Drones vs. Snowball Fights: The Contested Battlegrounds of Information Warfare

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When, in September 2014, a US-Arab coalition bombed positions of IS fighters in Syria, the U.S. Central Command published videos from their operation. They were taken from the fighter planes and showed how targets were destroyed directly and in a seemingly limited fashion. The effect of the pictures is twofold: it makes the audience feel close to the action and distances this action from the audience at the same time with its blurry, black-and-white imagery. This kind of footage is familiar to viewers, known in its course-grained style from the capture of Bin Laden or the rescue of Nicholas Brody in *Homeland*, from the air over Syria, or, in Season 9 of *24*, Greater London. It is part of actual news and their fictional variations, and it is this doubling of reality that has been explicitly aimed for by military and politicians in the so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA) (s. DerDerian 2001; Bronfen 2012).

The ability to make and record videos from fighter cockpits and bombs was first used in the Second Gulf War of 1991. A video that best captures the essence of the new type of war was launched by NATO in April 1999. It shows the crosshairs of a fighter plane browsing over the countryside. A church becomes visible, with a radar facility next to it. What happens now might not have been expected: the plane twists off and aborts its mission. Published during the intervention in Kosovo, this video was available on the NATO websites even many years after the end of the war (NATO 2012, 'NATO Radar next to Church'). Its message is clear: NATO is leading a military mission and avoids collateral damage wherever possible. It further conveys: NATO finds the enemy's equipment, but it will not be provoked into causing collateral damage where it can be avoided. It also does not allow for the war to carry religious implications. NATO, in a nutshell, is not letting itself getting sucked into a messy fight, it stays morally superior.

Quite obviously, in the videos that are published by the military, operations go smoothly and as planned. Indeed, the well-known videos of civilians being targeted in Afghanistan or Iraq were leaked. If we compare the early videos of 1991 or 1999 with those from the 2003 Iraq War, or the satellite images from Syria and Iraq in the fight against IS, as well as to the recent fictional accounts, the differences are obvious: there is an absence of people in the early cases, part of a noticeable attempt to show 'clean' wars in order to step up credibility. People are visible in later examples, which now do not function just as easily to underline moral superiority.

In the face of an asymmetry on the battlefield, the militarily weaker sides tend to present the war from a completely different angle. They aim to produce pictures of bombed houses, of collateral damages, of dead and wounded in order to make them the moral winners in a fight that they otherwise would not be able to win. Given the diversification of media actors, outlets, and consumption, it is now much easier to spread alternative messages of the 'real war' than it had been in the early 1990s. Nathan Roger has argued that the military still sees the media as it did during the Second Gulf War, while it has in fact changed dramatically (2013, p. 31). The media landscape is not the topic of the article at hand, and it can also only explain parts of what has changed.

In the early 1990s, war had become 'virtual' in many ways. A 'real war' was led off camera; the 'war' on camera did not show casualties or sometimes even enemies. What is more, it depicted a war that did not seem to entail considerable threats for large, high-tech armies. The US-led coalition was proud to only have suffered a few casualties in the Second Gulf War, just as NATO was in the Kosovo-intervention with not even one war-inflicted fatality on their side. These facts added to what it meant to lead a 'vitual war' in the sense that the risks for a country

to send their troops into a war – and of politicians to declare one – suddenly shrunk. This situation was fostered with the development of drone warfare, [1] while the idea of a fight man-against-man was ultimately suspended (s. Luttwak 1995, p. 109-122). Famously, Jean Baudrillard (1991) argued that the Second Gulf War had not taken place, since the war itself had not been on the screens. The at-times high-flying and abstract theories of Baudrillard and Paul Virilio (1993) were subsequently turned into theories of 'virtual' and 'virtuous war' that had a big impact including in International Relations and Political Science. [2] The question of asymmetry in warfare was also discussed in a philosophical string of the debate, with Judith Butler (2010) expounding the differentiation between 'grievable' and 'ungrievable lives'. Arguably, the 'zero-death-strategy' may have worked on the side of NATO during the Kosovo-intervention, for example, but it did not on the side of the Serbian army or the people on the ground of former Yugoslavia.

