

# Us soldiers imaging the iraq war

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HPPC Communication Vol. 7, No. 1, Nov 2008: pp. 0-0 US Soldiers Imaging

the Iraq War on YouTube Kari Anden-Papadopoulos Stockholm University

Anden-Papadopoulos US Soldiers Imaging the Iraq War on YouTube This

article examines the homemade videos uploaded to YouTube

bycoalitionsoldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I interrogate how perceptions of war, and the conventions of war reporting, change as new media technologies allow soldiers to log on to the Web and upload personal views from the frontlines. The Iraqi conflict is emerging as the first YouTube war, where homemade soldiers' videos throw into sharp relief the reportorial conventions of the mainstream news coverage. I take into consideration the format, meanings and communicative functions of these amateur videos, and the distinctive ways in which they reconfigure professional standards of ethics and authenticity.

The firsthand testimonials by soldiers offer the public uncensored insights into the experience of warfare and may provide the basis for a questioning of the authority and activity of U. S. foreign policy. INTRODUCTION This article considers the specific challenges that the online proliferation of alternative imagery of violent international conflict raises for traditional journalism and its standards of ethics and credibility.

I examine how modern communication technologies that allow active duty soldiers to log on to the Web from Afghanistan and Iraq, and upload personal and at times shockingly brutal views from the frontlines, can alter our

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perception of war and the conventions of war reporting. The most graphic images show the gruesome aftermath of suicide bombings and fierce gunfights between coalition forces and insurgents. Sites such as MySpace, YouTube, GoogleVideo, LiveLeak, and military.com abound with violent videos and stills from combat soldiers, some set to heavy metal or rap music, and include troops using obscene language.

My article examines the homemade videos uploaded to YouTube by coalition soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. These personal, poignant and sometimes shockingly brutal video testimonies clearly diverge from, and subvert traditional forms and standards for war reporting. I take into consideration the format, meanings, and communicative functions of these amateur videos, and the distinctive ways in which they reconfigure professional standards of ethics and authenticity.

The soldiers' firsthand accounts of the war have introduced new and sometimes highly controversial perspectives into the documentation of warfare that military and media elites are struggling to contain. The most contentious imagery uploaded to YouTube is undoubtedly Correspondence should be addressed to Kari Anden-Papadopoulos, Department of Journalism, Media, and Communication, Stockholm University, Karlavagen 104, P. O. Box 27 861, 115 93 Stockholm. E-mail:[email protected]jmk. su. se 18 ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS he live recordings of violent confrontations, in which U. S. troops can be seen taking part in aggressive and seemingly indiscriminate killings of Iraqi citizens. However, some of the soldier videos that have caused most public outrage are shot behind the scenes of combat, showing troops entertaining themselves by demeaning Iraqi children or abusing pet

animals. Also, the recurrent video tributes to fallen soldiers foreground a controversial and highly emotional subject: the premature and violent deaths of young U. S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

My analysis suggests that these audiovisual productions by active duty soldiers can provide us with the kind of critical perspectives needed for a more open democratic questioning of U. S. foreign policy and the conduct of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. IMAGE WARS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY During almost all major wars in modern times, governments have made systematic efforts to shape the visual experience of the citizenry (Brothers, 1997; Campbell, 2003; Griffin, 1999, 2004; Moeller, 1989; Roeder, 1993; Taylor, 1991, 1998; Zelizer, 1998, 2004).

In recent years, increasingly professional government media management strategies have strengthened the dominance of official perspectives in the U. S. and UK mainstream news media (Robinson, 2004). The media tend to support the government course of action during military operations and privilege the official version of events (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Thusu & Freedman, 2003; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). Central to the manufacture of this version is the representation of warfare as clinical and even compassionate.

