



The Bundeswehr's NEW MEDIA CHALLENGE

Thomas Rid

ARMED FORCES all over the world are struggling to come to grips with a new, aggressive media environment. In the first U.S.-led Iraq War, in 1991, many journalists still used typewriters, and only the large television networks could afford clunky satellite phones; today, slim cell phones are the norm for journalists, soldiers, and even civilians in most war zones. About 2.8 billion phones with built-in cameras, sound recording capabilities, and text-messaging are in use already, and 1.6 million are registered every day.¹ In the 1990s, reporters had a near-monopoly on war coverage; today, soldiers alone publish approximately 1,700 blogs on the Internet, and civilians in war zones publish a fair number of online diaries as well.² During General Norman Schwarzkopf's war, CNN and the BBC were the only providers of moving images; today, Internet video-sharing sites boast footage uploaded by U.S. troops as well as insurgents and militant Islamists. The footage includes recordings of executions, improvised explosive device attacks, and snipings, and the material is available to anyone with a computer, anywhere. This media environment signals a veritable revolution in media affairs. What might its consequences be?

To get a bird's-eye view of a development that is at first glance troubling and dangerous, this article will examine some of the German Army's recent media challenges; discuss several trends of wider significance for those who make policy, war, and news; and put the new media's effects into their proper contexts. It will also look at the new technology's positive aspects and suggest how to deal with the new realities.

Taking Hits

On 25 October 2006, *Bild*, Germany's most popular daily newspaper, published five photographs that shocked the Federal Republic.³ The photos depicted German soldiers in Afghanistan posing with bleached human skulls, exhibiting them as souvenirs and hood ornaments. In a particularly egregious one, a soldier holds a cranium while making sexually explicit gestures. The pictures hit political Berlin like a bomb explosion. Chancellor Angela Merkel said the soldiers' behavior "cannot be excused"; NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer voiced his concern; U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, traveling in Berlin, demanded clarification; and pundits called the German Army's moral fitness into question.⁴ The German Army and Germany's federal attorney launched investigations of 23 suspects, and 6 soldiers were suspended from

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PHOTO: A German reads the "Bild" newspaper in Bremen, Germany, 25 October 2006. Bild shows pictures of German ISAF soldiers posing with a skull and making obscene gestures in Afghanistan. Headline reads: "Bundeswehr Skandal in Afghanistan—Shocking photos of German soldiers." (AP Photo/Joerg Sarbach)

service. The “skull affair” had developed into one of the most embarrassing scandals the *Bundeswehr* (Federal Defense Force) ever had to face.

More was to come. On 13 April 2007, *Der Stern*, one of the country’s largest weekly papers, broke another story.⁵ In July 2006, a 90-second video posted on MyVideo.de, the most popular German-language video-sharing site, had shown a German instructor with a soldier dressed in camouflage in a forest in Schleswig-Holstein. The video recorded the instructor telling the soldier to imagine hostile blacks in the Bronx in New York City while he fired his machinegun. The soldier then fired and shouted an obscenity several times in English between bursts. *Der Stern*’s hugely popular website, stern.de, ran an article quoting an activist officer who blamed the Bundeswehr’s “fighter cult” and increased “international operations” for the troops’ behavior. The article came with the MyVideo-application neatly embedded, ready to play with one mouse click.⁶ Aired on German national television on Saturday, 15 April 2007, the video sparked over 600 newspaper reports in the English-language press alone. The German Defense Ministry described the video as “completely unacceptable.”⁷ German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier condemned it while on a mission to New York City, where the Reverend Al Sharpton demanded that President George W. Bush intervene in the affair.⁸ (The Virginia Tech shootings then overshadowed the story.)

