35

SCANDALS AND THE ARMED FORCES

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Introduction

The increased mediatization of society (Hjarvard 2008) goes hand in hand with the increased possibility of exposure and scandalization (Blach-Ørsten 2011). As Thompson (2005) has argued, the rise of a new mediated visibility is a double edged sword for those in power. On the one hand the new visibility may be used to spread and control information, messages, and images, on the other hand the new visibility can be a risk and lead to loss of control, and to the exposure of secrets or information that may end up threatening those in power. As an example Thompson (2005: 31) points to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and writes:

the hidden practices of U.S. military and paramilitary personal [were] suddenly opened up to public scrutiny, unleashing a sequence of further revelations that [was] difficult for those in power to explain and control. Thanks to the media, these previously hidden practices and events had been given an entirely new status as public . . . the invisible had been made visible.

Historically, mediated scandals involving armed forces can be traced back at least to the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906). This chapter, however, focuses on producing an overview of spectacles of this kind that have taken place in more recent times. More specifically, we test Thompson’s claim that fundamental changes in the power relations between the military and the news media occurred around the turn of the century, a relationship where scholars traditionally point to the military as the dominant power (Kristensen & Ørsten 2007).

In doing so we apply Hoskins and O’Loughlin’s (2015) theory on the three phases of mediated war: broadcast war (the 1990s), diffused war (2000s), and arrested war (2010s). We find a number of mediated scandals with a focus on war and the armed forces that have cast a new and critical visibility on military and government practices. However, we also find that the most serious of these scandals became public in the age of diffused war when the internet, and new actors such as WikiLeaks, disrupted the traditional media ecology. In the present phase of arrested war, scandals seem less frequent. We discuss the possible theoretical reasons for this and suggest some possible explanations. One explanation might be that in the age of arrested war, the mediatization of the military has helped it to become better at avoiding media scandals.
Scandals and the armed forces

(Crosbie 2015). Another explanation can be found in the “indexing” hypothesis (Bennett 1990) which states that most event-driven news, like scandals, quickly become constrained by routine journalistic practices such as framing stories within the range of sources and viewpoints that can be found amongst elite news sources. Finally, recent research on political scandals suggests that coverage of the more trivial, personalized ones simply outweigh the coverage of the more complex scandals such as the military ones (Entman 2012; Pollack et al. 2018).

The mediatization of the military

War and the news media have been closely interlinked from the early 1900s. Both World War I and World War II saw the development of and spread of propaganda for use in radio, film, and newspapers (Carruthers 2011; Horten 2011). Studies of the Gulf and Iraq wars have pointed out that “military and media networks have converged to the point where they are now virtually indistinguishable: the media constitute the spaces in which wars are fought and are the main ways through which populations experience war” (Thussu & Freedman 2003: 7). Webster (2003: 57) writes: “We live today in an era of ‘new wars’ which is to say that the circumstances surrounding such conflict have been radically transformed . . . Furthermore, war itself is changing, increasingly being what one might call Information War.” This is not just a British or American phenomenon, but something scholars of media and war in for instance Germany (Esser 2009) and the Nordic countries also point to (Dimitrova & Strömbäck 2005; Kristensen & Orsten 2007; Blach-Orsten & Lund 2012).

Research on news media and war have gained new traction with a focus on the mediatization of war and the military (Horton 2011; Maltby 2012; Crosbie 2015). The theory of mediatization builds on the premise that the news media in many Western countries have developed into an independent political institution guided by its own logic (Cook 1998; Strömbäck 2008; Allern & Blach-Orsten 2011) and that over time that institution and its logic have become deeply integrated into different levels of society (Hjarvard 2008; Strömbäck 2008). Studies have mostly focused on mediatization and national politics (Esser & Strömbäck 2014; Blach-Orsten 2016), but writing about news media and war, Horten argues (2011: 4) “that the mediatization of war [was] significantly accelerated with the news coverage of the Vietnam war and reached unprecedented levels during the Iraq War of 2003.”

Writing about the connections between mediatization and studies on war and the news media Maltby (2012: 255) states that the military has become increasingly mediatized because the news media play “a constitutive role in informing communication between states and their external publics in the enactment of war and international politics.” Building on this argument Crosbie (2015: 1) points out that today media management have become a primary focus of the military, while Maltby (2012: 257) describes the media management policy of the British military and emphasizes that the aims of its media operations are to maintain public and political support for its activity and to achieve success. The mediatization of the military can also be traced outside of the USA and Great Britain. Kristensen & Ørsten (2006) as well as Aagaard et al. (2014) describe how the Danish military since the beginning of the new millennium has had an increased focus on media relations, a development that coincided with the involvement of Danish soldiers in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Three phases of mediatized war

