

*r/CanadianForces as a “Free Place” for “Underlife” in the  
Canadian Military “Total Institution”*

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**Introduction**

While academic works address the institutional use of social media by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF),<sup>1</sup> the literature does not account for the participation of Canadian military members within the non-institutional social media space. There is also a gap in the literature regarding how CAF members enact discursive resistance within the organization, especially in the wake of incidents that impacted the military establishment in 2021. Specifically, in that year, the CAF faced a number of incidents whereby senior leadership was placed under investigation or sanction for inappropriate conduct, including sexual and racial misconduct.<sup>2</sup> This article is interested in public communications by CAF members animated by these incidents on Reddit and contributes to the literature on the use of social media by Canadian military personnel as well as the discursive resistance that they enact through the non-institutional social media space.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Tanner Mirrlees. “The Canadian Armed Forces ‘YouTube War’: A Cross-Border Military-Social Media Complex,” *Global Media Journal: Canadian Edition* 8, no. 1 (2015): pp. 71–93.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Burke, “Commander of Special Forces to Be Replaced Early after Apologizing for Handling of Sexual Assault Case,” *CBC*, 30 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/commander-special-forces-peter-dawe-apologizes-open-letter-1.6008705>.

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Reddit is a social news and content aggregation website/forum<sup>3</sup> that describes itself as “a network of communities based on people's interests.”<sup>4</sup> Owned by US-based Advance Publications, Reddit is a constituent of what is known as the participatory Web 2.0<sup>5</sup> ecosystem or digital media that enable users to create, share and consume media, and thus be “prosumers”<sup>6</sup> consumers who also produce content. As has been noted, the capability for users to create their own content in Reddit sets it apart from previous content aggregation sites and enhances discourse formation through the platform.<sup>7</sup> Users (usernames are prefixed “u/”) post within subreddits (prefixed “r/”) that are created around interest areas, thus becoming online communities. Hence, Vickery describes Reddit as an “online community-based bulletin board.”<sup>8</sup> These subreddits are managed by moderators, who, among other things, make and enforce subreddit protocols.<sup>9</sup> Participants enjoy relative anonymity as they are able to use pseudonyms, so the platform is pseudonymous rather than being completely anonymous.<sup>10</sup> The specific subreddit of interest to this study is r/CanadianForces. Designated as “The Canadian Armed Forces Community,” this is an unofficial subreddit for CAF members. Specifically, this paper is interested in the use of r/CanadianForces as a space of resistance by CAF members within the context of the CAF which is considered a model of what Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman described in 1957 as a “total institution.”<sup>11</sup>

Ordinarily, CAF norms informed by its character as a total institution preclude discourse critical of the organization and its leadership in member public communication. This paper seeks to answer the question: assuming that the CAF is a total institution, to what extent does r/CanadianForces serve as a space wherein

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<sup>3</sup> Panek, Elliot T. *Understanding Reddit* (Milton, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com).

<sup>5</sup> Rory P. Tannebaum, “Reddit and the Social Studies: Exploring the r/Democratic Curriculum,” *The Social Studies* 109, no. 3 (2018): pp. 167-75.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, and Barrington Nevitt, *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p .4.

<sup>7</sup> Panek, *Understanding Reddit*.

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, “The Curious Case of Confession Bear: The Reappropriation of Online Macro-Image Memes,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 3 (2014): pp. 301-25, p.302.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.871056>.

<sup>9</sup> Panek, *Understanding Reddit*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2017).

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members engage in discourse that potentially infringes organizational regulations and policies?

### Theoretical Context

Goffman defines a “total institution” as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”<sup>12</sup> This is not to be narrowly construed,<sup>13</sup> however, but to be viewed as a spectrum whereby some institutions are more open or closed than others, with more closed institutions being regarded as “total.”<sup>14</sup> One category of the total institution is “purportedly established the better to pursue some worklike task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks, ships, boarding schools, work camps, colonial compounds ...”<sup>15</sup>

Goffman proposes four characteristics of a total institution, all of which have the effect of imposing a unique level of bureaucratic control and attenuation of agency on organizational members. One is “batch living” or regimented communal life whereby all members are “treated alike” in pursuance of a common goal<sup>16</sup> or “militant mission.”<sup>17</sup> This characteristic allows for biopolitical surveillance of organizational members, “under conditions where one person’s infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the others.”<sup>18</sup> A second characteristic is “binary management”<sup>19</sup> or stratification of membership broken down between leaders and followers, with leadership conflated with the institution.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Goffman suggests that the relationship between members and total institutional leadership is influenced by suspicion and antagonistic or “hostile stereotypes”<sup>21</sup> due to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Jones, and A. J. Fowles, *Ideas on Institutions: Analysing the Literature on Long-Term Care and Custody* (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Jones and Fowles, *Ideas on Institutions*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, pp. 5-9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

the fact of organizational stratification and barriers to unrestricted communication between leaders and members. In other words, misconceptions and misunderstandings result from the fact that leadership and members occupy different hierarchical categories within the organization and cannot have frank communication with each other.

A third characteristic is the “inmate role,”<sup>22</sup> whereby recruits undergo “self mortification”<sup>23</sup> or enculturation into the unique value system of the organization. This self-mortification begins with admission procedures or initiation rituals that “program” a recruit to adopt the ethos of the institution.<sup>24</sup> Yet, even when enculturated, the member would try to claim agency through “secondary adjustments:”<sup>25</sup> passive or active resistance or subversion sufficient to navigate the institutional environment without triggering sanctions. In this context, members may form informal cliques. Goffman terms the resistance practices the “underlife” of the total institution, “being to a social establishment what an underworld is to a city.”<sup>26</sup> The underlife occurs in “free places:”<sup>27</sup> spaces outside the control or surveillance of the total institution. Thus, although total institutions attenuate individual agency, acts of resistance against social control are a “pervasive feature of total institutions.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, drawing on Goffman, it is pointed out that members in a total institution enjoy relative autonomy as “No organizational socialization generates a full consonance... Even in extreme situations, organizational actors discover or create spaces of (some) autonomy, in which they exercise their (even if much regulated) freedom beyond the structure of the organization.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, “No total institution is without its underlife. As soon as a total institution rises up, there rise up also secondary adjustments. This is but a way of saying that some inmates decline to take the ‘official view.’”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jones and Fowles, *Ideas on Institutions*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>28</sup> Anuragini Shreeya, “The Self as an Active Agent: Understanding Goffman’s Theory of Resistance in Total Institutions through Life-Histories.” *Sociological Bulletin* 67, no. 2 (2018): pp. 173-87, p.175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022918775500>.

<sup>29</sup> Sandro Serpa, “On the Concept of Total Institution.” *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 6, no. 9 (2018): pp. 31-33, p.32. <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v6i9.3467>.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Aloysius Schaldenbrand, “Lessons Form Total Institutions.” *The National Catholic Reporter*, 5 January 1966, p. 11.

The fourth characteristic of a total institution is the “institutional perspective:”<sup>31</sup> a construction of reality or “a view of life which denies [the individual] his perspective and validates the institution’s existence.”<sup>32</sup> Through this, the organization allows controlled spaces for community building while allowing the individual to experience liberties, at the same time, reinforcing the power of the organization over the individual. This allows for the construction of reality that members experience through the institution.