What is most striking about traditional war coverage in the Anglo-American news media is that the images are relatively bloodless and seldom hint at the capacity of modern warfare machinery to injure the human body. However, cable and satellite television, as well as new mediatechnology, have made it more difficult for nation states to control the information crossing their borders (Webster, 2003). The information front is no longer

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confined to traditional mass media but extended to an increasingly porous and fast global communication space (Taylor, 2003).

Alternative imagery of violent international conflict that has not been created or disseminated by mainstream media is exploding onto these new nonfiltered public spheres, and often finds its way to conventional news outlets. It includes stills and videos created by active duty soldiers and imagery produced by civilians in the war zone. Iraqi insurgent imagery is also prevalent, showing the bloody work of sectarian death squads, and U. S. soldiers being shot and blown up (Johnson, 2007).

The insurgent videos, set to inspiring religious soundtracks or chanting, are not only aimed at drawing new recruits and donations but also at terrorizing of the enemy with the violent spectacle. Increasingly, these spectacles of terror are staged primarily to generate footage to be circulated in the media and thereby subject potential mass audiences to the shocking displays of destruction. The proliferation of vernacular imagery of international conflict has become a key issue of concern for both military and media elites (Kennedy, 2008).

The military is uneasy with the threat such communications pose to operational security and also with their potential to subvert the understandings of war and foreign policy so powerfully framed by government and military powers. For the media, the main concern with the advent of citizen journalism is that it bypasses the established forms of news production and representation and even challenges the professional status of journalists. The popularity of internet communications in war zones has led the US SOLDIERS IMAGING THE IRAQ WAR ON YOUTUBE 19

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Pentagon to begin closely monitoring what its troops post online, with special attention being paid to images that show the aftermath of combat (Greene, 2006). A policy instituted in the spring of 2005, however, requires all military bloggers inside Iraq to register with their units. It gives unit commanders the authority to review blogs and other communications before they are sent to make sure there are no violations of operational security. The internet has become a key battleground of information and image warfare, a territory long dominated by Islamist extremist groups that have demonstrated greater sophistication than the U.

S. Army in their use of Web 2. 0 tools. They utilize the net for “ fundraising and recruitment, training and instruction, and propaganda and psychological warfare, and for gathering open-source information with which to plan attacks” (Weimann, 2006, p. x). The online response from official U. S. military sources has been fairly subdued, characterized by an unwillingness to exploit new media to get their message out. However, in March 2007, the U. S. Defense Department made a significant move into the cyberspace battleground with the launch of its own channel on YouTube, called Multi-National Force - Iraq. The videos uploaded to the site adhere to traditional norms of propaganda, showing American soldiers succeeding in “ clinical” combat and aiding local Iraqi citizens (Christensen, 2008). The channel is a direct attempt by the U. S. Defense Department to counteract the prolific posting of damaging video clips by its own troops, an attempt at online visual management accompanied by what appears to be a concerted effort to suppress online publications by troops in the field.

In May 2007, the U. S. military announced that it had blocked troops from accessing popular video-sharing sites, including YouTube and MySpace, on military computers. Shortly after, YouTube removed dozens of soldiers' videos from its archives and suspended the accounts of some users who had posted them. The U. S. Army is facing a dilemma over how to manage internet access by its troops. On the one hand, online communication clearly serves to boost battlefield performance and morale.

Soldiers and their families visit social networking sites to exchange notes, swap images, and share recorded messages - a form of instant communication that, together with e-mail, has largely replaced the mail call. Moreover, a large majority of military bloggers in the war zone express unabashed support for the operations in Iraq and elsewhere and, most importantly, lend them a human face, which provides invaluable PR for the military. On the other hand, the Pentagon knows that enemies are proficient at mining the Web to collect intelligence on potential targets.

In addition, the occasional posting of gruesome battle photographs and videos by serving soldiers not only jeopardizes operational security but also contradicts the carefully crafted image of modern warfare as clean, rational, and even humanitarian. THE " YOUTUBE WAR" A new digital generation of soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq is turning to the internet in a strongly felt urge to communicate and come to terms with the realities of experiencing a war up close. Today's soldiers are equipped with the same digital tools and technology as the media, which enable them to share their experiences with potentially vast audiences.