Thus scholars agree that, though there was always a close relationship between war and the news media, this relationship has become closer, deeper, and more multifaceted with the increased
mediatization of war and the mediatization of the military (Maltby 2012; Crosbie 2015). Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2015) suggest viewing the recent intensified relationship between the news media and war through three distinct paradigms of mediatization. The first phase, broadcast war, characterizes the 1990s and such wars as the Gulf War of 1991 and the war in the Balkans. In this phase the media ecology is relatively contained with television as the dominant news media, such as the national news media and upcoming satellite channels, such as CNN. In this phase we also see a fairly traditional, but tightly managed, military–media relationship, where government sources and military sources dominate the news (see for instance Bennett & Paletz’s 1994 study of the media coverage of Operation Desert Storm).

The second phase, the age of diffused war, characterizes the 2000s and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this phase the traditional mainstream news media is challenged by increased global competition, the rise of the web, and new non-state actors such as WikiLeaks. The military is under pressure and struggles to maintain power and control, while also trying to streamline media operations (Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2015). In the third phase, from the 2010s and onwards, war is changing to become a combination of both new wars (war on terrorism) and older threats (an emerging new cold war with Russia). The news media have converged and/or—to some degree—adjusted to social media (see also Chadwick 2017) and the military’s relationship with the media has deepened as the former increasingly adapts to trends of mediatization (Maltby 2012). As Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2015: 1327) underline: “For us, phase three of the mediatization of war includes new synergies of mainstream (news media) and the military.”

Summing up Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2015) conclude that the three phases can be understood as three different iterations of the relationship between news media and government and military elites. A first phase characterized mostly by stable and traditional power relations between news media and the military. A second phase of disruption, where power to some degree is redistributed away from government, military elites, and the news media towards citizens-cum-users and non-state actors, to a third phase where government and the military are still struggling with the effect of the internet, but where both have adapted to the logic of mediatization (Maltby 2012; Crosbie 2015; Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2015). The mainstream news media, meanwhile, have expanded what is considered to be mainstream by going digital and by appropriating much of the user generated content, thus also adapting to and remaining relevant in a new media ecology that is hybrid (Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2015; Chadwick 2017). But even if the three phases are distinct from each other, Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2015) are also quick to emphasize that the three phases of mediatization are not fixed, but overlapping and contested.

Scandals and the military

With the increased mediatization of the war follows the risk of increased scandalization. In fact Crosbie (2015: 2) points out that one way to investigate further the relationship between mediatization and the military would be to focus on scandals as “sites of mediatization.” Thompson originally (2000) defined three distinct types of political scandals: the political sex scandal, the economic political scandal, and the power scandal. The power scandal concerns the disclosure of hidden power to the public. One type of power scandal, such as the Watergate scandal, concerns the misuse of power by elected political leaders. Another type is labeled a “security scandal,” which concerns the blurring of the boarders between politics, the military, and the intelligence agencies. With regard to scandals and the military, Blach-Orsten & Lund (2012: 105) have argued that one way to investigate the relationship between news media and war in the age of mediatization could be through the lens of the power scandal, especially with a focus on the security scandal. And in their study of scandals in Denmark they find a small number of security
scandals concerning the Danish military’s involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Blach-Ørsten & Lund 2012). Though scholars thus seem to agree that the increased mediatization of the military may lead to an increased scandalization of the military, Crosbie (2015: 2) points out that despite the increased mediatization of war and the military, full-blown military scandals are relatively rare. There may be several reasons for this. One rather simple one is that questions on the military and/or about war are all subjects that often fall within legislation on “national security” and therefore information is often labeled top secret. This of course makes it difficult for journalists to obtain critical information on the military and thus to scrutinize it in the same way the press in most Western countries on a daily basis scrutinize other types of political subjects. Another reason is that the mediatization of war and the military has led the latter to develop strategies to handle the news media. Of particular importance to war journalism is the strategy of embedding journalists within the military in times of war (Tuosto 2008; Schleicher 2016). This allows the press to have front-line access, but also puts the lives of the reporters in the hands of the military making them reliant on the troops and thus (potentially) less critical. Finally, Entman (2012) writes about silenced scandals and uses the case of the missing WMDs in the war on Iraq as an example. The fact that there were no WMDs found could have been a huge scandal, but was silenced—because the Bush administration and the presidential party were united in handling the scandal, the opposition failed to ignite a debate or investigation thus leaving the media with no way to ask whether Bush had deliberately manipulated evidence of WMDs (Entman 2012: 173–174). All in all, this suggests that scandals involving the military may been seen as political scandals in their own right, though news media investigating military scandals are faced with challenges that are different, and harder to overcome, than when writing about other types of political scandals.