The scholarship recognizes the military as a total institution because of the extent to which members are bracketed out of the mainstream and subjected to structured, hierarchical bureaucratic control.<sup>33</sup> For the purpose of this article, the CAF is located within the construct of a total institution. Both published and unpublished academic literature exist in this regard.<sup>34</sup> When she conducted an external review into sexual misconduct and harassment in the CAF, former Supreme Court Justice Marie Deschamps described the CAF as a “total institution”<sup>35</sup> even if its members are not continually sequestered. In that regard, the terms “portable total institution”<sup>36</sup> or “semi

<sup>31</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, “When Race Makes No Difference: Marriage and the Military,” *Social Forces* 83, no. 2 (2004): pp. 731–57. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2005.0017>; Giuliana Franco Leal, “Socialization in a Total Institution: Implications of Education in a Military Academy,” *Educação & Sociedade* 34, no. 123 (2013): pp. 389–406. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-73302013000200004>; Godfrey Maringira, “On Entering the Military Organization: Decivilianization, Depersonalization, Order, and Command in the Zimbabwe National Army,” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 44 (2016): pp. 103–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599043>; Aida Alvinus, and Arita Holmberg, “Silence-Breaking Butterfly Effect: Resistance towards the Military within #MeToo,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 26, no. 9 (2019): pp. 1255-1270. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12349>; Charlie Barnao, “Military Training. Group, Culture, Total Institution, and Torture,” *Italian Sociological Review* 9, no. 2 (2019): pp. 289–304.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Carmen Poulin, “‘The Military Is the Wife and I Am the Mistress’: Partners of Lesbians in the Canadian Military,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 26, no. 1 (2001): pp. 65–76; Deborah Harrison and Lucie Laliberte, *No Life Like It: Military Wives in Canada*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1994; Robert E. Christie, “Civilianization and National Defence Headquarters: The Cause of All Evil?” MA thesis, (University of Manitoba, 2004); Steve J. Gillis, “No Sexualized Jokes, No Winks, No Nods: Elimination of Harmful Sexual Behaviour through Culture Change in the Canadian Armed Forces,” *Canadian Forces College Exercise Solo Flight* 42 (2016 2015); Victoria Rose Mowatt, “Who Joins the Canadian Forces,” MA thesis, (University of Saskatchewan, 2011); Lynne Gouliquer, “Soldiering in the Canadian Forces: How and Why Gender Counts!” PhD diss., (McGill University, 2011); Sean Raymond Bruyca, “Remembrance Forgotten: Seventy Years of Neglect and Our Obligation to Canadian Forces Veterans,” MA thesis, (Saint Paul University, 2016); Mercy Yeboah-Ampadu, “Between Webs of Obligation: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Mothers Serving in the Canadian Armed Forces,” PhD diss., (University of Calgary, 2017); Agocs, “Canadian Dilemma” ; Elaine Craig, “An Examination of How the Canadian Military’s Legal System Responds to Sexual Assault,” *Dalhousie Law Journal* 43, no. 1 (2020): 63-101.

<sup>35</sup> Marie Deschamps, “External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces,” 2015, p.40.

<sup>36</sup> Harrison and Laliberte, *No Life Like It*, p. 21.

total institution”<sup>37</sup> or “mobile total institution” have been coined to account for the contemporary realities of total institutions, which are not defined by brick and mortar restrictions but rather, by biopolitical surveillance whereby the institution is “portaged by individuals in their bodies, minds and everyday activities as they radiate, communicate and behave still in the shadow, but not in the physical presence of their overseers.”<sup>38</sup>

As Carol Agocs notes: “The CAF is a total institution, not an employer that offers a conventional job or career: everyone is a soldier all the time no matter what their trade or profession is, and being a member of the CAF is a way of life.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, within the CAF, different categories exist, each with varying levels to which members may be considered sequestered from mainstream society. The CAF is made up of the Regular and Reserve Force, with reservists being predominantly part-time personnel less impacted by military regulations than those in the Regular Force. Again, members of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) who deploy for months aboard ships would be more constrained than their land-based comrades. Yet, the principal thread is that all members of the CAF adhere to military regulations and conventions in ways that set them apart from the mainstream, and throughout their career, are subjected to the biopolitical surveillance regime Goffman identifies of total institutions, whether or not they are in uniform. Vis-à-vis the civilian population, the CAF, like most liberal democratic militaries, is also unique in that it requires unlimited liability of members and licenses the controlled application of violence on behalf of the state. This includes personnel who, at first blush, might appear to be in roles similar to what exist in the civilian world.<sup>40</sup> For example, a military cook may be required to take up weapons to defend a base, which is not something required of a civilian chef at their place of work.

CAF members routinely experience “batch living” to different degrees, for example, when on residential courses, exercises, or operational deployment. CAF members also exist in a rigid binary management regime or hierarchical “chain of

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<sup>37</sup> Igor Petrovic and Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, “Protest in Western Militaries.” *Sociopedia.Isa*, 2017, pp. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205684601771>.

<sup>38</sup> Gary T Marx, “Foreword,” in *Technocrime: Technology, Crime and Social Control*, edited by Stéphane Leman-Langlois (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2013), p. ix.

<sup>39</sup> Carol Agocs, “Canadian Dilemma: Is There a Path from Systemic Racism Toward Employment Equity for Indigenous People in the Canadian Forces?” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): pp. 273-213, p. 282.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

command.”<sup>41</sup> Communication within and without the chain of command is tightly controlled. CAF members undergo self-mortification to varying degrees,<sup>42</sup> from basic training to advanced courses. Yet, as noted by Goffman, members assert some agency through acts of legitimate and illegitimate resistance, both overt and covert. While the CAF is a total institution, it is not immune to socio-political currents that obtain in the mainstream, which, as Shreeya<sup>43</sup> notes, increases the potential for member resistance to total institutional norms. As well, the CAF encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills among its membership.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is to be expected that members might resist what they see to be inappropriate or irrational.

Consistent with the conceptualization of a total institution, the CAF also has an “institutional perspective”<sup>45</sup> through which members are allowed to perform their agency and experience individuality through organizational structures. There are spaces for informal socialization such as messes and wardrooms, and ceremonies for “role releases,”<sup>46</sup> such as Christmas dinners, during which organizational roles might be reversed<sup>47</sup> and leaders serve subordinates, reinforcing an organizational ethos of “service before self”<sup>48</sup> and ethical leadership. There is a grievance process under Article 7 of the *Queens Regulation and Orders (QR&O)* and whistleblower protections under *QR&O* Article 19.15.

In short, belonging to the CAF has implications for member agency. As has been noted, “In fact, not only do military personnel rarely demonstrate, they have limited access to rights like striking or freedom of speech.”<sup>49</sup> In the CAF, member freedom of expression is constrained by policies and regulations deemed necessary by virtue of membership in a profession of arms as well as the role of members as federal

<sup>41</sup> Joan Wharf Higgins and Tanis Farish, “When You First Start Out You Feel Like You Don’t Have Control: Quality of Life, Control, And the Canadian Forces,” *Canadian Military Journal* 7, no. 1 (2006): pp. 69-71.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Shreeya, “The Self as an Active Agent.”

<sup>44</sup> DND, “Canadian Armed Forces Professional Development Framework,” Education and awareness. 13 December 2018. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/education-training/professional-development/framework.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>48</sup> Canada, “Duty with Honour. The Profession of Arms in Canada,” Canadian Defence Academy – Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2009, p.9.

<sup>49</sup> Igor Petrovic, Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, and Bert Klandermans, “Dealing with Austerity Measures within Armed Forces: The Dutch Case,” *Military Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2018): pp. 321-34, p. 321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2018.1478536>.



government employees.<sup>50</sup> More specifically, constraints are deemed necessary for operational reasons. For example, imprudently disclosing operational information can compromise a mission and put lives at risk. Publicly attacking the institution or its leadership can affect member morale and cohesion, and compromise the ability of the CAF to achieve its objectives. Providing inaccurate information undermines the CAF's corporate legitimacy. Disclosing information about casualties or morale can facilitate adversarial knowledge about vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Speculating about ongoing investigations can jeopardise due process. Overtly identifying with a partisan cause undermines the identity of the CAF as a non-partisan Federal government organization.

