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Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of a war and terror blogosphere between 2001 and 2011. It identifies seven areas where blogs and related online genres could provide ‘alternative’ accounts to traditional media narratives of conflict. The article also assesses the challenges and opportunities of blogs in each area from the perspective of the working journalist in order to deepen our understanding of the changing influence of blogs on traditional media narratives of conflict. Parallel accounts and interpretations of conflict will collaborate and compete in a war and terror blogosphere in the future, but it has been significantly influenced by the adoption of blogging by military actors since 2008. The war and terror blogosphere is no longer a relatively unmonitored online space which is having an impact on both the production of ‘alternative’ accounts of conflict and the incorporation of these accounts into traditional journalism.

Keywords: media, war reporting, blogging, journalism, war, terrorism

Introduction: A war and terror blogosphere from the perspective of the journalist

The first decade of the 21st century saw the establishment of blogs as ‘alternative’ sources of news and information (Allan, 2006; Blood, 2002; Lasica, 2001; Rettberg, 2008). The field of war and terror reporting did not remain untouched by these general trends (Matheson and Allan, 2009). Bloggers presented alternative narratives to traditional media representations of war and some actively criticised journalists who were deemed to be inaccurately portraying a conflict (Wall, 2005; Wall and Bicket, 2008). But they also provided opportunities for journalists reporting war and terror. Blogs enabled journalists to access accounts from eyewitnesses to conflict and terror attacks, incorporate a variety of views and opinions on warfare, engage with comments and feedback, and broaden the scope of their journalism (Bruns, 2009; Gillmor, 2003; Lasica, 2003). Indeed, traditional media organisations still play a key role in amplifying the voices of other actors and it has been argued that the influence of blogs on the media

environment has often been dependent on their incorporation into the coverage offered by traditional news organisations (Castells, 2009; Leskovec et al., 2009).

Current research into blogs and war reporting, including recent contributions in *Media, War and Conflict* (Johnson and Kaye, 2010; Kuntsman, 2010), has concentrated on the use of blogs as communication tools by eyewitnesses, ‘citizen journalists’ and commentators on the news (Allan and Matheson, 2009; Wall, 2005). The entry of military organisations into the blogosphere has received less attention outside military journals (Caldwell et al., 2009) and particularly from the perspective of reporting conflict. I argue that as the impact of blogs on traditional media coverage became more prominent, previously sceptical governmental and military organisations have begun to pay more attention to digital media genres. The sustained entry of ‘official’ military sources into the online media landscape since 2008 represented a significant new development.

To contextualise and analyse military engagement in the blogosphere, this essay chronicles some of the key stages in the evolution of a war and terror blogosphere. It identifies seven categories of blogs and bloggers that might be of particular interest to journalists covering defence and security at media organisations:

1. Eyewitness accounts
2. Independent journalists, NGOs and activists
3. Diasporic blogs or ‘bridgebloggers’
4. Experts, analysts and specialists
5. Front line soldiers’ blogs and military blogging
6. Official military blogs
7. Microblogging insurgents

I assess the influence each category has had on traditional war and terror reporting, not only analysing why journalists have incorporated these accounts into their journalism, but also identifying the limitations of accounts on blogs for journalists. I argue that although the seven areas of the war and terror blogosphere identified will continue to collaborate and compete to represent conflict, the presence of military actors has significantly affected the nature of blogging around war and terror. It has also, therefore,

influenced the extent to which journalists can access ‘alternative’ sources of information online.

A theoretical backdrop: the internet, the blogosphere and ‘alternative’ sources.

Advocates for the transformative power of the Internet and the blogging genre heralded the potential for the democratisation of the news. In 2001, John Pavlik (2001: 24) suggested that new sources of news would facilitate a journalism no longer based on ‘objectivity’ but on ‘a complex blend of perspectives on news stories and events’. For Dan Gillmor (2006: xxv), the ability of the ‘former audience’ to publish online would offer ‘more voices and more options’ creating a ‘massive conversation’. Pioneering journalists at news organisations argued that bloggers were useful new sources of information and interacting with bloggers was regarded as an important part of a shift towards a more open and inclusive model of journalism – a journalism which reflected the views not only of ‘official’ governmental sources, but also ‘citizens in various walks of life’ (Gans, 2004: 313).

