

# The Information Environment of War\*

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## **Abstract**

This article observes high levels of anxiety about war in the present era though wars are in decline. It addresses this paradox by distinguishing features of Industrial and Information War. Industrial War is between states, requiring mass mobilisation of people and resources. It transcends frontiers, is asymmetrical, and its *hard* side is manifest in digitalised technologies and small professional forces. Its *soft* side evokes the expanded and fast-changing information environment of globalised media, transnational networks and the internet. Here wars are experienced intensely, but at a distance, at once close up and far away. This must contribute to heightened consciousness of war, though spectators are removed from danger. Though interests try to control information flows from and about war, the information environment is huge, shifting and unpredictable. As such it is impossible to control fully, thereby presenting opportunities for vigorous *symbolic struggles* involving anti-war campaigners and others.

## **Introduction**

People are acutely conscious of war today. They see it daily on their televisions and read about it routinely in their newspapers. Unsurprisingly, this exposure is associated with expressions of concern about the dangers and threat of war. Yet the practice of war is in decline and has been so for years. The *Human Security Report* (2005), for instance, charts a 40% decline in the number of armed conflicts since the early 1990s (p.3). Interstate warfare – an unexceptional feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – has decreased markedly, making the terrible casualties that accompanied struggles between the likes of Germany, Britain and the Soviet Union seem highly unlikely (Mueller 2004). This is not to trivialise horrors that accompanied the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, the atrocities in Rwanda during the mid 1990s, the fighting in Chechnya, the ongoing crises that beset Israel and Palestinian people, or the quagmire of the Iraq occupation since 2003. But it is to stress that the destructive wars between countries, the once familiar proxy wars fought between the superpowers, and the bitter struggles of national liberation fought against the colonialists, have diminished, and with them has receded the threat of war. In such a light it appears puzzling that, while most people are far safer from war

than their parents and grandparents, they are also remarkably concerned about the risks of armed conflict.

To explain this paradox we need to distinguish the era of Industrial War from Information War (Tumber and Webster 2006, ch.3). The former signals the days of inter-state conflicts, chiefly over territories, in which all the resources of a country were mobilised in the struggle against another nation. Industrial War evokes 'total war' wherein citizens, industry and agriculture are commandeered to support their side. It meant fighting on a mass scale, with attendant mass casualties when massed ranks of 18-34-year-olds were marshalled in battle in brutal 'wars of annihilation' (Mazower 1998, p.216). Losses could be catastrophic, especially when invading armies fought on another's terrain or captured land and subdued the populace directly, as witness death tolls of anything between 5-20% of entire populations in places such as Russia, France and Poland during the Second World War. Comparable tragedies continued into the 1980s, notably as regards wars of 'national liberation' fought to throw off the colonial power: Algeria, Korea, African decolonisation struggles, Vietnam, Cambodia, and so on. In addition, during the epoch of Industrial War, people learned about it either through first hand experience as combatants or through occupation (a profoundly shaming experience for very many in Europe, that, as Tony Judt [2005] reminds us, led to a 'collective amnesia' in many countries that refused for decades to acknowledge their guilt in collaboration with enemies or worse in aiding genocide) or – for most in the UK and America – via a controlled and deeply partisan media that ensured a flow of good news stories.

Information War is different on several dimensions (cf. Kaldor 1999). To start with, on its *hard* side (of weaponry) it is thoroughly digitised, with the United States far ahead of others in its access to sophisticated and deadly information and communications technologies (Berkovitz 2003). With a \$529 billion budget for defence that accounted in 2005 for 48% of the world's total expenditure in that area (SIPRI 2007) and its standing as leader in technological innovation *tout court*, the USA has been able to produce a remarkable array of information and communications intensive technologies that puts it far ahead of competitors. Corollaries of this are a reliance on aerospace and missile systems to wage war and the attendant dependence on relatively small numbers of

professionalised engineers and pilots. Few countries, America pre-eminently, possess developed Information War capabilities, but such as do (e.g. France, Britain, and Israel) possess massive advantages over potential foes (though the arms trade ensures that digitalised weapons systems permeate into the arsenals of many other nations).