Not long before this incident, on 10 March 2007, another video had appeared on the Internet. In the video, a previously unknown Iraqi insurgent group, the Arrows of Righteousness, paraded two hostages before the camera and threatened to kill them unless all German troops withdrew from Afghanistan within ten days.⁹ On 6 February 2007, Arrows of Righteousness had kidnapped 61-year-old Hannelore Krause, a German citizen living in Iraq, and her 20-year-old son, from their Baghdad home. After hearing the video’s demands, the German government said it would not submit to blackmail, and, on 17 March, Germany’s president took the unusual step of addressing the kidnappers in a video message of his own.¹⁰ In reply, the Arrows of Righteousness posted a video on the Al-Hesbah forum, extending the ultimatum for withdrawal by 10 days.¹¹ In the video, weeping and begging the chancellor personally for help, Krause read out,

“Germany was safe before it allied with America in this devilish alliance against what is called terrorism.” As this article goes to press, the Foreign Office’s “crisis staff” is still working on the case.

Setting Trends

The incidents described above depict aberrations and are in no way indicative of the Bundeswehr’s high professional standards. Yet the three incidents are highly instructive. The episodes bring to light five issues that may have a big impact on future military operations and even the perception of Western armies during peacetime.

First, *the new media environment is ubiquitous*. It’s not under control, and it’s nearly impossible to control. Enlisted soldiers tape digital cameras to their tanks’ armor, record incoming close air support, and post the clips online. Jihadists film suicide attacks, sometimes with three camera teams from different angles, cut the material into short clips, and distribute the resulting propaganda in forums. For German soldiers in the presently calmer northern part of Afghanistan, graphic action material is more difficult to come by, so the most popular Internet postings are photo-collections of soldiers with music soundtracks. Viewers leave comments on the videos’ quality, discuss the equipment used, and reminisce about their soldiering. One 39-year-old YouTube-user from the United Kingdom commented on a video provided by a German soldier in Afghanistan by writing: “Shame you can’t get some decent fighting in. I’m sure you’d be good at it. At least you won’t have to resort to ridiculous posing shots.”¹²

The British soldier’s remarks hint at a potential problem. When the Bundeswehr engages in combat action, the stress and strain on its service members will rise, and publishing on the Internet will then become a way to deal with that pressure. “You have two choices—take a valium, or start a blog,” wrote a 24-year-old Iraqi woman in the midst of the rising civil war in her country.¹³ IED attacks create tremendous psychological pressure. In May 2007, approximately 2,300 videos on YouTube.com had the tag “IED.” The top 20 of these, all uploaded within a year, were viewed about one million times.¹⁴ Mathis Feldhoff, a senior journalist at *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF, Second German Television) thinks stress-induced publicity will be “a big problem” for the Bundeswehr in the future.¹⁵

Second, *user-generated content, like a telephone conversation, is interactive, unedited, unfiltered, and often emotional.* When Albert Camus traveled to Algeria in January 1956 in an attempt to stem the escalating revolt through a “civil truce,” he thought he would be able “to speak in the name of reason.” However, faced with protests, he wrote with resignation, “Passion carries everything before it. One has to come here to understand.”¹⁶ In today’s new media environment, one no longer has to go there to understand. Many media products arouse passion, on both sides. A U.S. veteran in California created an impressive video compilation of IED and ordnance explosions set to the music of AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck” and uploaded it to the web. He timed the explosions so that the rock group’s drumbeats were coordinated with the detonations.¹⁷

Some insurgent media organizations use even more sophisticated techniques. Many of their videos are available for download in formats that enable mobile phone users to view them on their cell phone screens. Some commentary left on militant forums, such as *alfirdaws.org* (paradise jihad forum), is spontaneous, emotionally intense, full of religious rhetoric, and appeals to audiences with little access to other news. In such Islamic forums, the culture of online participation is as well developed as in American social networking sites, if not more so, and the user-generated content goes beyond that of a telephone conversation: it is public, illustrated, and archived.