Sceptical journalists maintained that journalism would still depend on professional journalism crafted from the cultivation of reliable sources, while academic critics identified several limiting factors in a news revolution. Manuell Castells (2009: 421) observes that global multimedia corporations have maintained their role as programmers of the decisive network – ‘the meta-network of communication networks’. Evgeny Morozov (2011) argues that hierarchies of power are attempting to reassert themselves online through direct and indirect censorship. Economic, political and practical pressures facing journalists have also not disappeared in the information age. For Angela Phillips (2010: 101) the increased speed of the news cycle leads her to conclude that rather than democratising the news, ‘the overall effect of the Internet on journalism is to provide a diminishing range of the same old sources albeit in newer [online] bottles’.

This article seeks to contribute to these broader debates by analysing the changing nature of a war and terror blogosphere, the extent to which journalists are accessing ‘alternative’ and diverse new sources of conflict in the blogosphere, and the impact of the seven areas identified on traditional journalism.

1. Eyewitness accounts

The use of blogs to document the events of September 11 pointed towards a future in which they would play a more significant role in the reporting of news events (Allan, 2004: 357). James Marino, for example, used a blog-style celebrity news and gossip website to document what he was seeing from his office window in New York on the day that al-Qaida operatives flew two planes into the World Trade Center (Rosenberg, 2009: 1-4). Marino demonstrated that eyewitnesses to the news did not have to be mediated by traditional media organisations in order for their accounts to be accessed.

As the use of blogs became more widespread, the potential for a blogger to be documenting a newsworthy event increased. During the Iraq war, bloggers like Salam Pax, Riverbend and Healing Iraq attracted significant audiences as media attention focused on the country. Their accounts offered a more nuanced view of the conflicting hopes and aspirations of many Iraqis. With reference to Salam Pax, Ian Katz notes that these blogs drew the reader into a world unfettered by editorial restrictions, traditional media frames, news values and agendas (Katz, 2003: ix-x). By the middle of the decade, blogs written by eyewitnesses to news events had caused a number of journalists to reconsider their scepticism of the value of blogging (Rosen, 2005).

As blogs evolved and merged with other online genres, eyewitnesses to major news events gained access to various means of multimedia publication online. The emergence of microblogging – via platforms such as Twitter – was a significant evolution in the mediation of war and terror online providing a way for eyewitnesses to news events to quickly relay information. Twitter limits users to only 140 characters encouraging brevity and immediacy. After a series of bomb blasts in Bangalore in July 2008, technology entrepreneur Mukund Mohan demonstrated how Twitter could be used to provide real time updates in the context of a terror attack. Mohan travelled to the scene where one of the bombs had exploded and acted as a reporter, speaking to eyewitnesses and the police (Mohan, 2008). He used his mobile phone, and subsequently his PC, to update a Twitter account with regular news about the aftermath of the bomb blast (Mohan, 2010). It was one of the first examples of Twitter being used as a reporting tool by a ‘citizen journalist’ to cover a terror attack.

Twitter updates can be incorporated into blogs or websites but particularly in the context of an ongoing breaking news situation the use of Twitter has become more prominent than blogs. As early as November 2008, one of the BBC journalists covering the attacks on Mumbai noted that rather than updating longer form blogs many Indians were using Twitter instead (Dissanayake, 2010). In 2008, journalists updating the BBC's live update pages on the Mumbai attacks cited blogs on five occasions. Three years later, during the BBC's live page coverage of Anders Behring Breivik's killing spree in Norway, no blogs were cited. The BBC cited 24 Twitter updates while covering the Norway attack – two more than the 22 cited during their coverage of the Mumbai attacks which lasted for a longer period of time. Microblogging allowed eyewitnesses to the news to immediately inform journalists at traditional media organisations of breaking developments from their mobile phones. Twitter was particularly attractive to journalists because it could be used as a searchable breaking news wire.

Bloggers' access to a conflict zone or their presence at the scene of a terror attack allied to the possibilities of digital publication meant they were sometimes better-positioned to perform the role of the newsgatherer than many journalists. This challenge to the role of the journalist was met by the widespread incorporation of blogs and other digital material into traditional journalism particularly in online reporting and especially in the form of 'live-blogging'. The development of ever faster mobile and online publication tools has facilitated a shift towards live updates from the scene of incidents and an emphasis on continuous breaking news. Media organisations also introduced new departments, such as the User Generated Content hub at the BBC, and specialist roles, such as social media editors and community managers, to collate online content. The willingness of news organisations to fundamentally alter their organisational structure to search and verify eyewitness accounts online and introduce new online formats to incorporate these contributions demonstrates the importance of this area of the blogosphere.

