The blogs of war: Narrating the Afghanistan and Iraq wars

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Abstract: The post 2001 'War(s) on Terror' have seen changes to the manner in which war is communicated, and this offers opportunities to those writing the social history of war. These events reflect the contemporary realities of war and communication. Borderlands of scholarship have opened and the community of those at/of war can now be more openly engaged and interrogated by the scholarly community. Past conflicts have been marked by the contest between official government representations of reality and the image presented by the mainstream media. This dual dominance is increasingly challenged by virtual individuals, a challenge that provides scholars fresh space to engage with a community that is too often excluded. Social media offers a remarkable degree of access for scholars to complement official reports and mainstream media accounts of war. This paper explores these areas of scholarly engagement and assesses the development of the new virtual community at war, with an examination of the 2010 case of Richard Strandlof and his fraudulent identity as wounded American war veteran Rick Duncan who was actively opposing war. New media has been used by community activist groups who detect and publicise such impersonations in both Australia and the United States, and in a more prosaic manner by soldiers and their families who just want their voices to be heard.

The recent conflicts in the Middle East, the 'War(s) on Terror', have been accompanied by changes to the manner in which war is communicated, and this offers opportunities to those writing the social history of war. Borderlands of scholarship have become open and the community of those at war can now be more openly engaged with and interrogated by scholars. Narrations of past conflicts have been dominated by the contest between official government representations of reality and that (sometimes dissenting) image presented by the conventional mainstream broadcast media, while personal or individual accounts have existed in the margins with less authority. The dominance by governments and mainstream media is increasingly challenged by individuals using the virtual realm, and this citizen journalism or grassroots media is something that provides scholars fresh space to engage with a community that is too often excluded. Social media can offer a remarkable degree of access for scholars to complement what are often defensive official reports or sensation seeking mainstream journalistic accounts. This paper will assess the development of the new virtual community at war and explores areas for scholarly engagement, with an introductory examination of one recent case study, that of invented veteran Rick Duncan.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have coincided with the evolution of social media and the blurring of previous distinctions between media audiences and practice which allows an increase in the diversity of opinions in the public domain, as well as misinformation and identity-fraud. Grassroots media or citizen journalism is well placed to provide an alternative reading to the official representation of conflict, but like this official representation, it also requires critical scrutiny and evaluation. Earlier scholarship saw the positive aspects of this, with enthusiasm regarding the progressive role of the internet in "developing alternative organs of communication" in the face of a mainstream media supportive of the Bush government war aims (Kahn and Kellner 2005). This paper illustrates the way that social

media has moved beyond mere opposition, and shows that it is both co-opted by the mainstream media, and is also embraced by participants in war and their families, and by their friendship networks. At different times any of these might be opposed to war, supportive of war, or ambivalent towards war.

Past scholars identified the internet as a progressive, vibrant and exciting terrain that could provide space for citizen activists challenging the status quo, as occurred with Zapatista activism in Mexico in the early 1990s or in the World Trade Organisation protests in Seattle in 1999 (Kahn & Kellner 2004). However, blogs have importance for groups that range from political observers (McKenna 2008) to teenage school girls (Bortree 2005), and social media can be used by those that seek to challenge what they see as mainstream norms from all dimensions of the political and social spectrum. Climate change sceptics and believers both use social media, as do racist hate groups (Chau and Xu 2007). The way in which blogs are part of both pro-war and anti-war domains has been successfully explored by Wall in her analysis of blogging during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Wall 2006), but more research remains to be undertaken on war blogs.

