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### **Witnessing War:**

Blogs from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# Witnessing War: Blogs from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan

Jessica Siegel

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## ABSTRACT

The Iraq War in 2003 began a new generation of soldiers who blogged about their experiences of war (milbloggers). They have written about day-to-day life, their own experiences of suffering, and the suffering they have encountered. This study employs theories of witnessing to analyse representations of war in military blogs (milblogs). It examines how these representations portray sufferers and witnesses to suffering. The research question is: ‘what role does witnessing play in representations of experiences of war in milblogs?’ The study uses critical discourse analysis to analyse three milblogs: *One Marine’s View*, *Rajiv Srinivasan*, and *My War Stories*. By examining discursive practice at multiple levels, the method allows for an in-depth analysis of representation. Additionally, the method helps identify how moral claims towards sufferers are constructed and where these claims are overtaken by larger social discourses.

The study reveals that the role of witnessing in milblogs is complex. Milbloggers allow their readers to experience war, and all of the suffering associated with it, as if first-hand via milblogs. Furthermore, the blogs allow milbloggers to describe their own individual suffering—demanding recognition of this from their readers. By bearing witness to their own suffering in blogs, soldiers enact therapeutic narratives which allow them to bring order to chaotic experiences. Finally, witnessing facilitates the construction of moral claims to recognise the suffering of both the victims of war and the milbloggers. However, these claims are often obliterated by larger social discourses. The study concludes that the role of witnessing in milblogs remains contested. While readers are often constructed as witnesses to suffering, the capacity to witness is frequently curtailed by narrative and social discourses.

## INTRODUCTION

For people to really understand our day-to-day experience here, they need more than the highlights reel. They need to see the world through our eyes for a few minutes.  
(Danjel Bout in Hockenberry, 2005)

News about war—grand strategy, tactics, political consequences—is featured in Western newspapers nearly every day, yet when military blogger Danjel Bout said the above quote to a reporter he put into words soldiers'<sup>1</sup> widespread desire to share the minutiae which make up the experience of war. Military blogs (milblogs) are personal weblogs written by military personnel—deployed and non-deployed troops mostly from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—describing their daily life. The blogs are a claim for public recognition of the details that comprise an ordinary experience in the extraordinary environment of war. The rise of milblogs necessitates a further understanding of how this new method of communicating day-to-day experiences of war changes how readers are able to relate to the soldier's war experience. It also queries the role of the blogs for the milbloggers themselves.

As an avid newspaper reader, I have always felt a disparity between how I, as a member of the public, perceive war and how war is experienced from participants within it. This gap is outlined by Silverstone (1999), who argues that while we use the media to understand the world, we also 'us[e] media meanings to avoid the world, to distance ourselves from it, from the challenges, perhaps, of responsibility or care, [and] the acknowledgement of difference' (p. 13).

My interest in milblogging stems from my curiosity about the promise of milblogs to bring the reader closer to a personal experience of war. In many ways, the production of a milblog itself is a moral claim made by the milblogger for the public to *listen* to the account (Silverstone, 2006). However, I want to look beyond the actions of the reader and the milblogger to understand how representations of experiences of war can construct a relationship between readers and soldiers, and between readers and the people depicted in the soldiers' writing. Certainly, soldiers encounter suffering in a way that Western civilians do not, and yet they also suffer themselves, through fear, hardship and loss. Their job sets up extraordinary and political dichotomies between victory and defeat and between doing-good and destruction. While soldiers have always written letters home (see Hynes, 1997), milblogs

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<sup>1</sup> Soldier will be used in this paper for the sake of simplicity to refer to all members of the United States Military, despite the fact that it is normally reserved for members of the Army. For linguistic ease, soldiers will also be referred to as 'he'.

make a specific public request to the reader to step inside their unique experience. Further, they claim that their ordinary military experience should be important to the public.

Through this, I noticed that witnessing is inherent within the texts themselves. Milblogs offer a public rendition of the personal truth of the experience of war. Drawing on witnessing theory from the Holocaust, religious and juridical perspectives, witnessing in milblogs takes place in two ways: (1) as testimonies in which soldiers bear witness to suffering of both themselves and of others and (2) as a new form of ‘media witnessing’ (Ellis, 2000; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009) in which people are drawn into the text to witness it as if first-hand. With this paper, I want to understand to what extent witnessing occurs in milblogs, how it promotes moral claims, and how it is constrained by larger social discourses.

While several studies have been done on milblogs, these have concentrated mostly on photographic representation and comparisons between milblogs and traditional media as information sources or as ideological texts (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2009; Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009; Wall, 2006). The closest study to mine is Keren’s (2005) work on the blog of *LT Smash* which traces the transformation of depictions of unique experiences into popular-cultural discourses of war. Keren, however, is more concerned with discursive domination than its moral consequences.

While the aforementioned work on milblogs is drawn on throughout this paper, I concentrated more upon the representational work of milblogs. I wanted to understand the role of witnessing in contemporary, everyday texts. This paper outlines the emerging role of blogs as personal narratives in times of trauma before discussing witnessing theory. It then uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how witnessing is represented in milblogs. How do milblogs represent war and come to terms with suffering? What kinds of relationships are constructed or hindered by these representations? These are the questions which guided my research.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

This paper proceeds from a social constructivist perspective, a theory which sees truth and knowledge as constructed through social interaction. As Hall (1997a) explains, ‘representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things’. Through representation meaning is assigned and ‘truth’ is constructed. Representation is therefore political: attempting to orientate social practices in certain directions and fix them. Representations naturalised as ‘truth’ are acted upon, allowing systems of knowledge (discourses) to exercise power through concrete and coercive action (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). While rejecting Foucault’s heavy emphasis on historical context due to the limited human agency he assigns (see Hall, 1997b), social constructivism allows for critical analysis of representational practices and the frameworks for action they assert. This is particularly significant in war-related communication which orientates people’s understanding of moral claims about suffering and justifications of violence.

### **The Personalisation of War Reporting**

The social constructivism adds an important perspective in light of new trends towards personalised and subjective accounts in war news production and consumption. Whilst academic literature on war reporting is diverse, it has traditionally been based upon the central question of how to achieve objectivity by attempting to communicate ‘the truth’ or ‘the facts’ during times of extreme bias and physical and emotional upheaval (Allan and Zelizer, 2004, Knightley, 2003). However, the desire for objectivity may be in decline. Kennedy (2009) points out that as technology has progressed, war reporting has moved increasingly closer to a more personal experience of war. The 2003 Iraq War, he argues, heralded a new age of war reporting on the Internet from actors within the war itself. From the consumption side, people increasingly claim to have used the Internet to find information about war from alternative, overtly subjective sources (Rainie et al., 2003, Berenger, 2006).

This argument closely follows the work of Frosh and Pinchevski (2009) who suggest that new technology has lead to a proliferation of publicised, personal accounts of traumatic events. They point to the myriad of personal video recordings posted online in the wake of 9/11. As these personal accounts were made public, they became a crucial part of what the public perceived to be the whole ‘truth’ of the event. Individual accounts have become equally, if not more important than the reporting of objective fact. The idea of witnessing an event *through someone else’s eyes* has become appealing.

Building on notions of citizen journalism, Lovink (2007) elaborates on Frosh and Pinchevski's (2009) ideas. Lovink is particularly concerned with how cynicism towards the top-down nature of media has led to a 'decline in the Belief in the Message'. Instead, he and citizen journalism proponents like Deuze (2003), argue that due to the ability to publicise personal experiences there is a new, fundamentally personalised approach to truth. Lovink argues that the very desirability of objectivity is in question. Rather than truth being related to objectivity, new technology such as blogging highlights a new feeling that 'the "truth" is inescapably subjective'. The ordinary person is therefore elevated to the status of knowledge producer, disrupting media hierarchies (Couldry, 2002), and placing a new value on personal experience as evidence of 'reality'. Thus personal accounts form the basis for social action and moral claims for many in contemporary Western society.