The impact of these eyewitness accounts on traditional media content is occasionally limited by the fact that some images are so graphic that they are 'judged unshowable' by news editors (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 31). Governments and militaries have also attempted to control the flow of information in crisis situations through blocking internet access or providing their own version of events using similar tools. Journalists and media organisations, however, regard compelling eyewitness accounts of war and

terror as especially newsworthy content. They are willing to devote significant resources to accessing these accounts online particularly in circumstances when more traditional methods of journalism are too expensive or too dangerous. Bloggers, ‘citizen journalists’ and activists will, therefore, remain important sources for journalists. As Allan and Matheson (2009: 147) note a personal experience of conflict ‘differs in some essential way from professional journalism or other “official” genres’ providing alluring and compelling alternatives to traditional media narratives and other areas of the blogosphere.

2. Independent journalists, NGOs and activists

Bloggers like James Marino, Salam Pax or Mukund Mohan started blogging because a monumental event had interrupted their everyday lives and they felt compelled to share that story with a wider audience. But other bloggers were impinging even more directly on the role of traditional media organisations by travelling to conflict zones. A few were independent adventurers, several were freelance journalists and a growing number were employees or volunteers for charities, non-governmental organisations or civil society groups with the specific aim of influencing the political agenda.

Independent journalists such as Christopher Allbritton, a former AP and New York Daily News journalist, and Michael Yon, a former Green Beret with US Army Special Forces have both used blogs to cover warfare. They sought to fund war reporting through donations from their readers. Allbritton reported from Iraq in the aftermath of the US-led invasion (Matheson and Allan, 2009: 78-83). Although he subsequently disputed his status as a ‘blogger’ and emphasised his background as a trained journalist (Allbritton, 2007), his reportage nevertheless eschewed traditional forms of journalism: ‘It’s not Associated Press inverted pyramid-style writing, but I didn’t think people wanted that on a site such as this. My reporting combines the personal, the micro and the macro’ (Allbritton, 2003).

Michael Yon has become renowned for his embedded dispatches from conflict zones and apparently built a more ‘intimate and trusting’ relationship with his readers than many traditional journalists (Betz, 2008: 526). His blog moved to a more standard website in 2005. Despite his preference for embedded journalism, Yon managed to retain his often outspoken and independent voice. He was generally sympathetic to

serving soldiers, but criticised several high profile military figures and also engaged in online spats with military bloggers.

Independent journalists were not the only actors looking to escape the constraints of traditional journalism – so too were charities, non-governmental organisations, and civil society groups (Horton, 2010). Dissatisfied with the limited space available in conventional print and broadcast media, organisations like Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières employ their own journalists and produce their own journalism. In addition to working with media organisations and providing content for them, NGOs have also begun to use blogging as a tool for communicating their work.

Independent journalists and NGO workers could use blogs to escape the conventions of the traditional media and they were able to tell the stories of people on the ground outside the confines, editorial guidelines and structures of traditional media conventions. These bloggers play a role in amplifying the voices of those in conflict who might not be easily accessible to news organisations or might be forgotten as the news agenda moves in its ‘dehistorical’ and fragmentary manner to the next major news story (Bourdieu, 1998: 7). Potentially, they are able to intercede ‘on behalf of suffering with public opinion’ (Seaton, 2005: 100) by deploying blogs as ‘weapons of care’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010: 79).

Their coverage of a conflict zone, however, is only likely to gain wider attention when their concerns intersect with the news agenda and values of the traditional media. Independent journalists often sell their content to traditional media organisations on a freelance basis to fund their projects, while collaborations between NGOs and traditional media journalists are mutually beneficial. The NGO gains more publicity while the journalist gains access to local sources, knowledge and expertise. The relationship between NGOs and traditional media organisations might, therefore, have limited the extent to which news from NGOs offers an ‘alternative’ picture of conflict. Natalie Fenton argues that NGOs’ Internet-based media deliver material that traditional media organisations are ‘crying out for – news that conforms to established news criteria and provides journalistic copy at little or no cost’ (Fenton, 2010: 166).

3. Diasporic bloggers or ‘bridgebloggers’

Bloggers are usually not isolated on the World Wide Web. In the context of war and terrorism, blogs written from the front lines of conflict situations by eyewitnesses, independent journalists or NGOs are supported or challenged by wider international blogging communities. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, bloggers in Lebanon were supported by a blogging diaspora.

