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Scandal and military mediatization

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Abstract

Mediated responses to reports of abuse during the Global War on Terror are puzzling. Few of the many revelations of abuse prompted concerted reactions (e.g. scandals), and those that did were often very similar to reports that were ignored. This article draws from empirical research into responses to prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib to develop new concepts that help untangle the mediatization of American wars. *Feedback* helps to model the variety of polemical interventions that are adopted in public discussions as a result of a scandal. The concept of *feedforward*, introduced here, enables us to model polemical interventions that develop within an organization in response to such feedback. Together, these concepts encourage greater sensitivity to the cultural horizon of mediated events. Further, they point to a new theoretical focus for mediatization research, namely the cycles of feedback and feedforward that help shape new forms of understanding and behaving within organizations.

Keywords

Abu Ghraib, civil–military relations, feedforward, mediatization, scandal

A number of scholars have recently focused their efforts on connecting mediatization literature to the study of militaries and warfare (e.g. Aday, 2005; Horton, 2011; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010; Maltby, 2012a, 2012b; McQuail, 2006; Wolfsfeld, 2003). Among these, Hoskins and O'Loughin (2010) and Maltby (2012a, 2012b) have specifically focused attention on two related points: first, that media management is an increasing concern for military organizations; and second, there is a historically new strategic significance associated with what Maltby calls 'unavoidably observable actions' (Maltby, 2012b: 92). Following in the spirit of these recent interventions, this article attempts to

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sketch the place of scandal in the broad mediatization processes transforming militaries and their ways of fighting wars.

Although they constitute one of the most visible sites of media activity surrounding contemporary wars, the scandals and controversies that periodically overwhelm the media cycle and focus attention on previously ignored issues have largely been ignored as sites of mediatization. One possible source of resistance is the awareness that full-blown military scandals are, in fact, relatively rare. On the other hand, attempts by journalists to trigger scandal are very common indeed, and the costs accrued by militaries in managing scandal are quite considerable. In addition to the costly impression-management organizations and practices described by Maltby (2012b) in the British context, these costs in the American context might be reasoned to include the loss of valued agents (including general officers, from one-star generals, such as Bryan Roberts and Jeffrey Sinclair, up to four-stars, including Stanley McChrystal and William E Ward) and weapons systems (including cluster bombs, tactical nuclear weapons, and chemical and biological weapons). This incomplete list suggests that the American military, at least, faces a supply-side economy of scandal in that their occupational realm is rich with potentially scandalous material and the national media marketplace is crowded with efforts to trigger such scandals.

Viewed from this perspective, scandal and the attempt to avoid scandal take on a more prominent role in the story of military mediatization. While it is tempting to view scandals as exceptional and exogenous events that intrude upon 'normal' mediatization processes, this is misleading. Scandals tap into deep cultural structures and reveal fundamental tensions (Alexander, 2006), and in that sense are in fact endogenous. This is made more complex by the fact, forcefully demonstrated by Adut (2008), that scandals are not naturalistic: the same material in different contexts may or may not give rise to scandal. If we are to capture the place of scandal in the broader effort to theorize the mediatization of militaries and warfighting, it is therefore important to think in terms of underdetermined scandal material that gains significance for military organizations through its context and presentation. Organizational preparation for and response to scandal should thus be viewed as aspects of mediatization.

This article grounds the discussion of military mediatization in the case of attempts to generate scandals about the US Army during the Global War on Terror (GWOT)[1] leading up to and including the Abu Ghraib affair. On 26 December 2002, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story that alleged detainee abuse at the CIA's secret detention center in Bagram, Afghanistan. This was the first report on detainee abuse in GWOT. The allegations included, among other brutalities, beatings by MPs and forced 'stress positions' by CIA operatives (1).[2] On 28 November 2009, the *Washington Post* ran another front-page story alleging detainee abuse at Bagram. Two teenagers allege, in the words of the reporter, that 'they were beaten by American guards, photographed naked, deprived of sleep and held in solitary confinement in concrete cells' (Partlow and Tate, 2009).

These are just two of the dozens of news articles that have alleged abuse at the detention center at Bagram, what Afghanis call the 'Black Jail' (Rubin, 2009). Despite these reports, no one has claimed that the American public has been conspicuously outraged by a 'Bagram scandal'. Each effort to develop a Bagram scandal failed to precipitate subsequent media interest (that is, they did not produce follow-up reports), although these

efforts were repeated for years by journalists and news outlets reporting on new instances of abuse and degradation (e.g. Coren, 2012; Gall, 2004; Schmitt, 2009).[3]

One might assume that Americans were simply not interested in prisoner abuse stories. But in fact, between the *Washington Post*'s 2002 and 2009 Bagram reports, the United States endured 'Abu Ghraib', the biggest scandal of GWOT, and one concerned with events almost indistinguishable from those at Bagram. Ten reports were released in major news outlets concerning abusive acts by Americans during GWOT before 24 April 2004 – including, remarkably, reports on the very abuses at the heart of the scandal. Nevertheless, general media interest did not pick up until Dan Rather intoned the words 'Americans did this' at the beginning of his *60 Minutes II* report.

Abu Ghraib was an enormous story. None of the first 10 reports of abuse were the top news item of the week, but this 11th, scandalizing report was the biggest item for four weeks (Tyndall Report, 2009).[4] The Abu Ghraib scandal was the third biggest scandal of the decade (2000–2009), with 366 minutes of coverage on network news, trailing only Enron (546 min) and pedophile priests (372 minutes).

