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**American Civil War Media Dependency**



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**ABSTRACT:**

*This study ties contemporary media dependency theory with the historical reliance on mass media during the U.S. Civil War. Researchers used a thematic textual analysis of references to newspapers and magazines in personal correspondence found in 32 published collections of approximately 1,000 soldiers’ letters. Consistent with previous media dependency research, soldiers needed media information for understanding of self in the horrific world they were now experiencing; for orientation of actions in the battles (or anticipated behavior for battles expected); and for entertainment relief as escapism. Researchers also found additional media dependency components: a validation of the experience; reliance for a better explanation than what an individual correspondent could express; a check on personal disagreements about the coverage due to what the soldier witnessed or thought; and as a support of an emotional longing for news about their locale, family, and friends.*

**KEYWORDS:**

MEDIA DEPENDENCY

U.S. CIVIL WAR

NEWSPAPERS

MEDIA HISTORY

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

**INTRODUCTION**

This interdependency study ties previous contemporary media dependency theories with the historical Civil War wartime reliance on the mass media of that era. As historical theory building based on previous media dependency studies, the aim is to understand why and how soldiers relied on their mass media when the Civil War distanced combatants from familiar surroundings and put them in a bloody war. In personal letters, both Northern and Southern soldiers referred to newspapers and magazines. The purpose here is not to seek mere mentions of the war in print media, but rather to see how soldiers relied on the then mass media during those wartime conditions as well as to add previous media dependency findings.

The Civil War era fits well into a historical exploration into nineteenth century letters and newspapers (Dicken Garcia, 1991; Zboray & Zboray, 1997). The years 1861-1865 had a reading and letter-writing public due to the influence of family, church, schools and academies, associations and institutes, and private and public libraries (Zboray, 1993). In fact, Iowa Captain William Vermilion wrote to his wife on June 23, 1865: “It won’t do for me to resign and leave my men just at this time when they need my services worse than they ever have. No other man knows as much about books and papers as I do” (Elder, 2003, pg. 322).

The United States in the nineteenth century had a restless and constantly moving population who relied on letters to maintain long-distance relationships. Those letters were lifelines (Zboray, 1993). Such correspondence as well as local newspaper publications became deputy communities outside of the usual geographical sites with familiar references to hometown places, updates, and news coverage. When the American Civil War (1861-1865) distanced soldiers from their local surroundings, personal letters along with familiar hometown newspapers became essential information sources.

At the same time, the nineteenth century public had a strong news consciousness, a desire to be informed, as an almost fundamental requirement of citizenship (Zboray, 1993). In fact, Vermilion gave this imagined scene in a March 24, 1863, letter to his wife: “I sit sometimes, and shut my eyes and imagine I am there, and my love is sitting near me, or lying in the lounge, and the fire is burning cheerfully, and the hearth is swept clean and bright and the Post and Tribune are lying on the round table at my side” (Elder, 2003, pg. 73).

The newspaper choices were massive. The 1860 Census pointed out the aggregate number of papers and periodicals of every class as being 4,051, an increase of more than 60 percent since 1850, with an annual circulation of almost a million copies, a more than 100 percent increase in ten years (Kennedy, 1862). The public read circulating magazines and local newspapers; they could also read multiple small-town weeklies, and had choices of more than 400 daily newspapers (Lee, 1937/1973). The largest northern daily newspaper, the *New York Herald* relied on up to 60 war correspondents in the field and had a circulation of 77,000 daily; and the weekly *New York Tribune* with its multi-correspondents had a weekly circulation of 200,000 (Endres, 1998). People sought information, especially under crisis conditions, there became a great dependence upon news. Constant news was crucial. In fact, soldier morale related to reading newspapers, according to Civil War historian James McPherson (1998). As a civil war, both sides spoke and read the same language; news accounts could also be dangerous, alert an enemy, place troops in danger, be wrong, and hurt morale about battle losses.

Repeated press extras following major events led to circulation growth of up to four million by 1870. The impetus was there. As Lee (1937/1973) recounted about 1861, “Never did an army before possess so much of cultivated intellect, or demand such contributions for its mental food as that now marshaled in its country’s defense.” Such demand indicated great media dependency by soldiers and the civilian populations alike.

**MEDIA DEPENDENCY**

Media dependency proposes an integral relationship among audiences, media, and the larger social system. Media dependency also “takes into account the human motivations that surround media usage and affect the process of understanding” (Grant, 1996, pg. 199). Especially when people are distanced from the comforting mantle of family, church, and neighborhood (Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Tai, Lu, & Hu, 2019), people turn to the mass media for social and emotional support, particularly under wartime conditions.

While Ball-Rokeach’s study and others are not historical, they found that during crises, such as war, the need media rises. For example, fantasy escape-type of media rises dramatically; consequently, there is an increased need for entertainment. Too, when social change and conflict are especially high, established institutions, beliefs, and practices become challenged, and force an individual to reevaluate and make new choices, thereby increasing dependence upon mass media. Unlike more stable times when dependency on mass media might go down, the reliance on the media for information becomes vital and increases during crises.