Security scandals and military sex scandals in the age of diffused and arrested war

Looking at mediated scandals with a focus on the army, the military in general, and war, we are confronted with the notion that, according to Crosbie (2015), military scandals are rare, and that research into the military is also difficult due to lack of access (Schleicher 2016). Looking into studies on media, the military, and scandal it is therefore perhaps not a surprise that we find relatively few international studies on the subject. We have chosen to focus on four distinct scandals that have all been the subject of research: two scandals that are internationally well known and may be categorized as security scandals, and two scandals that fall into the category of sex scandals and are less known outside the U.S.

Abu Ghraib prison scandal of 2004

Thompson (2005) points to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of 2004 as an example of how the double-edged sword of scandal and visibility hit the U.S. Army. The scandal broke out in April 2004, when CBS’s 60 Minutes II published photographs showing Iraqi prisoners being subjected to various forms of humiliation and torture by the American prison personnel. The scandal soon became public worldwide (Jones & Sheets 2009) and one of the major scandals connected to the Iraq war (Thompson 2005; Bennett et al. 2006; Entman 2012). The scandal put the Bush administration as well as the U.S. army under pressure, but a study of the news coverage in seven different countries (Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.S.) (Jones & Sheets 2009) also shows that, whereas news media in Germany and Spain described the events in the Abu Ghraib prison as torture, the U.S. news media were more likely to term...
what had happened as abuse or mistreatment. Bennett et al. (2006: 481) reached the same conclusion, looking only at coverage in the U.S. media: “for all the photos and available evidence suggesting a possible policy of torture laid bare at Abu Ghraib, the story quickly became framed as regrettable abuse on the part of a few troops”; the scandal ended up having few political or policy consequences (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 23). Bennett et al. explain the framing of the scandal in U.S. news media using the “indexing” (Bennett 1990) hypothesis which states that most event-driven news, like scandals, quickly becomes constrained by routine journalistic practices such as framing stories within the range of sources and viewpoints that can be found amongst elite news sources, in this case sources in the U.S. military and the Bush administration.

Sexual assault in the U.S. military, 2004–2011

A study by Crosbie & Sass (2017) documents the history of sexual assault in the U.S. military via media coverage from about 1965 to 2014. They write (ibid.: 121) that the taboo of reporting military sexual assaults and other army atrocities was first broken during the Vietnam War. Since the 1980s they find a steady stream of reports linking sexual violence to the military, with a peak in 2004 when the Denver Post published “Betrayal in the Ranks,” a series of articles focusing on rape based on interviews with more than 60 victims (Pro-Publica 2018).1 Crosbie & Sass (2017: 129) find that the media coverage led to a large-scale scandal that made it impossible for the military to ignore the problems. The scandal thus led to several reforms and initiatives with a view to reforming military culture. However, in his study of “how print media frames the US military during time of scandal,” Kuhl (2017) points to a more recent scandal of 2011, the “Lackland Air Forces Base sexual assault scandal,” which only received minimal coverage in the U.S. news media. Kuhl (2017) studies three such cases: the Aberdeen Proving Ground scandal (1996), the United States Air Forces Academy scandal (2003), and the Lackland Air Force Base scandal (2011). He concludes that the coverage of these scandals decreases over time, but also argues that the media coverage may help bring more public focus on the darker sides of the culture of the U.S. military.

WikiLeaks: collateral murder 2010

Collateral murder refers to a video tape that was released by WikiLeaks in April of 2010. The tape was from a gun camera video on a U.S. army helicopter that in 2007 had been involved in an attack in a suburb known as New Baghdad in Iraq. The video shows how an air attack goes wrong and 12 civilians, including a photographer and a driver working for Reuters, are killed (McNair 2012; Mortensen 2012). The video was a global news story, just like the Abu Ghraib prison pictures, and according to McNair (2012) the video helped give new visibility to military atrocities and thus changed the power relationship between new media, old media, and the military and political establishment. Even though the video was covered by the traditional news media worldwide, a study on the coverage in Denmark, the U.S. and the United Kingdom (Mortensen 2012) shows that the selected newspapers published a total of 106 articles on “Collateral Murder,” with only 12 focused on the actual content of the video, whereas the rest of the articles focused more on WikiLeaks itself. Thus, as Mortensen (2012) sums up, the story of WikiLeaks, its organization, motivation, and its principal Julian Assange ended up with more coverage that the actual leak.

