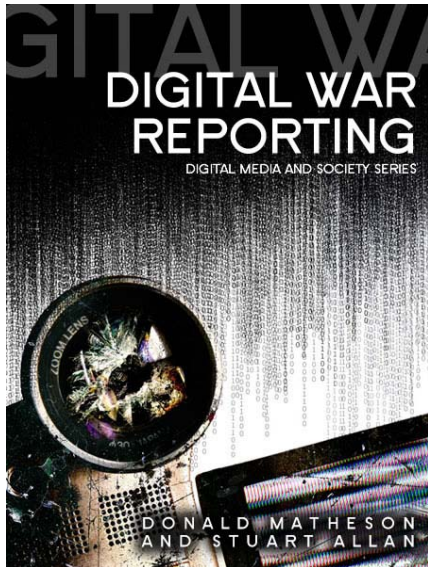


Reviews

Digital War Reporting, by Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan. Cambridge: Polity, 2009, £14.99 ISBN: 978-0-7456-4275-8, Language: English.

The focus of *Digital War Reporting* is on how and why digital technologies shape what is reported in war, and is on the impact of digital technologies on perhaps the most important question that media scholars of war reporting can raise, namely how the rhetoric of war



legitimises certain configurations of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The authors, Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan, situate this question within the wider context of journalism’s representational forms, practices and epistemologies. Written in a clear and accessible style, the book explores issues raised by the transition to digital war reporting and to the ‘technological affordances and limitations’ of such reporting (Matheson and Allan 2009, 18). Due attention is given to key features of the past decade, notably to the role of media convergence, the compression of time, space and place, and the rise of personal media. The influence of these features on agenda-setting and the visual culture of digital war reporting are discussed. These include such issues as the impact on the profession of journalism generated by greater access to the

front line, the greater sense of personal connection via user-generated content between distant audiences and those caught up in war, the ways in which the digital age allows individuals and nations to circumvent propaganda from the other side, and associated issues of distinguishing authentic user-generated content from propaganda.

This book is peppered with media examples. Through these, it gives a rich sense of changes in digital cultures across the time frame examined – starting with the first Internet war (Kosovo, 1999), continuing with the USA-led military involvement in Afghanistan (2001-), Iraq (2003-) and War on Terror (2001-), taking in other conflicts along the way, and ending with the 2008 crises in South Ossetia and Mumbai – usefully contextualising its digital focus with war reporting from pre-digital cultures.

Chapter Two, on Kosovo, is particularly interesting historically, given its journalistically-endowed epithet of being the first Internet war. The authors focus on how the emergent ecology of digital war reporting continued to evolve, as well as the journalistic self-reflective critique it generated regarding the impact of digital technology on the integrity of reportage. Eyewitness accounts in a pre-blog age are discussed as predecessors of the citizen journalism movement. This chapter unpicks the interplay of the glut of eyewitness accounts and visuals

from lay people, circulated via e-mail, message boards and online diaries, with standard forms of real-time television news reportage, itself compromised by the fact that most journalists from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries were expelled by the Serbian information minister. The chapter offers explanations regarding the ways governments on both sides used the Internet to conduct cyber war and advance their views, making information indistinguishable from propaganda, and by-passing the war correspondent as interpreter of events, to speak directly to the public. It gives detailed examples of how individuals, ranging from a Serbian Orthodox cyber monk to a teenage Albanian Muslim electronic pen-pal, offered first-hand and often real-time accounts that attracted the attention of the national and international mainstream news, and made people care about distant others' suffering. Meanwhile, journalists in the United States conversed online with diverse ethnic groups regarding the motivation behind their news coverage, and the status of online journalism (in relation to broadcast or newspaper coverage) grew. The potential of real-time reporting for compromising the military's operational security was raised as an issue by the military, as was the Serb's ability to readily propagandise on the back of collateral damage from NATO – both issues that would remain pertinent across the following decade. Meanwhile, journalists remained concerned about the audience's growing expectations that war be presented live and associated fears of producing voyeurs of violence.

Chapter Three develops the issues raised by digital reporting of the Kosovo war to highlight key developments in the USA-led wars in Afghanistan (2001-02) and Iraq (2003). It focuses on issues of digital simulations of bombing to represent otherwise unseen conflict thereby reproducing official versions; the mobility and liveness accorded by the satellite phone to correspondents on the ground – with Afghanistan labelled the first videophone war; the military gaze produced by live mainstream media coverage of Iraq's Shock and Awe invasion; and the emergence of the status of blogs offering direct accounts by soldiers, war correspondents and Iraqi citizens, reconfiguring the journalist-audience relationship by generating more personal connections.

