

A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Perceptions of the Media by Members of the British Forces during the Iraq War

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Little is known about service personnel's perceptions of the media's coverage of war and its impact on the personnel and their families. Using data collected from a major cohort study of the British Armed Forces, this article examines perceptions of the coverage of the Iraq War among British personnel deployed during the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Operation Telic 1). It draws on the theories of media's effects and gauges whether *hostile media effect* or *assimilation bias effect* takes precedence. The authors qualitatively analyzed the responses of 200 military personnel regarding their perceptions of the media and supplemented this by further quantitative analysis. This led the authors to identify concerns that the media coverage was unsuitable, inaccurate, and too immediate; however, in some cases, coverage was considered beneficial. The importance of the family to those deployed and the extent to which media coverage can affect morale make the military family an important media audience.

Keywords: *media; military; Iraq War; perceptions*

Background

Media, the Military, and Their Families

The subject of how the media should report war and conflict has attracted a considerable literature. Much has been written about the styles and methods used by the

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media, their motives, and the impact that media coverage has on popular support for military campaigns. Less has been written about how deployed personnel perceive the coverage of war and how they infer what effects it might be having on their friends and families. Instead, most insights on this subject have been drawn from frequently oblique asides in personal accounts, letters, and autobiographies of those who have served.¹ This article rectifies a gap in the literature by drawing on a study of the attitudes of a large cohort of serving military personnel, focusing on their perceptions of media coverage during the war-fighting phase (between April and June 2003) of the invasion of Iraq.

The war in Iraq provided an opportunity to consider the effects of media coverage in a more systematic fashion than earlier studies. As a result of the controversy that arose over the so-called Gulf War Syndrome after the 1991 Gulf War, and the perception that the absence of systematic data on the health and well-being of Gulf veterans had been a major failing, King's College London was funded to carry out a systematic study of the health of a large random sample of UK service personnel who took part in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, code named Operation Telic 1. Although the main focus of the study was on physical and psychological health, there was also an opportunity to collect data on perceptions of media coverage of the war and its effects on service personnel and their families.

Media in Wartime

The Korean War was the first modern war to be covered by television, but it was the Vietnam War that ushered in the modern age of televised war reporting. On that occasion, the United States learned how television dramatically magnified the importance of winning the battle not just on the front line but also on the home front. Part of the complex evaluation that the public undertake in their formation of views on armed conflict is their perception and understanding of casualty acceptance: a subject that itself has been studied in some depth,² but which falls outside the remit of this article. The progression of military-media relations in the United States has been described as moving from the media's being incorporated (pre-cold war), manipulated (during the cold war), and more recently, courted (post-cold war).³ The factors shaping this relationship have been analyzed in considerable depth, and a complex three-way relationship among media, military, and general population as an audience has been demonstrated.⁴

Since the 1950s and 1960s, both the military and the media have changed enormously. The advent of global instantaneous broadcast now facilitates the transmission of information far faster than ever before combined with the advent of continuous "24-hour" coverage, ever-increasing use of imagery and graphics, and a vast range of specialists, commentators, and experts. The modern military is now faced with the reality of intense scrutiny from "24/7" news. With the increasing range of media, the paradigm is shifting from a supply-based market, in which the audience receives what the media chooses, to a demand-based market, in which the audience chooses what to

receive from a variety of media outlets. Notable, among the new suppliers, are the Internet-based outlets such as YouTube and the “blogosphere.”

One response to these developments is what has been called “screening,” or less charitably, “censorship,” performed by the military insofar as they are able. War correspondents are protected on the battlefield and obey military commands, on the understanding that they will be protected and given an advantageous viewpoint from which to report their stories but meanwhile accepting that their copies will be censored.⁵ The military understand, however, that given the speed of modern communication technology and the constraints of limited information on the battlefield, mistakes in censorship can occur and information can potentially “leak” down informal, uncensored channels.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq also introduced two new elements. First, the media, which were at the least more questioning and in some cases openly hostile toward the war, reflected the divisions in public opinion about the legitimacy—indeed even the legality of the invasion of Iraq. This was in contrast with the previous UK engagements in the Falklands and Gulf where a broadly more supportive attitude was assumed in part because of the existence of appropriate UN resolutions. Second was the arrival of new media players, and very professional from a technical point of view, in particular, *Al Jazeera*. For the first time, satellite and cable subscribers in the United States and United Kingdom could be exposed to the views of what traditionally had been regarded as the “enemy.”⁶

