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‘BEYOND’ PSEUYDONMITY:
THE SOCIO-TECHNICAL STRUCTURE OF ONLINE MILITARY FORUMS

INTRODUCTION

> “Arrse is what the British Army is really like and what it sounds like when talking to itself”. Andrew O’Hagan (2011)

Online media and its related technologies have afforded new opportunities for military personnel to engage in, and contribute to representations of military work. Whilst others have considered these issues in relation to the US military (Wall, 2006; Robbins, 2007; Silvestri, 2013; Lawson 2014), the Israel Defence Forces (Caldwell et al. 2009), and Belgian soldiers (Reisteigne, 2010), few have empirically analysed how online media spaces are occupied, utilised and negotiated by the British Military. At the same time, there is a growing corpus of research that engages with what we might call the political economy of code (see also Patelis 2013). This work draws on critical software studies and science and technology studies (to name a few) to interrogate techno-social systems (such as social networking sites and online forums) in terms of their power relations (see Andrejevic 2011, Nissembaum 2011, boyd 2010, Gehl 2014), and comparing these power relations with the discourses of the sites themselves (van Dijck 2013, Hearn 2010, Gillespie 2010). This latter approach seeks to understand how the design of, and

discourses within, online spaces are able to/work to 'configure' (Suchman 2011, van House 2011) action, not in a straightforward or transparent way, but in terms of the socio-technical conditions within which users are invited to participate - and in so doing perpetuate, generate, alter, negotiate them (see also for example, Berry 2011, Kitchen and Dodge 2001; Gehl 2011; Manovich 2013, Steigler 2009). We consider these issues here by focusing on the 'anonymous' online spaces of military forums - where individuals are invited to obscure identity - to explore the wider power relations inherent in online technological mediations.

We draw upon data collected weekly from a variety of military forums between January and November 2014[i] including: Arrse (the Army Rumour Service), Navy Net (aka Rum Ration, the Unofficial Royal Navy forum), Rear-Party (for Forces wives and family), P-Prune (the Professional Pilots Rumour Network), e-Goat (Royal Air Force Rumour Network), and ArmyWags, RAFWags and NavyWags (forums for 'British Forces Wives and Girlfriends'). We were initially directed to the forums as a result of prior data collection that included web analytics of military issues in social media (see AUTHOR 2015), although the forums emerged as key elements in later focus groups with wives, partners and veterans. Of all of these forums, the most popular (by posts and views) were Arrse, Navy Net and Rear-Party. The forums, and the discussion threads within them, are accessible to view among non-registered users, an issue that we return to later. Our analysis included a mapping of the major themes (defence matters usually in relation to wider media agendas– defence cuts, political statements, kit, evaluations,

transitions from military to civilian life) within the forums, discourse and visual analysis of the content in relation to those themes, and wider web analysis of the role of forums within social media. For now, it is worth clarifying that our initial analysis focused on technological affordances of anonymity that might facilitate shared and intimate 'conversations' about the military that do not always resonate with the image of the Armed Forces the British military might seek to project (Author, forthcoming). But what emerged was something far more complex with regard to the complex interweaving of visible discourse, reputation, commercialisation, and politics that were all premised on, and enabled through, a presumption of anonymity. It is to the wider implications of these issues that this paper speaks. Indeed, although military forums are relatively unique in terms of the particular culture of the military (see for example Woodward et al, 2009; Woodward & Winter 2007; Barrett 1996; Goldstein 2001; Hale 2008; Silvestri 2013), we find our examples have a much wider resonance – particularly for social media - that we need to consider.

To develop this, we first explore the discursive online practices within military forums. Here we examine the extent to which the technological affordances of 'anonymity' (or what we define more accurately as pseudonymity) enable a pre-existing, imaginary performance of a collective military identity among users and which may be a necessary consequence of the very pseudonymity that facilitates it. In the second half of the paper, we explore the affordances of pseudonymity in terms of generating a *collective* military identity that operates and signifies powerfully for external parties.

Here we consider the extent to which pseudonymity also acts as a critical interface between the (supposed) military community who contribute to forum content, and non-military observers who read, access, mine and appropriate the content for political and economic gain. This latter issue not only points to the wider capitalist power relations inherent in technological mediations and online creation/consumption (see also Gillespie 2010, Gehl 2011). It also suggests that particular discourses are endemic to such sites and operate as powerful identifying features that have economic and political 'merit' within a capitalist and consumerist framework.

'FEELING' PSEUDONYMOUS

'Anonymity' is an increasingly slippery term (Kennedy 2006) that today speaks more to the feelings and imaginings of the user than it does to information or data privacy (Quian & Scott 2007, Nissembaum 2011, Gerlitz & Helmond 2013). It is fraught with presumptions around what constitutes information/data and how it circulates as well as who controls, has access to, or shares it. Concepts of anonymity are also embedded within practices and mediations of digital culture, whereby the overwhelming experience of the user is at an interface level. This aligns anonymity with visibility – in terms of what information is visible where and when – indeed in all the forums we analysed this is where presumptions and claims around anonymity were made: in the invitations to conceal specific personally identifying information. Of course, as many theorists have noted, this is a minor element of data sharing practices as terms such as the 'like economy', 'hit and link

economy' (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013: 3-4) or 'techno-economy' (van Dijck 2013: 164) suggest. These are all terms that direct us to a deeper understanding of the economic and political processes of data sharing online that occur within the discourse of anonymity beyond intentional information sharing at a user-end (see also Gehl 2011, Berry 2011, Gillespie 2010).