At Bagram in 2002 and 2009 and at Abu Ghraib in 2004, detainees were abused by Military Police (MPs), Military Intelligence (MIs) and CIA operatives. At Bagram and Abu Ghraib, detainees were beaten, placed in stress positions, photographed naked, deprived of sleep, and confined in small concrete cells. Why did journalists and members of the mass audience respond[5] to a story of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, the 11th report of its type, and not to the earlier stories of abuses at Bagram? I answer this question below through the concept of mediation: the specific way that this material was mediated, specifically its capacity to suggest multiple meanings to different audiences, made possible several distinct discursive positions.

In the terms that will be outlined below, I will argue that scandals are useful sites for studying the deeper political conversations within which public deliberation about institutions and organizations are suspended – that is, their mediation. But further, by disaggregating the scandal conversation into multiple streams of feedback (from civil society, from conservatives and from the military's own intellectual communities), we can better account for the feedforward (the shaping of future organizational behavior in response to media logics). Together, the feedback received by militaries and the feedforward produced in response to feedback constitute an important strand of the mediatization of the military and its warfighting.[6]

The mediatization of war should concern communications scholars both because it provides a usefully bounded organizational setting in which to study a broader social process but also because of its very real and direct impact on people's lives. And while various scholars have noted the influence of media on modern militaries, there has yet to emerge a shared understanding of what the mediatization of wars and militaries might look like or how it might best be studied. In the empirical section of this article, I sketch such an approach.

The mediation of war

In this section, I locate our theoretical understanding of war within a continuum that stresses the importance of the mass audience–military link. In the following section, I

draw from the field of communication theory to posit a set of tools that can help trace the shaping of war by its mediation, a process that I consider one aspect of a broader military mediation, and one that unfolds through a combination of feedback (produced by civilians or military actors) and feedforward (produced by military organizations in response to anticipated feedback). While other scholars have touched on these issues, the concept of feedforward, which is borrowed from management literatures (e.g. Meznar and Nigh, 1995), is unique in orienting our analysis to anticipated input, which in turn helps to distinguish simple mediation from the more complex phenomenon of mediatization.

Following Livingstone (2009), it is helpful to begin this discussion free from the terminological debate over 'mediation', 'mediatization' and cognate concepts and instead state in simple terms the goal of this research. The task before us is to develop tools to analyze the seemingly chaotic, random and diffuse linkages between three actors: the mass audience, the news media and the military. While these actors may shape each other in a variety of ways, this article focuses specifically on how their triadic relationship influences the fighting of wars.[7] This is a timely subject because, simply put, GWOT is not like other American wars. Since it revolves around abstract concepts of terror and risk rather than land or regime change, cultural work has a heightened role. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010: 3–4) capture this in their notion of 'diffused war'; Maltby (2012b) presses the issue further with the suggestion that 'information *becomes* the war' (p. 4, emphasis in original). Battles are fought in media-saturated theaters, and are mediated to many distinct media cultures.

It should be noted that American military tactics and strategy have developed extensive responses to this multi-dimensional media context. These prominently include Caspar Weinberger and Colin Powell's doctrines of the 1980s and 1990s (Record, 2007) and their focus on avoiding negative publicity; continue through the Marine Corps' development of the Three Block War doctrine in the late 1990s and its emphasis on humanitarian concerns (Krulak, 1999); and reach their fruition (for the moment, at least) in the adoption of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 (2007) and its theory of an operational 'mosaic'.

The adoption of Field Manual 3-24 by the US Army and Marine Corps, widely noted in the press, reflects a sense of urgency in accounting for the presence of media technology on battlefields and the resulting mediation of war. In historical terms, this doctrine marks a major shift. The modern state's long tradition of military organization was built around the hierarchical nesting of decision-making, where tactics falls within strategy, but this new doctrine predicts an intertwining of tactical and strategic levels. Traditionally, at the tactical level, the soldier's decisions are nested within a narrow spectrum allotted to him by a junior officer, whose decisions are in turn nested within a slightly less narrow spectrum determined by his commanding officer, and so on.

The doctrine reflects real differences in the mediation of war observed on the field of combat. Professional reporters benefit from ever more powerful and accurate audio and video equipment. At the same time, recording technology keeps getting cheaper and smaller: the professionals are now joined by legions of amateurs. In terms of culture, too, not only does the American military offer increasing depth of organizational access to professionals, but it now contends with soldiers sharing videos of combat on the internet (Mortensen, 2009; see also Wright, 2004: 74) and officers flocking to the 'chattering

class' of public policy commentators (e.g. figures such as Nathaniel Fick and Andrew Exum and online platforms such as SmallWarsJournal.com and Foreign Policy's AfPak Channel).

While the US military has focused increasingly on the issue of mediation as a central pivot in civil–military relations, only a small minority of scholars, many of them working in the interdisciplinary field of mass communications, have followed suit. This literature has in turn been criticized quite severely. In particular, McQuail (2006: 114) notes that this research has consistently undertheorized the mass audience. In sum, then, some scholars, especially those writing in the traditional subfields of civil–military relations and military sociology, still assume that militaries are fundamentally closed organizations, and are thus buffered from mass audience discussion or journalistic crusades. Others acknowledge that the mediating of war matters to militaries, but look only to the interaction between journalists and military actors, ignoring the cultural context and role of the mass audience. In turning to scandal as a key node linking the mass audience to the military through the work of journalists, it is possible to follow Maltby (2012a, 2012b), Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) and others in identifying linkages between audiences and organizational structures, to sketch a richer vision of the mediation of war, one that is vast and variable but also textured in comprehensible ways.

