

WAR AND CONFLICT NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS AND PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY ROTC CADETS

A THESIS IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

War and conflict reporting is a mainstay of the media diet of Americans wishing to stay informed about U.S. military endeavors. However, past research has revealed that the military/press relationship has room for improvement. For example, researchers have shown that current and former service members perceive negative bias in war and conflict media coverage and an overall public wariness of embedded journalism despite compelling evidence that such reporting is no more biased than stories from unilaterals (unembedded reporters). Expanding on this work, the present study utilizes a survey research design to investigate the perceptions of bias in war and conflict media held by university-aged ROTC cadets who plan to join the military as officers and who may likely have different media consumption habits from their more senior military counterparts. Moreover, the researcher of the present study aimed to screen for possible correlations between media consumption habits, perceptions of bias, and future service interests among cadets.

Eliciting survey responses from cadets proved difficult due to cadet's personal values, institutional pressures, prevailing current events, and/or institutional pressures. Due to this the researcher expanded the scope of the study to include interviews, but failed to yield better response rates. Consequently, data collected from surveys and interviews are non-generalizable as the sample size was too small to draw statistically significant connections between media consumption habits, perceptions, and service interests. Nevertheless, a close analysis of the survey and interview data is suggestive and raises questions for future research. For example, survey and interview respondents indicated their perception of some negative bias in war and conflict reporting, active engagement with war and conflict media, and a strong tendency to favor digital sources (as opposed to legacy media) for war and conflict news information. This research then, despite its limitations, suggests a useful model for larger-scale data collection and a jumping-off point for related future research including but not limited to: understanding and improving the military/press relationship, examinations of source bias and perceptions of journalistic objectivity, comparative studies of elite versus non-elite

sources, and potential gender differences in the consumption habits, perceptions, and service interests of female versus male ROTC cadets. Continued research into these topics may yield pertinent information for improving the military/press relationship, ROTC and military recruitment strategies, and the need for potential changes to ROTC policies and cadet training measures.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past decades, war and conflict reporting has become a mainstay, as Americans seek to become informed about U.S. military endeavors. This type of reporting has often come under fire due to allegations of biases created by the government or by the journalists themselves, many times being accused of being pro-war and/or pro-American, despite the neutral reporter viewpoint traditional journalistic practice encourages.

The current body of literature on war and conflict reporting investigates war and conflict media consumption, actual bias present in this reporting, possible causes for such biases, and differences between sources. It also investigates the opinions of the journalists and service members affected by this type of reporting by investigating their perceptions of both bias and censorship in the military/press relationship. Where pre-existing research falls short is in its ability to account for the war and conflict media consumption habits of a younger generation of service members in an increasingly more media-saturated world.

The aim of the present study is to aid in filling the current gap in the research by surveying a demographic, university-aged ROTC cadets 18 years of age or older, which will later play a key role within the United States military, as cadets become Second Lieutenants post-graduation. Goals of the study include investigating the media consumption experience of these cadets, studying their perceptions of these media sources, and using a series of questions about their service interests to determine whether a correlation exists between these interests and the media consumption habits and perceptions of the cadets.

This investigation will add to the body of research which already exists by providing insight into how cadets experience war and conflict news media, as well as the possible effects of their consumption habits and perceptions on their future service interests. This research is important because it will give a better understanding of the media consumption habits and perceptions of not

simply a group of young people who live in a world saturated with news from a variety of traditional, social media, and online sources; but a group of individuals who plan to become influential parts of the military for their careers. It offers insight into what sorts of habits and opinions may exist within the military's youngest leaders and members in the coming years, as well as an indicator for predicting what military/press relations may look like in the future. Additionally, this research may help ROTC programs gain an understanding of what possible effects the media consumption habits and perceptions of their cadets could have, and may serve as a means for potential adaptations within programming to account for these effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to review research focused on a few pertinent themes. One important overarching category was literature on the military/press relationship, since knowledge of this relationship is necessary in order to fully understand how both journalist and former/current service member perceptions of war and conflict reporting compare to- and potentially influence each other. This interaction between press and military is crucial for framing the topic of reporting bias within the larger theme of war and conflict media as a whole. Furthermore, literature on the topic of war and conflict media generally is an integral component of gaining an understanding of what bias and trends have been observed in war and conflict media, what potential causes for these biases could be, and what differences there are between distinct reporting sources. Knowledge of all of the topics above is an important necessity for framing the research at hand and understanding how studying ROTC cadets are consuming war and conflict media, their perceptions of that reporting, and possible correlations with future service interests.

THE MILITARY/PRESS RELATIONSHIP:

When studying the military/press relationship, it is first necessary to understand the types of reporters who cover war and conflict. In order to provide coverage, there exist both “embedded” and “unilateral” reporters (Aday, Livingston and Hebert 2005; Johnson and Fahmy 2009). Defined by Aday, Livingston and Hebert in their investigation, “Embedding the Truth,” embedded journalists are those journalists appointed by the government and attached to active-duty military units to cover the wartime action (this program was first instituted during the Iraq War), while unilaterals are “reporters who independently ventured into Iraq [and other areas in which the U.S. military is active in conflict] to cover the war” (p. 4). Due to the nature of their situations, embedded- versus unilateral war and conflict reporters interacted differently with the military, creating room for criticism of the embedding program. In “Embedding the Truth,” which sought to investigate objectivity in the media during

wartime, the authors write, "...the embedding program raised concerns with some that news from the Iraq War would be even more jingoistic than usual and that reporters would in fact be 'in bed' with the military" (Aday, Livingston and Hebert 2005, p. 7). The embedding program was judged negatively by media consumers, as they worried that the reporters' closeness with the military would impact the nature of their reporting, presumably by changing their objectivity and possibly imposing governmental censorship measures. No doubt, this created tensions on both sides as journalists and military officials carried out their operations, each working toward their own agendas.

In 2009, researchers Thomas J. Johnson and Shahira Fahmy sought to investigate how this relationship was perceived by the journalists themselves in a study entitled "Embeds' Perceptions of Censorship: Can You Criticize a Soldier Then Have Breakfast With Him in the Morning?" The researchers found that startlingly few of the 159 embeds they surveyed reported that they had dealt with significant government censorship: according to the researchers, "...more than 60% of respondents said they suffered little, if any, censorship" (Johnson and Fahmy 2007, p. 70). This sort of statistic seems counter-intuitive, given the general population's concern over possible military censorship of embedded reporters; however, Johnson and Fahmy later discuss what a potential cause for this statistic may be, which will be further discussed in the "War and Conflict Media" section of the present literature review. Importantly, the researchers of the study did find that, while most embeds said they endured little censorship, survey responses provided by reporters indicated that they tended to feel more censored with increasing reliance on government sources for the completion of their reports (Johnson and Fahmy 2007, p. 72). This observation is more in-line with the public's concern that closeness with the military could potentially lead to increased levels of bias in embedded journalists' reporting.

While the previous studies analyzed the military/press relationship from the press side of the equation, a later 2020 investigation sought to discover the ways in which contemporary war and conflict reporting was perceived by current and former service members (Schmidt 2020). The

researcher, Hans C. Schmidt, found in his work that both veterans and current service members tended to regard news media coverage overall with a grain of salt, but were especially critical of press coverage that surrounded war, conflict, and military related issues (p. 171). The researcher reported, “Furthermore, results show that many current and former military service members felt that news media portrayed the U.S. military in an especially negative light, suggesting the perceived existence of a hostile ‘us versus them’ relationship between news organizations and the military” (Schmidt 2020, p. 171). These findings indicate that although tensions are perceived to exist between reporters and the military from the reporter standpoint, there is also a level of unease in the military to reporter direction due to an overall distrust of media on the part of service members, but increasingly so in regards to the military and military endeavors. The level of hostility indicated by Schmidt’s findings are interesting when considering those of Johnson and Fahmy’s 2007 research because Schmidt’s imply that service members perceive reporters as lacking respect for military members and operations. However Johnson and Fahmy’s 2007 study results indicate that many embedded journalists showed compliance with military restrictions imposed upon them, as the authors write, “...journalists claimed that they had the social responsibility to provide the public a thorough understanding of the conflict without endangering the military’s mission and the lives of the troops” (p. 71), and additionally reported, “...they [journalists] also indicated they carefully followed the military’s guidelines of topics that they were not allowed to cover...” (p. 73). These pieces of evidence compared with each other could be read to indicate that perhaps the issue with war and conflict reporting for military members does not stem from interactions with reporters themselves, but rather what content is reported, which will be further discussed in the “War and Conflict Media” section of this literature review.

As a segue into that portion of this discussion of related pre-existing literature, it is first necessary to understand the topic of objectivity and reporting bias in regards to the military/press relationship, as well as understand how younger generations fit into this relationship, because both

media practice and technology have changed over the years. From Johnson and Fahmy's 2007 research, it is possible to infer that most embedded journalists perceived themselves as being objective because they reported little to no governmental censorship overall, indicating that they felt they were for the most part able to give unobstructed reports on the Iraq War, therefore making them objective parties. Findings from Schmidt's 2020 study reported, "...veterans and service members often reported feeling that their primary and preferred news source was of higher quality and covered military-related topics better than news media in general" (p. 163). This statement indicates a general perception amongst current and former service members that while news may have been biased, with some saying for the negative, they thought that their preferred sources provided the best coverage of military-related topics, although it is unclear whether this means "least negative" or "more objective" in terms of what that perception meant. Schmidt's finding that individual service members' perceptions were closely linked to their media consumption habits and preferences shows evidence that the best coverage very well could have been interpreted as being one-and-the-same for some service members (p. 163).

WAR AND CONFLICT MEDIA:

This sub-category of pre-existing research is focused on not what is perceived about war and conflict media, but what has been studied and be found by research in this area. The primary subject of contention is that which remains at the center of the military/press relationship: reporting bias in contemporary war and conflict news media.

The perception held by embedded journalists in Johnson and Fahmy's 2007 study that they were censored very little and therefore able to remain objective in their reporting is both called into question and supported by the existing research in this area. Evidence from Aday, Livingston, and Hebert appears to support the view of embeds: that they were not limited by censorship, further refuting the concern that embedded journalists would show greater sympathy toward the American

military. The research implied that embeds were just as objective as their unilateral counterparts saying, "...we did not find evidence that stories produced by embeds were more likely to adopt a favorable tone toward the American war effort...the differences between embeds and their 'unilateral' counterparts in Iraq lay less in biased stories than in what stories they covered..." (Aday, Livingston and Hebert 2007, p. 17). One such difference identified by the researchers was that embeds were more likely to cover stories about soldiers themselves in comparison to unilaterals, who they found were found to more often report on civilian casualties and post-war reconstruction (Aday, Livingston and Hebert 2007, p.17).