In all the forums we analysed, 'anonymity' was discursively encouraged through the use of pseudonyms: users were actively encouraged to employ non-identifying names and icons when registering. This suggests to us that anonymity is constructed within (and framed by) information sharing norms within the forums. By virtue of routinely asking some 'personal' questions (age, gender, location etc), while also suggesting other information is obscured, the space for 'anonymity' is generated – even as the possibility for it is negated (you have to offer information in order to conceal information). The other issue to note here is that there are legitimating processes within the forums that require users to disclose military-specific information to 'prove' they are (or were) legitimate members of the Armed Forces and thus establish their credibility as a 'military' contributor; for example, information about regiment and rank (existing or former) or familiarity with military terminology and acronyms. As one user stated on NavyNet: *"Have you served on the front line in an infantry role? If you're going to say something stupid like "no", it's pointless even attempting to explain it to you"*. This differentiation between military and civilian is not unique to online forums but reflective of an inculcation into military life that marks out military personnel as 'different' (Author, 2015; Barrett, 1996: 132). But, in the forums it is also

often accompanied by a lack of tolerance and hostility towards non-military users within the forum space as exemplified in the following post from Arrse:

> "If you are a never served civilian, please respect that this is a forum for soldiers, ex soldiers etc to chew the sh1t, catch up, tell lies and have their own little corner of the internet. You are tolerated as its naive to think that not all are bad and some genuinely contribute. Sadly of late there are increasing numbers of this type infecting the site and conducting themselves like cunts. Knock it off or fuck off and play somewhere you are either liked, welcome or wanted."

The demonstration of knowledge and affiliation with 'military culture' thus becomes a condition of participation; a statement of credibility that has to be visibly affirmed through discursive means. Seen here, 'anonymity' stands in direct contravention to credibility - and it is the *latter* that not only conditions participation in these forums but also what generates economic and political weight. While the distinctiveness of a military identity should be noted, the wider practice of credibility verification through discourse is a feature of many forums (see for example Bartlett et al. 2014, Barlett 2014, Bishop 2014, Suler 2004). A central question that we return to below, then, is about the wider discursive utility of the notion of anonymity - what it facilitates or generates, and what it purports to do through the registration, log in, and moderation processes.

More immediately, these issues highlights to us the continued inadequacy of the term 'anonymity' for understanding practices within these forums. Instead, we contend that 'pseudonymity' more accurately reflects the way

that socio-technical systems construct information sharing as a form of privacy or 'anonymity' at particular points within a wider interaction (log in and personal information rather than within the exchanges themselves). It also speaks to the ways in which forum users at once conceal their identities *and* perform them. 'Pseudonymity' allows us to investigate the affordances of this process, taking away the fetish of privacy or anonymity and instead focusing on the techno-social conditions that enable, generate and negotiate the practices of 'becoming' and 'identifying' within the ideological structures of the forum. Seen here, it is pseudonymity that generates the possibility and framework *for* credibility: it necessitates a particular kind of demand of the user in terms of actively demonstrating alignment and credibility. An intentional by-product of this is the generation of rich and compelling information and data that has economic value. We discuss this in more detail below through two key themes that emerged from within forum discussions. The first is mental health, which we suggest is not only enabled through, and contingent on, the affordances of pseudonymity but also lends credibility to the forum as comprised of a shared military community, particularly for external audiences. The second is misogyny where we draw attention to the inherent sociability of misogyny within socio-technical structure of the forums, which in turn, further establishes the authenticity of the forum for appropriation by others.

MILITARY MENTAL HEALTH: SHARING, COLLECTIVITY, CREDIBILITY

Mental health issues feature heavily across all the forums we investigated and we want to discuss the utility of this theme for demonstrating 'authenticity' or 'credibility'. As a theme within the forums, issues of mental health occupy two positions: the first relates to wider discourses of masculinity, heroism and durability (Woodward et al; 2009, Silvestri 2013) whereby mental health is one element among others to be endured and overcome. The second relates to mental health as a political, institutional or socio-cultural issue – where users are seeking to acknowledge, verify and ultimately legitimate mental health issues within a military community.

To take the first theme, users positioned the existence of mental health problems among military personnel as either unproblematic (by virtue of the adequate institutional support and resources available to those experiencing difficulties), or as a manifestation of individual weakness, often in relation to masculinity, and often as a comparative to physical injury. One user stated for example that those who experience "*an occasional nightmare/flashback*" should consider themselves "*pretty lucky*" compared to those who have serious physical injuries and they "*need to man the **** up!*" In this sense, the symptoms of mental health disorders are negated, and the legitimacy of mental health issues within the military undermined. As a consequence, behaviours that might be symptomatic of a mental health problem are positioned as errant, unsociable and unique to the (badly behaved) individual rather than a consequence of operational and military work. As one user argued:

> I[']m not saying that PTSD does not exist, but we have to be careful not to let the actions of drunken, violent people be justified by their time in uniform. Some people are just bad.

At the same time, as suggested above, there were competing discussions that not only drew attention to the need to recognise mental health as a military issue, but also to the ways in which the positions described above were detrimental to enhanced understanding of mental health. One user, for example, suggested that the 'manning up' attitude demonstrated an "*acutely obvious*" "*ignorance of mental illness*". Another suggested it might prevent the seeking of help. What was notable about these competing discussions was the inclusion, and sharing of experiences of mental health problems and PTSD as part of the dialogue.

THE AFFORDANCES OF MENTAL HEALTH

There are a couple ways that we might explain these discussions, both of which draw upon existing understandings of online forum cultures. The first is through the affordances of pseudonymity that allow users to disclose experiences of mental health (direct or otherwise) without compromising their professional or social standing within the offline military community. This is important because the military do not obviously facilitate or nurture discussions around mental health problems within the military. Yet, in the forums, we would suggest it is the centrality of 'feeling' anonymous that becomes central to the act of disclosure about mental health issues that might otherwise be prohibited (see Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1996;

Joinson 2001). Our point here then is that the 'feelings' of 'dissociative anonymity' and disinhibition are endemic to the affordances of pseudonymity (as user's are encouraged to understand their online responsibilities as differentiated from their offline - necessarily capable, resilient - identities), which are, in turn are forged through the socio-technical structures of the forum. While we return to the issue of disinhibition below, our point here is that, the issue of whether pseudonymity is ever anything more than an imagined construct becomes tangential to the discursive practices within the forums around controversial subject matter.