The mediatization of war

Several thoughtful histories of the term 'mediatization' have been offered in recent years (e.g. Friesen and Hug, 2009; Hepp, 2012; Livingstone, 2009; Lundby, 2009; Maltby, 2012a). Notwithstanding these efforts, the term remains underdetermined. While this is certainly true of the concept as used outside communication theory,[8] the term varies considerably even within the specialist community of mediatization scholars. Nevertheless, many communication theorists share a core intuition about the concept that can help move our analysis beyond the mere mediation of war to something more specific.

One way to gain leverage over the complexity of this field is to think in terms of separate strands of cultural material, termed here 'feed'. This is a useful means of escaping the tendency toward eliding the material that circulates in the public sphere, which is often drawn upon as evidence in these discussions, with organizational processes that respond to such material but which are much harder for civilians to access. A second-order clarification must also be made between feed as it is produced and consumed. Much like any cultural product, the feed 'consumed' by military organizations might be distorted, selected and configured in ways that have little to do with their initial production. The very images at the heart of the Abu Ghraib scandal are powerful evidence of this (Sontag, 2004). These images feed 'back' to the military through the work of civil society advocates in ways unimagined by the soldiers taking the pictures; but so too the meaning of this feedback is fed 'forward' by military professionals in ways that may well be incomprehensible to those civil society advocates. Feed and context are analytical categories that must be carefully distinguished in discussions of military mediatization.

These distinctions have not been effectively described in other mediatization research in part because this literature is built on often quite divergent presuppositional frameworks. This can be seen in the variety of actors that are modeled as driving the process.

If we consider Asp's (1983) influential precursor theory, the drivers of mediatization are members of the news media. Schulz (1997, 2004), McQuail (2006) and Couldry (2008) follow this track. Others put political elites in the driver's seat: Kepplinger (2002), Wolfsfeld (2003), Aday (2005), Cottle (2006), Esser (2009) and Stromback (2008), for example, all look at the process through the eyes of political collectives who either pressure journalists to shape the media environment or adapt their own practices to conform to media norms. A third variation of the literature has pointed to broader classes of actors, either media understood very generally, as with Lundby (2009), Krotz (2009) and Hepp (2009), or macro-level societal units, as with Hjarvard (2008), Stromback (2008), Livingstone (2009) and Hepp et al. (2010).[9]

This diversity of actor is matched by a diversity of processes and outcomes. While the earliest research was firmly rooted in specific institutional spaces (e.g. Asp, 1983), scholars have tended to envision macro-level outcomes derived from meta-processes (e.g. Hjarvard, 2008; Krotz, 2009). This tendency maps on to a number of recent efforts to develop global stadial theories, e.g. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) and Bimber (2003).

Major interventions in the field have come from Couldry (2008), Hepp (2009) and Hepp et al. (2010). These criticisms have differed in some respects, but share certain conclusions. Each has criticized the teleological assumptions of the macro, stadial versions of mediatization, which seem to cast all media as sharing a common logic and all societal units as equally susceptible to the same transformations. Each critical intervention has also advocated for greater awareness of historical contingency and closer attention to organizational, technological and regional diversity.

While a recent special issue of *Communication Theory* (2013) suggests an increasing consensus among mediatization scholars concerning the concept and its application, it is worthwhile considering an earlier objection raised by Couldry (2008) to using mediatization, a specialist term without an immediately obvious meaning, rather than the existing term 'mediation'. One objection is that the mediation of warfighting, perhaps more so than the mediation of other phenomena, includes quite separate but still consequential varieties of mediation that have nothing to do with news media and entertainment. For example, night-vision goggles and subvocal communications technology allow for extraordinarily mediated experiences in battlefields; remote sensors mediate the experiences of pilots and sailors (Adamsky, 2010; see also Mortensen, 2009); and drones allow officers in Syracuse, NY, to kill people in Afghanistan (Bumiller, 2012). These are all fully mediated experiences and worthy of research, but should be analytically separated from instances of mediation where the process is affected by the logics of news media and from the processes of mass audience deliberation.

Furthermore, following Hepp's (2009) response to Couldry (2008), mediatization remains an intriguing and rewarding term precisely for the diversity and nuance that it captures. While it remains tempting to some to overreach and imagine a fully and uniformly mediatized global society, the concept has repeatedly been infused with the opposite logic (e.g. Couldry and Hepp, 2013: 195–198). Across the board, there has been a sensitivity to mediatization's feedback (Asp, 1983) or cyclical character (Aday, 2005), a focus on its interrelation processes (Hepp et al., 2010), on interactions and interdependencies (Stromback, 2008), on filtering (Livingstone, 2009) and remediating (Lundby,

2009). This shared intuition recalls structuration, but reflects an additional sense of the entwining and mirroring triggered between institutions by media.

