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Challenging the Ideological Model of War and Mainstream Journalism?

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the internet in 2003 Iraq war from the perspective of the challenges it poses to the practices and formats of mainstream journalism and to the hegemonic articulations of war. Theoretically centralizing the concept of hegemony (as a network of interlocking but still distinct hegemonies), it positions blogs as alternative media by contrasting them to mainstream journalistic routines in situations of war and the tendency of mainstream media to essentialise the other/the enemy. Three very distinct cases are examined. First, the Iraqi blogger Salam Pax; second, the so-called mil-blogs and third the role of the internet in the distribution and archiving of the Abu Ghraib photographs. In each case, the discourses being produced are analysed in terms of the extent to which they challenge the hegemony of mainstream journalism and of the ideological model of war. While blogs certainly provide an alternative space for the production of different and counter-hegemonic narratives of war, approaching these blogs as inherently alternative and counter-hegemonic is deemed too simplistic. Some blogs re-enforce hegemony, and others are appropriated within the mainstream precisely because of their personalised and distinct narrative. At the same time this appropriation can also lead to hegemony striking back, disciplining the blogosphere or including some and excluding others from the mainstream public space.

"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)

Introduction

Weblogs can be defined in a variety of ways; as alternative 'citizens' journalism, as participatory instruments for citizens/activists to produce their own media content, as spaces for debate and the expression of opinions, and as a social platform to inform friends and family within everyday contexts (Atton, 2004; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Tremayne, 2006; Keren, 2006). This diversity can also be witnessed through the high degree of variety in actual practices within the blogosphere. However, in contrast to the often implicit reference to a new (but online) Habermasian public sphere, the blogosphere is rife with contradictions: between what is being perceived to be public and private, between alternative and mainstream media identities and structures, between the citizen/activist and the media

professional, and between alternative and dominant discourses and ideologies¹. The immense diversity of blogs in the blogosphere, makes that the dichotomies we often construct to make sense of social reality do not necessarily fit so neatly anymore.

Despite this diversity and complexity, blogs are still usually considered to be different from other (mainstream) media at the level of authorship, form, as well as content. Rachel North, a victim of the 2005 London bomb attacks and herself a blogger, illustrates these differences in authorship and content when she defines blogs as *"telling stories of the people, for the people, by the people."* (quoted by Hermida, 2006). The activation of the audience at the level of media production (which includes both the blogging itself and the commenting on other people's blogs) has led authors like MacKinnon (2004: 10) to suggest that the signifier 'audience' needs to be replaced with 'information community', whilst others have preferred to introduce the concept of the 'producer' (e.g. Bruns, 2007). Allan (2002: 127) also includes form-related differences, when he describes blogs as *"personalised journalism"*, characterized by first-hand telling, personal accounts and a two-way communicative process.

Because of this articulation of difference in relation to the mainstream, blogs are often attributed an alternative and counter-hegemonic capacity (Kahn and Kellner, 2004). It is this position that allows us to bring in the theoretical notion of hegemony, however contested this concept (and the related concept of ideology) might be. Following Brooker's claim (2003: 121) that hegemony *"remains a central and productive concept in the study of culture, open to further elaboration and practical work"*, this article explicitly aims to critically use (and enrich) the hegemony concept for the analysis of warblogs.

Firstly, the impossibility of total closure of a hegemonic order must be emphasised. Blogs exist in a discursive and material world, where a societal consensus has been achieved on a range of meanings, practices and discourses (and others remain open and contested). However dominant these hegemonic ways of thinking and acting are, and however necessary they sometimes are to support our social order, they are never all-encompassing and rigid, but always open to resistance and re-articulation (at least in the Gramscian approach to hegemony). As Mouffe (2005: 18) emphasised: *"Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony."*

From this counter-hegemonic perspective blogs can be seen to resist a variety of dominant ways of thinking and acting, within the media system and within society in general. But this raises a new theoretical problem, as the use of the hegemony concept risks generating a totalising dominant reality, where only one all-encompassing hegemony can be distinguished. However, a social order is not

¹ Blogs are also increasingly used as a new marketing and propaganda-tool for elites, (see Deuze, 2005; Cammaerts, 2008) which can be seen as a form of incorporation.

constituted by merely one hegemony, but by a network of articulated hegemonies, that (sometimes) interlock, and mutually enhance and enforce each other. In this article we will focus on two interacting hegemonies, and the ways that blogs offer counter-hegemonic alternatives to these hegemonies (or not). First, there is the hegemony of the mainstream media, at the level of authorship, content and form. Mainstream media – in their organisation and production – build on access control (still restricting access to authorship mainly to media professionals who master the required procedures and practices²), and have a preference for dominant (elite) discourses, representations, formats and genres. Second, as we focus this article on warblogs, we need to add one more hegemonic discourse, which we have termed the ideological model of war. This hegemonic discourse is based on the legitimisation (and even glorification) of violent practices as a means to resolve societal conflicts, thereby transforming political opponents into enemies.