The CAF's policy and regulatory framework constraining member freedom of expression is intricate. *Defence Administrative Orders and Directives* 2008-2 (DAOD 2008-2) empower and encourage members of the military to engage with media subject to a number of caveats and members are held accountable for what they say. Below are relevant caveats under Section 4.8 of DAOD 2008-2:

CF members and DND employees speaking in their official capacity, including designated subject matters experts and Public Affairs Officers, shall not:

- a. respond to media queries that fall outside of their personal areas of experience or expertise, unless authorized to do so;
- b. undermine the safety of personnel involved in, or the potential success of, a CAF operation;
- c. provide comments that could undermine the integrity of an investigation currently in progress;
- d. speculate about events, incidents, issues or future policy decisions;
- e. offer personal opinion on government, DND or CAF policy; or
- f. discuss advice given to the Minister, Cabinet or the chain of command.

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<sup>50</sup> Meaghan Hobman, "Loose Lips: Free Speech and the Canadian Forces," *IPolitics*, 20 June 2014. <https://ipolitics.ca/2014/06/20/loose-lips-free-speech-and-the-canadian-forces/>.



Whether speaking to reporters or posting in social media, CAF members are expected to conduct themselves appropriately and use language befitting of institutional ambassadors in the public space. As subsidiary legislation under the *National Defence Act (NDA)*, the QR&O structure the agency of CAF members in terms of freedom of expression. For example, QR&O Article 19.36 obligates members to seek permission to engage in a wide variety of communication categorized as “Disclosure of Information or Opinion.” Under QR&O Article 19.44, members are restricted in terms of what they can do or say to “affect the actual or perceived political neutrality of the Canadian Forces.” QR&O Article 19.14 spells out the CAF’s regulations on “Improper Comments:”

- (1) No officer or non-commissioned member shall make remarks or pass criticism tending to bring a superior into contempt, except as may be necessary for the proper presentation of a grievance under Chapter Z (*Grievances*).
- (2) No officer or non-commissioned member shall do or say anything that:
  - a. if seen or heard by any member of the public, might reflect discredit on the Canadian Forces or on any of its members; or
  - b. if seen by, heard by or reported to those under him, might discourage them or render them dissatisfied with their condition or the duties on which they are employed.

In 2016, the Department of National Defence (DND), the Federal government department responsible for the military, issued Chapter 17 of the *National Defence Security Orders and Directives (NDSOD)* on “Security and Social Media.” The directive requires DND employees and CAF members to ensure “that their on-line activities involving social media are in accordance with the *Privacy Act*, and other regulations, rules, policies, acceptable guidelines and best practices.”<sup>51</sup> In February 2018, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), who is the professional head of the CAF, issued a direction on “Professional Military Conduct,” noting:

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<sup>51</sup> DND. *National Defence Security Orders and Directives - Chapter 17: Security and Social Media* (2016), para 17.12.

CAF members shall ensure that their online activity, whether on - or off - duty, does not reflect discredit on the CAF, compromise the CAF's reputation and lead others to refuse, be reluctant to or be unable to work with the CAF.<sup>52</sup>

The CAF has its own social media platforms<sup>53</sup> but does not preclude member creation or participation in non-official spaces. However, CAF norms apply irrespective of platform: official or unofficial. To promote media literacy and ensure awareness of institutional norms for responsible social media use, CAF members receive media awareness and social media awareness briefings during basic training and annually. The CAF has sanctioned personnel for Improper Comments. The case of *R. v. Laurin*<sup>54</sup> in which the member was sanctioned for participating in the creation of a poster mocking a superior officer is instructive. Similarly, in *R. v. Cribbie*<sup>55</sup> a member was sanctioned for posting improper comments on Facebook.

The foregoing is not exhaustive as both formal and informal restrictions on expression exist. How members dress, groom, or conduct themselves, for example, have communicative or symbolic properties and are all structured by the organization. The Court Martial in the unreported case of *R. v. Purnelle*<sup>56</sup> decided that Section 129 of the *NDA* infringed the constitutional right of personnel to freedom of expression, but it was a reasonable limit "prescribed by law in a free and democratic society" due to the unique realities of military work, and thus saved by Section 1 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.<sup>57</sup> The Court Martial in *R. v. Tuckett*<sup>58</sup> arrived at a similar decision.

The CAF framework restricting member freedom of expression is mostly reliant on an honour system and the ability to identify transgressors. Prior to the evolution of Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate relative anonymity in publishing, potentially, CAF regulations attenuating member freedom of expression were enforceable against violators if they were identified. On the other hand, where violators are not identifiable,

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<sup>52</sup> DND. "CDS Direction on Military Conduct, CANFORGEN 016/18 CMP 008/18," February 2018, para 8.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-François Savard, and Mathieu Landriault. "Transforming the Relationship between the Canadian Military and Indigenous People: Evidence from the Traditional and Social Media," in Canadian Political Science Association, pp. 1–29. Canadian Political Science Association, 2019. <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/documents/conference/2019/105.Savard-Landriault.pdf>; Linna Tam-Seto

<sup>54</sup> *R. v. Laurin*, no. CM 4011 (Courts Martial, 11 June 2015), <https://canlii.ca/t/gkjin9>.

<sup>55</sup> *R. v. Cribbie*, no. CM 3008 (Courts Martial, 18 June 2018), <https://canlii.ca/t/hwcj2>.

<sup>56</sup> *R. v. Purnelle*, no. C199704 (Courts Martial, 8 February 1997).

<sup>57</sup> *Canada Act* (1982). <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-12.html>.

<sup>58</sup> *R. v. Tuckett*, no. CM 3005 (Courts Martial, 15 July 2019), <https://canlii.ca/t/j1ndv>.

it can be argued that the institution has a reduced enforcement capability. The following story is instructive.

In 2020, the RCN launched an investigation after a music video parodying naval officers surfaced online. The RCN went to extensive lengths “to track the social media footprint associated with the posting of the video on Facebook and YouTube in an attempt to determine who made the parody.”<sup>59</sup> The video had been made following media reports that the second-in-command of a naval ship had been removed from his post after disabling smoke and heat detectors in the warship’s wardroom so he could smoke, even though a fire had broken out on that same ship just weeks prior, leading to injuries. “The parody video called *Smoking in the Wardroom* — a takeoff on the rock hit *Smokin’ in the Boy’s Room* — sent navy leaders into a tizzy,”<sup>60</sup> the media reported. Leadership described the video as “unacceptable and brings discredit to the CAF and RCN.”<sup>61</sup> According to the news story, “Navy Capt. Jason Armstrong, then chief of staff for the navy, told public affairs officers to continue their efforts to identify the mystery musician... But he later acknowledged that, ‘although the team is attempting to ascertain the identity of the person, it is unlikely to gain results.’”<sup>62</sup> A r/CanadianForces moderator commented on 12 October 2021, that page moderators had declined a takedown order for the video from the military apparatus, leveraging the relative anonymity they enjoy and the corporate persona of Reddit based outside Canadian jurisdiction.

This is where media ecology as a theoretical concept is relevant. Media ecologists regard media as “‘species’ that coexist in the same ‘ecosystem’ of communication.”<sup>63</sup> Analogical to what happens in a biological sense, they assume that the introduction of new communication technologies results in fundamental alterations to the social ecosystem.<sup>64</sup> In this regard, critical communication scholarship is interested in changes

<sup>59</sup> David Pugliese, “Parody Music Video about Navy Officers Sparked Country-Wide Search for Culprit,” *Cape Breton Post*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.saltwire.com/cape-breton/news/canada/parody-music-video-about-navy-officers-sparked-country-wide-search-for-culprit-100644664/>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Carlos Alberto Scolari, “Media Evolution,” In *Mediated Communication*, edited by Philip M. Napoli, pp. 149–68 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2018), p. 156.