Alongside these expanding broadcast media, the ways in which individuals communicated with friends and families were transformed: the increasing availability of e-mail, Internet, cellular phones, and in some situations, television conferencing has reduced the isolation often felt by deployed personnel. This increasing telecommunication, however, itself has been described as a mixed blessing: while some individuals feel reassured by communication with home, others feel distracted or disempowered by domestic problems about which they can do relatively little.⁷

With this multiple, wide-reaching, and near-instantaneous media, a new issue has emerged: that of multiple audiences. The media are able to communicate not only with military personnel but also directly with their families in ways that can sometimes cause difficulties so far as the control and release of sensitive information are concerned. For example, families can potentially be informed of a serviceman’s or woman’s death via television, long before the military’s chain of command and chaplaincy service can act; this raises the issue of what ought to be shown and, consequently, what ought not to be. It should be noted, however, that to date, the UK media have maintained a “gate-keeping” arrangement, whereby names are not released on air until next of kin have been informed. Nevertheless, it remains the case that casualties or deaths from a region or unit can be covered before individuals’ next of kin are informed officially by the chain of command.

Analyses of mass media during wartime are numerous, but the majority employ self-analytical models, identifying the media coverage but not necessarily the effects

that this coverage might have had on specific populations, other than in the wider context of what ultimately constitutes propaganda.⁸ While there is a literature on well-publicized civilian disasters or terrorist outrages such as the September 11 attacks,⁹ and the effects that these have had on individuals and/or groups, the coverage of warfare among the military and their families has received less attention in the published literature. A small corpus of literature does exist, however, as outlined below.

Research from the mid-1970s among Israeli women demonstrated their increased desire for media coverage during wartime, which could not be solely ascribed to being due to the needs of those women whose husbands were serving in the armed forces.¹⁰ The same authors also found segmentation of the audiences by educational and socioeconomic level for different output media: newspaper readership was positively correlated with higher educational standing, while exposure to radio and television showed no such association.¹¹

More recently, a relatively small study ($n = 23$) identified three types of viewing habits undertaken by military wives and children: compulsive viewing of the war, controlled viewing of the war, and constrained viewing.¹² Some evidence was demonstrated that viewing habits potentially changed from compulsive to controlled viewing over time, in some cases following input from the military family support group. There was anecdotal evidence that more experienced military spouses were more likely to control their viewing habits.

The question concerning the balance of these needs among differing populations, which for our purposes are the military families, the military themselves, and the wider population, raises a variety of issues, not least in the way that these competing needs of differing populations interact. To identify how military personnel construe media coverage of the events in which they are involved and how that coverage affects their families, we require a theoretical framework in which to consider the relationships between the media and their audiences within the military context.

Theoretical Framework

The Perception of Reporting: Hostile Media, Assimilation Bias, and the Third Person

The perception of media coverage is a complex interaction process involving what the media distributes and what the audience receives. As this study specifically focuses on perceptions of media coverage, we concentrate on three relevant theories: *hostile media effect*,¹³ the *assimilation bias effect*,¹⁴ and finally the *third-person effect*.¹⁵

The theory of hostile media effect describes the tendency for ideological partisans to perceive any coverage as biased against their particular side. Hostile media effect was first described following analysis of the 1982 Beirut Massacre.¹⁶ Several pieces

of news coverage from major television networks on the massacre were shown separately to audiences specifically chosen to be either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. Both groups were convinced that the identical news reports were biased against them. The authors concluded that the two audiences compared the news reports' "unbiased" coverage with their own ideas of what they would consider to be fair representation and subsequently concluded that there was a mismatch; the authors also reported that audience recollection of the newsreels showed a disproportionate representation of ideas and concepts that they considered to be contrary to their own views and ideas.¹⁷ This discrepancy between coverage and recollection has been further fostered by a more general reduction in trust of news media.¹⁸ In the context of this study, combatants' personal experiences of being on the front line are likely to be considerably different from what the media portray as media coverage tends to focus on combat and the more dangerous and intensive elements of frontline duty. This disparity may provoke concerns that the media are not depicting frontline duty in a realistic manner; in relation to the media's impact on military families at home, the media coverage may be perceived to only heighten anxieties.