At the same time, Information War has been developed in a globalising world where there is little apparent opposition to market practices and where national borders are of reduced (but still vital) significance. It has emerged in a period where increasingly we have 'states without enemies' (Giddens 1994: 235), with challenges coming chiefly from variegated groups, ranging from Taliban insurgents to al-Qaeda Islamists (though ironically globalisation and the collapse of Communism have resulted in the supremacy of one 'unipolar' state, the USA, and perforce war is located in particular places, hence the nation remains vital). Information War, nonetheless, often entails trans-territorial features, such that opponents may be located in terrorist networks that are difficult to pinpoint or found in alleged 'rogue' or failing states such as Afghanistan or Pakistan.

To be sure, should nuclear weapons become part of the equation, then all is overturned. In this respect it is noteworthy that several nations appear to have concluded that, such is the superiority of the United States in digitised technologies, their only means of resistance is to develop nuclear weapons as a bargaining ploy (Ayoob and Zierler 2005). One might also note that, while war that involves the USA especially will be over with in a few weeks against most adversaries because of its overwhelming military superiority, once occupation of a territory is required, then the troops on the ground come more vulnerable to guerrilla attacks. The very notion of military victory may then become highly ambiguous should persistent resistance produce mounting casualties and public opinion at home turn against their own nation's foreign policy. So while superiority on the hard side of information war may produce successful military campaigns, for a democratic state to claim success in warfare requires legitimacy as well.

This leads us to emphasise the importance of the *soft* side of Information War – the centrality of a changed information environment of war. A key dimension is a vastly increased media and communications sphere, with transnational 24/7 reportage, cable

channels and the internet. On the one hand, this makes information control - however assiduously striven for – extremely difficult to sustain for any government of military campaign. War reporters are also harder to control than hitherto, while capable of sending back more immediate images through lightweight cameras and the video phone, so their messages, less constrained by patriotism calls to support ‘our boys’ in a cosmopolitan profession, may disrupt what those who wage war intend to convey (Tumber and Webster 2006). The availability too of transnational news organisations, notably via the internet, contributes to a ‘chaotic’ information environment (McNair 2006). Finally, should the military and government forces endeavour to crudely control the news sphere (e.g. by excluding reporters or resorting to direct censorship), as once they did with relative impunity, then they encounter not only practical difficulties on a formidable scale, but also a powerful ideology that insists democracies have rights to know what is being done in their name. On the other hand, this information environment means that civilians, while they are not called upon to directly experience war as foot soldiers or reserves, have enormously expanded *mediated* experience of war (Seaton 2005). This is *experience from a distance that is also remarkably close up* (Tomlinson 2001) through the television or PC monitor.

It should surprise no-one that the soft sides of Information War are of enormous import. Those who wage such war are generally democracies; accordingly they feel it especially important to gain the support of their publics for wars fought in their name. To this degree publics must be mobilised not with their bodies but as *spectators* of war fought in their name (Ignatieff 2000). To this end energy is expended in ‘information management’ that ranges from providing training in media presentation to officers to accreditation of ‘embeds’ for selected journalists (Taylor 2002). Moreover, it is essential that soft Information War is maintained since powerful nations can lose the war even if they are militarily insuperable should their own citizens lose heart and/or withdraw consent. At the same time, when reports appear, say of maltreatment of prisoners, or misconduct of one’s own military, or of the deaths of innocents, then the legitimacy of the war is challenged and information management becomes an unenviable task. Furthermore, as we shall see, the information environment of war today means that such stories are

inevitable, perhaps unavoidable, while the public has access to a volume and range of news and opinion that far surpasses any of their predecessors. This is information that brings the war closer to people who yet have little contact with battles or bombs.