The omnipresence of digital cameras and camcorders among serving soldiers means that they “ exist in a new relationship to their experience of war, they are now potential witnesses and sources within the 1 [http://youtube.com/profile? user= MNFIRAQ 20 ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS](http://youtube.com/profile?user=MNFIRAQ20ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS) documentation of events” (Kennedy, 2008 p. 4; see also Mortensen, 2007). This also means that the boundaries between those who are fighting and those who are documenting the war are becoming more and more blurred. In the age of digital media, the waging and representing of war are enmeshed almost to the point of being inseparable.

Much of the imagery that coalition soldiers produce of their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan is shared primarily with closefamilyand friends, and within their units, via e-mail or burned to CDs. Still, a large amount of the imagery is made available to the public via a wide range of internet venues, in particular through the rapidly growing subculture of “ milbloggers” - firstperson online diaries by serving troops. Since their first appearance in 2003, the number of milblogs has increased rapidly. Today it is estimated there are more than 2, 500 milblogs (Kennedy, 2008).

More recently, video-sharing platforms such as YouTube have become popular outlets for soldiers to publicize their audiovisual productions. YouTube has become one of the fastest-growing Web sites in the world - in January 2008 alone almost 79 million users watched more than 3 billion videos on the site. 2 By offering users the unprecedented ability to share their experiences inexpensively and instantly with a potential mass audience, YouTube has turned video sharing into one of the most significant features of contemporary internetculture.



The Web site's community guidelines forbid the uploading of material likely to be perceived as inappropriate or offensive, such as videos containing pornography or sexually explicit content, animal abuse, bomb making, graphic or gratuitous violence, or dead bodies. <sup>3</sup> Still, the enforcement of these guidelines is relatively weak, and videos that clearly violate YouTube's terms of use are proliferating on the website (Gimeno, 2008). <sup>4</sup> The video clips uploaded by U. S. soldiers on YouTube cover a range of settings, activities, and emotions: combat action, routine patrolling, colloquial interaction with Iraqi civilians, recreation in the barracks, and tributes to fallen comrades. <sup>5</sup> It is often the case that several or all of these five general thematic categories can be found in individual video clips. The videos contain not only private footage created by the troops themselves but also imagery appropriated from other sources such as official military recordings, news broadcasts, music videos, and so forth.

There is a significant degree of visual redundancy in these videos in the sense that certain stills and moving images tend to reappear time and again. This is also to say that the question of authorship and authenticity is difficult to decide when it comes to this type of image production. The Iraq war is being fought by what has been called the first Playstation generation, raised on Hollywood war films, graphic video games, and internet porn.

When this generation of soldiers now documents and tries to communicate their experiences of actual warfare, they fall back on contemporary popular culture and its broad repertoire of war as entertainment. The video clips follow an MTV style of format, with a montage of stills and live footage cut rapidly to music. The more violent scenes are typically edited to heavy metal

or rap music, while the recurrent themes of brotherhood, mourning, and loss are set to power ballads. In creating, posing <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube> [http://www.youtube.com/t/community\\_guidelines](http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines) 4 Thousands of videos on the website are for example explicitly tagged with human rights violation terms such as “ execution,” “ torture,” “ rape and sexual abuse,” and “ mass killings” (Gimeno, 2008). 5 A sixth type of content is the dissenting soldier testimony: Iraq war veterans bearing public witness to dark war experiences, such as killing unarmed civilians with the consent of their superiors. Since this is a specific genre that does not entail images that document the controversial aspects of warfare, I will not consider it further in this article. 2 US SOLDIERS IMAGING THE IRAQ WAR ON YOUTUBE 21 for, and uploading these videos the American soldiers also follow the trend in contemporary “ confessional” media culture to employ digital technologies as tools for exposing and exhibiting the self on the internet or other media venues. They are part of the recent explosion of (until now) private discourses in public spaces, such as swapping intimate details about your life via MySpace and Facebook. The troops can and do post footage on personal Web sites, but the networking sites and video-sharing platforms provide a more public arena where the videos become open to global audiences who can communicate directly with the soldiers and give feedback on their audiovisual productions. COMBAT ACTION Since the Vietnam War, news organizations and media scholars have debated the question of whether, and how, explicit images of the violence and carnage of war should be broadcast. For the soldiers serving in Iraq, however, this is not an issue. They are clearly not impartial or external observers of the war, who abide by the dictate to