Sune Haugbolle (2007) notes that a coherent blogosphere discussing Lebanese issues emerged in response to the assassination of Rafiq Al-Hariri in February 2005 and the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah the following year. Several blogs, such as *Siege Notes* and *Kerblog*, were being updated from Lebanon during the war in 2006, but a number of the key blogs were based abroad (Haugbolle, 2007: 9). *Across the Bay, From Beirut to Beltway* and the *Angry Arab News Service* were written from the United States. The author of *Beirut Spring* had also left Lebanon and several blogs about the conflict were being updated from Jordan and Syria (Fadda-Conrey, 2010: 161). A transnational media community was commenting on the war.

These diasporic bloggers helped amplify the message of those blogging from Lebanon by distributing news and adding their own commentary. Ethan Zuckerman (2008) has described them as ‘bridgebloggers’. Knowledge of their own culture and their adopted culture allows these bloggers to act as a ‘bridge’ between the two cultures mediating the concerns of their home nation to a new audience abroad. They become particularly relevant to English-speaking media organisations when they are able to translate – both literally and culturally – the experience of their compatriots. Diasporic bloggers could become important informal media hubs, hosting accounts from those who were witnessing conflict and becoming points of contact for journalists. The email updates of Hanady Salman, the editor of Beirut-based newspaper *As-Safir*, for example, were collated by a friend on the *Beirut Journal* blog. Similarly, freelance writer Rasha Salti’s *Siege Notes* were also distributed by bloggers (Harb, 2009: 255-58). Widespread coverage on Lebanese blogs brought the accounts to the attention of the traditional media.

Although these accounts were incorporated into the journalism of traditional media organisations (Harb, 2009), they also offered alternative sources of news about the progress of the war. A number of bloggers featured photographs which had been passed to them by Hanady Salman; gruesome images of the dead and wounded which the

editor of *As-Safir* knew would not be shown by the Western media (Ward, 2007). Diasporic bloggers, therefore, challenged journalists' approach to sensitive imagery by publishing disturbing images. A more graphic representation of the conflict online existed in parallel to more cautious coverage in traditional media outlets.

4. Experts, analysts and specialists

Academics, interested specialists, independent analysts and critical observers have also started blogs in the field of war and terrorism. Their views had often been sought by traditional media organisations in the past and incorporated into news coverage, but blogs enabled them to easily and regularly publish their thoughts to niche and sometimes larger audiences.

Juan Cole, Professor of History at Michigan University, began his *Informed Comment* blog as a hobby in 2002. Using his expertise in the area of Shiite Islam as a basis for commenting on the progress of the US invasion of Iraq, Cole attracted a substantial readership which had grown to 250,000 readers a month by 2004. The popularity of his blog led to appearances on CNN, NPR and before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). Rather than blogging individually like Cole, academics have also started blogging in groups to help manage the burden of regular updates and to provide a broader range of topics. The *Arms Control Wonk* blog, for example, features scholars from various universities who dissect nuclear proliferation and nuclear security.

These and similar blogs provide a greater degree of specialisation and report stories that would find no place in a more general news agenda. They can also be used as platforms to criticise media coverage of war and terror. In the UK, the *Defence of the Realm* blog, written by independent defence analyst Richard North, has been highly critical both of the Ministry of the Defence and the traditional media's coverage of Britain's military operations in the 21st century. He claimed few journalists understood the technical details of military vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan and lambasted the traditional media's fascination with human interest stories rather than providing detailed analysis of strategy.

Journalists have long used experts, specialists and analysts to lend authority to their news stories and blogs offer a new way for journalists to access their analysis, comment, opinion and reaction to news events. In 2007, the BBC's Security Correspondent Gordon Corera said he read *Arms Control Wonk* every other day. He said it provided 'technical answers for everything', and a 'level of detail and analysis that you wouldn't get anywhere else' (Corera, 2007). By 2011, he had noted an increase in the number of quality 'specialist blogs' available online. He said that blogs like *Arms Control Wonk* and several counterterrorism blogs contained very useful factual information for journalists rather than lengthy arguments which descend into 'noise' (Corera, 2011).

Although these blogs are being read by journalists like Corera to inform news and analysis, they also provide more detailed information than most news reports. The extent to which they are incorporated into coverage is limited by the existing conventions of news journalism. The blogs of eyewitnesses, front line soldiers and diasporic bloggers are likely to have more direct influence on news reports because they mediate the human stories that journalists regularly include in their journalism. Richard North's more technical approach, for example, may have informed the background knowledge of journalists, but the level of detail he was providing was not reflected in many news reports. A more specialist debate about the nature of conflict, war and terror will continue to exist in parallel to news reports online.