While these findings appear to show support for the neutrality of embeds and perhaps a mistaken military when it comes to trusting press coverage of war and conflict, other research shows that this is not the whole truth. An analysis of contemporary war and conflict media yielded results which supported military perception that they were often negatively portrayed, finding that the media did not often focus on the human participants, and that soldiers were shown to be 'flawed' or, in over 1/6 of the data collected which mentioned service members, dead (Schmidt 2020, p. 162). This finding is evidence that the negative perceptions of the press held by military members, both current and former, were not totally unfounded. In fact, further evidence promotes the idea that press coverage of military-related activities was not a full picture of the actual circumstances of the war.

According to Aday, Livingston and Hebert's 2005 research, which studied six American news networks and Al Jazeera, American networks especially presented the public with war reporting which was highly "sanitized," focused on episodic battle coverage without mention of bloodshed, diplomacy and weapons, amongst other things (p. 18). This finding was additionally supported 15 years later by Schmidt's research, which found that war and conflict media analysis showed support for this type of coverage reducing complex issues to anecdotal cases (p. 161). These two findings indicate that war and conflict media coverage was focused on reporting highlights, with minimal information about the more gruesome and less exciting details of the war, but it is unclear if that

would indicate the actual presence of biased media or lack thereof. Schmidt also found that in war and conflict media, military members and high-ranking officials were referred to limitedly (p. 162), something which could also play a role in the way military members perceived war and conflict media and its reporters. Still, it is difficult to say whether this is truly media bias, and the current body of literature seems to indicate that what is more accurate is an assessment of goals and differences between war and conflict reporting media sources.

As one point, Aday, Livingston and Hebert argue that objectivity is impacted significantly by culture (p.14). When we consider this, it is possible to see how objectivity becomes changeable, depending on circumstance. For example, in their analysis of survey responses, Johnson and Fahmy say that while embedded reporters told them that they suffered little, if any censorship from the military, in a way censorship still existed as the reporters were not fully free to cover the war whenever they wanted and took pains to make sure they followed rules set forth by the military (p. 73). Though some might say this is abject nonobjectivity, others could argue that this is still objectivity because reporters are still able to provide information, while also still following rules in order to keep themselves and service members safe. Furthermore, this idea is supported by Johnson and Fahmy's claim that the "needs of the media and the military need to be balanced" (p. 54). This is something which is impactful to both embedded and non-embedded reporters.

Additionally, it was shown that source access could have an impact on article content. While Johnson and Fahmy proposed that source access played a role in determining the throw of the article (p. 59), it is still unclear whether this counts as a loss of objectivity, as certain limitations impacted what sort of content reporters could present information on. According to Johnson and Fahmy, embeds' writing could have come off as more positively biased toward the American war effort because of the people they were surrounded by in comparison to unilaterals (p. 59). However, the difference in reporting may still not necessarily be biased, at least of the intentional source. In fact, differences also come from elite versus non-elite war and conflict media sources. This is to say that

differences exist between sources with a national or international versus local reach and/or smaller outlets versus larger, more established ones with greater funding. A 2007 study investigated if there was a difference between elite and non-elite media source use, much in the same way others looked at the embed versus unilateral relationship (Carpenter). The researcher found that elite outlets used more official sources, while non-elite outlets used about an equal number of unofficial sources for the reporting, a by-product of what types of sources the two were (Carpenter 2007, p. 769). When it came to perceptions, factors outside of bias also played a role. Johnson and Fahmy found that younger embedded journalists were more likely to feel that they were being censored by the government and predicted that this may not be because of actual censorship, but rather that the younger reporters had not been reporting at a time when restrictions on journalism were more severe (p. 71). This information goes to show that the topic of reporting bias in war and conflict media is not totally black and white, and report content varies greatly depending on certain factors.

What is currently lacking in the existing body of research is a lack of information on younger components of the military/press relationship, namely ROTC cadets. This is not only an important area for study because Schmidt says that survey of those with an in-progress education would be beneficial for future research (p. 164), but also because such cadets are motivated to become military leaders and hold influence in the military post-graduation. They also represent a younger generation, which has had the ability to interact with traditional sources of war and conflict media like newspapers and television reports, and also newer modes such as social media, which likely has its own differences when it comes to report content. In fact, according to researchers who carried out a 2016 study which sought to discern a relationship between military narratives and media via analysis of a variety of sources, it is of the utmost importance that patterns of media attention and practice continue to be studied as technologies continue to evolve, in terms of media and the military (Corner and Parry). These variations and advancements may in turn cause divergence in perception of war and conflict media for young ROTC cadets, as well as changes in the way that they consume it.

In addition to lack of research on young people, the impacts of war and conflict reporting and perceptions of it are not often discussed in the current literature. An understanding of how war and conflict media may correlate to future service decisions of ROTC cadets is an interesting area of study, especially when one considers the impact social media war and conflict media consumption could have. In fact, according to research from 2017, social media consumption was closely linked to increased fear of crime in young adults (Intravia et al. 2017). Finding out if war and conflict media reporting draws cadets closer or farther from war in terms of their future service interests is an area for research not often studied, but is intriguing nonetheless.

The research carried out in this study will aid in filling these two crucial gaps by allowing for data to be collected on young, motivated cadets who are both passionate about the military and represent a generation which has the ability to interact with war and conflict media differently than past generations via use of social media and the internet. Data collected will reveal a snapshot of cadets' media consumption habits and how they interact within the military/press relationship. Additionally, further analysis of service interests may fill an additional gap in the current knowledge by indicating if any correlation exists between war and conflict media consumption habits, perceptions, and future service interests of ROTC cadets. This information could prove valuable to ROTC administration and Army leaders as they learn how cadets and younger military members interact with war and conflict media and can use this to adapt their social media protocols, programming and even recruitment techniques. On a larger scale, these results could be a jumping-off point for further media research on the war and conflict media consumption habits and perceptions of this content for young people as a whole in the age of social media. It could also serve as a starting point for further analysis on the impacts of the military/press relationship as a whole.

METHODS SECTION

Data collected for the purposes of this research was assessed via survey analysis. The researcher used an online survey via Qualtrics for the study, which was advantageous for their purpose for various reasons. Firstly, use of an internet survey was valuable for this research because it allowed the researcher to access a sample of cadets who came from a variety of locations, which meant that results of the survey could be more generally applicable to cadets, rather than restricted to cadets from a certain region or university. Additionally, use of an online survey helped to streamline the process of IRB approval for the study, as cadets were not surveyed in relation to any university, giving the researcher the ability to collect data from a wider sample of cadets without having to go through the process of gaining IRB approval for each university in order to conduct this type of research. Furthermore, use of an online survey was valuable for keeping cadet responses anonymous, as the use of such a measure ensured that there was no contact between participant and researcher, unless the participant chose to provide a valid email in a separate survey to enter a drawing as reward for participation.

In order to take part in the study, participants were recruited via a digital advertisement email with a link to the survey shared in multiple ways. It was first shared with Drew University student ROTC cadets to share with fellow cadets informally, disconnected from association with their ROTC program and no penalty for choosing not to participate. Additional participants were recruited via the same advertisement distributed to ROTC-oriented Instagram pages to advertise on their stories with a link to participate in the survey. After low response rates to these methods of participant solicitation, the researcher applied for and was granted expanded IRB approval to do survey outreach via a number of social media platforms and personal connections, as well as request that people pass along this information in the hopes that a qualified party may see it and respond to the call.

Participant names and email addresses were not collected for the purposes of the research survey in order to maintain cadet anonymity in the hopes of eliciting genuine, unrestricted responses from participants. In order to ensure that participants did not feel coerced to participate, responding to the survey was entirely voluntary and no negative repercussions befell them if they decided not to participate at any point between initial solicitation and final survey submission. However, as compensation for participating in the survey, participants had the option to follow a separate link upon survey completion which allowed them to enter into a drawing voluntarily to win one of three \$35 gift cards. It was impossible to connect, nor did the researcher try to connect, the provided email address to that participant's survey response since they were two separate surveys which could not be associated with each other. Email address information was destroyed by the researcher upon gift card winner drawing selection.

The survey itself was structured as detailed here. A comprehensive consent form with a required response indicating consent to participate in the survey (no name required, for anonymity's sake) was the first section of the survey. Participants were not able to complete this survey without first agreeing to participate in the research after reading the consent form. This was then followed by a 3-part survey, which included short answer, multiple choice, rating (using a 5-point scale) and long answer questions. The first section in the survey was an optional demographics section which asked questions ranging from age and gender to ROTC year and expected majors and minors of the cadets. It was followed by a "War and Conflict News Media" section focused on questions about preferred news sources and perceptions of war and conflict news media. The final segment of the survey was a "Service Interests" section which the researcher included in order to gain a better understanding of cadet career goals and analyze later for possible correlations between this and media consumption habits and/or perceptions, a detail which was withheld from participants initially but exposed to participants upon completion of the survey in an end-of-survey message.

In order to draw conclusions and make suggestions for further analysis, the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative measures to analyze the survey results for trends within numerical and written data. The researcher looked at data not just for overt numerical trends, but also implications of long and short answer questions. Results were also analyzed by looking into variations within subsets of cadets (e.g.: first-year cadets versus fourth-year cadets) for possible correlations between responses and other demographic characteristics or particular service interests.

Survey data was stored in Qualtrics, protected by the systems' encryptions, with all possibly identifiable individual responses being destroyed upon completion of survey analysis in order to protect the anonymity of participants. An emphasis on anonymity was important to this project, as military organizations place restrictions on what their components may or may not disclose regarding certain topics, and in situations where this may not overtly apply, disclosure of such opinions could lead to issues for participants in terms of their careers and/or relationships, both professional and personal. Additionally, anonymity allowed participants to more readily share their responses where they might have otherwise remained reserved had anonymity not been offered. To further protect participant anonymity IP, and email addresses were not collected in relation to the core survey. If a participant wished to participate in the raffle for one of the gift cards, they could provide an email address which was kept confidentially and was used only for the purpose of the raffle and not published by the author. Only the researcher and her team had access to these documents. Additionally, email addresses collected in order to participate in the gift card drawing were not able to be connected to research survey responses due to being part of two separate surveys in order to maintain participant anonymity. All email addresses collected for this purpose were destroyed upon gift card winner contacting and selection.