A vital factor increasing anxieties about war today has to be the massively increased media coverage of and about war. We live now at a time in which we are presented with an almost unceasing diet of news and comment on the risks of war, the dangers of terrorism and of unrest from many parts of the world. While it must be conceded that there is no direct causal relation between media and fear of war, what has to be agreed is that there is nowadays available an enormously expanded and more vivid amount of mediated information on war. For a good many, perhaps most, this generates anxiety and fear. Still, it is a remarkable phenomenon: while our parents and grandparents frequently had direct experience of conflict, today we have much greater knowledge of war, but chiefly from afar. We are safer from war than ever, yet we witness it, often in appalling detail, as spectators. The astonishing informational output lets us know far more about conflict, about campaigns' development and attendant risks, about the consequences of bombing and military clashes, than the sailor mobilised to the Atlantic convoys, the soldier taken prisoner by the Germans at Tubruck, or the infantryman encircled at Stalingrad could have imagined. The sailor, soldier and infantryman knew well enough what it was to meet the enemy, to be incarcerated by adversaries and to feel the bitter cold of the Russian winter, but today's media-rich viewer can get instantaneous coverage from many spheres of battle, watch reporters communicating from satellite video phones, and then have this digested for its strategic significance by politicians and experts.

### **The Control Paradigm**

Those who wage war, yet who seek public legitimacy, endeavour to put the most favourable gloss on their conduct and policies. Conscious of this, politicians and commanders assiduously practice 'perception management'. They want, as far as they can manage, to have publics receive news and reports that justify their conduct. This ambition is succoured by a conviction that the Vietnam War, in which the United States participated from around 1965 until that nation's humiliating defeat a decade later, was

lost because an uncontrolled media was allowed unrestricted access that led to reportage such as the burning of villages, exposure of atrocities, and photographs of napalmed children that sapped American domestic support for the fight. Beginning with Robert Elegant's (1981) *Encounter* article, 'How to Lose a War', this stab in the back theory developed into a conviction amongst the military that media were important to the war effort, but were not to be trusted to be left alone to get on with their jobs since they might publish sorties that were unhelpful and even counterproductive. Thereafter military 'planning for war' has always included measures to control information: a preparedness to 'handle' journalists, the grooming of military spokespeople, and 'unfriendly' journalists held at bay. From this follows much documented practices of misinformation, 'minders' chaperoning journalists, and photo-opportunity events designed at central command. The extended conflict in Northern Ireland and media coverage during the Falklands War of 1981-82 provided well-documented cases of this information management (Curtis 1984; Morrison and Tumber 1988). The category of 'embedded' journalists who were allowed to accompany fighting units to Iraq during the 2003 invasion is in line with the 'planning for war': such journalists were accredited by the military and were restricted to locations the military controlled. Those journalists who spurned this arrangement, the so-called 'unilaterals', went without military approval and, it was made clear, without military protection from enemy attack (Tumber and Palmer 2004).

Media researchers have too readily moved from recognising this aspiration to accepting a control model of information about war that presupposes military and government are able to get away with it. Researchers in this mode might undertake, for example, content analysis of newspaper and television reports, demonstrate that there are patterns to reportage, and conclude that most of these prioritised government and military spokespeople. The conclusion is easily reached that media are disproportionately influenced by military and government sources (Glasgow University Media Group 1985; Philo and Berry 2004).

Such research meets numerous objections. One is that it is difficult with such an approach to take into account the relative importance of stories. It is all very well counting the number of times military or government points of view appear in the media, but such quantitative measures surely cannot match the effect of a story that shows, say, innocent civilians being killed by soldiers' misbehaviour or one that pictures one's own troops in the hands of enemies. It might be that, day on day, official press releases are major sources of news, but it is hard to believe that several weeks of such has anything like the consequence, say, of the leaked photographs of prisoners being tortured and abused by American guards at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad during the spring of 2004 or the video footage of the beheadings of kidnapped victims released by insurgents that year. The control model also too easily ignores the significance of unanticipated events that may throw awry the functioning of control processes - perhaps the untoward bombing of an air raid shelter, the resignation of ministers protesting government policy, or the shooting of one's own military in circumstances of 'friendly fire'.

