

## Knowing war

Lucy Suchman, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9752-4684>

Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology

Lancaster University, UK

*l.suchman@lancaster.ac.uk*

### Abstract

This commentary reflects on contributions to the PARISS special issue *Datawar*. My readings highlight the implications of war's remediations for practices through which it is rendered knowable. Critical engagement with martial epistemologies requires an articulation of the irremediable locatedness and partiality of knowledge practices, and the fallacy of data-solutionism as the latest promise of an end to 'the fog of war.' I conclude with some reflections on the possibilities that these writings suggest for counter-knowledges that might further destabilise military logics, to open spaces for modes of relation not based on the violence of claims to omniscience.

### Keywords

Knowledge practices – militarism – military intelligence – witnessing

## Introduction

What does it mean to know war? The managerial logics of modern militarism respond to this question within a positivist frame of 'intelligence' – most recently driven by data – and of the normative operations of the hierarchically organised military body. Feminist and anti-colonial onto-epistemologies, in contrast, begin from an acknowledgement that all knowledges are irremediably partial and situated, and that knowers are inescapably implicated in enacting the worlds that they articulate. However greatly war's remediations reconfigure relevant knowledge practices, the knower's location remains a matter of life and death. In this sense, war has always been participative.<sup>1</sup>

For those of us who are concerned about how the logics of war are perpetuated, and the gap between those logics and war's chaotic realities on the ground, disentangling the changing uses and effects of specific media in relation to each other and over time is an important forensic project. Mathias Delori<sup>2</sup> argues that the increased circulation of real-time images of war gives new urgency to the question of the knower's position in relation to the event, most obviously and categorically whether as observer, perpetrator, or target. Proximity and distance are relevant to knowledge making about war in multiple senses of the knower's location (geopolitically, spatiotemporally, experientially) in relation to sites in which warfighting is enacted and has its effects. It matters as well how those articulating war are positioned vis à vis the institutions devoted to its legitimisation, including the military-

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<sup>1</sup> Ford, Matthew. "Ukraine, participation and the smartphone at war." In *Datawar, 4.2 Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS), edited by G. Anderson, T. Lindemann, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Delori, Mathias. "The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs." In *Datawar, 4.1 Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS), edited by G. Anderson, T. Lindemann, 2023.

industrial-commercial complex, the offices of defense intellectuals and policy makers, command centers, front line operating bases, and the media.

### **The incorporation of ‘civilian sensors’ into the targeting ‘cycle’**

Matthew Ford<sup>3</sup> proposes that through the incorporation of smartphone metadata and the crowdsourcing of real-time intelligence into warfighting, the categories of media, weapon, civilian and combatant become further destabilised. In Ukraine, Ford observes, the crowdsourcing of intelligence and outsourcing of elements of the targeting ‘kill chain’ to civilians implies that a smartphone might identify the one who carries it as a combatant, and thereby increase their risk of being targeted. The significance of the smartphone and its consequences notwithstanding, it is also the case that these categories have always been contingently and precariously enacted *in situ*, stabilised by their prospective attribution and retrospective reconstruction. The binary schema of ‘friend/enemy’ or ‘them/us’ is both realised through the sensoria of warfighting, and vastly complicated by close analyses of contemporary sites and events of violent confrontation, both ‘at home’ and ‘abroad.’ As Christiane Wilke observes, “While the distinction between civilians and combatants is fundamental to international law, it is contested and complicated in practice.”<sup>4</sup> Wilke’s focus is on the figure of the civilian, read not as a pre-existing or fixed entity, but as at once stereotypic and precarious in its deployment as a subject position on the ground. Places (regions of a city or of a countryside), objects (vehicles or devices), and subjects (classified as men, women, or children) all embody ambiguities and uncertainties in their identifications that at once heighten the stakes of accurate discrimination and render it elusive (in the infamous case of ‘collateral murder,’ seeing the difference between a camera and a weapon).<sup>5</sup> Diminishing time frames through the increasing automation of warfare further close the space for deliberation or questioning.<sup>6</sup>

### **The noncoherence of data**

Is it the case, as Matthew Ford proposes, that “one device [the smartphone] conjoins the experience of war whether you are on the battlefield or located on the other side of the world”?<sup>7</sup> Or is the smartphone rather multiple, defined through the location of its user and effecting only partial translations among incommensurate and noisy realities?<sup>8</sup> While

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<sup>3</sup> Ford, “Ukraine, participation and the smartphone at war.”