In contrast to the hostile media effect, the assimilation bias effect theory states that there is a natural tendency to evaluate inconclusive information in favor of one's own preformed assumptions.¹⁹ One study demonstrated that people, when subjected to a series of academic papers indicating the deterrent effect of the death penalty, showing mixed results, tended to conclude that the evidence supported their own view.²⁰ Therefore, military personnel, who may have strong views on their role in combat, may perceive the media's coverage as being supportive of their cause. This view may be enhanced by the media's traditional support for military interventions abroad, such as during the 1991 Gulf War and actions in the Balkans and Afghanistan more recently.

Within these two theories, media perception is influenced by two variables: the source and the audience.²¹ One study, which sought to identify the interaction more specifically, presented the same pieces of information to a group of participants as either a student's academic report or a journalist's report.²² When told that the source was a journalistic report, participants tended to consider the information as being biased against their own views; when told that the source was a student's report, participants tended to consider the information as being either neutral or, indeed, favorable. While there is evidence that the position of the media reporting of the military during past wars, such as the Vietnam War, tended to be in favor of the military,²³ quite how far this can be extrapolated to what recently has been a less deferential media in the United Kingdom is debatable.

Information is also perceived within the context of the second influential variable, the potential audience. The hostile media effect has been shown to be stronger among males, lower income settings, people who identify strongly with a political party, and those more involved in the political framework.²⁴ Given the demographics of Army personnel, the regimental organization of the British Army, their role as

combatants within the theater of war, and therefore, their consequent self-interest, service personnel could be expected to be susceptible to the hostile media effect, in the context of the audience variable. This research has also hypothesized the concept of “safe discussions” where people of similar opinions discuss their views in a sympathetic environment, which serves only to emphasize opposition when faced with what may be a neutral or opposing view.²⁵

To promote in-depth understanding of how particularly influential “the audience” is in the assimilation bias effect, more recent literature has introduced the third-person effect. This theory hypothesizes that people exposed to persuasive communication through mass media consider the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves.²⁶ The audience that is considered as the “third person” should therefore be considered; in the context of this study with the deployed military personnel as subjects, there are two principal third-person audiences: the military family and the wider public. In the case of the military family, while they are not as familiar with military matters as those personally serving, they are more knowledgeable of military life than are the wider public. It could be expected that because of their proximity to the serving personnel, the military family would not be as predisposed to the third-person effect as the wider public could be.

The importance of this third-person effect is evident when considering the potential balance between the assimilation bias effect and the hostile media effect. The assimilation bias effect proposes that a person is likely to assume that a particular piece of journalistic reporting supports his or her own preconceived position. However, when a person is asked to consider how the same piece of reporting may be viewed by others, especially if the “others” are assumed to be not as well informed, then the same reportage is more likely to be viewed in a negative light; this is an example of the third-person effect leading to hostile media effect. The very nature of media reporting as being broadcast to the wider world and, thus, reaching a wider audience may predispose hostile media effect to take precedence over the assimilation bias effect.

Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of this study was to identify military personnel’s perceptions of media coverage and the presumed effects of that coverage on their families while deployed. Qualitative analysis of military personnel’s assessment of the media coverage using the constant comparative method²⁷ was conducted to determine perceptions and concerns held by military personnel of media coverage of the Iraq War and, from this gauge, whether hostile media effect or assimilation bias effect takes precedence. This qualitative analysis was supplemented with quantitative analysis to investigate which social demographic groups are more likely to perceive the media coverage as negative. In addition to this, we investigated the relationship between perceiving the media as negative and mental health.

In this article, we report on the testing of the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Given that the source variable is the media and that the audience comprises the military, military families, and the wider (nonmilitary) public, the hostile media effect would take precedence over the assimilation bias effect.

Hypothesis 2: Negative perceptions of media coverage would be associated with psychological distress.