Third, *the old media increasingly use the new media.* Although online videos are certainly better targeted and can more easily be viewed on demand than old-media products, one million views a year is a small number compared to the number of viewers watching any regular TV channel. Blogged stories and uploaded clips remain largely unnoticed by the broad public—unless, that is, the mainstream media pick up the story. When the ZDF’s Feldhoff did his report on post-traumatic stress disorder, he interviewed one Marc Obenland, a corporal and computer specialist who had served in Afghanistan in early 2006. After his tour, Obenland posted a 13-minute compilation online that captured the stressful nature of deployment.¹⁸ Feldhoff found it when he researched his report, and then contacted the corporal.

Fourth, *the publication of such material on the Internet can create news value, even if the event occurred in the past or its factual basis is unclear.* Many believe

that newsworthy events must be fresh and accurate, but this is not the case. The full impacts of the skull affair, the racism video, and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal came long after the events occurred. Arab television’s Al-Jazeera offers a more recent example: on 11 April 2007, it broadcast an interview with a representative of the so-called Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI), a terrorist group that had carried out several high-profile attacks against U.S. forces. Al-Jazeera aired an IAI propaganda video of sniper attacks on U.S. Soldiers, complete with Islamic martial music, the group’s logo, and a reference to its website, *iaisite.info*, thus making the group’s propaganda available to Al-Jazeera’s worldwide audience.¹⁹ The material’s date, origin, and accuracy remain unknown—and are irrelevant for the video’s immediate impact.

Fifth, *user-generated content can have a strategic effect.* In the above instances, the actions of enlisted soldiers and a previously unknown militant group had a strategic impact on a national debate. Our adversaries will continue to use their own media outlets to break the political will of democracies. “These videos are a true weapon,” says Lieutenant General Karlheinz Viereck, commander of the Bundeswehr’s operations command and responsible for all German overseas operations.²⁰

If, as Clausewitz wrote, war is an act of force to compel the enemy to obey one’s will, then Internet propaganda videos are particularly efficient weapons: they bypass the use of military force entirely and directly attack the government and the people, two elements of the Prussian theorist’s famous trinity. In response, to calm the public’s outrage after a highly publicized kidnapping in which a Nicholas-Berg-like beheading is a possible escalation scenario, the foreign minister or even the president is often forced to step in, thereby unintentionally acting in the kidnapers’ interest.

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The New Media Embedded

Let us put the issues described above into their relevant contexts. Although available technologies and new media consumption patterns are largely identical worldwide, the political, military, and mass-media environments of the United States differ significantly from those of most of its NATO allies. Again, Germany offers an illustrative case.

The differences are probably the starkest in the political realm. Unlike the U.S., today's Germany is a deeply pacifist society. An unspoken assumption in public discourse is that the use of military force is morally problematical: Germans believe that because their country's militarism wreaked havoc in the past, they had better be careful about using the army. German stabilization operations and provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in northern Afghanistan are already pushing the public's tolerance of military operations to the limit; the very idea of *Kampfeinsatz*, or combat operations, is a political no-go. Germany's deployment of six Tornado aircraft to Mazar-i-Shareef in Afghanistan's south is one of the most debated foreign policy decisions in 2007: more than 4,000 newspaper articles have been published on the matter, and the Left Party even sued the government in Germany's Supreme Court for breaking international law. One of the government's major lines of defense was that the aircraft would "only" do reconnaissance; they would not support combat operations. One YouTube viewer wrote below a video of German ground troops serving in Afghanistan: "[I hope] your government lets you off the leash so you can go south"—but that scenario remains highly unlikely.²¹

The military context is important. The Bundeswehr has reformed at an impressive speed since its first armed overseas operation in Somalia in 1993, and its officers' learning curve has been very steep in many respects. More than 7,500 troops are currently serving their country abroad. Yet German soldiers have not participated in major ground combat operations since World War II. Therefore, German military leaders have had few opportunities to learn from crises and to adjust their routines and procedures, particularly in public affairs—an activity that is difficult to rehearse in maneuvers.

