

<b>Institution:</b> University of Sussex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 34 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enabling the British Military's Digital Media Strategy to better Manage Risk and Behaviour		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2013 – 2016		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Sarah Maltby	Professor of Media & Communication	2013 – ongoing
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>With the advent of social media the British Military faced a communication environment that they could not ultimately control, and which presented them with significant risks as well as opportunities. Maltby and her team worked empirically to capture and analyse the broad landscape of social media use in the military. The research successfully bridged the gap between older policy makers (suspicious of social media) and personnel for whom social media was an everyday reality. Their findings and recommendations were largely adopted by the British Army in their guidelines for social media use. The research was also used to advise the Joint Insight Forum in relation to recruitment and online behaviour, and has had a wide impact on changing perceptions around social media within the military.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Professor Sarah Maltby is an internationally acknowledged media studies expert working in the field of media management research in relation to military institutions and conflict studies [R1]. She has been working empirically and analytically in this area since 2001, focusing on issues of media strategy, risk management, psychological and behavioural concerns [R2, R3]. Digital media increasingly offers opportunities for the British Armed Forces in strategic and operational contexts [R1, R2], and as a public relations tool. Simultaneously, however, with the growing use of social media among 200,000 armed forces personnel [R4] there are clear tensions between their social media use and the centralised requirements for control, security, and robust reputational management. These tensions are compounded by the lack of social media expertise among senior management that has generated risk aversion strategies that prohibit proactive and effective management of digital media [R3]. As Clare Parker, former Head of Insight and Evaluation at the Directorate of Defence and Communications in the Ministry of Defence stated, “older people who tend to be in command say [...] ‘don’t use social media’” [S2].</p> <p>In 2014 Maltby (PI) designed and ran the “D.U.N. Project: Defence, Uncertainty and ‘Now Media’: Mapping Social Media in Strategic Communications” funded by Defence, Science and Technology Labs and the ESRC with Co-I Helen Thornham (Leeds) and Daniel Bennett (post-doctoral Research Fellow). The objective of the D.U.N. Project was to interrogate how social media was perceived, managed and responded to differently at a strategic (MoD), Institutional (Army, Navy, Airforce) and individual level (Armed Forces Personnel) using the combined methods of qualitative interviews, focus groups and textual analysis. The research was extensive and ranged across collecting weekly data from online military forums to intensive discussions with personnel and their partners. All three researchers (Maltby, Thornham, Bennett) were involved in all aspects of the research but were directed by Maltby, who took the</p>		

lead in the analysis of the data, and in presenting the findings to the military. The aim was to identify the conceptualisation and reality of risks and opportunities presented by social media across constituent levels and how this could be better managed.

The project findings indicated that:

- Understandings of use of social media were relatively narrow in military command, undermining effective management of social media risk and opportunity, particularly with regard to the training of Armed Forces personnel and their families [R3, R4, R5].
- Dominant cultures of risk aversion in the Defence community cause personnel to misapprehend the institutional risks of social media despite the centrality of social media to their everyday lives, leading to clandestine behaviours [R4].
- Informal, public facing communications within the social media space, particularly pseudonymous spaces, were significantly undermining of the Armed Forces' reputation particularly with regard to issues of gender equality that feed into issues of recruitment and retention [R6].
- The tendency to see social media predominantly in terms of risk significantly undermines opportunities to develop digital knowledge, expertise, and management within the wider Armed Forces community, particularly around issues of training, recruitment and retention [R3].

### 3. References to the research

R1 Maltby, S., *et al*, eds. (2020) *Spaces of War, War of Spaces*. London and New York: Bloomsbury. Available on request.

R2 Maltby, S. (2015) "Imagining Influence: Logic(al) tensions in war and defence" in Fugl Eskjær, M., Hjarvard, S., Mortensen, M. (eds) *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts*. Peter Lang. pp.165-184 (Book Chapter) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1620-9> Submitted to REF2.

R3 Maltby, S (2016) *D.U.N. Project Final Project Report*. Available on request.

R4 Maltby, S. & Thornham, H. (2016) "The Digital Mundane, Social Media and the Military". *Media, Culture and Society*. Vol 38(8) pp.1153-1168  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0163443716646173>

R5 Maltby, S., Thornham, H. & Bennett, D. (2015) "Capability in the digital: institutional media management and its dis/contents". *Information, Communication and Society*. Vol 18(5) pp. 1275-1296 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1046893>

R6 Maltby, S., Thornham, H. & Bennett, D. (2017) "Beyond' Pseudonymity: the sociotechnical structure of online military forums'. *New Media and Society*. 20(5) pp. 1773-1791 DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817707273>

**Grant:** PI Sarah Maltby, *Defence, Uncertainty, Now Media (D.U.N): Mapping Social Media in Strategic Communications*, ESRC, 31 Oct 2013 – 30 Jun 2016, total £242,158, [ES/K011170/1](https://doi.org/10.1017/ES/K011170/1).