Method

The Iraq Cohort Study

The sample frame for the current study was the King's Centre for Military Health Research cohort study of UK service personnel.²⁸ This study compared the health and perceptions of 10,272 military personnel following the 2003 war in Iraq, some of whom had deployed to the Iraq War and others who had not.²⁹ The method of data collection was a self-reported questionnaire, which included questions on demographics, experiences before and during the invasion, and subsequent physical and psychological health.³⁰ The data were collected between one and three years following the start of the 2003 Iraq War. Due to particular concerns about the health of reservists, this population was oversampled by a factor of 2:1. Great efforts were made to ensure both a large and representative sample. Data were collected via three mail outs, visits to over fifty military bases, and further tracing and telephone contacts. Individuals were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their answers were confidential. The final response rate was 58.7 percent.³¹ In a previous publication, we presented data to suggest that the main reason for nonresponse was failure to trace.³² There was no evidence of bias by health status.³³

Inclusion Criteria

For the purposes of this study, our sample was restricted to those who had deployed as part of combat arms on Operation Telic 1 in order to ensure a relative uniformity of experience and background. In practice, this meant service personnel from the Royal Marines and Army. It would otherwise be difficult to compare, for example, the perceptions of a sailor deployed off the coast of Iraq or a logistician some distance behind the "front line" with those deployed to a spearhead element of an offensive force.

Those individuals answering both the following questions were included in our sample. "What effect did the media coverage of the war have on your family?" Possible responses were *very positive*, *positive*, *no effect*, *negative*, or *very negative*. There was a further space to explain the response in free text. Second, the participants were asked to *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree* with the

statement, “I felt supported by the media.” The responses to these questions were then recoded into the groups “positive effect on family,” “negative effect on family,” “felt supported by the media,” and “felt unsupported by the media,” respectively.

A subset of this population was randomly selected for qualitative analysis of their free-text responses from the “media and family” question. These responses were analyzed using the constant comparative method.³⁴ The raw data were broken down into segments of texts that shared themes and then grouped into initial subcategories by two independent reviewers. Further analysis was then undertaken to group together these subcategories, and key themes were identified.

Demographic data including sex, status, service, rank, age, educational qualifications, relationship status, whether participants had children, and the response to questions pertaining to specific problems at home while on deployment were also collected. Psychological distress was measured by the twelve-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12).³⁵

Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using STATA 9.1.³⁶ Appropriate survey commands (svy) were used to account for sampling fractions. Odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals were calculated by logistic regression analysis controlling for potential confounders.³⁷

Results

Study Sample³⁸

A total of 714 individuals were eligible for inclusion in our sample. Of these, 15.0 percent were officers, and 15.9 percent were Royal Marines. The median age was 29.1 years, with an interquartile range of 24.7 to 35.7 years; 75.7 percent were in a relationship, and 32.2 percent reported having children.

Free-text replies to the “media and family” question were provided by 384 individuals (53.8 percent), of which 200 were selected at random and qualitatively analyzed.

Results of Qualitative Analysis³⁹

Qualitative analysis identified twelve subcategories, which were grouped into four categories, shown in Table 1.⁴⁰

Category 1: Media coverage not suitable (46.0 percent). Almost half of the respondents commented that aired content was not suitable. Those with children made particular reference to the unsuitability of coverage for children for whom the stresses of separation from parents are difficult enough without further reminders of events and news of injury and death from the front line. More than a third of all

Table 1
Respondents' Assessment of Media Coverage from Qualitative Analysis

Category (% of Respondents) ^a	Subcategory (% of Responses) ^b
Media coverage not suitable (46.0%)	Coverage too graphic (11.0%) Specific remarks about suitability for children (3.0%) Coverage served to heighten anxieties or remind families of the dangers (37.0%)
Media coverage inaccurate (36.5%)	Stories untrue (9.5%) Selective or misleading reporting (15.0%) Stories "hyped-up" (7.0%) Negative bias or perceived lack of support in reporting (15.5%)
Media coverage too immediate (29.5%)	Information not specific enough (12.5%) Information preceding the chain of command and Army welfare channels (4.5%) Too much coverage (16.0%)
Media coverage beneficial (16.0%)	Facilitated direct contact (2.5%) Allowed family to gauge what was happening on deployment (15.5%)

a. Percentages are calculated for categories as the percentage of respondents ($n = 200$) responding within that category; because responses could cross more than one category, the percentages cumulatively are greater than 100 percent.

b. Percentages are calculated for subcategories as the percentage of responses; responses may overlap subcategories but also remain within a single category. As a result, the category percentages are not the simple sum of the subcategories. Furthermore, the total category percentages are of respondents, not just responses.

respondents commented that media coverage only heightened anxieties at home: "The news coverage kept the war in their minds all the time" [S046].

The more graphic nature of reporting from some of the embedded journalists in forward units was also subject of some comment: "Showing of bombs and bullets on [television] to relatives . . . has a negative effect" [S113]. Most comments highlighted the unnecessary, sometimes ghoulish nature of the coverage, which soldiers said they would have wanted censored for the sake of their families: "Our job is a sometimes awful one, but you don't want your family to see or hear the facts as it's happening" [S026].