### **Milblogs**

Within this context, the characteristics of milblogs take on particular importance, providing personalised narratives through which the 'truth' of war is represented. As Hookway (2008) points out, personal blogs are focused on the self-narrative. They reflect on the mundane as it unfolds by making statements about the self and by constructing narrative—a concept similar to that of the diary (see Plummer, 1983). Because of this, milblogs claim to be what Keren (2005) describes as a 'ground zero' where the reader can step into 'the very moment in which consciousness turns into memory'. Thus the milblog *resembles* an unmediated account of military life, masking its representational nature, whilst simultaneously releasing it from many of the constraints of other forms of communication.

Work by Johnson and Kaye (2004, Johnson and Kaye, 2006) reveals that it is precisely this unmediated, yet personal quality which appeals to readers. They find that people read milblogs because they are 'impressionistic, telegraphic, raw, honest, individualistic, highly opinionated and passionate, often striking an emotional chord' (2004). For readers, 'unmediated' means that milblogs represent the sensory, emotional and intellectual experience from a soldiers' perspective. However, theorists like Cammaerts and Carpentier (2009) point out that the personal representations in milblogs are still constrained by social discourses. They argue that 'rawness' is curtailed by 'the ideological model of war'—a discourse 'based on the legitimisation (and even glorification) of violent practices as a means to resolve societal conflicts'. The tension between ideological discourse and the unmediated nature of milblogs emphasises the importance of querying how these truth claims position readers and bloggers to act.

Furthermore, the representational practices of milblogs are both enabled and limited by their technological features. As Lovink (2007) explains, the very aesthetic of the blog format bounds its communicative abilities. For example, while readers' comments are facilitated at the bottom of each entry, they are separated from the entry itself, clearly limiting the reader's capacity to engage with the text. Moreover, each entry is displayed in chronological order, often with an archive sidebar. Through this, each entry becomes a fragment of a seemingly un-ending whole, giving each fragment greater meaning (Hookway, 2008, Kline in Lovink, 2007). The blog format, therefore, brings chaotic experiences into a larger narrative, and speaks to a desire to form coherence out of seemingly disparate experiences. Indeed, Keren's (2005) milblog study shows how personal experiences morph into overarching popular cultural narratives (termed 'image') as the blog progresses. This characteristic closely resembles the therapeutic narrative which will be discussed later.

## **Witnessing**

The concept of witnessing highlights the moral claims that are made when private experiences are publicised as 'truth'. Witnessing is particularly concerned with communicating experiences of suffering. In this section, the historical and cultural roots of witnessing will be outlined alongside a discussion of its various forms. Finally the section will explore the ethics of witnessing suffering and the therapeutic aspect of bearing witness.

### *Historical and Cultural Witnessing*

The cultural and historical backgrounds of witnessing highlight its communicative and moral functions. Witnessing has three main backgrounds: religious, juridical and Holocaust witnessing. Whilst each connotation emphasises different points, Peters (2001, 2009) argues that they are all unified by the importance of the physical body. Within religious witnessing, the physical suffering of a martyr (as witness to God) forms the basis of the veracity of his or her account (Thomas, 2009). It makes a moral claim to the public to recognise the martyr's suffering as evidence of a higher truth. Similarly, in juridical witnessing—through the torture of the witness' physical body and emphasis on the physical presence of the witness at the scene of the crime—the witness' body is offered in exchange for a 'true' account (Peters, 2001). Finally, there is the Holocaust survivor, whose bodily presence and experience of eyewitnessing suffering serves as a veracity claim.

Witnessing also includes the concept of bearing witness to the unimaginable and to silence. Following the concept of the Holocaust as 'an event without witnesses' (Felman and Laub,



1992), Agamben argues that Holocaust testimony has ‘value for...what it lacks: its centre contains a lacuna that bears witness to the missing witnesses, thereby making [...] survivors witnesses by proxy’(Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009). The survivor bears witness on behalf of those who cannot and also to their own survival—a trauma in of itself. This type of witnessing has been acknowledged in milblogging literature. According to Anden-Papadopoulos (2009), when soldiers post gruesome photos online, they express disbelief in their own survival amidst carnage. Therefore, a moral imperative to witness another’s suffering (the photos) occurs alongside a moral claim to come to terms with the self as a survivor (making the photos public).

### *Ways of Witnessing*

The complexity of witnessing forms the basis of contestation within witnessing literature and is testament to the instability within the field. In its most basic form, there are three types of witnessing: eyewitnessing, *seeing* an event first-hand; bearing witness, *testifying* to an event; and the witnessing audience, who *witnesses a testimony*. However, none of these categories has clear boundaries, and one often invokes the others.

Peters (2001) argues that eyewitnessing is the purest form of witnessing because it differentiates the witness, with his moral responsibilities, from the spectator. By being present in both time and space, the eyewitness is able to react to what he or she sees, whereas the witnessing audience cannot. Peters terms this ‘liveness’. He emphasises, ‘words can be exchanged, experiences cannot’ because by describing experience, the eyewitness must evoke representations and discourses which differ from their own, thus changing the original experience. According to Peters, bearing witness lacks the moral force of eyewitnessing precisely because it is socially and culturally mediated.

According to Ellis (2000), however, technologies relay experiences with such abundance of detail that the audience has the sensation of actually being present. Indeed, several authors (Silverstone, 2006, Cohen, 2001) argue that the capacity of media technologies to communicate experiences—particularly those of suffering—have made everyone in contemporary society into witnesses, despite their lack of physical presence or emotional connection to the event. As Ellis says, ‘you cannot say you did not know’. For Ellis, the amount of mundane detail conveyed by media technologies, compounded with their immediacy, makes audience members into witnesses of experiences of suffering. Paradoxically, the audience is made responsible to the event through technology, and yet

technology leaves them fundamentally powerless to respond fully. Technological development clearly throws the witnessing audience's moral role into question.

### *Intentionality*

One way of bridging the gap between Ellis and Peters' contentions is to further enquire into the intentionality of the text itself. As Ashuri and Pinchevski (2009) argue, when someone bears witness to an event they assert a personal version of truth; however, bearing witness is not complete until the audience acknowledges that testimony as truth. Indeed, Laub (1992a) emphasises that the listener, by accepting the testimony, 'is party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*'. Bearing witness is thus political, including the listener in its representation of reality. By asserting a specific 'truth', a witness constructs moral claims alongside that truth to acknowledge suffering. Consequently, the witnessing text can intentionally construct or obstruct moral claims.

Furthermore, by examining the intentionality of the text, it is possible to determine whether an audience is placed into a similar moral position of responsibility as an eyewitness. According to Frosh (2009), the audience can be invited to become 'pseudo-witnesses' through 'deployment of a host of discursive and representational techniques that imply liveness, immediacy, and co-presence'. Frosh gives the example of the Haggadah as a text which asks readers to imagine themselves experiencing first-hand fleeing from Egypt. Peters' (2001) problems of immediacy and physical presence are overcome by using discursive and representational devices to place the audience in a witnessing role. The text calls a witnessing audience into being and transforms them into moral participants in the representation of the original event.

### *Morality and Responsibility: Agency*

The concept of audience members as eyewitnesses has radical consequences for the responsibilities that witnessing implies. There is an ethic of responsibility in all forms of witnessing suffering—no matter how detached an individual is from the event. As Zelizer (2002) says, bearing witness to suffering creates 'a personal need to respond'. Specifically, Felman and Laub (1992) argue that to witness suffering is to acknowledge it as morally abhorrent; in Holocaust terms, it is to declare 'never again'.