During an actual war the two above-mentioned hegemonies are activated and become intertwined. First, war is the site where hegemonic mainstream media practices become highly visible (see Carruthers, 2000: 13 and Williams, 1992: 158), 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. 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 the second hegemonic level: the ideological model of war, that becomes almost inescapable for media organisations and media professionals at times of war, and which merits our detailed attention first.

War and the ideological model of war

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, and generating an ideological model of war. Following Galtung and his colleagues (Galtung, 1998; Galtung, 2000; McGoldrick & Lynch, 2000; 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,

² Of course, so-called citizen journalism has been used to bring non-professional voices within the mainstream media, but non-professionals' capacity for authorship remains nevertheless highly restricted.

civilised/barbaric, organised/chaotic, superior to technology/part of technology, human/animal-machine, united/fragmented, heroic/cowardice and determined/insecure. These oppositions play a key role in the hegemonic war project, which attempts to fix their meanings. Both sides claim to be rational and civilised, 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. In this process not only the radical otherness of the enemy is emphasised, but the enemy is also considered to be a threat to 'our own' identity (see also Carpentier, 2007).

States at war tend to use propaganda to hegemonise this ideological model of war that constructs the other as an enemy and as evil, which legitimates its destruction. Both military and political spokespersons will ideologically frame all military actions as good and necessary, for instance by referring to the need to safeguard the territory (e.g. from terrorism), to free another country's people from a ruthless dictator or to protect world peace. One of the major targets of the state's propaganda efforts are the mainstream media and a wide range of information management techniques have been developed in order to influence the (news) media's output.

In many cases the ideological model of war is simply too difficult to escape. As these discourses on the enemy and the self have been hegemonised and turned into common sense, they also become the interpretative frameworks of media professionals. Taking Westerståhl's (1983) approach on objectivity³ as a starting point, this ideological privileging of a specific interpretative framework strongly affects the construction of factuality and impartiality, and directly impacts on journalistic practices. In other words: what is to be defined as relevant and truthful, what fits within the balancing operation, and what is considered relevant enough to become represented in the media, is contingent upon the ideological model of war.

Moreover, journalistic procedures and rituals (Tuchman, 1972) increase the discursive weight of this ideological model. The mainstream media for instance attribute high relevance to the narration of war, supported by a continuous flow of images. These narrations are combined with the mainstream media's focus on elite sources. During periods of war this frequently provides the political and military leadership (and their discourses) unmediated access to the media, for instance through live and uninterrupted broadcasts of speeches-to-the-nation and press conferences. This focus is further complemented by the contextualisation of war by military experts, often-retired military or academics that comment upon the military strategies under development. And apart from the workings of the ideological frameworks

³ Westerståhl's model distinguishes between factuality and impartiality. Factuality has two components: relevance and truth(fullness). Impartiality also has two components: balance and neutrality.

discussed above, the procedures and rituals that try to guarantee the factuality of the media output (source diversity, and check and double check) often fail during periods of war due to temporal and spatial constraints. Moreover, access to information is often scarce and dangerous to obtain. In many cases this problem has led to speculation and misinformation, fed by assumptions based on the ideological model. A good example of this was the issue of the existence of WMD during the 2003 Iraqi War.

In summary, the mainstream media's war coverage often contains two different hegemonies. 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. All these practices remain firmly embedded with 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 sanitised narration of war, that allow 'ordinary people' to speak, and that deconstruct the traditional dichotomies of the ideological model of war.

Alternative voices

Although the processes described above often characterise the mainstream media output, care should be taken not to homogenise the diversity of media organisations, practices and outputs. In a number of cases mainstream media have managed to produce counter-hegemonic discourses and provided spaces for critical debate, in-depth analysis and humour. 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 model⁴, by giving a face to Iraqi victims or by paying attention to the strong European and the less strong US popular resistance against the war (see also Couldry and Downey, 2004).

Nevertheless, because of the mechanisms and characteristics of mainstream media war reporting described above and the sensitive, emotional nature of an armed conflict, alternative media organisations and communication channels are more apt at offering counter-hegemonic discourses and identities. These threaten the mainstream media's double hegemony, situated at the level of the hegemonic ways of covering war on the one hand, and at the level of the hegemonic ideological model of war itself on the other hand.

⁴ 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*'.

Blogging is seen as one of the sites where these hegemonies are disrupted or at least challenged. Maher (2006: 4) for instance notes that war-time blogging, among others, points to *"the possibility that the blogosphere may be an emerging alternative to the mass media as a source of news and a site for political action"*. Stanyer (2006: 405) states that blogs *"offer an unmanaged space for attitude expression that is not controlled by gatekeepers of various kinds"*, thereby relating to the lack of gatekeepers and control mechanisms to express opinions in public spaces.

