

The digital mundane: social media and the military

Media, Culture & Society
2016, Vol. 38(8) 1153–1168

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DOI: 10.1177/0163443716646173

mcs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article draws on empirical data with British military personnel in order to investigate what we call the digital mundane in military life. We argue that social media and smartphone technologies within the military offer a unique environment in which to investigate the ways individuals position themselves within certain axes of institutional and cultural identities. At the same time, the convolutions, mediatory practices and mundane social media rituals that service personnel employ through their smartphones resonate widely with, for example, youth culture and digital mobile cultures. Together, they suggest complex mediations with social and mobile media that draw on and extend non-military practice into new (and increasingly normative) terrains.

Keywords

digital, gender, military, mobile culture, social media, sociotechnical

Introduction

This article draws on empirical data with British military personnel in order to investigate what we call the digital mundane in military life. We argue that social media and smartphone technologies within the military offer a unique environment in which to investigate the ways individuals position themselves within certain axes of institutional and cultural identities. At the same time, the convolutions, mediatory practices and mundane social media rituals that service personnel employ through their smartphones

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resonate widely with, for example, youth culture and digital mobile cultures. Together, they suggest nuanced and complex mediations with social and mobile media that draw on and extend non-military practice into new (and increasingly normative) terrains. Furthermore, when considering the sociotechnical affordances of the particular Apps and social media the military utilise and drawing on research around gender and sexting practices, it is difficult not to argue that contrary to these experiences being held as unique to masculine and even misogynistic military culture, they are in fact endemic of a much wider gendering of mobile culture that is shaping normative communication practices more widely.

The digital mundane

The digital mundane is a concept that seeks to account for routine digital mediations or practices we enact daily. In this article, we posit three key ways of thinking about this concept. The first follows the trajectory of cultural studies scholars, extending what Meaghan Morris (1990) has called mundane banality to newer digital technologies (see also Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015, 2016; Hansen, 2006; Thornham, 2011). Here, the compulsive and mundane mediations we witness and partake in – what some scholars have referred to as ‘checking in’ (see Ling and Donner, 2009; Papacharissi, 2011; Turkle, 2011) – are part and parcel of a wider host of unconscious, mundane and quotidian actions that are embodied, corporeal and unthought. These actions or practices have also been termed ‘onlife’ (Floridi, 2009; Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol, 2013), a term that seeks to think through online and offline practices as complex, lived and interwoven rather than as dichotomous (see Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol, 2013). Floridi’s (2009) concept of ‘onlife’ conceptualises digital mediation spatially, temporally and in terms of materiality and flow – as both *here* ‘off-line, analogue, carbon-base’ and *there* ‘online, digital, silicon-based’ (p. 12). This is useful because it intercepts a somewhat circular argument around digital technology that wants to see it as either a visual media *or* as a material object (see also Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012), insisting that we conceive of onlife as always already both and together and also as necessarily including the embodied and ephemeral, imagined and mundane. Both of these concepts (digital mundane and onlife) acknowledge the labour and time involved in everyday mediation, where actions and onlife activities have become so routine they are disappeared into embodied actions that are quotidian. However, in their careful observation of human action and interaction, what they perhaps negate is the way the digital shapes these practices in convoluted and nuanced ways. Contemporary examples we might note here include the labour involved in turning off lights, switching to standby and locking doors in a domestic context (see Pink, 2012) or, in our findings, the daily labour involved in finding and securing WiFi signals on mobile phones.

The second way we conceptualise the digital mundane is to extend it into issues of embodiment to think about mobile phones and App use within a trajectory of embodied mediation. Here, digital use is part of what Shaun Moores (2014) has called ‘unreflective, taken-for-granted’ corporeal movement (p. 202), drawing on phenomenology (De Certeau, 1988; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]), and we can add feminist scholarship (Grosz, 1994; Sobchack, 1995) to consider embodied actions in specific places and with specific objects (Ingold, 2013; Pink, 2012). Seen here, our relationship with

technological objects as known and familiar, tactile or sensory (see also Kember and Zylinska, 2012: 120–122) produces new ontologies and epistemologies through sensory and tactile mediations with and through technology. Contemporary examples of embodied mundane practices might include logging on to a laptop (Moores, 2014), or the routine swiping, tapping and holding of a mobile phone. A more nuanced example might be embodied live coding where acts of digital mediation are necessarily and always already corporeal and sensory *and* digital.