David Petraeus sex scandal of 2012

The David Petraeus sex scandal caught the attention of the international media in November of 2012. General David Petraeus, one the most highly decorated generals in the U.S. army, who
at that time had taken over as Director of the CIA, had to resign as a consequence of infidelity. The FBI had uncovered the fact that Petraeus had an affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell, a punishable offense in the military, and this led him to resign (Lanpher 2014). During the investigation it was also discovered that Broadwell had classified information, and Petraeus was charged with having given that information to her—a charge he later pleaded guilty to. A study comparing the media coverage of the Petraeus scandal to that of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal (Widegren et al. 2013) finds that the former received a lot less coverage from U.S. news media than the latter, but that this probably had to do with the fact that, while Clinton denied his affair, Petraeus admitted his and resigned almost immediately after it was revealed.

Discussion

Scandals are not “something” that just happen by themselves, as Crosbie (2015) points out. The same type of information available at different times, or in different circumstances, may or may not lead to a scandal. So, when Crosbie (2015) also states that full-blown military scandals are relatively rare, the obvious question to ask is: why? One reason has to do with the mediatization thesis, more specifically the mediatization of the military itself. The massive military focus on news media and communication is clearly also an attempt to avoid, control, or steer relatively clear of scandals, as Crosbie (2015) also states. This argument can be linked to Hoskins and O’Loughlin’s (2015) three phases of military mediatization. In the age of diffused war (the 2000s) both the military and the traditional news media lost some control over the media ecology to the rise of the Internet and non-state actors as WikiLeaks—this is also the age of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the sexual assault scandal ‘Betrayal in the Ranks’, and WikiLeaks and the collateral murder scandal. Indeed, studies of both the Abu Ghraib scandal and the collateral murder scandal go some way to argue that the unwanted visibility these scandals have brought to the military and the political establishment might be seen as possible major shifts in the relationship between news media, new media, and the military (Mortensen 2012), and even as a possible democratization of political communication (McNair 2012). At the same time the studies point out how the Web, or digitalization, have also brought a fundamental change to the news media, pushing it towards a chaos paradigm, to use McNair’s (2012) term.

However, in the present age of arrested war WikiLeaks is far from the agenda setter it was in the early 2010s, and Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2015) argue that both the military and the now digitized mainstream news media have regained some status and control in the media ecology, leading to perhaps fewer military scandals. Leaks still occur (Snowden, LuxLeaks, the Panama Papers), but these leaks are mostly now the result of whistleblowers working together with international consortiums of investigative reporters and/or the traditional media organizations such as the larger international newspapers. To sum up, one part of the explanation behind the few full-blown military scandals might be that the news media ecology has moved away from chaos (McNair 2012) or diffused war (Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2015) and found a new order, where both the military and the traditional news media are reasserting themselves.

Another part of the explanation would be to remember the indexing hypothesis (Bennett 1990) and the many studies—including during studies of the Abu Ghraib scandal—inspired by this theory that show how the American news media “indexed” their framing of a story according to the statements available by elite sources, thus limiting critique of the scandal. A third part of the explanation, and in some ways linked to the indexing hypothesis, are the studies of scandals in both the U.S. and the Nordic countries that show that the more trivial personalized scandals, like sex scandals, receive a lot more coverage than the more complex scandals (Entman 2012; Pollack et al. 2018). For Entman (2012) the personalized scandals are more media friendly
because they are simple and do well on television; for Pollack et al. (2018) it is mostly the news media, working in an increasing competitive environment, that blow up the small-scale scandals because they so clearly arouse public attention and interest both in traditional media and social media. But as is the case with the indexing hypothesis, sources may play a key role in this as it is often easy for journalists to find many sources that are both willing and able to criticize the simpler transgressions in for instance a sex scandal (Blach-Ørsten 2011). On the other hand, more complex scandals, like those involving war and national security, require sources with more specialized knowledge of for instance the rules of engagement during war. These types of sources are often fewer and elite sources themselves, and perhaps also have more to risk by criticizing a government, or army, that may also employ them, or have employed them in the past (see also Maltby 2013).

**Conclusion**

Looking at scandals and the military we have focused on two spectacular security scandals and two sex scandals involving armed forces. Further studies of the different scandals show that although the two security ones brought new visibility to some very dark secrets, both the media coverage of each scandal, and the political or military consequences of each scandal, was limited. The technology potential of Thompson’s new visibility still exists, but as we have shown the increased mediatization efforts of the military in countries such as the U.S., Great Britain, and Denmark (Kristensen & Ørsten 2007; Maltby 2012; Crosbie 2015) may have had some success in “blunting” the double-edged sword that Thompson wrote about, and perhaps even increasingly have had the success of turning the increased visibility to their own advantage and silenced the potential for scandal.

**Notes**

1 See https://www.propublica.org/article/the-most-important-muckreads-on-rape-in-the-military.

**References**


Scandals and the armed forces