding others. In particular, they point to the importance of emotional structures and cues in giving the day its required experiential resonance and setting up ideas of the ‘respectful’ against which any departure is judged improper.

A final short article from Nina Franz offers a critical review of the emerging literature on drone technology and assesses the transformative power of this recent military development. In adapting tools of surveillance into weapons, military forces (and especially the US military) have further detached their own exposure to danger from the process of killing others and thereby further unsettled the traditional logic of warfare. In Franz’s discussion of the data-driven ‘pattern of life’ analysis undertaken in the selection of targets, it is possible to trace how the positioning of the ‘human’ becomes ever more uncertain

In sum, the contributions encompass a range of media and modes of enquiry across diverse geographical locations. We have traced a number of significant overlapping themes and concerns across the selection of articles here. Both in relation to them and across the broader field, there is clearly potential for further interdisciplinary research, including that which works with greater levels of access to military institutions and related industries than has usually been possible. As media and military technologies continue to develop at a rapid pace, as militaries adapt their capabilities to new forms of perceived threat, and as the public image of the nature of military ‘work’ continues to shift (including through more countries formally permitting women into combat roles) it remains important to investigate the concomitant patterns of media attention and communicative practice.

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