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16 Sport, media and the promotion of militarism: theoretical inter-continental reflections of the United Kingdom and South Korea

Abstract: The relationship between sport, popular culture, and western militarism is well established with the United States and its western allies witnessing a plethora of popular culture events being co-opted into providing platforms for citizens to “support” their governments’ respective armed forces. Central to such events has been the relationship between sport and the media, with sport having long been a fruitful cultural arena utilized to enable and encourage citizens to support and “thank” national military actors. The mediated spectacle of sport combined with its sacred symbolic significance offers both governments and disparate individuals the sanctuary of the imagined (“democratic”) nation and its accompanying ideological righteousness in the face of an uncertain global political world of “wars on terror,” economic crises, and “fake news.”

Keywords: United Kingdom; South Korea; remembrance; CDA; ideology; militarism

1 Introduction

The current phase of the sport–media–military nexus, precipitated and sustained by the US-led “war on terror,” has a fascinating history (for example, see Jansen and Sabo 1994; Silk and Falcous 2005; Butterworth 2005, 2008, 2010, 2017; Stempel 2006; King 2008; Scherer and Koch 2010; Jenkins 2013; Kelly 2013, 2017a, 2017b; Penn and Berridge 2016; Cree and Caddick 2019). The American and Canadian governments developed propaganda departments designed to use the mediatization of popular cultural activities to elicit, manufacture, and communicate consent for their respective military actors and actions, the latter of which consisted largely of two controversial wars in the Middle East (an invasion of Iraq and an occupation of Afghanistan) (see Stempel 2006; Butterworth and Moskal 2009; Scherer and Koch 2010). Operation Tribute to Freedom (USA) and Operation Connection (Canada) emerged in 2003 and 2004 respectively and have placed sport and other such patriotism-inducing cultural events at the center of their “support the troops” initiatives. Part of the power of such events is that the coordinated activities are highly mediated spectacles communicating to (and crucially) via the public that the events and the ideological causes they underpin are normalized and deeply embedded into the everyday culture of society. They become the militarized wing of the “banal nationalism” Billig (1995) so clearly
has outlined. The spectacle of military fighter planes flying over a major sports arena, military tanks being used as background props for promotional photos of sporting mascots, or uniformed military personnel entering the sports field to adulation and applause are just three examples of the everyday fusion of mediated sport and militarism in US and allied countries. The hidden governmental orchestration of such practices in the US emerged in 2015 when – after freedom of information requests – it was revealed that its government paid sports clubs more than US $9 million (combined) in return for military appreciation events; events which appeared at the time to be organically supported rather than manufactured by the government using the money of the taxpayers it sought support from (Aljazeera 2015).

Given there has been much work written on the US, this chapter extends its analysis to consider two (contrasting) allies of the United States – the United Kingdom (UK) and South Korea. The UK offers a European, western, and NATO perspective. South Korea’s status as a non-western and Indian Pacific Strategy ally of the US further extends our understanding of the sport–military–media nexus to Asia. Due to its military tensions with North Korea and universal conscription for men over the last seven decades, South Korea’s military culture is embedded uniquely in civil society (Moon 2005; Song 2014). One may therefore expect different relationships and patterns to develop with regard to civil–military relations and indeed the associated sport–media–military nexus. Yet, as we reveal, in common with the US and UK, in the last decade major sporting occasions have been increasingly occurring and mediated in ways which communicate consent for militaristic ideology in South Korea in the last decade. One such example is the Korean professional baseball league, the most popular and culturally significant spectator sport in the country. We discuss this illustrating the potency of the sport–media–military nexus in South Korea with its forms of militaristic and patriotic discourse being infused with baseball matches and their mediated coverage.

First, however, we discuss the UK and its most culturally symbolic and universally mediated sport, football. In 2016, FIFA reprimanded the UK’s football associations (FAs) for placing remembrance poppies on playing kits (FIFA investigates 2016; Royson, Davidson, and de la Mare 2017).1 Despite FIFA’s judgement that these acts of remembrance had breached Law 4.4 relating to “political, religious or personal slogans” (IFAB 2016), commentators in the UK universally defended these acts of remembrance as unequivocally non-political.2 To analyse this case study and the sig-

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1 The Earl Haig (red) poppy, named after First World War British military general, is the primary symbol of UK and Commonwealth military-related remembrance.