<sup>64</sup> Casey Man Kong Lum, “Introduction: The Intellectual Roots of Media Ecology,” *New Jersey Journal of Communication* 8, no. 1 (2000): pp. 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870009367375>. Lance Strate, “Studying Media as Media: McLuhan and the Media Ecology Approach,” *Media Tropes*, 2008.

to social power relations.<sup>65</sup> For example, one may consider how digital communications technologies change social power dynamics to allow marginalized elements to subvert the status quo. One may also consider how the evolution of new technological platforms creates opportunities for communications that would ordinarily have lacked a large audience or permanence. In this paper, our interest is in how r/CanadianForces as a social media platform has created a free place space for members within the CAF-as-total institution to engage in underlife or resistance.

Because of the extent of social media penetration and proliferation, it is no surprise that how the military institution and its personnel use or are impacted by social media has animated academic interest.<sup>66</sup> Within the Canadian context, while studies speak to how the CAF as an institution uses social media for its organizational communication,<sup>67</sup> none has discussed the use of social media by members vis-à-vis the military-as-total institution. On the other hand, there has been research on how military personnel use social media in other jurisdictions such as the United States,<sup>68</sup> United

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[http://fordham.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=comm\\_facultypubs](http://fordham.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=comm_facultypubs). Carlos A Scolari, "Media Ecology: Exploring the Metaphor to Expand the Theory," *Communication Theory* 22, no. 2 (2012): pp. 204-25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01404.x>;

<sup>65</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz. *No Sense of Place the Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, [1951] 1991); Neil Postman, *Technopoly : The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Michael Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman, and Jay G. Blumler, "Political Communication - Old and New Media Relationships," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625, no. 1 (2009): pp. 164-81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209339345>; Joshua Meyrowitz, "We Liked to Watch: Television as Progenitor of the Surveillance Society," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625, no. 1 (2009): pp. 32-48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209339576>.

<sup>66</sup> Eva Moehlecke de Baseggio and Olivia Schneider, "Introduction," in *Social Media and the Armed Forces*, edited by Eva Moehlecke de Baseggio, Olivia Schneider, and Tibor Szvircsev Tresch, pp. 22-38 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020).

<sup>67</sup> Mirrlees, "The Canadian Armed Forces 'YouTube War.'"; Savard, and Landriault, "Transforming the Relationship."; Linna Tam-Seto; Valerie M. Wood, Brooke Linden, and Heather Stuart, "Perceptions of an AI-Supported Mobile App for Military Health in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Military Behavioral Health* 9, no. 3 (2021): pp. 247-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2020.1838364>.

<sup>68</sup>Melissa Wall, "War Reporting 2.0: Social Media and Soldier Content," in *International Communication Association Annual Conference*. Chicago: International Communication Association, 2009.

[https://www.academia.edu/718489/War\\_Reporting\\_2\\_0\\_Social\\_Media\\_and\\_Soldier\\_Content](https://www.academia.edu/718489/War_Reporting_2_0_Social_Media_and_Soldier_Content).

David Johnsen, "Free Speech on the Battlefield: Protecting the Use of Social Media by America's Soldiers." *John Marshall Law Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): pp. 1085-1106; Sean Lawson, "The US Military's Social Media Civil War: Technology as Antagonism in Discourses of Information-Age Conflict," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2014): pp. 226-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2012.734787>. Umashanthi Pavalanathan, Vivek Datla, Svitlana Volkova, Lauren Charles, Meg Pirrung, Josh Harrison, Alan Chappell, and Courtney Corley, "Discourse, Health and Well-Being of Military Populations Through the Social Media Lens," in *The 3rd International Workshop on the World Wide Web and Population Health Intelligence, In Conjunction with the Thirtieth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (AAAI-16)*. Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 2016; Megan MacKenzie, "Why Do Soldiers Swap Illicit Pictures? How a Visual Discourse Analysis

Kingdom,<sup>69</sup> Bangladesh,<sup>70</sup> Slovenia,<sup>71</sup> Sweden,<sup>72</sup> and Israel.<sup>73</sup> In fact, characterizing unofficial social media use by military personnel as often being “subversive,” Stern and Ben Shalom note: “While scholars of armed forces and society have noted the growing importance that militaries have placed on digital media, there is little data regarding the unofficial uses and meanings that regular soldiers themselves make of social networking sites.”<sup>74</sup> The subject of subversiveness is also reflected in work that speak to ways in which military personnel enact resistance to official norms through social media.<sup>75</sup> In this regard, Alvinus and Holmberg examine how women in the Swedish military harnessed the #MeToo social media campaign to draw attention to violence against women and sexual harassment in the Swedish Armed Forces, which the authors conceptualize as a total institution.<sup>76</sup> However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how CAF members enact discursive resistance within the total institution, relevant especially in the wake of ongoing issues in the CAF. This merits research, similar to what Stern and Ben Shalom note of the Israeli military context.<sup>77</sup>

What studies of non-institutional social media use by military members in other countries show is a democratization of the public sphere for military members who would otherwise be constrained in speech, and thus posing new challenges for military institutions.<sup>78</sup> As one author notes of social media use by members of the US military:

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Illuminates Military Band of Brother Culture,” *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 4 (2020): pp. 340–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010619898468>.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Maltby and Helen Thornham, “The Digital Mundane: Social Media and the Military,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 8 (2016): pp. 1153–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716646173>; Peter Adey, David Denney, Rikke Jensen, and Alasdair Pinkerton, “Blurred Lines: Intimacy, Mobility, and the Social Military,” *Critical Military Studies* 2, no. 1–2 (2016): pp. 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1148281>.

<sup>70</sup> Md Khurshid Alam, “Soldiers’ Exposure to Social Media and Its Impact on Organizational Security of Bangladesh Army.” *NDC E-Journal* 17, no. 2 (2018): pp. 185–207.

<sup>71</sup> Uroš Svete and Jelena Juvan, “Soldiers’ Private Digital Communication as a Disturbing Factor,” *Res Militaris - European Journal of Military Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): pp. 1–13.

<sup>72</sup> Alvinus and Holmberg, “Silence-Breaking Butterfly Effect.”

<sup>73</sup> Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel’s Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2015); Shira Rivnai Bahir, “A Transparent Network – Soldiers’ Digital Resistance and Economic Unrest,” in *Social Media and the Armed Forces*, edited by Eva Moeckle de Baseggio, Olivia Schneider, and Tibor Szvircsev Tresch, pp. 257–87 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020); Nehemia Stern and Uzi Ben Shalom, “Confessions and Tweets: Social Media and Everyday Experience in the Israel Defense Forces,” *Armed Forces & Society* 47, no. 2 (2021): pp. 343–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X19859304>.

<sup>74</sup> Stern and Ben Shalom, “Confessions and Tweets,” p. 343.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Alvinus, and Holmberg, “Silence-Breaking Butterfly Effect.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Johnsen, “Free Speech on the Battlefield;” Bahir, “A Transparent Network.”

The issue is that with the ease-of-use of the technology, a growing sector of these soldiers use milblogs to criticize their superiors. Soldiers have now also taken to Facebook, a social networking tool that epitomizes open communication. Because Facebook allows soldiers to quickly make friends with other soldiers with the same viewpoints, and have the ability to send secret messages, the concern over military security is obvious.<sup>79</sup>

Further, as has been observed, the very uniqueness of the military vis-à-vis the civilian population makes social media use by military personnel deserving of academic attention.<sup>80</sup>

### Methodology

Between February and late June 2021, there were media reports of sexual misconduct/ inappropriate conduct investigations of CAF senior leaders. As this potentially would motivate the expression of CAF member sentiment, it was an opportunity to observe how CAF members express themselves in r/CanadianForces. Therefore, this study reviewed threads that were hosted on r/CanadianForces to discuss ten news reports relating to these cases. These threads generated more than 2000 comments within the period of study and are therefore, a rich discursive source. For broader atmospheric context, however, this research also reviewed other threads, such as memes on the subreddit within this period, as well as posts outside the period that are referenced in more recent threads, or posts that shed light on discursive practices in that subreddit space.

