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Article

Social media, gender and the mediatization of war: exploring the German armed forces' visual representation of the Afghanistan operation on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the mediatization of war point to attempts of governments to regulate the visual representation of their involvements in armed conflict – the most notable example being the practice of 'embedded reporting' in Iraq and Afghanistan. This article focuses on a different strategy of visual meaning-making, namely, the publication of images on social media by armed forces themselves. Specifically, we argue that the mediatization of war literature could profit from an increased engagement with feminist research, both within Critical Security/Critical Military Studies and within Science and Technology Studies that highlight the close connection between masculinity, technology and control. The article examines the German military mission in Afghanistan as represented on the German armed forces' official Facebook page.

Germany constitutes an interesting, and largely neglected, case for the growing literature on the mediatization of war: its strong antimilitarist political culture makes the representation of war particularly delicate. The article examines specific representational patterns of Germany's involvement in Afghanistan and discusses the implications which arise from what is placed inside the frame of visibility and what remains out of its view.

KEYWORDS:

Social media | military | Facebook | mediatization of war | Feminist Security Studies | feminist technoscience | gender | Critical Military Studies | Germany | Afghanistan

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Notes

1. This is a fully co-authored article. Author names appear in alphabetical order.

2. In communication studies, mediatization is often understood with a narrower focus on cultural and social change as a result of communication increasingly taking place via

different media (inter alia Hepp and Krotz 2014). For example, if people increasingly communicate not face-to-face but via digital social media, this will have an effect on society. As opposed to that, we use the term here more broadly to refer to the representation of war and violent conflict in different media, in line with the usage in the mediatization of war literature.

3. We focus here on states and their agencies but as the example of the Islamic State makes clear, this also applies to non-state actors (see Rid and Hecker 2009).

4. This not just includes traditional news media like magazines (the US Stars and Stripes and the German magazine Y being just two examples) but also popular culture, with some state agencies even producing their own comics (see Shim forthcoming).

5. Given the limited space available and the general thematic focus of this special issue on visuality, we omit a detailed discussion of the relevance of visual media in general and photography in particular. This has, in any case, been provided elsewhere (see, in particular, Hansen 2011; 2015; Shim 2014).

6. The only two contributions on the German armed forces' social media presence are a descriptive overview of these activities (Jacobs 2016) and an evaluation of its effectiveness in reaching the intended audience (Günther 2016).

7. We would like to thank Laura Shepherd for pointing us to this aspect.

8. In reality, gender discourse is more complicated than the binary suggests, with different forms of masculinity and femininity, ordered in a hierarchical fashion (Connell 2005). We leave this discussion aside here due to limited space.

9. In the US context, Masters argues, the desire to control (the representation of) death stems from the experience of the Vietnam War which 'exposed the vulnerability of the human body' (Masters 2008, 93). In the German context, one could argue, it stems from the antimilitarist culture that emerged after 1945.

10. The exact number of casualties is unclear.

11. Although one should keep in mind that to actually determine this one would have to do a cross-national comparison which is beyond the scope of this article.

12. The Facebook page only became the Bundeswehr's official presence in 2013. From 2010 to 2013, the page had been maintained by a private Facebook user who had

established the site because no site existed (Bundeswehr 2013).

13. The Bundeswehr's increased presence on social media comes amid increased recruiting efforts of the Bundeswehr after the moratorium of conscription in 2011 and attempts to raise awareness for, and the acceptance of, the armed forces' increasingly 'robust' international role in German society. According to the Bundeswehr, its YouTube and Flickr channels are intended to provide 'a "first-hand", extensive, realistic and above all transparent image of the daily routine and operational reality of our soldiers' (BMVg 2011) for German citizens. It is reasonable to assume that the Facebook page also serves mainly this purpose.

14. Schlag and Heck (2012) for example analyse a single image.

15. Note that some images show different types of vehicles at once, so the numbers cannot simply be added up.

16. Due to legal restrictions, this particular image could not be reproduced here, but it is available online: https://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr/photos/a.124539210944013.19483.122840837780517/220959664635300/?type=3&theater

17. The literature on sunglasses and their effect on the outside viewer is still limited. But Brown (2015) has recently examined their connection to notions of 'cool' in fashion. Coolness above all stands for a limited emotional involvement, again a typically masculine feature, commonly considered virtuous particularly in dangerous situations.

18. In this context, also the shape and colour of sunglasses are relevant, that is, their aesthetics matter. For depictions of troops or special forces with, say, sunglasses in retro shape with their oversized glasses or with pink-coloured frames are hardly imaginable and would not unfold their effects (e.g. to tell of a superior male warrior) like military-used sunglasses.

19. This is further supported, somewhat paradoxically, by the casual wear of their guns and the absence of combat helmets, which reinforced the impression of coolness in the face of danger.

20. Whether the soldiers have all the equipment they need to be protected is a recurring issue of debate in the German Bundestag.

21. Likes are a technical feature for Facebook to express an active, unambiguously positive association with specific online content like for instance photographs or status updates (Ringelhan, Wollersheim, and Welpe 2015, 6), and can even be used in research to accurately predict individual traits and attributes (Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel 2013; Hong, Chen, and Cong 2017). Moreover, if someone likes online content, this is presented to the user's Facebook friends, which means that the effect multiplies (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013).

22. Due to legal restrictions, this particular image could not be reproduced here. It is available online: https://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr/photos/a.750030141728247.1073741915.122840837780517/750030298394898/?type=3&theater

23. It should be noted that landscapes are also a prominent motif among the ISAF photographs, which also reinforce the impression of calm. Since our main focus here is on the connection between masculinity, technology and control, we leave this discussion aside (on landscape photography, see Marien 2002).

24. Some examples for movies prominently featuring the figure of the sniper are American Sniper (2014), Lone Survivor (2013), Jack Reacher (2012), The American (2010), Vantage Point (2008), Shooter (2007), Smokin' Aces (2006), Jarhead (2005), Tears of Sun (2003), D.C. Sniper: 23 Days of Fear (2003), Phone Booth (2002), Sniper 2 (2002), Enemy at the Gates (2001), Spy Game (2001), The Jackal (1997), Assassins (1996), Leon – The Professional (1994), Sniper (1993), Quigley Down Under (1990), Full Metal Jacket (1987), Two Minute Warning (1976) and The Deadly Tower (1975). Video games include Sniper: Ghost Warrior III (2017), Sniper Elite IV (2017), Sniper Elite III (2014), Sniper: Ghost Warrior II (2013), Sniper Elite V2 (2012), Sniper: Ghost Warrior (2010), Sniper: Art of Victory (2008), Sniper Elite (2005), World War II Sniper: Call to Victory (2004), Line of Sight (2003) and countless other so-called first-person shooter games that include the possibility to slip into the role of snipers with perhaps the most prominent examples being the Call of Duty, Battlefield and Rainbow Six series.

25. The comment is available here: http://www.facebook.com/Bundeswehr/photos/a.124539210944013.19483.122840837780517/154153654649235/?type=3&theater.

26. The phrase of the returning warrior is borrowed from Managhan's (2012) article about the Canadian security state.

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