Due to the nature of this study and its subject matter, it was possible that participants could face questions they were uncomfortable answering even anonymously, and/or experience discomfort with survey content. In an effort to combat this, participation in the study was fully voluntary and a

participant's decision whether or not to participate in this research did not affect their current or future relations with Drew University nor have any impact on their ROTC careers. Survey participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time and could refrain from answering any question by either not responding on an optional question or filling out the "prefer not to say" option on required questions. Any inputted data was not collected until the participant clicked "submit" at the end of the survey. Furthermore, in the end-of-survey statement participants were provided with contact information for a free crisis text line and encouraged to seek out campus psychological services in the event that they experienced emotional trauma due to the subject matter of the survey. Participants were also provided with researcher contact information and IRB chair contact information, should they have any questions regarding the survey.

The end-of-survey statement also included detailed information about entry into the gift card drawing and outlined the process in which winners would be awarded.

While the original research plan was to use solely survey data for the purposes of this study, the researcher applied for IRB approval for a secondary interview study which expanded the original research to include analysis of data collected in confidential interviews with cadets who responded to requests for interview. The interviews included a series of questions based on original survey questions; however, the researcher was also allowed to ask additional and follow-up questions pertaining to the research at hand as-needed during cadet interviews. Cadet interview subjects were solicited by way of Instagram advertisement, email solicitation to known ROTC cadets, and personal contact with ROTC cadets either via Instagram DM or in-person conversation. The solicitation included basic interview information, qualifications and a note that all participants who completed the interview process would be compensated with \$10 paid in physical cash or transferred digitally. Interested parties were asked to contact the researcher via DM, email, or text.

Qualified parties who agreed to take part in the interview were forwarded detailed consent forms which they were asked to sign and return ahead of the set interview time. They were also sent an optional Google Form which asked the same demographic questions from the original survey for later analysis purposes, if they filled it out. Ahead of the interview, participants were also given the option to choose an in-person, zoom, or phone call meeting and indicate how they would like to receive compensation (cash or digital transfer). Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, dependent upon cadet response length and researcher follow-up questions. The question format was similar to that of the initial research survey, but questions were phrased open-endedly to gain more detailed responses from cadets. After the conclusion of the interview, cadets were either given \$10 in cash for in-person interviews or asked to provide a PayPal, Venmo, or Zelle account for virtual transfers. They were also forwarded a post-interview debrief form. This debrief included basic research information, sources for further reading, as well as disclosure of the fact that the researcher would screen responses for possible correlations between war and conflict media responses and service interest responses. It also included information about psychological services and indicated contacts, should participants have questions regarding the research at hand.

Interviews were chosen in order to provide additional support to survey results as a small case study of current ROTC cadets. They were also chosen due to the nature of interview research, which allowed for more detailed cadet responses to be given in relation to the questions asked of them. It also allowed the researcher to ask more questions as they saw fit during the interview.

Although the researcher could not offer total cadet anonymity due to the nature of the interview format, steps were taken to ensure participant confidentiality and comfortability with participation in the interview. Participants were allowed to respond “prefer not to say” to any questions they felt uncomfortable with and were reiterated basic interview procedures from the consent form verbally at the beginning of the interview, as well as given an option to decline the use of their answers in the researcher’s work and exit the study at the end of the interview, at which point

all materials relating to the interview would be deleted. In addition to this, cadet names and all identifiable information was not published in final quotes and transcripts of interviews and was either redacted or replaced with an alias. In another measure to ensure confidentiality, participants were notified that all potentially identifiable information associated with the research, including forms, interview transcripts, and other correspondence with participants regarding interview procedures, would be destroyed at the time of research completion or by May 12, 2022 at the latest, only non-identifiable versions of the research would remain. This confidentiality allowed for interviewees to respond more freely to interview questions than they may have otherwise.

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative measures to analyze the interview results for trends within responses and implications made by these answers. This additional research was then partnered with survey research to provide a greater understanding of ROTC cadets' war and conflict news media consumption habits and perceptions alongside their service interests by way of survey and interview findings and analysis.

With these studies, the researcher aimed to find results which would prove or disprove the hypothesis that cadets' responses would further confirm the wariness of war and conflict news coverage seen in Schmidt's study of current and former service members, as well as indicate changes in their consumption habits and a correlation between their habits, perceptions, and service interests.

FINDINGS

SURVEY FINDINGS

Overall response to the researcher's survey was limited. Though the survey deadline was extended several times and the researcher made efforts to promote cadet response, as of April 13, 2022, there were only 7 potentially viable responses. Although Qualtrics indicated that the study had been opened several times more than that, it is possible that some cadets intended to complete the survey, but changed their minds upon reading consent form information. One of the potentially viable responses was discarded from the final data set for multiple reasons. One of these was that the participant's reported age (52) was not part of the demographic – young, college-aged student cadets – which the researcher sought to study with this survey. The other justification for this participant's removal from the final study data set was that responses to survey questions, both multiple choice and short-answer, indicated that the respondent was not an ROTC cadet but a former- or possibly current service member who had mistakenly responded to the researcher's call for ROTC cadets.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics section of this survey was optional, however many out of the 6 respondents chose to answer the majority of questions in this section of the research.

All 6 respondents reported their ages. Cadet ages ranged from 20 to 22, with the average respondent age being 20.8. On the question regarding race, 5/6 reported that they were white and 1/6 said that they were Hispanic. All participants chose to report their gender, with all 6 of them identifying as male. 5/6 cadets provided information on where they were from, and respondent regions of origin were located in the West Coast, Southwest, and East Coast. All respondents reported their years in training: 2 were in their second years, one in their third year, and 3 in their fourth year

or more. Out of the 4 cadets who chose to report their majors, it was an even split between STEM and non-STEM degrees. There were also two cadets who had user errors in response to the question and reported specific school names, which will not be disclosed for the purposes of maintaining participant confidentiality.

WAR AND CONFLICT NEWS MEDIA

When asked whether they actively kept up with war and conflict news media, 2/6 of cadet respondents reported that they consumed this type of content at least once per week. Another 2/6 participants reported keeping up with war and conflict news media 1-2 times per month, while the remaining participants said that although they had kept up with this type of content in the past, they had not in the past month or longer. None of the cadets chose to decline answering this question.

The next survey question asked cadets to disclose which sources they used most often to consume war and conflict news media in a “check-all-that-apply” format including a “prefer not to say” and “other” option. None of the cadets declined to respond, however two cadets made use of the option for others, and submitted “friends” and “News Channels.” Overall, social media and online-based sources such as news websites and blogs made up 10/13 of the total source options checked by cadets, with only one cadet claiming use of a print or online version of a newspaper as a source for this information. A follow up question asked survey-takers to list specific sources which they used to consume war and conflict news media, however only 2 of the cadet participants chose to respond to this question. One of these responses did not include specific sources, but listed again that participant’s selections for the previous question. The other cadet response named specific sources and named “Snapchat News Sources,” CNN, and BBC.

Question 4 of the war and conflict news media section of this survey asked cadets to rate their perceptions of bias in this type of media using a scale with the options “mostly negatively biased” and “mostly positively biased” on either end (Appendix A) with 3 being neutral. Overall, the set

ranged from “a little negatively biased” to “a little positively biased,” with none of the cadets selecting either extreme. “A little negatively biased” was chosen by the most cadets (3), however only one responding cadet marked that they perceived the bias to be “a little positively biased” and the other cadets reported that they felt this coverage was neutral. All six cadets chose to respond to this question, though none of them rated war and conflict news media as being mostly positively biased.

Using a similar scale, participants were asked to rate the accuracy of the information present in war and conflict news media in general in the next question, with 1 being “extremely inaccurate” and 5 being “extremely accurate.” All of the cadets responded to this question, creating a response range of 2-4. The mean rating was a 3, voted for by 3/6 of cadets; the average rating for the set was slightly lower at 2.83. Only one respondent rated accuracy in general to be higher than a 3 on the given scale.

The next question served as a follow up to its predecessor, and this time asked participants to use the same scale with their preferred source in mind. Overall, the average rating of the accuracy of information present in this war and conflict news media as perceived by the cadets was significantly higher, at 3.5. The range of responses also changed to a narrower set of 3-4, with the mean being both 3 and 4. All cadets responded to this question.

SERVICE INTERESTS

Question 1 for this part of the survey asked participants why they decided to participate in ROTC. 5/6 cadets elected to respond to this question. Common themes, either directly mentioned or implied, amongst responses included service/military ambition (5/5 responses) and career (4/5 responses). Education was also a common theme, with 2/5 respondents mentioning it directly in their responses.

The second question in this segment of the survey asked cadets whether they planned to continue their ROTC training at this time. All 6 cadets responded, with 5 saying “yes” and 1/6 responding that they were not sure yet.

The next question was regarding MOSs, otherwise known as a person’s job within the military. Responses ranged from “submarine officer” to cybersecurity to aviation. There were multiple mentions of the positions of armor, aviation, and field artillery. When asked whether they would prefer to go active duty, reserves or national guard post-graduation, 5/6 cadets responded that their preference was active duty, while 1/6 chose reserves.

In response to question 5 which asked about post preferences, 5/6 cadets responded however only 3 provided answers. One of the responding cadets said they were not sure. Other cadets listed “Carson, Reily, anywhere in Europe” and “Korea, Germany, Alaska,” as well as another response which listed Forts Dix and Wadsworth.

Question 6 in the service interests’ section of the survey asked cadets to disclose how many years they planned to spend in service. All cadets responded, with 3 out of those 5 saying they planned to serve 15 or more years. Two other respondents indicated that they planned to spend 7-9 years in service, while one answered 4-6 years

INTERVIEW FINDINGS:

Although response to interview solicitation attempts was limited, 5 cadets contacted the researcher in order to take part. While 4/5 cadets chose the phone call option, 1/5 chose to do an in-person interview. All cadets provided answers to all of the pre-set interview questions, which were not given to them ahead of time, as well as additional questions that the researcher asked in relation to their responses.

DEMOGRAPHICS (BROAD)

Cadets were ages 21-22. All identified as white, with 2/5 interviewees identifying as female and the rest as male. Locations of origin were all from either the Southwest or East Coast. 4/5 interviewees were in their 4th year of ROTC, while one was in his second year of ROTC. For the purposes of research analysis and discussion, cadets will be referred to as Cadets A-E, individual profiles viewable below.