As Moores reminds us however, although such embodied actions may be taken for granted, they are *not* unresponsive. Consequently, the third way we need to consider the digital mundane is in relation to mundane and everyday technical infrastructure that conditions and frames our mediations. This latter conception acknowledges the ‘durable’ power relations (Latour, 1990) of the technical that may be increasingly obfuscated into the wider rhetoric of ‘immediacy’, ‘connectivity’ and ‘sociability’ that emerge through techno-economic systems and that are interested in ‘sharing’ because of the financial benefit of the data such actions generate (Van Dijck, 2013, see also Gehl, 2014; Kennedy, 2013; Van House, 2011). At the same time, the economic merit of data production becomes downplayed or unimportant to users who ‘feel’ connected (see also Papacharissi, 2012; Turkle, 2011). It is not (simply) that algorithms make certain relations durable (techno-economic, sociotechnical). Rather, as Suchman (2007) argues, such systems also configure mediation, not straightforwardly or transparently but by framing our ‘capacities for action’ (Suchman, 2007: online). In this context, the digital mundane thus relates to the increasingly in/visible infrastructure of social media that becomes in/visible through everyday use, mediation and promotion through uptake. The infrastructures of social media, that are now familiar, normative, well used and loved, prioritise quantification and measurement (Andrejevic, 2011), meritocracy and success through visibility (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013), as well as the extraction of economic value from sharing practices (Van Dijck, 2014). Contemporary examples of the digital mundane in this context would be the practices of selfies or the phenomena of ‘checking in’ that are increasingly compulsive *and* generate economically profitable data (Berry, 2008; Gehl, 2014). The fact that these processes are increasingly normative and mundane through use and familiarity, acceptance and deployment, is a central issue for this article.

These three conceptions of the digital mundane emerge in complex and nuanced ways throughout this article, and our contention is that they go some way to explaining how institutional and cultural identities operate together even when they appear to be contradictory but are rarely posited as such by our research participants. Indeed, digital connectivity is not a new practice for the military, and we can consider these practices within a long history of sociotechnical sharing cultures of the military in the United Kingdom (e.g. Shapiro and Humphreys, 2012) and more globally (e.g. Kuntsman and Stein, 2015; Pötzsch, 2015; Silvestri, 2014) and within a culture of (masculine) military life (see Hale, 2008; Hockey, 2003; Woodward et al., 2009; Woodward and Winter, 2007). But what also emerges is a long and complex gendering of digital mundane onlife practices that resonate not only with wider masculine military culture (Kuntsman and Stein, 2015; Robbins, 2007) but also (and importantly) with wider digital culture per se (see Ringrose et al., 2013). This suggests to us that despite our specific corpus of data, there are resonances with wider digital and in particular social media culture that extend beyond particular

identities. Finally, we note that social media supports, condones and promotes a particular kind of capitalist neoliberal digital gendered culture (see also Bunz, 2013; Kennedy, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014). While this may be unsurprising given the politics of social media (see also Gehl, 2014), it means we need to desist from thinking of social media as a sociotechnical infrastructure that is divest from gendered politics (see as Dafus, 2011) and instead consider the implications of a gendered digital mundane for the future.

Methods and notes

The empirical data used in this article derive from focus groups conducted in an army barracks between March and June 2015 with serving British military personnel and their wives and partners. The focus groups comprised four key demographic groups: (1) wives and partners including veterans (women who had been in service but had left the army for childcare reasons), five female participants aged 20–30 years; (2) junior soldiers, five males, one female aged 20–30 years; (3) COs: commissioned officers (those who graduated as officers), six males, one female aged 20–25 years plus a senior officer aged 35–40 years; (4) NCOs: non-commissioned officers (those who were promoted to officer status through the ranks), five males, two females in their mid- to late 30s. Each focus group was recorded, transcribed and anonymised, and the audio files were deleted (as stipulated by the MoD ethics procedure). We refer to all speakers as m1 (male) or f1 (female) and list their ‘rank’ (WP, soldier, CO, NCO), when quoting them in this article.