At the same time there is an unwarranted optimism embedded in such remarks, as the relationship between blogs and the network of articulated hegemonies is highly complex and above all unstable. Firstly, these blogs do not always face both hegemonies head on, but often negotiate a critical position in relation to these two dominant positions. Secondly, they tend to change over time, as these alternative voices sometimes become incorporated by the mainstream. To illustrate this complex relationship between blogs, (counter-)hegemony and compliance, three cases, with very different relations to the network of articulated hegemonies, were selected⁵. This selection is based on the matrix in Table 1, where (despite the many nuances) in one case study both hegemonies are disrupted, in another case only one hegemony is disrupted, and in the third case none of these hegemonies are (initially) disrupted. These three cases were carefully selected based on their prominence in academic and societal debates, in order to reflect and illustrate the complexity of the unstable dialectic between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. As such they will be analysed in relation to their capacities or incapacities to destabilise the above mentioned hegemonies – the hegemony of mainstream media routines, forms and content and the hegemony of war, constructing a righteous self, an enemy, legitimate to destroy and a victim to be saved. The first case, the blogger Salam Pax, shows how a blog can resist both hegemonies, by launching a more alternative and personalised account into the public space which at the same time contrasted with the traditional images of cheering Iraqis. The second case, of the so-called military-blogs, illustrates how blogs can resist mainstream (hegemonic) formats by offering narrations of eye-witness accounts but include both hegemonic pro-war positions, and counter-hegemonic anti-war positions (see also Wall, 2006). At the same time, all mil-bloggers have to negotiate a complex (and unequal) relationship with the military command structure. A third case, the Abu Ghraib pictures, disrupts the clear-cut difference between mainstream and alternative media even more. This case stresses the importance of hegemonic mainstream media (and journalism) to uncover pictures hidden in 'alternative' interpersonal on-line networks. At the same time these pictures can be seen as extreme versions of the ideological model of

⁵ These cases were also used in an analysis of participatory journalism (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2005).

war. In relation to the mainstream media hegemony and the ideological model of war, the three case studies can be situated as follows:

Table 1: Overview of the three case studies

		Relation to the mainstream media hegemony	Relation to the hegemony of the ideological model of war
Salam Pax		Personal narrations but being incorporated in the mainstream media space	Disrupting dichotomies
Mil-bloggers	*A Day in Iraq *My War: killing time in Iraq *American Citizen Soldier	Personal narrations (but restricted by censorship)	Disrupting dichotomies (but restricted by censorship) Normalising dichotomies (but restricted by censorship)
Abu Ghraib		Covered in 'alternative' (personal) internet-supported networks; uncovered by mainstream media	Production of photos based on ultra-hegemony; societal reactions became counter-hegemonic

This case study analysis of the discourses being produced through blogs, both textual and visual, was guided by two main sets of questions. 1) To which extent do these discourses disrupt the hegemony of (the ideological model of) war and the hegemony of mainstream journalism? In which cases do these discourses align themselves with these interacting hegemonies?; and 2) What is the reaction of mainstream media to the counter-hegemonic challenges of their own identity and of the disruptions to the pervasive ideological model of war?

Salam Pax: disrupting the hegemonic definition of 'the Other'

The Salam Pax blog is an illustration of the ability of bloggers to disrupt both hegemonies. Salam Pax, known as the Baghdad Blogger⁶, 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 the suppressed gay community in Iraq (Melzer, 2005). He started a blog to keep in touch with his friend Raed who left for Jordan to study. Although the Baghdad blogger is not an average Iraqi, he did provide, during and in the aftermath of the invasion, a critical counter-weight to mainstream war reporting. As Allan

⁶ See URL: http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/ and his new blog: <http://justzipit.blogspot.com/>

(2006: 110) points out, Salam Pax provided *"a stronger sense of immediacy, an emotional feel for life on the ground, than more traditional news sites"*.

Blogging – as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) – is strongly based on the narration of the self; they *"express personal fear, insecurity, and disillusionment, [which are] anxieties looking for partners in crime"* (Lovink, 2007). Through this personalised narration, the blogger offers his readers a counter-hegemonic format. But, as some of the excerpts below illustrate, this personalised narrative of war – from inside Iraq – also contradicts the prevailing good-evil dichotomy that classifies Iraqi either as victims of the dictatorship that welcome the American army as liberators, or as supporters of the Iraqi regime. Through his lived experience of being under fire, his claim that *"the American government is getting as many curses as the Iraq"* (Salam Pax, 30/03/2003⁷) critiques the very heart of the hegemonic western ideological model of war. Also, his auto-biographical account, the use of 'I' was crucial in establishing trustworthiness and authenticity among an ever increasing audience. As Whitlock (2007: 25) notes:

Pax is a sign of what happens when testimony – the act of bearing witness to an event, of providing or establishing evidence before an actual or projected audience – moves into cyberspace and goes to war.

