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The Internet and the Second Iraqi War: Extending participation and challenging mainstream journalism?

Bart Cammaerts & Nico Carpentier

1. INTRODUCTION

Weblogs, or what is often called the blogosphere, can be deconstructed in a variety of ways; as alternative 'citizens' journalism, as a participatory instrument for citizens/activists to produce their own media content, as websites of opinion, as a social platform to inform friends and family within everyday contexts, but also increasingly as a new marketing and propaganda-tool for elites. They challenge several dichotomies: between what is being perceived to be public and private, between alternative and mainstream media and between the citizen/activist and the media professional.

In this chapter we examine the use of blogs by different actors in the context of the war in Iraq and their relation to the mainstream media. Armed conflicts constitute, of course, an extreme and extra-ordinary situation, but that is precisely why we choose to study it, as certain (media and communication) processes become very visible and apparent in these circumstances. As Carruthers (2000: 13 [quoting Williams, 1992: 158]), quite rightly points out that:

'[w]ar should not be seen as a special case of how the media works', but rather as a magnifying glass which 'highlights and intensifies many of the things that happen in peace-time', albeit revealing them in exaggerated form.

Moreover, war is the site where different hegemonies meet. First, it is the site where hegemonic mainstream media practices become highly visible, also because alternative media fiercely (try to) resist them. Mainstream media practices and representations are stretched to their limits, and often start showing cracks, fissures and internal contradictions. Especially the mainstream (news) media's much-cherished notions of objec-

tivity, balance and truthfulness lose much of their taken-for-grantedness. Through the fog of war, it becomes visible what they 'really' are: always-specific constructions of ideal-typical concepts. This process of demystification can be explained by two causes: the enormous stream of practical problems that mainstream media have to face during wartime, and the confrontation with another hegemonic level: the ideological model of war, that becomes inescapable for media organizations and media professionals at times of war.

2. WAR AND IDEOLOGY

When a nation, or a people, goes to war, powerful mechanisms come into play, turning an adversary into 'the enemy'. Where the existence of an adversary is considered legitimate and the right to defend their - distinct - ideas is not questioned, an enemy is excluded from the political community and has to be destroyed (Mouffe, 1997: 4). The transformation of an adversary into an enemy is supported by a set of discourses, articulating the identities of all parties involved.

Following Galtung and his colleagues (Galtung, et al., 2001) it is contended that these discourses on the self and the enemy are based on a series of elementary dichotomies such as good/evil, just/unjust, innocent/guilty, rational/irrational, civilized/barbaric, organized/chaotic, superior to technology/part of technology, human/animal-machine, united/fragmented, heroic/cowardice and determined/insecure. Both sides claim to be rational and civilized, and to fight a good and just war, attributing responsibility for the conflict to the enemy. The construction of the enemy is accompanied by the construction of the identity of the self, clearly in an antagonistic relationship to the enemy's identity.

The problems in the representation of war are strengthened by the application of the specific procedures and rituals (Tuchman, 1972) that media professionals use to guarantee or legitimize their truth-speaking (and objectivity). Journalistic daily practices and procedures are regulated through key concepts as balance, relevance and truthfulness, which have an important impact on the representations journalists produce. As these fluid concepts have to be transformed into social practice, their content is rendered highly particular and specific.

The mainstream media's war coverage often contains a double hegemony. First, they contain the ideological model of war that dominates the cultural sphere in which they operate. This hegemonic model defines 'the self' and 'the enemy', and connotes them positively or negatively. Secondly, the mainstream media's war coverage is based on

procedures, rituals and values that are in themselves also hegemonic, and become very visible at times of war (see Galtung et al., 2001; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). The main characteristics of mainstream media coverage of war include:

- A preference for the factual narration of the events of war, detached from individual (private) suffering, and supported by eyewitness accounts of journalists;
- A preference for elite spokes-persons whose statements are considered to be of public relevance;
- A preference for (often military) experts providing contextual information to the conflict.