<sup>4</sup> Wilke, Christiane. “Seeing and Unmaking Civilians in Afghanistan: Visual Technologies and Contested Professional Visions.” *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 42(6) (2017): 1031.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://collateralmurder.wikileaks.org/>; for further discussion see Suchman, Lucy, Follis, Karolina, and Jutta Weber. “Tracking and Targeting: Sociotechnologies of (In)security.” *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 42(6) (2017), 983-1002.

<sup>6</sup> Emery, John. “Probabilities towards death: bugsplat, algorithmic assassinations, and ethical due care.” *Critical Military Studies* (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Ford, “Ukraine, participation and the smartphone at war,” p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> The sense of multiplicity referenced here is developed in Mol, Annemarie and Law, John. “An Introduction” In *Complexities*, edited by John Law and Annemarie Mol. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002; Mol, Annemarie. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham, N.C.: Duke, 2002. On partial translations see Verran, Helen. “Re-imagining land ownership in Australia”. *Postcolonial Studies*, 1(2) (1998), 237-254.

proclaimed ‘the first networked war’,<sup>9</sup> the proliferation of media channels for reporting the war in Ukraine has also produced a fracturing of knowledge about the war’s events. As Ford explains regarding the ‘crowdsourcing’ of intelligence on the ground:

Even though OSINT [Open Source Intelligence] work is trying to verify and fact check images of events, it is not clear whether the battlefield is rendered any more transparent. This is principally because of the challenges of verifying material at the speed, quantity, and scale that it is being posted and the way that disinformation gets layered in with accurate material.<sup>10</sup>

Anxiety over this latest instantiation of the ‘fog of war,’ mediated through a proliferation of information sources, fuels further investment in technologies of data analysis that promise to deliver a coherent synthesis. In the United States Department of Defense and associated agencies this takes the form of a succession of “concepts” and “experiments” in so-called joint all domain command and control (JADC2). With ancestry in the AirLand Battle strategy of the 1980s, these ‘new’ initiatives trade in “familiar enthusiasms for high-tech novelty (surveillance and target-acquisition sensors, cutting-edge weapons platforms).”<sup>11</sup> As summarized in the DoD-oriented publication *Defense One*: “In this vision of future warfare, everything on the battlefield is digitally linked, allowing artificially intelligent decision aides to help commanders find and hit targets.”<sup>12</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Charles Pope promises that “As envisioned, JADC2 will allow US forces from all services – as well as allies and partners – to sense, make sense and act upon a vast array of data and information ... fusing and analysing the data with the help of machine learning and artificial intelligence and providing warfighters with preferred options at speeds not seen before.”<sup>13</sup>

Still in the process of conceptualisation, the plans for JADC2 display a certain strategic vagueness. Ongoing exercises extend efforts at data integration between increasingly hardware and software-laden bodies, vehicles, and command locations, while continuing to be haunted by the demands and resistances of legacy systems and ‘siloes’ US military branches. Particularly problematic for weapon systems based on so-called machine learning is the question of the sources for training data, and their associated translatability and transportability. The problem is evident in questions submitted by prospective vendors regarding the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center’s ‘Data Readiness for AI Development’ Request for Proposals in April 2021, particularly those asking for further specification of data requirements. Written questions referring to specific clauses in the Request include: “This section mentions “data” several times but doesn’t provide detailed specifications. What kind of data (what format, what structure, etc.)? How large is the data? How fast does the data need to be moved? What sources will the pipeline be consuming from (APIs, databases, file systems, etc.)?” Responses take the form of ‘Data labelling should be interpreted as the

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<sup>9</sup> Schmidt, Eric. “The First Networked War: Eric Schmidt’s Ukraine Trip Report.” *Special Competitive Studies Project* (2022), <https://scsp222.substack.com/i/73166266/the-first-networked-war-eric-schmidts-ukraine-trip-report>, accessed 14 April 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Ford, “Ukraine, participation and the smartphone at war,” p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, Grey and Lindemann, Thomas. “Introduction: Worlds of Data.” In *Datawar, special issue of Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS), edited by G. Anderson, T. Lindemann, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Tucker, Patrick. “Will 2021 be the year JADC2 takes off?” *Defense One*, 19 March, 2021. <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/05/will-2021-be-year-jadc2-takes/174099/>, accessed 14 April, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Pope, Charles. “With its promise and performance confirmed, ABMS moves to a new phase.” *US Air Force*, 21 May, 2021. <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2627008/withits-promise-and-performance-confirmed-abms-moves-to-a-new-phase/>, accessed 14 April 2023.