serve the so-called “ public interest. ” They are combatants documenting the war as they wage and experience it.

Many combat videos focus on the physical actions of the U. S. troops, shooting or blowing up targets that are in the distance. Most of them are edited to music, but some present live action footage with original sound, showing troops engaged in intense street battles and gunfights. Young soldiers often take what appears to be a near-sexual pleasure in the violent fighting – you hear them breathe heavily, moan, and make excited comments. One example is an entry on YouTube titled “ Iraq Witness War Crimes U. S. Soldiers Murder Unarmed Civilians. ”<sup>6</sup> The clip shows a group of U. S. oldiers open fire on unidentified targets across the street from a rooftop in Ramadi. The troops cheer and laugh loudly as they fire on two cars that apparently by chance drive into the line of fire. The unarmed passengers leave the cars running in an attempt to seek protection in the nearby buildings but are summarily gunned down by the soldiers. The boasting comments made by different soldiers on the video make the scene of what appears to be unprovoked aggression even more disturbing: “ See that car, I lit that fucker up! He got 30 rounds in that bitch! ” “ Oooh, my bitch is fucking done dude! ” “ Dude, look at it! We fucked those people all to shit down there! ” The edited to music combat videos are typically made in a fragmented style with a rapid succession of various battle scenarios. They are often set to hard rock music – a symbolic expression of the adrenaline rush felt by soldiers going into a fight. In some cases, these videos seem to glorify violence and promote a kind of adolescent machismo with soldiers taking keen delight in shooting or blowing up targets. Other combat videos

however clearly distance themselves from such a pro-war sensibility and militaristic celebration of power.

One example is a video titled " U. S. Army, Marines-Iraq War-Kill Insurgents (4th video Battle). " Set to the heavy metal song " Eyes of the Insane" by Slayer, it is a montage of stills and moving images that shows U. S. troops engaged in various spectacular combat scenes. The lyrics of the song are the guiding principle <sup>6</sup> [http://www. youtube. com/watch? v= JWYNn1pTwPM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWYNn1pTwPM) Added February 22, 2008, by " Slavesrevolt. " Accessed June 15, 2008. <sup>22</sup> ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS for the set up of the video, taking the point of view of a soldier who suffers from the traumatic effects of war.

He testifies to the " devastating insanity" of war which he keeps re-experiencing in the form of intrusive images: " I keep seeing mutilated faces/Even in mydreams/Distorted images/Flashing rapidly /Psychotically abusing me/Devouring my brain. " The video starts with an extreme close-up of an eye, in which the reflection of a soldier can be seen. This visual effect emphasizes that the rapid flashes of violent battle imagery in the video represent horrific war experiences as they are reflected - and compulsively replayed - in the eyes and mind of a traumatized soldier.

One scene shows what appears to be an unarmed Iraqi civilian driving a motorcycle being gunned down from across the street by U. S. troops. Another shows two unidentified men running for their lives down a dusty Iraqi street before they are killed by U. S. troops in a Humvee. Yet another shows three marines on a balcony as they are hit by shrapnel blasting back at high speed from a distant exploding building. The video documents and expresses the maker's own experience of the insanity of war - the chaos,

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panic, vulnerability, and kill-or-get-killed logic that compels soldiers to use sometimes indiscriminate violence.