Category 2: Media coverage inaccurate (36.5 percent). More than a third of respondents commented on the inaccuracies of reporting, whether accidental or intentional. The respondents implied a spectrum of inaccuracies from alleged "entirely untrue" stories through to the selective reporting to "make the story" or, alternatively, to push a media angle. The responses ranged from skepticism of the media to contempt: "[The media] never knew really what was happening" [S095]; "most of the time [the media] just get in the way" [S096].

The media emphasis on the actual war fighting was criticized as overplaying the apparent dangers. Despite this, some respondents expressed no surprise in the selective coverage: "The unsurprising media focus on the most dramatic aspects of the campaign did not reflect the reality for the vast majority" [S134]; "really combat is 95% nothing and 5% mayhem" [S186]; "they were following me to play my pipes for them" [S093].

The major split occurs when categorizing the reasons why deployed personnel felt that the media selectively reported: this was perceived either as part of an attempt to increase ratings and find "interesting" stories or as an element of a more sinister agenda to support the media's own interpretation of the nature and legitimacy of the war. Various references were made to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and one of the more center-left newspapers as being particularly negative in their coverage with allegations made about their motive. A small number of respondents alluded to the political dimensions of the operation and criticized the coverage given to the antiwar lobby: "Most of the time it showed people demonstrating against the war" [S124]. Alternatively, they commented that the media's agenda only further undermined the extent to which the family members could offer indirect support of their troops: "[The] BBC did not support the war and undermined family support" [S033].

With regard to coverage that was regarded as "hyped-up," particular reference was made to the ways in which the media emphasized the threat posed by chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) and weapons of mass destruction: "My wife panicked every time she heard about [CBRN]" [S002]; "[they were] telling my Mum I was getting shot at/chemically attacked" [S149].

Category 3: Media coverage too immediate (29.5 percent). More than a quarter of respondents commented that they felt the media were too fast in their reporting. The information that moved through nonmilitary channels via the newswires and the rolling news coverage back home was often in advance of official communication chains. There were two major concerns: first, that the information was unverified and, second, that the nonspecific nature of the information caused unnecessary anxiety among the watching "military family." "When our Regiment lost a soldier, no-one's family knew for days who it was" [S111]. This comment is typical of numerous others. There are accepted restraints on media reporting of military operations in order not to convey information deemed "useful to the enemy." In addition, there is an automatic news blackout on releasing the names of seriously injured or killed service personnel until the next of kin can be informed. The result was that nonspecific information that a casualty had been sustained would be transmitted with detrimental effects on all families: not just those who had had been bereaved. This emerged as the major concern of most respondents. The announcement of name and unit of the killed servicemen per protocol is released via Ministry of Defense channels following the next of kin being informed.

Even following the Ministry of Defense news release, however, one reply shows how lack of specific information can lead to further concern: "Someone with the same name . . . did die and [my family] thought it was me" [S197].

A number of replies allude to the new demands of rolling news coverage, which requires "breaking news" and stories to fill the schedules: "Too many so-called experts talking rubbish" [S171]; "24 hour media bombardment—saturation—no let up" [S195].

Category 4: Media coverage beneficial (16.0 percent). A minority of respondents held positive beliefs surrounding the media's coverage of the war. Chief among these reasons was the immediacy and illustrative nature of the coverage. Although criticized by the majority, these features were believed by some to improve communication between personnel on the front line and their families back home: "They did at least feel as if they were being left informed" [S105].

Several individuals commented that they had personally been featured on one medium or another at some point, and this was considered as useful: "I featured in most daily newspapers at one point—which gave my family news on my whereabouts and health" [S166]; "They knew more about what was happening than I did!" [S052].

Supplementing the Qualitative Analysis

We ascertained the demographics associated with negative perceptions of the media's effect on the family. With a considerable number of references being made to children and the suitability of media coverage, we considered whether having children and whether home problems were related to negative perception of the media and feeling unsupported.

Results of Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 shows the demographics associated with perceiving the media coverage as having a negative effect on the family. The majority of the respondents (69.6 percent) perceived the coverage as having a negative effect on their family. Royal Marines were more than twice as likely to perceive negative coverage, after controlling for key demographic variables, status, service, and rank. Older personnel were also more likely to perceive the coverage negatively (borderline significance). We found no association between having children and negative perceptions of the media's impact on the family.

