
A Fragmented Audience: How to Remain on Target

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This article considers how the role of social and digital media in combat reflects the multiple forms of stakeholder agency that conditions of mediatisation have created in modern warfare. The 'chaos' apparently threatened by the intrusion of digital media into military operations can be explained in reference to social desires that have been ever present in media history. This article explains how we can understand the current state of military/public media relations in reference to the history of audience research, paying special attention to feminist research.

This article introduces themes from the history of audience studies to discussions about the role of social media in military affairs. 'Audience' is a fluid concept that does two things; first, it helps to explain how centralised media power can be conceived in situations where many stakeholders contribute to the public framing of conflict. Secondly, an audience's perspective also shows how the concept of 'arrested war' sits in a history of media scholarship, where the relationship between the military, the media and various audiences epitomises changing ideas about the political impact of media.¹ In illustration, the essay focuses on two figures who encapsulate alternative perspectives on media/military relations. One is Chelsea Manning, the infamous US army intelligence specialist who sent classified materials to WikiLeaks. The other is Lisa Smith Molinari, a blogger who won more modest fame by writing about being the matriarch of a military family. Like all historically significant people, their notoriety reflects structural social shifts; in this case, the move toward 'mediatised' worlds, where public discourse is shaped by media industry practice.² Understanding how each captured specific ideas about the relationship between media, audience and public life contributes to a research trend noting the "appropriation and control of previously chaotic dynamics by mainstream media".³

The argument involves the following steps. First, I explain why fears about the subversive power of social media might be exaggerated. Next, I show how military interests have featured in four 'epochs' of audience studies. Finally, I make the case that military blogging is an exemplar of the fourth age, which reflects the concept of mediatisation; crudely, the notion that social life and social institutions are significantly guided by media business

¹ Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Arrested War: The Third Phase of Mediatisation', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 18, no. 11 (2015), pp. 1320–38.

² E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987).

³ Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 'Arrested War', p. 1320.

strategies.⁴ By some accounts, mediatization has ‘arrested’ the chaos that social media threatened to wreak among the authority of State armed forces and mainstream media alike, since both parties have learned to absorb the energies of media users. It bears noting that this line of thought connects the study of media/military relations to developments in thinking on the nature of media power, as they have evolved in relation to media audiences.⁵ Putting all of these elements together, it makes sense to regard global media operations as the foundation for any potential ‘disruption’ to military operations that might seem to come from media users, largely since the nature of media power rests in some respects on the ability to ‘lend’ that power to diverse groups who contribute in various ways to the mediatization of conflict.

‘Staying on Message’: Precautionary Observations

Initially, audience research offers three lessons informing discussions on social media and the armed forces. First, one of the main media effects at play in our world is the *impression* that media influence what people think. The third-person effect suggests that most audiences see themselves as immune to persuasion, but believe that others are far more susceptible.⁶ This model, developed by W. P. Davison, emerged from combat. Davison was inspired by an anecdote from the Pacific theatre during World War II. The Japanese, so the story went, had dropped propaganda leaflets encouraging black soldiers to rebel against a segregated army. A terrified white officer withdrew some black units from the line, despite the absence of any insurrection.⁷ His actions became the prelude to an enduring observation about media effects; that media affect society by convincing us all that they matter.⁸ Perhaps there are echoes of this phenomenon in concerns about the mutinous power of social media.

Second, the key word in social media is, of course, social. Evidence suggests that the main impulse for media use is the desire for companionship, and this has more to do with making a niche within established social hierarchies than ‘changing’ anything, as such.⁹ That idea was around long before Facebook et al.

These points are made to redefine the terms in which media power is understood. Arguably, *the* lesson of audience research is that media businesses colonise ordinary life, by making themselves integral to almost

⁴ Anders Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Hoskins and O’Loughlin, ‘Arrested War’.

⁶ W. Phillips Davison, ‘The Third Person Effect in Communication’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 1 (1983), pp. 1-15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

every occasion that one can imagine. This renders the desire to integrate with media culture the defining principle of contemporary political life. It is this desire that affects military and publics alike, as they struggle with the reality of fighting alongside social media.