The more dependent individuals are on the mass media for fulfilling their needs, the more important the media will be to those persons. Media dependence accordingly correlates with the significance and influence of the media even though people might use the mass media differently, even selectively, and can be affected differently. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) found that individual and demographic factors such as attitudes, values, and interests influence media dependency—not just the necessity for general information. Moreover, media dependency indicates a complex relationship and may be shaped by outside conditions, the culture, various social conditions, and the availability of non-media alternatives. The more alternatives an individual has for meeting information requirements, the less dependent the individual might become on the established mass media. During the American Civil War, the few communication alternatives were limited to oral speech and personal letters, thus, necessitating a continued reliance on the existing mass media of newspapers and magazines.

**THE CIVIL WAR AND MEDIA DEPENDENCY**

The Civil War focus provides that complex societal relationship between the wartime media and a military reading audience torn from their familiar local, social, and emotional support of families, churches, and neighborhoods. Media dependency becomes one way to understand that war’s impact. Merskin (1999) wrote that when traditional norms and roles are in a state of flux, the need is particularly great because the media can reduce ambiguity.

As with previous populations studied (Morton & Duck, 2000; Jang & Baek, 2019), soldiers required mass media information for an understanding of self in the horrific world they now experienced. They also needed such media for orientation of action toward the battles they faced, or for anticipated behavior for the battles expected. Such need for media would provide entertainment, as relief or escapism (Loges, 1994; Ng, Chan, Balwicki, Huxley, & Chiu, 2019). Yet, it is possible that media dependence also could motivate problem solving and emotional longing for connections to home.

This study acknowledges the deprivation explanation and the influence of a situation on an individual’s experience and adaptation to the horrific situations. The stress of the 1861-1865 wartime environments can indicate soldiers’ media needs, much like Vandebosch’s (2000) “captive audience” prisoners who maintained their “former viewing, reading, and listening patterns (outside) and the personal needs and media possibilities in their new environment (inside)” (pg. 531). The militia in the Civil War already had mass media reading patterns; and now in a wartime environment of soldiering, they also had possible new media needs.

**THE HISTORICAL STUDY ON CIVIL WAR MEDIA DEPENDENCY**

To understand how Civil War militia depended upon the media, researchers conducted a thematic textual analysis of letter writers’ references to newspapers and magazines. As “bottom up” research (Stone, 1997) of the text found in private correspondence, researchers sought those patterns that became themes for diverse types of media reliance. This strategic method meant the historical primary sources were personal correspondence found in 32 published collections of approximately 1,000 soldiers’ letters. Union and Confederate combatant writers had varied levels of literacy, education, and background, and they represented all military ranks. The researchers noted when and how soldiers mentioned the press (Ryan, 1996).

The goal was an understanding of how nineteenth century soldiers acted when using and depending upon the mass media during the Civil War era, and, through media dependency theory, what meaning could be determined by that use. Researchers distinguished between a mere mention of a newspaper or magazine to some element of dependence by showing a purpose, need, habit, craving, or reliance on a newspapers and magazines.

The analysis began with contemporary media dependency theory with categories taken from DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) and Ball-Rokeach (1998) for likenesses and differences for new repeated patterns. The goal was to understand the repeated patterns of media dependency from soldiers’ media references in the almost 1,000 letters found in published collections from both Confederate and Union soldiers.

This mass communication study is a function of the complex relationships between the media, the audience, and society as exemplified by Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976). By repeated patterns, the researchers found themes that indicated that the letters became surrogates for soldiers who sought information and social support, vital for the complex media dependency argument.

To learn more about those complex relationships, researchers first looked for the repeated themes that DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) had suggested in twentieth century media dependency system studies: understanding by knowledge, orientation for action or reaction, and entertainment for fantasy and escapism. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) previously found individual media reliance for larger societal understanding of what happened. The researchers sought such dependency in this study about the war generally or about particular campaigns or battles. The knowledge also could be individual, as to what to believe. For a larger understanding, media reliance could assist in interpreting the fighting and the war in general.

Additionally, the previously found theme of media dependency for orientation was found, based on knowledge about the war and for an individual’s future action or collective reaction on how to manage difficult situations in strange surroundings. Like findings by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), there was also the fantasy escape theme or entertainment. The Civil War print media gave soldiers a way to relax alone, or served as a type of catharsis to what had happened. The researchers sought reinforcement of themes found in previous contemporary media dependency studies as well as any new components of media dependency.

**NEW MEDIA DEPENDENCY COMPONENTS FOUND**

Additional media dependency components were found in this study, adding to previous scholarship: a validation of the experience; reliance for a better explanation than what an individual correspondent could have written; and as a check on personal disagreements with the coverage because of what the soldier witnessed or thought. Too, problem solving also was found as an elaboration on DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach’s (1989) media dependency orientation as a motivation for an action. Along with those media dependency themes, there was an additional support theme that centered on an emotional longing for news about soldiers’ locale, family, and friends.