However, surely the most telling criticism of the control paradigm is that it is out of date. Instead of control, one might better conceive the information environment of war and conflict nowadays as chaotic, certainly more confused and ambiguous than might have been possible even a generation ago. Amongst the reasons for this is the resistance of journalists. It is exceedingly hard for the military and governments to control a diverse group of often hundreds of correspondents who set out from the presumption that all sources are trying to manipulate them at the same time as they can access huge repositories of alternative information from the internet (Tumber and Webster 2006). Furthermore, the development of satellite and cable television, and transitional news services from BBC World to Al Jazeera, means that audiences have much more differentiated information sources than were possible just a few years ago (Calhoun 2004). The increased availability of the internet to ordinary citizens, bringing along blogs, e-mails, electronic versions of newspapers and periodicals, video clips and web sites, means that any idea of information control being readily achievable from conflict zones must be jettisoned. It is striven for, but the information domain is so febrile, extensive and open that control is at best an aspiration.

It is now necessary to conceive of a much more expanded and differentiated information environment. Publics are receiving their information on war mediated, but this is a mediation that is now considerably more ambiguous. It comes quicker than previous forms, it is less predictable, much denser and more diverse than before. To say this is not to suggest there is pluralism operating in the media realm, but it is to insist that space has opened up in a vastly expanded realm. Scholars need to acknowledge that we are 'engaged in the first war in history... in an era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, blackberrys, instant messaging, digital cameras, a global internet with no inhibitions, hand-held video cameras, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts, satellite television. There's never been a war fought in this environment before' (Rumsfeld 2006). Those who wage war have acknowledged the change and the new imperative to 'fight the net' as a 'core military competency' (Department of Defense 2003, p.4 *passim*). British Prime Minister Blair (2007), for instance, appreciates that 'twenty-five years ago, media reports came back from the Falklands [during the 1981-82 war with Argentina] irregularly, heavily controlled', but nowadays internet sites allow 'straight into the living room... gruesome images (that are) bypassing the official accounts'. As such, this 'transforms the context within which the military, politics and public opinion interact'. It is time media researchers also recognized this.

### **Symbolic Struggles**

When it comes to the mediation of war and the threat of war the information environment might be conceived as one of *symbolic struggles* between various agencies that compete for time, for news agendas, and for interpretations of events. A significant set of players in these symbolic struggles are the anti-war and peace movements (Gillan *et al.* 2008). These rarely act within the actual theatre of battle, but they do participate vigorously in the mediated spheres in which public opinion is formed and where crucial battles for hearts and minds take place. Anti-war activists strive to ensure that their perspectives get access to media in various ways, from organizing enormous demonstrations that may be co-ordinated across the world and be compellingly newsworthy, as in February 15<sup>th</sup> 2003 when so many people took to the streets of major cities that a *New York Times* writer was

moved to describe the action as ‘the second superpower’ (Tylor 2003) after the United States, to presenting journalists with briefing papers setting out well argued and coherent opposition to those who wage war. They also adopt a panoply of new media – e-mail communications, list serves, web sites, and discussion groups – in the struggle to ensure that their views get a platform.

Over the past five years or so anti-war opposition has been readily visible in Britain, especially – but by no means solely – via the internet. On any given day it is scarcely a minute’s effort to access information online that claims the war in Iraq is going badly, that government policies are fatally flawed (and even duplicitous), that soldiers are despondent and their senior officers admit that Iraq is a lost cause, and that the terrorist threat has been made worse by a misconceived ‘War on Terror’ launched by George W. Bush. If generally in a less bald manner, similar criticisms commonly appear on television and in newspapers (to be rapidly amplified by hyperlink connection to websites, electronic newsletters and blogs). Never before can it have been easier to get hold of such detailed and up-to-the-minute criticisms and condemnations of belligerent nations’ involvements in war.