There are two issues to note with regard to our data collection. The first is that the focus groups were conducted either in the Officer’s Mess or the Sergeant’s Mess according to the rank of the group in question (the Wives and Partner’s group was conducted in the Officer’s Mess). These markers of distinction, reflective of the differentiation in rank, clearly shaped the content of the focus groups. The second is that we cannot be sure that the participant involvement in the groups (with perhaps the exception of the wives and partners) was entirely voluntary. A selection process may have taken place, perhaps most noticeable in the gender breakdown of the groups. We note these issues to acknowledge the compromises and negotiations of entering an institution like the British Military that frame the data with certain caveats in terms of presenting accuracy or truthfulness. At the same time, our reading of our data as representative of much wider and normative practices (beyond the military) is upheld in the participant’s recounting of experiences that, to us, are so mundane that they could not (necessarily) be considered contentious, unusual or damaging. This is important in light of the implications of the findings.

Conscious and unconscious practices: the labour of the digital mundane

In this section, we detail what we call conscious and unconscious practices that the military personnel engage in to get/be digital: to get/be online. In some ways, the labour involved in ‘being digital’ nuances the notion of the digital mundane insofar as the lived, embodied and technical mundane are further broken down into a range of labour-intensive and conscious practices. While this makes visible some of the quotidian practices *as*

cumbersome, it is also notable that the participants were both aware of the convolutions and inconsistencies *and* accepted them as taken for granted:

You don't get 3G in our block. You don't even get a phone signal there; as soon as you walk in here your phones gone, so you have to use the Wi-Fi within the block otherwise you just don't communicate unless you go outside and walk 500 yards that way. (m1 soldier)

When you go into the accommodation you just lose everything, there's just no service. (m3 soldier)

I pay £27 a month for the lowest package, and it's not on every night is it? It's been off for the last couple of nights, hasn't it? (m5 soldier)

Nearly every focus group remarked on how WiFi was both expensive and difficult to connect to for a range of reasons that included the materials of the buildings, the specific location of the barracks and the specific broadband provider contracted for the Barracks by the British Military. Connectivity was possible in accommodation through individual signups to fixed routers but, as our participants told us, this meant passwords were shared and online security was not very thorough. Some had bypassed the contracted provider and clubbed together to get a Sky or BT router, and while this worked for a time, often whole accommodations were moved without warning so that people found themselves with redundant WiFi contracts they still had to pay for: *'they've just been told they have to move 100 meters down to another block and there's no way you can clear that contract'* (m4 soldier). Mostly, connectivity was sporadic and patchy. This meant people in the barracks were constantly searching for WiFi. Indeed, all the participants could tell us the exact zones within the barracks where connectivity was impossible (*'500 yards that way'*, *'not in the mess, but in the hub'*, *'on the east side of the block'*, *'five seconds away from the barracks'*, *'on the main road but not outside the mess'*).

At the same time, digital and mobile communication was embedded into their daily routine as the first recourse of communication:

We use WhatsApp quite a lot for connectivity between us at work because it's a quick way to spread messages and things. I use Facebook, Twitter and everything like that, because the younger guys use that and they don't use normal access to the computer network we're using now. And it's easy, unless you don't have internet and you live [here]! (m5 officer)

All communication pretty much is through Whatsapp or Facebook or Twitter; nothing goes through a phone signal really. (m3 soldier)

I'll phone Charlie on my mobile maybe rather than walk down to this room and speak to him, it's just a bit easier. (m3 officer)

These moments are interesting in terms of how the mundane and corporeal use of smartphones sits alongside a lack of connectivity. The fact that these actions are routine and frequent despite their limited success (which is long-term and familiar) suggests that the first recourse is the embodied and corporeal action of reaching for your smartphone

and that there are expectations about the possibility of connectivity despite a deep and lived knowledge to the contrary.

Moreover, these practices of the digital mundane hold together a number of contradictions: First, our participants' understanding of their technology is forged despite a lack of connectivity, although much of their smartphone functionality is dependent *on* connectivity. Second, their compulsive and corporeal un/conscious actions continue despite knowledge of a lack of connectivity and their probable failure to connect. Third, their deep and lived knowledge of the barracks and its population and geography does not impact the immediate act of reaching for one's smartphone for connectivity purposes even when they are not in known WiFi spots. Together, these result in continual and embodied corporeal actions of 'checking in' as well as certain convolutions that seem labour-intensive for the purposes of connectivity:

I was late because I was in the block cleaning because I got told a different time [for the focus group] but they had to send someone from the lines to our accommodation, which is like 1K I think it is, so a kilometre, just to tell me that the timing had changed because I couldn't get a signal. The only time they can get in touch with us is because we've got Wi-Fi on our phones. The Wi-Fi is that bad. But they expect you to pay for your Wi-Fi yourself and they expect to be able to contact you all the time on your phone. (m2 soldier)

It means I'm checking the phone all the time and then, 'oh, I've got a text message', I've got – yet like I said the only place I get it is like as I head towards the garrison; in the garrison – all the back roads I don't get it at all. I don't get anything and then as soon as I get near the block I get a signal. (m2 officer)

If we draw on mobile media theorists, we also find such convolutions and repetitions are increasingly normative mobile phone practices *per se* so we should not read these as unique to the military (see boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2011). There are a number of ways we could consider this in relation to the excerpts above, but what is notable for us is the way they frame the users *not* as consumers but as positioned within a set of institutional, technological and lived frameworks in which sporadic connectivity is simply a fact. Although the labour is inconvenient and positions them in an unequal power relation with both the institution of the British Military and the digital provider, the everyday and routineness of it construct the labour as a shared and normative experience that is accepted and lived. This does not mean that there is not a politics here – and indeed, when we consider the way that mobile phone use is also disparaged and used as a signifier for rank and age difference, these politics becomes apparent:

Soldiers are constantly on their phones, walking around, but they're conscious that they're not meant to be so you spot them and they'll put them away, but they spend a lot more time on their phone. (m2 officer)

Soldiers are constantly on their phones, I find. When you go for a meal with your soldiers they'll often get their phone out at the table and just do like that, rather than talk. (m3 officer)

They're sat there on the bed in ten-man rooms, there will be four or five blokes in the same room that will talking to each other on a social media site. They wouldn't talk to each other yet

they're in the same room. They're sending messages backwards and forwards to each other on Facebook, like that. (m2 NCO)

The last issue we want to discuss in this section relates to the meanings of the mobile phone for the participants of our study, and how they articulate their relationship with the technological object. This is in order to elucidate the relationship with the object itself that adds layers of nuance to our understanding of the digital mundane: these practices may well be routine, even unthought and compulsive, but they are also *meaningful*. The objects signify *despite* sporadic connectivity, which suggests to us that the mobile phone should not be elided with connectivity when thinking of the meaning or use of the object. But more than this, feelings around and for their mobile phone resonates with research about other (non)military groups and serves as a further step in extending these issues into a wider context.¹ In a similar vein to previous work on mobile phone culture (boyd, 2014; Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2016; Hall and Baym, 2012; Turkle, 2011), our participants clearly told us that they loved their phones ('*I love it*', '*I love my phone like it's a family member*', '*I lost my phone last week it was like my left arm had been chopped off*', '*My phone is my life*'). This emotive connection further nuances the notion of the digital mundane in terms of meaningful practices that are also affective. It adds an extra layer to the routine practice of checking or reaching for the mobile phone as the first recourse to connectivity despite its frequent failure: it suggests a *pleasurable* digital mediation and a *desire* to utilise these digital objects.

Imagined institutional frameworks

As suggested above, when we engage with wider research on mobile phones, it is noticeable that the feelings and meanings associated with the object expressed above resonate more broadly in terms of a wider cultural and social phenomenon. This prompts us to consider the way these technologies help bridge and obscure divisions between military and civilian life and the way that the technological affordances facilitate a more fluid identity which can never be either wholly military or civilian (if it ever could). Indeed, in many ways, the mobile phone, and digital connectivity, fits into – with some convolutions – an already established military culture seemingly without too much friction. Where friction is notable – as with the Officer's comments above about soldier's 'constant usage' despite rules to the contrary – mobile phone practice feeds into an already established rank system (rather than, for example, disrupting it) so that the digital practices offer, reinforce and repeat overt and recognisable stereotypical behavior.²