The Four Ages of Audience Studies: A Military History

The challenge facing military organisations today reflects the general dimensions of mediatised societies, where private, social and institutional life are coloured by corporate media interests.¹⁰ Intriguingly, military needs have featured in changing the focus of audience research, from asking what exposure to particular messages does to particular viewers, to analysing how corporate storytelling subtly coordinates the actions of media users.

STAGE 1. PERSUASION

The issue of how social media practices affect military morale inherits a rich history. 'On message' concerns reflect early interests in how media changed thoughts and behaviours.¹¹ Media research as we know it started with the Great War, and the impression that allied propaganda had convinced the public that sacrifices were needed in the face of a bestial enemy. In *Propaganda Techniques in the World War*, Harold Lasswell challenged media researchers to discover if these impressions were true.¹²

Fighting exigencies led the testing, and dismantling, of the idea that media messages alone could persuade audiences to change. The Second World War challenged the US Army to persuade an isolationist public to re-engage with tumultuous European politics; confronting some conscripts with the prospect of shooting at their own relatives. Hollywood director Frank Capra was enlisted to make the case for war through the *Why We Fight* documentary series. Social scientists were similarly drafted to conduct experiments on the films' success. The results of the latter played a major role in ending the first stage of audience studies.

The mobilisation of men and movies presented social scientists with a novel opportunity to examine how propaganda stoked fighting spirit. Carl Hovland led a team that examined the impact of the *Why We Fight* series on male conscripts.¹³ The most enduring outcome of these studies was the specification of how difficult it is to define and research persuasive effects. The question of whether these films improved combat morale was dismissed as unanswerable, given the impossibility of following research subjects into

¹⁰ Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization*; Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*.

¹¹ Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory or Performance and Imagination* (London: Sage, 1998).

¹² Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1927).

¹³ Carl Iver Hovland, Arthur A. Lumsdaine and Fred D. Sheffield, *Experiments on Mass Communication* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

battle. Moreover, the combination of information, persuasion and entertainment in the films made it hard to assess what their 'message' was in the first place. It was possible that their success depended on the extent to which they *entertained* soldiers, but this issue was not interrogated.¹⁴ Subsequent studies have emphasised the mistake of seeing the series as simply a set of information films, rather than aesthetic landmarks in the history of cinema.¹⁵ At any rate, studies of what films 'did' to soldiers were instrumental in specifying the difficulty of equating media influence with persuasion, and hinted that entertainment was a factor to be reckoned with in any desire to harness media to instrumental ends.

STAGE 2. ENTERTAINMENT AND IDEOLOGY

The relationship between entertainment and impact was a key theme in a second stage of audience studies, focusing on how media seduced audiences into accepting ideological arguments as common sense. The 'incorporation/resistance' paradigm, as described by Abercrombie and Longhurst, focused on how media entertainment subtly encouraged audiences to regard contestable political arguments as statements of fact.¹⁶

Military interests took centre stage again. In the mid-1990s, renowned media scholar George Gerbner explained how media/military relations during the 1991 Gulf War concretised his thesis on the political effects of television violence.¹⁷ Gerbner was a military man, having won the Bronze Star during World War Two while serving in the US Office of Strategic Services (a career highlighted by the arrest of Ferenc Szálasi).¹⁸ GI bill-funded PhD in hand,¹⁹ Gerbner commenced an academic career studying how television affected American postwar political discourse.²⁰ His core thesis was that television, a global storyteller of unparalleled power, taught audiences that consumption and obedience mapped the path to happiness. Curiously, violence was a main theme in this story.²¹

From the late 1960s, Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania compiled annual 'violence profiles', enumerating acts of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Andre Bazin, 'On Why We Fight: History, Documentation, and the Newsreel', *Film & History*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2001), pp. 60-62.

¹⁶ Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*.