For these reasons, I introduce here the concepts of feedback and feedforward as purely heuristic tools intended to help encourage precision in thinking about mediatization processes. At the beginning of this section, I advanced the claim that feed and context should both be analytically clarified in the course of describing mediatization processes. Of course, as we can see now, I am not the first person to have this intuition, but rather advance 'feed' in particular as a tool to link together the separate conceptualizations (e.g. cycle, interrelation, interaction, dependency, molding) described above. Feedback and feedforward, which can be understood as a means of categorizing Hepp's (2009, 2012) molding forces, offer more precision in describing separate but related sequences without collapsing them together or prioritizing one at the expense of the other. Feedback is the more familiar concept, and is composed of mediated representations that comment on or refer to an institution. The mass audience is both audience and actor since content comes from the mass audience, e.g. in the form of editorials and, increasingly, comments in digital forums. At an abstract level, all production of information addressing the action of a closed organization by members of the mass audience might be termed feedback. However, there are clear channels of delivery that prioritize certain forms of feedback over other forms. Civil society and public intellectuals, in particular, occupy central feedback positions, transmitting their viewpoints through media to the mass audience or (and perhaps increasingly) to targeted audiences.

The public character of feedback processes should not be mistaken for the sort of rationalistic deliberation we sometimes associate with the public sphere. Rather, events can be more realistically rendered by conceiving them as operating within a given civil sphere (Alexander, 2006), a space of pre-existing meanings, symbols and feelings, with polemical stances fitting into deep grooves. This is an important step because it challenges the assumption that mediatization will be rationalistic. Abuse scandals like Abu Ghraib concern organizational matters that are not logically connected to warfare, but it is through their contingent cultural properties – that is, their ability to resonate with deeply-rooted meanings – that they gain strategic prominence.

The less familiar concept of feedforward is the intra-organizational corollary to feedback. It is a set of new signals produced within an organization in response to feedback and in anticipation of future mediation (and, as a result, future feedback). Actors inside organizations respond to feedback from outside, but this matters to the organization in ways that are separate from how they matter to any given external public. Significantly, a concept that is 'fed forward', that is to say, integrated into an organization's policies and routines, may have only superficial resemblances to the material to which it is responding (the feedback). Analytically, we must separate that variety of organizational interventions in public debates from those debates that happen inside and trigger organizational change – and which are often quite distinctive. This latter category, which I term feedforward, is again textured and traced with polemical grooves, but these may well be unique to the organization.

While the feedback–feedforward approach to mediatization demands a fine-grained analysis, it also captures something simple and not always obvious. Scandals have the peculiar ability to make people care. For militaries, this matters not only to the degree

Table 1. List of reports by media context.

Case	Date	Source	Page #	Author	Words
1	26-Dec-02	WP	Cover (A1)	Dana Priest, Barton Gellman.	2640
2	4-Mar-03	WSJ	B1	Jess Bravin and Gary Fields	870
3	13-Mar-03	N	Cover	Eyal Press	3340
4	17-Mar-03	NYT	A11	Marc Lacey	770
5	18-Aug-03	LAT	A10	David Lamb and Ester Schrader	1550
6	5-Oct-03	AP	n/a	Charles J Hanley	600
7	17-Jan-04	NYT	A7	Eric Schmitt	370
8	20-Jan-04	CNN	n/a	Barbara Starr	550
9	3-Mar-04	S	n/a	Jen Banbury	4650
10	21-Mar-04	NYT	A14	Thom Shanker	625
11	28-Apr-04	60M	n/a	Dan Rather	650

AP = *Associated Press*; LAT = *Los Angeles* Times; N = *The Nation*; NYT = *New York Times*; S = Salon.com; WP = *Washington Post*; WSJ = *Wall Street Journal*; 60M = *60 Minutes II*.

that the feedback from the public proves disruptive to the military's monopoly on force but also to the degree that the feedforward it produces in its doctrine triggers changes in its warfighting capabilities. As will be seen, the events on the ground are of secondary importance; what matters is their mediation.

Why feedback?

The theory outlined above postulates that mediatization occurs through the development of public feedback and the internalization of a response in the form of private feedforward. In this section, the empirical case of the Abu Ghraib scandal is put forward in order to model how such an approach might work. However, due to the closed character of the US Army, it is not possible at this juncture to provide definite evidence of organizational feedforward. Rather, one strand of internal Army feedback is analyzed to gain clarity on how the meanings mobilizing within Army organizations differ from those that enter the military from outside.

I select this case on the grounds that it was GWOT's biggest news item, as noted above. Further, its unique characteristics triggered a variety of distinct polemical stances from a broad spectrum of public commentators.[10] Finally, the scandal produced an unusual amount of publicly-available internal military commentary. While this commentary does not reveal organizational change per se, it is suggestive of a specific set of differences within one important realm of military thought. Of course, the Abu Ghraib scandal is not a standard or generalizable event, but is instead chosen as an exaggerated site where feedback from the mass audience and military is produced in relatively great quantities.

The first 11 reports of abuse, listed in Table 1, varied by source, length, prominence and author's professional standing. These reports were drawn from a variety of media: articles in newspapers (the *Associated Press, Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times,*

Washington Post, and *Wall Street Journal*); long-format pieces published on a news website (*Salon.com*) and in a news magazine (*The Nation*); and television reports, airing first on CNN and then the *60 Minutes II* television report on CBS. As such, they represent a broad spectrum of audiences and journalistic practices (notably, each of these outlets produced stories on Abu Ghraib following the *60 Minutes II* report).

Reports 1–4 occurred after the September 11 attacks and during the UN-backed war in Afghanistan. Reports 5–11 were released during the far less popular war in Iraq. This would sustain the argument that audiences would be more receptive to controversy-inducing efforts after 20 March 2003, but fails to make sense of the failure of reports 5–10 or the failure of subsequent efforts to induce a Bagram scandal. A more nuanced reading, one that correlates the meanings of the reports with their discursive and symbolic context, is needed.