Table 3 shows associations between problems at home and the perception of media coverage, as well the perception of media support. The results show an association between "serious financial problems," as well as "other major home problems," and negative perception of the media coverage on families. Associations were

Table 2
Demographic Associations of Perceptions of Media Coverage on the Family

		Perception of Effect of Coverage of the Iraq War on Families of Those Deployed?						
		Positive			Negative			Adjusted <i>p</i> Value ^b
		<i>n</i>	% ^a		<i>n</i>	% ^a		
Status								
Regulars	191		88.6	417		83.5	1.00	
Reserve Forces	25		11.4	81		16.5	1.14 (0.66–1.97)	.630
Service								
Army	193		90.1	406		81.5	1.00	.004
Marines	23		10.0	92		18.5	2.06 (1.25–3.39)	.002
Rank								
Soldiers	191		88.6	417		83.5	1.00	.082
Officers	25		11.4	81		16.5	1.54 (0.94–2.50)	1.46 (0.87–2.45)
Age								
Median age	27.52			30.17				
Interquartile range	24.51–34.86			24.88–35.94				
Age per 10 years							1.32 (1.03–1.69)	.026
Relationship status								
Single	58		26.7	114		22.4	1.00	.460
Relationship	157		72.8	381		77.0	1.00 (0.87–1.83)	1.14 (0.76–1.70)
Did not indicate	1		0.5	3		0.6		

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Perception of Effect of Coverage of the Iraq War on Families of Those Deployed?							
	Positive		Negative		OR (CI)	p Value	Adjusted OR (CI) ^b
	n	% ^a	n	% ^a			
Family status							
Do not have children	101	47.1	205	41.7	1.00	.414	1.00
Have children	66	29.6	167	33.4	1.27 (0.87–1.85)		1.19 (0.78–1.82)
Did not indicate	49	23.3	126	24.9			

Note: The odds ratio (OR) is a measure that quantifies the risk of a particular outcome if a certain factor is present. For example, if an OR is 1.5, then there is a 50 percent increased likelihood of finding that outcome in the presence of the nominated factor, when compared against the general sample. In addition to the OR, the confidence interval (CI) describes the range of numbers within which the statistical analysis is 95 percent confident that the true OR sits. If the CI describes a range that includes 1.0, then there is no significance (equating to $p > .05$); conversely, if the range does not include 1.0, then the association is statistically significant, equating to a $p < .05$. Worked example: in the case of the Marines, the OR is 2.20; this means that there is more than twice (120 percent) chance of finding negative perceptions of the war among Marines. The CI indicates that the statistical analysis is 95 percent confident that the true OR is between 1.34 and 3.61. The p value equates to less than 0.2 percent. For more information on OR and other statistical methods used in this article, the authors recommend J. Hebel and R. J. McCarter, *A Study Guide to Epidemiology and Biostatistics*, 6th ed. (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 2006).

a. Percentages are adjusted to take into account sampling fractions.

b. Adjusted for status, service, rank, age, relationship status, and family status. These variables for adjustment were predefined based on D. Goldberg and P. Williams, *A User's Guide to the General Health Questionnaire* (Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson, 1988).

Table 3
Home Problems Associations with Perceptions of Media and Media Support

	Positive/ Support		Negative/ Unsupported		OR (CI)	p Value	Adjusted OR (CI) ^b	Adjusted p Value ^b
	n/Σ	% ^a	n/Σ	% ^a				
Perception of effect of coverage of the Iraq War on families of those deployed?								
Lack of family support	10/216	4.1	11/498	2.2	0.53 (0.22–1.29)	.162	0.49 (0.18–1.33)	.161
Partner left	14/215	6.8	27/498	5.4	0.78 (0.40–1.52)	.466	0.71 (0.34–1.50)	.371
Problems with children	6/216	2.7	30/498	5.7	2.21 (0.89–5.51)	.088	2.07 (0.82–5.18)	.122
Serious financial problems	5/216	1.5	22/498	3.8	2.68 (0.95–7.57)	.062	2.94 (1.08–7.98)	.034
Other major home problems	14/216	6.3	64/498	12.9	2.20 (1.19–4.07)	.012	2.18 (1.19–3.99)	.012
Felt supported by media?								
Lack of family support	2/224	0.7	19/490	3.8	5.61 (1.20–26.26)	.029	4.83 (1.01–23.05)	.048
Partner left	7/223	3.3	34/490	7.0	2.24 (0.97–5.15)	.058	1.97 (0.81–4.78)	.132
Problems with children	5/224	2.3	31/490	6.0	2.66 (1.01–6.98)	.047	2.76 (1.04–7.37)	.042
Serious financial problems	4/224	1.4	23/490	3.9	2.86 (0.92–8.90)	.068	1.79 (0.54–5.89)	.337
Other major home problems	16/224	7.0	62/490	12.8	1.95 (1.09–3.50)	.024	1.87 (1.03–3.40)	.040