¹⁷ Hamid Molwana, George Gerbner and Herbert I. Schiller, *Triumph Of The Image: The Media's War In The Persian Gulf, A Global Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

¹⁸ John A. Lent (ed.), *A Different Road Taken: Profiles in Critical Communication* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

¹⁹ John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁰ Michael Morgan, *George Gerbner: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

²¹ George Gerbner, 'Cultivation Analysis: An Overview', *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 1, nos. 3-4 (1998), pp. 175-95.

violence on prime-time US television. They also used surveys to establish relationships between television consumption and political attitudes.²² In combination, evidence from these studies suggested that television entertainment relied heavily on violence-based stories, which had a chilling effect on audiences. Heavy television viewers overestimated their chances of being a victim of violence, were distrustful of others and pessimistic about the prospects for social change.²³ Strangely, though, Gerbner argued that screen violence had become a medium for winning consent for the values of consumer society. Its prevalence reflected the need to win global markets for American advertisers, since action genres 'travelled' better than others. The main effect of this brutal diet was the impression that there was little for the viewer to do about the world other than consume.²⁴

The Gulf War sharpened Gerbner's thesis. Gerbner argued that the American armed forces and news media collaborated to produce a tightly controlled, entertaining 'story' about the war that bombarded international audiences with images of smart weaponry. These were accompanied by spectacular shows of public war enthusiasm in mega-events such as the Superbowl. The coincidence of interests between armed forces, news companies who showcased new 24-hour global networks and audiences who had the chance to become part of the show had profound political outcomes. One survey found an association between television watching, the underestimation of Iraqi casualties, and support for the war.²⁵ Gerbner's likening of Gulf War coverage to entertainment summarised the essential argument about media and 'incorporation'. Collaboration between military and media quickly transformed battlefield events into an entertaining picture. The partnership was so successful that it spawned a trade in commemorative DVDs. Politically speaking, this had the effect of writing the war's history, literally before the dust had settled.²⁶

STAGE 3. PARTICIPATION

Prima facie, Gerbner's observations do not seem to address the subversive potential of social media. Gerbner focused on how the combined interests of global news industries and post-Vietnam military media operations wrapped audiences in a single narrative about the capacity of sophisticated weaponry to exercise responsible and effective foreign policy. Blogging appears to some writers to unravel this project. According to Hellman and Wagnsson,

²² Ibid.

²³ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Jackson-Beck, Steve Jackson-Fox and Nancy Signorelli, 'Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile #9', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1979), pp. 176-207.

²⁴ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorelli, 'The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile #11', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 30 (1980), pp. 10-29.

²⁵ Michael Morgan, Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally, *The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion, and Public Knowledge*, Research Report (Amherst: Center for the Study of Communication, University of Massachusetts, 1991).

²⁶ Molwana et al., *Triumph of the Image*.

the thrust of writing on blogs “suggest that the new media activism gives rise to counter-hegemonic narratives that thrive on and through social media sites”.²⁷ This conclusion is at odds with the view that, when it comes to conflict at least, “user-generated content and its chaotic dynamics ‘out there’ have been absorbed and appropriated”.²⁸ According to this line of thinking, there are reasons to believe that user agency solidifies the effects that Gerbner observed, and that military blogging is a symptom of the suspicion that social media do little to rearrange the balance of power between media industries, institutions and publics. Certainly, some audience researchers characterise ‘users’ as a misnomer that loses an important sense of subordination, where most political imaginations remain within the boundaries of mainstream media narratives.²⁹ This point of view gels with studies of how the nuanced relationships that armed forces share with their citizens, their political masters and even their own personnel are contained by an overarching media logic. This ‘logic’ is based on the recognition that modern warfare works best when it is allied with conventional media, and their capacity to gather audiences whose support is integral to success.³⁰ Either way, blogging keeps military affairs at the heart of debates on how media dictate the terms of social participation, and how the process can be understood in relation to the audience concept.

So far, this essay has accounted for only one side of the ‘incorporation/resistance paradigm’. Where Gerbner was concerned with incorporation, others saw popular media as more of a staging ground for conflict. People like popular culture because it lets them imagine a different social order.³¹ Political communication, for example, becomes much more fun thanks to voracious news cycles bent on catching politicians with their trousers down—literally and metaphorically.³² According to journalism scholar Brian McNair, the proliferation of news making devices, many now held in the hands of the people we used to call audiences, heralds an era of ‘cultural chaos’, where the sort of centralised power enjoyed during the first Gulf War is now impossible.³³

This brings us to Chelsea Manning; the low-ranking soldier who caused the kind of uproar that elite journalists dream about. One can regard Manning

²⁷ Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson, ‘New Media and the War in Afghanistan: The Significance of Blogging for the Swedish Strategic Narrative’, *New Media & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2015), pp. 6-23.