DEMOGRAPHICS (INDIVIDUAL)

Cadet A: 21, white, male, 3rd year

Cadet B: 22, white, male, 4th year

Cadet C: 21, white, female, 4th year

Cadet D: 21, white, male, 4th year

Cadet E: 22, white, female, 4th year

WAR AND CONFLICT NEWS MEDIA

The first interview question asked interview subjects whether they actively kept up with news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict, as well as why. All but one cadet, Cadet E, reported that they kept up with this type of media. While Cadets A, B, and C reported active upkeep, Cadet C identified herself as “moderately” active and estimated that she consumed this type of content a bit more than 1-2 times per month when prompted. Cadet E said that she did not actively keep up, but reported that she “passively” collected this information through personal connections and ROTC training. In regards to why they kept up with this information, either actively or passively, all of the cadets gave responses which directly or indirectly referenced their military careers. Many cadets also spoke about “preparedness” in some manner. For Cadet B, this was being ready for any futures that might involve the U.S. military, while Cadet C mentioned preparedness for a career in legal work for

the military (Cadet C was a diplomacy major). Cadet D referred to this in relation to leadership as an officer post-graduation, as well as for being respected by peers (Cadet D had prior service years with the U.S. military). Cadets A, B, and E mentioned that keeping up with this information in some form was unavoidable. This question also prompted Cadet A to mention social media use and referencing several different news sources in relation to war and conflict news media, which was elaborated upon in response to question 2.

This question asked cadets to talk about the sources they used most often to consume news media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict and their reasons for using these outlets. 5/6 respondents directly mentioned using social media to keep up with this type of information and 1/6 referred to technological access to these materials using apps on her devices (Cadet C). Through their answers, 4/6 cadets indicated that social media was often where they first found the latest war and conflict news updates, which they then followed up with checking other sources. Sources included both large (elite) and small (non-elite) media outlets which the cadets kept up with through social media or other digital means. Elite sources included *CNN*, *BBC*, the *New York Times* and *NPR*, while non-elite sources were independent news organizations like *OAF Nation*, *Task & Purpose*, the *Military Times*, and *Human Rights Watch*. Cadet B mentioned that they had once used *Fox News* as one of their sources, but had since unfollowed them on social media because they felt the organization was no longer producing the same quality of reporting. Cadet B also mentioned using podcasts as some of their sources for war and conflict news information. Cadet C listed foreign affairs and foreign policy statements, while Cadet D mentioned using Google searches. Due to passive collection of information, Cadet E said that aside from following military members on social media, her boyfriend (also in ROTC) and military science courses were prime sources of information. Cadets A, B, and D all mentioned the accessibility of social media in their responses, due to the quickness of these platforms in relaying information. These same cadets all directly mentioned use of multiple sources of different viewpoints.

Question 3 asked the cadets whether they felt bias was present across news media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict in general and why they felt that way. All cadets agreed that bias was present and responses provided several reasons why the cadets perceived this. They pointed out social media misinformation/a rush to put out news coverage quickly, differences in organization perspectives, U.S. bias, access to governmentally sensitive information, and black and white versus nuanced approaches to this type of reporting. Cadet D mentioned a bias in the mainstream media and referred to cherry-picking of information to get certain points across but also pointed out reasons for why smaller news sources could be more reliable because he said they had more of a tendency to correct mistakes or delete misinformation when “called out.”

In relation to question 4, about cadets’ perceptions of the accuracy of news media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict in general, cadets provided responses which ranged from 50 to 90 percent. The low end was a “pessimistic” estimate by Cadet A, who said he felt that the actual accuracy was closer to 70 percent. The high end came from Cadet D, who provided a broad range of 70-90 percent for his estimate. Many cadets directly or indirectly mentioned that broader details were easier to get right, but that it was difficult to provide total accuracy on smaller details without actually being on-site. Cadet C indicated a “grain-of-salt” mentality and said she doesn’t take anything except peer reviewed scholarly journals as fact without checking multiple sources first. Cadets A and D both mentioned the importance of talking with soldiers on the ground, while Cadet B talked about problematic social media systems which often cause greater commotion around fake news once it has been reported fake than the attention it would have gained before deemed false information. Cadets A, D, E all directly mentioned the difficulty of maintaining accuracy of smaller details of events.

When asked in question 5 whether the perceptions discussed in questions 3 and 4 changed when cadets considered their preferred sources, 3 cadets said there was no change. Cadets A and D attributed this to their multiple sources/viewpoints approach to consuming war and conflict news media, while cadet C indicated that she was aware of bias across all sources, so it was not different

for her preferred ones. For the cadets that said there was a difference, Cadet B noted greater trust in smaller (non-elite) sources and Cadet E said that all of her sources had a U.S. bias, making her preferred sources more biased than the mediascape in general.

SERVICE INTERESTS

The first question in this part of the interview asked cadets to explain why they joined ROTC. Most cadets' responses indicated an interest in serving as a member of the military or as law enforcement (A, B, C, E). 3/5 cadets also mentioned a college education, while all 5 cadets mentioned possible scholarship benefits. All cadets also mentioned career and income security for the future in some manner in their responses. Other draws to joining mentioned included previous ROTC experience in high school (Cadet A), previous military experience/prior service (Cadet D), program accessibility (Cadet B), leadership (Cadet D), and officer status (Cadet E).

Question 2 asked cadets whether they intended to continue their ROTC training until graduation. All of the cadets responded "yes." Reasons included contracts, upcoming commissioning ceremonies, investment and passion in the program, educational benefits, challenging themselves and ensuring secure financial futures. Only Cadets A and E indicated some past hesitation in their responses. This was indirectly referred to by Cadet A, who said he could see the light at the end of the tunnel and was ready to finish out his training rather than cut his losses and move on. Cadet E said she had struggled with the tactical aspects of ROTC and often felt frustrated, but was glad she stuck it out in the end.

4/5 cadets reported that they had already been assigned their MOS in response to question 3, which also asked them to say how they felt about this. Although not yet assigned, Cadet A said he was optimistic about his future MOS designation. All 4 assigned cadets expressed at least contentment with their given MOS, while also expressing some other thoughts including initial frustration with assignment (Cadet B), slight hesitation about not changing designation areas between enlisted and

officer assignments (Cadet D), and allowing for educational development in career paths (Cadets C and E).

When asked whether they would prefer active duty, reserve, or national guard in question 4, 5/5 cadets said they would prefer to go active duty. Reasons indicated included full-time job status and greater potential for rank advancement. In reality, 2/5 cadets were assigned reserves, while Cadet A was unassigned, and Cadet C had an educational delay because of her intention to become a member of the JAG Corps. Only Cadet A mentioned some hesitation toward his preference for active duty, citing the potential strain it might put on family life in the future.

Question 5 asked about preferred post assignments. Cadets listed a variety of posts, but common mentions were specifically Fort Carson (Colorado, 4/5), Hawaii (3/5), Korea (also 3/5). Two cadets also mentioned locations in Europe. Reasons why included interest in travelling (directly mentioned by 2/5, but indicated by 4/5), interest in surrounding landscapes (indicated by 3/5), and being near to home (indirectly or directly indicated by 3/5). Cadet D also mentioned educational opportunities at Fort Bragg, as well as the size of the base.

In response to the final pre-set question, referring to how long cadets expected their service careers to be, answers ranged from 6 to 20 (potentially more) years. Most cadets indicated wanting to serve at least 10 years in their responses. Cadets A, B, and D all said they wanted to serve a total of 20 years or more. Cadet A gave an upper limit of 24 years, Cadet B left room for the possibility of more years past 20, and Cadet D said he already had 5 years under his belt but wanted to get to 20 by serving an additional 15 years. Cadets C and E reported the shortest times planned to serve, with Cadet C reporting a minimum of 10 and possibly more and Cadet E reporting a minimum of 6 with possibility for additional time. All of the cadets' responses left room for additional service past their given estimates, given that they may want to continue at that point in their careers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Overall response to the survey portion of this research was limited, despite researcher efforts to disseminate survey information widely and incentivize cadets to participate by making the survey anonymous and offering a \$35 gift card drawing upon survey completion. This could have been due to many factors, including – but not limited to – structural values within the military, current world events, cadets' personal values, and researcher outreach limitations. In addition, response to the researcher's call for cadet interview participation was also limited, with only 1/5 interview participants accepting the researcher's \$10 compensation for participating in the interview. Many of the same factors listed previously could have played a role, but two of the cadets (Cadets C and D) refused payment after finding out that the compensation came from the researcher's personal funds. Cadets A and B told the researcher that compensation was not necessary. This indicates that while survey and interview non-response may have been due to a variety of factors, for those cadets that did respond to either survey or interview were not drawn by reward benefits, which may have been motivated by their personal values and/or sensitivity for the financial situation of the researcher. Research conducted in 1996-97 studying 120 young men between ages 17-21 found that those with more tenuous financial security paired with less support sources, and less connections than more affluent young men tended to be more interested in enlisting in military service (Nieva et al. 1999). Especially in the case of Cadet D, this is consistent with his interview responses to question 2, in which he specifically mentioned motivations for continuing in ROTC training being a poor financial background and desire to keep his children out of poverty. This desire appeared to also extend to others, as Cadet D said, "So they're [my children] aren't down in the dirt after I've already been through it. I don't really want others to go through it."

As all university ROTC cadets are military members in training, or may have already acquired some degree of military service time, it is feasible that values held by the U.S. military

both structurally and personally impacted cadets' willingness to respond to my research. One cadet who was reached out to by the researcher personally due to an indication of being involved in ROTC in their Instagram bio declined to take part in either survey or interview saying that in disclosing their opinion, they would be failing to be a neutral party and failing as a service member. As a principle, the U.S. military does implement some restrictions on the types of statements that service members can make, with political statements against the president and some political social media posts, amongst others, being in violation of UCMJ and/or court martial regulations (U.S. Congress 1958; Johnson D. 2007; Jordan 2021). It should be noted that the researcher's ban from soliciting survey responses in the subreddit r/ROTC and lack of follow up from group administrators when asked about the reason for the ban added to this cautiousness surrounding contacting ROTC battalion administrators as the researcher took the ban and dismissal of query as an indication that the survey research may deal in potentially sensitive topics subject to UCMJ or other regulations. Cadets may have been cognizant of this due to the nature of their training. Though the questions asked of cadets in this research were not necessarily political in nature, cadets may have been uncomfortable with responding due to potential political coding that could have been interpreted through their survey responses. Like the cadet mentioned, many may have felt that response to this survey was in violation of their personal and/or military values and may have also feared potential repercussions should there be a breach of their anonymity. This could also potentially be a reason why providing a gift card drawing as an incentive proved to be ineffective.