2 For example, Scottish secretary David Mundell asserted “this isn’t a political gesture; it’s a gesture about paying respect.” He condemned FIFA’s application of its own rules as “inexplicable” rejecting the world governing body’s authority to legislate its own sport, adding they “should duck out of the issue” (FIFA completely 2016). British Prime, Minister Theresa May described the ruling as “utterly outrageous” (Elgot 2016) and, through her official spokeswoman, noted: “We continue to believe that footballers and fans should be able very clearly to show their support for all that our armed forces do” (FIFA fines 2016).
nificance of communication in (and of) sport, we locate the everyday lived intersections between language, power, and society as they relate to UK military-related remembrance. While the chapter’s focus is sport, we avoid viewing the sport–media–military nexus as a de-contextualized abstraction. It is vital to contextualize that sport’s power to communicate such ideological messages is because it reinforces identical messages communicated across a range of other national settings. In other words, sport acts in harmony across a multitude of socio-cultural settings to normalize and legitimize identical ideologically laden messages of banal militarism camouflaged as apolitical spectacle. After illustrating some of these sporting settings in which banal militarism occurs, we analyze the alleged (and refuted) politics of the red poppy and remembrance in British sport by outlining the wider national meanings of remembrance to illustrate the ways in which it is ubiquitously and officially interpreted. This involves first offering a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the live television coverage of the 2016 Remembrance Sunday event by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC1) and Sky News. Understanding the ideological representation of the UK’s primary remembrance-focused event by the official British state’s national broadcaster and the UK’s most prominent commercial broadcaster enables a fuller contextual understanding of communicating consent for militaristic violence on behalf of the UK government. We reveal a common set of ideological discursive articulations that are almost universally accepted in Britain, eliciting few critical comments or acts of dissention. We suggest that these televised productions and their articulations represent a trustworthy barometer with which to judge accepted and common interpretations of British remembrance and, consequently, contextualize the FIFA “poppy controversy” more fully.

We conclude that, despite being quite different types of US ally with very different historic and political civil–military relationships, the sport–media–military nexus in both the UK and South Korea functions similarly as part of an overarching cultural reproduction process that serves to use sport to both normalize and communicate consent for US-allies’ foreign policy, military violence, and wars.

2 UK remembrance

The United Kingdom has witnessed many of the American and Canadian “support the troops” campaigns being replicated. Beauty contests, prime time Saturday night television shows, military-related music albums, military branded food products, newly formed charities, recently invented traditions such as Armed Forces Day, and homecoming parades have all combined to ensure a multi-agency hero-ification and celebrityization of the British military occurs (see Kelly 2013). Britain’s Invictus Games has joined the American Warrior Games to offer a sporting platform for injured military personnel to compete and elicit public support. British football clubs such as Bolton Wanderers FC, Raith Rovers FC, and Millwall FC have honored the military by sport-
ing playing kits that resemble military uniforms and/or include military camouflage
designs. There has also been a growth in military charities partnering sporting organ-
izations in providing platforms for ideological and financial support. For instance, the
recently invented *Tickets for Troops* charity offers free tickets for serving soldiers for
a range of high-profile sports occasions, each serving to increase military visibility,
social acceptance and public support through the vehicle of sport. Such examples
exist as part of a wider sport–media–military nexus. Accompanying these events and
partnerships are quite explicit political messages communicated via media platforms.
For example, in describing the Football League and Help for Heroes partnership in
2010, Football League chairman Lord Mawhinney was cited in the popular UK daily
newspaper *The Sun* as incorporating Britain’s football supporting public into showing
“appreciation.” He stated:

> [t]he contribution being made by our armed forces around the world is truly humbling. The foot-
ball for heroes week will provide an excellent opportunity for supporters to show their apprecia-
tion for the outstanding work being done (see Footie clubs 2010).

Understanding that sport and popular culture events have been used as stages to
incorporate citizens by proxy into showing support and appreciation for the mili-
tary violence of nation-states (euphemistically sanitized as “contribution” and “out-
standing work”) is important because it exposes the intimate – yet often less-than-
explicit – ideological overlap between government, foreign policy makers, military
figures, and sporting governing bodies. Moreover, the role of the media is central to
such events. For without widespread media coverage, sporting and political figures
would be unable to inform supporters and citizens of how they are expected to ide-
ologically internalize and interpret such activities. It is within this context that the
aforementioned British football governing bodies’ fine occurred for making political
statements, and it is events such as these which raise questions around the politics of
sport, the ideological interpretations of military-related remembrance, and the func-
tion of the media. We now turn to the UK’s remembrance activities in order to further
consider such questions.

The UK’s (and wider Commonwealth’s) Remembrance Sunday event occurs
annually on the nearest Sunday to Armistice Day, November 11, incorporating senior
members of the British establishment such as the hereditary head of state – i.e., the
Queen – and other senior royal family members, the Prime Minister, leaders of opposi-
tion parties, senior religious clergy, and military groups (including bands and British
military personnel). The event has traditionally been perceived by many as a mark of
remembrance for those who have suffered as a result of military conflict – most com-
monly connected to the two world wars – but its meaning remains fluid and open to
interpretation with debates around its meaning occurring as far back as the immediate
aftermath of World War I (Basham 2015; Iles 2008). In recent times, remembrance has
signified a conflation of sorrow, pride, and gratitude towards both past and present
military actors and actions. It is increasingly being connected to supporting those
British military actors recently engaged or currently engaging in military violence in locations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. For example, in 2016 – the same year of the FIFA controversy – the official custodians and coordinators of UK remembrance, The Royal British Legion, officially re-branded their annual campaign as “Rethink Remembrance” stating:

There’s a new generation of veterans that need your support. This year, The Royal British Legion is asking the nation to Rethink Remembrance by recognising the sacrifices made not just by the Armed Forces of the past, but by today’s generation too. ... For many people, Remembrance is associated with the fallen of the First and Second World Wars. While we will always remember them, the Legion wants to raise awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel that need our support. (Rethink remembrance 2016)

Thus, the shift from a symbol of sorrowful remembrance to symbolizing current (and living) military actors has now been widely acknowledged and forms a central focus of the official branding strategy of UK remembrance. Furthermore, this marketing campaign extends sorrowful remembrance to include seeking recognition, support, and awareness of the sacrifices of British military actors.