Note: OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. For more on OR and CI, see the note to Table 2.

a. Percentages are adjusted to take into account sampling fractions.

b. Adjusted for status, service, and rank. These variables for adjustment were predefined based on D. Goldberg and P. Williams, *A User's Guide to the General Health Questionnaire* (Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson, 1988).

also found between “lack of family support,” “problems with children,” as well as “other major home problems” and feeling unsupported by the media.

Table 4 shows the associations between psychological distress and perceptions of the media. Those who were “GHQ cases” (defined as exceeding the conventional cut off of three-fourths and indicating mostly minor health problems such as stress, depression, and anxiety) had more negative perception of the media. No association was noted between level of psychological distress and feeling supported by the media.

Discussion

Editors versus Soldiers: What Should Be Broadcast?

The principal findings of this study are as follows: almost half of respondents questioned the suitability of content distributed by the media, in particular those on the broadcast networks. The main criticism of coverage was the perceived negative effect of families seeing traumatic events. More than a third of respondents alluded to the coverage serving only to further alarm families. Overall, the respondents had negative perceptions of the media; these perceptions were more negative among those soldiers with self-reported psychological distress, thereby supporting both of the study’s hypotheses.

Participants were concerned that families might be informed of events, most notably, deaths, by the broadcast media, which were working faster than the military’s own welfare channels. More specifically, the breaking of news surrounding a death, providing only a regimental or battle-group name, in the view of respondents left many more families in a state of anxiety. The introduction of further rolling news channels means that there is more air time and, consequently, further time for speculation and “expert opinion.” In the context of the reporting of deaths, our respondents were raising serious questions as to what public interest was served by the reporting of these events, especially prior to the families and next of kin being informed.

Complaints were also leveled at the media for what the military personnel believed was inaccurate reporting, namely, that the media give disproportionate coverage to the negative aspects of the conflict and the growing antiwar movement on the home front. A third of respondents complained of media inaccuracy and the selective reporting or exaggerating of incidents; more than half of these respondents felt the media were unsupportive or negatively biased against them. Given that the criticisms of overrepresentation of the war fighting were made by combat-arm troops themselves, this emphasis on the war fighting must have been even more acutely felt among those not serving on the front line.

Deciding what is appropriate to show in the media has never been easy, and in the current situation of ever faster news relay, fine editorial judgment is ever-more crucial. The findings from this study indicate that there are disparities between what military personnel themselves consider as appropriate and what the editors decide to

Table 4
General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) Associations with Perceptions of Media and Media Support

GHQ Score	Positive ^a		Negative		OR (CI)	p Value	Adjusted OR (CI) ^c	Adjusted p Value ^c
	n	% ^b	n	% ^b				
Perception of effect of coverage of the Iraq War on families of those deployed?								
Positive	41	18.9	132	26.0	1.00	.049	1.00	.019
Negative	167	81.1	362	74.0	1.50 (1.00–2.25)		1.65 (1.09–2.49)	
Felt supported by media?								
Felt supported by the media	43	18.8	176	26.2	1.00	.033	1.00	.037
Felt unsupported by the media	130	81.2	353	73.8	1.54 (1.04–2.29)		1.55 (1.03–2.33)	

Note: OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. For more on OR and CI, see the note to Table 2.

a. Cut off of greater than 3 indicates positive GHQ score.

b. Percentages are adjusted to take into account sampling fractions.

c. Adjusted for status, service, rank, age, relationship status, and family status. These variables for adjustment were predefined based on D. Goldberg and P. Williams, *A User's Guide to the General Health Questionnaire* (Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson, 1988).

broadcast. Broadcasters are aware that the public can now choose from an ever-more diverse range of outlets including the Internet: the execution of Saddam Hussein is reputed to be the most rapidly and widely seen execution in history. With this in mind, the distribution of material that was previously considered as inappropriate and right to withhold, now is subjected to the argument that if “we don’t broadcast, then others will.” Those agencies that choose not to broadcast such graphic scenes as the mutilated bodies of American contractors dragged through Fallujah, still suffer reputational damage from the actions of other media outlets that did, as the media are collectively grouped together by the public.