As the excerpts below show, Salam Pax is highly critical of the mainstream media and its practices he considers cynical, 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 an expert, an independent observer and a citizen journalist. His private experiences, grounded in his cultural expertise, were communicated directly, without the mediation of professional journalists. In doing so, he generated an alternative media practice that created exceptional insights and bypassed the professional journalistic culture of detachment. Through his inside reporting he also laid bare the unavoidable artificiality of the outside reporting of most western journalists that were struggling with getting physical and cultural access. The artificiality of the presence of mainstream journalists is also illustrated by the discussion of the two female journalists about moving from Baghdad to Pyongyang: journalists come, report and move on to the next conflict. In contrast, Salam Pax lives in Baghdad.

⁷ See URL: http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/2003_05_01_dear_raed_archive.html (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

Selected excerpts from Salam Pax's blog⁸

Excerpt Posting 24/03/2003:

Last night's bombardment was very different from the nights before. It wasn't only heavier but the sound of the bombs was different. The booms and bangs are much louder; you would hear one big bang and then followed by a number of these rumbles that would shake everything. And there are of course the series of deep dob-dob-dobs from the explosions farther away.

Excerpt Posting 30/03/2003:

If we had a mood barometer in the house it would read "to hell with saddam and may he quickly be joined by bush". No one feels like they should welcome the American army. The American government is getting as many curses as the Iraqi.

Excerpt Posting 23/04/2003:

A conversation overheard by G. while in the Meridian Hotel – the Iraqi media center :

Female journalist 1: *oh honey how are you? I haven't seen you for ages.*

Female journalist 2: *I think the last time was in Kabul.*

Bla bla bla

Bla bla bla

Female journalist 1: *have to run now, see you in Pyongyang then, eh?*

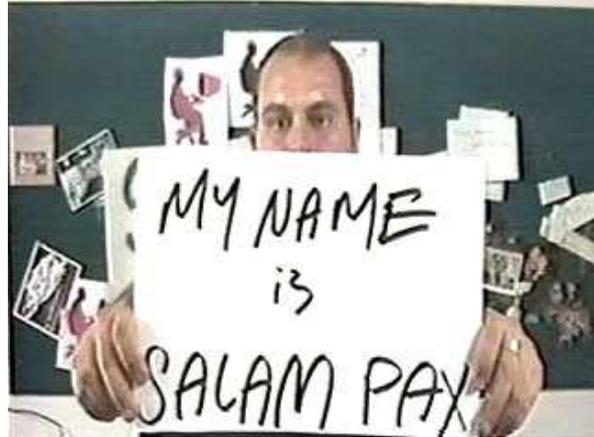
Female journalist 2: *absolutely.*

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.

As Hebdige already argued in 1979, resistance against dominant structures and cultures always risks incorporation. In the Salam Pax case, even during the invasion and immediately after it, several newspapers in Europe and the US started to re-print excerpts of his blog. Not surprisingly – being the living evidence of the ideological complexity of the position of the Iraqi citizen – doubts about his authenticity also started emerging within the blogosphere. Countering these doubts about his authenticity and thereby re-establishing his credibility (Kahney, 2003), Peter Maass of the New York Times Magazine and Rory McCarthy, a journalist for The Guardian, managed to track down Salam Pax in Baghdad in May 2003 (Maass, 2003; McCarthy, 2003). The UK newspaper The Guardian also offered him a platform in their newspaper, thereby co-opting and/or propelling him in the mainstream public space as a valuable and trustworthy source of alternative information. His blog-writings were also published in book form

⁸ See URL: http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/2003_05_01_dear_raed_archive.html (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

(Salam Pax, 2003). Furthermore, Salam Pax produced a series of documentaries for Guardian Films (Salam Pax, 2005).



Source: Guardian Films

Salam Pax thus evolved from being a concerned Iraqi citizen blogger into a foreign (war) correspondent, filmmaker and author. In doing so he was incorporated by the mainstream media, which unavoidably recontextualised his writings. However, he did not lose his alternative voice, critiquing the ideological model of war. From a different angle, this also shows the capacity of (some segments of) mainstream media to carry alternative voices and provide a forum for dissident discourses.