5. Front line soldiers' blogs and military blogging

Early front line military blogs also offered a different picture of war to that being presented in the traditional media. The United States' 'global war on terror' was a catalyst for the emergence of the military blog (Allan, 2004: 358). The war in Iraq divided political opinion and military bloggers began discussing both the merits of the invasion of the country and the portrayal of the conflict by the traditional media (Wall, 2006: 115-121). As the war stagnated bloggers both questioned and defended the 'war on terrorism'. Many of these bloggers were based in the United States, but the construction of significant military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan enabled soldiers to communicate with friends and families via the Web. Some started blogs while others uploaded media content to websites like Facebook and YouTube as a way of communicating their perspective of war and terror.

One of the first military bloggers to gain notoriety was US Army Specialist Colby Buzzell. His blog, *My War*, captured the raw experience of his life in Iraq as a US soldier in 2004. Although Buzzell aimed to keep his blog ‘under the radar for as long as possible’ (Buzzell, 2005: 115), he was not very successful in remaining out of the spotlight. One vivid account of a firefight in Iraq noted that US troops had been low on ammunition and water, a piece of information that formed part of an article in *The News Tribune* by journalist Mike Gilbert. Buzzell’s commanders were subsequently alerted to his blog and it was not long before he was ordered to stop writing (Buzzell, 2005: 321).

When Buzzell’s blog made headlines in 2004, a US Army spokesperson stated that blogs would be tolerated as long as they did not ‘violate operational or informational security’ (Cooper, 2004). In practice, blogs that became controversial for a variety of political reasons tended to be closed by their authors under pressure from military superiors. Buzzell discovered that his right to freedom of expression under the First Amendment – which he quoted on his blog – was firmly challenged by the power of military command and control (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2009).

Buzzell was not the only soldier who explored the limitations of democratic freedoms through a blog. Captain Matthew Gallagher, who wrote *Kaboom: A Soldier’s War Journal* from Iraq during 2007 and 2008, stopped blogging after he had vented his frustration at the US Army’s internal politics in a blog post. Gallagher had published details of his refusal to accept a promotion because he wanted to remain with his men as a platoon leader (Gallagher, 2010: 142-5). Similarly, one British military blog, written by an RAF technician, ended after he wrote a blog post that had offered Condoleezza Rice ‘some pointers’ following her visit to Kandahar airbase in Afghanistan. The blogger concluded his post by suggesting that the then US Secretary of State would be better-advised not to visit again (‘Sensei Katana’, 2008). A Ministry of Defence press officer said the blogger, known only as ‘Sensei Katana’, had taken his blog down of his own accord after realising that ‘posting some of the information was not a particularly sensible thing to do’ (MoD, 2008). While the MoD claimed he was ‘not forced’ to delete the blog, it was clear that his commanders had become aware of his blog, and it was unlikely that Sensei Katana’s sarcastic advice to such a senior figure in the NATO alliance was welcomed.

Bloggers like Buzzell, Gallagher and Sensei Katana entered the online world in the hope that it was a place where they could 'speak the truth' and they took advantage of a window of opportunity whereby their blogs were unknown by their professional superiors or the wider world. But open and honest accounts revealing some of the inner workings of military life inevitably attracted attention and military blogs written from the front lines were featured in traditional media articles. As military commands became increasingly aware of blogs, the freedom to publish unadulterated accounts was reined in both formally, through military directives and informally, through self-censorship.

In December 2009, a number of military bloggers held a silent protest in support of blogger C.J. Grisham, who had been disciplined by his chain of command for a blog post concerning his dissatisfaction with the conduct of a school Parent Teacher Association meeting (Anderson, 2009). Although this was not a post from the front line, it led to more general consideration about the state of military blogs. Blackfive.net, one of the most influential, raised concerns about the decline in 'combat blogs' from Afghanistan compared to Iraq, and the 'level of self-censorship that is creeping in' (Blackfive, 2009). Another blogger suggested that 'many field grade officers and senior NCOs' not only failed to support blogging but were issuing verbal and written reprimands against 'active duty milbloggers and milspouses' ('MsMarti', 2009).

