



# Differentiated Factors Drive Media's Influence Among Cadets



## Bonnie Rushing

Master Sergeant, United States Air Force  
Course Director & Senior Instructor  
Military & Strategic Studies Department, USAFA Academy



### Introduction

The Joint Chiefs of Staff stress the importance of developing practical warfighting skills for future wars. Leaders must be cognitively prepared to conduct joint operations in all domains, integrating experiential learning.

Cadets engage experiential learning inside USAFA's Multi-Domain Laboratory (MDL) during the core course, "Airpower & Joint Operations Strategy," MSS 251. The immersive learning environment is an engaging, simulation-based educational experience with a realistic conflict scenario where students apply lesson objectives through hands-on activities, including encounters with fictional media broadcasts related to the wargame. Cadets receive interactive national security education.

### Background

- Multiple case studies illustrate how the CNN Effect influenced US leaders, even at the highest levels. (Robinson, 2006; Doucet, 2018.)
- News literacy/information warfare education teaches students how to critically examine communication sources and information warfare tactics. Participants should be more informed about media content, trustworthiness, and biases (GCF, 2021.)

### Goal & Hypothesis

This study explores information warfare education and its impact on cadet decision-making through the increased incorporation of fictional media in a wargame immersive learning environment. MSS 251, with labs held in the MDL, is an ideal choice for investigating such impacts.

### RQ: How does the added Information Operations module affect student decision-making?

H: The robust Information Operations module will improve students' self-reported understanding of information warfare when compared to standard student groups who do not experience the module, leading to more informed trust or distrust of media communications.

*"curricula should leverage live, virtual, constructive, and gaming methodologies with wargames and exercises... to develop deeper insight and ingenuity" -- Milley, 2020*

### Key Concepts

- Production Value: technical elements of a production to increase audience appeal (lighting, décor, audio/visual qualities)
- Influence: the power to change or affect someone/something.
- The CNN Effect explains how news reporting drives government leaders' responses, including military decision-making.
- Media trust: Accurate and fact-based communications lead to public confidence and trust. (JP 3-61)



Figures 1 & 2, Bonnie Rushing teaching cadets in the MDL, Oct. 28, 2021 (U.S. Air Force photo by Jeff Holmquist)

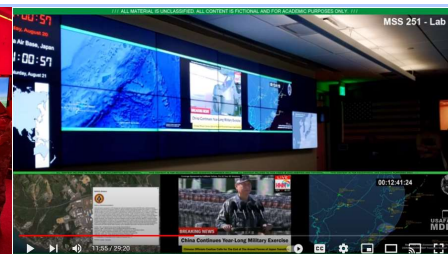


Figure 3. Immersive learning environment with fictional news broadcasts in the MDL. (Screenshot from USAFA MDL YouTube, 2022)

### Mixed Methods Study

**Research methodologies:** Grounded theory empirical findings: statistical analysis of hand-coded themes from questionnaire responses; explores how added information warfare education may affect decision-making.

**Participants:** 2 groups of cadets enrolled in USAFA's core military strategy course, MSS 251

- Information Module/Test Group: (n = 35) – Added Information Operations module
- Control Group: (n = 40) – Original MSS 251 course content

#### Procedure:

The robust Information Operations module provided greater detail on media influence. In the module, students learned about polarization, echo chambers, how to identify and research information sources, analyze biases, distinguish opinion versus fact-based reporting, and compare news reports from various outlets.

Anonymous & voluntary Google Forms questionnaire link sent to all sections of students (via their instructors) during standard class time for research purposes only in May 2023. The questionnaire solicited student feedback regarding wargame decision-making (specific self-reported behaviors & actions taken in the scenario) based on information warfare influences, and participant reflections on media source trustworthiness.

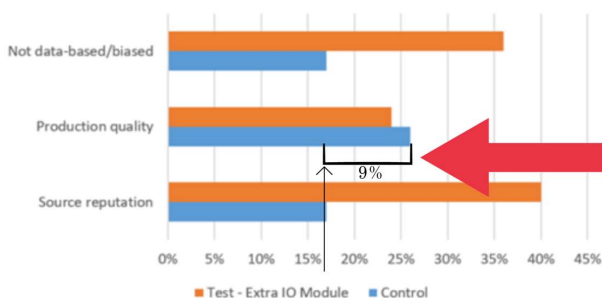
Increased trial validity: questionnaires were accomplished in two or more class sections of each group/variable.

The lesson objectives in the **added Information Operations Module:**

Cadets will be able to...

- Describe news literacy, echo chambers, information source biases, and confirmation biases.
- Describe "The CNN Effect" and how media may influence a leader's decision-making.
- Explain the characteristics of credible and trustworthy communications as detailed by USAF Public Affairs.

### What made media seem **NOT** trustworthy?



### Additional IO Module Group findings:

- 12% more likely to trust unbiased/data-driven sources
- 23% more suspicious of disreputable sources
- Thought about media 32.6% more often
- Discussed media with classmates 44% more often
- Considered source trustworthiness 34.9% more often

### Results & Conclusions

Cadets without Information Warfare education were more suspicious of and concerned about poor production quality than the media source itself.

*I did not trust the media that seemed like "disconnected transmission, sounded spotty." -Anonymous Participant*

Quotes from control group participants

*"...anything spoken or written that sounded like broken English" was suspicious. -Anonymous Participant*

### Take-aways

These findings expand on existing literature: The Goodwill Community Foundation (GCF, 2023) suggests to **think critically to discover if media is just "all smoke and mirrors."**

Without news literacy education, this "smoke and mirrors" of production value affected the Control Group more often.

**High production quality → lower suspicion of media**

**Adversaries may produce high-quality content to gain influence.**

**Without Information Warfare education, military members may be more susceptible to misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, especially when the media has high production value.**

*Disclaimer:* The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not reflect official policy or position of the USAF, DoD, or the U.S. Govt.

### Acknowledgements

US Air Force Academy, Military & Strategic Studies Department  
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning  
Special thanks to Dr Lauren Scharff, Dr Marc Napolitano, Dr. Ethan Eagle, and the Mastery of Teaching Certificate Community.

### References

Doucet, L. (2018). "Syria & the CNN Effect: What Role Does the Media Play in Policy-Making?"  
GCF (2021.) "Digital Media Literacy: The Blur between Facts and Opinions in the Media."

Guess, A., Lyons, B. (2020.) "Social Media and Democracy."  
Mayville, W. (2015.) "Joint Publication 3-61 Public Affairs."  
Milley, M. (2020.) "Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War."  
Munsch, S. (2020.) "Joint Publication 5-0 Planning."  
Robinson, P. (2006) *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy, and Intervention.*