In what here is labeled a validation theme, soldiers referred to specific news coverage of what had been experienced. Validation meant that the newspaper content correlated with an individual soldier’s experience. Here, there was an agreement with the coverage. As an example, Captain William G. Morris of North Carolina wrote to his family (8 September 1862) this validation: “You may Believe almost anything you see in the Papers about our fights because they Cannot make it much worse than it really is on the Enemy, they are Badly whipped (sic)” (Watford, 2003, pg. 63).

The soldiers’ letters included confirmation statements such as “what you will see,” “you will get,” and “watch for” to authenticate the event. Too, the speed of the newspaper account became juxtaposed to a letter’s arrival time and increased a validation of coverage. For instance, Captain Jacob Ritner wrote his wife Emeline (30 March 1863): “It is not worth while [sic] for me to try to tell you any war news; you will hear it all by the papers before a letter could get there. We look to them for the news ourselves” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 143).

In another instance, Corporal Charles Cort of the Illinois Infantry Regiment wrote in 1864 of waiting to see what the newspaper story would add and sought to validate the coverage: “I will leave off this very imperfect account and wait untill [sic] I see the newspaper stories. If you get any general account of it in the paper, I would like you to send it to me. The report is that we are to leave here in three days in what direction is uncertain” (Tomlinson, 1962, pg. 156).

Such a validation of coverage resulted in the recommendation to take a specific newspaper to keep up with what was happening because the writer could not give accurate and timely updates due to battle censorship. For example, as the war was winding down, Yankee Captain Ritner asked of his Iowan wife Emeline (8 June 1964), “I want you to take the *Hawkeye* while this campaign lasts. I can tell you but very little in my letters” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 291).

Too, there was a reliance on the media for a better explanation than the soldier could elucidate himself. In their letters, writers often asked recipients to seek the newspaper account. The soldier’s rank and previous education did not make any difference; officers, captains, and privates alike refer to newspapers’ superior detailed descriptions. For example, Rebel Captain Alfred Belo wrote in 1861, “If I have omitted any items of news or any importance, I suppose you will see it in the next Sentinel” (Watford, 2003, pg. 12).

In fact, some letter writers cited the newspapers as a superior source. North Carolinian Private John A. Jackson wrote his sister Martha (9 May 1863), “So I shal [sic] say no more about the battle for some body [sic] else can give a better description than I can and that will be put in the papers for every body [sic] to read” (Watford, 2003, pg. 110).

Several reasons contributed to the newspapers’ ability to provide a better explanation. The first is that newspapers, the medium of choice, often reached the home front before the soldiers’ letters. The telegraph assisted in the speed of coverage and so too did the war correspondent’s desire to beat the competition. Confederate Tally Simpson, son of a South Carolina senator, told his sister Anna that he had “no news to write except what you have already found through the papers” (Everson & Simpson, 1994, pg. 80). Simpson also wrote his aunt Caroline Miller after the 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg and acknowledged, “An account of it you have read in the papers by this time, and it will be useless for me to attempt to add anything of interest” (Everson & Simpson, 1994, pg. 165).

Soldiers consistently told their families to follow newspaper accounts, which they said provided better news than they could. For example, lawyer turned Confederate soldier David Pierson wrote (15 August 1861) to his father William, “You will see a complete description of the fight in the papers, and I expect more correct than what I write since theirs is from headquarters and mine from camp reports” (Cutrer & Parrish, 1997, pg. 34). Later that same year, on September 26,1863, Jacob Ritner went as far as to urge his wife to follow the papers to determine his own whereabouts, writing, “If you watch the papers for Osterhaus’ Division you will learn our whereabouts sooner than from my letters” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 212).

In recounting events, soldiers also recognized that the newspaper war coverage was regular with definitive accounts. Major William Watson, a surgeon in the Army of the Potomac, wrote (16 Dec. 1862) after the Second Battle of Bull Run, “We have had a severe battle or rather a series of battles. You will see in the Newspapers a better and more definite account than I would be able” (Fatout, 1961). The prior year, during the first Bull Run Battle at Manassas Junction, Confederate officer David Pierson wrote his father (15 August 1861) to turn to the papers for a fuller and quicker account: “You can see full particulars of the battle in the papers before this will reach you and more correct than I can possibly give you, as I can only tell you what our Regt did” (Cutrer & Parrish, 1997, pg. 42). In fact, many Union soldiers cited accurate newspaper accounts of battlefield skirmishes. Captain William Vermilion, in a May 21, 1864, letter to his wife Mary, wrote, “If you will look in the Missouri Democrat of last week you will see what the boys say is a good description of the fight at Marks Mills” (Elder, 2003, pg. 277).