The reports themselves support the analysis as polemical exchanges (Dascal, 1998) in a pre-existing civil–military conversation. Some reports are written with the attitude of a discussion between the journalist and military, where the reader takes the place of impassive witness. Here, the stakes are small, involving only the observation that the military is responding appropriately to internal problems. Other reports dispute how the military or political administration runs the war. The *60 Minutes II* report is somewhat different, drawing from both rhetorical attitudes but also reflecting a high degree of interpretive ambiguity.

In the discussions of military abuse, there is no evident tension between the journalist's attitudes and the ethics of the military as such. These reports reflect agreement between the journalist and the military that an agent of the military has done something wrong. Lt. Col. West's actions are reported as criminal offenses that are properly being investigated by the military by Schmitt (7) and Shanker (10). Likewise, and more remarkably, the events at Abu Ghraib are three times merely 'discussed' (in this technical sense), by Schmitt (7), Starr (8) and Shanker (10).

The strongly editorializing reports, particularly by Priest and Gellman (1), Press (3) and Banbury (9), are indeed sophisticated polemical efforts. The goal in (1) is stated explicitly: to convince the reader that 'the picture that emerges [of the administration] is of a brass-knuckled quest for information' (p. 1). These reports aim to 'win', that is, convince the reader that the military's attitude and behavior are simply wrong.

The *60 Minutes II* report is somewhat more complicated. The report opens on the photograph of a hooded prisoner. For 3 seconds, there is silence, as the camera slowly pulls back. Famed reporter Dan Rather's familiar voice breaks the silence with the words: 'Americans did this to an Iraqi prisoner.'[11] The first 7 seconds of the report are emotionally fraught, implicating the majority of viewers, as Americans, in the strange and disturbing scene they are being shown.

However, Rather quickly shifts tone, describing the events from the military's perspective:

> According to the US Army, the man was told to stand on a box with his head covered with wires attached to his hands. He was told that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted. It was this picture and dozens of others that prompted an investigation by the US Army. Yesterday, we asked General Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of Coalition Operations in Iraq, what went wrong. (p. 11)

Table 2. 'Abu Ghraib' in American newspapers.

	21 Apr–28 Apr	29 Apr–5 May	6 May–12 May	13 May–19 May	20 May–26 May	27 May–2 Jun
New York Times	2	34	110	102	85	44
Washington Post	3	35	108	73	74	38
Total # of reports	61	329	1209	1217	889	503
Total # of newspapers	43	86	106	114	109	107

Gen. Mark Kimmitt offers the military's interpretation:

> Frankly, I think all of us are disappointed at the actions of the few. You know, every day we love our soldiers and – but frankly, some days we're not always proud of our soldiers.

Rather and Kimmitt are presented to the viewer as in agreement about the nature of a problem, namely that a crime has taken place in Iraq involving the photographed prisoner. Kimmitt's perspective, however, is undercut by the photographs that play across the screen as Rather introduces him. Soldiers Charles Graner and Megan Ambuhl are seen in medium-shot, smiling in front of a flesh-colored mass. The camera pulls out to reveal that they are reacting to a pyramid of naked detainees, shown from the front. This is made even more startling by the inclusion of a reverse shot of the group, almost entirely blurred by censors. Next, the camera pulls away from another close-up on a hooded detainee to reveal a smiling soldier, Lynndie England, giving the thumbs-up and pointing to the prisoner's blurred genital region.

Feedback 1: Civil society invades

Rather's report contained two conflicting interpretations of the images. In Kimmitt's account, the images are particularistic. They are metonyms of human failure, disclosing the aberrant character of those soldiers present during the abuses, 'the actions of a few'. However, also inherent in Rather's report is the trope that would be adopted by prominent civil society advocates, namely the claim that 'Americans did this', an interpretation of the images in universal terms as metaphors implicating many people not obviously associated with the photographed events. A metaphorical interpretation severs the images from their organizational context and turns them into symbols of evil, not, as the metonymic reading suggests, failure or dysfunction.

The struggle to generalize either a metaphorical or metonymic reading is the core of the deeper meaning-struggle of the scandal. For the months following Rather's report, members of civil society 'invaded' the military through a sequence of attacks rooted in metaphorical readings of the dozen or so published photographs.

The first week following the Rather report (28 April to 5 May 2004) suggests the cascading logic of press follow-up. Table 2 indicates the considerable diversity and frequency of articles written with reference to 'Abu Ghraib'.

I provide information on the use of the term in two national newspapers to suggest the broad audiences exposed to the debate. The total number of reports suggests a snowball

effect, where a sudden spike in interest with the initial report led to sustained, growing interest for several weeks. The decrease in the third and fourth weeks is considerable, but nevertheless indicates quite frequent references to Abu Ghraib. The total number of papers indicates that the story becomes known across the country.

A deeper exploration of the stories suggests that the cascading logic of controversy is also present in how commentators interpret the images. People across the country, in many dozens of American cities, were reading journalistic accounts and editorials and responding with their own opinion pieces. These instances of audience feedback provide another dimension in our understanding of broader cultural patterns underlying the various strands of feedback that would ultimately be received by the military.

There are strong commonalities among these reports. The *New York Times*' first editorial comment on the abuses simply advocated a 'fair but thorough' investigation 'examining culpability along the entire chain of command' ('Abuses at Abu Ghraib', 2004). This is in line with the military's metonymic reading. Its second comment on the abuses (3 May 2004) shifted tone, reflecting an increasingly emotional rhetoric in its title, 'The Nightmare at Abu Ghraib'.