The extent to which military bloggers provide newsworthy content for journalists has therefore been limited by the assertion of direct and indirect military control over blogging personnel. Soldiers' blogs from the front line potentially offered a fascinating insight into the personal experience of warfare, but their blogs are now often part of a vetted 'official' military blogging project or have to be thoroughly checked by their commanding officers prior to publication. Where previously military authorities were only vaguely aware of the blogosphere, now it is taken far more seriously. Militaries are also taking a more active interest in blogs being written by the wider military blogging community as they attempt to influence online debate. The window of opportunity for journalists to incorporate front line military blogs into their journalism, therefore, appears to be small, and if a journalist takes advantage of the blog as a source, it may inadvertently lead to the window being permanently closed.

6. Official military blogs

Once the activities of their soldiers had raised awareness within military commands of the increasing importance of the online world, they were not content simply to close down bloggers that were deemed to be ‘off-message’ or a threat to operational security. They also sought to communicate their own narratives of conflict using blogs. The entry into the blogosphere of military actors fundamentally altered the nature of blogging on war and terror.

An article on the US Department of Defense website claims that the first official military blog was written by Capt. Steve Alvarez for the Orlando Sentinel newspaper as part of his official duties while deployed to Iraq in 2004-5 (Alvarez, 2006). Like a number of early blogs it was a personal online column with limited functionality. Alvarez said that he had permission to write the blog from Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton in 2004 and then later Lt. Gen. David Petraeus. Alvarez notes, however, that the blog caused ‘a lot of heartache’ despite its ‘success’: he claims the Commandant of the Defense Information School asked him to close it down for ‘the good of his career’ and ‘until they could figure out a position on blogs’ (Alvarez, 2010).

The Department of Defense’s New Media Directorate was established in October 2006 but official US military blogs only emerged in significant numbers during 2008 and 2009. One of the first was started by the US Army Accessions Command in partnership with Weber Shandwick PR and Communications Agency. *Army Strong Stories* aimed to provide interesting posts written by soldiers and a place where potential recruits could ask questions about life in the US Army (Gassett, 2010). It was followed by the Chief of Information in the Department of the Navy in January 2008, the US Army Corps of Engineers the following month and by a Department of Defense blog hosted on Blogger in April 2008. By the end of 2009, the US Navy, Air Force and Army as well as the Department of Defense were all updating official blogs. Chief Public Affairs Officer, Maj. Gen. Kevin Bergner, noted that the US Army had witnessed the ‘value of blogs’: ‘they are powerful tools of communication for our Soldiers, veterans, family members and others’. He said ‘many great stories’ had been told through the blogosphere, and that the Army was ‘excited to join that community’ (Bergner, 2009).

Other militaries were also experimenting with blogging. In 2008, Major Paul Smyth, a Territorial Army soldier who runs his own PR firm, started the *Basra Blog* – an official project in support of British military operations in southern Iraq. The Ministry of

Defence already had a blog of that name, hosted on their website which was only updated every few weeks. Major Smyth said he ‘deliberately launched a competitive blog’ to highlight the potential of blogging and other online tools to his colleagues in the MoD and provide ‘a strategic viewpoint’ of the campaign (Smyth, 2011). Hosted on a standard blogger template, *Basra Blog* lasted a year, closing several months after British troops had officially withdrawn from Iraq in April 2009.

In January 2009, a similar venture, *Helmand Blog*, was started by Major Smyth for the UK’s Afghanistan operations prior to his own deployment on Herrick 11. This project also incorporated Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr accounts. Major Smyth said he built on the lessons from Iraq to develop a social networking tool that he could use when he arrived in Afghanistan. By October 2009, he claimed the blog had developed an ‘established audience’ including a ‘following of international journalists’ and he regarded it as ‘valuable platform for delivering media operations’ from Afghanistan (Smyth, 2011). An offshoot of *Helmand Blog*, called *Front Line Bloggers – Afghanistan*, collated blog posts written by servicemen and women serving in Afghanistan. Although Smyth claimed it offered a ‘different flavour’ (Smyth, 2009) of what was happening in Afghanistan, the fact that any contributing soldier was aware that it was a MoD project meant posts never wavered from the ‘official line’. There was a system of editorial control over contributing soldiers as blog posts were vetted by Major Smyth and the theatre media operations team for operational security violations.

Smyth’s approach was evident in a more centrally operated project – *UK Forces Afghanistan*. Launched on 1 July 2010, the project established separate blogs for each of the three services. The MoD officially described it as the ‘first-ever mass blogging initiative’ by British forces in Afghanistan (MoD, 2010). The aim of the blogs was to inform the public about the work of the men and women ‘at the forefront’ of the mission in Afghanistan (MoD, 2010).