The Remembrance Sunday event always places primary focus and importance on the British military – as an institution and on military individuals – with marching soldiers, military insignia, military-infused nostalgia, and military-centered performances for (and by) dignitaries who stand attentive in deference to militarism and who behave with a ceremonial solemn demeanor to the “sacrifices” of British and Commonwealth military. Such practices – and their ideological articulations – constitute historical and contemporary events that are both open to political interpretation and involve particular power interests such as the state, foreign policy, and militarism. Remembrance in Britain, therefore, has functioned as part of a broader civil–military relationship, and in understanding its political significance (and/or meaning) in and beyond sport, these relationships and discourses should be acknowledged and understood.

In considering the political potency of UK military-related remembrance and how sport is utilized as an extension of the state’s militaristic public relations, the starting point is the centerpiece institutional representation of British remembrance at the political, cultural, and mediated levels, Remembrance Sunday. This day is marked annually by a televised event broadcast live on the state-funded BBC and commercial channel Sky News. Post-ceremony, it is treated as nationally significant news to be covered in local and national news sites in all modes of British media. We provide a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the live BBC1 and Sky News broadcast coverage of Remembrance Sunday 2016.³ As Machin and Mayr stress:

³ 2016 was selected because it was the same year of the Royal British Legion’s noted re-branding campaign to “re-think Remembrance” and it was also the year the debates surrounding the political nature of remembrance in the UK emerged (largely due to the aforementioned FIFA decision to fine the UK football governing bodies for breaking the rule on political advertising).
CDA assumes that power relations are discursive. In other words, power is transmitted and practiced through discourse ... exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends. The term “critical” therefore means “denaturalizing” the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts. This will allow us to reveal the kinds of power interests buried in these texts (2012: 4–5).

In analyzing the live television coverage, we hope to reveal and critique the strategies and representations of these events and de-naturalize the language, revealing those ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in the discourses. When understanding the relationship between sport, language, power, and UK society, it is reasonable, therefore, to situate the discussion in its broader contexts around language, communication, and symbolism. By doing this, more trustworthy analyses of meaning and symbolism within sport can be achieved. We recorded two live broadcasts (Remembrance Sunday Live, BBC1 2016; Remembrance Sunday Live, Sky News 2016) from beginning to end and watched the entire broadcasts numerous times each, noting thematic articulations until saturation point was reached and no new themes emerged. This allowed us to isolate and categorize major themes from each broadcast. We only include a major theme if it was obvious in both broadcasts. Four inter-related themes emerged as key articulations of the event and its media representation in almost parallel fashion on both national channels:

1. Remembrance is continually connected to current military conflicts/violence as well as the traditional two world wars.
2. Remembrance Day is framed as a day to venerate some or all of the British Empire, the United Kingdom (and its constituent nations), and the monarch/crown.
3. Remembrance Day is articulated as being about remembering those who “protected” and continue to “protect” “freedom.” Freedom here is represented as an apolitical matter of fact that is undisputed and the desired property of every (presumably virtuous) human being. The possibility that this freedom is a British state version contested by some citizens (of the United Kingdom and other nation-states) is overlooked.
4. Remembrance Day is utilized as an opportunity for “the nation” to pay homage to the British military. This includes “the nation” honoring, thanking, and showing gratitude (and is mirrored in the BBC and Sky broadcasts’ editorial approaches which both involve presenters positioning themselves as being grateful, thankful, and in deference to military actors and actions).

These four themes are briefly discussed in turn.
2.1 Connecting remembrance to current military conflict/violence

In apparent harmony with the Royal British Legion’s re-branding of remembrance, both the BBC and Sky television broadcasts articulated the “Rethink Remembrance” unambiguously as paying respect to current military actors. In distinguishing between the conscripts of two world wars and current military actors, BBC anchor David Dimbleby discussed the latter early on in the three-hour broadcast stressing, “we have a moment to remember those men and women and their families too and the sacrifices they’ve made” (original emphasis). Connecting such sentiments of recent and current military personnel as being integral to the meaning of remembrance and framing this as the “nation’s collective remembrance,” the BBC production supplemented its live coverage with a series of pre-recorded interviews of current and recent soldiers or their bereaved families discussing the more recent “wars” in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Argentina. Sky News anchor Alistair Bruce made a similar connection in the opening three minutes of Sky’s coverage, acknowledging the 100 years anniversary of the Battle of the Somme before lexically connecting this to today commenting, “and so many other things come to mind, and not least more recent memories of loss in battle [pause] here at the cenotaph.” During these comments, Sky’s on-screen strap line header reinforced a similar message reading: “PM: Remembrance Day should honour UK forces fighting Islamic State as well as those killed in previous conflicts.” Continuing the theme of re-thinking remembrance, Sky’s coverage turned to their female presenter Rebecca Williams who was among the marchers. The main studio anchor (Alistair Bruce) introduced Williams as having a better understanding of the meaning of the event (insinuating this was due to her being among the participants of the ceremony). Williams then began:

Yes, very emotional here. As you can see so many people have turned out as [pause] as far as the eye can see, to pay tribute to those who’ve made the ultimate sacrifice, not just in the first and second world war but in conflicts in between, and now, as Theresa May has said, also those who continue to fight the threat of Islamic State and Daesh.

Reproducing a conservative Prime Minister’s request as though it is presenting neutral news, the Sky News presenter informed viewers that this request is being fulfilled by those present – and by extension, one may assume, she was encouraging viewers to do likewise. It is also significant at this point to note that Williams framed the attendees’ presence and involvement in the event as representing them “paying tribute” (as opposed to alternative interpretations such as showing regret and/or sorrow or representing a never again attitude to war and military violence).
### 2.2 Remembrance as celebration of empire, nation-state, and monarch

The second main theme to emerge from the BBC1 and Sky News coverage involved Remembrance Day acting as a quasi-celebration of the British Empire, the United Kingdom, and monarchy. Displaying a musical “united” Kingdom of the nations of the UK, the BBC broadcast military bands playing “Rule Britannia,” “The Minstrel Boy,” “Men of Harlech,” and the “Skye Boat Song.” At Sky, Alastair Bruce commented on the significance of the music, noting, “everything means something and [he chuckles] and the music says something too. There’ll always be an England.”

Bruce then informed viewers of the meaning of the cenotaph, stating it means “an empty tomb” before encouraging viewers to begin considering who they would think about during the approaching two-minute silence. He then instructed, “The concept is that whoever you are, whoever you may be thinking about, place your thoughts in that empty tomb and it will be your personal memorial as well as one for a British Empire that stretched all across the world.”

Bruce demonstrates the ease with which the personal becomes the national while representing the national as constituting the British Empire. Here we see how British remembrance works to make a person’s existence as an individual indissoluble from her/his existence as a patriotic citizen of the nation (and Empire). The clear insinuation without being explicit is that remembrance (and its symbols) represents a connection with (or even longing for) a lost Empire and as a memorial to those who secured it. The possibility of contested versions of empire is absent as is the notion that remembrance may be detached from this (or any) ideologically framed version of national identity or nationhood.

Both channels reinforced a British state identity. The BBC incorporated an identical production practice as Sky, having a main (male) anchor (David Dimbleby) commenting from the studio while intermittently moving to their (female) presenter (Sophie Rayworth) located on the streets of London among the procession participants. Rayworth was shown interviewing two serving soldiers who had received injuries in Iraq. One of the soldiers noted the connection between public support and remembrance, framing this combination as increasing his pride in his national identity: “When you march out those gates to all those wonderful people who have supported us and tens of thousands who line the streets, it just (pauses emotionally) it just makes me proud to be British.”

The United Kingdom (and its constituent nations) and the British Empire were joined by the crown and monarchy in being remembered and honored both as part of the official ceremony and its mediatization. Sky’s coverage showed the Church of England’s the Right Reverend Richard Chartres addressing the audience: “Almighty God,

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4 The band was playing the tune “There’ll Always be an England” at the time this comment was made.
grant we beseech thee, that we who here do honor to the memory of those who have
died in the service of their country and of the Crown.” This plea was followed by the
military band playing the United Kingdom national anthem, God Save the Queen. At
this point, the ceremony is clearly invoking the Christian God, framing remembrance
as being about honoring the memory of people who died “for a country” and an une-
lected, hereditary monarch.

2.3 Remembrance “remembers” those protecting “freedom”

The next main theme to emerge in the coverage involved framing it as about remem-
bering those who protected and continue to protect “freedom.” This freedom in turn
was framed as universal rather than a British state5 (or British media) interpretation of
freedom. Freedom here is represented as an undisputed, apolitical matter of fact that
is the desired property of every (presumably) virtuous human being. One such illus-
trative example capturing this involved an interviewed soldier commenting, “I’ll be
thinking about Brett [recently deceased soldier] and about all those who have served,
who have given me and my country and family the freedom and opportunities that we
are able to have today because of them” (BBC1, 13/11/16).

On Sky, Alistair Bruce sought to frame the viewers’ reflection for them as inextrica-
bly involving freedom and sacrifice, noting, “we reflect on much this year. ... through
all of it, we have to understand the cost of freedom.” He then informed viewers of what
the day’s events should mean for them, adding, “it’s a day for you (viewer) to value
your family and to value the freedom in which you live and to say thank you through
poppies to those who have given the final sacrifice. We think of them here.”