Mil-blogs: rendering the private self visible

Besides Iraqi citizens, also US military personal and their families increasingly use blogs to connect the front with the home front and vice versa⁹, 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. These published private experiences – rendering the private public and above all visible for a potentially global audience – again contradict (and implicitly critique) the mainstream media's focus on the abstract narration of war that leaves little space for the concrete narrations of the lives and experiences of individual soldiers (and Iraqi's). Similarly, the publicness and visibility of these ordinary soldiers taking the floor contradicts the mainstream media's focus on expert knowledge and elite representation. In this sense, these blogs are again alternatives to the mainstream media's way of

⁹ To witness the popularity of the internet amongst soldiers and their families, it suffices to visit portal-sites such as <http://www.military.com/blogs> or <http://www.milblogging.com/>, providing a gateway to a diversity of military related weblogs.

covering war. It is well-reported that the journalistic routines inherent to mainstream media in combination with a war situation often limits a journalist's capability to freely 'report' on a fully fledged armed conflict, and this was certainly also the case during the second Iraqi war. As a result of these limitations, Rosengarten (2007: 1297) asserts that "*men and women serving in the combat zone may be the only people adequately positioned to relay accurate information to the American public*", thereby also defending the right of expression and free speech for military personnel.

However, it also has to be noted that many of the milblogs simultaneously re-enforce the hegemonic discourse of war, reverting to the classic dichotomies that characterise the Western ideological model of war. In fact, the most popular warblogs appear to be foremost pro-war blogs (Rosengarten, 2007: 1320). Such blogs do not per se challenge the "*mainstream political positions*" (Couldry, 2002: 25), but rather the symbolic media power of the mainstream journalist, as an "*authorized truth-teller*" (McNair, 1998: 65). An example of such a hegemonic mil-blog is that of Buck Sargent¹⁰, an infantry officer who presents 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. Commenting on the death of Army Specialist Casey Sheehan and seven colleagues in Sadr City in April 2004, and indeed on every casualty in war, he wrote:

They died for a set of ideals, principles, a creed. Imaginary concepts impossible to "deconstruct," yet born out of war and nourished by the blood of patriots in a long line of succession that remains unmoved, unbroken, and unmatched. Displaying the best known side of human nature: steadfast opposition to its worst. Becoming intimate with war, thus allowing others to know peace. (American Citizen Soldier, 23/03/2006¹¹)

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 information¹².

¹⁰ See URL: <http://americancitizensoldier.blogspot.com/>

¹¹ See URL: <http://americancitizensoldier.blogspot.com/2006/03/what-casey-sheehan-died-for.html> (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

¹² Disturbing in this regard (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 to protest against or to question the legitimacy of the Iraqi war as such. 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/>).

Challenging the hegemonic model of war can be done in two ways: explicit, as in blogs by critical veterans or family members of soldiers, or implicit, as the blog *A Day in Iraq* shows. It is written by a US-infantry soldier called Michael, who describes the everyday life of a soldier. He writes about the emotional stress, but also on the sheer banality and boredom of war. As the excerpt from *A Day in Iraq* below illustrates, this blog contradicts the heroisation of American soldiers in Iraq by narrating the ordinariness of their activities:

The Horror. I can hear Marlon Brando repeating those words in Apocalypse Now. There is no horror here, not now anyway. We even make fun of the horror, imitating Brando's voice when making light of a somewhat harrowing mission. You get back from a mission and someone asks you how it went. "Oh, the horror," we reply, which is a clear indication that there was anything but any horror involved. "The horror," would be a more accurate description of a four hour guard shift. How we dread the time we have to spend on force protection. It kills you from the inside out, eating away at you like a cancer. (A Day in Iraq, 11/06/2005¹³)

Another example of a similarly critical blog by a US soldier is *My War: killing time in Iraq* written by Spc. Colby Buzzell, who was based in Mosul. His blog had a daily hit-rate of 10.000 in September 2004 (Cooper, 2004), and the print edition (Buzzell, 2005) won the 2007 Lulu Blooker Prize. This blog also emphasised the personal storytelling and the straightforward expression of the raw experience of war. This is what arguably made *My War* a popular blog with a large audience. His readers also extensively used the interactive potentialities of the internet to engage with his writings, thereby further reducing the old dichotomy between the 'passive' audience and those producing content (Livingstone, 2004). This transformation of the reader into the writer (see Atton, 2002: 103) is also distinctive from the formats and practices in mainstream media.

The case of Buzzell is, however, also relevant because it illustrates the collision with one of the main protectors of the ideological model of war: the military command structure. More specifically, the popularity of Buzzell's blog attracted the attention of the Pentagon censors (Cooper, 2004; Rosengarten, 2006). As his blog was said to jeopardise the security of his unit, he was ordered to remove two postings from his archive and to have his contributions screened by his superiors before posting them. Although Buzzell was not ordered to stop blogging entirely, revealing the relative tolerance from his superiors for his blog-activities, the intervention of the military establishment did result in silencing him (at least online). It

¹³ See URL: <http://adayiniraq.blogspot.com/2005/06/horror.html> (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

also has to be noted that this initial tolerant position of the Pentagon towards milblogs, has in the mean time shifted to a more restrictive mood regarding internet-use by soldiers (see DoD, 2007).