When witnessing suffering through mediated representations, however, distance can complicate the witness's moral capacity. As Cohen (2001) argues, 'there is a real immediacy

[...] but there is also a fathomless distance'. Witnessing *through* someone's account can obscure the human details of suffering that construct the witness's moral claim. To have a moral claim, the witnessing audience must be able to recognise certain qualities in the sufferer: sufferers must be represented as human, but not as identical to the witness. Thus moral representations bring sufferers closer without obliterating their distinctive qualities, what Silverstone (2006) terms 'proper distance'.

Chouliaraki (2006b, 2006a) approaches this question in depth, arguing that using 'the analytics of mediation' helps to understand how media texts present suffering in ways that enable or disable audience engagement. Through the orientation of the text and agency of those depicted in it, Chouliaraki argues that a physical and emotional relationship between spectators and sufferers can be facilitated—what she terms 'pity'. The relationship of pity 'raises the moral obligation for the spectator to respond to the sufferer's misfortune in public' (p. 264). However, texts can also evoke the 'sublime', a term she builds on from the work of Boltanski (1999). In the sublime, the use of aesthetics, distance and narrative construct a spectator response of 'inaction' around 'contemplat[ing] the horror of the spectacle'(2006a).

Instead, Chouliaraki explains, a framework of moral action should be constructed by the text itself. It should distinguish the prosecutors and benefactors of suffering as humans and allow the audience to recognise them as such by constructing the audience as 'free subjects' (2006b) who draw upon their own emotional and experiential backgrounds. Oliver (2004) agrees, explaining that full witnessing requires a degree of 'response-ability'—the capacity to engage with one's surroundings. For Boltanski, this capacity for agency is key. He argues that when suffering is framed correctly, pity 'is no longer disarmed and powerless, but acquires the weapons of *anger*'. Indeed, in the use of the sublime, the mundane details central to the act of witnessing described by Ellis are obliterated and replaced with aesthetic spectacle and grand narrative. When suffering is presented without pain and without persecutors the witnessing abilities of the audience are effectively denied.

Whilst Chouliaraki (2006b) is careful not to be deterministic about the text bounding audience reaction, she underemphasises how the act of bearing witness can still fulfil a moral and therapeutic role for the eyewitness. Laub (1992b) reveals that 'being a witness to the process of witnessing' is a central component in allowing the eyewitness to proclaim 'never again' to the suffering they witnessed and also helps them to alleviate their own suffering. Consequently, the audience performs a therapeutic function by listening.

### *Therapeutic Witnessing*

Without straying too far towards psychoanalytical research, it is important to acknowledge that suffering and eyewitnessing suffering can resemble some aspects of trauma<sup>2</sup>—particularly the unfamiliarity that accompanies it. Bearing witness has a therapeutic aspect: that of constructing a public narrative out of seemingly unfamiliar and chaotic experiences. The concept of the therapeutic narrative introduces a tension between the desire to regain agency on the part of the sufferer and the act of forgetting.

Several milblog studies argue that soldiers attempt to negotiate a position for the unfamiliar in their ‘normal’ lives by posting evidence of their own suffering and that which they have witnessed online. This is done through the construction of a narrative on blogs (Keren, 2005) or by posting gruesome photos online—as done by soldiers on NowThatsFuckedUp.com (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2009). Anden-Papadopoulos argues that these postings are ‘an attempt to allow the outside world to bear witness with the soldiers, who are experiencing realities whose documentation and recognition are denied a place in traditional Western media and culture’. The sharing of such images can be seen as a therapeutic attempt to share the burden of witnessing the unfamiliar with the public which demanded such an act, and yet often refuse to witness its consequences. Indeed, the site’s closure makes a statement about what types of witnessing and representation are deemed socially unacceptable and silenced. Similar to the Holocaust testimony, these images speak the unspeakable (Laub, 1992b). However, publicising them can also be seen as a means of externalising responsibility. Thus the moral position of not simply witnessing, but also perpetrating a degree of suffering is brought into a public forum in which the soldier hopes to negotiate the unfamiliar scenes and acts he or she has encountered with the culturally sanctioned job he performs.

Beyond the photographic image, the construction of narrative through discourse is also therapeutic. Felman and Laub (1992) emphasise that the unique narrative of the survivor provides therapeutic release from silence. By telling, they argue, the eyewitness shares his moral burden. However, both Zelizer (1998) and Keren (2005) argue that in the process of bearing witness this uniqueness is subsumed by larger social narratives. Zelizer explains that the Holocaust narrative has become the dominant narrative through which Western societies view suffering. This allows witnesses to ‘forget’ the particularities of experience, diminishing the capacity for a specific (and thus moral) response. For Zelizer, whilst therapeutic, bearing

witness through narrative is an act of ambivalence. Similarly, Keren's study of the blog of *LT Smash* finds that through blogging, personal experiential detail becomes overwhelmed by popular cultural discourses<sup>3</sup>. Whilst therapeutic, this allows the author to duck moral responsibility by embedding unique experiences within familiar discourses.

Bearing witness has also come to have larger social connotations, such as the therapeutic narrative as discussed by Illouz (2003). Using the example of Oprah, she examines the act of publicly bearing witness to one's own suffering. Here, the highly individualised experience of suffering is fitted into a standard social narrative of overcoming obstacles on the way to completion of the self. Thus suffering becomes simply a 'complication in a broader narrative of well-being'. The listening public shares in the suffering, helping the witness place the event in the past and progress towards an 'improved, transformed' self. In this way, the act of bearing witness is performative; as Illouz says, 'to speak is already to heal'. However, in putting suffering behind, the witness forgets the details of the suffering, contextualising it in a generic framework of growth and renewal. The act of bearing witness can therefore construct and undermine moral roles for both the audience and eyewitness.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Following from the trend towards the personal and immediate in war reporting, milblogs present a window into the experience of war. However it is important to see them not as unmediated texts, but as complex representational entities which set up relationships between readers and bloggers and which also fulfil functions for the bloggers themselves. It is here that witnessing and the therapeutic narrative provide a helpful conceptual framework—mapping the representational work of milblogs to understand how moral claims are both enacted and obliterated, and how the strange is made familiar.

Building in particular on work by Peters (2001, 2009), Ellis (2000), and Chouliaraki (2006b), witnessing theory sees immediacy (or 'liveness') as the basis of moral claims. Both readers and eyewitnesses can be morally implicated depending upon how the text represents suffering and whether or not this suffering is brought into a relationship with the witness. While rejecting Peters' claim that only the eyewitness can be responsible to an event because he is there in space and time, it is possible to use witnessing theory to query how immediacy is constructed through the text. Combining this with the work of Chouliaraki demonstrates

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<sup>2</sup> For a full definition see Laub, D. 1992a. Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening in: S. Felman & D. Laub (eds.) *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, New York, London: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Popular war discourses are also noted by Brown and Lutz (2007).

how the text can construct the reader as a moral witnessing agent or as a passive, distanced spectator. To achieve ‘pity’, Chouliaraki identifies the importance of emotional ‘*specificity*’, physical ‘*concreteness*’ and ‘*mobility*’ which connects the contexts of safety and danger’. These characteristics bridge the distance between readers and sufferers. Representations of humanness and agency therefore help to identify the intentionality of the text. Theoretically, this also builds upon Oliver’s (2004) work, identifying an agent as one who is response-able, and on Frosh’s (2009) work on intentionality. Witnessing theory demonstrates how moral claims can be constructed and hindered by the text itself through the process of representation.