Soldiers checked on the coverage as they knew newspapers would soon be running stories about bravery or their good work. As one example, John Brobst, a Wisconsin regular, wrote to his friend (and future wife) Mary Englesby (22 May 1864), “General Woods has issued an order to compliment our regt. for its good conduct on the battlefield. It was a good one. Perhaps you will see it in some of the papers soon” (Roth, 1960, pg. 61).

War correspondents often were closer to the heart of the battle than some letter writers and could thereby give a bigger picture of the happening. Additionally, journalists sometimes could write more freely than soldiers. Al Pierson, writing home (11 July 1862) told his father William, “You will get more particulars concerning the battles before Richmond from the papers than I am able to give” (Cutrer & Parrish, 1997, pg. 102). Even high-ranking officers often could not get full accounts of the war, as evidenced by Colonel Hans Christian Heg’s 1862 letter to his wife Gunild. After the Second Battle of Bull Run, he wrote “I find that the 1st, 10th, 21st and 24th Wis Regiments were all in the fight on the 8th and that they were mostly all badly cut up. The Papers will tell you more about it than I can” (Blegan, 1936, pg. 147).

Common knowledge could be dangerous, especially concerning planned troop maneuvers. The press often was blamed for a defeat, such as the Union’s loss at Bull Run. Vermont resident William Young Ripley, Sr. wrote his son, William Jr. (19 July 1861), “And there is one other thing that they ought to do, and must do—if they expect any movement, without having the enemy fully advised of their plans—and that is to hang every newspaper reporter, and editor, that they find within ten miles of Washington or any military post” (Marshall, 1999, pg. 40).

The reporting of military movements resulted in court martial. Troop movements were not telegraphed without sanction of the major general in command. In fact, almost every northern military department suppressed at least one newspaper or had its correspondent or editor arrested (Endres, 1998). For instance, Dr. Franklin Dyer recorded in April 1865: “Denyse, correspondent for the New York Herald, was sentenced by court-martial to hard labor on the public works for sending such an article for publication” (Chesson, 2003, pg. 71).

Nevertheless, even though combatants depended so much on the newspaper coverage for knowledge and orientation, soldiers added their own contributions to the coverage. As an example, Second Lieutenant Leonides L. Polk updated his wife Pamela in North Carolina (6 August 1863) after the battle of Gettysburg: “So we go. Yankee papers say that N.C. is back in the Union and quote Holden as the authority. The militia of this place is ordered out & are on duty. I saw a man today who was taken with our sick in Penn. He brought me a full list of all of them, and I sent it to the Daily Progression in Raleigh & requested the Observer copy it” (Watford, 2003, pg. 129).

Regardless of rank, soldiers could be paid by column inch as a correspondent; they then sought the coverage. Gen. Voris wrote of contribution in October 1863: “I announced an order this morning giving my views of the duties of soldiers…. a copy with it I sent to the Herald for publication. If it is published you can get a copy of the paper for preservation” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 140). As another example, Colonel Hans Christian Heg wrote to his wife (28 December 1862) to say, “I have given an account of our exploit, in capturing the Cassion, to the Governor, and Fleischer, so you will see the account of it in the papers soon” (Blegan, 1936, pg. 162).

The effort was time-consuming. Madison Bowler wrote his Minnesota wife Lizzie (18 December 1861), “I have not written a letter to any Newspaper since I left Minn. It is too much work for little pay” (Foroughi, 2008, pg. 40).

Sometimes, a particular soldier was appointed to be the correspondent. Such was the case of Harvey Reid, a former teacher from Racine, Wisconsin. He wrote his family in 1862: “Before leaving Cincinnati, Captain Williamson had asked me to become a Company correspondent to the Advocate. Thinking it might be an advantage to me, I consented” (Bryne, 1965, pg. 4).

As another reference, Theodore Upson wrote at the end of the war what news was appreciated and salient: “Colonel Grimes never got tired of talking about our Army, and the City papers still print a good deal in the way of descriptions of the different Regiments and especially those of our Corps. I gave one paper an account of our battle at Griswoldsville, and they printed it in full. They are glad to have funny anecdotes and I have told several to reporters” (Winther, 1958, pg. 178).

Another theme was the repeated patterns of the soldiers’ strong disagreement with coverage. Often, there were evaluative general statements as well as bits of evidence to prove the fraudulent accounts. For example, Lt. Col. Alan Voris wrote of the unreliability of the newspapers in 1862 during the Battle of Shiloh: “If Jack Wright knew how newspaper articles were made, and how exceedingly unreliable they were he would not feel so bad. I see by the Cincinnati Commercial that I got 14 bullet holes in my overcoat cape, or that it had lots of bullet holes in it. 14 bullet holes, enough to make a strainer of it” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 49).