²⁸ Hoskins and O’Loughlin, ‘Arrested War’, p. 1321.

²⁹ S. Elizabeth Bird, ‘Are We All Producers Now?’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, nos. 4-5 (2011), 502-516.

³⁰ Sarah Maltby, ‘The Mediatization of the Military’, *Media, War and Conflict*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2012), pp. 255-68.

³¹ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London; Methuen, 1987).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Brian McNair, ‘WikiLeaks, Journalism and the Consequences Of Chaos’, *Media International Australia*, vol. 144 (2012), pp. 77-86.

as the archetypal 'produser'. This term, coined by Axel Bruns, describes a radically decentred media world where:

The creation of shared content takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge.³⁴

Bruns' words and Manning's actions capture the ethos of Julian Assange's 'scientific journalism'; a form of news where universal access to primary documents allows audiences to check journalists' claims against primary evidence.³⁵

However, the extent to which produsage is a meaningful reality, and that Manning's actions represented a counter-hegemonic landmark, have both been hotly contested. The case has been made that most online media actions recycle mainstream media material, and that there is little evidence to support the impression of public enthusiasm for sustained content creation.³⁶ Added to that, people who have the most interest in changing the global political order have the least access to the media means to do so.³⁷ Finally, where creativity and participation do occur, it is often because people want to work with media industries; that is, social media have created the means whereby audiences can enter into new partnerships with established media industries.³⁸ Ironically, Manning's atypicality is a testament to mediatisation in action and, with it, the value of holding on to the audience idea.

Manning's contributions to WikiLeaks' video expose, *Collateral Murder*, became the subject of an academic debate that reflected diverging views on the political weight of audience action. One line in this story notes how 'unruly' audiences have been incorporated by commercial interests; that is, apparently 'disruptive' moments where audiences seem to go 'off message' are far less radical than they may appear, if we take that 'message' as being that commercial media can embrace all cultural needs in the twenty-first century. Manning and *Collateral Murder* help to explain what this means.

Ostensibly, Manning embodied 'chaos', or:

The most dramatic example to date of the capacity of digital communication networks to subvert the control of official information once enjoyed by

³⁴ Axel Bruns, 'Produsage.org: From Production to Produsage: Research into User-Led Content Creation', 2007, <produsage.org/node/9> [Accessed 12 October 2015].

³⁵ Graham Meikle, 'Continuity and Transformation in Convergent News: The Case of Wikileaks', *Media International Australia*, vol. 144 (2012), pp. 52-59.

³⁶ Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham, *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁷ Bird, 'Are We All Producers Now?'

³⁸ Mark Andrejevic, 'The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of *Big Brother*. Reality TV in the Era of Digital Capitalism', *New Media & Society*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2002), pp. 251-70.

political and other elites, and to shape the news agenda in ways that have the potential to seriously disrupt the exercise of power.³⁹

However, critics characterised this 'drama' as a smokescreen for WikiLeaks' utterly conventional media business model, an approach that underwrote the mediatisation of politics.

One line of criticism ran that 'scientific journalism' was an underhanded way to turn 'transparency' into a brand value. Manning's revelations only became so thanks to partnership with mainstream news organisations.⁴⁰ Assange's 'method' was quickly adopted by other news organisations seeking to gain leverage in a competitive news market.⁴¹ Scientific journalism might be bad for the military but it was good for media business, important not so much as a way to empower audiences but to buy and sell their attention to advertisers.⁴²

In this version, the Manning episode was a parable for how corporate media dominate the cultural logic of ordinary life. Transparency has been transformed from a political value to a corporate friendly media practice, highly effective in putting audiences to work in the interests of media businesses.⁴³ Far from representing a new age of audience power, Manning was a spectacular example of a pervasive, mundane reality, that media industries have sophisticated methods for channelling audiences' desires in commercial directions.⁴⁴

Ironically, the 'democratisation' of whistleblowing, according to some accounts, has defanged investigative journalism as an institutional threat. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about *Collateral Murder* was how little impact it had on public opinion. Certainly, the revelations were met with alternative accounts about what had happened on that day from the US Army.⁴⁵ The battle over what the words and pictures really meant reflected the ambiguities of what Mark Andrejevic has termed 'post truthism', a condition where the proliferation of storytelling resources means the ability to tell an entertaining tale has superseded an interest in truth. Consequently, "strategies of debunkery and information proliferation can work to reinforce,

³⁹ McNair, 'WikiLeaks, Journalism and the Consequences Of Chaos', p. 77.