The following day, the *New York Times* printed 10 letters to the editor under the title 'The Shame of Abu Ghraib: Voices of Revulsion'. Most of the letters ask for investigation into or an acceptance of responsibility by President Bush and congressional and military leaders. One letter argues that 'this is no time for polite deference to the powerful … the responsibilities ultimately go to the commander in chief and his cabinet' (Bell, 2004). Four other letters to the editor (Nashashibi, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Seaquist, 2004; Singh, 2004) lay the blame directly on Bush or the military's chain of command and advocate for broader and fearless investigation.

Two writers of letters to the editor see the events as having symbolically polluted the entire country, instances of strongly metaphorical readings. Joan Z Greiner (2004) claims that Lynndie England 'shamed me and every ordinary American woman with her conduct'. Mary Robertson (2004) asks Bush to apologize to the Arab world, as 'these actions have humiliated our whole country and violated our most basic sense of why we went into Iraq.'

Twenty-seven days after the Rather report, scholar Susan Sontag (2004) makes the claim that 'the photographs are us … representative of the fundamental corruptions of any foreign occupation together with the Bush administration's distinctive policies.' The meaning of the images is almost entirely metaphorical in Sontag's account. Likewise, art historian Dora Apel (2005) takes up Sontag's claim that the images are like photographs of American lynchings.

By interpreting the images as metaphors indicating general guilt, academics and intellectuals indict the military as an uncivil organization and the Bush administration as evil. Their metaphorical interpretations naturalize a set of connections between surface and depth until it seems obvious that these photographs demonstrate general sexual dysfunction among Americans, a torture culture, or other forms of American evil that offends and disturbs – and that requires reform.

Feedback 2: Conservatives respond

This universalistic interpretation is powerful, especially when wielded by skillful rhetoricians like Sontag. However, attempts to define the photographs as broad metaphors of

political and military evil were countered by those with quite different political agendas. Conservatives actively opposed civil society's efforts to implicate the military and political administration in the events.

Rush Limbaugh (2007) famously associated the images with fraternity hazing rituals. He elaborated on his thinking in a radio segment in 2007, where he addresses his comments to Bill Moyers, a left-leaning journalist:

> When I saw the first pictures of Abu Ghraib with the Islamofascists in a pyramid, I said it looked like a fraternity hazing stunt. My reaction to this is because I knew what the people reporting on this, like [you,] Mr. Moyers, were trying to do. You were trying to destroy the U.S. military … You were trying to harm the war effort … you tried to paint, tar and feather the entire U.S. Military as being just like those renegades inside Abu Ghraib.

Limbaugh is admitting here that his association of the images with the metaphor of a hazing ritual was strategic, intended to undermine what he considered equally strategic efforts to 'tar and feather' the entire military for actions taken by 'renegades'. This is a polemical effort to counter civil society interpretations of the images as broad metaphors by interpreting them instead as narrow metaphors, referring to a small group of wrongdoers. For Limbaugh, the images reveal the essence of the abusers to be renegades, outsiders, and they reveal the abusees to be Islamofascists. As he argues the point, it is absurd to use the images to criticize the war effort, since the one has nothing to do with the other.

Interpreted in this way, the often flippant attitude taken by many conservative commentators toward the abuses can be understood as consistent behavior given the premise that the abuses implicate only a small group of peripheral actors in any real guilt. Thus, when Glenn Beck and Mark Steyn joke about the abuses, they dismiss the issue as one of broad important and instead relegate it to a degree of absurd insignificance:

> *Beck:* Well, I mean Abu Ghraib was hm, a bit, don't you think?
> *Steyn:* Yeah it was a guy, whatever it was, a banana and Victoria's Secret panties, I mean, big deal. (Beck, 2009)

This exchange suggests that from a certain perspective, the symbolic qualities of the images are so irrelevant to discussions of the war effort that they can be casually laughed off. Abu Ghraib in this view is 'hm', anomalous, curious, irrelevant.

Regardless of how strategic and disingenuous the pundits are being, they reflect a perspective on the images that may strike many viewers as the obvious and only reasonable interpretation, and they would not (in a rationalistic sense) be wrong. These images can sustain multiple, contradictory meanings. Without a detailed study of audience reception, of course, there is no way to say how these or any reports were interpreted. However, what is significant for our present purposes is that these conservative commentators proposed a common analytical perspective that differed dramatically from that produced by many civil society commentators, specifically in that the conservatives draw on narrow metaphors revealing the evil of a few outsiders.

Feedback 3: Internal military feedback

Instead of viewing the images metaphorically, some inside the military accepted them as metonyms with self-evident meanings. By searching for references to 'Abu Ghraib' in monographs published by the Strategic Studies Institute (a part of the US Army War College),[12] I found three common classes of narrow metonymic readings of the images. Only in one report, cited below, did the author view the images as metonymic reflections of guilt beyond those directly involved.

The first category of response is to argue that the abuses in the images were simply not important events in themselves. Drinkwine (2009) describes the events as a 'mishap', while Iverson (2006) describes them as an 'unfortunate situation' (p. 93).