The second way in which we might explain the affordances of mental health is to suggest that the theme enables the generation of a collective sense of military identity, which is what marks the forums as both powerful and unique. Mental health operates as a theme around which sharing culture can be generated among users in the knowledge that they are doing so with other, similarly positioned or like-minded people (see also Barak et al., 2008; Coursaris and Liu, 2009). This is clearly a powerful rhetoric for the users of the forums, indeed as one Arrse user stated of his own experiences with PTSD, Arrse was his "biggest help":

> As a reservist, i didnt have the close-knit team that regulars might have so i think ARRSE filled the gap. I found that others have had it far far worse, read others tales etc

While we are not disputing that users clearly feel a sense of affinity, there are other issues to note here. Indeed, as Jenny Kennedy reminds us, within a

wider digital context the rhetoric of sharing is as much about the semantic richness of the concept than about genuine support: As she states, it is 'never employed neutrally' (2013: 129). Kennedy's argument reminds us that the activities that occur within an online forum are forged through power relations that continue to remain somewhat obscure: sharing is not an activity that is (solely) generated from users actions: it is facilitated and produced through a range of systems that have alternative economic and political logics. In relation to this last point, we might also consider how issues of mental health work in a similar way to the discussions noted earlier, to 'authenticate' or give credibility to military identities. Here then, it is the subject matter and experience that validates a particular identity. These discussions also resonate with a wider socio-political context in which on-going public debate and media discourse has centred on mental health problems among military personnel and veterans, particularly in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (McCartney, 2010; Iversen et al, 2005; see also Keane, 2009; King 2010). Out point is that the credibility and authenticity of the forum – manifest through discussions of mental health issues - becomes tied as much to the meaning it may have for external parties who access, mine and appropriate the discussion threads as it does for those who contribute to its content.

Taking all of these observations together, what we see emerging from the forum discussions of mental health is threefold. First, users discuss aspects of military life in an 'alternative' space that is made 'visible' as an alternative space in particular ways, but also ways that also resonate with the

perceptions of (non-military) among external publics. Second, the discussions are contingent on the notion of pseudonymity that facilitates 'sharing', which is also inherently visible and public and conditioned by power relations that are also intrinsically interested in the culture of sharing (see also Castells 2009). Third, the forums are suggestive of a performed, pre-existing - imagined or otherwise –military identity through which connection and inclusion is sought and through which the forum space becomes bounded and defined. It is to these latter two points that we now turn through our analysis of another theme that emerged from the data: misogyny.

MISOGYNY: SOCIABILITY, IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY

In keeping with much work investigating gender and social and digital (see for example Coleman & Golub 2008, Papacharissi 2011, Nafus, 2012) military forums are also notable in their active silencing of women within the forum (such as the discussions themselves) and the simultaneous oversaturation of sexually objectified images of women that are routinely posted and commented on. While there are a number of correlations we might make here with wider military culture (for example Barrett 1996; Hale, 2008; Woodward and Winter, 2007; Higate, 2003a; Hockey, 2003; Goldstein, 2001; Kerfoot and Knights 1993), the active silencing of women within the forums was especially visible in the responses of other users when they suspect a woman has posted in Arrse and Navynet. In these circumstances, the women are 'outed' (as such) and their comments, questions, queries dismissed. For

example, when one user asked what Sandhurst was like "*from a woman's perspective*" the responses included *'Ooooh! Ooooh! A girl posted a question on Arrse!"* a comment that was later removed by moderators. The exception to this is RearParty, not least because it is a separate, contained/able space for women only. In contrast, forums like Arrse and Navynet become the domain of the masculine, both in terms of who is using them and in the discursive masculine performativity within them through misogynistic discourse.

The most prevalent and visible form of misogyny was the sexual objectification of women, especially in Arrse and NavyNet. Much of this centred on users 'rating' women's (sexual) attractiveness within specific categories including: '*Fancy a Bit of Ginger'; 'Women you fancy that you shouldn't'; 'Ladies – Non Ginger'; 'Help! Are All Scottish Women Ugly?'; Asian Women...'; 'Fit birds in uniform' and 'Lady thread (NO GASH SHOTS) NSFW*' and '*MILF's – You would do?'*. Comments within these threads were varying in their explicitness regarding the sexually desirability of women but all positioned women within dominant patriarchal, heteronormative sexual discourse, and one that converges with pornography. For example, a thread on NavyNet entitled '*Women that need a good seeing to*' ran to over 110 pages and included the following posts:

> Supernanny fcuking wants it, the filthy chunker.

> Don't know why but I've always wanted to nail the slim jock lady in "How clean is your house" (Aggie?). She could clean up after I'd spaffed allover her glasses

> In the MILF stakes, Lorrain Kelly would seriously get it. I just think she would be pure scottish filth. Every hole a goal and a deep fried mars bar for breakfast.
>
> That Emma Cosby off GMTV is fcuking div's. I would sh1t in her mouth. Lucky girl.