⁴⁰ Bart Cammaerts, 'Networked Resistance: The Case of WikiLeaks', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2013), pp. 420-36.

⁴¹ Mohamed Zayani, 'Al Jazeera's Palestine Papers: Middle East Media Politics in the Post-WikiLeaks Era', *Media, War and Conflict*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), pp. 21-35.

⁴² Christian Fuchs, 'WikiLeaks: Power 2.0? Surveillance 2.0? Criticism 2.0? Alternative Media 2.0? A Political-Economic Analysis', *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1-17.

⁴³ Luke J. Heemsbergen, 'Radical Transparency in Journalism: Digital Evolutions from Historical Precedents', *Global Media Journal: Canadian Edition*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), pp. 45-65.

⁴⁴ Jack Bratich, 'Amassing the Multitude: Revisiting Early Audience Studies', *Communication Theory*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2005), pp. 242-65.

⁴⁵ Marouf A. Hasian Jr, 'Watching the Domestication of the Wikileaks Helicopter Controversy', *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2012), pp. 190-209.

rather than threaten, relations of power and control”.⁴⁶ The upshot is that the question of how the military can keep its publics on message is meaningless in isolation from a more foundational matter; both parties are kept ‘on the message’ of media industries.

In summary, the Manning affair punctuated a history of audience studies where military matters have frequently dramatised key junctions in the development of thought on media, audiences and political power. Far from being a harbinger of an intelligence apocalypse, the events that enveloped her actions demonstrated the need to move beyond matters of persuasion toward asking how media industries manufacture social ties. This leads to a change of focus. Instead of asking how social media give people power, what about concentrating on how they become indispensable as resources for social contact? Such is the core concern of mediatisation research.

STAGE 4. MEDIATISATION

According to Hjarvard, “mediatisation refers to a long-term process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of media’s influence”.⁴⁷ When it comes to audiences, this suggests a growing dependency on media resources as facilitators of social life. If the age of participation was characterised by the concept of people doing things with media, mediatisation describes a scenario where people do almost everything with media. This change has been in train for some time, and has been especially clearly traced in studies of women and media. This explains why Molinari’s blogging career is an evocative symbol of this new age of audience studies, which examine how media industries capitalise on the social ambitions of the public.

If we are looking for a figure who encapsulates the meaning of social media for military affairs, the history of audience research suggests that Molinari represented a conceptually valid counter point to Chelsea Manning. In 2015, Molinari topped a list of twenty-five best military blogs, as voted for by the online community ‘Circle of Moms’.⁴⁸ Molinari’s ‘The Meat and Potatoes’ offers “a heaping helping of hilarious stories about marriage, parenting and military life”.⁴⁹ Significantly, Molinari’s success is based on her experience as a military spouse, combined with a career as a journalist whose blogging content has been recirculated by mainstream media outlets. She also epitomises how media serve and profit from the social desires of audiences and how these desires are managed in the interests of political stability.

⁴⁶ Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013), Kindle pp. 306-8.

⁴⁷ Stig Hjarvard, *Mediatization*, Kindle pp. 560-63.

⁴⁸ Circle of Moms, ‘Top 25 Military Family Blogs’, <www.circleofmoms.com/top25/military-families> [Accessed 12 October 2015].

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Molinari sits squarely in another audience history narrative, where women have defined the social grip of media forms. They have done this by ingeniously using media technologies to solve the challenges of social isolation. Canny as these strategies have been, they have cumulatively placed media use—and the businesses that make it happen—at the centre of social life, and Molinari is a symbol of what this means.