Soldiers are now required to reveal their identity to their chains of command, losing the right to post anonymously. A commander in the field has received more powers to screen and judge material before it is posted and to take disciplinary action if posts have been made without prior consent. Access from the battlefield to several web sites, among (many) others YouTube and MySpace, has been blocked. Furthermore, *"anything that transpires within the Ministry of Defense computer system is subject to monitoring, including e-mail"* (Rosengarten, 2006: 1314). The sudden explosion of milblogs during the second Iraqi war took the Pentagon by surprise and revealed once again the tensions between on the one hand basic liberal civic rights such as the freedom of speech and the rights of citizens to be informed correctly and on the other hand operational security, the culture of secrecy of the military and their attempts to control information provision in a top-down and PR-driven way.

However, because of its design and nature, the internet is not so easy to control. For instance, the first censored postings of Spc Buzzell emerged on other blogs mirroring the content and thereby bypassing the attempts to remove them from the public space. Esquire Magazine also published the censored postings in print. The excerpt from Colby Buzzell's censored posting 'Men in Black', rendered below, again shows the counter-hegemonic strength of these blogs. It shows the irrationality and indiscriminateness of war, which contradicts the image of the (American) heroic soldier that is always in full control and does not 'shoot everything' that - accidentally or not - is in the area.

Bullets were pinging off our armor all over our vehicle, and you could hear multiple RPG's being fired and flying through the air and impacting all around us. All sorts of crazy insane Hollywood explosions bullshit going on all around us. I've never felt fear like this. I was like, this is it, I'm going to die. I cannot put into words how scared I was. The vehicle in front of us got hit 3 times by RPG's. I kind of lost it and I was yelling and screaming all sorts of things. (mostly cuss words) I fired the .50 cal over the place, shooting everything. (My War: Killing Time in Iraq, 05/08/2004¹⁴)

It would nevertheless be too reductive to frame the anxiety of the military authorities and attempts to control mil-bloggers in a top-down approach to hegemony. The generation of a negotiated consensus plays a key role in the Gramscian (1988) meaning of hegemony. In Colby Buzzell's case – and many other mil-bloggers - we can find a clear acceptance of some of the elements of the military discourses that

¹⁴ Originally posted on: <http://cbftw.blogspot.com>, removed by the author, but mirrored on: <http://perspective-seeker.blogspot.com/2004/09/my-war-fear-and-loathing-in-iraq.html> (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

support and protect the ideological model of war. Buck Sargent's Blog, for instance, explicitly states that "*Opsec [Operational security] will be strictly observed in all submissions*", exposing the internalisation of control.

Nevertheless, resistance is never far away. If we approach power and control as productive processes, resistance is unavoidably a constitutive part of the dynamic interplay between the enabling and restrictive features of power. Productive power also manifests itself in the inability of hegemonies to completely fixate the social and the political, practices of resistance can unsettle these hegemonies, but hegemony can also strike back. While the military establishment intervened to protect the purity of the ideological model of war, it could not prevent these counter-hegemonic discourses to permeate into the mainstream public space. At the same time, the Pentagon has managed to silence quite a number of milbloggers.

The Abu-Ghraib Pictures: falling on the wrong side of the hegemonic divide

In the course of 2003 several accounts of prisoner abuse and practices of torture started emerging, which were largely ignored, certainly in the US. As early as June 2003, one month after Bush declared 'mission accomplished' on board of the USS Abraham Lincoln, Amnesty International (2003) already condemned the US government for its treatment of prisoners in Iraq. Mid-October 2003 the International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed to visit the prison and reported several serious forms of "ill-treatment" (ICRC, 2004: 13).

Also some US-military personnel provided witness-accounts of incidents of torture. One such example is Sgt. Frank "Greg" Ford, a counter-intelligence agent, who after reporting several incidents of what he described as being war crimes to his superiors, was repatriated for medical reasons and honourably discharged from the army (DeBatto, 2004). It was, however, another soldier, who initiated a number of investigations regarding the misconduct of military investigators and prison guards at Abu Ghraib. 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). This eventually resulted in the internally produced Taguba report (2004), exposing the abuses in the Abu Ghraib prison.

The Abu Ghraib torture photographs were acts of self-representation, as well as what Slewinski (2006: 91) calls "*sadistic souvenirs of torture*". The soldiers present at and involved in these acts of torture used digital cameras to document their 'everyday lifes' in the Abu Ghraib prison, with the explicit intent to share them amongst a nano-audience of colleagues, friends, family and other members of their social networks.

They were souvenirs of the 'good times' the makers had in Iraq¹⁵. 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: np) made the analogy with so-called lynching photo's taken in 1880s-1930s, "*which show Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree. 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 violent-sexual nature of many of the abusive photo's, which the late Baudrillard (2006) qualified as 'war porn' (see also Hall, 2007), shows the psychology of shame and bio-politics (Foucault, 1975) in its rawest form. The prisoner is reduced to what Agamben (1988) calls *homo sacer*, whose life is without value, dispensable with impunity. Here again we find the ideological model of war at work. The evilness of the enemy legitimises the dehumanisation of the enemy. In warfare, this logic is used to justify the killing of the enemy, 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.



