eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Introduction: Communicating War

Journal of War and Culture Studies, Vol 7 No. 1, February 2014, pp. 1–4

Ekaterina Balabanova and Katy Parry

This special issue is a collection of articles drawn from the one-day international conference that took place in January 2011 at the University of Liverpool, organized and hosted by the Media and Politics research group based at the Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool. The issue brings together work from the fields of media and communication, international relations, political geography, and literary culture, to discuss the ways in which the causes and consequences of war are portrayed across diverse texts, imagery and media platforms; it thus aims to encourage a trans-disciplinary dialogue on the varied depictions of war and conflict.

It is our contention that cultural understandings of war require critical analysis of a diversity of media texts, and the contexts of their production. For example, a customary emphasis on Anglo-American national news agendas tends to overlook the role of local and transnational news representations; a traditional logocentricity across academic disciplines is now being challenged by work which explores the visual construction of war narratives in media forms. Similarly, in shifting an empirical focus to media genres 'beyond the news', research into popular culture or activist media can investigate how alternative media forms and actors are able to challenge preconceptions of legitimate voices in the 'storytelling' of war experiences. The papers in this issue together provide a timely focus on the ways various representations, with their proffered definitions, repetitions and archetypes, become the dominant narratives and images of conflict, or, alternatively, are effectively contested and resisted. They ask: to what extent do representations of warfare sustain or disrupt collective understandings and memories of conflict? How do different voices get heard in debates over war and the management of its consequences?

The contributors to this special issue take forward the international research agenda concerning the communication of war, and present interdisciplinary approaches to the subject, balancing strong empirical dimensions with practical and theoretical insights. The articles cover both historical and contemporary cases, and are rooted in strong empirical research conducted with both communicators and in the analysis of varied media texts. While journalistic forms continue to attract the most attention, the authors provide new theoretical and practical insights into forms of local journalism (Taylor), crisis journalism (Kramp and Weichert), and television reporting (Shreim).[1] We are also delighted

---

[1] This special issue also originally included an article on Life magazine and the photojournalism of the Vietnam War, complementing our current selection with a visually-focused piece. Due to space and copyright negotiations, the article will now appear in a later issue of the journal.

to include contributions on the communicative qualities of non-news forms: the military memoir provides a more personalized form of communicating war experience but is also a constrained (or constraining) genre (Jenkings and Woodward), while documentaries might open up spaces for diverse and marginalized voices (Luna).

In 'Communicating war through the contemporary British military memoir', Neil Jenkings and Rachel Woodward explore how the genre of the contemporary military memoir shapes the possibilities around the war narrative, and how the authors negotiate established conventions of the genre, institutional censorship and forms of self-censorship, drawing on interviews with published memoirists. The military memoir can be viewed as one of the genres of life-writing (along with letters, diaries, biography, and in forms beyond 'writing', oral testimony, portraiture and digital media) which are now attracting attention across academic disciplines, for example as demonstrated at the 'War and Life-writing' conference held at the University of Oxford in November 2012 (organized jointly by the War and Representation Network (WAR-Net) and the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing). Exploring memoirs as a form of life-writing, or as self-representation (Thumim 2012) provides welcome inter-disciplinary debate through which to better assess the particular generic and formal qualities, the shift to personalized and 'ordinary' voices, and crucially the role of varied public institutions in the co-production or legitimation of personal experiences and stories.

Also based on interview data, 'Covering the world in despair' by Leif Kramp and Stephan Weichert, presents new insights and reflections on journalistic practices and professional performance during states of emergency and crisis from a non-Anglo-American perspective. The focus on experiences and views of German journalists is a welcome and illuminating addition to the existing studies centring on British and American crisis and conflict reporting. The study follows a qualitative framework in its investigation into the specific challenges of journalistic activities in areas of conflict, with perceptions from journalists relating to ethical dilemmas, working relationships, professional ideals, economic pressures on newsrooms, and the risks and benefits associated with new media technologies. The authors build on their observations to suggest practical improvements for those preparing to report from crisis and conflict situations: with such difficult working conditions the authors conclude that reporters must be vigilant if they are to retain critical independence and credibility.