Additionally, current events may have also increased cadets' worries about making statements regarding war and conflict news media. Although at the time of its inception, in fall of 2021, the U.S. was withdrawing from Afghanistan and entering a new era of relative peace within its military in comparison to previous decades, when survey dissemination began in early March of 2022, Russia had just begun its invasion of Ukraine, forcing many Americans to consider the possibility of once again directly engaging in war with a foreign country. Due to these current

events, it is not implausible that security concerns within the U.S. military rose and, with them, harsher regulation of statements made by service members and cadets alike, increasing their awareness of potential repercussions for breaking UCMJ guidelines. This may have created a sense of fear or apprehension in cadets that also played a role in their lack of response to the researcher's survey.

Interestingly, those cadets which chose to take part in the interview portion of this work were much more candid about their responses. While survey responders showed some hesitation by making use of the "prefer not to say" option when answering questions, interview participants provided detailed answers to all questions asked of them by the researcher. This indicates that although the interview was confidential, as opposed to anonymous, interview participants were more at ease responding than were survey participants. Part of this also could have been due to their interactions with the researcher, which may have made them more willing to share and respond because of a level of trust developed between researcher and participants during the process. According to an article, which cites research from Kenneth Bailey, interview research can yield a better response rate than mailed questions, which could be extended to include digitally disseminated surveys (Sociology Group).

Another cause for lack of response to both survey and interview was potentially due to researcher outreach limitations because of IRB proposal limitations. Although reaching out to ROTC programs directly may have proved to be more fruitful in terms of cadet response to the survey, the researcher refrained to take this route for two reasons. Firstly, because gaining additional IRB approval from the schools associated with each ROTC battalion may have proven difficult and taken more time than was available realistically for the completion of this project. A second reason was that the researcher feared that direct contact with ROTC battalion administrative leadership directly may lead to the potential shutdown of the project and punishment of cadet respondents should those administrators believe that the research was in violation of UCMJ/MCM

guidelines. Due to this approach, it is possible to assume that response to survey and interview calls was also low

because of the researcher's relatively limited options for contacting ROTC cadets informally. It should be noted that the student acquired IRB approval from their university to carry out both parts of their study separately, which also put restraints on the researcher's ability to collect responses in a timely fashion.

With these factors taken into account, there were 6 total survey responses gathered from ROTC cadets. Although the demographics section of research was optional, most cadets chose to respond to the majority of these questions. The trend also remained consistent amongst interview participants who all chose to provide demographic information in an optional part of the process. This indicates that there was some sense of pride in identity for the responding cadets, or that they felt that the demographic questions were relatively harmless to disclose information about, despite the potentially borderline nature of the other survey questions. This second indication is not necessarily reflected in interview research because cadets chose to respond to all questions, indicating overall comfortability with the process.

Survey results showed that all of the respondents were male, with an average age of 20.8. The average age, alongside results from another survey question which asked cadets to report their year in university ROTC training, indicates that the majority of respondents were in the later parts of their ROTC careers, with 4/6 of respondents saying that this was their 3rd or 4th plus year in ROTC. In fact, none of the respondents were freshmen. This could in part be due to older cadets feeling more secure in their positions within ROTC and therefore more willing to take a chance and respond to the survey. It could have also been due to researcher limitations in that the cadets they reached out to directly and asked to spread survey information were mostly in their second year or more of ROTC training.

Unlike in the survey, interview respondents included 2 female participants. Interviewee ages ranged from 21-22, and all cadets were in their 3rd or more year of training in a university program. Reasons for the lack of underclassmen representation could have been due to the same reasons stated previously, but it is worth noting that all interview participants had already contracted with the military at this point in their careers, so this may have created feelings of greater security to provide response, in addition to the security already provided by being on the tail end of a university ROTC career.

Furthermore, demographic information revealed that most of the cadets responding identified as either white, Hispanic, and/or possibly both, with none of the responding cadets selecting any other racial/ethnic categories. Interview respondent demographics are consistent in terms of race, with 5/5 cadets identifying as white, but this group also included two female cadets. These results are in-line with 2018 military demographic information which reported that 19% of all Army officers were female, and nearly 80% of all military officers identified as white (*Demographics of the U.S. military*). In regards to the survey, the fact the majority of responses came from cadets identifying as mostly white and all male, while it may not have directly affected results, should still be considered when discussing survey findings. This gender difference should also be noted for consideration when going over responses provided by interview subjects. It should also be mentioned that cadet respondents came from a variety of U.S. regions for the survey, but all interview participants were either from the Southwest or East Coast, which may have been tied to researcher connections. Despite the limited number of responses and that there was a fairly even split between those with STEM and non-STEM degrees between the cadets who chose to report their majors/minors, indicating that interests outside of ROTC were varied and not necessarily indicative of other survey responses. While the interview did not ask cadets to provide degree information, they expressed a range of interests in their interview conversations.

WAR AND CONFLICT NEWS MEDIA

Survey and interview sample sizes were too small to make significant conclusions about whether or not support was found for the researcher's hypothesis that findings from Schmidt's study would remain consistent and that media consumption habits had changed, beyond conclusions made in specific relation to the small group.

On the whole, responses to the first question in the war and conflict news media section of this survey showed that cadets had, in general, some interest in keeping up with war and conflict news media to varying degrees, with some choosing to stay more connected than others. While the highest number of cadets (3/6) indicated that they consumed this type of media at least once per week, a comparable number of cadets said that they had kept up with this type of media in the past, but had not in the past month or longer. One cadet responded that they kept up with some regularity, consuming war and conflict news media about 1-2 times per month. None of the cadets reported that they did not keep up with war and conflict news media at all. All six responding cadets answered this question, which is an indication that none of them perceived that their interest or lack thereof in war and conflict news media was particularly harmful to impart to the researcher. Their answers also show that staying connected to this type of media to some degree was a concern for most respondents, even though some no longer chose to keep up for reasons that the researcher did not screen for.

Interview responses were also consistent with these findings. While 4/5 respondents said that they actively kept up with news media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict, only one reported that she did not. However, this cadet was still consuming information in what she called a "passive" manner through social media, conversations with peers, and in her military science classes. Her response indicates that while she was not actively seeking out information on war and conflict news involving the U.S., she was still actively keeping up with this information by nature of being an ROTC cadet and because of her personal relationships and social media habits.

Additionally, while Cadet C said that she was only moderately active in keeping up with this type of information, her response to clarification questions from the researcher revealed that she was fairly well-engaged and seeking out this type of information more often than a moderate approach would imply (defined by the researcher as 1-2x per month).

These responses also provided reasons as to why cadets chose to actively keep up (or not) with war and conflict media regarding the U.S. and all cadets mentioned their careers. This was a motivator for actively keeping up for most, however Cadet E was an outlier in that her career with the military was the reason she chose to passively consume this information because it would get back to her one way or another. The greater trend in responses indicated that cadets viewed keeping up with news media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict as an important step for being prepared in their military careers as they take on leadership roles as officers post-graduation. This was especially important for Cadet C, a diplomacy major who planned to do legal work within the military for her career. Cadet D's response indicated that although this active consumption could be taxing, it was a necessity for taking on a leadership role. Cadet A's mention of multiple source use and cross-checking information hinted at trends toward this kind of consumption which revealed themselves in later interview responses.

Responses to the second and third question in the war and conflict news media section of this survey were also particularly interesting, due to the insight they provided on sources which cadets used in order to gather news information on U.S. involvement in war and conflict. According to responses to question 2, cadets indicated a general reliance on digital sources for collecting information of this type, with online-based sources (like blogs and news websites) and social media making up 10/13 of the total sources used that were reported with a "check-all-that-apply" method. All cadets confirmed using online sources, while 4/6 said that social media was one of the sources they used most often, comparatively high numbers against 1/6 who reported using newspapers either in-print or online and 0/6 who reported using magazine sources. These numbers indicate that

the young cadets may be moving away from print sources for war and conflict news information entirely and becoming increasingly reliant on digital sources. The responses to the “other” category in question 2 were “friends” and “news channels,” indicating that cadets also gained war and conflict news information from their social circles and governmental sources. High response rates to this question showed that cadets were not apprehensive about reporting which sources they tended to use for war and conflict news information.

Cadet responses to the corresponding interview question reaffirmed this information. In these interviews, cadets revealed heavy use of social media and digital source access were key parts of their war and conflict news media consumption habits, due to 5/6 reporting use of social media and 1/6 referring specifically to app usage. Due to the fact that 4/6 indicated that social media was usually the first place they went to see these types of updates, it is clear that apps like Instagram and Snapchat, which were specifically mentioned, played principal roles in the cadet war and conflict media consumption process. Explanations for this by cadet’s A, B, D, and E indicated that the accessibility of these sources was important to cadets and that the quick updates they brought were easy to fit into busy lifestyles as both students and cadets. These responses also confirmed that cadets used a variety of sources, including those from both elite and non-elite sources. Their method of accessing this material was usually first through social media, then to the source site. Additionally, Cadets A, B, and D all mentioned multiple source use and cross-checking information in their answers to the question.

In comparison, question 3 was only responded to by 2/6 cadets, indicating that while naming general sources was not a problem, listing specific sources was potentially a touchy subject for cadets, possibly due to potential political coding within responses had they given them. Although only one cadet reported making use of newspaper content either online or in-print in question 2, question 3 asked cadets to name specific sources they used and showed that information from large news organizations such as BBC and CNN, but not necessarily newspapers, were still

key sources for at least some cadets. This inference is also backed up by the fact that at least one cadet reported use of news channels in their fill-in-the-blank response and interview source responses which indicated the same, with Cadets A, B, and D indicating use of information from a news channel, possibly accessed via social media, in their answers. Paired with responses to question 2 of the interview portion of this research, only one cadet (Cadet D) reported use of an elite newspaper, the *New York Times*, but there was no indication whether this was in print or digital format.

Response to question 3 also further confirmed the clear impact of social media for the consumption of this type of information which was reflected in interviews, as one cadet listed “Snapchat news sources” and another restated “social media” as one of their primary sources for war and conflict news information. It can be assumed from responses to survey question 2 that this may have been true for other cadets who chose not to respond as well. It should be noted that one cadet who responded to this survey question only restated their answers to the previous question, but did not list specific sources within each category.