America's military leaders had to learn the hard way that shutting out the media in Grenada, Panama, and during the first Persian Gulf War was not beneficial.²²

The U.S. embedded-media program for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a conceptual turnaround. "Let's tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions as they most certainly will continue to do," said a November 2002 message from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to all combatant commands.²³ To enable the U.S. to be the first out with information, the Pentagon delegated release authority for news to the lowest possible level and advised commanders to "approach these decisions with a 'why not' rather than 'why?' [attitude]."²⁴

The German Ministry of Defense has not learned this lesson yet. The ministry is structurally set up to be reactive, not proactive. The ministry's public affairs leaders focus more on the minister's personal image than on the Bundeswehr's. One former public affairs official argues that under the stress of more intense combat operations, with friendly casualties and killed enemy combatants, the ministry might snap back into a restrictive information policy.²⁵ Defense correspondents share this view.

A widespread misunderstanding compounds the problem. The embedded-media program, which most journalists and officers in the United States regard as a successful undertaking, has a rather bad name in Europe. Many German officials, civilian and military, assume that the United States does not allow embedded reporters to report freely and that restrictions on them go well beyond mere operational security. Such embedding, some argue, is not compatible with article 5 of Germany's Basic Law, which prohibits censorship.²⁶ Another argument says that the Bundeswehr's public affairs policy is so good that the press has no interest in being embedded. While the German army's current press policy is indeed good, and some journalists do go on patrol with units, this state of affairs might not be crisis-proof.

Finally, the policy's positive side aspects should not be ignored. The U.S. debate on security and defense policy has benefited tremendously from books and articles by formerly embedded journalists such as Michael Gordon (*Cobra II*), Thomas Ricks (*Fiasco*), Rick Atkinson (*In the Company of Soldiers*), and Mark Bowden (*Blackhawk Down*). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—no matter how badly they were initially executed politically and militarily—have educated the press corps in military matters, with the result that the Fourth Estate's views

are taken very seriously today. *Fiasco*, for example, probably has received more attention in military circles than most doctrinal documents have.

Even so, instead of seeing the embedded-media program's positive effects, the German press largely views it as a shrewd form of propaganda and censorship. For many European journalists, being embedded with military units means losing impartiality and becoming co-opted. This attitude is akin to that of a soccer reporter who refuses to comment on a soccer game because he neither understands the rules of the game nor approves of soccer. However, the few German journalists who have been embedded have a more nuanced view: they know the military better than their colleagues do, and hence write and speak about military affairs in a more knowledgeable way. Embedding more foreign reporters with units engaged in major operations may have a beneficial side effect on national debates in third countries in the long-term.

By contrast, with respect to the new media, there are significant similarities between the United States and Europe. MyVideo.de, launched in April 2006, was number 17 on Germany's most popular sites only one year later, and viewing is on a sharp upward trajectory: its reach has increased by 46 percent in the past three months.²⁷ The popularity of dailymotion.com, the most popular French video site, increased by 76 percent in the same period.²⁸ Today, YouTube is the world's fourth most visited site, and MySpace is the fifth.²⁹ The abundance of web-capable mobile devices is enhancing this trend.

Many politicians, officers, and experts are concerned about and even alienated by the spread of these new technologies and fear they are losing control of them. Today's senior leaders have not been socialized with the new media. Many discovered email, chat, text messaging, and podcasting for the first time when younger colleagues or their own children showed it to them. They continue to read newspapers in hard copy as their main source of information. The generals who don't understand Web 2.0 are what Marc Prensky of games2train calls "digital immigrants."³⁰ Many of today's majors, captains, and lieutenants, however, and surely the enlisted ranks, are "digital natives." For them, it is normal to have MySpace profiles, chat online, subscribe to podcasts, read blogs, and post their comments and even videos online.

