

Review - Military Media Management

Written by Rhys Crilley

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RHYS CRILLEY, APR 11 2014

Military Media Management: Negotiating the 'Front' Line in Mediatized War

By: Sarah Maltby

London: Routledge, 2012

The relationship between the media and armed conflict has recently been subjected to an increasing amount of attention within the discipline of International Relations. James Der Derian has explored the ways in which the Pentagon, the defense industry, the media, and entertainment industries are increasingly interlinked. Susan Carruthers has investigated how the media operates within conflict zones, whilst Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin have argued that war and conflict can no longer be understood without paying attention to the role of media. This work is exemplary of a much broader literature that seeks to address the mediatization of conflict where 'war becomes defined, justified, legitimated and ultimately fought through and with the media' (p.4).

Despite the diversity of approaches taken to examining the nexus of security, media, and contemporary conflict, there is a common theme of adopting an interdisciplinary approach that unites the best research on the topic. International Relations (IR) does not, on its own, provide a comprehensive set of theoretical and methodological tools to make sense of the mediatization of conflict. Consequently, scholars have turned to the fields of visual culture, media studies, and political communication to investigate mediatized conflict. Sarah Maltby's *Military Media Management* stands as one of the latest works that adopts an interdisciplinary approach to examining mediatized war. Her work will be of interest to scholars, students and practitioners interested in learning more about security and the media.

Maltby begins by situating her work within the context of the growing literature on war and media. Recognizing that this work has exclusively focused on the military restriction of information, or has been broadly theoretical and has overlooked the nuances of military practices, Maltby aims to

empirically ground the explicit and implicit information management that *both* the military and the media bring to bear on the production of war news, and the consequences of these practices for the conduct of war. (p.3, emphasis in original)

To do so, Maltby grounds her approach in the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman. This theoretical underpinning, where social reality is derived from intersubjective symbolic exchanges and interactions, resonates with constructivist, interpretive, and post-modern approaches to IR, whilst also providing Maltby a focused way of understanding a complex topic. Utilizing Goffman's notion of strategic interaction, Maltby goes on to explore how the British Armed Forces 'attempt to control what is acquired, revealed and concealed about their activities' (p.7) in their pursuit of broader objectives.

Military Media Management draws upon almost a decade of research. Maltby's empirical analysis examines British Armed Forces media management practices through qualitative methods of interviews, observational fieldwork, and textual analysis of documents such as Joint Doctrine Publications (JDPs). The book begins with an introduction to the issue of media operations, focusing on how they are used by the military as an influencing activity, as public relations, and as responsive in the context of an 'external' media environment. This chapter is then followed up with a contrasting argument that proposes media operations themselves both shape and are shaped by the interactions that

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take place between the military and the media. This interactionist perspective perceives military media operations work in accordance with Goffman's notion of impression management. That is to say, military media operations are

intended to influence the impression that others come to formulate of military activities and as such is organized according to the ways in which the military interpret and give meaning to their own actions and the actions of others. (p.32)

This approach places the interactions and social relations between the media and the military at the forefront of Maltby's analysis, whilst drawing attention to the interpretive work that is being done by the actors involved in the process of military media management. The next chapter of the book engages with the issue of audiences and how the military imagines and attempts to understand those with whom they are trying to communicate and influence. This shines a light on why the British Armed Forces aim to generate particular responses among groups such as the external, internal, and adversary audience (p.41-43). By focusing on the issue of audiences, Maltby makes it clear that military media operations are fundamentally concerned with generating belief within audiences in order to influence them to behave and act 'in accordance with military organizational and operational goals' (p.49). Moreover, Maltby makes it clear how the military imagines different audiences, and shows how the desired responses at the level of belief and action are different across audiences (p.47).

With the 'why?' of military media operations outlined, Maltby moves on to the 'how?'. Maltby outlines three different control moves that are used by the military to define situations and generate influence. Maltby argues that linguistic control moves set up binary oppositions, whereas narrative control moves detract from the simple linguistic dichotomies of things like winning/losing and instead focus on a central message of transformation and progress (p.56). Perhaps this is so, but surely winning/losing, good/evil, freedom/restriction, and other binary oppositions, alongside connotative visuals, are reliant upon narratives to make sense in the first place? As interesting and as 'meta' as these questions may be, it is clear that Maltby is aware of the problems of analytical distinctions in theory, and overlapping complexity and interdependence in practice, and they do not detract from Maltby's analysis that delves deep into the strategies and techniques of military media management in the British context.

The concepts of linguistic, visual, and narrative control moves are drawn out and supported in a persuasive and insightful way, however I would be intrigued to know more about the relationship between the three. Clearly there is overlap and commonalities across the three control moves, but I am left wondering whether linguistic or visual control moves sit outside of narrative? Does language, or an image, make sense without some kind of narrative?

The remainder of the book consists of an analysis of the performative aspect of media operations and impression management. The first of these chapters gives further insight into how the British Armed Forces organize their media operations through place-bounded interaction with media observers, using press centers and embedded journalists. The second explores distanced circumstances where the media may uncover information about the military through 'diffuse and diverse patterns of access over which the military have no control' (p.89), including intended observable actions (the distribution of aid) and unavoidably observable actions (massive bombing campaigns).

The final chapter brings the book full circle, highlighting the utility of Goffman's framework to make sense of mediatized war. It also reiterates the key notion that, while media logic transforms military practices, these military practices also impact on the organization of the media according to the logic of the military (p.103-104).

One of the main critiques that could be leveled at *Military Media Management* is that there is little analysis of the impact of digital media technologies and social media on the contemporary context of the British Armed Forces media operations. More recent Ministry of Defence documents, specifically Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 on Strategic Communication, also do not feature in the book. However, this is hardly surprising as JDN 1/12 was published in 2012; the same year as the book. On the whole, perhaps one would expect more attention to be paid to the development of military social media usage, but one must remember that even the MoD's earliest social media presence in the form the British Army's blogs and Facebook pages only began in 2009. By which time *Military Media Management* will have been well along the research process. In the space of a few years, social media technologies such as Facebook have grown exponentially and, at the time this book was written, their use by the MoD probably

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seemed marginal. Thus, their lack of presence in *Military Media Management* does not illuminate a criticism of the author, but rather a problem for IR more broadly. With such a fast-paced and ever-changing media environment, how can we engage with these important issues surrounding mediatized conflict without falling behind the curve of technological and social development?

Fortunately, Sarah Maltby's ongoing research project—the Defence, Uncertainty, 'Now Media' project—seeks to address these issues by engaging with the role social media is playing in the media operations of the British Armed Forces, and it seems that *Military Media Management* lays the foundation for this. In conclusion, *Military Media Management* contains a sophisticated, yet accessible, analysis of the media operations of the British Armed Forces. It should be required reading for all students, scholars, and practitioners who want to understand contemporary conflict and the ways in which it is mediatized.

About the author:

Rhys Crilley is a Research Associate at the Open University, UK. He is currently working on an AHRC funded project 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?''. His research explores social media, visual politics, and narratives in global politics. He tweets at @rhyscrilley.