The contest between official government representations of reality and that (sometimes dissenting) image presented by the mainstream media has already been mentioned. While opposition or support for conflict varies between mainstream media outlets, there is no government censorship at the levels seen in major conflicts such as the Second World War, and commercial imperatives meant that even conservative media outlets that supported the United States led invasion of Iraq in 2003 were obliged to report the negatives such as the failure to find Weapons of Mass Destruction, the increasing death toll, and the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. Association between media proprietors and politicians might shape such reporting but the stories themselves could not be ignored. Attempts to shape and manipulate the mainstream media in the war zone in what was a continuous struggle for public opinion were more overt. After the comparatively free access to the battlefield of the Vietnam era, the United States military learned to control the media and journalists found themselves constrained first by a media pool system in the 1989 invasion of Panama and in the 1990-91 Gulf War and then by embedding them in the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (Foster 2008; Kellner 2008; Middleton 2009). Yet it is symptomatic of the lack of restraints and the flexibility of the new social media that it can also function both as a weapon supporting an official transcript of war crafted by the authorities, as well as becoming a richly diverse terrain for discourse among participants in war.

Communities at/of war

In the past decade the United States and other actors including Australia have been engaged in wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and this experience of warfare has become significant for both veterans of the Middle East conflicts and to those in their communities at home. In both Australia and the United States, more people have experienced war than at any time since Vietnam. This era of war is significant because of the long duration of these conflicts, the repeated deployments of soldiers, and because of the numbers involved in this experience. While the United States government has not released official figures, it is likely that more than 2.2 million Americans are veterans of these wars, compared to the 2.59 million who were in Vietnam (Benjamin 2005; Korb et al. 2007; Burstein 2011). In the case of Australia, analysis of the Australian government Honours and Awards website on 28 November 2010 indicates that at least 28,658 have served in the Middle East, compared to 59,000 who went to Vietnam. Since 1975, more than 62,210 Australians have seen active service in a wide range of conflicts ranging from Rwanda to Somalia. Sizable though this

veteran community is, it is even larger when non-military veterans are included. The civilian elements of the community at/of war can also experience the full challenges of war, an example being the death in Afghanistan of British surgeon and blogger Karen Woo (Boone 2010).

The experiences of this multifaceted community of soldiers, aid workers, federal police, diplomats, civilian contractors, and their families remains on the borderlands of scholarship and is relatively unexplored by the academy which will often focus on high profile issues such as the debates over the legality of these wars, human rights abuses in detention centres, or the case against continued military commitment. At a time when webcam is ubiquitous, Skype offers easy and near instant communication with home, and virtually every soldier has a laptop, the wartime experiences of these communities of/at war offer a rich and untapped cultural realm to be explored.

The perception that Vietnam was the world's first televised war has been succeeded by an understanding that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the first Internet wars. In earlier conflicts personal accounts such as letters, memoirs and journals and diaries were written for local or intimate audiences but often only published for a general audience many years later. Contemporary technologies have changed this. While the scope of this paper will not explore indigenous Iraqi or Afghan blogs in detail, some accounts exist. Baghdad based examples include the 2002 to 2003 blog *Where is Raed?* by the gay secular Iraqi known as Salam Pax, which became the book *The Baghdad blog* (2003), and *Riverbend*, in which a young female observer chronicles the transitions from dictatorship to occupation and insurgency in 2003 and 2004. Her account, presented in book form as *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (2005), engages the reader to provide an endogenous account of an Iraq at war. This rich and fascinating area will be explored in my extended research, while the account below focuses on the exogenous Australian and American accounts of war.

The way in which past conflicts have been narrated has varied. Primacy and authority is often given to official government representations of reality, and these appeared in published form as contemporary sources such as incident reports and statements to the mainstream media, and also after the conclusion of conflicts as official histories. Of course, official government narratives are often constrained by narrow, partisan desire by members of governments who wish to protect their own positions, and also by legitimate concerns regarding operational security. War narratives are also formed by the mainstream media, and historically these also appeared in published form as ephemeral contemporary news sources, which journalists might subsequently refashion into books. Other personal accounts by participants can appear in book form for a public audience, or as letters home, journals, diaries and memoirs directed at an immediate and narrow family audience. While these were significant for family recipients, they would only appear in the public domain when published as books long after the conflict. Some examples include the interwoven letters and diary entries in Philippa Poole's *Of love and war*, an account of her father's experiences as a prisoner in Changi (Poole 1982) and more recently, *From the frontline*, Hew Pike's anthology of four generations of his extended family experience in wars that spanned a century (Pike 2008).