The following questions of the survey surrounding bias and accuracy of information present in war and conflict news media indicated that cadets tended to be wary of negative bias on the whole, but their perceptions of the factual accuracy of the information reported about U.S. involvement in war and conflict changed when considering the general news-scape versus their preferred sources. While interview responses affirmed cadets’ awareness of bias across war and conflict news media regarding the U.S. and considerations of factual accuracy, cadets considered their preferred sources with a more nuanced approach which yielded different results than the original survey.

Due to the fact that, in the survey, 3/6 cadets reported that they felt war and conflict news media surrounding U.S. involvement in such situations was at least a little negatively biased paired

with only 1/6 who reported that they thought bias was anything better than neutral (a little positively biased), it can be inferred that cadets surveyed were, in general, at least a little weary of bias present in war and conflict media and perceived that to be mostly in a negative direction or at least not a positive one. For the 2/6 cadets who reported that they perceived war and conflict media to be neutral on the whole, it is possible that these cadets perceived bias within individual sources which, but perceived this as being mitigated when taking in a holistic view of the media-scape, as indicated in Carpenter's work. All of the surveyed cadets chose to respond to this question, which indicates the possibility that they were passionate about the topic at hand, or that they did not find the question to be particularly political or sensitive in nature.

Responses to question 3 of the interview, which corresponded with question 4 of the survey, showed that the cadets interviewed all felt that there was some level of bias present in news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict as a whole. Although justifications for responses were mixed, the common themes of biases created by social media, organizations' viewpoints and sizes, information accessibility, and approaches to news coverage indicated that cadets had an awareness that bias could be caused by factors outside of political motivations. Interestingly, the social media framework of pushing out content and instances of both over- and under-regulation had positive and negative impacts, according to cadets, amongst them spread of misinformation but also drives for "authenticity" especially within smaller news organizations (this was mentioned by Cadet D, but also touched upon by Cadet B in response to interview question 5). These responses indicated that while cadets did perceive bias across the board, the biases present in the general landscape of this type of coverage were not viewed as being the same, but rather produced by a number of factors, which may have affected the sources that cadets preferred using overall. It was noted by Cadet D that cherry-picking of information and presentation with a political environment was evident especially when considering Fox News' Tucker Carlson. "Suddenly, you don't have to read between the lines," he said. In conjunction with previous statements made by Cadet B in

reference to Fox News, there seemed to be a level of distrust, at least for those specific cadets, in response to content produced by this major outlet. This is interesting when compared with Cadet A's analysis that sometimes the left was quicker to villainize in reports and took more of a black and white approach, while he perceived the right as taking a more nuanced approach, due to Fox News being a right-wing network.

Responses to questions 5 and 6 of the war and conflict news media section of the survey showed that while none of the cadets perceived the information presented in the media regarding U.S. involvement in war and conflict had high degrees of either inaccuracy or accuracy, they tended to perceive greater accuracy from their preferred sources. In general, the average rating of accuracy was 2.83 out of 5, with 5 being "extremely accurate," and rose to 3.5 when considering preferred sources. However, only one cadet rated this accuracy as above a 3 in either poll, indicating that there was some level of doubt regarding accuracy amongst all respondents. Paired with responses from previous survey questions, these results could indicate that while cadets relied heavily on digital sources for their war and conflict news media, they also took this information from their preferred sources with a grain of salt. These questions were also responded to by all cadets, indicating again that they were either passionate about the topic and/or did not feel that these were problematic responses to provide.

The "grain-of-salt" mentality was also displayed by cadets in the interview portion of this research. Although cadets gave accuracy estimates of anywhere from 50-90% in reports, their responses indicated that they did not ever totally trust one specific source and preferred to check multiple sources. "I don't take any information and run with it," said Cadet C, who said the only sources she would be less likely to cross-check would be scholarly articles which were peer reviewed. In addition, responses to question 4 of the interview showed that cadets felt that broad details were easier to report on, but showed more wariness of the nuances and finer details of situations that were reported, especially without knowing for sure what was happening on the

ground. Cadets A and D both said that talking to more soldiers who were actually taking part in the conflicts could help with this issue, and Cadet A specifically said that this is something he would like to see more of across the board, which lies in the skillsets of embedded journalists. This proved interesting, when considered alongside the cadets' mentions of greater trust in smaller independent news sources, due to results from Carpenter's study, which also encouraged multiple-source use to be the most informed about war and conflict situations (Carpenter 2007, p. 771). This provides further support for Schmidt's assertion that current and former service members tended to be more trusting of their preferred sources, however isn't totally reflected in all cadet responses, perhaps due to the approach that cadets were taking in their consumption processes. Paired with the cadets' claims, this raises questions about which frames cadets felt were most trustworthy in war and conflict reporting and if they viewed all embedded reporting as equally valid.

Cadets A and B also touched upon the ability of social media to put coverage "on blast," whether or not it was factually correct and both saw this as a negative thing. These responses indicated that cadets were not fully trusting of any one source, felt that more talking to troops as sources could benefit accuracy of information in coverage, and that the social media design of getting out information was problematic in some ways. The answers indicated why cadets may have felt the need to cross-check across sources, but also starting points for future changes in reporting in regards to using soldiers as sources and social media news coverage. It should be noted that in a previous response to question 3, Cadet B noted that the government is not always forthcoming with information, something which was reiterated by Cadet D in response to question 4. This indicates that cadets understood that full knowledge of a situation would be difficult to uncover, in part due to governmental restrictions on the publication of that information.

Looking holistically at the data collected from this part of the survey it is reasonable to conclude that respondents did not feel threatened when responding to most of the war and conflict media questions. However, the researcher was met with some resistance to responding when

questions asked for specific beyond base-level general statements, as shown in question 3. While this could have been caused for many reasons, it is plausible to infer that some of this may have been due to cadet anxieties over potential political coding that could be interpreted from their responses caused either by social- or institutional pressures. An overall intake of this survey information also shows the importance of digital news sources like websites and social media for young cadets consuming war and conflict news information, as well as their general regard of this content as at least partially negatively biased and wariness of its factual accuracy. War and conflict media survey results show that, at least with respect to the specific cadets who responded, while younger military components may be more reliant on online and social media sources, the findings reported by Schmidt in 2020 remain consistent, in that they show a general wariness of war and conflict news media amongst current and former service members.

On the whole, interview responses showed an overall willingness to respond to all interviewer questions, including ones which asked for greater specificity in answers. This indicates that cadets may not have feared possible political coding which could have been read into their responses or felt at ease with the confidentiality precautions taken by the researcher. It could have also been attributed to the interview format which allowed them to give more nuanced responses, something which may have made cadets feel like their responses were less likely to become politically coded and problematic. A look at interview content overall indicates that cadets were invested in war and conflict news media regardless of if they chose to actively consume it or not. There were also repeating trends of cross-checking sources, greater trust of independent news organizations, use of social media, and indications for more reporter interaction with soldiers across responses. These findings reaffirm survey results that indicated greater reliance on digital accessing of sources for cadets, while also remaining consistent with Schmidt's 2020 findings.

SERVICE INTERESTS:

The intended purpose of this part of the survey was to screen for any correlation between responses toward war and conflict media questions and cadet service interests, however, with such a small sample size it is difficult to draw any significant conclusions. With this in mind, results yielded from the service interests section of the survey showed a few common themes amongst the 6 cadets who responded. The same remains true for interview findings, which could not be screened for correlation due to sample size, but still provided interesting results for consideration in regards to cadets' service interests.

Question 1 of this part of the survey asked cadets why they joined ROTC. 5/6 of the cadets responded and common themes amongst the provided answers included dedication to service: "...it's a way to do my duty for my country," said one cadet in their response. Another cadet responded something similar, and one similarly noted that they had always had military ambitions. Alongside this, career was another motivator touched upon by name by 3 cadets and implied by a fourth who said that ROTC gave him "direction" likely in reference to his life and career goals, as well as by another who indirectly implied this when talking about military aspirations. The former cadet also introduced a moral element in their response, "doing something I consider 'good,'" which indicated a sense of pride in their ROTC career, something which seemed to be shared in the tone of all other participant responses, including one which mentioned leadership as a motivation. One cadet also mentioned the educational benefits of joining ROTC with "pay for college," referring to the scholarship option which is available for ROTC cadets who contract with the U.S. military within a certain timeframe during their ROTC career and is also affected by the number of scholarships each battalion is able to designate. Another cadet mentioned familial pressure to gain a college education. Some cadets may have chosen not to answer due to the personal nature of this question, however the response rate of 5/6 indicates that most cadets felt secure sharing these personal details.

In the corresponding interview question, cadets again offered a variety of reasons for joining ROTC. These cadets all mentioned scholarships as an initial draw, as well as the guaranteed career and financial benefits of serving in their answers. This indicates a strong interest in the potential of ROTC to reduce educational debt and provide future careers, and therefore income. Importantly, a prior interest in military or law enforcement work was noted by 4/5 cadets, and although not mentioned by Cadet D in response to this question, though it is something which may be inferred due to his prior service as a military policeman and intent to commission as a military police officer. Additionally, cadets A, C, and E all mentioned the importance of their education in responses, indicating a strong desire amongst some cadets to receive higher education. It should be noted that Cadets C and E, both females, sought to continue their education beyond undergraduate degrees, something which was not mentioned by male interview subjects. Although survey responses indicated a certain amount of pride taken by cadets in their decisions to join ROTC, interviewees presented themselves more earnestly in their responses, and while Cadet D mentioned leadership, this seemed more related to his other interview responses which indicated a desire to challenge himself. Cadet E's mention of status was the only one of its kind, although Cadet A also hinted at something similar, indicating that this was not the most important consideration for other cadets or was more of an added benefit than a key motivator. The other motivations for joining ROTC, including previous experience in high school ROTC programs or the military and program accessibility indicated that cadets' exposure was also a factor for joining ROTC.

The next question in this section of the survey was in regards to participants' intent to continue on with their ROTC training at the given point in time. While all 6 cadets responded to the question, only 5/6 reported definite "yes" answers, while one responded that they were not sure. This indicates that while the trend amongst cadets moved toward continued interest in training, at least one cadet harbored some uncertainty about continuing on at the time of survey taking. The dedication of cadets toward continuing training may have, in part, been influenced by the fact that

4/6 takers were in their third year or more, a point at which many cadets are asked to contract with the military or exit from ROTC training. However, personal dedication to service may have also been a prime motivator, given the pride expressed in the answers to question 1.