Official blogs by the United States and British Armed Forces were established in the context of ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the outbreak of conflict could also act as a catalyst for military projects. The *IDF Spokesperson* blog was started on 27 December 2008 as the Israeli Defence Force prepared to invade the Gaza strip during Operation Cast Lead. Digital media did not figure prominently in the planning for Israel’s substantial public relations campaign and an online strategy was hastily

conceived merely days in advance of the start of the operation (Shachtman, 2009). The IDF set up a YouTube site, a Twitter feed and the *IDF Spokesperson* blog, which began publishing information only hours before the first aerial strikes on the Gaza strip. For all the interactive potential of the format, the *IDF Spokesperson* blog was not a space for discussion on the military operation – readers were not allowed to comment on blog posts. The ‘new’ media format was co-opted as a vehicle for ‘old’ media messaging and the Gaza experiment became the basis of a more sustained online public relations strategy. The digital presence of ‘IDF Spokesperson’ is now backed by a fully operational ‘New Media desk’ (Landes, 2011).

Less visible military ‘information operations’ are also occurring in the online space. In 2011, aspects of the US military’s Operation Earnest Voice (OEV) were revealed. As part of this information operation, a Californian company was contracted to provide an ‘online persona management service’ which allows US military personnel to control multiple ‘fake’ social media identities. According to US Central Command, this technology was only used to counter extremist and enemy propaganda on foreign-language websites. The general remit for Operation Earnest Voice, however, was broad. In March 2010, General David Petraeus told the Armed Forces Senate Committee that ‘OEV provides CENTCOM with direct communication capabilities to reach regional audiences through traditional media as well as via websites and regional public affairs blogging’ (Petraeus, 2010). Some information operations practitioners are also arguing for closer co-operation between open public affairs activities and more covert information campaigns suggesting that military influence in the blogosphere will extend beyond immediately identifiable ‘official’ projects in the future.

The official military entry into digital media signalled the establishment of several militaries as a permanent media presence. Military organisations are now bringing more resources to online engagement in an attempt to shape a war and terror blogosphere and influence journalists. There are, however, significant limitations to the influence of ‘official’ military blogging projects based on journalists’ understanding of ‘news’. While the *Jack Speak* blog claims to offer an ‘unlimited view’ of the Royal Navy, for example, there are many operational security, political and linguistic constraints placed on the blog’s content. Journalists are concerned that they would not find newsworthy information on such tightly controlled platforms or at least nothing more than they already receive through existing communications from the military. Commenting on the

British Ministry of Defence's mass blogging announcement in July 2010, BBC World Affairs Producer, Stuart Hughes (2010), said it was an 'interesting, if pointless initiative': 'I don't think I'll be holding my breath for an explosive indiscreet leak on the MoD blogs that's going to make the lead [story] on the Ten [O'clock News]'. Major Paul Smyth (2012) acknowledges that to obtain national media coverage, he needs to offer news organisations an "incredible story" regardless of the regularity and speed of his blogging initiatives.

7. Microblogging insurgents

A recent development which is beyond the scope of this article, but worth noting as a direction for future research is the more visible online presence of insurgent actors. Notably in 2011, Twitter accounts were started by both the Taliban (@alemerahweb) and the Somali-based insurgent group, Al-Shabaab (@HSMPress). Their Twitter accounts are used to present their own narrative of conflict and engage in a war of words with their respective adversaries online – @ISAFmedia, the official account of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and Major Emmanuel Chirchir (@MajorEChirchir), the spokesperson who runs the Kenyan Army Twitter feed in support of operations in Somalia.

The emergence of these insurgent microblogging campaigns poses a new challenge to militaries: their 'official' Twitter accounts were designed to inform and influence domestic and allied international audiences, but they are now also engaging 'the enemy' using the same online presence. This is a visible example of the problematic blurring of traditional military distinctions between 'public affairs' activities and 'information operations' or 'psychological operations' in support of a military operation. For journalists, these accounts provide quick access to the perspective of the 'other side', but how they use this information and the extent to which it influences their journalism warrants further exploration.

Conclusion: The impact of military influence in the war and terror blogosphere

Narratives of conflict in the war and terror blogosphere have been shaped by the way in which blogs have been adopted by a variety of actors. This article has documented major developments in a war and terror blogosphere and considered the shifting

opportunities and limitations of this evolving blogosphere for working journalists over the first decade of the 21st century. It concludes by considering the impact that the sustained presence of ‘official’ military blogs has had on the nature of this online space since 2008.