A different picture emerges when narration of conflicts in the age of new media is analysed. What was formerly an authoritative government representation now routinely expects to be challenged by mediums such as Wikileaks. Both government accounts and those of the mainstream media have had their monopoly threatened by the subversive forms of the new media. However, the extensive resources of both governments and the mainstream media have also allowed them to use new media to disseminate their preferred depictions of reality,

and the military is also aware of how blogs can be used in their information operations (Robbins 2007). Because of the 24-hour news cycle and the requirements for instant comment, both governments and media organisations are placed under increasing pressure to be able to respond rapidly.

The fiction and non-fiction narrations of war continue to be important, but the speed of publication and globalisation makes this far more accessible to far more writers. As always film is very effective, with movies such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008) being highly successful in capturing the horrors of war. The embedded journalist becomes a feature of both a United States and an Australian military that sought to both promote itself and control the media, a topic that has been widely discussed (Foster 2008; Kellner 2008; Middleton 2009). Embedded journalist Evan Wright's acclaimed *Generation Kill* (2004) is a narration that appeared across mediums in magazine, book and television to offer a journalist's account comparatively soon after the fall of Baghdad and defeat of Saddam's government. As a companion text for this, Nathaniel Fick, one of the soldiers who Wright was embedded with wrote his own memoir *One bullet away* (2005) depicting military life in Afghanistan and Iraq from the inside. A further example from the United Kingdom is the populist Andy McNab's account *Spoken from the front* (2009) which is based both on his interviews with British soldiers and their emails.

Milblogs – military blogs

The biggest change has occurred in the area of personal narration - letters, journals, diaries and memoirs. While letters are still sent home and individuals still keep journals, these increasingly use an electronic format. The use of Skype, email, Facebook and blogs has become a defining feature of the narration of both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars. Blogs in particular have become a medium where individuals communicate with family and friends, and ultimately with the global community.

Blogs (or rather milblogs) take many forms, but a small sample can give the flavour of these narratives. An older account is that of Dan, a male American marine officer who deployed to Afghanistan in 2006 and again in April 2010. In the accessible and well organised *Afghanidan* (2006-2011) he articulately records routine and remarkable events which bring the reader clearly into his world over two separate deployments. Another readable account is *The sand docs: The story of a navy forward surgical team in Afghanistan*, with commonplace posts about the quality of food and encouragement to bench press 300 pounds in weight set against more eventful stories of trauma in war (Scott 2010-2011). Some reflect the American home front as is the case in *Army Tanker's Wife* (Chrissy 2005-2011) in which an African-American spouse gives an account of her life at home with their children while her husband is deployed, including helpful hints for other spouses. Another that covers the experiences of the spouse whose partner is deployed is *The kitchen dispatch: a literary Milspouse blog* (Fong 2009-2011). This blog, with its subtext banner of 'war, literature, writing, wellness and Yoga' includes posts as varied as one about the Special Forces Female Engagement Team and their activities in building hearts and minds and developing linkages with Afghan women, and another speculative piece from a deployed male soldier on the wave of democracy spreading through the Arab world. A warm and moving Australian milspouse blog is *Adopting our Thai baby and my life as an army wife*, whose title reflects the hybrid nature of its author's life (Gemma 2008-2011). Milbloging has reached the stage where an annual milbloggers conference is held, and the 2010 Conference saw United States General David Petraeus speaking as an online attendee with the avuncular and awkward fashion of the baby boomer

confronted by a new phenomena he accepted as significant, but did not quite feel at home with.