All of these discussions incorporated images of women, some in sexually explicit poses. This is important because the posting of pornographic images is banned within the sites. The inclusion of sexual explicit images therefore draws our attention to the interpretive frameworks utilised by both the users and moderators in their appraisal of the images that remain visible both in discussion threads and as profile icons (see Figure 1). Threads specifically dedicated to the posting of images of semi-naked women were also common. In an Arrse thread entitled '*Drunk Girls passed out for our amusement!*' for example, a number of images of unconscious and semi-naked women were posted. This thread, amongst others that were similar, raise critical questions regarding consent. It is not clear from the images how some of the women came to be semi-naked, nor is it clear if (or how) they consented to being photographed, *and* having the image (re)distributed through the forum. These issues are bought to prominence by the posting of the images but simultaneously denied within the discussion; the images become, solely, for the amusement of other (male) users.

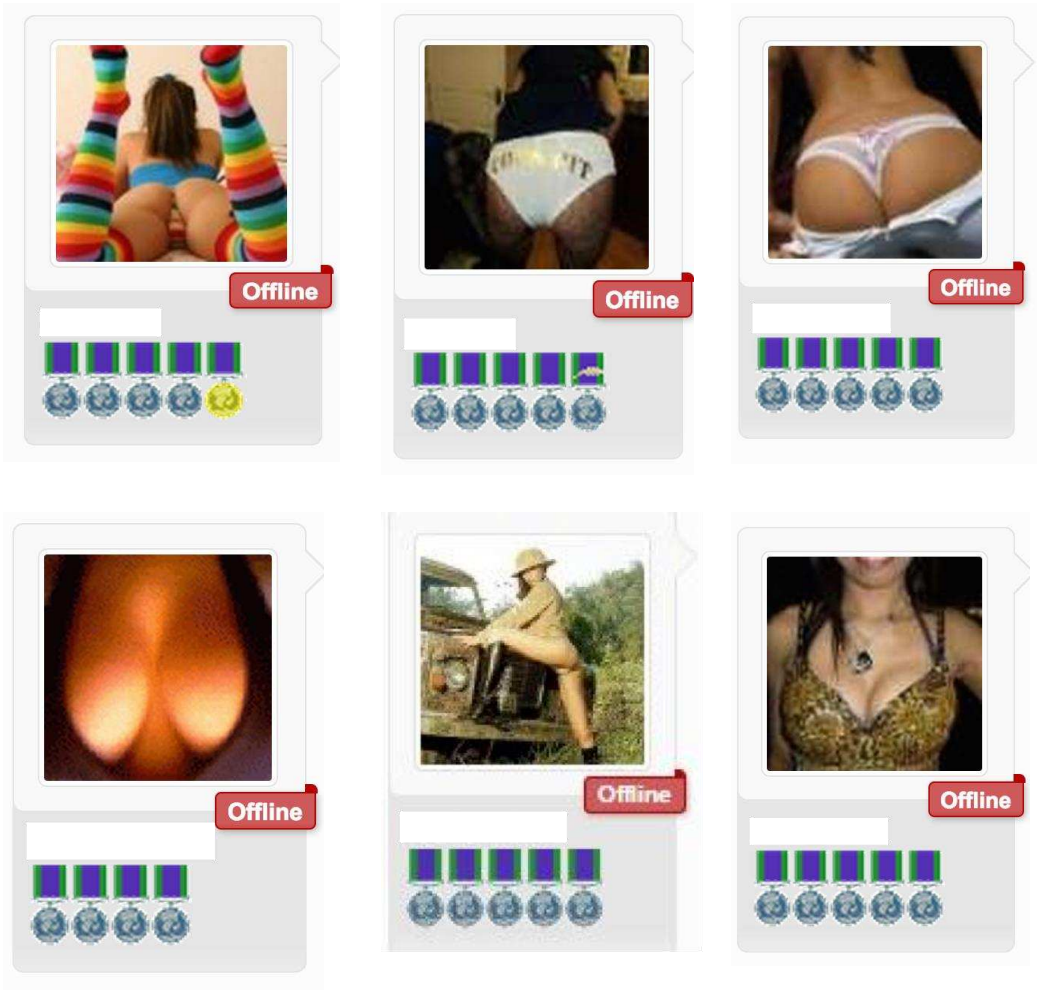

Figure 1: Profile Icons from User Profiles on Arrse

Throughout all of these discussions and their accompanying visual imagery women are only present in their objectification and subjugation; they are foregrounded within the discussion but inherently excluded from it. It is perhaps unsurprising that what emerges from this convergence of masculinity and the sexual objectification of women, is a normativity of implied violence towards women within the forum (through the bullying and harassment of perceived women users), and within the discursive practices. This is especially apparent in the following quotes extracted from a discussion around adultery where a user had asked for advice about how to

respond to his wife's engagement in sexual relations with his colleague/friend:

> Move on my ******* itchy hoop!! Get cunted, walk your slag whore of a "wife" into a door, ****-punt her, then drag her round to your mates house by her hair. Kick his door in, throw her at him shouting "You can have the ******* slut!". That way she's out the house, you get to watch your "mates" wife kick the **** out of your "mate", and possible your "wife" too! Then get your skinny wretched body back to the pub for last orders. Win Win!

> WTF is wrong with you bunch of ******* queers?!?! "write him a letter"?!! **** that! Drive round to his house, park your car in his front room. Knock the **** out of him, then rape his wife and kids. Douse the place in petrol, then video them burning. Post on Arrse for prosperity. Reach the pub by last orders.

What we see in the above quote – and across the forums - is the tolerance of an implied, yet explicit, violence towards women - which congregates around the subject of sex, ''slag whore of a wife'; 'rape his wife and kids'; '****-punt her'. These are spaces that are dominated by (masculine), and generative of, uncivil rudeness, aggression, violence and misogyny.