Furthermore, by bearing witness to their own suffering and that of others, milbloggers can construct therapeutic narratives. Therapeutic narratives can be constructed to facilitate generic social discourses, allowing the details of the suffering experience to be forgotten (Zelizer, 1998), or they can invite the audience into the process of bearing witness in a moral role (Laub, 1992a). Contextualising experiences in discourses such as ‘the ideological model of war’ (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2009) or popular-cultural war discourses such as the American war hero (Keren, 2005, Brown and Lutz, 2007) can restrict both the reader’s and the blogger’s ability to engage with the unique experiences of suffering. Similarly, Illouz’s (2003) work highlights the global phenomenon of the therapeutic narrative as a public act of overcoming suffering and healing, emphasising the tension between the recognition of the suffering experience and the desire to contextualise experiences of suffering in wider social narratives. However, as Felman and Laub (1992) advocate, constructing a narrative can also allow the sufferer to regain agency by familiarising the unthinkable and the strange. Also, here, the sufferer invites the reader into a moral role: to listen and to acknowledge the sufferer’s experience.

## **Research Question**

The rationale for research begins with the trend towards the personal account of suffering, especially through blogs. It builds on witnessing theory and the therapeutic narrative to understand how texts can structure interaction between readers, sufferers and eyewitnesses to suffering. Drawing on social constructivist theory, it is explicitly interested in the representational nature of discourse, and thus aims to understand how witnessing is enacted by these representations.

The main research question is:

**What role does witnessing play in representations of experiences of war in milblogs?**

The moral claims of witnessing are also of interest. Thus, several secondary questions about milblogs emerge, namely:

- How are moral claims advanced or curtailed through representation?
- How are relationships between sufferers and witnesses established (through detail) or undermined (through larger discourses)?
- Does witnessing result in the construction of a therapeutic narrative, and if so, how does this construct the blogger, reader and sufferer?

This will allow for an understanding of what elements of witnessing are in play and how the act of witnessing—particularly the moral role of the witness—is constructed through representation in the texts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the research question outlined above. By asking about witnessing as a social practice with moral ramifications and about representation, the research question emphasises a need to examine the very levels of discourse outlined by CDA—‘text, discourse practice and socio-cultural practice’ (Fairclough, 1995)—and how these come together to form relations of power.

CDA is a varied, interdisciplinary field with roots in linguistics, speech act theory, Marxism and psychology (Van Dijk, 2001, Potter, 1996). However, all of these approaches emphasise that CDA is explicitly interested in questions of power and domination<sup>4</sup>. Thus it also encompasses the question of *why* discourses are constructed in certain ways. This paper will draw on CDA as outlined by Fairclough (1992), Chouliaraki (2006b) and Van Dijk (2001), who combine elements from several aspects of CDA theory to focus primarily on issues of power at multiple layers of discourse: text, practice and context.

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<sup>4</sup> Hence ‘critical’ which distinguishes CDA from Discourse Analysis.

## Research Design: Using CDA

CDA takes the social nature of language, representation and meaning as its starting point, making it particularly useful for the research question at hand. Through social interaction, meanings are formed, assigned and grouped into larger systems of understanding and acting called discourses. As Fairclough (1992) explains, '[d]iscourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning'. Language and representations are therefore embedded in particular, and yet overlapping, social contexts which both constrain and enable certain forms of discursive interaction. Fairclough points to a need for three levels of analysis—text, discursive practice and socio-cultural context—in which all three levels are investigated, but also drawn together. The emphasis within CDA upon the 'dialectical relationship' between structure and agency present a dynamic view of power and individual agency. In this way, CDA emphasises discourse as a location of wider social struggle. These three levels of analysis form the framework for the research design.

At its core, CDA examines relations of power, inequality, domination and resistance. As Van Dijk (2001) explains, 'CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society'. CDA ties well into the theoretical component of witnessing and narrative by emphasising how representation can exercise hegemony and resistance. This method will therefore uncover the assumptions and power asymmetries inherent in different modes of witnessing, revealing how the texts draw on particular discourses to construct eyewitnesses, sufferers and readers as agents.

Specifically, this will be done by analysing the *representation*, *themes* and *orientation* of the texts. Chouliaraki (2006b) uses these components of CDA specifically in relation to suffering and agency in her 'analytics of mediation'. She emphasises the space-time orientation of the text in establishing a relationship for action or inaction with the reader. One of the key areas Chouliaraki addresses is the importance of the present tense and immediacy in the language and the semiotic construction of the text. Without this, she argues, spectators (readers) are left powerless to engage morally. This will be an area of emphasis in the analysis, as it reveals how discourses can shape hegemonic forms of action which inscribe patterns of domination over sufferers.

CDA also analyses how discourses draw on or are in tension with other discourses. These are the concepts of *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality*. Interdiscursivity relates to the way



different discourses interact with each other—either in support (rearticulation) or resistance (Fairclough, 1992). Building on Gramscian theory, CDA points to the dynamic<sup>5</sup> interplay of discourses and emphasises the unsettled and heterogeneous nature of each discourse as a whole, as well as its component parts. Dominant discourses incorporate elements of resistant discourses to maintain their power (Forgacs, 2000). Thus it is important to look for elements within discourses that are being compromised in order to chart wider discursive change and new forms of social action. This forms a crucial part of the research design by helping to identify tensions between moral claims and the role of social discourses such as the ideological model of war (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2009).

Similarly, *intertextuality* refers to the relationships between different texts—in this case between different blogs, films, forms of media (entertainment and news) and other, even seemingly unrelated, texts. As Fairclough (1992) explains, intertextuality is related to hegemony because ‘it points to the productivity of texts, to how texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions’. Thus, the meanings within a text have multiple layers and references, but can also create new meaning by drawing on past texts. It is important to recognise the interrelated nature of discourses and texts in order to accurately assess their specific and broader meanings.

To explore this, this study will look for ‘manifest’ cases where discourses are identified and either aligned with or discredited (Fairclough, 1992). Also according to Fairclough’s model, micro elements of the texts, such as *lexical choice*, *cohesion* and ‘*architecture of the text*’ will be analysed for signs of tension or strength as an indication of how this may affect macro levels of socio-cultural context and interaction. Are certain historical discourses of witnessing being drawn upon or rejected? How does this empower or disempower sufferers, eyewitnesses (bloggers) or readers to act? CDA therefore allows a map of social power to emerge from the texts and contexts it analyses. Furthermore, it will reveal *if* and *what kinds* of witnessing and narrative are prevalent discourses in milblogs and how these influence social practice.

Finally, CDA is concerned with the productive and dispersed nature of power as outlined by Foucault (1980). By analysing discourse at various levels, CDA aims to expose the pervasive nature of power relations and to reveal how they are naturalised, rearticulated and contested through everyday interaction. CDA therefore fits well with analysing blogs, which are daily forms of expression, as outlined in the theory chapter. CDA recognises everyday discourse as

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<sup>5</sup> This stands in opposition to Foucault’s concept of historical context as a much more static state of being in which

a central component of the discursive terrain. For Foucault, power resides in this ability to control the minute rules and practices surrounding what is seen as common sense or ‘truth’. For him, power produces ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’. However, Fairclough offers a more dynamic account of power in which through the reformulation of meaning, new discourses come into being. He terms this ‘creativity’. Thus, the method will look for subtle new forms of discourse and also for rules, constraints and the unspoken.

## **Limitations**

The theoretical background of CDA highlights the largest potential weakness in the methodology: interpretation. As much as discursive power impacts on the text to be analysed, it also impacts on the researcher. It is important to maintain a reflexive stance throughout the research project (Silverman, 1993). My own discursive construction could be critiqued on the same grounds as the text I am critiquing. Thus an inescapable weakness of this paper is my use of ‘sufferers’, ‘bloggers’ and ‘readers’ as abstract collectives. This limitation merits further discussion in suffering literature.

To make interpretive work explicit, each element of textual analysis and text selection is justified by the research design and conceptual framework (Hall, 1997b). Furthermore, because CDA does not have a set methodological framework, there is potential for vague analysis and over-generalisation (Antaki et al.). To avoid this, I attempted to focus on fewer texts and on the themes outlined in the conceptual analysis.