labelling or annotation of data sets for Artificial Intelligence training purposes’, or ‘This level of requirement detail is not available at the Basic Ordering Agreement (BOA) level.’<sup>14</sup>

The problems sighted here are not simply a matter of early stages of system development. Carlo Caduff’s account of the early warning system developed to monitor emergent pandemics might just as well apply to the military imaginary of all-domain command and control’<sup>15</sup>

the vision of a ‘global surveillance network’ and ‘early warning system’ described by experts in reports is often more virtual than real. The network is dispersed, the ties are thin, the surveillance erratic, and the meaning of the ... information uncertain. The network is fragmented and fraught with inconsistencies. It is pictured as a seamless system of surveillance, but this is primarily the network’s own mythology of coherence, logic, and rationality.

The US DoD’s aspiration to “actionable intelligence at speed”<sup>16</sup> presumes transparent mediations and accountable translations from signal to data to information. In dominant military discourses this chain of reference (Latour, 1999) is considered problematic only in terms of its efficiency, rather than as a matter of its onto-epistemic premises. It is here that a growing body of investigative journalism and critical scholarship becomes relevant, posing fundamental questions for the project of automatic data analysis in the service of real-time feeds from ‘sensor to shooter’.<sup>17</sup>

## The manufacture of measurable results

War as a coherent construct is sustained through the discursive practices that give military meaning to its chaotic enactments.<sup>18</sup> Assessments of the ‘effectiveness’ of weapon systems are needed to justify their expanded development and operations. This requirement comprises a through line from the creation of the US Air Force following positive assessments of strategic bombing campaigns in WWII to current exercises in the development of data-driven, ‘sensor to shooter’ infrastructures across the branches of the US military. Mathias Delori<sup>19</sup> directs us to two key constructs designed to enable the rationalisation of war’s immeasurable effects:

- The language of ‘precision’ attributed to targeting practices associated with the rise of air force in the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>14</sup> Joint Artificial Intelligence Center. “Data readiness for artificial intelligence development” (DRAID) services; Basic ordering agreement (BOA) for the joint artificial intelligence center (JAIC), 31 March, 2021. <https://sam.gov/opp/cd81d4e7ed9843bfa4820cae783ea070/view/>, accessed June 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Caduff, Carlo. *The Pandemic Perhaps: Dramatic Events in a Public Culture of Danger*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Deputy Secretary of Defense. “Establishment of an algorithmic warfare cross-functional team (Project Maven)” (2017). <https://dodcio.defense.gov/Portals/0/Documents/Project%20Maven%20DSD%20Memo%2020170425.pdf>, accessed 14 April 2023.

<sup>17</sup> For an elaboration of this argument and examples see Suchman, Lucy. “Imaginaries of omniscience: Automating intelligence in the US Department of Defense.” *Social Studies of Science* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03063127221104938>

<sup>18</sup> Delori, Mathias. “The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs,” p. 17.

- The concept of ‘morale’, which enabled attributions to both war fighters and target populations of collective psychological states that were measurable and manipulable by social science methods.

Delori points to historical evidence for “the weight of industrial and organisational interests on the production of the most important reports” regarding war’s effectiveness.<sup>20</sup> He urges attention to the “epistemological side of the story,”<sup>21</sup> that is, the presuppositions, logics, and imaginaries that inform these analyses. While in the case of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) the results produced by Galbraith and Likert were conflicting, he observes, interested actors were able effectively to amplify the story that supported their interests. Delori’s point is not that one of these reports was unbiased while the other was tainted, but rather that the knowledges articulated in the reports were differently situated. Delori’s commitment to a ‘symmetrical’ analysis does not eschew critical assessment, in other words, but the assessment is framed methodologically in ways that place this story in the longer history of positivism and “the extravaganza of facts and figures”<sup>22</sup> generated with the rise of questionnaire surveys, datafication, and statistical analysis in the social sciences.