We return to the relation of the anti-war and peace movements with established media below, but we would stress here that the changed and changing information environment means that we need to think beyond a settled media in which movements are reported upon. The changed information environment has allowed the anti-war and peace movements to create their own media, even to establish what might be considered an alternative information environment. For instance, a web maintainer at Stop the War Coalition (StWC), the main coalition in the UK, told us about StWC’s Newsletter that goes out to 20,000 subscribers (and an estimated 40,000 readers) via a list serve. This constitutes an element of an alternative information network for campaigners. It appears fortnightly or so, though in periods of intense activity more frequently, and it offers a digest of key issues, comment on topical matters and hyperlink connections to other sources of information.

## Information Circuits

All the significant anti-war and peace movements have produced web sites that, relatively cheap to set up and maintain, were unknown a decade ago (Pickerill, 2003). The web sites contain varying amounts and qualities of information, but typically provide a statement of principles, news and comment as well as links to cognate organisations. They are a first port of call for those wanting to know more, often by-passing secondary information sources such as newspapers. The sites generally offer facilities that allow readers to sign up to a list serve, so that they may receive e-mail messages that will keep them up to date direct from the group.

So elements of an alternative information network are in place, but there are complex connections with established media. To better appreciate the current information environment we need to take cognisance of the information circuits that flow between different media, groups and actors. There are several sorts of circuitry that might be distinguished.

1. *Information flows from established media to the anti-war and peace movements.*  
Interest in a subject makes people eager to seek out information. Anti-war and peace campaigners are hungry for news and comment about conflict and seek it out in a range of media, though quality newspapers on the liberal end of the spectrum, such as the *Guardian* and the anti-Iraq War *Independent*, are disproportionately read. However, this is not simply a matter of activists reading a particular newspaper. StWC's web site, for example, presents many articles taken from mainstream as well as oppositional periodicals, allowing those who wish to access particular pieces – commentaries, features, news items – via hyperlinks from the StWC web site. Heavily used in this respect is the *Guardian* newspaper's website, *Guardian Unlimited*, which allows free use of materials. This flow of information to the anti-war and peace sites extends to collating government reports and publications in documents and articles authored by activists. Milan Rai of *Justice Not Vengeance* (a small and mainly virtual anti-war organisation) produces briefing papers that he distributes to a list mail of around three thousand

subscribers. 'All the sources', he explains, 'are completely mainstream', being 'newspapers or government reports or reports from establishment bodies like Chatham House'.

2. *Information flows from anti-war and peace movement activists to mainstream media.* The established media report on the anti-war and peace movements, for example when it stages a demonstration or rally. In such circumstances the movement adopts various tactics that help get its message across into the mainstream, from cultivating contacts with sympathetic journalists to ensuring high visibility by, for instance, designing eye-catching displays and memorable slogans. For instance, a national demonstration was held in London on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2006 to protest against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. StWC had organised the demonstration around the theme of 'Unconditional Ceasefire Now' and to maximize effect it urged members and sympathisers to turn out in large numbers, promoted the support it had from distinguished figures, and urged demonstrators to bring along children's shoes to deposit as a symbol of innocent lives being taken by Israel actions. The amount of influence anti-war and peace protesters have is limited, not least because they lack resources as well expertise in public relations. Lindsey German, convenor of StWC, contrasted the 'very, very slick PR operation' of three wealthy former employees of National Westminster Bank who were facing extradition to America on charges of financial malfeasance during the summer of 2006 with StWC's much more modest endeavours. She admitted that 'it's very hard to punch your weight in that area unless you've got high flying professionals'. Nevertheless, in the current period the fact that two national newspapers (the *Daily Mirror* and the *Independent*) editorially support the anti-war and peace movements does mean that considerable amounts of sympathetic coverage is ensured. Thus on the day of the August 5<sup>th</sup> 2006 demonstration the *Independent* newspaper supported it with a front page full of mug shot photographs that featured esteemed individuals wearing tee-shirts proclaiming 'Unconditional Ceasefire Now'. Finally, one might note that several anti-war and peace supporters figure regularly in some of the mainstream media – for example, John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Andrew Murray and Gary Younge. These congregate in

the pages of the *Guardian*, *Mirror* and *Independent*, but they are generally then put onto web sites where they can be readily accessed by anti-war and peace campaigners.