Soldiers highlighted the many mistakes and lies in the coverage, especially when skirmishes and battles were lost. For example, following the occupation of Savannah, Captain Jacob Ritner wrote his wife on Christmas 1864: “You need not believe anything you see from southern papers about the opposition we met on the way here” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 398). As another example, South Carolina volunteer Tally Simpson’s August 11, 1865, letter to his sister Anna spoke of the unreliability of newspapers: “I see in one of the Columbia papers that there are four or five southerners there. This is emphatically a mistake. The only force we have there is one I mentioned above, and they go and return from Fairfax C.H. every day” (Everson & Simpson, 1994, pg. 53). Similarly, Confederate Second Lieutenant Samuel Burney wrote a Dec. 15, 1861, letter to his wife Elizabeth stating, “I understand the Ga. papers are full of accounts of a great fight on the Peninsula. There is no truth in it, but I guess you will all be apprehensive till you hear the denial of it” (Turner, 2002, pg. 81).

For the Confederacy, southern newspapers attempted to improve southern morale by downplaying failure and enthusiastically proclaiming victories, regardless of what happened (Trahan, 1998). At the same time, reporting was difficult for southern correspondents when they tried to obtain food and horses. They and northern newspaper correspondents faced threats to suppress any newspaper that published anything derogatory concerning the generals’ leadership (Trahan, 1998).

Both southern and northern newspapers were disingenuous. Early in the war, when the Union Army was in trouble, General Alvin Voris explained the coverage from Maryland: “The papers give a very imperfect idea of the war. Much of the published matter is utterly untruthful, more near fiction, being the visionary dreams of paid letter writers, and with the semi-official telegraphic war news is the fulsome praise…. An inevitable defeat is made a masterly strategic movement. A scandalous preconcerted plan of the Gen commanding. Victories are highly puffed. Defeats are immense amount of ingenuity exerted to make victories on paper” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 140). Voris continued to express his skepticism in 1864: “Our army is too light to do anything more than threaten their weak points and destroy their lines of communication. This the papers say has been effectually done, but I don’t think so” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 174).

Other soldiers also complained about the northern newspapers’ falsehoods. Major Henry Livermore Abbott wrote his father (7 November 1861): “In a word, you had better disbelieve all the stories & all the puffs in the papers, except those which have the sanction of this regt., & then you will be safe” (Scott, 1991, pg. 74). Captain Ritner disagreed with newspaper accounts of General Sherman’s planned actions: “I see the Northern papers say that Sherman is in no hurry to take the place, but is going to take his own time for it. This is all bosh” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 328).

Media dependency meant comparisons; the disagreements were not just about lying but also the extent of unrecognized military failure. William Watson wrote his father (30 October 1864) about the advance in northern Virginia: “The papers state the 2nd and 5th Corps merely went on a reconnaissance and, succeeding in developing the strength of the enemy, retired to their old positions. To tell the truth, Pa, this is not so—for we advanced with the intention and almost certainly of turning the enemy’s right flank, capturing the south side railroad, Petersburg and probably Richmond, in all of which we failed. This of course will not be published—nevertheless it is true” (Fatout, 1961, pg. 88).

Media dependency meant evaluations, too. The newspaper editorials came in for great criticism. Daniel Holt, a surgeon in the Army of the Potomac wrote his wife (4 December 1863): “I tell you how it is, Louisa, if Meade ever did a noble act in his life, it was when he concluded *not* to fight Lee in his strong hold upon the banks of Mine Run at a temperature of the weather far, far below freezing. Newspapers blame him and call him coward for not doing so; but let their editors be with me to have seen and felt what I saw and felt upon that occasion, and instead of taunts and ridicules, they would bestow words of commendation” (Greiner, Coryell, & Smither, 1994, pg. 160).

Soldiers in their letters corrected newspaper accounts. For example, Tally Simpson, a Confederate soldier from South Carolina, told his brother Richard (7 August 1861), “I suppose by this time, having consulted all the papers concerning the celebrated battle of Bull’s Run [sic], you are well posted in all the particulars of the fight. But knowing that you have formed your ideas of the battle ground by the descriptions in the papers, I inclose [sic] a drawing of the positions of both parties during the memorable conflict. The arrow points north. By examining the paper you can easily obtain a pretty correct idea of the positions of the parties when the battles began on Thursday and when [it was renewed] on Sunday” (Everson & Simpson, 1994, pg. 43).

Media dependency for comparisons meant reactions, too. Letter writers not only disagreed with particular newspaper accounts, even in their own states, but lauded a violent reaction. North Carolinian Private Jacob H. Hanes wrote his brother (16 September 1863) about an attack on an editor’s office: “I was verry (sic) much pleased to hear of the soldiers making a raid upon old Holden’s office. It undoubtedly would have been the primary step towards promoting the honor of N.C. had they pitched old Holden into the streets and broke his neck instead of his press. The Raleigh Standard has a bad effect upon the ignorant class of people who are not able to comprehend its design. It should not be allowed to be sent to the army” (Watford, 2003, pg. 133).