### 4. Details of the impact

#### Impacting on Social Media Policy

In 2018 the British Army published a new set of guidelines for Army personnel: *#DigitalArmy: Using Social Media in the British Army* [S8]. The guidance adopts the central recommendations of Maltby's research: to recognise social media as a fact of everyday life and not something that can be prohibited; to recognise the opportunity for social media to offer positive representations of army life; but also to give clear guidance about what constitutes unacceptable behaviour (from

security breaches to inter-personal bullying and sexual harassment). *#DigitalArmy* uses the language of Maltby's research, introducing ideas of reputational management and risk (p. 2) and arguing that there is no absolute anonymity online ('pseudonymity'). Referring to the work of Maltby and her team, the document states: "Research shows that some of our best received communications are created by more junior ranks using digital channels in an authentic manner. The Army is keen to support them" [S8 p. 2]. This represents a decisive shift in policy that acknowledges not simply the reality of social media, but that younger recruits might be the ones most able to contribute to the reputational growth of the Army.

For an institution that is inevitably hierarchical, the dramatic shift underpinning the new policy was generational: thus Lt. Col. [text removed for publication] admits that "the issue we have is we tend to have older people like myself making policy decisions and we need to be able to encompass what young people think in order to make those policies as effective as possible" [S6]. It was this younger perspective that informed *#DigitalArmy* and was a direct consequence of Maltby's research: "when I was reviewing the Army's new social media policy [...] I did so with Sarah's work at the forefront of my mind" [S6].

Maltby's work emphasised what is at stake around social media and the military: as Blanca Grey, Directorate of Defence Communications, put it, "Maltby really gave us an initial idea of how people perceive the armed forces as not being very inclusive" [S7], and this was predominantly due to online material. The research recommendation to encourage 'healthy' social media and to have a policy of responsibility and openness around social media practice "which was taken on board by senior MOD personnel at the time" [S7] is fundamentally embedded in the guidelines and was adopted as part of a policy on retention and inclusivity. *#DigitalArmy* guidelines are distributed to all Army service personnel (approximately 79,000 regular full-time personnel and 27,000 reserve part-time personnel) and incorporated into annual refresher and pre-deployment training sessions marking a significant footprint for this research [S8].

### **Changing Perceptions of Social Media in the Armed Forces**

The findings from the research were shared at a series of workshops with the Heads of Digital Communications for each of the military services and senior personnel at the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC). Later Maltby was invited to join the Joint Insight Forum - a newly formed MOD committee of insight and evaluation representatives working across Defence. Maltby's research initially challenged, even shocked senior military, but that shock resulted in fundamentally new understandings of the opportunities afforded by social media. For a senior academic at the Defence Studies Department at JSCSC, "[Maltby's] research challenges much of the received wisdom about the MoD's understanding of both the digital environment and how defence practitioners operate within it" [S3]. For another figure involved in Royal Air Force communications at the highest level, the recommendation that "we shouldn't even try to exert control was well made but potentially shocking"; but this shock led to the recognition that "it's an important element that we need to tease out and agree on" [S4].

The new understandings generated by Maltby's research took military thinking away from focusing solely on risk. Thus Clare Parker, Head of Insight and Evaluation at the MOD, found that the "research gave me a better understanding of how we in the MOD need to manage the culture of risk aversion [...] Sarah's work was brilliant and it distilled a lot of long term 'niggles' I had about social media and the way the military treated it. It was really helpful" [S2]. The shift away from an obsession with risk allowed the military to think and plan much more generatively around welfare, inclusivity and retention, recognising the crucial role that social media has in maintaining family life. Thus, for a former senior staff member involved in developing the Royal Navy's Digital Strategy for Defence Communications, research "like Sarah's is important - if you get this right, you change lives" [S1]. For them, Maltby's work is continuing to have impact, because it is used to "look at families and the impact on families through social media [which] can help to deliver a sort of strategic effect, which is all about retention" [S1].

**Impact Legacy**

The British Military are necessarily a secretive institution and unwilling to fully acknowledge how they will exploit and deploy research findings. Thus Neil Verrall, Principal Psychologist in the Defence and Security Analysis Division of Defence Science and Technology Laboratory has only hesitantly revealed that further exploitation of Maltby's findings is underway, "but due to classification of the projects/topics we cannot provide any further info...except to reassure you that your work is being used along with many other projects to articulate and understand specific issues of interest" [S5]. He is however emphatic: "please be reassured that your important work has not been forgotten" [S5].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

S1. Former senior staff member involved in developing Digital Strategy for Defence Communications, Ministry of Defence. October 2017

S2. Clare Parker, Head of Insight and Evaluation, Directorate of Defence Communications, Ministry of Defence (audio file and full transcript available). 25 November 2017.

S3. Senior academic at the Defence Studies Department at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Defence Academy (email available in archive) 30 September 2016

S4. Interview with senior figure involved in Royal Air Force Communications (audio file available). 24 February 2016

S5. Neil Verrall, Principal Psychologist in the Defence and Security Analysis Division of DSTL (email 16 May 2016)

S6. Statement from, Lt Col [text removed for publication] British Army (May 2019)

S7. Statement from Blanca Grey, Insight and Evaluation Manager, Directorate of Defence Communications, Ministry of Defence (June 2019)

S8. *#DigitalArmy: Using Social Media in the British Army*. British Army Social Media Guidelines (published Sept 2018). Pdf. <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/our-people/a-soldiers-values-and-standards/social-media-policy/>