THE AFFORDANCES OF MISOGYNY

Of course, these behaviours are not unique to military forums. There is a long tradition of research into 'anonymity' that associates disinhibition with misogyny (Suler, 2004, Kennedy, 2006, Turkle, 1996: 210; Cherny, 1994; Gladys We, 1994; Bernstein et al, 2000, Hutchens et al.2014). There is also a corpus of work on trolling, flaming and deviancy online that routinely notes

the long history of misogyny within these practices (Bishop 2014, Bartlett 2014, Bartlett et. al 2014 Hmielowski et al. 2014). [ii] Both corpuses are relevant here not least because they draw our attention to the affordances of pseudonymity, particularly in terms of, for example, disassociative anonymity, feelings of invisibility, the asynchronicity of the forum posts that can contribute to disinhibition not least because they contribute to a 'loosening' of social norms and inhibitions that might otherwise shape discourse within a face to face environment (see Suler 2004). In terms of the military forums, we suggest that pseudonymity contributes to, or indeed generates, explicit misogynistic discussion within military forums because of its particular affordances for disassociative anonymity and disinhibition. At the same time, we should also remember the wealth of literature that highlights the gendered and misogynistic nature of military culture *per se* in a manner that resonates with the heteronormative performances of masculinity seen above, particularly through 'physical toughness', 'aggressiveness' and 'a rugged heterosexuality' (Barrett 1996: 132; Hale, 2008; Woodward and Winter, 2007; Higate, 2003a; Hockey, 2003; Goldstein, 2001; Kerfoot and Knights 1993).

Consequently, if we combine technical infrastructures of pseudonymity with the construction of the forum as a space used by a pre-defined masculine 'military' community, they also become a space for the articulation of a military identity that is inherently linked to (but at times distant from) – a wider military identity *per se*. Viewed from this perspective, and in keeping with our argument in the earlier sections: if the predominant and unique

aspect of these forums is the establishment of a collective military identity in order to generate resonance externally, then misogyny is not only a theme to establish certain affinities, it is also part of a socio-technical structure designed to elicit 'sharing' for commercial gain (see also Gehl 2011: 1229). Moreover, if we consider the long history of pseudonymity and misogyny as detailed above, then we also need to consider the extent to which misogyny is an inherent and increasingly unassailable feature of sociability (to use van Dijcks term 2013).

Alongside the sociability of the misogynistic content is the tolerance of misogyny by the forum moderators that becomes revealing of the wider infrastructures and power relations in which users are situated. Like other forums, these are managed and controlled through terms and conditions of use, legal parameters and reactive moderation.[iii] Despite this, there is little evidence of active intervention in the discursive content, particularly with regard to misogyny. This implies a tolerance - and even promotion – of misogynistic discourses that become necessary to the growth and maintenance of the forum as a space in which masculine military identities can be played out and played with. Moreover, whilst moderators themselves are often highly 'visible' (contributing to discussions and debates) their moderation is not. Deleted posts are not marked as such – they simply disappear – at times with little rational logic or recourse to forum rules. The rationale behind removing the comment *'Ooooh! Ooooh! A girl posted a question on Arrse!"* for example is especially unclear, particularly in light of it appearing alongside other misogynistic comments that remained. The

disappearance of comments like this one – notable to us because our analysis meant the consistent revisiting of threads - make the act of moderation especially 'invisible' drawing our attention to the extent to which moderation – when it is active – becomes obscured from users. Thus what appears to be unfettered, un-moderated and necessarily free in expressiveness regarding the realities of military life is in-fact highly moderated and controlled. Viewed in this way, it is hard not to see misogyny, abusive language, offensive material and aggressive, masculine performances of military identity as socio-technical *conditions* of the site that become critical to the maintenance of the authenticity and credibility of the forum as distinctly 'military'. Taken together, this means that misogyny within the forums is doubly exacerbated through the wider perception of military identity as misogynistic (off and online), which regardless of its 'accuracy' or 'truth' is key to the economic and political success of the forums. The latter, as we argue above, depends on a wide acceptance that the military forums are 'authentic' through the performance of a collective military identity. In this sense, the issue of whether military culture 'actually' is misogynistic is only relevant insofar as it widely perceived and imagined to be so: it is a popular imaginary that the forum must seek to fit.

It is with this in mind that we turn to our final point where we explore the extent to which the performances of military identity on military forums becomes critical to the functionality and legitimacy of the forums as a sites of publicly visible data that can be accessed, mined and appropriated by others. Here, we suggest that the discourses discussed above in relation to mental

health and misogyny may actually be functional to the construction of an 'online military community' by the forum owners. We argue that pseudonymity acts as a critical interface between the military community who contribute to the content, and non-military observers, who read, access, mine and appropriate the content for political and economic gain and where moderation becomes selective, purposeful, functional and essential to the monetising the community who contribute to the content.

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATIONS: ONLINE CREATION AND CONSUMPTION

We start by exploring the work of the umbrella organisation under which Arrse (Army Rumour Service), NavyNet, and Rear Party are managed: Military Media. It is through an analysis of the services and products offered by Military Media in addition to, but intrinsically founded upon, their management of the forums that we see the functionality and appropriation of military forums – and the communities constructed in and through them - as economically and politically viable. In this regard, Military Media's statement that they produce the '*UK's busiest military online communities*' becomes purposeful, as do the user statistics evidenced to support it: *'... with a combined reach of over 20,000 people... comprising of approximately 1/3 UK serving, 1/3 UK ex-serving and 1/3 others (overseas military, potential recruits and interested parties)*"[iv]. These statements are an overt, public construction of the forum (and its users) as 'military'. This becomes further evidenced through an analysis of the three key services that Military Media offer beyond the management of the forums; all of which speak to the necessity of publicly

accessible performance of (intimate) military identity/culture within the forum that can be accessed, mined and recursed.