Her evolution has been a long time in the making. Shortly after the *Why We Fight* studies, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's *Personal Opinion* surveyed over 800 women in the American Midwest regarding their media use.⁵⁰ Their most intriguing finding was that talking about media content had become a vital source for social contact, community and prestige in postwar American consumer society. Although the project began by asking how advertising and political communication influenced women, the researchers soon found that the question of how, why and to what effect women *shared* media content through *talk* became a much more significant indicator of the media's emotional purchase. In the context of a debate that has included how one of history's great security breaches may have been motivated by loneliness,⁵¹ it is significant that one of the landmark studies in the history of audience research concluded that, in the main, what women wanted from media was the chance to find companionship and respect by participating in the circuit of media communication. Talking about movies, advertising and political campaigning became a way for some of the women to demonstrate leadership capacity.

The desire for comfort, belonging and voice continued as a theme in studies of women audiences. In the process, this literature has, like no other, demonstrated how political effects of the media channel through the desire for sociality and autonomy. An alternative history of audiences presents women media users as the vanguard for the social transformations that changing media landscapes invoke, and the practice of military family blogging can be explained as one manifestation of this history. Since women have borne the brunt of global postwar economic and social changes, so too have they played a leading role in developing popular culture as an 'ideological seam' through which it becomes possible to articulate the political tensions and contradictions of ordinary life.⁵² Over the last forty years, studies of how women engage with magazines,⁵³ romance

⁵⁰ Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (New York: The Free Press, 1955).

⁵¹ Paul Lewis, 'Bradley Manning Trial Revealed a Lonely Soldier with a Troubled Past', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2013, <www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/21/bradley-manning-lonely-soldier-childhood> [Accessed 12 October 2015].

⁵² Janice Radway, 'Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytic Method, and Political Practice', *Communication*, vol. 9 (1986), pp. 93-123.

⁵³ Angela McRobbie, and Jenny Garber, 'Girls and Subcultures', in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance Through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), pp. 209-22.

novels,⁵⁴ television soaps⁵⁵ and mobile telephones⁵⁶ have all shared the idea that these media practices shape how women make sense of their social identities through using media with their peers. The 'new' practice of military family blogging belongs to this history.

Themes of identity and community at play in these studies have taken a marked turn in more recent work on reality television, and this research also plays an important part in understanding the political purchase of military blogging. Skeggs and Wood argue that reality television matters as a genre that has encouraged women to think less about the social world, and more about the self.⁵⁷ Reality television is, according to the authors, an exercise in self-disciplining. Audiences are shamed into accepting that the individual is solely responsible for her own fate. There are a couple of reasons why these observations are relevant to mediatisation as a phenomenon that touches issues of military and social media. The first is that the authors see the genre as typifying a general thrust in political discourse that encourages people to take control of their own lives. The second is the role that media play in encouraging audiences to discipline themselves within existing media and social hierarchies. The authors do not think that these tendencies represent a *fait accompli*, but do feel that the focus on individual self-monitoring within the dominant status quo of media-based consumer society is a force to be reckoned with.

From Television to Blogging: Military Perspectives

Feminist audience research suggests that media mainly 'work' by filling the space between individual and collective identity. This connects leisure with the political debate over well-being and personal responsibility. Synergies exist between conservative ideologies, consumer culture and media industries that all have vested interests in addressing publics as autonomous individuals. Seen from this perspective, there are reasons to argue that contemporary media practices are biased against 'disruptive' readings of established hierarchies, based on the logic that personal challenges are to be personally managed. This view offers that the main media 'effect' is to encourage self-disciplining among audiences who police themselves, rather than joining together in collective action.⁵⁸ The question is, how does this state of affairs transfer from reality television to military blogging?

⁵⁴ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵⁵ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodromatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

⁵⁶ H. Hijazi-Omari, and R. Ribak, 'Playing with Fire: On the Domestication of the Mobile Phone among Palestinian Teenage Girls in Israel', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2008), pp. 149-66.

⁵⁷ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The key to making this connection is appreciating how opportunities for social action afforded by the media are premised on the perception among audiences that making things happen means coordinating action with structures of institutions and media practices as they exist.