The next two articles turn to analysis of journalistic content. Ian Taylor considers the often-overlooked local press and the similarly often-marginalized anti-war movement in his article, 'Local press reporting of opposition to the 2003 Iraq War in the UK and the case for reconceptualising notions of legitimacy and deviance'. Adapting Daniel Hallin's (1986) model of the 'spheres of controversy' to account for the different shades of legitimacy and deviance, Taylor provides

evidence to illustrate how the legitimacy of the anti-war movement changed as the crisis rolled through its successive stages. The findings illustrate how local press news reporting and editorials served to police the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of protest. In light of the findings, Taylor develops and outlines a more nuanced model for calibrating the degree of acceptability or otherwise of the anti-war movement.

Moving from local newspapers to transnational television coverage, Nour Shreim investigates the way the English and the Arabic language services of BBC and Al-Jazeera covered the events of the Gaza War of 2008-09, in 'War in Gaza: A multimodal analysis of the attacks on the UNRWA school'. Whereas Taylor's key concepts are 'legitimacy' and 'deviance', Shreim focuses her analysis on the related thorny issues of 'proportionality' and 'culpability', as evidenced in the extent to which coverage emphasized the casualties and humanitarian consequences for each side.

Each of the articles on journalistic texts collected in this issue provides food for thought on the often opaque structures, rituals and conventions by which 'newsworthiness' and narrative authority is formed and consolidated through news construction and its often repetitive presentation. Careful examination of visual and textual elements reveal patterns of coverage, whether over time or comparatively observed in different media outlets, and so help to reconfigure the theoretical underpinnings which inform the media's role during wartime.

The final article presents insights into a conflict which has attracted a great deal of US military aid but is rarely covered in the mainstream media or academic writing. In 'Colombia: Audiovisual media landscape in the age of Democratic Security', Maria Luna considers the media landscape of Colombia, with the form of the television documentary assessed for its potential to provide 'other spaces' for citizens to learn about the violence and to appear as political actors. Luna applies the concept of 'heterotopic documentaries', in the sense that the genre has the possibility to open "other spaces" of circulation and represent spaces of conflict and war excluded from the outer world. In a concentrated and largely privatized media landscape, this could mean documenting the everyday life of people usually neglected in the daily news. In her discussion of documentaries broadcast during the Democratic Security Policy (DSP) started under Alvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006) Luna finds that the emergence of heterotopic documentaries was rapidly reabsorbed by the logic of private and transnational media formats.

Within a single special issue such as this there is of course not enough space to provide a fully comprehensive exploration of all the varieties of media forms and their conflict representations. Perhaps the most obvious gap in these analyses concerns the significance of digital media. The discussion of memoirs - not really new media forms as such - does, however, venture in that direction. Anxieties

over information control, noted by Jenkings and Woodward, are heightened when it comes to digital forms of self-representation, with the military institutions appearing to play 'catch-up' with the potential benefits and pitfalls of accessibility and circulation afforded by digital media, and especially visual materials. The helmet-cameras used in Afghanistan, often the soldiers' own, have provided some of the best publicity for modern soldiering, such as when broadcast in the documentary series 'Our War' (BBC3, 2011-2012) but also some of the worst, with footage found by civilian police recently providing crucial evidence in the conviction of a Royal Marine for the murder of a Afghan insurgent – the first such case in the Afghan war and for many years beyond.

For those of us concerned with conflict and how it is reported we are living in interesting times. There is an urgent need for work on new communicative practices such as citizen journalism, which has become an indispensable part of conflict and crisis reporting. Grassroots social media groups, bloggers, and tweeters are undeniably changing the ways we learn about crises, their causes and consequences. The events of the 2011 'Arab Spring' and the on-going conflict in Syria are some of the examples of situations where more traditional media forms were complemented by mobile phone footage, and with input from bloggers, citizen journalists and activists representing the different perspectives on the conflicts. No doubt this poses challenges for the accuracy and credibility of the coverage, and has implications for the rules of war as applied to non-traditional journalists; it also raises questions about the accountability of citizen journalists, but also of media organisations using them, probing the divisions between journalism and activism. However, while these novel technologies and practices add new dimensions, the underlying challenges for scholars remain broadly similar. In our view it is crucial that research draw, and build upon, the insights and methodologies that have been built through decades of investigation into the reporting of conflict. In that sense, the development of a more nuanced understanding that includes a plurality of media forms and perspectives – which is the focus and aim of this special issue – can only be seen as a step in the right direction.

References:

Hallin, Daniel (1986) *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*. London: University of California Press.

Thumim, Nancy (2012) *Self Representation and Digital Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.