In the midst of Delori’s story of the USSBS poet Auden enters as a key witness, one who saw both the destruction wrought on the ground in Germany and the reductions and betrayals involved in the quantification of survey responses. Auden’s critique of the translation of moral concerns regarding civilian bombings to questions of psychosocial ‘morale’ anticipated the latter’s weaponisation as a justification for any actions that would shorten the length of war, however brutal. At a time before the declaration of unjustified civilian killing as illegal, these rhetorical moves had enormous material consequence. As Delori points out, effectiveness is the moral justification for the killing of civilians in these logics, and “the conclusions of the USSBS contributed to the social construction of the belief in the ‘strategic’ effectiveness of bombing civilians, a belief that helped give military meaning to the bombings in Korea and Vietnam.”<sup>23</sup> The unmistakable brutality of those campaigns, along with the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, produced a collective witnessing that challenged those meanings as “the bombing of civilians became the symbol of an inhumane way of waging war.”<sup>24</sup>

The longer history of a commitment to positivism in international relations provides the frame for Thomas Lindemann’s analysis of China’s construction by the United States as an existential threat.<sup>25</sup> The politics of knowledge are at their most explicit here, as are assumptions regarding the self-standing, and self-evident, nature of an objectively existing world ‘out there.’ Lindemann’s more specific interest is in “how positivism reframes or even metamorphoses social reality to construct ‘trends’”.<sup>26</sup> Figurations are key here, as China becomes, in the alarmist discourse of what Lindemann names “positivist misrecognition,” a “homogeneous actor that ‘rises’ and appears to be intent on imposing its will on the world in

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<sup>20</sup> Delori, Mathias. “The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs,” p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Delori, Mathias. “The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs,” p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, Grey and Lindemann, Thomas. “Introduction: Worlds of Data,” p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Delori, Mathias. “The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs,” p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Delori, Mathias. “The positivist, the Keynesian, the poet, and the bombs,” p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Lindemann, Thomas. “Theorising danger or dangerous theories? Positivist data and the making of the China threat.” In *Datawar, 4.2 Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS), edited by G. Anderson, T. Lindemann, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Lindemann, Thomas. “Theorising danger or dangerous theories,” p. 2.

a near future through a long-standing strategic plan.”<sup>27</sup> Whether articulated as willful individuals or abstract forces, the agential actants in positivist theorising, Lindemann argues, over-represent social and political determinacies and place internal heterogeneities, noncoherence, and associated spaces of possibility outside the frame. It is these discursive moves, backed up by quantification, measurement, and their associated reductions, that sow the soil of fearful sociopolitical imaginaries. The latter, in turn, underwrite the necessity of ‘deterrence,’ ‘containment,’ and ‘preemption’ by ‘geopolitical actors’ identified as defenders against the hegemonic ambitions of relevant others.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, and key to these logics, the classificatory profiling required for the production of countable and comparable entities systematically erases the specificities that constitute actually existing persons and collectives.

### **The violence of abstraction**

Sabine Dini<sup>29</sup> tracks the weaponisation of data through the case of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Following its own expansionist ambitions, she argues, the IOM deploys its technologies of quantification to process materials extracted from the life stories of forced migrants to articulate the problem for which the organisation offers a solution. Dini’s focus is on quantification as both a practice and a narrative, specifically in this case the IOM’s translation of migrant lives into statistical variables. The Displacement Tracking Matrix and the Migration Crisis Operational Framework incorporate technologies of surveillance and control in the service of the humanitarian project of ‘migration management.’ Framed as information in support of those on the front lines of assistance (a military metaphor now well entrenched in the sphere of humanitarian aid), the language of migration management shows its close kinship with the aspirational information matrix of military operations. Dini’s analysis suggests that the production of statistics is as much in service of the perpetuation of the IOM as an organisation as of its mission, just as the creation of strategic military imaginaries of data-driven war fighting are in service of the perpetuation of military-commercial alliances invested in new technology as much as or more than saving lives in zones of armed conflict. These initiatives naturalise their problems (e.g., ‘mobility cycles’), and nominalise their solutions (e.g., Displacement Tracking Matrix), as a way of establishing the theatres of their operations.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the efforts of international actors to position enumeration as a pre-requisite to assistance, the relations of counting to care remain contested. Here it is the violence of abstraction, through homogenisation and profiling, that translates persons into fungible, transactable bodies and is the precursor to targeting, whether for military operations or for exclusion from entry. (The connections to military operations are explicit in the case of the IOM’s partnership with the Djibouti national police.) As with the construction of ‘terrorism,’ establishing illegal migration as a problem is the prerequisite to expanding initiatives in migration control. As in all projects of state boundary-making, undocumented mobility is the constitutive outside of territorial ‘integrity’; it is the latter’s exclusionary mandate that places the migrant in the danger to which the IOM is a response.