Past accounts of the experience of war were usually print based, but an ongoing phenomena of the new media in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars is the evolution from electronic to print, where military blogs have become books. An example is Matthew Burden's *The Blog of War: Front-Line Dispatches from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan* (2006). Overall, this is a book that presents a positive picture of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and uses the blog material to create an account that supports soldiers and their families. It explains the challenges of the conflict rather than exploring detailed criticisms of the military. There could be a variety of explanations for this, one of them being commercial. Any United States book recounting the experiences of soldiers today needs to appeal to one of two markets, that of those who wholeheartedly support the war, or that of those who oppose the war. American military culture also constrains soldiers, as Browder notes in her (print based) *When Janey comes marching home: portraits of women combat veterans* (2010). The female soldiers Browder interviewed felt it was disloyal to criticise the mission in Iraq or Afghanistan and were reluctant to do so, even when they did not support the wars.

Blogs have allowed what was once private to become public, as has occurred in the case of the blog *Kaboom*. Started in 2006 by soldier Matt Gallagher with the usual bloggers stated intention of informing family and friends, *Kaboom* became widely popular before being shut down by his superiors in 2008. The United States military directed him to close it after he detailed complaints he had made about his immediate superiors, something which would normally have been a protest directed privately to his family and friends. Because these complaints appeared on his blog site with its wider public access, this was seen as an inappropriate criticism of the United States military that could not be tolerated (West 2010). Two years after his return from the war the material in the blog was published in hard copy book form as *Kaboom: Embracing the suck in a savage little war* (2010).

We live in a borderless world where government institutions are hypersensitive to criticism, and that such criticism can be disseminated almost instantaneously through the proliferation of emails is a telling difference between the wars of the contemporary online age and earlier conflicts. Governments are under increasing pressure to be able to respond rapidly and coherently to any apparent criticism, even if such criticism emanates from the lowest of levels in the form of a personal email between individuals. Such personal critique is accorded power and significance out of all proportion when the position of the writer is considered. It seems a disproportionate response when a high-ranking Lieutenant-General is required to respond to an apparently private criticism from a low ranking soldier, as has occurred in one Australian case (McPhedran 2010). This willingness by a large government organisation to engage with an individual's dissenting email is interesting when set against Kevin Foster's assessments that the Australian military within Afghanistan is too reluctant to provide open access regarding its activities to the media (Foster 2010). Again, this illustrates the strength of the new media's influence in the communication of war, but the new media goes further and also provides a strong yet complex forum for opponents of war.

Truth and fiction: The Rick Duncan story

Rick Duncan was a former Marine Corps captain who appeared to be custom-made as a perfect opponent of United States President George Bush's War on Terror. He ticked all the boxes as an advocate of veterans' rights and as a faultless anti-war activist, and naturally became a supporter of the Democratic Party. Personable and articulate, a combat veteran who

was also a graduate of the elite United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, he was also gay, a marginalized identity in a military that prohibited service by homosexuals. He matched the popular American stereotype of a genuine combat veteran, having suffered a head injury from a roadside bomb attack in Iraq. Even his injury was perfect, having been sustained in the Iraqi town of Fallujah, a town whose name has iconic status in United States military circles as the location of heavy fighting in 2005.

On his return from Iraq Duncan left the military and took up the cause of war veterans in need, establishing the Colorado Veterans Alliance. His popularity and his charisma led him to be drafted in United States Democratic candidate Hal Bidlack's (unsuccessful) campaign for Congress. Rick Duncan's veteran status, his record of advocacy and his past role as a nuclear missile launch officer made him an ideal supporter of Bidlack's anti-war platform in the 2009 Congressional elections. He also supported the successful campaigns of Congressman Jared Polis and Senator Mark Udall. Besides being a member of the Colorado Veterans Alliance, he was a member of VoteVets and Iraq Veterans Against War. His military background gave credibility to the opponents of the war, and came at a time of increasing dissatisfaction with the Republicans and criticism of the wars. In a conservative American political culture where prominent political figures had suffered from the perception that they lacked war experience and credibility (remember the insinuations that Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had evaded military service?) Duncan was the man of the hour.