This approach is not novel. As portable digital devices proliferate and the social media through which these portable media are accessed become an extension of the public sphere, it is not unusual for researchers to engage in social listening or social media monitoring, to observe behaviour or discourse.<sup>81</sup> As is noted, such an approach allows for insight into community sentiment.<sup>82</sup> De Bassegio and Schneider observe that:

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<sup>79</sup> Johnsen, "Free Speech on the Battlefield," p. 1088.

<sup>80</sup> de Bassegio and Olivia Schneider, "Introduction."

<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., Ariel Pomputius, "Can You Hear Me Now? Social Listening as a Strategy for Understanding User Needs," *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2019): pp. 181–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2019.1588042>; Margaret C. Stewart and Christa L. Arnold, "Defining Social Listening: Recognizing an Emerging Dimension of Listening," *International Journal of Listening* 32, no. 2 (4 May 2018): pp. 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2017.1330656>; María Teresa Ballestar, Miguel Cuerdo-Mir,



Social media can be understood as a digital gathering in which information is weighed, evaluated, and commented on. Thereby, social media users leave a footprint on social media which allows for insights into the social attitudes and conditions of communities. Due to social media, such discussions – which, until recently, were reserved mainly for the private sphere – become accessible and public.<sup>83</sup>

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and María Teresa Freire-Rubio, “The Concept of Sustainability on Social Media: A Social Listening Approach,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 5 (2020): pp. 2122-2140. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12052122>; Benjamin Lucas and Todd Landman, “Social Listening, Modern Slavery, and COVID-19,” *Journal of Risk Research* 24, no. 3–4 (2021): pp. 314-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1864009>; Stern and Ben Shalom, “Confessions and Tweets.”

<sup>82</sup> Lucas and Landman, “Social listening.”

<sup>83</sup> de Baseggio and Olivia Schneider, “Introduction,” p.31.



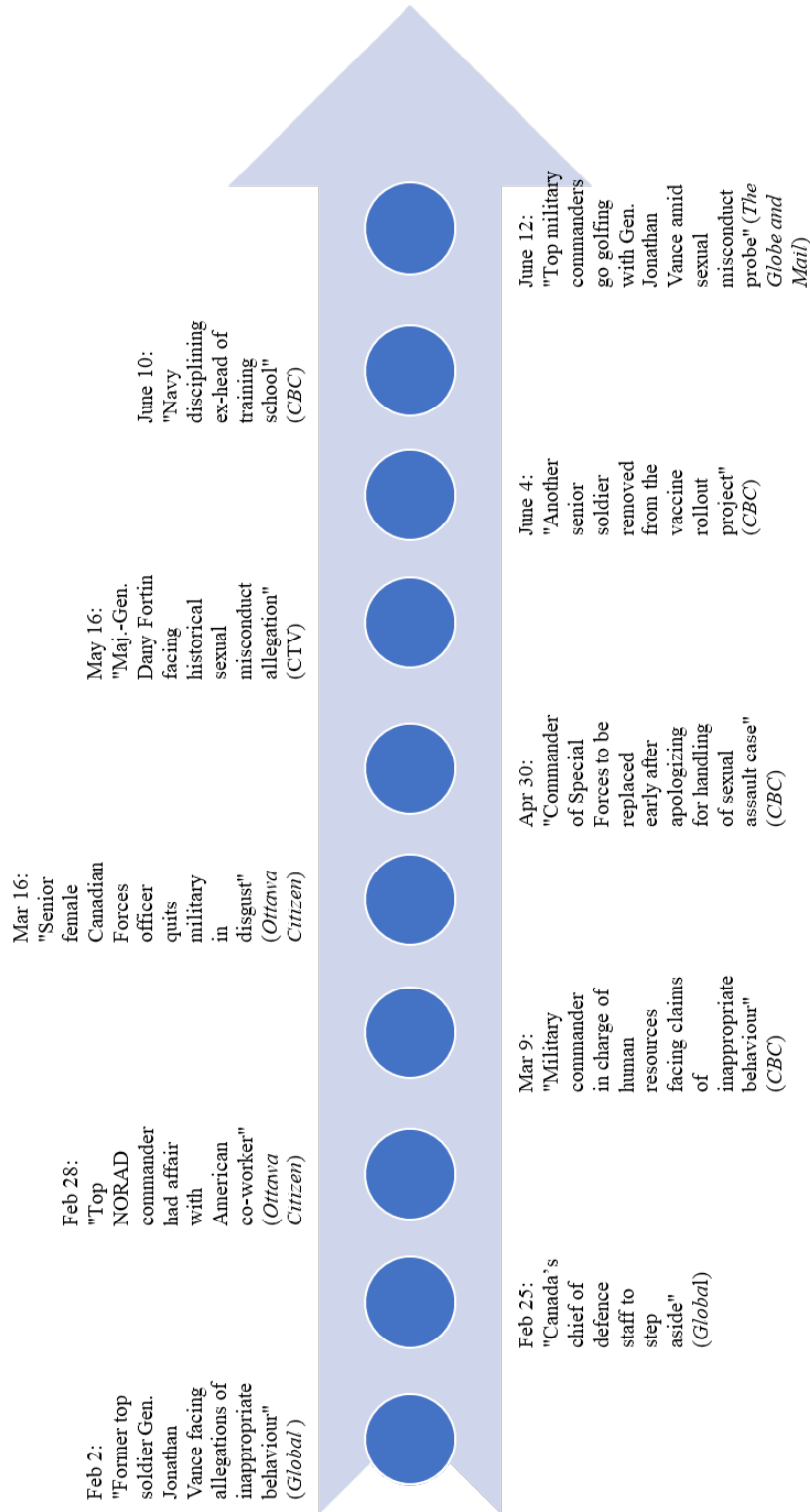


Figure 1: Incident Timeline.

## Study and Discussion

Created in June 2011, r/CanadianForces had 39.5k followers as at July 2021. Its raison d'être is as follows:

There are a lot of Canadian Armed Forces members on reddit, and a lot of Canadians who honestly & truly love the fine folks in uniform. This unofficial subreddit is in support of past, present and future members of the Canadian Armed Forces, their families, & the great people of Canada.

The subreddit has elaborate protocols, including rules against hate speech, operational security breaches, etc. The subreddit features organic content such as memes and narratives generated by members. It also features mass media content posted by members. Each post generates a thread of comments, all subject to upvotes and downvotes to show member approbation or otherwise. The subreddit has moderators who remove posts that they judge to infringe forum rules. The rules, while trying to be compliant with institutional norms on operational security, personnel security etc., and seeking to create a space for respectful communication, do not preclude negative comments aimed at the civilian and military leadership or the CAF, and thus, are not compliant with institutional policy and regulation regarding Improper Comments. In other words, r/CanadianForces does not purport to be an institutional space: it is clearly a space outside institutional boundaries. Colourful language is often used in a manner inconsistent with CAF norms. Some topics are potentially precluded under *QR&O* Article 19.36. Indeed, this study finds that negative sentiment against the CAF and its leadership predominate in discussions generated by the 2021 incidents. That is potentially inconsistent with the Improper Comments regulations, and thus, marks the subreddit as a free place as Goffman<sup>84</sup> conceptualized.