Remembrance is used here to symbolize a politically infused narrative consisting
of two related ideological assertions:

1. That military violence and death resulted from a fight for freedom rather than for
economic, political, geographical, or ideological reasons/gain.
2. That this alleged fight for freedom necessarily required physical violence and its
predictable outcomes (death and injury to soldiers and civilians) as opposed to
other peaceful diplomatic actions.

Moreover, sorrowful remembrance and/or regret is/are supplanted by “thanks” and
viewers are informed that thanks should be given by them through the red poppy. With
an air of foreboding, Bruce adds, “we are always having to fight or to defend ourselves
to protect freedom.” Thus, not only is British military violence represented by remem-
brane (and the poppy) as a defensive apolitical act securing universal freedom, but

5 Of course, a “British state” version is really the version of the political party in government at the
time and may not be shared by other political parties or individual members from that state.
the viewer is primed for future military violence, and viewers’ acquiescence for it is subtly built-in to the discourse. This example of “ideological squaring” (Machin and Mayr 2012) leaves viewers in little doubt as to how they should evaluate the participants and their most visible symbolic signifier, the red poppy. Without being explicit, British violence is articulated as a defensive response to foreign aggression with the former protecting freedom and the latter violating it. Understanding such ideological work and UK remembrance more broadly is necessary because its cumulative effects build on and extend official political leaders’ mediated messages which occur simultaneously and function as a compounding and self-fulfilling political message – that British military violence is necessary for freedom. British Prime Minister Theresa May further revealed political interpretations of British remembrance when promoting the 2016 Remembrance Sunday event, commenting:

The way of life we enjoy today depends upon the service offered by members of the armed forces and their families. Across generations and in every corner of the UK, today we remember those who gave so much for our values, our democracy and our nation. At this time of reflection, we must not forget those members of the armed forces who are currently away from loved ones, whether taking the fight to Daesh, assisting UN peacekeeping efforts in Africa or fighting piracy on the high seas. As we are united in remembrance of those who have made sacrifices for our freedom, so we are united in our gratitude to those who continue to keep us safe (Sky News 2016).

Way of life, values, democracy, sacrifice, freedom, safety, British unity, and nation (state) are all invoked as integral to remembrance, and sorrowful remembrance elides into proud gratitude. May extends remembrance further still to include remembering those who may not be dead or even injured to include soliciting gratitude to military personnel who are “away from loved ones.” Re-articulating remembrance as being about current military actors and action and presenting such action as representing a quest for freedom, democracy, and nationhood are furnished in multiple ways and Remembrance Sunday offers high profile and politically potent stages for such undeniably ideological messages to be promoted.

2.4 Remembrance is opportunity to honor British military

The final narrative emanating from the BBC and Sky broadcasts underpins the previous three in that it involves framing Remembrance Sunday as a UK military venerating event mixing nostalgia, fun, and personal support from the individual presenters, revealing a combined message of unquestioning loyalty and support for the British (and Commonwealth) military and its actions. Honor, thanks, and gratitude were all used during the broadcasts. Framing the event as fun, Sky News’ Rebecca Williams interviewed a serving female soldier with an explicit carnivalesque tone and related questions, encouraging the soldier to enunciate on the “great atmosphere” and how wonderful military life/career is. Williams ended the interview by telling the soldier
to “enjoy the rest of today.” Reproducing a similar carnivalesque tone, Williams’ colleague Bruce used the military band’s live tune to break into song before pausing to suggest, “you can almost hear them singing on their way to the battlefields. It must have been extraordinary.” These representations combine to expurgate the reality and horror of boys and men leaving home to fight in World War I with a romanticized version of invented nostalgia that seamlessly connects to contemporary times and its 21st-century personification of the female soldier carrying on the tradition by soaking up the “great atmosphere” during what has historically been perceived to be a solemn ceremony of remembrance.

This analysis of the television coverage of Remembrance Sunday 2016 emphasizes that, in conjunction with the long-standing military-centered commemoration of loss and sacrifice, there is a shifting emphasis in the way remembrance and the red poppy are being represented and re-articulated in Britain. This re-articulation – which gathered momentum after the invasion/liberation of Iraq in 2003 – maintains the long-standing constituents of regret and sorrow for damaged or lost lives from two world wars. However, of critical importance for the current debate, the re-articulation explicitly “incorporates British citizens by proxy” (Kelly 2013) into showing “appreciation and support” for currently serving military personnel, whilst simultaneously extending military-related tributes to ideologically position British military as “heroes” “serving the country,” “fighting for freedom,” and “keeping us safe” by carrying out current military violence in the cause of the British government’s foreign policy objectives.

This reveals the official and accepted narratives around the red poppy and remembrance in the UK allowing us to contextualize the use of sport for “support the troops” initiatives in the UK. Utilizing sport, these narratives are reinforced and widely used to communicate consent for British militarism. Yet in understanding FIFA fining British football governing bodies for its act of remembrance (displaying the red poppy on football shirts), further contextualization can enable even deeper insights. Football was used during a period of increasing concerns from senior British state officials about dwindling public support for both military actors and their (violent) actions. For example, in 2007, senior British military commander General Dannatt lamented that the British public don’t support the troops enough, commenting:

Soldiers are genuinely concerned when they come back from Iraq to hear the population that sent them being occasionally dismissive or indifferent about their achievements ... As operational commitments have become more intense, so has the need for support from the nation (Army chief warns 2007).