The second category of response is to observe that others wrongly identify the images as metaphors, and wrongly use these metaphors as examples of fundamental problems in the military. Several commentators (Dauber, 2009: 63; Jones, 2005: 6–7) argue that insurgents explicitly operationalize symbolic readings of the images in order to erode support for the US, often by adding verbal or visual references to the abuses in the videos they make of their beheading of Westerners. Pumphrey (2008: 137) critically describes the images as a 'propaganda gift' to insurgents. These scholars identify several other places where this process is unfolding: in the UK (Edlin, 2006: 57), in Kuwait (Terrill, 2007: 50), in Jordan (Terrill, 2008: 46), and domestically (Jaeger, 2007: 23; Martin, 2007: 130).

The final version of the narrow metonymic response is to identify the abuses as evidence to support the existence of the 'strategic soldier'. The problem is described as twofold: soldiers really are important strategic actors; but this was not recognized at Abu Ghraib until the images were revealed. Zuhur (2006a: 57) notes that 'these problems while representative in the least of American intentions, were nevertheless very damaging to the U.S. moral position', a perspective echoed by Marcella (2008: 34). Zuhur (2006b: 38) optimistically notes that this is being reflected in military policy changes.

Only one of the monographs used the images to accuse the military of organizational dysfunction. Rocheleau (2008) concludes from his assessment of the abuses that far more of the military command structure should bear responsibility that has done so. He notes:

> The U.S. Army has a record of prosecuting its own criminals, but such trials all too often seem to be conditional on publicity leaks and confined to the rounding up of low-ranked 'bad apples,' while ignoring command responsibility. (p. 27; see also note on p. 31)

Here, Rocheleau demonstrates the fluidity between a narrow and broad interpretation of the abuses. By reading the images metonymically, commentators can be led to a spectrum of conclusions about how much of the military or political structure is connected to the abuses. These remain particularistic and not universalistic to the degree that the commentator's outrage is tied to the abuses themselves and not what they symbolize.

Of course, this sample is far from generalizable and provides only a glimpse into the logic underlying the formal feedforward processes, which requires detailed research to fully understand. Nevertheless, they hint at a military that receives external feedback

through a thick organizational filter. The feedback produced within the military is in this sense qualitatively different from and out of step with either of the categories of feedback produced outside the organization.

Shifting to a feedforward research paradigm

The notion of a civil–military conversation pre-existing any given public discussion of the military helps ground research in the sort of 'crowded marketplace' scenario described by Bimber (2003). A rich understanding of such a conversation – only a sketch of which has been attempted here – will help predict the sorts of exceptional information needed to generate interest. All other information is likely to just 'rally the base'. The benefit added by thinking in terms of both feedback and feedforward is that we can better grasp the ways that institutions like the military endeavor to change the pre-existing conversation.

Throughout this article, I have hesitated to articulate the link between these strands of feedback and whatever feedforward may have been produced as a result of the scandal. Thorough research based on still-classified records is needed to satisfy this question, and it is the intention of this article to encourage and guide such research. However, some preliminary remarks may be helpful to gain a richer sense of how to link the two parts of our argument, the contingency of feedback and the relation of this to feedforward. Reports published by Armed Forces employees are suggestive of the dominance of internal feedback logics over the feedforward process. For example, Bland (2005) analyzes the effects of the scandal on Army interrogation practices, finding that it triggered a feedforward process of rationalizing interrogation (removing torture from the menu) and has therefore improved the quality of extracted information. However, this process has had the unintended consequence of revealing to American enemies 'new interrogation resistance techniques' (p. 14), including the benefit of making false accusations of abuse. What actually feeds forward is an empirical question. Certainly, interrogation doctrine was changed. But given Bland's observation of the costs of not torturing and his expectation that untortured detainees will still allege torture, there remains good cause to question the depth of penetration of that doctrinal adjustment.

Each strand of feedforward needs similarly nuanced attention. We may anticipate in this case and indeed in almost any case that the feedforward that follows a major scandal will be concerned with both preventing acts of deviance and altering the perception of deviance – especially the capacity to perceive to it. The adoption of counterinsurgency doctrine and the promotion of media-savvy generals who espouse more palatable views on human rights should also be considered part of a global feedforward process, tied to preventing the sorts of feedback that are visible to the institution. Studying feedback is immensely useful in focusing our attention on feedforward, but both elements needs to be accounted for if we are to begin to understand just how it is that scandals affect social life.

Of course, our case is an extreme outlier. With Abu Ghraib, the trigger for feedback was manifestly strange and remarkable. However, even with strong and attention-grabbing material to work with, feedback is a difficult and highly contingent form of cultural work. To add a further dimension of complexity, internal military feedback is likely to vary widely from external, civilian feedback, as polemical positions from outside get translated into organizational terms and tested against internal perspectives.

This is significant for future research designed to consider the organizational consequences of scandal on militaries. While Maltby (2012b) has done pioneering work on the issue of the reciprocal nature of military and media professionals' working relationships and several scholars have made significant inroads into the complex issue of embedded war correspondence (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005; Lindner, 2009; Tumber and Palmer, 2004; see also Kavotsky and Carlson, 2003; Schechter, 2003), there is a gap in our collective understanding of broad media events like scandal as a factor in military policy and decision-making.

The acts of 'invasion' and 'reaction' are instances of mediation. However, as they feed into the US military, they contribute to the difficult-to-observe process of mediatization. In terms of the mediatization of war, this research suggests, on the one hand, that the US military has a secondary buffering beyond its formal capacities for censorship. The history of US war reporting has partly inured the mass audience to the sorts of atrocity that occur in war, which makes the work of journalists ever more difficult. On the other hand, the US military's doctrine increasingly prioritizes the mediation of war. We can perhaps predict an even more resilient military public relations system than is sometimes suggested (e.g. Cottle, 2006). The US military can be expected to stay ahead of journalistic efforts to the degree that its feedforward is responsive to the specifics of the American civil–military conversation. In other words, more Bagrams, fewer Abu Ghraibs. However, doing so would require a sensitivity to the sorts of meanings that are current in the broader public, which the organizational culture of the US Army, at least, makes difficult.