All these practices remain firmly embedded within the ideological model of war that frames the images that are shown and the analyses that are made. At the same time the mainstream media's practices and preferences also tend to exclude a number of other approaches that transcend the sanitized narration of war, that allow 'ordinary people' to speak, and that deconstruct the traditional dichotomies of the ideological model of war.

3. ALTERNATIVE VOICES

Although the processes listed above often characterize the mainstream media output, care should be taken not to homogenize the diversity of media organizations and practices. In a number of cases mainstream media have managed to produce counter-hegemonic discourses and provided spaces for critical debate, in-depth analysis and humor. They have also, on a number of occasions, shown the horrors of war. Some even attempted to counter some of the basic premises of the ideological model¹, by giving a face to Iraqi victims, by paying attention to the strong European and the less strong US popular resistance against the war.

Alternative media organizations and communication channels offer counter-hegemonic discourses and identities that threaten the mainstream media's double hegemony, described above. These counter-hegemonic discourses are, however, much more complicated than often assumed. First, they do not always face both hegemonies head on, but

¹ A modest but interesting example is provided by the North Belgian newspaper *De Morgen* on April 4, 2003, when referring to the US-led coalition as a '*mini-coalition*'.

often negotiate a critical position in relation to these two dominant positions. Second, they tend to change over time, as these alternative voices sometimes become incorporated by the mainstream. To show this complexity, we have selected three very different cases that are all related to what is now commonly called the blogosphere.

This first case of the blogger Salam Pax shows how this blogger managed to deconstruct the dichotomous model of war by expressing his reluctance to be liberated. The second case of the so-called mil-bloggers illustrates the complexity of eye-witness accounts even more, as this time American soldiers are seen to enter into the public space. Finally, the third case of the Abu Ghraib pictures totally disrupts the clear-cut difference between mainstream and alternative media, private and public, taking the dehumanization of the enemy to an extreme.

3.1. Salam Pax: disrupting the hegemonic definition of the Other

The Internet has emerged as (one of) the privileged channels or arenas that could be used to voice dissenting discourses regarding the war, thereby articulating alternative representations of war (and peace).

In this regard, Salam Pax, known as the Baghdad Blogger², is a prime example. He is an affluent, western-educated architect, with good knowledge of English, likeable from a Western perspective, not extreme or fundamentalist, and also a member of a suppressed gay community in Iraq (Melzer, 2005). Salam Pax is in many ways not an average Iraqi, but he did provide us with an alternative and highly personalized narrative of war. An example of this can be found in this quote: *'War sucks big time. Don't let yourself ever be talked into having one waged in the name of your freedom. Somehow when the bombs start dropping or you hear the sound of machine guns at the end of your street you don't think about your 'imminent liberation' anymore'* (Salam Pax, posted on 9 May 2003). His personalized narrative, from the inside of Iraq, contradicts the prevailing good-evil dichotomy that classifies Iraqi either as victims of dictatorship that welcome the American army as liberators, or as supporters of the Iraqi regime; *'No one feels like they should welcome the American army. The American government is getting as many curses as the Iraqi'* (Salam Pax, posted on 10 March 2003).

Salam Pax is also highly critical of the mainstream media and its practices, but his mere existence (and postings) already constituted a critique towards the mainstream media on a number of levels. As a witness he could – as no journalist could – simultaneously write from the position of

² See URL: http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/ (with archive) and his new blog: <http://justzipit.blogspot.com/>

an expert, an independent observer and a citizen journalist. In doing so, he generated an alternative media practice that created exceptional insights and bypassed the professional journalistic culture of detachment. An example of his critical stance towards professional journalism is this quote: *'Iraq is taken out of the headlines. The search for the next conflict is on. Maybe if it turns out to be Syria the news networks won't have to pay too much in travel costs'* (Salam Pax, posted on 23 April 2003)

During the invasion and immediately after it, several newspapers in Europe and the US started to re-print excerpts of his blog. Salam Pax subsequently became a bi-weekly editorialist for *The Guardian* (McCarthy, 2003). His critical perspectives were also published in many other newspapers throughout Europe and the US. His blog-writings were also published in book form (Salam Pax, 2003). Furthermore, Salam Pax also produced a series of documentaries for Guardian Films, using his own footage (Salam Pax, 2005). These contributions have been bundled on a DVD and were aired on BBC's *Newsnight*.