Interview responses to question 2 of the service interests segment of the interview revealed that cadets were motivated to continue on in their training for a number of reasons in addition to contracts, which were not indicated to be prime motivators, although important because all 5/5 cadets interviewed had already been contracted. Due to 4/5 subjects being in their 4th year of training, the closeness of their commissioning ceremonies was a key factor, and was also a strong motivator for Cadet A who was still in his 3rd year of training. In addition, many cadets indicated a passion for their work in ROTC or saw it as a way to challenge themselves. This indicates that cadets felt invested in their careers as ROTC cadets, which also served as a reason for finishing their training. Cadet C mentioned education in her response, while Cadet D's answer indicated a desire to secure the financial situation of his future family, having come from a financially disadvantaged background. These factors showed that both higher education and financial security were on the minds of at least some cadets as they considered continuing on in the ROTC careers and subsequent military careers. Interestingly only Cadets A and E indicated any sort of past doubt in their responses, which could be read as something which not all cadets felt or information which not all cadets felt forthcoming about disclosing. These responses showed that personal motivations varied but were just as much, if not more, important as reasons for continuing on in training than contracts, indicating that ROTC participation was not just contractual, but personal for responding cadets.

The researcher next asked about MOS designations and preferences that cadets might have, with the intent of seeing if these specialties might coincide closely with specialties working closely with war and conflict incursions. Results showed that cadets had a wide range of interests, with some interested in intelligence operations (cybersecurity, military intelligence) and others in

more direct involvement in combat with positions such as armor, field artillery and aviation. One cadet mentioned an interest in military police, a position which gathers both intelligence and is directly involved in military law enforcement anti-terrorism measures. Another cadet mentioned being a submarine officer, indicating an interest in demanding work as an officer in a highly specific environment. While these responses did not necessarily show what the researcher was looking for, they indicated that cadets had a wide range of interests when it comes to MOS and that each had given this topic thought, exemplified by the fact that all cadets chose to respond to this question.

Interview findings showed that 4/5 cadets had already been assigned their MOS, with Cadet A showing optimism toward his future assignment. Of the cadets who had already been assigned, all showed at least contentment with their designations, although one noted frustration with the process (Cadet B), another held some reservations about not diversifying his portfolio (Cadet D), and others noted educational impacts on MOS which complicated these feelings (Cadets C and E). Half of the assigned cadets were on their ideal paths, however cadets B and E had designations which weren't their first choices. MOS interests and designations varied, but interests in military police, armor, and aviation officer positions were stated by at least 2 participants each, while one participant explained that she intended to join the JAG corps and had an educational delay in her process in order to receive the necessary degree for this path. These results showed that responding cadets, for the most part, were making due with their MOS assignments, regardless of them being their first pick or not. This indicated a passion for military work, as well as particular interest in positions more closely related to war and conflict, however survey sample size is not large enough to justify correlation beyond the interview group.

Paired with a follow up survey question, which all cadets responded to, that asked whether cadets would prefer to serve as active duty, reserve or national guard, there is perhaps some support for an argument to be made that the cadets shared an interest in playing significant roles in military

operations and perhaps additionally an interest in being more directly involved in war and conflict. This due to the fact that all cadets said they would prefer to go active duty, however interview analysis showed that cadets had various reasons for this choice, and that direct involvement with war and conflict was not stated as a motivation by any interviewed cadet. While all interviewed cadets said they would prefer to active duty, reasons had to do with status and rank increase potential (Cadets A, B, and E) and also the ability to do military work full-time (Cadets B and C). In actuality, only 1/3 already assigned cadets were active duty, while the other 2 were reserves (in the case of Cadet E, due to educational and career goals for a nursing degree and interest in joining the Army Nurse Corps). In the case of Cadet C, there was an educational delay in her assignment due to intent to receive her Juris Doctorate. This indicates that preference toward active-duty service preference had more to do with status, rank mobility, and full-time military work than it did involvement with war and conflict. Additionally, only Cadet A expressed some concern about his preference toward active duty, citing the potential strain it might put on future family life. This, paired with Cadet D's earlier mentions of providing financial stability for his future family indicates that at least some cadets were thinking about future family life in their considerations, as well as the potential positive and negative effects that military life may have on this.

Question 5 dealt with post-commissioning post choices (i.e.: the locations which cadets would like to be stationed). 3/6 cadets responded, while 2 said they preferred not to say, and another cadet expressed that they were not sure at this time. For the cadets who chose to list post choices, both national and international posts were listed as potential options, with particular interest in European posts ("Germany," "anywhere in Europe"). The lack of response to this question may have been due to its personal nature which may have made some cadets feel uncertain about disclosing due to the themes of the rest of the survey.

All interview participants gave responses to this question. They listed a variety of places; however, Fort Carson in Colorado was directly mentioned by all but one of the cadets (Cadet C). 3

cadets also listed Hawaii (Cadets B, C, and D), and the same was true for [South] Korea (Cadets A, B, C). 2/5 cadets also listed locations in Europe, Germany (Cadet A and C) and Italy (Cadet C). This variety indicates cadet interests in both national and international locations, with special interest in Fort Carson held by most cadets. The interviewees' responses to the "why" portion of this question indicated that post preferences were due to a number of reasons, including interest in travel and culture, preference toward certain landscapes and interests in locations close to the areas they called home. Cadet D also mentioned educational opportunities at Fort Bragg. Though none of the cadets had been assigned posts yet, responses to this question indicated that cadets were open to a variety of locations but had preference to those which would allow them an opportunity to travel, live in a landscape they liked and/or to be closer to home.

The final question in this section of the survey asked cadets to indicate the number of years which they planned to remain in service for. 6/6 cadets responded to this question with 1 saying 4-6 years, 2 others reporting 7-9 years and the rest responding 15+. These answers showed that on the whole, most cadets were interested in long careers with the military, beyond the required 4-6 years that they would have to complete post-commissioning. It is plausible that these responses were perhaps influenced by the pride expressed in question 1, as all responding cadets planned to be involved in military service for upwards of 7 years.

Interview findings showed that 4/5 cadets spoken to planned to serve at least 10 years in the military (Cadets A, B, C, and D). Additionally, 3/5 said they planned to serve 20 or more years (Cadets A, B, and D). Many responses left room for re-evaluation at the end of their estimated time periods and said they may take on more years if they were enjoying what they were doing. For Cadet E, her intention to serve 6 years to meet minimum requirements showed shorter service goals, however she left room open to serve for longer. Cadet C expressed shorter service goals as well, reporting she planned to serve a definite 10 and would decide how she felt once she got to that point. All male participants expressed interest in serving 20 years or more, with Cadet D having

already completed 5 years of service as an enlisted soldier. Cadet A disclosed that he thought he would be able to enjoy service for that long, while Cadet B cited retirement benefits, and Cadet D said that 20 years was of goal of his, however this could also be tied to his desire to achieve financial security for himself and his future family, as stated in previous responses. Responses in general indicated that most cadets intended to serve longer than minimum requirements, however the two female cadets in the set reported shorter lengths than the men, despite leaving room for later reevaluation. This could perhaps indicate shorter service goals for women across ROTC, but a larger sample size would be needed to make this correlation and survey findings have no way of supporting this claim due to all participants being male. The interview findings also reconfirmed survey findings' indication that cadets trended toward longer service careers beyond minimum requirements. Responses did not necessarily back up that pride played a factor in this, however revealed that, for some cadets, money may have been a motivator, alongside a maintained passion for their work.

The combination of responses provided in the service interests section of this survey showed that for the majority of responding cadets, there was a sense of pride in their work with the military which could have played a key role not only in their decision to join ROTC, but also their choices to continue on in the program, interest in serving in active-duty positions, and maintaining long careers with the military. Interview findings showed that cadets were interested in ROTC and military service, but that financial benefits like scholarships, guaranteed careers, retirement aid, and financial security played a role for many cadets, alongside passions for the work and leadership opportunity. These trends remained true of both ROTC and military service ambitions for the surveyed cadets, who also showed interest in the ability of this work to help them travel, further their education, and provide for future families. Interestingly it was not female cadets who mentioned families in their responses, but male cadets. While cadets showed passion in their

responses, demeanor was earnest, indicating that it was more than a sense of pride which motivated their actions.

Although the survey and interview sample sizes were too small to make any meaningful correlations between service interests and war and conflict news media consumption and perceptions, survey results show that cadets who took part in this research showed interest in consuming war and conflict news media, especially digitally. This also remained true of interview results, which showed cadets' specific interest in using social media, specifically Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter to follow news outlets and military members for this type of information. Survey and interview results also showed that these cadets perceived some negative bias within war and conflict news media sources and were wary of the factual accuracy of sources, even though survey results said that they perceived their preferred sources to have greater factual accuracy in general. Paired with interview responses, this indicated a general "grain-of-salt" mentality to war and conflict news media consumption, which promoted cross-checking of sources by cadets, regardless of if they felt that their preferred sources were of higher quality than the general mediascape. All cadets reported that they wouldn't put full stock in any one report, despite trusting certain outlets more than others (elite versus non-elite organizations, Fox News versus CNN, U.S. versus global sources, etc.). Survey results additionally show that cadets mostly had strong interests in creating military careers as active-duty officers and indicated that most cadets carried a sense of pride in the work they were doing. Beyond this, interview results reaffirmed cadet interests in active-duty careers and showed that service motivations moved beyond pride to include both financial interests and passions as key components for their continued service.

CONCLUSION

The original purpose of this research was to investigate the war and conflict media consumption habits and perceptions of university ROTC cadets and use questions about service interests to screen for correlations between these habits and their interests. Although survey and interview response rates were too limited to allow for broad conclusions and not large enough to screen for correlations, the research provided insight into cadet habits, perceptions, and service interests which pose interesting questions for future studies. This is especially important given that research on ROTC cadets in general is limited, despite their importance within U.S. military leadership as second lieutenants' post-graduation and potential to rise to higher positions after that.