To explain how this works, let us begin with reality television. During the war in Afghanistan, British actor turned investigative reporter, Ross Kemp, made a series of well-received programs about life on the frontline for British soldiers. I reviewed reactions to the show posted to a dedicated online viewer forum. The research found that *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan* was applauded for uncovering largely unacknowledged problems that British army soldiers and their families faced in managing frontline service. Alongside the combat insights that one might expect, surprising domestic realities—like the fact that many soldiers had to take out their own life insurance to protect their families—came to light. Having opened the door to the issue of the unseen hardships of family life, some forum users chose to discuss other off-camera hardships. One writer complained about the lack of post-combat aftercare that led to her own experiences of domestic violence. In response, other viewers with military connections advised the woman how to seek help from established lines of military welfare.⁵⁹ The net effect was that cooperation between the military and the evolving structures of reality entertainment offered an effective means of educating families on how to manage their own affairs through media-based communities.

Thinking about the lessons of *Personal Influence*, this particular incarnation of media's organising power gave a firmer materialisation of an idea that remained inchoate in Katz and Lazarsfeld's piece, that media matter as a *primary* means of organising social groups.⁶⁰ Under some circumstances, people are organised as media audiences or users before they can take social action: in a mediated world, this condition applies across a significant number of social circumstances.⁶¹ Communication and critique are facilitated by the ability to speak media languages.

The ramifications of these insights become sharper when applied to social media. The Ross Kemp study suggested that controversies could be managed by providing consensual lines of voice that suit institutional arrangements, military and media. That is, the lesson is personal and community needs are most powerfully addressed when they learn to speak in official languages. This insight had been used to temper the claims made

⁵⁹ Andy Ruddock, 'Cultivation Analysis', in Virginia Nightingale (ed.), *Handbook of Media Audiences* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 340-59.

⁶⁰ Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*.

⁶¹ Sonia Livingstone, 'Exciting Moments in Audience Research: Past, Present and Future', in Helena Bilandzic, Geoffroy Patriarche and Paul J. Traudt (eds.), *The Social Use of Media: Cultural and Social Scientific Perspectives on Audience Research* (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), pp. 257-74.

for democratised conditions where almost anyone can create and share media content.

Critics have observed that it is one thing to be able to make alternative media content, but finding an audience for it is quite another.⁶² The fact remains that the media world continues to be dominated by professionally produced content, and most audiences seem to prefer its glossy attractions—even when it comes to social media.⁶³ All of this explains why, when it comes to the question of what social media mean for the military, it makes as much sense to look at Molinari and ‘Circle Of Moms’, as it does Chelsea Manning. Molinari is an archetype of the idealised media user whose success represents the interlocking trajectories of audience studies and feminist media research. Historically speaking, Molinari’s success is the product of changing media ecologies.

According to Molinari’s biography, ‘The Meat and Potatoes of Life’ represents the synthesis of personal experience, professional training and a media landscape that is ripe for the popularisation of her personal reflections. She enjoys double accreditation: as a spouse who abandoned a legal career for the love of a naval husband, and a blogger welcomed into the fold of professional journalism. Molinari describes the turning point as follows:

One winter, while her husband was deployed to Africa for a year, Lisa began jotting down her observations as a way of coping with the chaos of handling the three kids, the dog, and the household alone. Before she knew it, one of her essays got published in *The Washington Post*, and the rest is pretty much history.⁶⁴

That ‘history’ shows how the networked culture of blogging, and its synthesis with mainstream journalism, has created a position of considerable clout for an authoritative figure who organises military related communities, including the American ‘Military Spouse of the Year’ award. As different as the outcome of her actions have been—actions that have drawn her closer to military and media institutions—there are also some striking parallels with the Manning case, not least converting isolation into a sellable story—and an entertaining, useful one at that. Molinari’s writing was praised for its combination of humour and good advice, exemplified in a report on why Hooters restaurant is a great venue for Navy families during holidays when a partner is at sea.

⁶² Jean Burgess and Josh Green, *YouTube* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

⁶³ Paula Cavagnaro, Zach Niles, Emilie Reiser and Banker White, ‘This is Our Generation: Sierra Leonean Youth Views through Film’, *Youth Media Reporter*, 1 February 2011, <www.youthmediareporter.org/2011/02/this_is_our_generation_sierra.html> [Accessed 12 October 2015].

⁶⁴ Lisa Smith Molinari, ‘The Meat & Potatoes of Life’, <themeatandpotatoesoflife.com/about/> [Accessed 12 October 2015].