Salam Pax thus evolved from being a concerned Iraqi citizen, blogging on how Iraqi citizens experience the war into a foreign (war) correspondent, filmmaker and author. In doing so he was catapulted into the mainstream. Salam Pax still positions himself as opposed to the hegemonic structures that define professionalism and journalism, while at the same time reluctantly becoming a part of it.

3.2. *Mil-blogs: rendering the private self visible*

Besides Iraqi citizens, also US military personal and their families use blogs to connect the front with the home front and vice versa, but also (at times) as a platform to disseminate alternative representations of war and personal accounts of how this is being experienced by the soldiers themselves and their families. In this sense, these blogs are alternatives to the mainstream media's way of covering war.

Although these sites can be seen as critiques towards mainstream media's hegemony, most of them simultaneously re-enforce the hegemonic discourse of war, reverting to the classic dichotomies that characterize the western ideological model of war³. An example of such a hegemonic mil-blog is that of Buck Sargent⁴, an infantry officer who presents

³ To witness the popularity of blogs amongst soldiers and their families, it suffices to visit portal-sites such as '<http://www.military.com/blogs>' or '<http://www.milblogging.com/>', which provide a gateway to a diversity of military related weblogs.

⁴ <http://americancitizensoldier.blogspot.com/>

himself as 'a University of Texas graduate, a Ronald Reagan conservative, and a George Patton patriot. [...] pro-victory'. Having done tour of duties both in Afghanistan and Iraq, Buck Sargent eloquently amplifies the persuasive discourses of the war on terror, claiming to bring peace and democracy in both countries.

Some mil-blogs not only offer an alternative position towards the mainstream media, but simultaneously take a clear counter-hegemonic position in relation to the ideological model of war. These more critical mil-blogs have understandably been the object of controversy and gave the military establishment the uncomfortable feeling of (partially) losing control over the flow of information. Disturbing in this regard - at least for the US military, but difficult to discipline or control, is the use of blogs and websites by family-members of soldiers on tour of duty, by family-members of killed military personnel or by veterans to support the troops and/or to protest against or to question the legitimacy of the Iraqi war as such⁵.

Counter-hegemonic discourses can also be expressed in a less obvious, implicit, way by describing the everyday life of a soldier, the emotional stress, but also the banality and boredom of war. They are contradicting the heroization of American soldiers in Iraq by narrating the ordinariness of their activities. A telling example of this is a critical blog *My War: killing time in Iraq*, written by Spc. Colby Buzzell, based in Mosul. This blog had a daily hit-rate of 10.000 in September 2004 and offered a critical perspective of 'his' war (Cooper, 2004; Buzzell, 2005). He wrote about the irrationality and indiscriminateness of war, contradicting the image of the (American) heroic soldier that is always in full control. The case of Buzzell is also relevant in terms of the efforts of the military to re-assert control over mil-bloggers. Due to its popularity, Buzzell's blog attracted the attention of the Pentagon censors (Cooper, 2004). He was ordered to remove two postings from his archive and to have his contributions screened by his superiors before posting them. As he was not ordered to stop his blog, his case not only reveals the presence of censorship, but also the tolerance for blogs. This also exposed the Pentagon's view on blogging, as is summarized by the following statement of a military spokesperson:

⁵ Examples of such sites and blogs carrying distinct counter-hegemonic messages and voices are Families Against the War ('<http://www.mfaw.org.uk/>'), Military Families Speak Out ('<http://www.mfso.org/>') and Iraq Veterans Against the War ('<http://www.ivaw.net/>').