Repeating a corresponding message in 2009, the British Chief of Defense Staff Jock Stirrup complained that the Taliban’s bombs were less threatening to the morale of British troops than “declining will” among the public to see the war won (cited in Gee 2014: 29). He added, “support for our servicemen and women is indivisible from support for this mission” (cited in Gee 2014: 29). British Prime Minister, Tony Blair
made similar pleas for the public to make seamless connections between support for soldiers and support for military violence stressing “the armed forces want public opinion not just behind them but behind their mission; [we should] understand their value not just their courage” (cited in Gee 2014: 29). In the UK, therefore, connection is continually made between the ontologically separate support for troops and support for military action, which includes politically opposed/supported military violence (described by both public figures as “mission”) carried out to fulfill the British state’s politically infused foreign policies. The umbilical connection between incorporating citizens by proxy into connecting support for troops seamlessly with support for military action alongside such action being represented as necessary for securing “freedom” and “way of life” is difficult to escape. Such interpretations are inherently political and ideological, yet when they are intimately connected to and expressed through the apparently non-political world of sport, they become de-contextualized to the extent the political is rendered invisible. Such political articulations compound wider remembrance acts – such as those that FIFA judged broke its rules on political statements – serving to promote and justify British foreign policy (and wars) through what Basham calls the “everyday embodied and emotional practices of remembrance and forgetting” (2015: 883). In other words, sacrifice is remembered while its political contexts are forgotten (or more accurately airbrushed out).

3 South Korean celebritization of militarism

We now turn to the sport–media–military nexus in South Korea, another close ally of the United States. South Korea maintains an important defense partnership with the US as its Indo-Pacific strategy report highlights (Panda 2019). Indeed, the alliance between the two countries is claimed to be the “lynchpin of peace and prosperity of Northeast Asia” (The Department of Defense 2019: 24). As we illustrate, the sport–media–military nexus relating to South Korea’s armed forces, reveals close practical and ideological overlaps with that of the UK (and US and its allies).

South Korea is still technically at war with North Korea and there are occasional military confrontations between them. For both the US and South Korea, communist Korea represents a serious military threat, and the allied forces’ regular military exercises in the South are alleged to be “provocative” by the North (Landay 2019). Unlike the UK, South Korea operates a mandatory (two-year) national service for its male citizens. Because of this near-universal conscription for men, a (male-centered) legacy of national service is deeply embedded in South Korean society (Moon 2005) and compulsory service is often featured as one of the most sacred devotions to the nation (Song 2014).

With this prevalence of militaristic social practice, it is no surprise that South Korean cultural commodities often romanticize and normalize a rather rigid (and
gendered) army culture (Baek 2018). Sport is no exception. In common with the UK (and US), a range of remembrance rituals take place in environments frequently associated with major sporting competitions. Sport is also actively exploited to reinforce civil–military relations. Our media analysis examines the intersection between South Korean professional baseball and the South Korean military.

3.1 The South Korean army and its community relations

Professional baseball is the most widely circulated sport-media product in South Korea (Yi and Lee 2011). The Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) league is arguably the most popular spectator sport league in the country. Almost every match is broadcast live, and national television runs daily and weekly magazine programs. KBO league news is a major feature of sport pages in most South Korean newspapers. It is therefore unsurprising that in South Korea the baseball field is where the fusion of sport, media, and militarism frequently occurs. With parallels to the US, in 2015 the KBO and the South Korean army signed a memorandum of understanding, with the stated aim of improving the image of the armed forces via professional baseball. As part of this military PR campaign, the army headquarters dispatches its ceremonial regiment to a number of high-profile baseball matches. The KBO All-Star Game is one of the most popular baseball matches in the season. This annual one-off match is often imbued with carnivalesque elements because it is largely organized to entertain baseball fans including children. Understandably, a range of cultural events also take place in association with the annual baseball festival. Since the MoU agreement in 2015, the performance of a ceremonial army regiment has become a regular feature of this baseball event.7 An army orchestra plays the national anthem before the match and its soldiers perform rifle drills and hand-to-hand combat skills to the spectators during the pre-game show. A special-forces parachute display team also parachutes over the stadium. It is worth noting the similarities here between the US’s practices as part of its Operation Tribute to Freedom.

In sport, the stadium spectators are increasingly becoming secondary to their social (and traditional) media-consuming spectators. Therefore, such patriotic and militaristic performances would be unlikely to occur and would certainly not have the propaganda potential unless they were highly mediated productions. Moreover, in common with the overwhelming majority of their US and UK counterparts, the

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6 All media reports (TV and newspapers) being discussed in relation to South Korea are originally published in Korean. As native speakers of English and Korean respectively, we carefully checked our translation in order to be sensitive to subtle cultural meanings when the Korean text was translated into English.