It presents warfare as a traumatizing experience that leaves the soldier full of questions and disturbing memories. In many cases, the videos contain imagery that originates from military surveillance devices such as night vision cameras and aerial surveillance technologies. Here, the representation of war becomes one with the waging of war itself. One example is a clip titled "Apache Kills in Iraq," which consists of guncam footage taken at night from an Apache helicopter. 7 The video shows a U. S. attack aircraft using high power ammunition to eliminate three suspected weapon smugglers on the ground. The clip is disturbing not only because the Iraqi men apparently are gunned down without a confirmed identification, but also because it visualizes the devastating impact of high power artillery when used against humans. The thermal imaging system used at night shows the glowing presence of the warm human body against the dark surroundings, making the effect of impact shockingly apparent: When the 30mm rounds hit the Iraqi men, you literally see warm viscera scattering in all directions.

As one of the three victims lies helpless and wounded on the ground, the Apache pilots take aim and kill him with a second salvo, an action that would seem to qualify as a war crime. "OPERATION IRAQI BOREDOM" Soldiers have privileged access to the frontline of war and also to its back stage. They can go behind the scenes and document the more private settings, activities, and feelings that professional photographers cannot access and would not necessarily attribute news value to.

The soldiers perform not only in front of the camera, but apparently even for the camera, often in playful, intimate, and humorous ways that clearly defy the more formal and distancing conventions of professional journalism. They often film themselves and their comrades goofing off for the camera, playing pranks such as capturing and overtaking a port-a-John housing a soldier dressed mockingly as a terrorist. 8 Frat-style humor is a key feature not only of these recurrent <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoFq9jYB2wo>. Added July 24, 2006, by "acdclights. Accessed June 19, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvMLREePkyY&NR=1>. Added June 16, 2007, by "Sensicane." Accessed June 29, 2008. 8 7 US SOLDIERS IMAGING THE IRAQ WAR ON YOUTUBE 23 "toilet action" clips, but of many of the videos that show troops in downtime activities. The soldiers waste time in measured nonsensical performances such as taping a comrade to the front of a Humvee, dancing poorly in their underwear, drinking maple syrup, or pouring canned air - which boils at room temperature - into the palm of their hand and watching as it burns the skin.

These videos testify to the boredom that soldiers feel when not in action. Making videos is a way to offset the monotony, and also to release stress and frustration. Some of them are rather creative and witty, such as the celebrated rap song spoof about Ramadi titled "Lazy Ramadi." 9 This is a battle zone parody of the widely popular Saturday Night Live's "Lazy Sunday," created by and starring two National Guard staff sergeants who rap jokily about insurgents, body armor, Jell-O, and their hometown Muncie, Indiana. The clip evidently struck a pop-cultural chord.

It became an overnight internet sensation that has been viewed millions of times on different internet venues. Ramadi is considered to be the most dangerous city in Iraq. The rap skit makes light of a hazardous and high stress situation, providing comic relief for both soldiers and the home front. "Lazy Ramadi" has many imitators on YouTube, with music video parodies that mock the grim conditions of war. There are also more controversial examples of activities that soldiers resort to in order to entertain themselves and their YouTube audiences. A clip posted in March of 2008 shows a U.

S. Marine, David Motari, throwing a puppy off a cliff while on patrol in Iraq. 10 The 17-second clip generated international attention and sparked outrage from animal right groups around the world when it came to light. In the video, Motari smiles and jokes with his comrades before he hurls the puppy over a cliff as it yelps. An unknown person operating the video camera is heard laughing and another voice saying, "That's mean. That's mean, Motari." The video clip caused the Marine Corps to expel David Motari and to take disciplinary measures against a second Marine involved.