I have elaborated elsewhere on the function of the Vietnam War for conducting and reporting wars since the 1990s that finally lost its appeal after the Iraq War of 2003 (Klein 2011). For the military and politicians, Vietnam was long taken as a negative example of how not to conduct a war, while, for the media, it served as a positive example of how to report a war (Klein 2011, p. 217-288). Three of the most important and widely known pictures of a war that lasted more than a decade were all taken during the Tet offensive in early 1968: they show the wounded girl Phan Thị Kim Phúc, labeled 'Napalm Girl' by the media; the execution of General Nguyen Van Lem; and the massacre of My Lai. What were these pictures taken to represent? They show a war in which there are no winners or losers, in which the Vietnamese as well as the American troops lost their morality. Until today it is argued by many conservatives that the war was psychologically lost, but militarily won (s. Peach 2010, p. 555-565). In this sense, the Vietnam War may be taken as an example of how important it is for a party in a conflict to control pictures. In the decades after the Fall of Saigon, American military and politicians extensively worked on a military strategy that, at the same time, was also a good media strategy (Boot 2002, p.332). [3] The next wars in Grenada, Panama ,and the Gulf War were led with the US in full control of their imagery. Gadi Wolfsfeld (1997, p.27) concluded: "Those who control the situation have little problem controlling the news."

The blame game of military, politicians, and media led to journalists aiming for a way to report that would not interfere with the military's strategy, but document and thus strengthen them. The population of the United States was not easily convinced after Vietnam to engage in large-scale wars. Therefore, operations were led in a limited (Grenada) or hidden (El Salvador) way. All this changed with the Iraq War of 2003. The US was still in control of the situation and the narrative, although other media actors entered the scene (e.g. Al Jazeera), and control of the battlefield, like in 1991, was not achieved. It managed to come up with a script that was largely followed by Western media, at least. Whether or not a narrative of a 'clean' and 'just war' works or not, however, rests on the credibility of the whole endeavor, which certainly was at least challenged in the case of the Iraq War.

In Syria and Iraq now, the US and its allies are faced with a situation in which they are neither in control of the battlefield, nor of the war's narratives. Footage from planes and drones is countered by videos and pictures that show a bloody and gruesome fight on the ground. Where a 'clean war' is presented, civilians and journalists are deliberately targeted; where buttons need to be pressed, people are beheaded with knives on the other side. The media strategy of the group 'Islamic State' (IS) rests on two main pillars. First, to make the risks of engaging in a war in the region obvious, and to send gruesome and graphic messages to the United States and Great Britain in particular. The message to their sympathizers, on the other hand, is a very different one, which pushes the very idea of a 'virtual war' even one step further; war as leisure-time activity, leaving enough time and tranquility to engage in a snowball fight with the comrades. This idea of war can be traced back to when it was perceived as an adventure and reported in the context of exotic travels and adventure stories more so than that of politics. For many media outlets, dealing with the IS footage turned out to be a real problem. Television stations, and especially the news channels, need footage for their reports, but what to do if no journalists are present to provide that? Videos often are still used, but marked with a note regarding the source, maybe even with the label "propaganda video". That alone, however, does not necessarily have an effect on the perception. Other commentators thus advise to contextualize the material offered by IS, for example, by better and eventually disclosing what they were, namely the blunt attempt to legitimize a terrorist regime with the help of polished videos (Walter 2014). A third approach was followed by the German TV station ZDF, which in a news programme simply stated that a beheading had taken place and then added: that is all there is to say, no need to show any pictures (s. Datta and Berbner 2014).

Susan Sontag has stated (1977, p.108-109) that a picture needs to be interpreted, that it cannot otherwise speak, and that a caption added in a news report is only one possible interpretation. But does it really make a difference here whether or not viewers know who is behind pictures and videos? After all, Sontag herself had has famously held (2003, p.76) that a picture gives mixed signals: "Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims: What a spectacle!" One could argue that once pictures are out there, they leave an impact that cannot always be channeled or delimited by an introduction, voice-over, or later discussion. How much did it matter, after all, that the photographer of the assassination of General Lem thought this was a righteous act, because that General had just murdered the family of the very person who then executed him (Newsweek 1985, p.64)? Or does it matter that the 'Napalm girl' was in fact a victim of friendly fire (s. Paul 2005)?

In the face of the war in Syria and Iraq, where the control neither of the battlefield nor the images can be easily claimed by one party, questions of how to construct and cope with competing narratives of a war are again pressing for conflict parties, researchers, media actors, and consumers the like.

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Notes

[1] For an account of the development of drone warfare, see: Lloyd C. Gardner,*Killing Machine. The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare*, New York: The New Press, 2013.

[2] See, e.g.: DerDerian, *Virtuous War*; Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War. Kosovo and beyond*, London: Picador, 2001; Mary Kaldor, American Power: From 'Compellance' to Cosmopolitanism?, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1/2003, pp. 1-22.

[3] See, e.g., the work of the conservative historian: Max Boot, The Savage Wars of Peace. Small Wars and the Rise of American Power, New York: BasicBooks, 2002, p. 332.

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