CONSULTANCY: REACHING OUT TO USERS

The first is the (re)production of the forums as consultancy spaces through which external actors – including the media, public sector organisations (the UK Government) and commerce - can access the opinions and insights from the 'military community'. Here, Military Media represent the forums – and themselves as forum owners – as facilitating '*a wide range of opportunities*' for 'engaging *the military and their families*'. They foreground instances where the forums have been used as '*regular sources of comment and research for the national media, both printed and broadcast*'[v] and in so doing further legitimise the forums as places where the 'military community' can be located and drawn upon. To this end, the Arrse forum in particular has hosted a number of 'consultancy' discussions including: for the House of Commons Defence Committee regarding the Ministry of Defence's Future Army 2020 plans; for the Electoral Commission regarding the Armed Forces voting; and for British Petroleum regarding social e-learning. Similarly, there are a number of threads initiated by members of the media inviting comment on, or contributors for both generic and military specific media documentaries (ie. The Big Allotment Challenge, or 'Home Carers' 'Army Wives', 'Ex-Forces Housing' and 'Military Families'). The wider point here is that engagement with the forum in this context is entirely reliant upon a wider acceptance of the 'legitimacy' and 'authenticity' of the forum as representative of an authentic military experience.[vi] Secondly, it is also in the

interests of the forum owners to permit – and perhaps even elicit – consultation requests because it further validates the forums and increases their commercial viability for would be advertisers.

ADVERTISING: TARGETING USERS

The second way in which the forums are (re)produced and (re)appropriated by the forum owners is through their marketing of the forums as key sites for advertising. They claim the sites have '*strong brands'*, and the users '*fierce loyalty.*; in effect, branding the forums as offering a distinct yet homogenised (military) market segment at which advertising can be targeted.[vii] At the same time, Military Media publish commercially oriented demographic data (obtained from Quantcast) about the forum users, differentiating them by gender, age, estimated income and interest (see Figure 2). Consequently, whilst user's personally identifying data remains hidden (for the most part) because of their pseudonymity, their *consumer* identity is made expressly visible through social profiling algorithms that constructs them like any other market audience. Indeed, it is the latter data that is economically valuable, and returns us to the socio-technical and techno-economic conditions of the forums (see also van Dijck 2013: 164; Gehl 2011, 2014; Gillespie 2010). What makes them unique however – and in turn targetable - is their location and 'reach' within the boundaries of the forum itself, offering discrete opportunities for advertisers to display, link and sponsor products and services within the discursive content generated by the users.

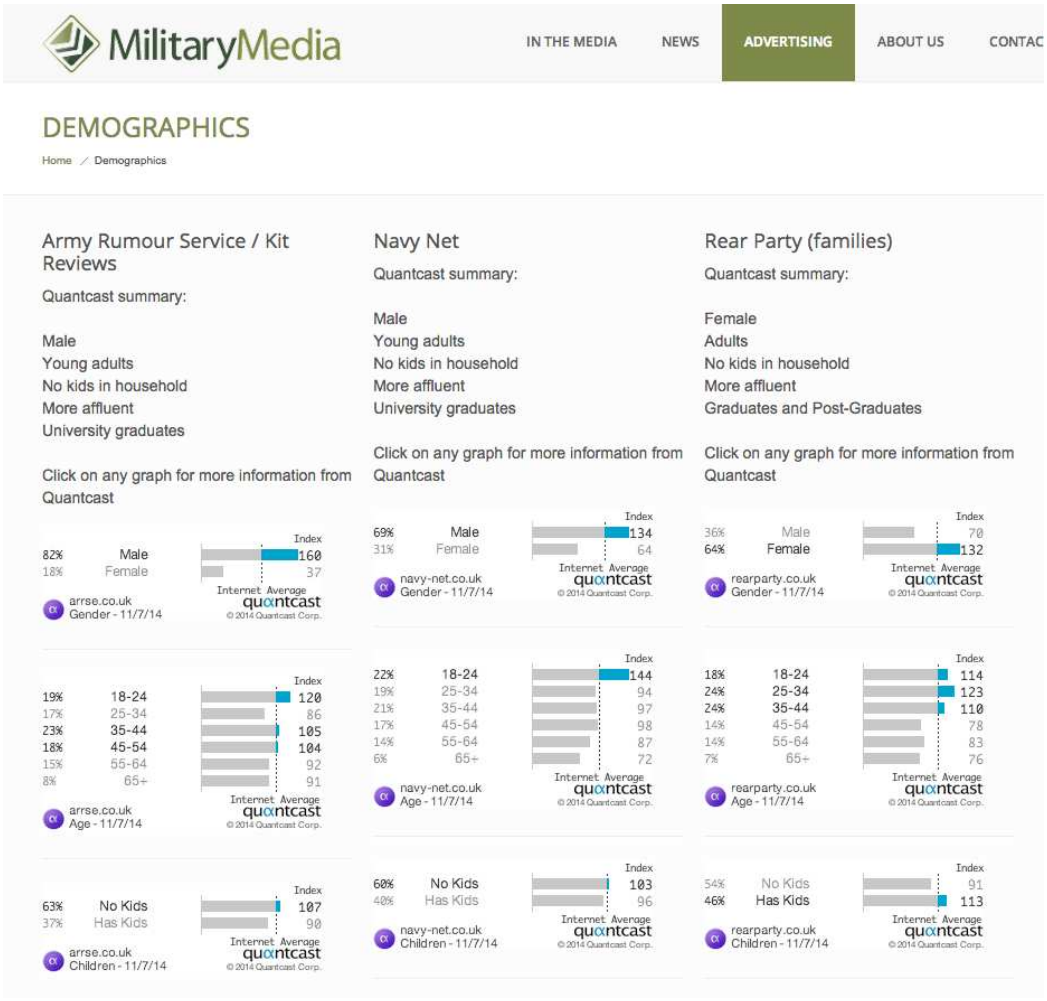

Figure 2: Quantcast demographic information made available by Military Media on their website.