This study could also be critiqued on the basis that it incorporates only one method. Orgad (2005) emphasises how incorporating offline methods can add depth to online findings, revealing previously hidden feelings and tensions between online and offline accounts. Indeed, I initially considered integrating CDA with milblogger interviews. Interviews were set up to take place at the Milblogging Conference, via Skype; however, permission was withdrawn close to the conference, citing technical difficulty. This refusal highlights the tension between the public feelings of the online blogger and offline persona. It also indicates scepticism towards academic research, and perhaps a larger fear of exposure that could result in a mandate to remove the blog.

Ultimately, following Orgad’s (2009) advice on tailoring method to the research question, I decided to exclude interviewing to concentrate on the representational work of the texts

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one discourse or ‘regime of truth’ was dominant (Foucault and Sheridan, 1979).

themselves through in-depth analysis rather than on the producers' intentions. In fact, knowing the intentions of the milbloggers could have tainted the reading of the texts themselves, changing the meanings inferred by particular representations and resulting in biased analysis towards the bloggers' perspectives.

Content analysis was also considered as a means of combining qualitative and quantitative methods; however, since the study is concerned with representation, it was deemed that an interpretive method would be more beneficial.

## **Sampling**

The sampling process to select blogs and posts was complex. Firstly, in terms of blog selection, all of the blogs had to be linked to milblogging.com or mudvillegazette.com, two milblog aggregator sites. This took account of the concept of intertextuality within the milblogging community. The exclusion of non-aggregated blogs is perhaps a weakness of the research, and indeed, aggregator websites could be seen as constraining discursive possibilities. Nonetheless, as Hookway (2008) notes, the blogging world is vast and complex, and without tailoring the sample field to the research question, the researcher risks disorientation and abstraction from the research topic.

All of the Afghanistan and Iraq blogs on these two sites were examined, and some immediately discarded due to a lack of discussion about war or lack of entries. Hookway (2008) describes trawling as an important phase of research, training the researcher to read blogs as users do. This stage proved beneficial to gain familiarity with the milblogging community and its discursive context.

To determine sample size, past studies of milblogs were consulted. The most similar work, by Keren (2005), focused on one blog. Cammaerts and Carpentier's (2009) study encompassed two milblogs and two warblogs. Whilst this study aimed for an in-depth study like Keren's, the discursive element of the research question called for more than one blog to be analysed. I decided three blogs would allow for both plurality and depth within a paper of this size.

Blogs were selected on the basis that they were (1) of a personal nature—therefore *not* news-related; (2) about the experience of war on the front lines of combat<sup>6</sup>; and (3) written during the blogger's time at war. Also, a range of popularity was desired. Using the visitor counters

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<sup>6</sup> Although I wanted to include a female milblogger in the sample, female soldiers are not allowed on the front lines of combat missions, limiting the blogs' relevancy. However, a further examination of these blogs would likely bring new concepts to the forefront.

and user comments as a guide, I selected one very popular and one less-visited blog. The final blog was chosen somewhat arbitrarily as one which looked similar to the many blogs which had been trawled through.

Within this, four posts were selected from each blog on the basis that they displayed themes (even if resistant) from the conceptual framework. I strategically selected at least one post about encountering the dead, one post about contact with the local population (which turned out to be with children in all three blogs) and one post about the blogger's experience of combat. A final post was selected on the basis that it was typical of the blog. These are the blog entries selected and the references which will be used to identify them:

*My War Stories, Jedi (Afghanistan)*

J1—'Yesterday Was a Bad Day' (17 August 2005)

J2—'Doc Thomas Stone rest in peace brother...' (15 April 2006)

J3—'PBC continuation...The Road North...' (11 December 2007)

J4—'My Dearest:' (27 November 2007)

*One Marine's View, MajPain (Iraq and Afghanistan)*

M1—'Another Fine Marine Corps Day' (8 October 2005)

M2—'Afghanistan II' (2 November 2005)

M3—'Smoke Em If Ya Gotem!' (25 November 2010)

M4—'The Little Ones' (28 November 2005)

*Rajiv Srinivasan, Rajiv (Afghanistan)*

R1—'The Great Outdoors' (12 August 2009)

R2—'Purple Hearts and Minds' (13 September 2009)

R3—'Thankful' (28 November 2009)

R4—'The Last Patrol' (27 June 2010)

## **Ethics**

The public-private tension in blogging was important in setting up an ethical methodological framework. As Joinson (2005) emphasises, 'an understanding of the social aspects of Internet behaviour is crucial to the effective design of Internet-based methodology'. While the Internet makes information public, authors often intend for their work to be private (Scharf, 1999). Hookway (2008) argues that the decision between treating blogs as public or

private should be made on the basis of the intentions of bloggers and users themselves. He sees blogs as 'a public act of writing for an implicit audience', asserting that blogs which are not password protected are public. This is further endorsed by Bruckman (2002). Indeed, the milbloggers were not deemed to be at risk, since the blogs were freely available online, fulfilling Ess' (2002) criteria of 'do no harm'. Thus, exposing private thoughts to a public audience was not an issue.

The consideration of anonymity was also an important decision. Because the content is easily searchable online, disguising blogger pseudonyms seemed to create an easily breached facade of anonymity. Therefore, the bloggers' pseudonyms were used. In fact, as Bruckman (2002) argues, 'people care about the reputation of their pseudonyms'. The use of pseudonyms is thus important for online standing and also for giving creative credit. Finally, on the question of consent, it was determined that consent was both unattainable and not required. It is impossible to verify the identity of the blogger giving consent, and also, the lack of risk and public nature of blogging eliminates its necessity.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Through CDA, three themes were identified with reference to the conceptual framework of witnessing outlined in Chapter 1: suffering of bloggers, the distanced persecutor and eyewitnessing suffering. These draw together in the final theme of ‘therapeutic narrative’, which analyses one of the main moral functions of witnessing which these milblogs perform. Many themes are evident across all three blogs, but tensions between blogs and entries will be highlighted. Lexical choice, meaning and clause construction will be emphasised within quotations through the use of italics.

### Suffering of Bloggers

One of the most prevalent themes throughout the blogs is how the suffering of the bloggers becomes ordinary because of the environment of constant uncertainty and fear in which the soldiers are immersed. This is particularly noteworthy because suffering is extraordinary by its very nature, and yet the *ordinariness* of their suffering stands out. The bloggers represent themselves specifically as human sufferers through their use of detail in describing their emotions. Through the text, the bloggers bear witness to their own suffering, in a therapeutic sense. Also, they invite the reader into the experience of suffering by making moral claims to recognise the soldiers as sufferers and even step into the role of sufferer themselves.

#### *Suffering as Ordinary*

The bloggers represent themselves as living in a constant state of uncertainty and fear. Although often presented in abstract scenarios, the pervasiveness of this emotion testifies to its importance. Describing an ordinary day, MajPain writes, ‘Here you *always* have that “someone is trying to kill you thought” out there *constantly* in your head’[sic] (M1). His use of ‘constantly’ indicates the overwhelming nature of fear and uncertainty. Similarly, on a convoy, Jedi describes his approach into a village, saying, ‘Now the fun really begins’ (J3). The ironic humour in the line implies that ‘the fun’ is actually fear, and ‘really’ indicates a constant state of fear. Also though, the humour represents a sense of denial—suffering has clearly been normalised as routine, and yet it implicitly contrasts with the non-suffering routine of readers. Finally, Rajiv reflects on ‘the *thousands of scenarios* that could take place on *any given mission*’ as he begins a regular convoy. Fear is represented here as feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty, an emotion which is scattered throughout the texts.