As previously mentioned, Goffman identifies suspicion and antagonism as characterizing sentiments held by members towards the total institution and its leadership, with members viewing leadership as conflated with the institution, and being "highhanded and mean."<sup>85</sup> In respect of the sentiments observed during this study, members tended to regard the institution as bureaucratic, insensitive, and inefficient. Some senior leadership was predominantly seen as self-serving, political,

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<sup>84</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

unethical and detached from the lived realities of members. Members also regarded the subreddit as a free place where they could voice opinions and exercise their agency in a fashion precluded within approved institutional spaces. As u/viennary commented on a thread relating to CAF members expressing political opinions on 4 June 2020, “Why do people express their political opinions on social media where everyone can judge you and nobody really cares, when they can simply do it anonymously on reddit?” This confirms concerns that military personnel would leverage social media to criticize superiors or engage in transgressive discursive acts.<sup>86</sup>

Consistent with Goffman’s characterization of free places,<sup>87</sup> a key characteristic of r/CanadianForces is that formal institutional rules are suspended, and members are free from institutional norms of formality and language. Members consider this free place as *their* space, where, irrespective of rank, *they* can express themselves freely, and thus, a space where any leadership choosing to participate would be disadvantaged not just because of group dynamics but also because the discourse is more typical of the free place. On 2 May 2021, u/Tommy2Legs announced that the *CBC* had referenced the subreddit,<sup>88</sup> generating 186 comments. This includes a question by u/BloeFlob about a rumour of a moderator being summoned by their chain of command about subreddit activities. The moderator, u/Slappy\_MC\_Garglenuz responded to the comment to assert the independence of the subreddit: “The CAF/DND has no influence in the moderation of this subreddit.” This illustrates an important point consistent with the literature on social media use by military personnel: the evolution of Reddit as a Web 2.0 platform has created opportunities for CAF member agency while simultaneously creating threats to the ability of the CAF-as-total institution to attenuate member freedom of expression. To that end, the highly mediatized incidents of sexual misconduct and inappropriate behavior involving senior leadership in 2021 became flashpoints for r/CanadianForces discourse.

In February 2021, news broke that former CDS General Jonathan Vance who had recently retired from service, was under investigation for “allegations of inappropriate

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<sup>86</sup> Johnsen, “Free Speech on the Battlefield.”

<sup>87</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*.

<sup>88</sup> Christian Paas-Lang and Ashley Burke, “Special Forces Commander Put on Leave as Acting Top Soldier Apologizes for Handling of Situation,” *CBC*, 2 May 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/special-forces-commander-on-leave-1.6011036>.

behaviour with female subordinates.”<sup>89</sup> Vance had overseen the launch of Operation HONOUR, the CAF “mission to prevent and address sexual misconduct within its ranks.”<sup>90</sup> Vance had launched this mission in response to Justice Deschamps’ report on sexual misconduct in the CAF.<sup>91</sup> Vance’s story in the media became a precursor to other media stories about allegations of CAF senior leadership malfeasance. Figure 1 shows a timeline of these cases in the media, which became topics in r/CanadianForces.

When Vance’s story broke, u/CodCheeks posted it, garnering 313 comments. Some of the comments, especially those that derided what was regarded as senior leadership hypocrisy with Operation HONOUR, could be deemed Improper Comments and also reveal the state of member morale to adversaries. This is the same with a meme posted by u/IOnlyPostBBQ on 6 February 2021. This meme suggested that military career managers were insensitive to the impact of service postings on marriages and attracted concurring comments. Another meme posted by u/Det\_JohnKimble666 on 13 February 2021, which garnered 114 comments, recorded members’ disaffection with their jobs in the CAF. u/SneeringImperial complained as follows:

My unit, formation and L1’s [element commanders and their civilian counterparts] dysfunctions mean we’re constantly late to the party, under-supplied, under-supported, lacking direction or caught in the middle of bullshit senior level politics between self-serving careerist ‘leaders.’ We’re teetering on the edge of being a joke of a military due to horrific kit deficiencies, from office supplies to fighter jets, outdated structure and organization, lack of innovation, an unhelpful top-heavy institution with a policy and administrative system which would make a 12th century clerk in Constantinople go ‘the fuck dude?’

Similar posts about disillusionment with the CAF and its senior leadership proliferate. What comes out on the subreddit within the period of study is a distrust of some senior military leadership consistent with what Goffman notes as being characteristic of a total

<sup>89</sup> Mercedes Stephenson, Marc-André Cossette, and Amanda Connolly, “Former Top Soldier Gen. Jonathan Vance Facing Allegations of Inappropriate Behaviour with Female Subordinates: Sources,” *Global News*, 2 February 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7614063/jonathan-vance-sexual-misconduct-operation-honour/>.

<sup>90</sup> Department of National Defence. “About Operation HONOUR,” 9 April 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/conflict-misconduct/operation-honour/about-operation-honour.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

institution. On 9 March 2021, u/OneRainyNight posted a *CBC* story titled “Military commander in charge of human resources facing claims of inappropriate behaviour.”<sup>92</sup> This story attracted negative commentary targeting senior leadership. u/MasterPtshitposter said: “My unit is telling it’s pers [personnel] not to talk about or post anything on social media that could reflect discredit on CAF and it’s senior officers. Drives me nuts knowing about issues that exist and not having a way to make concerns heard.” In the total institutional context, this illustrates the use of the free place by members to vent their frustrations.

In response to a meme on 27 February, insinuating that the leadership was prone to sexual misconduct, u/Unknown\_76980277’s said: “I remember a rule about bringing discredit to the military or speaking ill of the military is an offence of some sorts. I wouldn’t be surprised if the CoC [chain of command] used it against subordinates. It would be stupid to do and that’s exactly why it could happen.” This provoked a riposte from u/Beanonan: “discredit to the military? No need to bring what’s already there.” On 7 March 2021, u/lightcavalier posted a *Global* news story titled “Senior naval officer was threatened after reporting McDonald allegation: sources.”<sup>93</sup> This generated a heated thread. u/Particular\_Set5959 commented as follows: “Anonymous for obvious reasons. As an officer, I feel so ashamed. I mean we all knew some high ranking officers were trash... Senior officers have shown their incapacity to lead by example.”

Between the date when General Vance’s case was announced and the end of June, there were at least 75 memes caricaturing the CAF and its senior leadership, with a preponderant focus on what members saw as a lack of integrity among the institutional leadership especially with regards to inappropriate sexual behaviour. However, there were also instances of debate about what some saw as a trial-by-media creep, especially in the case of Major-General Dany Fortin. Fortin had been the commander of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out task force and the face of the vaccine roll-out in Canada. He was, however, removed in May 2021 due to a historical sexual misconduct allegation. On 17 May 2021, u/judgingyouquietly posted a news report titled “Maj.-Gen. Dany Fortin facing historical sexual misconduct allegation: CTV News

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<sup>92</sup> Burke, “Commander of Special Forces.”

<sup>93</sup> Mercedes Stephenson, Marc-André Cossette, and Amanda Connolly, “Senior Naval Officer Was Threatened after Reporting McDonald Allegation: Sources,” *Global News*, 7 March 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7682628/art-mcdonald-allegation-canadian-military/>.

sources.”<sup>94</sup> This sparked debate about the justice system, and the fairness of the allegations against Fortin, given that they were historical in nature and the fact that he had endeared himself to CAF members and the public when he demonstrated leadership in the COVID-19 vaccine delivery program.