Whilst the forums contain generic advertising alongside content (for example, eBay, Amazon, Jaguar), targeted advertising is also embedded within the discursive content of the forum (see also Turow 2011). Here specific words are selected within the user-generated discussion and rollovers imposed on these words with placement links or pop- up ads. For example, in the following quote from the 'Homecoming' thread on RearParty, a rollover advert (signified by the arrow) for Top Man clothing was inserted over the word 'man'.

> So the long-awaited homecoming has happened, but all is not rosy. I don't know what I expected. For those who have known me on this board for a few years you'll know that I am very much in love with mylovely [rollover ad for Top Man] man. I hope it's temporary, but my gentle, loving man has changed - he's not kind with me, or patient with me, or loving.

The recursive advert placement targets the themes and issues being discussed within the forum, with particular sensitivity to key words and user identity - in this case wives, girlfriends and partners of military members. The placement of the ads shift and change over time, for example in Nov 2014 the rollover for Top Man appeared over the word 'man', Two months later a new advert for a 'mum and me' brand of Cussons baby wash was imposed over the word 'gentle'. In some cases the advertised product is tangential to the actual content of the discussion but speaks more to the collective identity of the forum – aligning the word 'gentle' with children, washing or parenting is a move made possible because of the collective/constructed identity of the RearParty site as gendered female Nevertheless the recursive processes behind the placement ads is suggestive of how the data generated within the forum is appropriated, sold and re-sold.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT: APPEALING TO USERS

The third way in which the users of military forums – as an identified, 'branded', 'targetable' community – become inherently tied to the economic interests of the forum owners is through the development of subsidiary products and services by Military Media and their parent company Olive Net Ltd. These include, for example, military dating sites (Military XXX), reviews

of military equipment and clothing (Kit Reviews), military outdoor clothing and equipment online shop (RVOps), recruitment agencies aimed at the military community (Olive Jobs), and risk management consultancy (Emergency Planning Solutions). These products and services link directly to the – imagined or otherwise – military identities and culture performed within the forums.

Figure 3: Military XXX Website Banner

Discussion and reviews of equipment and 'kit', employment, redundancies and transitions form military to civilian life are, for example, prevalent on the forums, particularly Arrse. But perhaps the most explicit example of a subsidary product is the Military XXX dating site. Here we see military forum users being (re)presented and recursed in accordance with the discursive content of forum. Not only do Military XXX foreground '*casual relationships*' and '*wild sex*', and employ resonant misogynistic visual semantics (see Figure 3), they also position military identities as critical to the dating encounter ('*girls looking for sex with heroes in uniform and heroes looking for adventurous girls*'). What we see then in the development and promotion of

these subsidiary products is the overt economic operationalization of the forums. The products simultaneously draw upon and speak to, the very identity of the forums and their users but in a manner that also attempts to reach beyond the forum to wider audiences seeking engagement, and services related to, military matters.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taken together, these observations highlight particular sociotechnical and communicative links between producers and consumers. They draw our attention to the extent to which the marketplace has become a social (what we would term sociotechnical) space of conversation through review, discussion and engagement (Storr, 2008). But they also highlight how discursive content is the starting point for the marketplace that becomes aligned to the perceived desires, interests and aspirations of contributors. This speaks to the wider dialectical relationship between the market and the community where the market as socially constructed simultaneously influences and impacts social life (Gudeman, 2001: 15). Indeed as Marc Andrejevic has argued, 'contrary to conventional wisdom, social networking sites don't publicize community, they *privatize* it' (emphasis in original 2011: 97). Central to this, as we have argued, are the affordances of pseudonymity. What is particularly interesting, of course, is that data from the forums suggest that users are – at times – aware of these contradictions, which returns us to contemporary debates around the sociotechnical power relations of such forums that were noted at the start of this article. Indeed, it seems to us that subsidiary product development and advertising is designed

to naturally situate adverts within, and appeal to, user discussion, so that they become endemic to the technical and social contexts in which the discussions occur. It is here that the multiple personal, consumer and military identities become at once concealed, revealed and performed. And it is here that the power relations – in terms of what is valued and supported within the forums - become most explicit.

All of these observations highlight the tensions apparent in anonymous military online forums as layered sites of privat*ised* (to play with Andrejevic's term) performances of collective military identity *and* sites of distinct power relations that inform, frame, appropriate and monetize the military community in particular ways. Key to this, we would argue, is the functionality of pseudonymity *and* traumatic and misogynistic discourse that are intrinsic to the construction of the forums in specific ways. First, the forums are a unique discursive space that produces certain kinds of data and information that has particular utility and is suggestive of a hierarchy of value within such sociotechnical spaces – misogyny as a practice can be condoned and even supported if it contributes to the perception of a collective identity that has utility elsewhere. Second, through the moderation of the space, which is unevenly visible and invisible and emerges in key ways such as targeted advertising and marketization and the deletion of comments. This moderation similarly condones if not actively upholds certain practices and discourses, topics and images as normative. Third, the public-ness of the space that enables it to be engaged with and viewed by outside organisations and individuals (including us). Consequently, we

would suggest that the commercial concerns significantly complicate the nature of these online forums in terms of shifting what is valued within them. This in turn raises critical questions about the complex tensions apparent in online forums that purport to offer anonymous, shared and intimate spaces but in which the convergence of private and public, and visibility and non-visibility, and creation and consumption creates complex tensions, negotiations and power relations.

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NOTES

[i] This article draws upon data collected for the XX Project,.

[ii] See for example https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Rules_of_the_Internet or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy

[iii] In particular, specific clauses prohibit users from posting illegal, fraudulent or malicious content (spyware or malware); posting defamatory, abusive, hateful, or threatening content; posting content which contains adult or objectionable content; posting material which contains personal information of others or risks copyright infringement.