The most significant shortcoming of the present study was the sample size which the researcher was able to use for evaluation of their original research questions. With such small response rates, it is difficult to make any meaningful conclusions about what ROTC cadet war and conflict media consumption habits and perceptions may look like on the whole, and results must be considered only within research parameters despite the interesting questions which they raise. Additionally, military practices and regulations of political statements could have played a role in the researcher's ability to elicit response to cadets, alongside current world events, with Russia proceeding with its initial invasion of Ukraine close to the time that data collection began. Future researchers would have to take both of these factors into consideration for their studies, as well as experiment with other methods for eliciting cadet response, as researcher methods in this study proved to be unfruitful. Another potential source of bias could lie in researcher survey and interview solicitation methods, which included heavy reliance on personal contacts in order to get in touch with cadets. Additional reasons for bias in the data collected could have come from ROTC cadet ages, regions of origin, and gender, which could be very different across a more representative sample of cadets and yield potentially entirely dissimilar results. It is also worth noting that

interview research could be difficult to conduct on a large scale without a significantly longer research time frame.

Questions asked in the war and conflict media sections of both survey and interview elicited responses which supported past research on current- and former service members by Schmidt in 2020 which found that this population harbored a general wariness of war and conflict news media. However, this research also found that the cadets studied tended to make use of digital sources, especially social media and independent news outlets (often only published online), for accessing this type of media. If replicated on a larger scale, possibly by studying ROTC cadets in an official manner or by expanding research to include younger enlisted service members, these findings could yield interesting insight into the consumption habits and attitudes toward news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict which may prove to be a fruitful resource in ROTC, military, and reporting settings.

In addition to this, cadet responses to this research indicated that most perceived bias in war and conflict news media sources, as well as average but imperfect levels of accuracy in reporting. Cadets mentioned cross-checking of information as a method of accounting for this, which would provide interesting insight into cadet media consumption habits, if replicated on a larger scale. It could also be interesting to see if this “grain-of-salt” mentality toward war and conflict news media consumption remained consistent between ROTC cadets and enlisted troops of the same age range. Additionally, cadets’ calls for more interaction with troops on the ground to provide greater accuracy was consistent with findings by Schmidt and would show that this is a trend across current, former, and incoming military proponents, should research on a greater number of cadets be able to produce the same results. It would also be useful to study military member perspectives on methods of including more information from soldiers as sources, without jeopardizing governmental security and without creating news that strayed from neutrality and did not create a pro-soldier bias. With that information, news agencies could adapt their strategies to provide

information that was more trusted by military members, strengthening the military-press relationship as a whole.

Other interesting questions for study in this area would be looking into what kinds of bias cadets find more or less problematic when consuming war and conflict news media, as well as additional research into if trends toward increased trust of non-elite news sources was consistent across a broader sample of cadets and, if so, what factors played into this and how the actual non-elite war and conflict news media landscape compared to that of elite sources. Additionally, should evidence be sufficient, it would be possible and worthwhile to study non-elite embedding procedures for comparison with elite sources. Answers to these questions could provide valuable insight that could help ROTC leadership to better understand the consumption habits of cadets, as well as aid in news organizations' ability to adapt to the quality demands of service members. Furthermore, future research could also consider whether a growing distrust of Fox News was a trend across service member populations, and whether this was more because of the channel's political alignment or due to the reporting practices of the organization – information which would be useful to networks at large and Fox specifically.

Due to cadets' heavy reliance on social media, and mentions of podcast use in their responses, research posed interesting questions relating to the presentation of the war and conflict news media which cadets were consuming. Paths for further research in this area could include looking into if cadets leaned into consumption of news media which they could quickly and/or passively collect while working on other things, a quality often true of social media posts and podcasts alike. Additionally, future research could analyze whether, if this trend was replicated on a larger scale, busy cadet lifestyles play a role in creating these habits, due to packed schedules between schoolwork and ROTC-related training and curriculum.

Responses to the service interests portion of both survey and interview research also provided insight into the responding cadets' decisions and raised many questions for future research. Cadets' answers for why they chose to join ROTC indicated that reducing educational debt and financial security were important, alongside interest in service jobs and law enforcement, as well as receiving higher education. If this trend was maintained in a larger group, it would provide information about why young people may join ROTC which the U.S. military could leverage in their recruitment strategy. Additional questions for study in this area include figuring out why cadets found military and law enforcement work so appealing, if the trend continued across a greater sample.

When considering what cadet responses indicated in terms of their desires to finish out ROTC and continue onto military careers, motivations went beyond contract fulfillment and were personal for each cadet. Future research could look for trends in personal motivations of young people for joining ROTC and/or enlisting in military service, which could also help military recruitment strategy while also being indicative of trends affecting the younger population at large as they enter adulthood. The passion for service, but earnestness in responding to interviewer questions reflected by ROTC cadet subjects could also be tested to consistency across a greater sample, which could speak to cadet behavioral tendencies and/or military training frameworks, if replicated. In addition, screening for cadet sensitivity to financial concerns of their ROTC and non-ROTC peers, in response to their overall unwillingness to accept compensation for participating in this study, would also provide interesting insight into the cadet population's priorities and sense of self.

This study also yielded results which would provide interesting insight from a gender perspective, if replicated on a larger scale. Pathways for future research in this area include looking into if the tendency to for female cadets view themselves as less actively engaged with war and conflict news media was a trend consistent across a larger sample, as well as if female cadets in a

larger sample were more likely to report lower numbers of expected years in service than their male counterparts. It would also provide interesting insight to screen whether family factored into the military considerations of male and female cadets at different rates, and if male cadets tended to factor in family more, as seemed to be indicated in this study, though not in a significant manner due to sample size. Answers to these questions could provide information useful for analyzing differences between cadets based on gender both in terms of their media consumption habits and their service inclinations.

Despite being unable to totally meet researcher goals due to a limited response rate, this work confirms that studying the interaction of university ROTC cadets with war and conflict news media, as well as collecting information on their service interests is a worthwhile area for further research. The responses provided by young cadets raise questions for news organizations, scholars, and the military alike which indicate that future research could bring about findings fruitful for greater knowledge and development for all parties involved.

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APPENDIX

A - Qualtrics Survey

Pt. 1 - Introduction

- Survey description
- Consent form

Pt. 2 - Demographics (optional)

- Age (fill in the blank)
- Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply)
 - White
 - Black
 - Asian
 - Hispanic
 - Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander
 - Other
- Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
- Region, state or city of origin (either where you have lived the longest, or the place you have lived which you associate most closely with. If you choose to provide city, please also provide state). (fill in the blank)
- Year in ROTC
 - 1st year
 - 2nd year

- 3rd year
- 4th year or more
- College/University achieved or expected degrees (majors and/or minors) (fill in the blank)

Pt. 3 - War and Conflict News Media

- Do you actively keep up with news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict?
 - Yes (I consume this type of media at least 1x per week)
 - No (I don't consume this type of media at all)
 - Sometimes (I consume this type of media at least 1-2x per month)
 - I have in the past, but not in the past month or more
 - Prefer not to say
- What sources do you use most often to consume news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict? (select all that apply)
 - Newspapers (print and online editions)
 - Social media
 - Magazines
 - Online news websites
 - Other (fill in the blank)
 - Prefer not to say
- Of the sources you selected, indicate which you use the most. (select one)
 - Newspapers (print and online editions)
 - Social media
 - Magazines
 - Online news websites
 - Other (fill in the blank)

- Prefer not to say
- In general, do you consider war and conflict media surrounding the U.S. to be
 - Mostly negatively biased
 - A little negatively biased
 - Neutral
 - A little positively biased
 - Mostly positively biased
 - Prefer not to say
- IN GENERAL, how would you rate the accuracy of information presented in war and conflict news media regarding the U.S. on a scale of 1 to 5? (1 - extremely inaccurate; 5 - extremely accurate)
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - Prefer not to say
- For your PREFERRED SOURCE, how would you rate the accuracy of information presented in war and conflict news media regarding the U.S. on a scale of 1 to 5? (1 - extremely inaccurate; 5 - extremely accurate)
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5

- Prefer not to say

Pt. 4 - service interests

- Why did you decide to participate in ROTC? (If you do not wish to respond to this question, write “Prefer not to say”.) (long answer)*
- At this time, do you plan to continue your ROTC training until graduation?*
- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- Prefer not to say
- Which military occupational specialties (MOS) are you considering for yourself at this time?
Name 3. (If your MOS has already been assigned, indicate this and also indicate 1-3 preferred MOS choices if different. If you do not plan on continuing ROTC training, write “N/A”. If you do not wish to respond to this question, write “Prefer not to say”.) (short answer)
- Would you prefer to go active duty, reserve or national guard post-graduation?
- Active duty
- Reserve
- National Guard
- Prefer not to say
- What are your top 3 post choices after completion of ROTC training? (If your post has already been assigned, indicate this and also indicate 1-3 preferred posts if different. If you do not plan on continuing ROTC training, write, “N/A”. If you do not wish to respond to this question, write “Prefer not to say”.) (short answer)*
- How many years do you plan to serve at this time?*
- 4 - 6

- 7 - 9
- 10 - 15
- 16 - 20
- 20+
- Prefer not to say

C - Interview Demographics Form (optional)

- Age (short answer)
- Race/Ethnicity
 - White
 - Black
 - Asian
 - Hispanic
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
 - Other (fill in the blank)
- Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other (fill in the blank)
- City/State of Origin (short answer)
- Year in ROTC:
 - 1st year
 - 2nd year
 - 3rd year
 - 4+ year
- College/University expected degrees (short answer)

C - Interview Questions

Participants may respond “prefer not to say” if the interviewer asks any question which they wish not to answer.

Pt. 1 - War and Conflict News Media

- Do you actively keep up with news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict? Is there a reason for this?
- What sources do you use most often to consume news media surrounding U.S. involvement in war and conflict? Which of these do you find yourself using the most and why?
- In general, do you think that there is bias present in the information presented modern in war and conflict news media regarding the U.S.? Why or why not? (How much bias?)
- In general, what do you think of the factual accuracy of this media?
- How do your perceptions of bias and factual accuracy of information change (or not change) when considering your preferred source for this type of news media? Are there any factors which you would attribute to making this difference?

Pt. 2 - Service Interests

- Why did you decide to participate in ROTC?
- At this time, do you plan to continue your ROTC training until graduation? Why or why not?
- Have you already been assigned your MOS?
 - a) If yes: how do you feel about this assignment? Is there any MOS that you would prefer?
 - b) If no: Which MOS are you considering for yourself at this time? Why does this stick out to you?
- Would you prefer to go active duty, reserve or national guard post-graduation and why?
- Have you been assigned a post?

- a) If yes: how do you feel about this assignment? Is there a post you would prefer?
- b) If no: What are your top 3 post choices after completion of ROTC training?
- How many years do you plan to serve at this time? Why do you say this?