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<sup>27</sup> Lindemann, Thomas. “Theorising danger or dangerous theories,” p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Lindemann, Thomas. “Theorising danger or dangerous theories,” p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Dini, Sabine. “Migrant Datafication as a ‘Cynegetic War’?” In *Datawar, 4.1 Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS), edited by G. Anderson, T. Lindemann, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Masco, Joseph. *The Theater of Operations: National security from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

## Counter-knowledges

In their Introduction to this special issue, Anderson and Lindemann provide a history that troubles repeated declarations of ‘newness’ and ‘firsts’ in military affairs.<sup>31</sup> Rather than an analytic resource, they suggest, those declarations need to be taken as part of our subject matter, examining what work they are doing to reiterate and maintain the telos of military logics. The same could be said for tropes like ‘information flow,’ amenable to cybernetic renderings while erasing the messy specificities of heterogeneous and differently located communicating bodies. The Introduction’s history underscores the durability of militarism’s commitment to the premise of rationality, in both the strategic justifications for war and its operational command, across counterevidence in practice and associated shifts in strategic doctrine.

How can we assess the significance of new infrastructures of warfighting, while also tracking the lines of continuity that hold the premises of modern warfare in place, not least that war is a rational undertaking subject to command and control? How can the knowledge-making projects of those who challenge the rationality of war and the narratives of command and control that sustain them be amplified, along with those calling for a redistribution of resources to strengthen institutions of negotiation and reparation? Ford underscores the importance of analyses that read across mainstream media, social media, and military information infrastructures, tracking relations and differences between narratives produced by military actors, policy analysts and defense intellectuals on one hand, investigative journalists, and witnesses on the ground on the other. Knowing war in this sense means articulating the limits of knowledge in ways that interrupt the ideologies and imaginaries that sustain war’s legitimacy. As Ford concludes: “The alternative is to overstate our claims, underplay the limitations of what can be known even as we accelerate the violence of war.”<sup>32</sup>

The project of destabilising military logics requires thinking about data-driven analyses in terms of the accountabilities that might warrant or challenge their truth claims, tracing out the genealogies of martial knowledge-making and their associated politics. In her preface to *Frames of War* Judith Butler writes: “The critique of war emerges from the occasions of war, but its aim is to rethink the fragile character of the social bond and to consider what conditions might make violence less possible, lives more equally grievable and, hence, more livable.”<sup>33</sup> Arguably the most crucial resource for the work of interrupting military logics are modes of on-the-ground research and reporting.<sup>34</sup> These are resources through which we might restore non-innocence to knowing war and to the relations that data translations variously capture and betray. Reports from critical practitioners, whistleblowers, and dissenters inside military operations, and investigative journalists and citizen witnesses outside, convey the radical openness of war, foregrounding its injuries, challenging the military’s attempt to make clean demarcations where there are none to be made, and

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<sup>31</sup> Anderson, Grey and Lindemann, Thomas. “Introduction: Worlds of Data.” In *Datawar, 4.1 Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS)

<sup>32</sup> Ford, “Ukraine, participation and the smartphone at war,” p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to valorize front line reporting categorically; as Jennifer Terry points out in her analysis of YouTube videos posted by US soldiers during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, records of war, however unedited, are shot through with war’s cultural/historical frames and deeply implicated in militarism’s reproduction. Terry, Jennifer and Kelly, Reagan. “Killer Entertainments.” *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular*, 3(1) (2007)

demonstrating knowledge-producing practices that do not fit the military's imaginaries of technological oversight.<sup>35</sup> The 'fog of war' on this analysis takes on a different aspect, not as a naturally occurring atmospheric condition, or even the effect of deliberate obfuscation directed by one set of combatants at another, but as war's ineradicable chaos. At the same time, the irremediable uncertainty of war fighting, in its refusal to be contained, holds open the spaces of resistance to militarism's closed-world logics and to the magical thinking of data solutionism.

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<sup>35</sup> See Lindsay, Jon. "Target Practice: Counterterrorism and the Amplification of Data Friction." *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 42(6) (2017), 1061-1099.