Source: photo made by Cpl. Charles A. Graner Jr, see Salon.com¹⁶

However, it was not until April 2004, when Seymour Hersh reported in *The New Yorker* on the ongoing internal investigations and published some of the photographs (Hersh, 2004), and when CBS aired a

¹⁵ This also points to the increasing ubiquity of digital cameras (see Kellner, 2004).

¹⁶ See URL: http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/chapter_5/7.html (Retrieved on 20 December 2008).

documentary on the photographs, that the Abu Ghraib scandal really gained its momentum. More and more mainstream media printed and broadcasted pictures of misbehaving soldiers, leaked to the media from within the Pentagon. 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 sordid spectacle of global proportions, leading Kellner (2004) to consider it "*one of the most intense media spectacles in contemporary history*". It was the investigative journalism of the mainstream media that allowed them to be the catalysing actor through which the photographs were tilted from the private into the public domain. Bennett et al. (2006: 468) claim that the Abu Ghraib scandal became "*big news because digital cameras in the hands of military personnel enabled the press to build a story that was largely buried behind Pentagon walls before the photos emerged*". Here, the 'alternative' internet was first used to restrict the circulation of these pictures, by keeping these trophies inside the social networks of the perpetrators, and outside the control of the state and military. Later, but only after the mainstream media made these pictures public, photo-blogs would mirror, copy and paste these pictures on many other websites, thereby acting as a living and permanent memory¹⁷.

The publicness generated by the mainstream media also changed the nature of the Abu Ghraib pictures from trophies into legal evidence. As the torturers transcended the cultural norms of warfare, taking the dehumanisation of the enemy to the extreme and moreover deriving pleasure from it, they became a threat for articulation of the American self as 'good'. Here, these pictures, produced by the workings of the hegemonic model of war, became symbolic weapons that were turned against this model and became supportive of a more critical and alternative approach towards the war. 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). Although this reaction rescued the ideological model, it has nevertheless allowed this model to be fundamentally questioned, as is witnessed by Zimbardo's comments on the Abu Ghraib scandal:

It's not the bad apples, it's the bad barrels that corrupt good people. Understanding the abuses at this Iraqi prison starts with an analysis of both the situational and systematic forces operating

¹⁷ 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. Salon.com also archived all the Abu Ghraib photo's. Also wikipedia has archived the Abu Ghraib photo's on: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_prisoner_abuse_reports/Gallery

on those soldiers working the night shift in that 'little shop of horrors'. (Zimbardo, quoted in Brockman, 2005)

However, while (part of the) mainstream media is responsible for breaking the story and exposing the photographs, thereby reacting on leaked documents and visual material that were restricted to the military, at the same time the hegemony of war, as well as of mainstream media routines and forms resurfaced when reporting on the aftermath of the scandal. Bennett et al. (2006) convincingly argue that most influential opinion-makers and newspapers in the US shied away from adopting a torture-frame when reporting on the Abu Ghraib scandal, but instead bought into the Bush's administration frame of abuse by a limited number of bad apples. Questioning the media's independence, Bennett, et al (2006: 482) conclude that despite all the visual- and document-based evidence and NGO-outcry, the US's *"leading media proved unable or unwilling to construct a coherent challenge to the administration's claims about its policies on torturing detainees"*, thereby re-asserting both hegemonies under discussion.

Conclusion

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 (partially) bypassing mechanisms of control imposed by either the state or the military, and generating alternative discourses, as well as alternative channels of communication to distribute these. The public spaces opened-up by blogs potentially enable ordinary citizens, regular army personnel, as well as families of servicemen to produce not only a personalised account of their particular experiences of war, but also to challenge the hegemonic ideological model of war and at times also the dichotomous discourses of 'we' versus the 'other'.

Many blogs disrupt the hegemonic practices of the mainstream media, and their almost exclusive focus on rational narratives, the warring elites and the semi-military experts. Through individual accounts and ordinary everyday experiences, these blogs offer us alternative ways of reporting war that are embedded in daily life and that potentially offer us insights that the detached accounts of (professional) journalists can never provide us with. These alternative ways of reporting show that ordinary people can also perform expert roles and communicate valuable knowledge, and that these subjective experiences can be factual, relevant, truthful and authentic. From this perspective bloggers are not that different from what we expect from professional journalists, but they rather complement these more traditional forms of journalism. This

of course does not discredit professional journalism: the Abu Ghraib case illustrates that mainstream journalism still remains an important truth-finding and exposing system.