Such a call for violence often was the soldiers’ reaction. Major William Watson, a doctor stationed with the 105th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers, wrote after the Bloody Manassas Junction fight (1 November 1862): “I received the Bedford Gazette you sent. It is a vile sheet. One of the Boys read it and remarked he would like to hang the editor” (Fatout, 1961, pg. 26).

Newspaper coverage could be dangerous. Soldiers agreed with suppression of the press, too. Andrew Evans received a June 11, 1864, letter from his son Sam, a Union solider from Ohio, who wrote, “I would Love to see news papers that circulate that kind of Lies Suppressed. News papers talk of the ‘freedom of the Press’ and all that kind of stuff. We would have had better Success in subduing this Rebellion if 49/50 of the papers had been suppressed in the beginning [and] the army ‘correspondents’ been required to take a musket instead [of] the pen” (Engs & Brooks, 2007, pg. 263). Such threats did indeed result in mob action against newspapers (Trahan, 1998).

In the midst of lies, puffery, and newspaper suppression, soldiers sought better quality of information, regardless of whether the newspaper was from the Union or the Confederacy. They willingly traded newspapers across enemy lines for opposite battle accounts. The first instance found in this analysis was an 1862 account written by Second Lieutenant Samuel Burney to his wife Elizabeth. Burney complains: “We both saw a gentleman of our side exchange a paper with one of the scoundrels for a New York Herald. At that point on the lines the pickets do not shoot at each other” (Turner, 2002, pg. 184). He mentioned four more exchanges in 1863 and 1864.

This sharing of newspapers between the two sides was astonishing. Gen. Alvin Voris wrote in 1863 as if the exchanges were normal: “we sent sugar and old newspapers to them; they tobacco and newspapers to us” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 125). Another letter account from North Carolinian Private John Fuller Coghill to his sister Mildred (27 September 1863) mentioned almost normal contacts following the Battle of Chickamauga: “While we are on picket we would talk with the Yankees and would swap news papers and we would go down to the river to wash our face and hands” (Watford, 2003, pg. 34).

Of course, both sides wanted varied accounts of battles to understand what happened. The situation in some places was almost devoid of news. Many southerners lost newsprint and paper imports immediately. General Voris wrote his wife Lydia in March 1862: “Newspapers are rarely seen from the south. In fact paper has become almost obsolete here” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 34). Ohioan Isaac Jackson wrote his brother Moses and sister Phoebe in 1863: “The Rebs were very low in spirits—they could not entirely hide it. I read one of their papers printed on the 3rd. It was printed on wallpaper, on the white side” (Jackson, 1960, pg. 111).

Bartering of newspapers across enemy lines added to a media dependency for an understanding of what was happening as well as another way to validate soldiers’ experiences. During the Virginia campaigns, Edgeworth Bird wrote to his Georgia wife Sallie (18 August 1864) from Richmond: “Perry went on the lines yesterday and exchanged a Richmond paper for a New York Herald of the 24th. I’ll send it to you. One of the men went out afterwards and waved his paper, the usual signal for an exchange, and out walked a nigger soldier with a paper” (Rozier, 1988, pg. 192).

Waving a newspaper was the common signal. Harvey Reid wrote his family in 1864: “Just as we rode up to our picked post one of the boys was waving a newspaper in his hand. Soon the signal was answered from the log house, and three rebs. started down the hill with papers in their hands. Three of our boys also started with their papers and each one also carried a bag of coffee. They met just beyond the creek and talked half an hour. Indeed, we left before all the boys got back. The papers they got were not very valuable for news, being religious papers at least a month old” (Byrne, 1965).

Another media dependency theme was the soldiers’ emotional longing for news about the familiar home, family, and friends. As homesickness increased, hometown newspapers provided a familiar sense of community. As an example, toward the end of the war Captain Ritner highlighted his angst during the Louisiana campaign (14 March 1865): “We have got no mail yet, but a boat came up this evening and brought some northern papers—some as late as March 6th. I have not had time to read them much yet. But it seems like getting into a civilized country again, to be where we can see a New York paper. You have no idea how lonesome and lost one feels to be a month or six weeks in these woods and swamps, without hearing anything from America!” (Larimer, 2000, pg. 429).

Throughout the Civil War, soldiers wrote about how newspapers supplied emotional support by providing news from home. For example, Second Lieutenant Samuel Burney asked his wife Elizabeth (5 November 1861) to say that he “received a letter from Bro. John & a package of papers from Pa with your letter last night. Nothing is so encouraging to the soldier as to know that he is remembered at home” (Turner, 2002, pg. 53). Indeed, as McPherson argued, the local newspapers kept up military morale with hometown news.

Homesickness was a common response. Captain August Horstmann (22 December 1863) wrote his parents, “Is the *Criminal-Zeitung* still arriving regularly? Friends, home becomes more precious from afar” (Kamphoefner & Helbich, 2006, pg. 127). Similarly, Sam Evans wrote to his father Andrew on April 19, 1863, expressing that he “received the Bee you sent me and felt quite at home on reading it” (Engs & Brooks, 2007, pg. 130).