Couldry (2008) and Hepp (2009) critique the tendency to posit unitary media logics and to fail to specify fields of action. Taking these critiques seriously demands we consider variance among mediated militaries. Some states may be home to highly mediated but not mediatized militaries, e.g. Russia and China, where there is broad journalistic interest in these militaries but less press freedom and stronger governmental resilience to external feedback. Others may have nationally-mediatized militaries, e.g. Switzerland and Denmark, which are likely responsive to local feedback but which generate less international interest. Still others may have a transnationally-mediatized military, at the level of a geographical bloc (e.g. France in relation to the EU mass audience) or alliance (e.g. Turkey in relation to NATO member-state mass audiences). Only a few are likely to be susceptible to mediatization forces from across the globe. The US military is certainly among them, but much comparative research needs to be done in these areas.

Following Hepp (2009), this article argues that the crucial issue is the molding force of the media, in this case its molding of military organizations. Using the language of feedforward and feedback, we can refine Hjarvard's (2008) broad category of indirect mediatization to capture such molding processes. Whatever the deeper theoretical commitments, much empirical research needs to be done to open up the feedforward side of the equation. This article has attempted to sketch the gulf between perspectives on feedback that suggest in turn challenges to adequately addressing (through feedforward processes) anticipated feedback in the future. The benefit of viewing scandal as separate and internally diverse streams of feedback and feedforward is to gain clarity in our understanding of the shaping tendency, rather than direct effect, of scandal on organizations. If the US military is mediatizing, than it mediatizes partly on its own terms.

Indeed, an important final note is that the empirical research here supplements rather than grounds the theoretical investigation. In the case of military organizations, feedback can be researched much more easily than feedforward, but both elements of the equation must be considered as we move forward in our understanding of mediatization. The mediatization of war remains an exciting area of research because it promises to shed light on a phenomenon of broad concern which, despite sometimes awkward terminology, can be expressed in simple terms: we are all involved in the fighting of war.

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Notes

1. The 'Global War on Terror' is acknowledged to be a contested concept (ethically, politically and militarily), but the term is retained in order to remind the reader of the political context of the period in question.
2. The first 11 reports of abuse during GWOT are included in a separate numbered list at the end of the article and are referenced by chronological number (1–11) throughout.
3. Note that subsequent media interest is not implied to be a proxy for broad public outrage. Instead, the comparison of the Bagram non-scandal and the Abu Ghraib scandal concerns media coverage, not the feelings and opinions of the media's audience.
4. The Tyndall Report compares media interest by using minutes of network news coverage. During the news week of 3–7 May, it occupied 122 minutes of network news time; the week of 10–14 May, 80 minutes; the week of 17–21 May, again 80 minutes. The story was displaced in the week of 24–28 May by 42 minutes of reports on 'Iraq post-war reconstruction efforts', but was again the biggest news item in the week of 31 May– 4 June with 24 minutes.
5. The term 'mass audience' is used throughout to refer to the conceptually undifferentiated audience of mass media. It is intended as a more precise alternative to public (which fails to capture the active role required to become an 'audience' member) and more value-neutral than 'general public' (which may suggest consensus) or 'public sphere' (which suggests a rationalistic deliberative environment). Members of a mass audience respond by producing feedback. This may take the form of editorials, letters, works of art, analysis of works of art and the like. The minimal requirement is that meaning is attributed publicly to the event in question. Analytically, this feedback can be analyzed according to common themes.
6. While I contend that the concepts of feedback and feedforward are helpful for disentangling the mass of chatter around complex media events like scandals, this distinction may also prove helpful for researching other aspects of mediatization. At present, however, my comments will be limited to mediatization processes triggered by scandal.
7. As noted by Bartels (1993), there are real difficulties in studying media effects. This article tries to model the way that the interactions of the mass audience, news media and military might lead to definite outcomes, but I do not try to specify such effects here.

8. For example, in cultural studies, Jameson (1991) defines mediatization as media self-awareness; in history, Wijfjes (2009) conflates media logics and mediatization; in anthropology, Agha (2011) defines mediatization as the commodification of information.
9. This latter stance has been recently scaled down by Hjarvard (2013) to the meso-level, reflecting a growing consensus in the community also echoed in an editorial statement by Couldry and Hepp (2013).
10. Feedback was sampled through a LexisNexis search for 'Abu Ghraib' in US newspapers for 24 April to 5 May 2004. This resulted in 333 news items from 65 newspapers. Comments from leading intellectuals were also selected as indicative of broader discourses (Sontag, Apel, Limbaugh and Beck).
11. Dan Rather has long had an ambivalent reputation, but was unquestionably one of the most prominent reporters in the United States at the time of the report. He was at the time both a reporter for *60 Minutes* and its spin-off *60 Minutes II* and the anchor of the CBS Evening News, having replaced legendary anchor Walter Cronkite (Auletta, 2005).
12. The monographs that I cited for the present paper are included in a separate list in the references below. These monographs were chosen by searching by keyword 'Abu Ghraib' on the SSI website.

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