The quantity of coverage was criticized by over 15 percent of respondents: a trend particularly seen among older individuals. This may be because those who are younger are used to more saturated media coverage and, therefore, are not as overwhelmed by the volume of reporting now available.

Perceptions of a Hostile Media

The negative perception of the media coverage leads us to the conclusion that the hostile media effect was more important within our sample. The wide-reaching nature of coverage and the increasingly competitive environment for news reporting in the United Kingdom across television and the Internet, with the nation’s public service broadcaster being seriously threatened by the likes of *News International*, have led to widespread concerns that commercial interests may threaten the concept of balanced reporting, thereby only furthering the hostile media effect.

The significantly negative perceptions among the Royal Marines of the media coverage may be due to the concept of the safe discussion already described. The relative homogeneity of the service may only heighten the negative perception.

Beneficial Effects of the Media

In some cases, the media’s coverage was considered as beneficial. Not only did personnel feel that interviews served to communicate what was going on to the world, but it also provided a useful service to indirectly “contact” family, particularly in times when there was an otherwise communication blackout.

Through the analysis, a number of patterns of viewing were reported, supporting the literature.⁴¹ Some families were reported as compulsively viewing, but in other families, the media were “switched off.”

Risk Factors for Negative Perceptions of Media Coverage among Military Personnel

The findings from the quantitative data were not unexpected. However, of note are the significantly increased levels of negative perception among the Royal

Marines. There are many possible overlapping explanations: their different role in theater, personnel selection, and unit culture, all of which develop the safe-discussion concept in this relatively homogeneous group.

We have shown that family problems at home are associated with more negative perceptions of the effects of the media and feeling unsupported by them. The likelihood of finding GHQ-case-ness alongside negative perceptions of the media is increased by approximately 50 percent.

Evaluation

Like all retrospective studies, this study is subject to recall bias. Recollection of the scope and impact of media coverage on serving personnel and their families may be biased by the influence of subsequent postdeployment media coverage and with the knowledge of their family's recollections and perceptions. Given the logistical issues facing military personnel on return from deployment, the one-year delay is still a relatively short time, certainly when compared with studies of the Vietnam or 1991 Gulf conflicts. Despite this, recall bias cannot be excluded in this design.

While our sample size was considerable, it remains possible that other weak associations were missed because of a lack of power.

The issue of exposure of personnel and their families to media reporting, and indeed, the form of media reporting, both during deployment and upon return, is a limitation of the study. A methodological refinement would be to quantify actual media exposure in either service personnel or families over time.

Furthermore, it would be useful to examine the communication media used by the deployed individuals to communicate directly home, in order to ascertain whether media was considered more useful as a supplement to firsthand news. While the Internet was not accessible during the time period analyzed in this study, the authors understand mobile phone use to have been widespread.⁴²

While this study examines perceptions, it should be noted that research in the Dutch military has shown that perceived negative coverage is not necessarily correlated with actual negative coverage.⁴³ The same study also showed that actual negative coverage in itself does not necessarily influence the audience unduly.

Conclusion

This article has explored the perceptions of UK military personnel of the intense media coverage of a campaign in which the personnel themselves took part. The study has identified the main categories of concern about the media coverage and analyzed a number of specific circumstances that the military personnel felt could be handled

differently, particularly the coverage of deaths. Criticisms of the media coverage in its fairness, accuracy, and depiction are linked with a military desire to continue and perhaps extend current restrictions on reporting on behalf of service families. It is crucial that the military and media can coexist in what is an important symbiotic relationship—a key theme in earlier literature on the military and the media.

The media are, of course, more than aware of their impact on the general public, but what this study shows is that the personnel themselves react to the coverage, especially on behalf of their families. Thus, service personnel form an important constituency for media coverage: one that is often overlooked.

Notes

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39. The "[S000]" assigned to each quote corresponds to the identification of the individual quoted from the anonymized study database.
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