7 There have been occasional military performances like this before, but these never used to be an annual performance.
media productions are universally supportive and ideologically framed to endorse the military actions of its government. For instance, when almost 100 soldiers entered the stadium at the 2016 All-Star Game (to perform a taekwondo demonstration), the SPOTV (16/07/16) commented that, “the Korean Army demonstration team are brave soldiers who, being equipped with a must-win spirit, train their battle skills against enemies day and night. We should support them!” (italics added).

Such commentary is illuminating because it reveals that despite those servicemen performing in the stadium as part of a carnivalesque celebration of a special sporting occasion, they were essentially represented as warriors prepared and ready to fight against “enemies.” Although the media do not explicitly name North Korea, few are likely to doubt the identity of the imagined “enemy.” The communicative power of such imagined enemies is that it further facilitates, if not explicitly instructs, the sport fan and media consumer to “support the troops.” These developments are not unrelated to the fact that since the end of the Cold War and subsequent termination of a military dictatorship in the 1990s (Lee 2020), the social status of the armed forces in South Korea has diminished. In this context, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) seeks to manufacture support from the public in order to boost the morale of the South Korean armed forces. It should be noted that unlike the respective civic domains in the US and UK, pro-military public campaigns such as “support our troops” and charities such as Help for Heroes are not widespread in South Korean society. Sport, especially baseball, is one of the few windows through which the Korean armed forces undertake community relations programs. This media commentary can be understood as the media publicity of the MoD.

Despite these subtle differences, such celebration and pride in the nation’s military has, in common with the US and UK, become normalized even when the event is sport-focused (rather than for explicit military purposes). When honor guards performed a rifle demonstration before the 2017 event, the SPOTV (15/07/17) also proclaimed that “the army honor guards are showing remarkable drills! They must have trained a lot, and their hard work finally makes this amazing performance. It is really spectacular, indeed.”

Here, we can see the media celebrate the appearance of the army unit in the stadium. Various national newspapers also published a series of photographs depicting the army displaying meticulous drills on the diamond with positive undertones. By disseminating these texts, the media naturalizes, if not glorifies, the presence of the military personnel at the All-Star Games. Such practices can, therefore, be interpreted as supporting the South Korean and American military alliance in order to protect geo-political and economically motivated ideological desires (articulated as safeguarding peace and prosperity in the Korean peninsula). In common with the UK and US, the fusion of sport and the military has become more visible and pronounced over recent years. The following two episodes aptly reveal this.
3.2 The Korean Series

The Korean Series is the grand finale of the Korean professional baseball league, which is KBO equivalent of the MLB World Series. In 2015, the sport governing body decided that each game should be given a special theme. The showcase opening match of the 2015 Korean series was given the theme of national defense and security. A game logo was created containing an army camouflage outline, and players wore camouflaged baseball caps and uniforms during this game. The reason for this militaristic branding of sport was to pay respect to two South Korean soldiers who were maimed by North Korean land mines while patrolling the border area in August 2015 (Choe 2015). The tensions between the two Koreas was high at that time (relating to North Korea’s missile tests and its alleged attempt to develop a nuclear warhead) creating a situation whereby a particular form of anti-North Korea patriotism emerged as a major political and cultural discourse (North Korea missile tests 2017). The Korean series, especially the opening game, was clearly reflecting and reproducing this mood.

The KBO invited the seven servicemen who were on duty with the two maimed soldiers to the Korean series along with more than 100 members of the armed forces. A military band played the national anthem and the army honor guards performed rifle drills as a tribute to the two amputees. Additionally, a retired military man (Colonel Lee) who had lost his two legs while saving a wounded soldier in the demilitarized zone 15 years previously was also invited to the series. The retired officer opened the competition by pitching the ceremonial ball. The involvement of Colonel Lee at the series was particularly noteworthy because he is regarded as a military hero for losing both legs while protecting junior infantry members. Colonel Lee has become a symbol of South Korean patriotic militarism in the 21st century. The YNA, a major news agency in South Korea, reported, “The retired Colonel Lee was walking towards the mound, relying on his prosthesis. He waved back to the fans who welcomed his entrance to the stadium, and pitched the ball to the catcher. The sound of applause was getting louder” (26/10/15, italics added). 

Kukmin Ildo, a daily newspaper in the country, added that, “Colonel Lee … stepped into the baseball ground wearing a military uniform. He was a true military man who lost his two legs due to a mine explosion while trying to save wounded soldiers” (26/10/15, italics added).

Such media discourses demonstrate Lee’s heroic status in South Korean society. It is important to note that these newspapers highlighted his military injury despite it having no relevance to the sporting occasion. Hence, the overall meaning that these media discourses disseminate is that as a “true military man,” Colonel Lee becomes a role model for patriotic South Korean servicemen and citizens. Significantly for us, this occurred as a result of the fusion of sport, media, and militarism.