**PREVIOUS MEDIA DEPENDENCY REPEATED METHEMES**

The themes from previous contemporary media dependency studies were found. Soldier’s letters did seek better understanding (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Indeed, that category showed up in the letters, especially when no newspapers were available. For example, Gen. Alvin Voris wrote his wife in June 1862: “We are so cut off from news that I do not now know what is going on. I have not had a letter from you since May 11th, have seen only two newspapers later than May 24. We hear idle rumors about victories and defeats & etc., etc., but have no reliable information” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 61).

Voris, who survived the Battle of Fredericksburg, wrote his wife in February 1863: “Newspaper, the light and luxury of modern times, I might say almost a necessity to our existence, have been cut off from the 30th of Dec. last to 30th Jany” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 104). Near the war’s end, Voris wrote in 1864: “We have the Eastern papers of the 13th, and frightful indeed are they with the horrid recitals of war” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 174).

Captain William Vermillion wrote his Iowa wife Mary in January 1863 about needing the newspapers for understanding: “I have not seen any papers this week and all I know is hearsay. I can’t wait, it seems to me, for news” (Elder, 2003, pg. 42).

As another contemporary theme, DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach wrote that media dependency related to orientation both individually and as general guides for specific behaviors. Cornelia Hancock worked as a nurse, primarily in Washington, D.C., after her physician brother-in-law asked her to assist in caring for the Gettysburg wounded. She indicated the information need in 1864 and personal action: “I returned to Philadelphia, but remained only a short time, for going on an errand to 7th & Arch one day, I heard the newspaper boys crying, ‘The battle of the Wilderness’ and ‘General Hays killed.’ I did not finish my errand, and went home and told Ellen I was going to Washington that night and did go, to find Washington in the same suspense and uncertainly that prevailed in Philadelphia after the battle of Gettysburg” (Jaquette, 1937, pg. 89).

Orientation also could be a type of group problem solving. For example, that hope was when Confederate Joseph Hopkins Twitchell wrote his father June 9, 1861: “We have procured a grant of 100 daily papers for each regiment—which argues that the several proprietors regard themselves as beholden to the warmakers. I hope that gift will tend to make the men intelligent and appreciative of the causes of war” (Messent & Courtney, 2006, pg. 30).

A press orientation alerted individuals to ensuing battles. William Daily, an uneducated farmer from Iowa, warned his wife Anna (23 January 1863): “I supose [sic] you have heard all about our fite [sic] we had before this reaches you. I hope hian’t [sic] heard anything bad from the 25th. If you have, I want you to bet what the hogey [newspaper] says about it, may be good or bad” (Austin, 1999, pg. 34).

Orientation related to expected actions. Officer Samuel Burney of the Army of Northern Virginia wrote his wife on November 7, 1861: “I suppose you read the papers close to see if there is anything about a fight or probability of a fight in and near Yorktown. My opinion is we will have no fight on this peninsula until next spring” (Turner, 2002, pg. 56). Burney’s optimism continued the next winter; in a February 6, 1862, letter, he wrote, “I think from what I read in the papers that England and France will intervene and raise the blockade in a very short while” (Turner, 2002, pg. 116). By war’s ending (24 July 1864), Burney was writing, “I can see from the papers that one hundred men have gone from old Morgan to meet the enemy at Atlanta. This is the way to defeat Sherman, and if every county will do as well, he will be defeated” (Turner, 2002, pg. 277).

Another Southern officer, Tally Simpson, wrote his sister (5 April 1863) about news orientation and interpretation based upon a feature about Major General McLaws: “The other day I sent you a copy of the ‘Illustrated News’ which contains a photograph of our worthy major general, McLaws, together with a short sketch of his life since he became a military man. McLaws’ Division gets the credit of taking Maryland Heights. This is all very correct. But Kershaw’s Brig should have more credit for the part it acted” (Everson & Simpson, 1994, pg. 209).

Confederate Twitchell, who oversaw the camp logistics, wrote his father (26 May 1861) about the importance of printed tracts for future group actions: “I had made up my mind not to let Sunday slip by unnoticed. So, I took care yesterday to furnish myself with a supply of soldier tracts and publications of all sorts and thus armed I spent several hours in distributing them among the men, seasoning the operation by such conversation or admonition as chance suggested or allowed” (Messent & Courtney, 2006, pg. 28).

Corporal Sanford Branch of Savannah, who was captured in 1863, wrote his mother in September about the newspapers giving him hope: “I am in hopes of geting [sic] exchanged or paroled soon, the Yankee papers speak of a new cartel having been agreed upon. I hope it may be so for am tired of this country” (Joslyn, 1996, pg. 173).