The popularity of Molinari's light-hearted yet respected advice on how to manage the frequently painful challenges of service family life epitomises core lessons of feminist audience studies. Communities of women have found many creative ways to use media as a solution to social isolation. Often, these uses are a conscious attempt to cope with the demands placed upon women by economic and political policy, and articulate where they 'are' in history. At the same time, these strategies have created a historical trend where the ability to 'find' oneself depends on the knack of fitting in with media industries (in this case, Molinari's ability to relate ordinary military family life to the languages of professional journalism and consumption).

The point here is not to suggest that Molinari is somehow more typical than Manning; it is to claim that both extraordinary stories are guided by the logic of media culture and media users. Both exemplify how social media provide easily accessible outlets for social and personal tensions and how, as a result, media logic has worked its way into the management of military relations on the micro and macro levels. Further, this is a continuation of a trend whereby media have monopolised the desire to be social, affording media businesses gravitational power over individuals, communities and organisations. Molinari and Manning are part of the same media-based sentiment, that the only life worth living is a mediated one.⁶⁵ Whether seeking fame, infamy, or just the chance to be part of the media world, media users only count when they can articulate their experiences in the language of media brands—be that *WikiLeaks* or *The Washington Post*—and it is this reality that anchors the apparent 'chaos' of the digital age.

Conclusion

Publicly, the threat that social media pose to military operations has been widely noted.⁶⁶ Restrictions on serving bloggers have attracted media attention, and bloggers fret about loose lips sinking ships.⁶⁷ To many, Chelsea Manning embodied the fear that digital ecologies render sophisticated intelligence operations vulnerable to transgression in the ranks.

Academic studies of media/military relations, on the other hand, paint a more sophisticated picture, where media become influential by lending their power to various organisations who all seek to influence different audiences—publics, politicians and personnel—with different ends in mind.⁶⁸ This notion of 'loaned power' suits influential views on mediatization and audience

⁶⁵ Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2013).

⁶⁶ Xenia Jardin, 'Military Tightens Rules on Military Bloggers', NPR, 30 October 2006, <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6405962> [Accessed 8 October 2015].

⁶⁷ Douglas Yeung and Olga Oliker, 'Loose Clicks Sink Ships: When Social Media Meets Military Intelligence', The Rand Blog, 14 August 2015, <www.rand.org/blog/2015/08/loose-clicks-sink-ships-when-social-media-meets-military.html> [Accessed 8 October 2015].

⁶⁸ Maltby, 'The Mediatization of the Military'.

research.⁶⁹ The matter of how militaries use social media to cultivate productive relationships with their personnel, families and publics is a subset of larger questions about how media industries gain influential by offering agency and sociality. To make this argument, this article has explained how the questions we ask of military blogging can be informed by the historical development of audience and feminist media studies. In particular, it has explained how blogging by military spouses exemplifies key trends in the political economy of the media. Historically, the development of audience studies suggests that media industries have been spectacularly successful in capturing the energies of audiences.⁷⁰ Consequently, it makes sense to consider the circumstances that make military blogs exercises in self-policing, where radicalism lags behind desires among writers and readers to 'fit in' with military organisations and media industries.

But more than this, it is wise to ask how military organisations and media users alike are both subject to the influence of commercial media businesses that are increasingly adept at seamlessly blending business imperatives with social and institutional needs. The challenge of social media to the armed forces is but a subset of wider dynamics where media industries have assumed a powerful 'brokering' role in the conduct of public discourse. From the history provided here, it can be seen that conflict has played a major role in showcasing the artistic, political and commercial potential of changing media forms—from Capra's films through to Assange's efforts to build a new world information order and, perhaps more tellingly, the gaming industry's military partnerships that popularise novel game designs in the guise of addressing virtual gaming needs.⁷¹ Bearing this in mind, the constant feature in changing relations between militaries, publics, political elites and enemies is a growing social dependency on access to mainstream media resources that offer an intoxicating brew of influence, company and pleasure.

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⁶⁹ Sonia Livingstone, 'On the Mediation of Everything: ICA Presidential Address 2008', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2009), pp. 1-18.

⁷⁰ Bratich, 'Amassing the Multitude: Revisiting Early Audience Studies'.

⁷¹ Robertson Allen, 'The Unreal Enemy of America's Army', *Games and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2011), pp. 38-60.