Yet our participants also talked about their own positioning within institutional frameworks through their mobile use and through social media more widely, as ways of intervening into institutional frameworks: '*Soldiers are constantly on their phones*'. In some of the extracts below, they set their social media practices overtly against a constructed institutional norm – whether this is imagined or not. Using phones on training exercises, while waiting for instructions or while moving around the barracks (as we both witnessed and was discussed in the groups), can be thought of, then, as minor subversive acts *and* recognised practices specific to particular demographics *and* entirely mundane and normative. But perhaps the most helpful way for us in thinking about these practices

in relation to the digital mundane relates to how it enables them to position themselves, and through this negotiate the various axes of institutional and civilian life complete with the inculcations, doctrines, discourses and cultures they evoke in order to do this. Again, when we consider the debates around mobile gaming in public places (Hjorth, 2011), issues of surveillance and the disciplined or quantified subject (Burrows, 2012; Dodge and Kitchin, 2005; Foucault, 1977; Kitchin, 2014; Van Dijck, 2014) or university students checking social media during lectures (Bundgens-Kosten and Preussler, 2013), this is not in and of itself a unique phenomenon. But what is notable with the accounts in this article is the way the mundane acts of going for a meal, walking around the barracks, being in accommodation are framed *first* in relation to their identities as soldiers and later in relation to their digital mobile practices. It is worth considering then what these excerpts reveal about imagined and constructed lived military (and civilian) identities, about their active articulation and alignment with a wider military identity through this distinction and the extent to which this needs to be constantly and actively performed and claimed (see also Ang and Hermes, 1991).

Bobbing for chips: normative sociotechnical practices

In this section, and drawing on a corpus of literature that engages with mobile and sexting practices of young people (Albury and Crawford, 2012; boyd, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013), we discuss specific practices that emerged from all of the focus groups in relation to key contemporary Apps (Facebook, Tinder, Instagram, Snapchat) and activities (tagging, selfies, checking in, sexting). Drawing on such literature offers a wider, non-military-specific context for our discussion to which the practices discussed in the focus groups also speak. Here, we can consider the sociotechnical and the way that their practices are condoned, supported, encouraged and shaped by the infrastructure of social media and the specific affordances of each App. But, in utilising this literature, our aim is not to comment on the content of communication (reading moral anxieties or gendered practices into the images themselves) but rather – in a similar vein as Ringrose et al. (2013) – to ask what the wider implications of these practices are given they are so mundane and banal:

I tag myself everywhere; everywhere I go I tag myself in. So if I go to Nandos I tag myself at Nandos. And like ... You've got me on Facebook, you've seen me tagging myself in everywhere. I'm not going to change it though neither. (f1 soldier)

I tag for the other girls in it, I tag them all in it and – yeah, to me it's nothing like. I just think it's a photo I'm putting on Facebook like. (f1 soldier)

Its only not a problem [Tinder] because it's a crap signal anyway so you're all right! (f1 NCO)

Army officers use Tinder a lot. A lot of the guys. Even when you go away on exercise and stuff, just out of interest, they're never looking to 'meet' anyone, they'll just see what's in the area. It's constant, constant throughout the day. (m2 officer)

There are a number of things to note from these excerpts in the context of this article. The first is the widespread, routine practices discussed within them. This is particularly

noteworthy in the specific context of, and conditions that framed, the focus groups (as noted earlier). While we do not want to labour this point, the military have a series of official and unofficial edicts in relation to (social) media use that are delivered to service personnel through formal training and official documentation (see MoD, 2009). What is interesting about the excerpts above then is the way that the participants describe their everyday practices as occurring against an imagined institutional edict or imposed rule: *'Soldiers are constantly on their phones ... they're conscious that they're not meant to be'*. Quite often the comments like the excerpts above were phrased in a manner that acknowledged these edicts, but talked about practice *'anyway'* (*'I'm not going to change it'*, *'to me it's nothing'*). Other practices discussed within these same parameters included geolocating yourself, posting pictures of yourself in uniform or tagging others in uniform, discussing sensitive materials or political affiliations, circulating nude or indecent images, and commenting on Army policy or routine. For us, this suggests a subjective positioning more in keeping with an imagined, performed institutional identity rather than one that is understood or enacted in relation to official sanctions regarding social media use.