At the same time though the three case studies show us that these alternative channels of communications and these alternative discourses are less straightforward than often assumed. Situated in the extreme context of war, these case studies show that a rigid separation between alternative and mainstream, the distinction between the public and the private, and the assumed univocal inter-relationship between mainstream and hegemony is difficult to sustain. There are clearly different hegemonies at work at different societal levels. The hegemony of a dichotomous ideological model of war turns out to be (in theory, but also in practice) very different from the hegemony of professional journalistic practices within the mainstream media, although these hegemonies can sometimes strengthen each other. Similarly, the counter-hegemonic reactions to these hegemonies can be very different – even potentially contradictory, but in some cases acts and practices of resistance can also strengthen each other. The Salam Pax blog is a good example of a blog that juxtaposes more personalised narrations to the mainstream media formats and practices, and that simultaneously resists the ideological model of war. But in other cases the use of alternative (personalised) formats does not lead to alternative content. In these cases the counter-hegemonic media practice is combined with content production that fits quite nicely within the ideological model of war (often used by mainstream media). Cases in point are the patriotic mil-blogs that combine the personalised and interactive with the jingoistic. These blogs show that the alternative and hegemonic can go together, albeit at different societal-discursive levels. Also the Abu Graib cases shows that 'alternative' media can actually be used to keep ultra-hegemonic images underground, merely having them circulate within social micro-publics.

These hegemonies (and counter-hegemonies) are, however, never completely stable in time. Some of the more critical, alternative, potentially counter-hegemonic bloggers have been partially incorporated by the mainstream media. It is in this regard telling that two of the bloggers (Salam Pax and Colby Buzzell) featured here became authors and published their blog in book format. Bloggers are welcomed in the professional hegemony of the mainstream media and they are portrayed by mainstream media as the new 'authentic' truth-tellers. Their work is considered to be important – even by the mainstream media – precisely because their personalised and experience-based accounts cannot be provided by the professional journalists, which are severely restricted by the ideology of professional journalism and the constraints placed upon them by the military establishment (Rosengarten, 2006). At the same time their work is recontextualised by their entry into the mainstream media spaces, and at least some of their alternativeness is lost because of that. This dynamic between the alternative sphere and the mainstream, that is apparent in every sub-case, can also be interpreted as co-optive strategies from the part of the

mainstream media. In effect 'critical' voices, that had already proven to have a wide and dedicated audience online, are appropriated to cater for an increasingly (defined as) critical citizenry.

And here, mainstream media still manage to maintain control in their territories. For instance, it has to be noted that not all Iraqi, nor all military bloggers, were granted the same level of exposure. Here too, hegemonic journalistic routines and codes influence the choice of which bloggers are 'selected'. Quality of writing, critical perspectives, independent views and also the ability to provide a personalised account that is relevant to a wider (Western) audience, are still relevant. This would explain why Spc. Buzzell got a high exposure and other mil-bloggers not or much less. Along the same line, we could ask why it is that so much attention was focussed on Salam Pax and not or much less on other Iraqi bloggers (such as Riverbend¹⁸, a female blogger) or on more fundamentalist bloggers.

At the same time, these incorporations also affect the mainstream media that "receive" them. In this regard, the mainstream media cannot be articulated as a singular or as a necessarily subservient actor to state propaganda and -control. Moreover, they did provide access to a selected number of counter-hegemonic voices (like Salam Pax) and/or their blogs were referred to in mainstream online, print or broadcasting media, which resulted in a broader distribution of alternative discourses through the mainstream media. Through their presence, these alternative voices - with their alternative practices and journalisms - entered and 'contaminated' the professional journalistic cultures of the mainstream media. To use one of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts: these blogs deterritorialised (by their mere presence) the rigidities of the hegemonic journalistic professional model. By bringing in these more personalised voices, the often taken-for-granted voices of the traditional journalistic experts was at least complemented by other - alternative - voices.

In some cases the (initial and symbolic) negotiation between hegemonic and alternative voices - both at the level of (journalistic) practices and at the level of the ideologies of war - can result in the development of fierce counter-strategies. While the Abu Ghraib pictures represent the loss of control over the communicative process by the US-government, initiated by whistleblowers from within the military, re-establishing control was very much an issue when it came to the mil-blogs, as well as to limiting the damage of the Abu Ghraib torture pictures after the initial story broke.

Besides overtly censoring blog-posts, more subtle (self-)disciplining techniques are also at play, often seen as common sense in view of not breaching operational security. These relatively successful attempts by the Pentagon to discipline the military blogosphere shows that the claims of the internet providing anonymity and holding the potential to totally bypass the state or military are (at least sometimes) over-

¹⁸ See URL: <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>

stated. In the Abu Ghraib case, the mainstream media eventually followed the US governments' frame in refusing the torture frame. In other words, hegemony can sometimes still strike back, with a vengeance.

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