Through the representation the everyday-nature of suffering, the bloggers also bear witness to their own feelings, detailing them with human attributes for the reader to identify with.

For example, as Rajiv returns from a mission, he writes, ‘I was hungry, tired, and up until this point, uninspired’ (R1). What is most noticeable about this physical description of exhaustion is that it is centred around the blogger (‘I’). It constructs Rajiv as an agent with human emotions, making a moral claim to the reader to witness his suffering as a fellow human. Also the text serves as a therapeutic outlet in which the blogger regains control over his surroundings, helping him to organise seemingly chaotic experiences by fitting them into social discourses. Excerpts like the one above introduce ideological discourses about ‘wag[ing] war against those who wish to kill Americans in the name of God’(R1), thus serving a therapeutic, if unethical, role for the blogger.

Through detailed physical and emotional descriptions of experiences of fear, the reader is also invited into the text as eyewitness. This is done in several texts through the use of ‘you’ to describe sensory experiences. For example, calling upon the feelings of tension and uncertainty, MajPain details a patrol:

I could explain every detail to *you* about it but *you* wouldn’t feel the sneaky eyes peeking around corners with cell phones calling trigger men ahead waiting to try to blow *you* up or *you* wouldn’t feel the weight on *your* chest as *you* swerve to miss the crater holes...(M3)

This description places the reader inside of the feelings of fear (‘the weight on your chest’) and as a passive recipient of direct threats (‘waiting to try to blow you up’). This transports the reader from safety into the physical and emotional details of danger, fulfilling Chouliaraki’s (2006b) model for spectator agency through *mobility*. By placing the reader inside the experience as eyewitness, it makes a moral claim to the recognition of the soldier-as-sufferer, but it also limits that claim to the blogger’s perspective. The reader also performs a secondary, therapeutic witnessing role, listening to the blogger bearing witness to his own suffering.

Furthermore, the entry describes the indescribable, prefacing the details with ‘I could explain every detail to you [...] but you wouldn’t feel...’ This distances readers from the sensory experience, preventing their total agency as eyewitnesses. However, the language also serves a therapeutic purpose for the blogger, in Felman and Laub’s (1992) terms, describing the indescribable to familiarise it and move forward. Thus the text resembles the therapeutic aspect of Holocaust witnessing, whilst simultaneously reducing the direct moral claim of the reader as eyewitness.

## **From Humanness to the American War Discourse**

The initial emotional specificity of suffering is often enveloped within wider discourses, thus constraining the reader's ability to recognise the humanness of the blogger. This results in an unstable witnessing claim. One particular entry by Jedi exemplifies this well. Waiting to hear about the loss of one of his fellow troops, Jedi explains: 'The sour taste in my mouth and the restless angst I couldn't control was fear' (J2). The specificity of the 'sour taste' and 'relentless angst' construct him as human. The description invites readers to identify Jedi's feelings with their own experience of those feelings, a necessary quality for Chouliaraki's (2006b) model of spectator-agency. By making a claim to the reader to recognise Jedi's suffering, the blogger is also making a claim to contextualise his suffering in a war discourse of sacrifice. The uniqueness of his suffering is therefore obscured by his soldierly sacrifice for the nation (here including the reader).

Also noticeable above is the blogger's lack of agency in his position as sufferer. The feelings are represented as beyond his control, indicating a need to structure the experience of suffering in order to overcome it. '[A]ngst I couldn't control' (J2) indicates a loss of responsibility and agency in the experience of suffering. The narration of these feelings of suffering can therefore be read as an attempt to create coherence. Similar to Laub's (1992a) description of the therapeutic aspect of witnessing, by bearing witness to his own suffering, he is healing and even regaining agency. Jedi even describes this process of healing by writing later in the same entry, 'As I have been trying to make sense of the loss of my friend...' (J2). However, the chaotic details of suffering are overwhelmed at the end of the entry, as Jedi calls upon the American war hero discourse, describing the loss of his friend as a testament to 'the honour, the integrity, and the love one man can show for his brothers'. Thus within the narrative structure, he consciously obliterates the unique facets of his own experience of suffering, undermining previous claims to human agency in favour of a popular-cultural narrative. The representation of Jedi's humanity as a moral claim therefore remains unsettled and contested, inviting the reader to recognize his humanness and simultaneously denying it.

MajPain also invites the reader inside his experience of suffering in combat and then transitions into ideological discourse. In this blog entry about a convoy, he details the physical experience of suffering alongside a sense of dread:



The explosion was a very bad sounding noise as you feel the pressure hit your chest. The kind you really don't like to hear regardless of the distance it is from you. The truck disappears in a cloud of smoke. The radio erupts with chatter. (M4)

This text clearly evokes a storytelling discourse. The dramatic visuals painted by the 'cloud of smoke' and the cinematic description of the experience of the bomb distance the reader from the unique details of the experience. This invites the contemplation of the sublime outlined by Chouliaraki (2006b), rather than constructing the reader as a witness.

However, upon closer inspection physical detail and immediacy predominate. This is evidence of the unsettled role of the reader as witness. The soldier's suffering is foreshadowed in his narrative structure, 'a *very bad sounding* noise' (M4). The total experience of violence pervades the discourse, moving from the physical description of 'pressure *hit[ting]*' to 'the radio *erupt[ing]*'. The sudden use of 'you' and change to present tense take the reader directly into the experience. This combination evokes immediacy which constructs the blogger as suffering in real time with the reader, even though he is not.

As the text continues, the reader remains morally directed towards the suffering of the blogger. The suffering of others is represented in abstract collectives as 'Marines' and 'some' (M4). The structure of the narrative remains focused on the blogger's experience: 'as a smaller 81mm mortar detonates on the front of *my* truck.' The lexical choice of 'as' and personal use of 'my' maintains a personal claim towards the blogger as the sufferer.

The text asserts a limited moral claim to the reader to help through moral support and action in the present. This is taken up at the end of the posting in a direct, widened request, '*Pray* for them, *tell* them thanks [...] We as a grateful nation are indebted to past and present warriors.' The use of the imperative constructs the readers as agents, compelling them to act morally on the basis of the suffering they have witnessed through the text. Also though, it bounds the moral claim through the discourse of the ideological model of war ('nation indebted' and 'warrior'). The 'my' and 'I' indicating agency the previous section are replaced with a collective discourse of 'we' and the 'grateful nation'. A wider truth claim based on the American war hero and ideological model of war discourses dominates over the humanness and personal feelings previously described. The heroism of the American 'warrior' sets up America as good and war on the enemy as justified. As such, at a discursive level it assumes that the reader is both a part of this ('we') and supports the sacrifice of the suffering 'warrior' on their behalf. The moral claim can be seen as transferred onto the American people—for it

is Americans who need the warriors' protection. Thus the text constructs a complex moral role for the reader: to witness the suffering of the blogger as a sacrifice for the reader himself.

### **The Distant Persecutor**

Although the detail and humanness in the representations make a partial claim towards bloggers as sufferers, their persecutors are not clearly defined, leaving the reader's capacity to witness incomplete. All three of the blogs are written primarily through a military discourse. Threats are represented terms such as 'a bomb/IED maker' (J2), 'the enemy' (M1), and 'enemy contact' (R1). This military jargon abstracts and distances the reader and blogger from the persecutors, objectifying, collectivizing and dehumanizing the persecutor. This eliminates the reader's agency by removing his or her ability to direct anger and dismay at the prosecutor, undoing the relationship of pity Chouliaraki (2006b) so prizes. This stands in stark contrast to the agency and familiarity apparent in the use of 'we' and 'I' representing soldiers and the blogger (see above).