The second issue to note is that the *content* of the images – other than to note *'what'* is posted – is less important to our participants than the ubiquity of the *practice*. This serves to remind us that the content of social media should not be elevated above or outside the practices of social media use while also noting that the content was also discussed in mundane and normative terms. Finally, although these practices may be *'unthought'* (to reiterate Shaun Moores term earlier) in terms of their banal nature and taken-for-granted-ness, specific examples nevertheless induced reflection, consideration and critique:

There was a bloke in the regiment who thought it was acceptable to send me a picture of his bits, right? And I wasn't having none of it at all, so I screen shot it and sent it to My Photos and I said to him, I'll put this on Facebook and I'll tag everybody I know in this regiment and all your mates if you ever send me anything like that again'. 'Oh please delete it, I didn't know, I didn't know'. (f1 soldier)

Bobbing for chips we call it [Tinder] ((laughter)). (m4 NCO)

She just basically said, she doesn't give a shit if she gets followed around. But what happens, God forbid this, but what happens if she actually does go outside camp and get raped for instance? (m1 soldier)

It is noteworthy that these conversations about bobbing for chips (routinely checking who was *'available'* for intimate relations in the area via Tinder), sexting (the posting of naked selfies and genital images) and checking in or tagging (Facebook, Instagram) were frequent and immediate across all the focus groups which, as stated earlier, suggests to us the mundane and ubiquitous nature of these occurrences. However, the ways in which these practices were discussed differed according to the gender of the speaker. In the first extract, for example, the female soldier – who tells us that receiving images of men's *'bits'* is part and parcel of her everyday digital life – discusses how she screen grabs one image to demonstrate to her male colleague that the image he sent is not – as he thought

– only visible for the set amount of seconds (as stipulated by Snapchat) but in fact capturable and sharable. This act of exposure repositions her relationship with the sender. But what was most notable was the reaction of the other focus group participants who expressed surprise at her possession of the knowledge, skills and initiative required to respond as she did (*'did you send it?'* *'can you do that?'*). Similarly, while the men discussed 'bobbing' for 'chips' as a 'harmless' 'bit of fun', 'see[ing] what's in the area', they positioned the women who post on Tinder as 'available' 'up for it' and 'too keen'. Perhaps most clearly, the CO focus group told us that Tinder was an activity that wives and partners 'just didn't do', highlighting a whole host of resonances with traditional and long-standing gender signifiers of women both within and critically beyond the military (see also Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2011; Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

We see this in the last excerpt above where there is a clear trajectory drawn between online activity and embodied consequence: 'but what happens if she actually does go outside camp and get raped for instance?' Here, in a similar vein to Ringrose et al.'s work (2013) and following a long tradition of feminist scholarship (see, for example, Attwood, 2009; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), we see the utilisation of a wider gendered discourse that posits the 'moral responsibility' – for actions such practices may or may not produce – with the woman (Ringrose et al., 2013):

It happened to one of our lasses as well, she'd just got to an arrangement with one bloke and then literally a couple of weeks later there was this one bloke from the Battery and she was sending him nudes of herself and I'm pretty sure within a week the Commanding Officer of the Camp had the pictures ... effectively the whole regiment had seen her naked. (m1 soldier)

Within two or three weeks, she'd slept with a couple of blokes. She went around a couple of blokes and she's known for that so I mean it went out through the whole regiment. The bloke thought it was funny and he was showing everyone else in his barrack. He thinks it is cool because he is sleeping with this new bird and he's said to one of his mates, and it goes up and up and up and more and more people start to see it. (m2 soldier) (p. 316)

These excerpts are not (just) about the moral reading of the woman's sexuality: They also interweave moral judgement into a narrative of otherwise normative and mundane practices of sharing selfies; they detail who can and can't (within the context outlined) engage in this practice; they elide certain signifiers which we might want to question (such as the woman's sexuality with the digital practice of sharing selfies with her subsequent exposure); they construct a double standard in which the sharing practices are 'funny' for the men and career damaging for the woman ('the Commanding Officer of the Camp had the pictures').³ At the same time, the excerpts clearly resonate with much feminist scholarship regarding gender politics and performance, and more recent research into sexting practices. This suggests to us that these practices not only have a long and established history – in military *and* civilian culture – but that they are also practices that increasingly and centrally constitute the digital mundane. And *this* is the central issue here. It raises a number of questions about where the politics or critique of these practices should/can be located if they are simultaneously mundane and everyday *and* politically and socially problematic by virtue of their implications for gender politics. They also raise a crucial question around the 'disciplinary' role of the technologies

(Gill, 2007) in continuing to promote such longstanding and gendered cultures despite (or indeed because of) new iterations of mobile technologies and digital practices. It is here we now turn.