Civil War combatants also wrote of the fantasy and entertainment media needs, similar to what DeFleur and Ball Rokeach found. For example, North Carolina Captain James A. Graham explained to his mother (30 December 1864) his pleasure of receiving letters and newspapers: “if we are deprived of the mail, we will fare but poorly in camp as we have very little pleasure now except from the letters & papers we get” (Watford, 2003, pg. 190).

General Alvin C. Voris complained of the loss of newspapers to his wife in February 1862: “We have no newspapers—dull! dull! Vacant day…. I saw a beacon a day or two since 23rd of Jan. and once a while I got a Herald but we are now beyond the post office” (Mushkat, 2002, pg. 49).

One North Carolina chaplain wrote of the soldiers’ pleasure with free distributed newspapers, even religious ones. Rev. Jeffrey H. Robbins wrote the editor of *North Carolina Presbyterian* (24 March 1863): “For some time I intended to drop you a line in acknowledging the receipt of a bundle of your paper, which regularly makes visits to my regiment. It is a very welcome comer, and I take pleasure in distributing it among the soldiers who are always glad to receive it, especially those of your church. For your paper is the only public representation that your church has in the brigade” (Watford, 2003, pg. 153).

Soldiers expressed the “play” of entertainment or escape theme in many distinct ways. One was the use of magazines’ female visual plates to decorate camp walls. The date, sender, and recipient are unknown on a letter stating “What are most sought after for this purpose are the colored fashion plates in the ladies’ magazines. As hardly any women are ever seen, the images of attractive women are put where the boys can feast their eyes on them” (Murphy, 1993, pg. 58).

Newspapers and magazines, though, were mainly used to pass away the boring non-eventful days of camp in between marches and battles. Ohioan Isaac Jackson wrote home twice to express his enjoyment of the printed materials people were sending him. In a March 4, 1863, letter to his brother Ethan and sister-in-law Mary, he sent thanks for the receipt of an issue of *Harper’s Weekly*: “I had got very hungry for something to read as well as for something to eat. You must not forget to send us reading matter, for we need it very much” (Jackson, 1960, pg. 64). Similarly, he wrote to his father on May 14, 1864, to say “I want you to send me the Gazette every week, for I find some very interesting reading in it” (Jackson, 1960, pg. 174).

Other soldiers sent similar sentiments. Second Lieutenant Samuel Burney wrote his wife Elizabeth on Feb. 20, 1862, to say “The rainy days are very dull. I read in my Bible and what papers we can get ahold of” (Turner, 2002, pg. 126). Similarly, on Sept. 25, 1861, Major Henry Livermore Abbott wrote to his mother Caroline to ask her to “Send me *Vanity Fair* every week, will you? The last was delightful” (Scott, 1991, pg. 49).

Magazines and newspapers offered a possible shared experience for enjoyment. Union officer Robert Gould Shaw wrote to his sister Susie in 1861, “Have you seen the ‘punch’ that has the illustrations, songs, &c. about Bull Run? Mr. Hughes’ article, which I read to-day, is consoling” (Duncan, 1992, pg. 141).

Reading a newspaper or a magazine was one way to relax. For example, Joseph Hopkins wrote his father, April 17, 1862, “The great army lay quietly at ease on its back in the shade, writing home, or smoking pipe, of reading a paper” (Messent & Courtney, 2006, pg. 11).

**MEDIA DEPENDENCY AND NEW THEMES**

With the crisis of an all-out Civil War, soldiers use of newspapers and magazines did indeed relate to the contemporary aspects of media dependency. With a high need especially following the battle crises, there was a reliance on understanding—not necessarily self-understanding but rather the general understanding of the war and battles. This study also found references to orientation of the war as to actions and decisions both individually and in general.

There were few alternatives to the newspapers for dependable information, even if they were filled with mistakes and lies. Yet, there was an orientation with the media dependency for problem solving. Like contemporary studies, soldiers depended on media, whether in religious tracts, women’s fashion magazines, or magazine features for entertainment in general, as escapism, and as a way for individuals to relax.

Soldiers’ letters also indicated new types of media dependency such as validation of what had been experienced. There was reliance upon the press accounts to tell what happened better than the soldier could write himself. The traditional norms of society had been in a state of flux, and the need for mass media was especially great. Nevertheless, one theme was disagreement with the coverage despite soldiers’ dependence on press accounts. An additional theme was emotional longing, a type of homesickness that local newspapers could fulfill as part of the soldiers’ community.

Lastly, there was much sharing of the newspapers between the Rebels and the Yankees with the signal of waving a newspaper to stop shooting long enough to exchange the newspapers, along with coffee and tobacco. There was a need to see all sides of what had been experienced. Beyond sharing, the more educated soldiers sent their own accounts to the newspapers and alerted their families to watch for those articles.

Soldier’s letters connected them to their families and friends, but the mention of newspapers and magazines showed types of importance and dependency to reduce ambiguity and continue some semblance of normalcy of their lives prior to the war. This research indicated how media dependency could historically find similar patterns to contemporary studies, but also found new themes to explored, especially under war conditions.

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