Special Issue: Contemporary Soldiering, self-representation and popular culture

Editorial Introduction

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The ideas behind this Special Issue initially came together as a panel at the 2014 International Communication Association annual conference in Seattle, USA. Originally comprised of papers from Maria Hellmann and Charlotte Wagnsson, Lisa Silvestri, Katy Parry and Nancy Thumim, along with a film directed by Sarah Maltby, our panel's focus was very much on the lived experiences of military personnel as articulated and understood across a diverse range of media forms and genres. We then extended our invitation for this issue to bring together further scholarship which embodies a shared interest in the performance of soldiering, the vernacular and genre in an attempt to scrutinize and uncover the political and affective work of such forms in varied historical and geographic contexts. Such work remains crucial to investigating how war and violence are legitimized and remembered.

In our compiling of the selected papers we intentionally focus on a range of media forms to avoid a one-medium bias. Decidely then, we have included genres other than journalism (cinema, social media, photography, memoirs, exhibitions, NGO materials), all with an emphasis on soldier-produced texts or on media forms that claim to represent fighting forces and veterans. This is not to suggest a diminished role for journalism but, rather to emphasise that 'media' should not routinely refer to 'news media'. In so doing, we aim to draw attention to the role of popular culture and new intermediaries in representing, mediating and embodying the soldiering

experience so as to offer fresh insights that move beyond 'combat' to also include the ways that friendship, kinship, hardship and identity formation become realised through media practices. In this sense, the contributions contained here can be situated within the perceptible scholarly turn towards more experiential, personalized and popular mediations of war for example, feminist international relations (Enloe, 2010, Sylvester, 2012), geography (Woodward and Jenkings, 2012), politics (Kelly, 2013), literature (Coker, 2014) and sociology (King, 2010). The field of media and communications is well placed to contribute advanced perspectives and sensibilities to these debates, not least because we pose questions that tease out what 'media' actually represents as an object of study in contemporary public culture. Notwithstanding the continuing pervasiveness of traditional media institutions, information about war and its protagonists is created and accessed through varied devices, platforms and networks, which, rather than simply negating the ideologies of mass media, are embedded with their own ideologies (through their very claims of 'direct' communication and disruptions to gatekeeping practices, for instance). This means it is more important than ever to pay attention to the processes of mediation and the variations between different media genres and formats in the study of war and conflict.

The contribrutions contained in this special issue thus engage with the affordances, styles and constraints of different media genres, the tensions between official narratives and performances of lived experience and the degree to which forms of self-representation and life-writing are able to offer counter-narratives. They encompass NGO materials (Millar), video memes (Silvestri), blogs (Hellman), memoirs (Chouliaraki), cinema (Smets and Akkaya) museum displays and television documentaries (Parry and Thumim). They also employ a range of methodological approaches including interviews, qualitative content analysis, discourse and textual analysis. Taken together, with an emphasis on popular culture and self-representation, they allow us to consider: the motivations behind those producing and sharing materials designed to represent the experiences of soldiering, the extent to which there is scope to challenge dominant power relations and flows of

communication and how the affordances of new media technologies create new dangers and opportunities (of both security and imagination and creativity).

The articles

In the 'turn' to personalized media and individualized experience there is often a concern for depoliticization of conflict. The first article by Katharine Millar brings such tensions to the fore through her analysis of the representational practices of US and UK NGOs and charities whose work may be varied in political approach, but in their affirmations to 'support the troops' often inadvertently construct 'the troops' as dependent and passive, as a matter for collective civic concern. As Millar argues, charities and activists such as 'Help for Heroes' and 'CodePink' have become 'not only the medium of a broader socio-political discourse regarding society's relationship with the military, but also part of the message in mediating 'the troops' to the general public'. It is this mediating of 'the troops' through websites and press releases which constructs a civil-military relationship purporting to be based on solidarity and avowedly apolitical, but which works to depoliticize the conflict by casting the invited support as an individual and moral matter, yet based on universal values. The NGOs in Millar's article are third-party groups in the military-media relationship, purportedly speaking on behalf of the soldiers and veterans, and yet, for Millar there is an implication of subjectification of this supported constituency as recipients of help in the NGOs' representative practices.

In the subsequent three articles, the representations are initiated by the serving military personnel – as videos, blogs and memoirs. Here the authors are more concerned with the kind of political and cultural work made possible through *self*-representational practices. Lisa Silvestri writes of the 'meta-meme' created by US marines when they lip-sync to Carly Rae Jepsen's hit single *Call Me Maybe*, imitating the Miami Dolphins cheerleaders' own meme. For Silvestri this parody of the

cheerleaders' mimetic performance allows them to carry out significant cultural work and to demonstrate technical and ideological literacies whilst highlighting the unambiguous war context of the forward operating base (FOB) in Afghanistan. As Silvestri writes, the video memes shared on YouTube are conducive to establishing common ground with civilian audiences but also work to define the servicemen as a social collective against outsider groups. This tension between openness and guardedness, sharing experiences and enacting barriers, resonates with the military management of the media more generally.

Maria Hellman's study of Swedish milblogs takes up this theme, exploring the potential for the 'everyday experiences' of warfare to legitimise the strategic narratives of the administration. Such negotiations of the personalized and domesticated with the strategic narrative are explored empirically through qualitative content analysis of the Swedish soldier blogs. The soldiers play down the dangers to themselves, concentrating on routines and procedures, assisting civilians and reassuring their families. As Hellman argues, the depiction of soldiering as ordinary and mundane contributes to normalising military intervention and legitimises the strategic narrative, even when the overriding purpose for the military role is distinctly avoided.