The objectification of the prosecutor is particularly evident in Rajiv's entry about being hit by a thrown rock:

*Two rocks hit me square in the face. One in the eye brow and the other in my jaw. [...] Blood filled my hands from my mouth, flowing not nearly as quickly as the profanities I was yelling, cursing this ungrateful and disgusting country. (R2)*

Despite his detailed description of the physical and emotional experience of suffering which calls upon the reader to recognize Rajiv's humanity, the persecutor is represented abstractly as 'two rocks' and 'this ungrateful and disgusting country' (R2). This unclear delineation of the persecutor demonstrates a tension in Rajiv's representation. The text demonstrates a desire to make sense out of his chaotic experience of suffering by assigning and judging a persecutor, yet through abstraction it deliberately avoids placing blame. This tension is demonstrated in the entry's conclusion, 'Taking such a painful wound from *the populace, not the enemy*, gave me a distressful few nights of serious reflection.' Even in reflection, the 'wound' comes from the collective which is classified separately from an 'enemy' prosecutor. The abstraction of the prosecutor continues throughout Rajiv's entries, highlighting the instability of the text's moral claim to the reader to channel dismay against a specific person. Instead the text is more clearly positioned as a therapeutic narrative in which Rajiv reflects to make sense of his suffering.

MajPain is the only blogger to describe ‘the enemy’ in ideological terms as ‘Hajis’ (M1), a term he describes as ‘a compliment’ despite using it in other postings to describe his dislike of them<sup>7</sup>. ‘Haji’ is represented as reckless and weak, inviting his own death by ‘speeding’ past convoys and ‘try[ing] to hide’(M4). The collectivised, yet Afghanistan-contextualised representation of ‘Hajis’ as the persecutor marks a creative construction of new discourse which objectifies the prosecutor (Fairclough, 1992). However, its Afghan-specific meaning is overwhelmed by its manifest intertextuality. The term evokes the American war discourse of place-specific derogatory enemy nicknames such as ‘gook’ or ‘dink’ (Brown and Lutz, 2007). It cues the reader into an ideological war discourse with an enemy who deserves to be obliterated—a discourse supported by the Iwo Jima-like image which serves as MajPain’s banner (see Appendix II). By focusing the reader’s witnessing on objectification and on hatred it constructs any moral role for the reader as tokenistic—their anger only validating a pre-existing good-versus-evil dichotomy.

Combining both abstraction and ideological discourse, Jedi describes an encounter with a potential ‘VBIED’ [vehicle-borne improvised explosive device] (J3). The man inside the vehicle is described as ‘a guy’ who is later lumped in with ‘terrorists like these’, evoking a discourse of the War on Terror in which the prosecutor is objectified. Furthermore, the use of ‘terrorist’ along with the man’s description as ‘insane’ represents him as not fully mentally aware—thus distinctly *lacking* in human qualities which the reader might be able to condemn. The discourse of the persecutor is therefore severely delimited by abstract and frequently ideological representation.

### **Eyewitnessing Suffering**

The bloggers’ representations of their encounters with children demonstrate how the soldiers gain agency through the way they representation the act of alleviating suffering. The bloggers first clearly construct children as sufferers. Then they represent themselves as agents capable of alleviating children’s suffering through personal interaction. The sequential nature of this narrative structure in each of the three blogs makes a moral claim, asserting that as eyewitnesses to suffering, they are compelled to alleviate it. In MajPain’s encounter, he gives an Afghan girl a Pepsi outside of a medical centre he is guarding (M2). Jedi’s encounter takes place as he guards a rubbish truck and children come to claim the rubbish (J4). Rajiv describes the most distant of the encounters with children—waving to kids and smiling as he

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance (MajPain, 4 November 2005).

passes by in his Stryker (R1). The pattern of all three suggests that the texts intend for the reader to witness the blogger's acts of compassion.

### *Child Sufferers*

The classification of children as sufferers is evident in the bloggers' lexical choices and the links drawn between the themes of child vulnerability and the dangerous nature of the child's home country. Lexical choice is most obvious in Jedi's representation of children as 'mostly dirty and raggedly dressed' sufferers who 'have so little' (J4). The children are represented as deprived, but no persecutor of that deprivation is present besides the abstract 'economic and socially disruptive environment they have grown to accept as life'. The seeming inescapability of their position focuses the text on the blogger's act of witnessing suffering. Also, 'they have so little' implies a contrast between the child-sufferers and the soldiers *and* the readers, who presumably 'have so much'. While the children are collectivized as 'the kids', they are also given specific human characteristics such as exact ages ('3 to 14 or 15') and agency ('they *fight* for our trash' and 'they *jump* into the pit'). Their actions take place in a way which saddens the blogger to 'pity', cementing his moral claim to them as a moral truth.

MajPain displays similar lexical choice, representing the child he encounters as 'a dirty nasty little thing' [sic] (M2). Although objectified as a 'thing', the child is also given gender ('girl'), age ('3-5 year old') and agency ('she protected herself'). Furthermore, she is placed within a context described as 'the middle of hell'[sic], further strengthening her status as a sufferer.

Finally, Rajiv represents children in the most abstract sense. They are consistently collectivized as 'kids' or made typical as 'the child' or 'a girl' (R1). In Rajiv's entry, children are represented as sufferers solely because of their environment ('the painful history of this country') from which any persecutor is absent. However, Rajiv represents children with human qualities and life stories. The children he encounters have 'acquaintances and loved ones hurt or killed in war'. Children are thus clearly defined as sufferers in terms of loss, hardship and humanness, qualities with which the reader can identify, albeit abstractly.

All three of these accounts exemplify bloggers bearing witness to their own act of eyewitnessing. In doing so, they construct a personal moral claim for themselves and a lesser one for the reader.

*Agency Through Familiarity*

The children also gain agency through their representation as familiar within an unfamiliar context. While the setting might be ‘hell’(M2), the children are recognizable. This enables the full moral claim of eyewitnessing suffering to take place, bridging the identification of a sufferer with the moral imperative to alleviate suffering.

All three bloggers represent the children in their entries as having generic, yet familiar, qualities. Rajiv celebrates their universal purity—‘an innocent child, untainted’ (R1)—constructing a moral claim to safeguard this in the face of an environment full of suffering. He represents children as typical the world-over with the truth claim, ‘children are either blank slates [...] or stubborn reflections’. While the construction of children as typical can be seen as a distancing mechanism, the pervasive theme in Rajiv’s text is how this stable familiarity allows him to connect with them as an agent himself. The entry reads, ‘I have quite the soft spot in *my* heart for happy kids’, thus making a personal claim (‘I’) towards the well-being of the ‘happy’ child in the face of adversity. Finally, the entry is structured as a narrative, allowing him to fulfil his moral claim by exercising his agency in a way which bonds him with the child. He represents his actions as a benefactor, writing ‘*I try* to make an effort, however futile, to write something positive on their clean slate.’ The public nature of this representation demonstrates his fulfilment of this moral claim in front of readers, making it imperative for them to witness his reaction to eyewitnessing suffering. This is further endorsed by the banner image of soldiers interacting with locals on Rajiv’s blog.

Jedi also represents the children he encounters as typical, describing them as ‘undeniably curious’ (J4). His experience witnessing children ‘jumping into the pit’ to retrieve soldiers’ rubbish leads him to make a moral claim towards the very act of eyewitnessing. Because the event is represented as shattering his concept of the typical child’s life so drastically (he judges the scene as ‘to tragic’[sic]), he refuses to take a photograph of it for a friend, thus emotionally validating Peters (2001) claim that certain moral claims come only with eyewitnessing. Paradoxically though, while he refuses to take ‘snapshots’, he still blogs his experience. This suggests that the reader, by witnessing his testimony of suffering is able to form a moral relationship to the suffering children through him in a way that they could not through the technology of the photograph. Thus, the personal nature of his testimony makes a moral claim for the reader to witness his emotion (sadness) as evidence of suffering. Jedi’s intention for the entry to be publicly appreciated is evident in his translation of ‘Salaam A-likem’ [sic], which he says to an adult upon witnessing the suffering. He wants the reader to recognize his closeness with the adult through the native language and acknowledges that the

reader needs a translation. Like Rajiv, Jedi's entry represents a desire for recognition of his moral reaction to witnessing. Also though the blogger represents himself regaining his agency through interaction with the adult ('I [...] *showed* him respect...'). His public display of personal bonding fulfils his moral claim as eyewitness and also makes a claim for his reader to acknowledge his actions.