We treat them [the blogs] the same way we would if they were writing a letter or speaking to a reporter: it's just information [...] If a guy is giving up secrets, it doesn't make much difference whether he's posting it on a blog or shouting it from the rooftop of a building. (Lt. Col. Barry Venable, quoted in Cooper, 2004)

Not surprisingly, the censored postings emerged on other blogs mirroring and thereby again bypassing the attempts to remove them from the public space⁶.

Although the anxiety of the military authorities and attempts to control and screen material posted online was apparent in the case of Colby Buzzell, there are clearly also more subtle disciplining mechanisms of self-censorship at work. Buck Sargent's Blog, for instance, explicitly states that '*Opsec [operational security] will be strictly observed in all submissions*'. Sgt. Lizzie, a female soldier blogger serving in Iraq, points to the notion of operational security while also exposing a strong desire of soldiers to escape the everyday reality of war through their blog:

Reason you don't hear about much action from me: 1. I work in a very sensitive field, 99% of my work is classified, so I really can't talk about it. 2. Operational Security. There are certain things that I just can't talk about because it isn't wise to. (New Lives, 20/10/2004⁷)

Finally, technology also allows relegating blogs back to the private sphere of family and friends. The Green Side was an example of a site primarily directed at family and friends, which was still publicly accessible. However, after concerns of operational security voiced by the military establishment, the site was secured by making it password-protected.

⁶ <http://perspective-seeker.blogspot.com/2004/09/my-war-fear-and-loathing-in-iraq.html> (Consulted on 16 July 2006).

⁷ http://sgtlizzie.blogspot.com/2004_10_01_sgtlizzie_archive.html (Consulted on 16 July 2006).



Source: <http://www.thegreenside.com>

3.3. *The Abu Ghraib Pictures: falling on the wrong side of the hegemonic divide*

As early as June 2003, one month after Bush declared 'mission accomplished' on board of the USS Abraham Lincoln, Amnesty International already condemned the US government for its treatment of prisoners in Iraq, both in Camp Cropper at Baghdad International Airport and in Abu Ghraib Prison (Amnesty International, 2003). Several US soldiers also provided eyewitness accounts of incidents of torture (DeBatto, 2004). In January 2004, Sgt. Joseph Darby handed over photographs he had obtained from others in his company who had served in Iraq, to the US-Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID).

These torture photographs were acts of self-representation, made possible by the ubiquity of digital cameras. The soldiers present at, and involved in, the acts of torture used digital cameras to document their 'everyday life' in the Abu Ghraib prison, with the explicit intent to share them with friends, family and other members of their social networks. They were souvenirs of the 'good times' the makers had in Iraq.

The self-representations of the Abu Ghraib photographs were not neutral, but were mainly depictions of proud torturers in the same frame with the humiliated tortured, at times smiling and showing us the thumbs-up signs. Sontag (2004) made the analogy with so-called lynching photo's taken in 1880s-1930s, '*The lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib.*' The sexual nature of many of the

abusive photos also shows the psychology of shame and bio-politics (Foucault, 1975) in a raw form. The evilness of the enemy legitimizes the dehumanization of the enemy soldiers. In warfare, this logic is used to justify the killing of these enemy soldiers, eradicating their bodies with a total disregard of their humanity. It similarly justifies torture, as these enemy bodies are no longer human, but mere containers of military information, or fragmented objects of (sadistic) pleasure, a *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1988).



Source: The Memory Hole⁸

It was not until April 2004, when Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* on the ongoing investigations and published some of the photographs (Hersh, 2004), and when CBS's 60 minutes aired a documentary on the photographs, that the Abu Ghraib scandal really gained its momentum. More and more pictures appeared in the global mainstream public sphere and in February 2006, Salon.com managed to obtain a DVD with a thousand unpublished photos and an internal CID-report on it, from a source who had served in Abu Ghraib and was '*familiar with the CID investigation*' (Benjamin, 2006).