The promotion and popularity of blogs and memoirs (officially sanctioned or not) can be viewed as part of a broader pervasive if uneven individualisation – seemingly at odds with the hierarchical, structured and secretive institutions of the military but as ever there are contradictory forces here that should be acknowledged – the personal emotions and especially humour conveyed in memoirs, videos, blogs invite empathy from a broader public whilst also constructing boundaries of an earned inclusivity for those with shared forces experiences. As Lilie Chouliaraki writes in this issue, the 'performance of the soldiering self' in such forms offers a connection to the soldier's private experiences but also points to 'complex transformations in the technologies, philosophies and public cultures of warfare'. Chouliaraki's comparison of First World War memoirs and 'war on terror' milblogs traces continuities and change in the two 'memoiristic genres' through analysis of the

narrative tropes and the performance of the soldiering self: where Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves share an ironic sensibility in the form of suppressed emotion, the milbloggers rely on explicit forms of affectivity and a 'meta-ironic' stance.

Many of the materials collated by authors for analysis in this issue exist initially as images or words to be shared privately, amongst colleagues, friends or family. Indeed, there are a number of stages in the mediation processes which often become condensed and even strategically underplayed in the final media artefact. But whereas memoirs might take years to develop into publication, and soldiers' own imagery traditionally starts life as messy and incoherent fragments, Chouliaraki remarks on the changing temporality and connectivity afforded by new technologies. This quality of immediacy or real-time dissemination of milblogs can also be extended to other social media forms such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook, and perhaps here is where the idea of 'direct' communication is most convincing – not because it is unmediated but because time for reflection is short-circuited in such instant sharing.

One further way in which our articles overlap is through the notion of the vernacular – understood often in opposition to 'official' or mainstream accounts and defined as specific to a certain local population or produced by 'ordinary people'. There is a clear correspondence here with the rise of the citizen or amateur producer of media, in using non-conventional channels of distribution and adopting informal language or challenging aesthetics. Aspects of vernacular language, style or means of production recur throughout the collection – whether in the soldiers' abundant swearing captured in *Our War* (BBC3), the amateur YouTube videos or the blogs which capture 'everyday life' – but Smets and Akkaya especially provide a conceptualisation of a 'vernacular cinema of conflict', highlighting its hybridity and challenging the sense of an alternative/ mainstream binary. Drawing on ethnographic work and film analysis of the Kurdish film-maker, Halil Dağ, Smets and Akkaya show how Dağ's identity as both a guerrilla fighter and filmmaker, as a witness and a participant – along with the mix of fictional and factual content, and the informal and often illegal circulation of the films – all work to blur recognized

distinctions. The films offer an 'independent aesthetic visual language' but are also 'appropriated and institutionalized by conflict actors'. In this way they suggest that the distinctions between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses also become blurred, as the 'raw' depictions become 'absorbed and institutionalized by the Kurdish insurgent movement'. In this case Dağ's imaginative work is endorsed into the Kurdish culture of resistance as part of the history of 'mountain cinema'.

An interest in genre, and the functions that varied genres perform in mediating war, is the final thread we'd like to acknowledge in our selection of articles. From the exploration of the articulations of support in NGO's textual productions, through to video memes, blogs, memoirs and vernacular cinema, each of our articles pays significant attention to narrative construction, aesthetics, forms of address and how certain modalities within such media become recognized and playfully adapted. In our final article, Parry and Thumim explore the image of the contemporary British soldier through the 'genre of self-representation' (Thumim, 2012). In the two cases discussed here, an Imperial War Museum exhibition entitled 'War Story' and the BBC3 documentary '*Our War*' (2011), the appeal of the genre is defined and characterized through its promise of 'direct' insight into soldiers' experiences in Afghanistan. The helmet-cam footage from *Our War* promises 'war as you've never seen it before'; visceral and exhilarating for the viewer who is sharing the soldier's perspective of being under fire, but more importantly its intimate portrayal offers something '*valuable* and comprehensible' from the Afghanistan war: purposeful, professional and humanized soldiers exemplifying the British nation. Indeed, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin (2015: 6-7) have recently argued that 'military, media, and political actors, who initially struggled to adapt to the new media ecology […] have now more fully harnessed its digital potential', captured in the 'synergies' of military and mainstream media in programmes such as *Our War* (BBC3). In this sense, the intimate and vernacular 'media of the self' (ibid) is deployed to support the narrative of the war, rather than challenge or counter the official version.

Through the studies collected here we hope to better understand how popular media genres are disturbing and/or contributing to the traditional 'heroic warrior' myth: but also to better scrutinize our own reference points and underlying assumptions when we write about discourses of militarization and militarism. As Millar writes, the familiar proclamations to 'support our troops' and 'help the heroes' typify discourses favoured by authorities and charities whose apparent altruistic aims also work to stifle oppositional or unsettling voices. But the routine use of such unquestionable affirmations of support also belies the vulnerabilities and instabilities in public awareness and support for war – whose interests are served when we 'love the troops but hate the war'? Mainstream and official appropriations of personalized media forms may have helped military-media operations when it comes to empathizing with soldiers, veterans and their families, but it has not necessarily translated into support for recent wars or in forces recruitment. If popular culture media forms have become another weapon in the arsenal of military authorities, appropriated into hegemonic discourses or propaganda practices, what exactly is the message they are hoping to convey?

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