Logical digital mundane

If we think of the excerpts above within wider frameworks including both military connectivity and sexting/sharing culture, we must also consider the practices from which they derive more explicitly in relation to the sociotechnical. This is for a number of reasons. The first is to centre and *implicate* the technologies into the digital mundane as a powerful framing and shaping force. This allows us to consider all aspects of the digital mundane, not just those observed, witnessed or discussed during the focus groups but the objects, platforms and Apps as well. The second is to extend the discussion about institutional and subjective identities to reflect on the role of the digital in enabling them to operate simultaneously despite some of the convolutions (e.g. between the embodied and the known, or the institutional and individual). Here, our contention is that the digital mundane of the sociotechnical blurs the civilian and military and enables the participants of our focus groups to normalise, routinise digital practices in the ways noted above. The digital mundane of the sociotechnical is also what makes the practices within the focus groups resonate more widely. Consequently, they cannot be solely understood in relation to military culture, not only because the excerpts resonate with research on mobile digital culture per se (boyd, 2014; Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2016; Turkle, 2008, 2011) but because the digital infrastructures support, condone and condition these practices:

90% [of Snapchat and Tinder] is always nudes because you know they are just going to see this photo for a few seconds and that's it. (m5 soldier)

Imagine how many thousands and millions of people do that [send selfies] every single day. Not just in the Army. (m2 soldier)

Our starting point then, following Berry (2014), is to consider the way the 'computational has become hegemonic' (p. 26) in terms of not only users but also interface and architecture. If 90% of the content of Snapchat or Tinder consists of selfies (constituted in a variety of ways here), Berry's notion of the hegemonic takes on new resonances. Indeed, it is not necessarily the normalisation of selfies we are noting here, but the constant (and mundane) practice of the visual and the elision of that with the social. In what follows, we sketch out some of the arguments – drawn from critical software studies and science and technology studies (STS) – that position the infrastructure of the digital as a powerful (if not *the* powerful) shaping force for practices and mediations. In the context of this article, these arguments draw our attention to the increasingly mundane practice of sending and taking selfies *and* the way the digital is implicated as the framing force in these practices.

As many theorists have indicated, the digital is *powerful* (Bassett, 2013; Berry, 2014; Suchman, 2007; Van Dijck, 2014; Van House, 2011). It is – to draw on Latour (1990) – 'durable' and materially *felt*. This means it operates powerfully even when the power relations are not transparent. It is affective, not necessarily through the content (i.e. naked

selfie) but through the prevalence of the visual and the elision of this with immediacy and sociability (Van Dijck, 2014). Drawing on Van House (2011: 424) and Suchman (2007: online), the question we need to ask then is how the design of social media ‘configure[s] members capacities of action’, or, to put another way – drawing on cultural studies – how the technology ‘disciplines its subjects even as it produces them’ (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 437). The practice of taking selfies is forged as much through the socio-technical conditions – the stabilisations over time of key designs in technology (particularly camera-phone, smartphone technology), of code and algorithm and of interface – as well as through the burgeoning practice of taking selfies as a social and cultural phenomenon (see also Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2016) and the increasing prevalence of the visual as the key mode of communication. At the same time, technological design is conducted socially and culturally (see also Balsamo, 2011) so that the ‘conditions’ to which Suchman speaks (above) are not linear, but complex and dialogic. In the first excerpt above then, the technical design of immediacy of Apps like Snapchat is noted as an enabler for the practice because of what immediacy and temporality mean to notions of privacy or even security (*‘going to see this photo for a few seconds and that’s it’*). If we consider the surprised reaction of the group on learning that Snapchat images can be stored and captured, there are also issues here around how the Apps offer frameworks for/of knowledge, lived relations and shape familiar and routine expectations.