Sometimes, when things seem too good to be true, they are too good to be true. Unfortunately, Rick Duncan was not actually Rick Duncan, but was a socially isolated schizophrenic named Richard Strandlof. All American hero Rick Duncan had not been on duty in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 because he had been in California at that time as Richard Strandlof. He had never been to Iraq, he had never been wounded in combat, and he had no military background at all, but he was a very convincing individual (Frosch & Dao 2009). However, he was a compulsive milblog reader whose well-developed understanding of the world of the combat veteran came from the Internet, as well as his face to face contact with veterans (Melloy 2009). There is a duality in virtual identity as both the actor and their audience have to exist to develop an online persona (Jordan 2005) so Rick Duncan was both a fraud who betrayed his milblog community as well as a part of that very audience.

Duncan/Strandlof had an impressive ability to impersonate a former soldier, and his military knowledge was extremely convincing. Inconsistencies in his accounts of his military experiences had initially been explained away as a consequence of his Fallujah head injury, but he was eventually questioned and exposed first by milblogers, then weeks later by mainstream media on 7 June 2009. Since 2005 United States legislation (The Stolen Valour Act) has prohibited individuals from falsely presenting themselves as military veterans, despite court challenges to the act. Duncan/Strandlof was unsuccessfully tried under this Act, and subsequently had a case filed against him by the United States veterans organisation, the American Legion (Seavey 2010). While his own motivation for this fraud remains a subject for further research, the motivation behind similar inventions of other faux veterans often relate to a basic desire by a low status alienated individual seeking validation and importance.

The online media facilitated the birth and evolution of Richard Duncan to become Richard Strandlof, just as it also contributed to his demise, and it could be argued that his outing by the online community is an illustration of the strengths of that community, not a weakness. Although linked to online media, his authenticity was validated by his public appearances and his face to face advocacy work, making him more than just a web phenomenon like the fictional leukaemia sufferer Kaycee Nicole Swenson who 'died' online in 2001 after two and

half years of virtual (and illusory) suffering (Jordan 2005). There are no Australian cases where high profile false veterans of Iraq or Afghanistan with political interests have been created from the Internet world, but there have been less spectacular cases of a more suburban style of Walter Mitty. There is an Australian veteran online community, the Australia and New Zealand Military Imposters network (ANZMI), who operate a website dedicated to the exposure of military frauds. This organisation tries to have individuals who impersonate veterans prosecuted under the Section 80A of the 1903 Defence Act, but generally relies on public shaming in an effort to compel them to apologise for their impersonation and manipulation of others. The ANZMI method of operation demonstrates a reliance on new media, with photographs of suspects taken at public events and downloaded to the webpage. They conduct investigations, and the story and image remains on the site but may be removed if the accused person admits their guilt and apologises.

As is perhaps the nature of such individuals for whom fantasy has replaced reality, claims are often made of their membership of special forces, of secret 'off the record' operations, and of atrocity stories along with accounts that appear to be racist and delusional. Some of these accused individuals appear to go to great lengths to exploit and manipulate those around them and to gain access to financially rewarding veterans' benefits, while others exploit nothing more than the good natures of those nearby as they seek to impress, and their fellow drinkers at the local bar. The cases of the ANZMI make compelling reading, yet are also incredibly sad, when the individuals who go to great efforts to create false histories about themselves have their facades stripped away as they are exposed in their home communities by the power of the new media (Hyland 2007).

Conclusion

Narrating war is increasingly becoming the realm of the virtual world, ranging from high profile actors such as Rick Duncan/Strandlof to any dissenting soldier, however inarticulate. This provides scholars with the challenge to engage with a community that is too often not considered, that of the community of/at war, both active participants and their wider families. In the United States, this is becoming an increasingly significant community due to the numbers that have had this direct experience of conflict, with an estimated 2.2 million Americans having served in Iraq or Afghanistan. The figures for Australian are of course smaller, but this remains a significant area of research for scholars of international cultural studies, history of war, and of media. By using social media, we can access these communities and critique both defensive official reports and sensationalist commercial journalism in an arena that calls for scholarly engagement.

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