The mainstream media and their hegemonic practices were a necessary condition to turn the Abu Ghraib scandal into a media spectacle of global proportions. It was the investigative journalism of the mainstream media that allowed them to be the catalyzing actor through which the photographs were tilted from the private into the public domain. Here,

⁸ http://www.thememoryhole.com/war/iraqis_tortured/index2.htm (Consulted on 16 July 2006).

the 'alternative' Internet was first used to restrict the circulation of these pictures, by keeping these trophies inside the social networks of the perpetrators. Later, but only after the mainstream media made these pictures public, photo-blogs would mirror, copy and paste these pictures on many other websites⁹.

The publicness generated by the mainstream media also changed the nature of the Abu Ghraib pictures from trophies to legal evidence. As the torturers transcended the cultural norms of warfare, taking the dehumanization of the enemy to the extreme and moreover deriving pleasure from it, they became a threat for articulation of the American self as 'good'. In order to maintain its hegemony, the model that constructed the Iraqi soldiers as evil and the American soldiers as good, had to be defended. This was done by defining these soldiers as 'bad apples' and pushing them outside the American hegemony (and military).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The three cases explored above – the Salam Pax blog, the mil-blogs and the Abu Ghraib pictures – show, each in their own way, how the Internet manifests itself as a medium capable of bypassing mechanisms of control imposed by either the state or the military, and generating alternative discourses capable of challenging the hegemonic ideological model of war and at times also the dichotomous frames of 'we' versus the 'other'.

These blogs disrupt the hegemonic practices of the mainstream media, and their focus on the rational narrative, the warring elites and the semi-military experts. These alternative ways of reporting show that ordinary people can also perform expert roles and communicate valuable knowledges, and that these 'subjective' experiences can be factual, relevant, truthful and authentic. In this sense they are not that different from what we expect from professional journalists, but they do complement these more traditional forms of journalism, whilst professional journalism still remains an important truth-finding system, as is illustrated by the Abu Ghraib case.

⁹ A good example in this regard is the site '<http://www.thememoryhole.org/>' dedicated to archive sensitive material that is in danger of disappearing from the public sphere. Also wikipedia has archived the Abu Ghraib photo's on: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_prisoner_abuse_reports/Gallery (Consulted on 16 July 2006).

At the same time this chapter shows that these alternative channels of communications and these alternative discourses are in many cases more problematic than often assumed.

First, the cases show that a rigid separation between alternative and mainstream, and the assumed univocal inter-relationship between mainstream and hegemony is difficult to sustain. It shows that while some actors use alternative media channels such as weblogs, they in fact reproduce hegemony (cf. the patriotic blogs). Similarly, some counter-hegemonic voices are given a platform by some mainstream media in their quest for balance. Bloggers then become portrayed by mainstream media as the new 'real' truth-tellers, as long as they fit within the professional hegemony of the mainstream media.

Second, while the Abu Ghraib pictures represent the loss of control over the communicative process by the US-government, ironically initiated by whistleblowers from within the military, re-establishing control was very much an issue concerning the mil-blogs. Besides this, more subtle disciplining techniques are also at play, often internalized by mil-bloggers and seen as common sense for instance not to breach operational security. In other words, hegemony can sometimes strike back.

Finally, these dynamics and interactions between alternative media and the mainstream media illustrate that the mainstream media cannot be articulated as a singular or necessarily subservient actor to state propaganda and control. Selected counter-hegemonic voices were given a platform and/or their blogs were referred to in mainstream online, print or broadcasting media. Furthermore, sound investigative reporting revealed and initiated the Abu Ghraib scandal. It is too easy to dismiss this as mere co-option strategies and to condemn 'the media' for being a mouthpiece of US and UK propaganda. At the same time it has to be noted that not all Iraqi, nor all military bloggers, were granted the same level of exposure. And here again, hegemonic journalistic routines and codes influence the choice of which bloggers are 'selected'. This would explain why Spc. Buzzell got a high exposure and Sgt. Lizzie did not. Along the same line, we could ask why it is that all attention was focused on Salam Pax and not or much less on other Iraqi bloggers (such as Riverbend¹⁰, a female blogger) or on more fundamentalist bloggers.

¹⁰ See URL: riverbendblog.blogspot.com/ (Consulted on 16 July 2006).

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