TRIBUTES TO THE FALLEN US SOLDIERS Tribute videos foreground a controversial and highly emotional topic: the deaths of U. S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are made as specific tributes to individual soldiers or as a generic homage to the U. S. troops serving and dying overseas. The former are typically created by close family members or friends and show private recordings from the funeral ceremonies interspersed with snapshots from family albums. The latter often present melancholic meditations on the ordeals U. S. troops face in Iraq, highlighting the harsh conditions and consequences of their mission.

These memorial videos almost obsessively parade images of coffins draped in the American flag, a motif that inevitably conjures up the ghosts of Vietnam. In contrast to much official imagery, they also show seriously wounded American soldiers, soldiers being hit, and soldiers breaking down and crying. The Pentagon and the Bush administration have gone to great length to avoid images of U. S. casualties being broadcast or published in the U. S. media and have enforced a ban on pictures of the flag-draped coffins returning home from Iraq and 9 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5k3L\\_Snu7k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5k3L_Snu7k).

Added May 15, 2006 by SSG Matt Wright and SSG Josh Dobbs. Accessed June 30, 2008. See also Lazy Ramadi's official site at <http://lazyramadi.com> 10 The video was viewed tens of thousands of times before YouTube took it down because of a violation of the site's terms of use. The clip is still widely available on the internet, however. 24 ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS Afghanistan. Military and governmental officials always have been careful to prevent images that show their own troops dead or seriously wounded, since such sights might arouse fears about war's personal and social consequences and undermine faith in the cause.

What makes these images so contentious is not only the disturbing sight - actual or symbolic - of dead bodies, but the repressed question that they might evoke: Is the war worth the cost? Hence, official narratives have persistently sought to put depictions of American death in a meaningful context. Blood is sacrifice, spilled for sovereignty and freedom. Corpses are swiftly transformed into martyrs, whose surrender warrants our redemption.



Mortality is relied on to project immortality, impregnability, and a reinvigorated sense of national purpose.

In contrast, soldier tribute videos present more mixed messages. The themes of bravery, camaraderie, and patriotic pride are counterbalanced or even nullified by distressing expressions of pain, vulnerability, and irretrievable personal loss. One example is an entry on YouTube titled “ Final Salute: American Soldiers in Iraq. ” 11 The clip starts with footage taken from a moving military vehicle, shot through the front windshield. After a couple of seconds, a roadside bomb explodes and shatters the windshield right before our eyes, as smoke and fire fill the screen.

The spectacular scene positions the viewer with the vulnerable soldiers, making palpable the experience of lethal danger. This is followed by a slide show with images of soldiers crying, embracing, and paying tribute to fallen comrades. A recurring motif is the ritual shrines assembled of the dead soldier’s military gear. These memorials symbolically resurrect the dead soldier, with the rifle as a body placed in the boots, crowned by the helmet and dog tag. Sometimes they also include a formal portrait of the deceased. Images of flag-draped coffins are also repeatedly shown in the video, as are photographs of wounded U.

S. soldiers. Some of the latter are extremely graphic, such as a close-up of the remains of a soldier’s blown-off feet. The overall theme of many tribute videos is the anguish and grief that the casualties of war cause for the U. S. soldiers and their families. They ask us to remember and fully appreciate the sacrifice of the young men and women serving overseas. Where the military and government elites attempt to spin American death into a political

weapon, used to reinforce loyalty to the nation and to the military effort, tribute videos lament the loss of young lives in their own right.

They insist that we recognize and recall the fallen American soldiers as persons, as unique individuals, whose sacrifice can only truly be measured through the consideration of what they meant to those who knew and loved them. INTERACTION WITH IRAQI CIVILIANS A great number of the soldier videos contain images of Iraqi children, the epitome of innocence and hope for the future. Many clips clearly attempt to cultivate the image of a good relationship between U. S. forces and local civilians, showing troops in amiable exchanges with Iraqi children and families. 2 The soldiers hand out candy, toys, and books to happy children, play with them, and give them medical care. The Iraqi children laugh, give a “ thumbs up,” and wave 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wlw-BP4zfW4>. Added August 27, 2006, by “ prezjackie. ” Accessed June 27, 2008. 12 “ Iraq War: The Soldiers,” at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUm05\\_I8xJ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUm05_I8xJ4). Accessed July 16, 2008. Iraq video “ Why” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPVPqERfTM4>. Accessed July 16, 2008. US SOLDIERS IMAGING THE IRAQ WAR ON YOUTUBE 25 small American flags, and are often seen embracing and even kissing the troops.