Finally, MajPain also represents his ability to witness and alleviate suffering as partially contingent upon the child's familiarity. He represents the girl as familiar in that she is un-Afghan, writing 'Its taboo for a female to look a man in the eyes in their customs. She was *too young to know or care*[sic] (M2). Her familiarity in innocence allows him to engage with her. The cohesion (Fairclough, 1992) between her familiarity and his agency as a witnessing benefactor is evident in the sentence's proximity to the sentence describing his action. Immediately following familiarity: '*I got up and moved towards her...*' and '*I open one [Pepsi] for her*'. The use of 'I' and active verbs construct him as an agent, contrasting with his previous representation as a collective 'we' with troops. As MajPain bonds with the girl, 'we' becomes him and the girl: '*We just sat there and she and I enjoyed a hot Pepsi...*' Crucially, for MajPain, the moment is one in which he is relieved of his own fear, 'I wasn't worried as I had a full combat platoon providing security'. This hints at Laub's concept of constructing a narrative for therapeutic purposes: through MajPain's agency as benefactor he is able to reassert control over the previous feelings of chaos and uncertainty. The reader bears witness to both his suffering and the girl's, but also to the fact that he is able to regain control over his suffering. Thus the narrative fulfils a dual sense of witnessing.

### **Therapeutic Narrative**

Through bearing witness to suffering, the bloggers use narrative to bring order to seemingly disparate experiences. They do this by calling upon therapeutic discourses of renewal or returning to the ideological model of war. The reader is intended to bear witness to the blogger overcoming suffering either through growth or through strength. This model fits well with Illouz's (2003) theory of the public, social component of publicly bearing witnessing to one's own suffering in order to overcome it. Thus by witnessing the construction of therapeutic narrative, the reader helps the blogger to heal. The therapeutic capacity of the narrative is therefore contingent upon the assumed presence of the reader.

One entry by each of the bloggers demonstrates this best. Rajiv's entry is about helping troops hit by an IED (R3); MajPain's entry is about a convoy mission hit by three IEDs (M4);

and Jedi's entry is about arriving at the scene of a helicopter crash (J1). In each of these entries, the blogger's encounter with dead soldiers is the theme of the entry and it is embedded as a moment of suffering within a wider narrative.

All of the bloggers represent their direct encounters with death as absurd and unfamiliar. This is most evident in MajPain's account of a Marine who has been hit 'doing a kinda flopping chicken dance on his back' (M4) and in Jedi's representation of bodies as 'burned and blackened and utterly alien' (J1). Whilst Jedi's description is almost cinematic in character, the absurdity and unfamiliarity of these representations demonstrate an inability to come to terms with what is being seen. The bloggers bear witness to their inability to comprehend the suffering of others.

The subsequent emotions they describe contextualise this suffering into a wider narrative about their own growth and strength. Although he does not describe death as absurd or unfamiliar, Rajiv's description of death is from a distanced vantage point as if it is already contextualised into an overarching narrative. The suffering is presented as already on the mend, distanced in a scene of recovery from war, 'I can see it from my hatch through my night vision. There are soldiers scattered around, doing whatever they can for those shaken up in the blast' (R3). For both Rajiv and Jedi, the encounters with the dead are immediately drawn into a reflective framework. Jedi generalises and externalises his experience, writing 'if you let it get to you, and you embrace the pain too deeply and make it your own, you're in trouble' (J1). In reflection, Jedi can be seen both acknowledging his pain and forgetting it through a truth claim that suffering must be overcome to be a soldier. As the narrative ends, Jedi describes himself crying on a rooftop, paying tribute to the sacrifice of all troops ('complete strangers') from a distance as a means of renewal. Rajiv's representation of renewal is more symbolic, as he writes about contemplating the narrative of his life as he watches sunrise: 'The sun was about to rise, and it promised to be a beauty. [...] I'm just thankful we all get to see this sunrise.' The survivor discourse is evident here in enabling a sense of renewal. Finally, Rajiv concludes by recalling Thanksgiving at home and places his experience as a part of a social ritual of renewal.

MajPain, however, contextualises his encounter with the dead in an American war narrative. Witnessing suffering is represented as a means of proving his strength. Suffering is distanced, directly encompassed into the story of the American war machine: 'Past training and experience goes into motion and takes over like Im on *auto pilot*'[sic] (M4). The entry concludes with 'keep attacking, attack again, never stop'. For MajPain, healing occurs

through proving his strength. Thus it forms a discourse of renewal clearly shaped by the hegemonic discourse of American war.

What can be seen in all three of these narratives is that healing is a public act in the realm of the blog. As witnessing texts, the blog entries have their own spatial and temporal location. Through the creation of a therapeutic narrative by writing the text, the blogger's suffering only begins the act of healing. Thus the suffering is suspended in time and space, awaiting public consumption in order to be complete, a characteristic unique to blogs.

The duality of the blogger bearing witness to his own suffering and the reader bearing witness to the process of overcoming suffering has both a hegemonic function—maintaining the discourse of the strong American war hero—and a therapeutic witnessing function—requiring a public act of bearing witness to suffering in order to heal. In many ways, this draws together the representations discussed throughout the analysis chapter, showing how each aspect of representation is important for constructing an overall whole out of diverse and contested representations of experiences. There is a sense of Zelizer's (1998) 'forgetting' in this blurring of unique representations; however, it demonstrates how the role of witnessing in military blogs operates at multiple levels for both the reader and blogger.

## CONCLUSIONS

Examining milblogs has demonstrated the diversity of witnessing which can occur in any one text. All three of the milblogs displayed tensions between asserting moral claims to the audience to bear witness to the suffering of the milblogger and abstract claims to the reader to see the perpetrators of suffering as objectified, collective 'enemies'. This shows how larger discourses—especially 'the ideological model of war' and American war narratives—can curtail the capacity to witness. Representations of war in text are therefore crucial to constructing moral relationships between readers and bloggers, readers and sufferers in the text, and bloggers and the sufferers they eyewitness. Thus this study validates the work of Chouliaraki (2006b) in particular. Also though, witnessing theory allows for a critical differentiation of the various relationships between witnesses and sufferers. It highlights *who* has the power to assert moral claims and *how* different forms of witnessing—eyewitnessing, bearing witness and 'media witnessing'—allow for varying levels of recognition of suffering.



Indeed, it would be interesting to further query whether different forms of witnessing could be considered social discourses in of themselves. Also, it would be fruitful to expand the study to include more blogs and readers' comments.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is how the blog texts set up a direct relationship between the reader and milblogger. Here, the reader was placed as an eyewitness to the milblogger's suffering through the text of the blog itself. The text of the blog not only constructed the milbloggers as sufferers by detailing their experiences of war, but the texts themselves can be seen as evidence of suffering. Indeed, the final finding—that the text set up a therapeutic narrative—shows how milblogs have a concrete time and space of their own. The 'multimodal' nature of the texts themselves demonstrates that moral 'media witnessing' may be possible. Witnessing theories emphasise how texts can assert moral claims by constructing readers as eyewitnesses, but also they show where these moral claims become weak. Representations of war in milblogs are still clearly unsettled. The complexity of these texts points to the fact that witnessing suffering is still a highly contested discursive realm.

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