Chapter Four explores three key issues concerning the rise of citizen journalists during war in more depth. These are: how eye-witness, citizen journalist accounts intersect with, and are incorporated by, traditional news media; the alternative information networks that emerge alongside this; and the state's response to these media, particularly its tendency to incorporate citizen-produced media into propaganda, cloaking their propagandistic intentions in the mantle of independent media. Examples are drawn largely from citizen reportage of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the USA and July 2005 bombing of London transport, the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq, the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, the 2008 military stand-off between USA warships and Iranian patrol boats in the Straits of Hormuz, and the ongoing War on Terror.

Chapter Five explores issues around the speedy proliferation of the digital image in war-time, drawing largely from the Iraq War, and paying particular attention to the Abu Ghraib detainee abuses (2004) captured on USA soldiers' own cameras, and the execution of Saddam Hussein (2006) captured on the mobile phone camera of a Shi'a witness to the execution. Both of these user-generated images contradicted the official version of events. Framed by Susan Sontag's (2003) appeal regarding journalistic photographs of suffering – 'Let the atrocious images haunt us' – this chapter reflects particularly on the visual power of such

user-generated digital photographs and videos in rendering the photographer's socially situated perspective, thereby challenging journalistic notions of impartiality.

Chapter Six, on the politics of mediation, seeks to think through the impact of digital war reporting on what Raymond Williams (1982) describes as culture of distance – a concept which finds news media projecting the horrors of war as remote and beyond the concern of the audience. It opens with an example from Georgia's (2008) military offensive against South Ossetia (a breakaway region of Georgia striving for independence), and Russia's counter-attack against Georgia. This short conflict is used to illustrate the deficiencies of both citizen journalism and western mainstream news reporting. The latter was sparse, and, according to the authors, it framed the Russian-Georgian conflict 'within the familiar terms of a Cold War binarism, whereby Georgia was characterised as an innocent victim of Russian aggression' (Matheson and Allan 2009, 167). The citizen journalism that stepped into the breach left by mainstream's journalism's lack of in-depth reporting offered ways for audiences to personally connect with the suffering, but suffered from issues of trustworthiness as most of the blogs were anonymous and short-lived. As such, Allen and Matheson suggest that digital media, and especially personal media, are increasingly politicised during war, used by states and political groups, and drawing in individuals used to mediating themselves – as in the reservists bombed by the Russian military in Gori. The book concludes by evaluating this politicisation alongside the impact of digital technologies on the ways war reporting can reaffirm or challenge existing configurations of 'us' versus 'them'.

To move into a critical vein, like most media books on war reporting, *Digital War Reporting* leaves those readers with a substantive interest in wars themselves wanting more analysis of the political context. For instance, to understand why the digital war reporting of the 1999 Kosovan war is significant surely requires an understanding of why the war itself is significant – why it started (nationalistic tensions simmering up as the Iron curtain came down) and ended (NATO's so-called clean war using precision weapons), its scale and impact (the continuing disintegration of Yugoslavia, accusations of genocide and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees), and the main protagonists involved (from Serbia, Albania and NATO countries). Without an even cursory background political analysis, it is difficult to get a sense of the stakes at play in the information management strategies of Milosovic versus NATO during this war, and thereby an appreciation of the role of the digital therein.

Undoubtedly, the authors ran up against the constraints of space as the book throughout conveys a close engagement with the ongoing realities and ever-changing forms of digital war reporting. Even as it concludes, the book squeezes in a final example of a (then) new technological reporting form – pointing to the potential of social networking site, Twitter, in reporting crises (using Mumbai, 2008 as the example). This close attention to detailed examples means that, although the wider political context is lost, the problems and potential of the key moral and political issue of war reporting – the portrayal of us and them – in a digital age are firmly addressed. Its detailed rendition of digital war reporting over the past decade will ensure that this book is of interest to media and war historians, while its use of a range of theoretical perspectives – such as Sontag and Williams – will ensure an audience among media theorists.

References

- Sontag, Susan *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Williams, Raymond. 'Distance', in *Raymond Williams on Television*, Alan O'Connor (ed.), London: Routledge, 1982.

VIAN BAKIR is senior lecturer in the Department of Creative Studies and Media, Bangor University, UK. Her research on political communication, risk communication and new media has appeared in a number of publications. [e-mail: v.bakir@bangor.ac.uk]