Apps are also premised on the economically profitable notion of ‘sociability’ and ‘sharing’ (see also Gehl, 2014). Indeed, Apps like Snapchat and Tinder are good examples of how operational logics become durable concepts within social media – such as those highlighted by van Dijck and Kennedy (above) – *and* which have particular affordances because of their commercial and economic value gained through the ‘stabilisation’ of underpinning socio-technical features *as* logical and familiar. One question to ask in relation to selfies or tagging pertains to the economic value of this mundane practice and the extent to which economic imperatives have forged this practice as normative. If we consider the debates around free labour (Fuchs, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Terranova, 2000) and the way our engagement with social media does free work for the economic benefit of the social media organisations, we also need to consider the ways we may have, through processes of ‘disciplining’ or routine, come to accept, live and support the ideologies embedded in the technical structures we may once have critiqued. As Jenny Kennedy (2013) reminds us, ‘Good subjects post, update, like, tweet, retweet, and most importantly, *share*’ (p. 131). For us, this is crucial to understanding why the practice of sexting/selfies discussed in our focus group excerpts are critiqued, but the content of the images remains mundane. It also helps explain why these sociotechnical structures have been discussed most obviously as capitalist (Berry, 2014; Gehl, 2014; Van Dijck, 2014). If these structures are capitalist, however, they are also inherently *gendered* (see (Balsamo, 2012; Grosz, 2001; Suchman, 2007) because what becomes valued and shared is complicit with the normative masculine culture it serves, producing gendered norms around content, practices and values.

Concluding remarks

For us then, the concept of the digital mundane is a useful device for allowing the convolutions, contradictions and inconsistencies of mobile digital practices to sit side by side

with embodied, unthought and routine practices within a variety of institutional and civilian settings. Our aim has not been to offer a rigid, top-down framework of military culture in which mobile digital practice occurs. Indeed, the ways the institutional politics, culture, practices, ideologies and norms of the military were articulated in the focus groups were *through* discussion around the practices of mobile phone and social media use and not vice versa. This suggests to us the performative and imagined nature of an institutional identity, but it also details its pervasiveness insofar as an institutional identity *is* evoked through routine and normative digital practices that were discussed as mundane.

Similarly, while we could have framed this article through a dichotomy of social media use versus the edits of the military as an institution, this would negate the banality of social media and mobile phone use that undermines any subversion of top-down politics. It was clear from the tone and content of the focus groups that the practices discussed in this article were entirely normative and mundane. The concept of the digital mundane, then, is a useful device for not only explaining the banality of these digital practices *per se*; it is also useful in explaining *how* such practices have become so mundane. This is further underpinned when we consider the wider resonances of these practices through recourse to research on young people and sexting, mobile technologies and feminist research. Here, we find that the digital practices highlighted in this article are far from unique to military life and there is a blurring across cultures and practices via social media. One explanation we have offered in this article relates to the sociotechnical – the way that social media supports, promotes and condones the sharing and communicative practices discussed here. At the same time, mobile technologies and social media Apps are so widespread and familiar and perhaps also, as Moores (2014) argues, done ‘with little thought’ (p. 202) that they *can* more easily become part and parcel of military everyday life. Similarly, the economic imperatives of social media operate outside the specific conditions of military (or other sub) cultures so that although it is possible to envisage dichotomous ideologies at work here (between the economically driven design of social media, for example, and the political ideologies of the military) and that these may even be articulated to a certain extent in the discussions around mobile technologies, this doesn’t (indeed, cannot *because* they are so mundane) alter practice, digital engagement or modes of communication.

We find ultimately that our (military and non-military) ‘capacities for action’ in a digital age are increasingly conditioned by the digital mundane that are in turn shaping geographies, creating times, routines and disciplines through lived and everyday, embodied, tactile and sociotechnical. The fact that this is gendered, ‘unthought’ *and* reflective, individual *and* institutional, embodied *and* known is part of the complexity and embeddedness of the digital into our everyday. It is this that needs critical attention if we are to understand the politics of the digital mundane and its impact across cultures, subcultures and institutions for the future.

Funding

The research on which this article is based was jointly funded by The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) Futures and Innovation Domain and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the Science and Security Programme under the RCUK Global Uncertainties Programme. Grant Award ES/K011170/1.

Notes

1. Indeed, we could think of these uses of mobile phones in a range of ways – as promoting an individual space within a particular hierarchy (see also boyd, 2014), as generating a ‘back channel’ for the soldiers (see also Turkle, 2011), as form of resistance (see Russell et al., 2011): all of these suggest mobile phone use is both *meaningful* and mundane.
2. It is worth noting here that while we did not find any noticeable difference between Officer and Soldier use of smartphones, officers talked about soldiers’ use in derogatory terms. The officers also tended to discuss the soldiers’ use of mobile phones as a first recourse (rather than reflecting on their own): but this, we contend, noted discursive rather than material differences.
3. While we don’t have the scope to fully unpack these issues here, it is worth noting the long history of feminist scholarship that engages with these complex double standards around sexuality.

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