3. *Web Sites, Blogs and Interactivity*. These areas of the internet readily service the alternative information networks of the anti-war and peace movements, but some observations on their relationships to established media might be made. As a preliminary, we might remind ourselves of the novelty of cyberspace and the blogosphere: just a decade ago web sites were almost unknown, e-mail just taking off, discussion groups and chat rooms little used. Now web sites are prevalent in the anti-war and peace movements, and these often include features that enable readers some interactivity. Blogging has grown rapidly, especially since 2004, so much so that a Harris poll in Britain (*Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2006) reported that 40% of internet users (which amount to about 70% of the population) read a blog. The PEW (Lenhart and Fox 2006, p.20) organisation estimates that 90% of bloggers allow readers to respond, hence integrating interactivity into the process. These developments, still inchoate, merit comment in terms of traditional media not least because many journalists are informationally insatiable and avidly seek out sources. It is clear that journalists keep a close eye on the internet and its traffic. As such they are amongst the more avid readers of blogs (and many journalists, especially the commentariat, maintain their own blogs) and this can influence what they write. For instance, during the summer of 2006 when Muslims were arrested in Britain on terrorism charges, Polly Toynbee noted in her *Guardian* column that 'the Internet hummed with theories that this was all a plot to deflect attention from Lebanon' (15 August 2006). Regular media such as *The Times* and *Guardian* now also offer reviews and comments on web sites and blogs. In addition, some have web sites that allow readers to contribute to discussion. For example, the *Comment is Free* section of *Guardian Unlimited* is interactive, featuring articles from the newspaper along with a range of blogs from an extensive list of contributors that are accompanied by often lengthy reader comment; 'The aim is to host an open-ended space for debate, dispute, argument and agreement and to invite users to comment on everything they read'

(<http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/>). Even the BBC, Britain's most used web site, enables readers to comment on news items. From a different angle, some blogs can be a form of journalism that is itself newsworthy. For instance, blogs from Baghdad have provided insight into conditions and experiences where journalists cannot easily go. Nor surprisingly, these sites are frequently visited, reported on in traditional media and on occasion produced in book format (Salam Pax 2003; Riverbend 2005).

The information environment now instances significant traffic between and across traditional media and the anti-war and peace movements. There is appropriation from the mainstream media, contributions made more or less directly to that media, and, with new media especially, possibilities of amplification, challenge and discussion through interactive features and the growth of the blogosphere. While a good deal of these developments enable an autonomous information network to be constructed, it is also clear that the anti-war and peace movements connect with established media in significant ways. To emphasise, none of this ought to be interpreted as suggesting that we now have a plurality of equal voices – official spokespeople still get the lion's share of attention and it is rare for the anti-war and peace movement actors to set agendas for consideration. It is simply that the information environment is now considerably expanded and possessed of more possibilities of participation than traditional media, and scholars need to acknowledge this fact (Coleman 2005).

## **Conclusion**

We began this article by emphasising that people are safer than their predecessors, yet have experience of war and the threat of war through media that is unprecedented in its intensity and range. This must contribute to high levels of anxiety and fear of war recorded in opinion surveys. Moreover, the information environment of which this mediation is composed is shifting, complex and diverse, making adherence to the influential control paradigm in media analysis problematic. Here the anti-war and peace movement finds significant space for messages contributing to symbolic struggles over

war and has even been able to establish elements of an alternative information environment using list serves, web sites and related technologies.

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