These clips are obviously intended to project an image of the U. S. and coalition soldiers as humane and compassionate. They reflect and reinforce the official U. S. framing of the Iraq conflict as a “ war of liberation” - the troops appear as the longed-for saviors of an undeveloped nation in need of paternal guidance. Other clips, however, employ the symbolic power of the innocent child to communicate strong anti-war messages. 13 Here, the Iraqi

children are foregrounded as defenseless victims who cry out for us to take a critical stand on a conflict that deprives even infants of their tender life and limb.

These videos contain graphic depictions of children seriously wounded, bleeding, screaming, and crying – often with a direct address to the camera, imploring us to act upon their unjust suffering. Such imagery evidently reflects negatively on the military effort in Iraq. By implication, if not explicitly, the U. S. forces are portrayed as cruel assaulters – rather than fatherly protectors – of the people of Iraq, bringing injury, death, and destruction to the country. In contrast to the feel good visuals of smiling Iraqi children, these depictions present the war as immoral and misguided.

Apart from the clips that implicate U. S. soldiers in physical cruelties, there are also videos that document troops abusing Iraqi children in a more psychological sense. A notorious clip, “ Iraqi Kids Run for Water,” shows U. S. soldiers dangle bottles of clean water over the back of a truck. 14 Much to the amusement of the soldiers, the trick makes Iraqi children run after the truck for a long period in a vain attempt to reach the bottles. Another clip shows U. S. soldiers entertaining themselves by teaching a group of Iraqi children (who apparently do not understand English) to say “ Fuck Iraq. 15 In another video, a U. S. soldier dupes a clueless Iraqi boy to admit that he has “ fucked donkey. ” 16 Needless to say, the humanitarian halo fades in the light of such stark enactments of patronizing, neo-colonial arrogance.

**CONCLUSIONS** The frames of media and military elites no doubt remain powerful controls on the public understanding of international affairs. Still, the explosion of vernacular imagery of international conflict is becoming an

increasingly important factor in the representation and shaping of the news and the newsworthy, and in mediating perceptions of war and foreign policy.

The Iraqi conflict is emerging as the first YouTube war, where homemade soldiers' videos throw into sharp relief the reportorial conventions of mainstream news coverage. Contrary to the myths of national glory, macho heroism, and clinical warfare manufactured by military and media elites, the firsthand testimonials by soldiers actually living the war offer the public uncensored insights into the mundane, violent, and even depraved faces of warfare. They challenge traditional

13 " War in Iraq" at [http://www.youtube.com/watch? v= 4Gu7pswE43Y&mode= related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Gu7pswE43Y&mode=related&search=). Accessed July 16, 2008. " Iraq anti war video" at [http://www.youtube.com/watch? v= 3wKG9T1xPwY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wKG9T1xPwY). Accessed July 16, 2008. 14 [http://www.youtube.com/watch? v= L71Y1galpyA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L71Y1galpyA). Accessed July 2007, 2008. This clip has been submitted to YouTube numerous times by different users. 15 [http://www.youtube.com/watch? v= eBGi8jr\\_CBE&feature= related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBGi8jr_CBE&feature=related). Added December 18, 2006, by " tmacdagreat. " Accessed July 27, 2008. 16 [http://www.youtube.com/watch? v= kpHWaUSfYj8&feature= related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpHWaUSfYj8&feature=related). Added February 7, 2007, by " 666stunts666. Accessed July 27, 2008. 26

ANDEN-PAPADOPOULOS journalism's claim to authenticity and credibility precisely by showing that which the mainstream news will not show and thus rendering dubious the professional practices of selection, framing, and editing. The authenticity of the soldiers' experience lends a heightened sense of veracity and immediacy to their representations of war. The " reality effect" is further underscored by the soldiers' personal points of view and the often raw emotionalism and poor technical quality of their amateur videos.