Initially sceptical of the value of blogging, major news organisations have devoted significant resources to retrieving newsworthy accounts online from eyewitness and diasporic bloggers. They have established dedicated departments to find, curate and verify material, created new journalistic roles to sift digital material and developed increasingly sophisticated online verification techniques. News organisations have also adopted ‘live blogging’ or live updates as a way of incorporating the contributions of a digitally connected audience into their online content at speed. The importance of contributions from bloggers to media organisations has increased when aspects of the story could not be covered using traditional means on grounds of expense or lack of access to a conflict zone. Media organisations have also formed mutually beneficial alliances with NGOs, charities, activists, independent journalists, military bloggers and experts to enhance their coverage of conflict.

The widespread adoption of online tools by journalists as a means of accessing sources and the increasing importance of the online media environment demanded a response from ‘official’ military and governmental sources. Rather like media organisations, they realised that a revolution in publication led by the emergence of blogs could no longer be ignored. This article demonstrates that since 2008, there has been a sustained increase in the online presence of US, UK and Israeli militaries in the war and terror blogosphere. Initially sceptical of the importance of the Internet, and then ponderous in adapting largely vertical organisational structures to an instantaneous communications environment, ‘official’ sources of information are now bringing significant budgets and resources to the challenge of presenting news and information in a more diverse media landscape.

At one level, digital media campaigns conducted by ‘official’ military sources on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube aim to bypass the journalist’s ‘secondary role’ (Hall, 1978: 57-9) in reproducing and potentially reinterpreting news events by publishing directly to online audiences. Advocates within military organisations for engagement in the blogging and social media environment stressed the potential benefits of directly

conveying messages to the public without the necessity of conforming to the media's rituals of publication. Military organisations are attempting to directly influence the blogosphere by engaging with influential bloggers outside the military who would lend 'credible voices' to the military message and encouraging their own personnel to 'tell the story' on blogs as part of carefully regulated official blogging projects.

At a second level, official military blogging projects are a method of ensuring that any blogging soldiers who remain outside 'official' projects nevertheless stay 'on message' and within the military's accepted narrative of a conflict. Military organisations have closed down bloggers who offered insights into the conduct of combat operations or internal military politics. Expressing negative opinions on overall military strategy or the broader politics of a conflict would also invite censure for the majority of military personnel. By emphasising the dangers of undermining 'operational security' – used both reasonably and unreasonably as a rationale for closing down blogs – and co-opting talented bloggers into more official projects, military organisations have been able to limit the number of 'alternative' accounts of conflict appearing online. In the past, it was possible for independent front line military bloggers to blog under the military radar. As military commands have become more aware of blogs and brought in guidelines for the use of digital media, some military bloggers have claimed that they are increasingly self-censoring.

At a third level, military organisations use blogging and digital tools to influence journalists at media organisations by providing regular access to content at speed for a 24/7 news cycle. The adoption of digital media tools was an attempt to address the deficit in speed between militaries' cumbersome bureaucratic procedures for publishing information and other actors in the blogosphere who were quickly relaying their accounts of war and terror online. Once militaries had established blogging and social media accounts, however, the ability of paid military professionals to provide news organisations with regular updates and content online was potentially a significant advantage over blogging competitors who were only offering sporadic coverage of a conflict. Moreover, there can be less work required of journalists incorporating these accounts into news reports as journalistic convention usually allows them to simply attribute information received from militaries rather than undertaking potentially time-consuming verification procedures.

The extent to which the official military move into the blogosphere has influenced narratives of conflict warrants further study. Journalists might use these official military blogs for background information but they often provide a journalist with no more information than they were already receiving. In the UK, journalists will still receive embargoed press releases from the MoD and other privileged information before it appears online. Moreover, first-person accounts from eyewitnesses to conflict situations tend to trump 'official' offerings. Blogs by soldiers incorporated into official military blogging projects lose much of their appeal for journalists once they have been vetted by superiors for operational security and possible political fall out. Journalists at the BBC say it is difficult to find potentially 'newsworthy' accounts on military blogs. The impact of more covert military projects, such as Operation Earnest Voice, is inevitably difficult to assess and it is also unclear how far military blogging initiatives influence online audiences. What is certain, however, is that a very short period of media history when the war and terror blogosphere was a relatively unknown space for journalists and the public to access 'alternative' accounts of conflict has come to an end.

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