Similar sentiments were shared in a contested debate when it was announced that the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff Lieutenant-General Michael Rouleau and Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy Vice-Admiral Craig Alan Baines had gone golfing with Vance while he was under investigation. u/skygrunt commented on a thread about the news item on 13 June 2021 as follows: “We are getting into a dangerous territory of public opinion trials and shaming. This has nothing to do with my personal feelings towards them which aren’t great for the record.” However, as that person noted, such sentiments are not popular on the subreddit, a point u/molsonman7800 made that: “People on this subreddit seem to forget about due process & innocent until proven guilty.” This attracted downvotes.

As well, there are posters who extolled the virtues of leaders especially those under whom they have served. When, on 16 March 2021, u/hken167 posted an *Ottawa Citizen* report that: “Senior female Canadian Forces officer quits military in disgust over sexual misconduct allegations,”<sup>95</sup> the senior officer in question received praise: “I’m sad that the CAF has clearly lost a fantastic officer” u/SolemZez said. u/Rovenbird agreed: “A real loss. Excellent officer and leader and a fine person all around.” These comments received high upvotes. Similarly, when, u/Patarknight posted a *CTV* news story titled “Brig.-Gen. Krista Brodie named as new national COVID-19 vaccine rollout lead,”<sup>96</sup> it was greeted with several positive comments regarding her leadership. For example, u/throAwae-eh said “She’s a solid lady with great leadership and a strong head on her shoulder. Ridiculously smart!” “She is smart, kind and an outstanding officer. Great choice!” chimed in u/SassyPants5. u/InternationalFun6281 posted: “...She is a brilliant

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<sup>94</sup> Annie Bergeron-Oliver and Kevin Gallagher, “Maj.-Gen. Dany Fortin Facing Historical Sexual Misconduct Allegation: CTV News Sources,” *CTVNews*, 16 May 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/maj-gen-dany-fortin-facing-historical-sexual-misconduct-allegation-ctv-news-sources-1.5430554>.

<sup>95</sup> David Pugliese, “Senior Female Canadian Forces Officer Quits Military in Disgust over Sexual Misconduct Allegations,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 16 March 2021, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/senior-female-canadian-forces-officer-quits-military-in-disgust-over-sexual-misconduct-allegations>.

<sup>96</sup> Rachel Aiello, “Brig.-Gen. Krista Brodie Named as New National COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout Lead,” *CTVNews*, 17 May 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/brig-gen-krista-brodie-named-as-new-national-covid-19-vaccine-rollout-lead-1.5431859>.

individual, an inspirational leader and an exceptional officer... She's perfect for this role."

While members wish to preserve relative anonymity to comment in the free place, they want institutional leadership awareness of the space and their concerns. u/when-flies-pig commented on 3 April 2021: "I know snr [senior] and flag officers visit this subreddit so I hope they know they have completely lost our trust and confidence in their bullshit." When *CBC* news referenced the subreddit as a source for gauging member sentiment in May 2021,<sup>97</sup> members took it as mainstream approbation of legitimacy. In a sense, this story demonstrated the potential of the subreddit to provide a competing narrative vis-à-vis the official institutional narrative.

Not only is the leadership aware of the subreddit, some are present on it, even if in a lurking capacity. The following post by u/anon637281 On July 7, 2020 is instructive:

Backstory: several days ago, I commented on a thread here regarding the 'seaman' name change and how Admiral Sutherland told members to contact him directly if they have an issue with the change. My comment was more or less 'the change is good, but dont bother contacting him because ive personally gotten a 5B [threat of being released from the CAF] for contacting people much lower in rank than him.' Which leads me to admitting when I am wrong. Rear Admiral Sutherland is on this sub. Not only that, but he PM'd [private messaged] me directly after seeing my comment and stating that hes had 4 junior NCMs [non-commissioned members] contact him since the article and several officers and an open invitation to him if I had any constructive criticism. A senior leader like that with his ear to ground is exactly who we need at the top and it is reassuring to see we have such open leadership at the top.

Official presence on the platform can also be overt. In December 2021, the senior Cyber Operator in the CAF hosted a forum to answer questions for those interested in joining the military's evolving cyber occupation. Thus, the institution tacitly acknowledges the existence of the platform and its value to members. However, the presence or participation of CAF leadership on the platform must not be confused with official control. Unlike what obtains within official CAF forums, the discourse on the subreddit is dictated by the membership. When institutional leadership engage, they do so without the power and privilege which they otherwise enjoy and have to submit to

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<sup>97</sup> Paas-Lang and Burke, "Special Forces Commander Put on Leave."



subreddit norms. As can be seen from some of the excerpts, moderators have refused to accede to official wishes. However, the current CAF approach to the platform creates opportunities to reach out and correct harmful information if needed. The platform also offers the institution opportunities for social listening to understand member concerns and sentiments.

From the excerpts cited in this paper, it can be seen that as a free place in the CAF's underlife, the subreddit is a Habermasian public sphere. Jürgen Habermas<sup>98</sup> idealized an Enlightenment-era public sphere or discursive space outside State or elite control such as European coffee houses, salons, and public spaces where, irrespective of status, people could gather to discuss matters of common concern, giving rise to civil society and liberal democratic culture.<sup>99</sup> This ideal, in the past applied to evaluate traditional media, is now applied to social media, as this is seen as being interactive, participatory, having less gatekeeping in comparison to traditional media, and being democratic in ethos, more capable of discursive community formation.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Reddit has been conceptualized as part of the public sphere because of its collaborative and discourse formation properties in relation to matters of societal interest.<sup>101</sup> Just as Goffman's model of the total institution is an ideal or continuum, the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is merely an ideal or model that does not fully obtain in reality.<sup>102</sup> For example, the Enlightenment-era spaces that Habermas romanticized were predominantly gendered spaces, and thus, not universally accessible.<sup>103</sup> With that

<sup>98</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy," in *Re-Imagining Public Space: The Frankfurt School in the 21st Century*, edited by Diana Boros and James M. Glass (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), pp. 19-43. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137373311\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137373311_2).

<sup>100</sup> Manuel Castells, "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): pp. 78-93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311877>; Mohamed Nanabhay and Roxane Farmanfarmanian, "From Spectacle to Spectacular: How Physical Space, Social Media and Mainstream Broadcast Amplified the Public Sphere in Egypt's 'Revolution,'" *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011): pp. 573-603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2011.639562>; Richard Mills and Adam Fish, "A Computational Study of How and Why Reddit.Com Was an Effective Platform in the Campaign Against SOPA," in *Social Computing and Social Media*, edited by Gabriele Meiselwitz, pp. 229-41. Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20367-6\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20367-6_23).

<sup>101</sup> Tobias Kauer, Arran Ridley, Marian Dörk, and Benjamin Bach, "The Public Life of Data: Investigating Reactions to Visualizations on Reddit," *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 6 May 2021, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445720>; Panek, *Understanding Reddit*.

<sup>102</sup> Castells, "The New Public Sphere."

<sup>103</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): pp. 56-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

caveat, however, it is possible to see r/CanadianForces as an inclusive, democratic space for the CAF's "civil society," free from constraints of the hierarchical, rank-oriented culture of the total institution, thus, affording CAF members, irrespective of rank, the ability to candidly articulate their sentiments. This is more so for members who, by virtue of rank, would be reticent to speak freely within the organization, even if given the opportunity.

It is also important to observe from the forum discussions that the evolution of communications technology has facilitated public communication of individual opinions in the public sphere in a manner that was previously limited by orality. Ordinarily, the unfiltered, free flowing conversations and slang would be characteristic of small intimate private gatherings. With the availability of social media and in this case, Reddit, this commentary gains wider dispersion across space and permanence across time as public communication.<sup>104</sup>

Irrespective of its public sphere ethos, the negative comments against the CAF and some of its senior leadership on r/CanadianForces are potentially inconsistent with CAF regulations, especially those applying to Improper Comments. As well, irrespective of its public sphere ethos, the potential for the subreddit as a public facing page to facilitate adversarial social listening and intelligence gathering exists, a point made in NDSOD 17.<sup>105</sup> It seems that members have a narrow interpretation of what could be a risk to the CAF. So long as something is not considered a risk to operational security, personnel security, classified information, etc., members are not overly concerned.