Many of the soldier videos not only conflict with the official message that the military mission in Iraq is about rebuilding and peace but also with the persistent marketing - and popular perception - of "our" troops as fair, courageous, and caring. They show aggressive fighting by U. S. and coalition troops that at times revel in violently destroying the enemy. Other recordings contradict the image of a benign American presence in Iraq by showing troops unscrupulously abusing Iraqi children and pets - the embodiment of a degenerate abuse of power.

The soldier videos also challenge the mainstream news convention of hiding the disturbing sight of dead and badly injured bodies from public view. They display gruesome images of dead and mutilated Iraqi insurgents and civilians, and also of U. S. casualties. The many memorial videos also defy the mainstream practice of transforming dead soldiers into generic symbols of national purpose and rectitude. Instead, they urge us to remember the fallen soldier as a specific individual whose death has devastating consequences for the loved ones left behind.

This highlighting of war's personal and social consequences undermines the official attempts at concealing these costs of war. Another sight not often found in official imagery, but frequently so in the soldier videos, is of troops crying. Here, the soldiers openly express their vulnerability when faced with the fatalities of war. If such a display of emotions contradicts the ideal of macho heroism, this is even true of some of the mundane imagery showing troops killing time in the barracks.

Their playful performances for the camera abound with obscenities and adolescent humor, showing an unruly, even silly side of the troops that works

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against the official image of the regimented U. S. soldier. Yet they serve to put a human face on the U. S. military. For better and worse, many of the soldier videos bring us closer to the troops as real people, as opposed to prescribed images of dutiful soldiers who place their lives at risk in order to restore security to the sacred homeland.

The homemade soldier videos represent a way of dealing with the stress, agony, and boredom of experiencing a war first-hand. Making these videos, though often a form of entertainment, can be seen as a coping mechanism, helping the soldiers to make sense of and communicate about a war that has gotten more and more complicated since Saddam's statue fell. These new sources allow for more diverse points of view that complement, and at times disrupt the traditional framings of war.

As my analysis of the soldier videos makes apparent, these nonprofessional contributions can provide us with critical insights into the complex, painful realities of experiencing a war directly, thereby offering the basis for a more open and democratic questioning of the authority and activity of U. S. foreign policy. It may be that these dispatches lack a coherent explanation for why the bombs are going off, and that it is often difficult to ascertain what is going on in each video, when and where it was shot and who shot it.

Still, it is precisely the lack of prescribed framings and official narratives that make the soldier videos valuable, in that they provide raw, often unfiltered views that resist an all too neat packaging of war by those who direct it. The soldiers, as war insiders, can record, synthesize, and disseminate information that circumvents official channels of discourse. Their productions include the messy, visceral, chaotic, mundane, and emotional aspects of war often left

out in the sanitized reports available on the network news. These, along with videos from insurgents, are transforming YouTube and

US SOLDIERS IMAGING THE IRAQ WAR ON YOUTUBE 27 other video-sharing sites into alternative news networks. This multiplying of perspectives, accessible on the World Wide Web, empowers internet users to go beyond the one-way broadcasts directed at them and to actively seek out other points of view on the tangled realities of war and its policies. REFERENCES Allan, S. , & Zelizer, B. (Eds. ). (2004). Reporting war: Journalism in wartime. London and New York: Routledge. Brothers, C. (1997). War and photography: A cultural history. London and New York: Routledge. Campbell, D. (2003). Representing contemporary war.

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