[iv] Source: Military Media website accessed Nov 2014: http://www.military-media.co.uk/

[v] Source: Military Media website accessed Nov 2014: http://www.military-media.co.uk/media/

[vi] One argument in the previous sections is that themes such as mental health and misogynistic practices are a complicit element of establishing this

[vii] Source: Military Media Website accessed Nov 2014 http://www.military-media.co.uk/advertising/

Figures: Beyond Pseudonymity

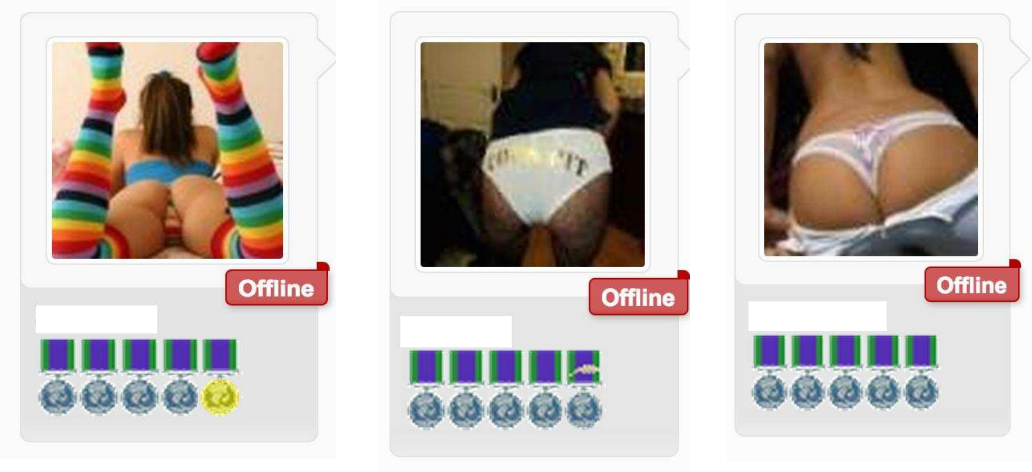

Figure 1: Profile Icons from User Profiles on Arrse

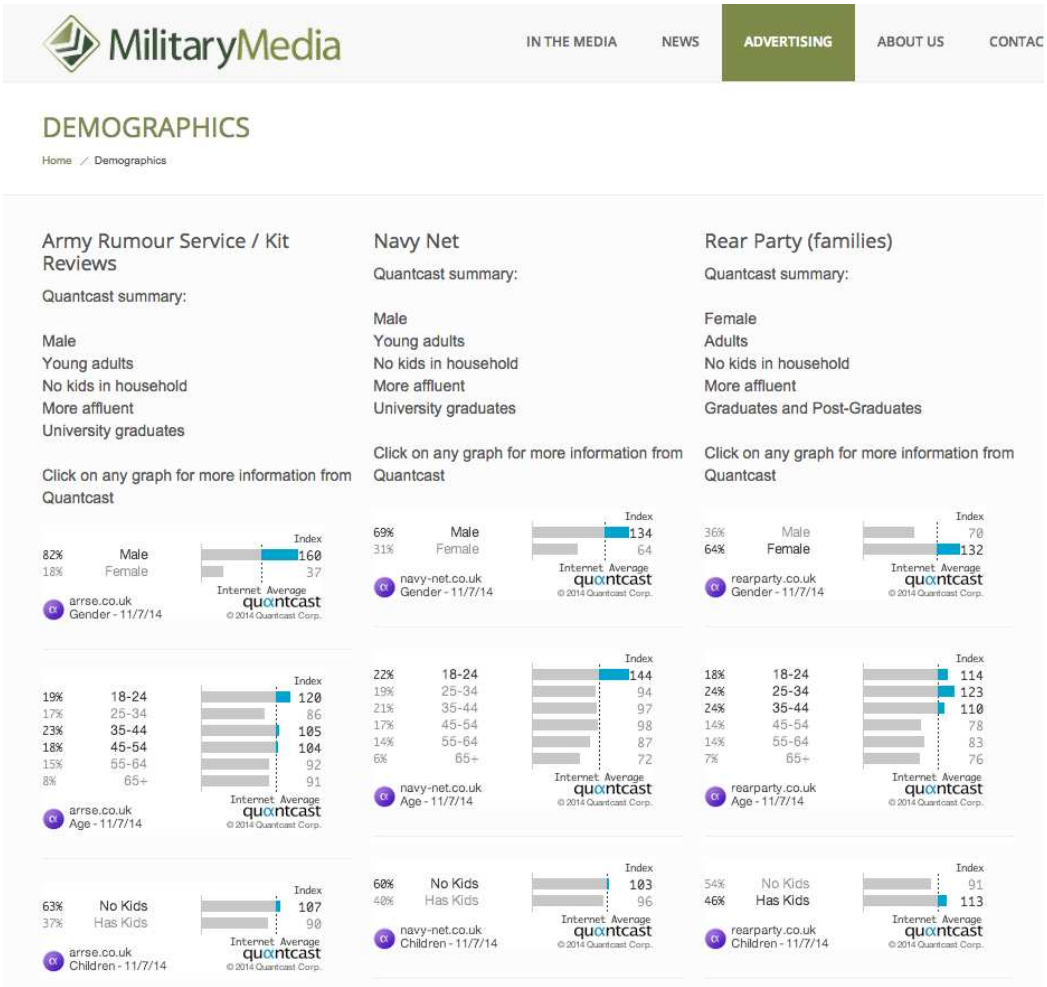

Figure 2: Quantcast demographic information made available by Military Media on their website.

Figure 3: Military XXX Website Banner