### Conclusion

Goffman conceptualized the total institution as possessing an adversarial inmate/member perspective versus an institutional/leadership perspective, "Two different social and cultural worlds develop, jogging alongside each other with points of official contact but little mutual penetration."<sup>106</sup> Previous literature on the CAF in relation to social media has focused on the institutional dimension. This study takes us

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<sup>104</sup> Panek, *Understanding Reddit*.

<sup>105</sup> DND, NDSOD, para 17:22.

<sup>106</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 9.

into the member dimension through r/CanadianForces. This research engages with r/CanadianForces seeking to answer the question: assuming that the CAF is a total institution, to what extent does r/CanadianForces serve as a free place wherein members engage in underlife discourse that potentially infringes organizational regulations and policies? This study focused on posts and comments between February and July 2021, when media reports of sexual misconduct/ inappropriate conduct investigations of CAF senior leaders proliferated. This makes it timely and salient: the subject of inappropriate conduct in the CAF has been topical in recent years. And in 2021, the focus in this regard fell predominantly on the highest levels of the Canadian military leadership.

Based on a review of threads that were hosted on r/CanadianForces to discuss ten news reports relating to these cases and posts on the subreddit both within and outside the study timeframe, it is confirmed that as a feature of the contemporary media ecosystem, the subreddit is indeed a free place for underlife discourses to the extent that members treat r/CanadianForces as a space where they can express themselves freely irrespective of rank, unlike spaces afforded by the total institution or other media. The evolution of the media ecosystem has facilitated the elevation of what would have been oral gossip in the private sphere to discourse within the public sphere. Through personal narratives, members construct alternative realities of the CAF that might be inconstant with the realities constructed through official narratives. This is similar to what Stern and Ben Shalom observe as a “counternarrative,”<sup>107</sup> created by members of the Israeli military vis-à-vis the institutional narrative about service realities. This might, therefore, contribute to a broader social construction of the CAF’s reality vis-à-vis the official institutional narrative. It is noted that non-institutional social media activity by members of the Israeli Defence Force often transgress disciplinary boundaries within a strict hierarchical organization,<sup>108</sup> leveraging the relative anonymity of social media,<sup>109</sup> and similarly, the discourse in r/CanadianForces at times potentially infringes institutional norms. This is mainly with regards to criticism of the CAF and its senior leadership, and thus, is potentially inconsistent with the

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<sup>107</sup> Stern and Ben Shalom, “Confessions and Tweets,” p. 346.

<sup>108</sup> Stern and Ben Shalom, “Confessions and Tweets.”

<sup>109</sup> Kuntsman and Stein, *Digital Militarism*.

organization's Improper Comments rules. Topics and language are also sometimes potentially inconsistent with CAF norms.

In their contribution to a book titled *Threats to Military Professionalism: International Perspectives*,<sup>110</sup> Lew, using the Singaporean military as a case in point, suggests that social media represents one of the threats to the institutional legitimacy of contemporary professional militaries.<sup>111</sup> This is because what members say or do in social media could impact the public image of the organization. Thus, the ability leaders of the military-as-total institution hitherto had to regulate member conduct is problematized by the emergence of a virtual space outside institutional control. As one author notes from a media ecological perspective, "the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and social media in the 2000s radically changed the conditions of the media ecosystem. In this new context, the old media and actors must adapt to the new environment if they want to survive."<sup>112</sup> A take-away from this study is that the evolution of platforms like r/CanadianForces is a double-edged sword for organizational leadership. It gives the CAF opportunities for social listening to access member sentiment and concerns that would not be accessible within institutional spaces. However, this study also shows that this media evolution constitutes a threat to the boundaries and control of the contemporary total institution. Specifically, consistent with research regarding military personnel use of non-institutional social media in other jurisdictions, this study suggests that the evolution of Reddit as a Web 2.0 platform has created opportunities for CAF member agency vis-à-vis the organization, simultaneously creating threats to the ability of the CAF-as-total institution to attenuate member freedom of expression. As does Chuah, it is argued herein of the CAF membership that "web 2.0's participatory features have created numerous possibilities for users to resist at a microscopic level."<sup>113</sup> This signals a need for the CAF and similar organisations to review their policies for member social media

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<sup>110</sup> Jeff Stouffer and Douglas Lindsay, eds. *Threats to Military Professionalism: International Perspectives* (Kingston, Ont.: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> Psalm B.C. Lew "Threats and Opportunities for Military Professionalism from Social Media," in *Threats to Military Professionalism: International Perspectives*, edited by Jeff Stouffer and Douglas Lindsay, pp. 87–99 (Kingston, Ont.: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Carlos Alberto Scolari, "Networks: From Text to Hypertext, from Publishing to Sharing, from Single Author to Collaborative Production," in *The Oxford Handbook of Publishing*, edited by Angus Phillips and Michael Bhaskar (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019). <http://hdl.handle.net/10230/42737>.

<sup>113</sup> Thoo Chuah, "Interpersonal Surveillance and Resistance in Social Media," in *IAMCR 2016 Conference, Participatory Communication Research -PCR Section* (Leicester, UK: 2016).

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communication and determine the extent to which these are consistent with contemporary realities.

The fact that CAF leadership sometimes overtly or covertly engage members on the platform suggests an awareness of the need to nuance official perspectives towards the kind of underlife that r/CanadianForces represents. It may also reflect an awareness of institutional limitations to control social media underlife activities. Overt interventions by leaders on the subreddit may also be a means of role-modelling transparency, active listening and responsible social media use, a strategy Lew proposes for contemporary military leadership.<sup>114</sup> As previously mentioned, Goffman identifies suspicion and misconceptions as characterizing the relationship between leadership and members in the total institution due to communication barriers. This could be mitigated through frank organizational communication. Thus, leadership engagement on the subreddit could also be seen as a means of reducing institutional misconceptions. Only time will tell if the CAF approach to the subreddit constitutes best practices. Much will also depend on the availability of political will in liberal democracies like Canada to enforce CAF regulations on pseudonymous platforms like Reddit, as well as the availability of technological means to do this without difficulty. For example, despite the nature of the content posted on with r/CanadianForces, a search of the CAF Court Martial and Court Martial Appeal databases<sup>115</sup> did not reveal prosecutions for Improper Comments in the subreddit. However, going forward, proactive strategies must be developed to eliminate systemic internal communication barriers and create genuine opportunities for members to express concerns without the security and institutional risks posed by doing so in the social media space; and leadership must demonstrate genuine listening. Members would also need to be aware that while new media platforms create opportunities for them to exercise their agency, discourse on these platforms creates opportunities for adversarial social listening and intelligence gathering, and thus, member and institutional vulnerabilities.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Lew, “Threats and Opportunities.”

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.canlii.org/en/ca/cm/>; <https://www.canlii.org/en/ca/cmac/>.

<sup>116</sup> Judson C. Dressler, Christopher Bronk, and Daniel S. Wallach, “Exploiting Military OpSec through Open-Source Vulnerabilities,” in *MILCOM 2015 - 2015 IEEE Military Communications Conference*, pp. 450–58, 2015.

<https://doi.org/10.1109/MILCOM.2015.7357484>; Sofia Martins Gerales, “The Dark Side of Interconnectivity: Social Media as a Cyber-Weapon?” in *Social Media and the Armed Forces*, edited by Eva Moehlecke de Baseggio, Olivia Schneider, and Tibor Szvircsev Tresch, pp. 289–313 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020).