8 A measure of Colonel Kim’s elevated national status is that a musical commemorating his military actions was produced in South Korea.
3.3 Busan Giants’ military series

The final example to illustrate this increasingly close sport–media–military alliance in South Korea involves the Busan Lotte Giants baseball club, which, since 2017, has devoted one weekend in June to organize an annual military series. In this military weekend, the Giants’ players wear a camouflaged baseball uniform and several hundred soldiers are invited to the matches. Additionally, cheerleaders sing patriotic songs and battle hymns during the matches and a large electric screen in the stadium shows a short film that honors war veterans. Interestingly, the overall festive and light-hearted atmosphere of this military series contrasts with the more solemn and traditional June remembrance rituals. Fans, specially invited solders, and athletes joyfully watch and participate in this military-themed competition. Given the majority of adult male spectators would have completed military service, many of them participate by wearing their vintage army uniform. In short, this baseball series offers a stage on which deeply seated South Korean civic militarism is widely performed and accepted without dissention.

Because this is a regional event in Busan, the second-largest city in South Korea, national television networks tend not to cover the Giants’ military series though some national newspapers publish a preview of it. However, Giants TV, the online channel run by the club, released a short video featuring the key moments of the military series (02.06.17). In this respect, three distinctive elements emerge from this media production. First, wearing a semi-military uniform, the captain of the cheerleaders is shown standing on a podium in the grandstand. Then he salutes the spectators, calling out his rank and identification number as if he was a soldier on duty. Then, with military terminology, he ordered the fans to follow his gestures. The spectators cheered joyfully at the captain. Second, female cheerleaders, dressed in sexualized military uniforms, were shown dancing provocatively while the camera captured the military dressed male fans visibly entertained and gazing at the cheerleaders. Third, the video also showed male fans who wore a camouflage outfit performing a humorous dance and mimicking military demeanor. After these light-hearted gestures, they saluted back to the captain and the cheerleaders.

This short video clearly reveals the deeply seated military culture in South Korea. So much so that, the fusion of sport and militarism is freely circulated without much if any public dissension. The case of the Giants’ military series is particularly interesting in that unlike other war commemorations which are rather serious and solemn, militarism in this occasion is actively celebrated as a form of popular culture. Notably, the rather comical performance of the male fans seems to represent a common perception in South Korea that, insofar as they do not physically harm others, sexist and misogynistic actions of servicemen within civic society are generally accepted and easily pardoned because they sacrifice their youth for the country. This is indicative of the permeation of military culture in the daily life of most Korean people (Moon 2005). Moreover, the power and significance of the sport–media–military nexus is further revealed.
4 Conclusion

The media-focused campaigns briefly outlined here in the UK and South Korea cannot be viewed in a de-contextualized vortex. Nor can the sport, media, and military relationship be considered in isolation from wider geo-political processes. As Philo (2007) acknowledged:

"Language [is] linked to wider social processes and how individual meanings and communications relate to conflict and divisions within society as a whole. [Therefore] the issue then [is] not to look simply at the descriptions which were offered of the world in a specific text, but to look at the social relations which underpinned the generation of these descriptions (Philo 2007, 5, our emphasis)."

These examples contextualize civil–military relations in Britain as political, exposing official concerns of dwindling public support for military action/violence, and leave no room for doubt that senior British state officials were aware of the need to expose the British public to “support the troops” public relations/propaganda. When assessing the political symbolism and utility of sport – for example, the FIFA poppy controversy – such political contexts expose the world of sport as a site for communicating consent for militaristic violence on behalf of nation-state governments’ foreign policy objectives as part of geo-political processes.

The increasing celebritization of civil–military relations in South Korea has also occurred in tandem with wider geo-political processes, notably increasing tensions between North and South Korea (and the US and China). Thus, when baseball competitions and teams celebrate and “honor” military personnel and incorporate baseball fans and the wider public by proxy via media platforms to “support” them, it becomes difficult to detach the geo-political desires and conflicts of nation-states from sport. The nature of civil–military relations in South Korea is different from the UK and the US, with the former still enforcing military service for its men while still being “at war” with its northern counterpart. This inevitably impacts on the culturally embeddedness of military life and appreciation for military personnel in the country. Perhaps South Korea requires less manufacturing of military consent as the US and UK, but it still utilizes the sport–media–military nexus to promote and normalize everyday militarism in ways that are often ideologically aligned with US foreign policy and militaristic dogma.

Sport is a powerful propaganda tool for a number of intersecting reasons: it represents a sacred site of national expression and identity; it is viewed and presented as pure, heroic and virtuous in and of itself; it is articulated as separate from the serious elements of life such as the political. Sport’s everyday apolitical façade offers effective camouflage for those using it for political purposes. As a sacred site of popular culture in both the UK and South Korea, sport continues to be a primary media product. Indeed, it is this intersection of the sport–media–militarism nexus that facilitates such rich “public relations” opportunities. In a period of so-called fake news, wars on
terror, and dynamic international movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, critical readers of media productions capable of situating media re-presentations and their communicated events in broader socio-political contexts, have seldom, if ever, been more necessary.

References