Handling New Tools

Islamic militants, jihadis, and insurgents are usually rather young and well acquainted with the new media. Some insurgents in Iraq use local telephone service providers to send out mass messages using the Short Message Service. Sunni militant groups work the Internet with sophistication. Today, the web is the "primary repository of the essential resources for sustaining the culture of terrorism," says Michael Doran, the new U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Diplomacy. On 3 May 2007, in a briefing to the Senate Committee On Homeland Security, Doran said that Al-Qaeda employs the Internet as an "operational tool" for a variety of organizational purposes, such as recruitment, fundraising, training, instruction, operational planning, and as a "virtual extremist madrassa."³¹

We should learn from the militant extremists' manipulation of the new media. Clearly, the latter are more than just tools for external communication, even though the most sophisticated armies too often still regard them as such. As they use the web, cell phones, and other new technology, insurgent groups have displayed characteristics that Western armies and government agencies should also develop: language skills, cultural and religious empathy, pragmatism, technological dexterity, and networked organizations.

What does this mean in practice? First, we can use the new technology internally to make our operations more efficient. Gerhard Brandstetter, a former commander of the German PRT in Kunduz, believes that mobile phones and digital cameras are essential tools in reconstruction work. Say money from funding agencies is needed to rebuild a school or to get modern equipment for a hospital. Digital photographs, instantly developed and shot around the country in seconds, can help involved organizations prioritize tasks, prepare technically for the job, and get the resources to do the job. According to Brandstetter, prohibiting the use of digital cameras, cell phones, and similar devices is "entirely illusionary, and would not serve the purpose."³²

Other new-media enablers are communities-of-practice. The most prominent one, CompanyCommand.com, has become part of the U.S. Army's infrastructure. So has PlatoonLeader.org, a kind of military version of MySpace wherein U.S. Army troops exchange information about their work.³³ The Marine Corps and

the Air Force then tried to emulate the Army's successful initiative. In 2006, the U.S. intelligence community built its own community-of-practice, Intellipedia, based on Wikipedia's software. Intellipedia is a community-networking site designed to share information across security agency boundaries.³⁴

Armies can also use the new media environment externally to meet new demands. For example, we should make use of blogs written by a growing number of active-duty soldiers (milbloggers). In times of scarce journalistic coverage, mainly due to the poor security situation in Iraq, modern armies should welcome milblogs as an additional—and credible as well as candid—perspective on their work. Multi-National Force—Iraq opened a YouTube channel on 17 March 2007, promising a boots-on-the-ground perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom.³⁵ Other military units and services started similar channels. It remains to be seen how successful these experiments will be.

Text messaging and using locally preferred Internet sites to reach a local audience in the area of operations are other good possibilities. During the European Union Force's (EUFOR's) military operation in Congo, the EUFOR public affairs officers used mass text-messaging to organize press conferences for local journalists, and they offered support for African journalists trying to acquire cell phones.

Currently, only a very small number of German milblogs exist; the phenomenon is most widespread in the U.S. Army, where a search for the right regulatory policy is on. A 6 April 2005 memorandum from Headquarters, Multi-National Force-Iraq, ordered milbloggers to register their sites with their units. Not all have done this. Regulation 530-1, issued 19 April 2007, went a step further. It requires bloggers to "consult with their immediate supervisor and their OPSEC Officer . . . prior to publishing or posting information in a public forum."³⁶ Not only is this level of control unrealistic, it is, in effect, a step back from the trust-based treatment embedded journalists received. Army Public Affairs subsequently drafted a memo to rectify the overambitious regulation.³⁷

Finally, we must not lose sight of the big picture. The Internet and mobile phones have made it much more difficult to maintain communications monopolies. The Soviet Union had a monopoly on public information and news during the cold war (which

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made U.S. public diplomacy a lot easier); and in pre-invasion Iraq, Saddam Hussein had total control of the Iraqi press and thus the information the Iraqi people received. Today, the flow of information to citizens is more difficult to control for the state, and loopholes exist even in authoritarian systems that crack down on Internet activism. Liberal democracies should welcome and support these developments. **MR**

NOTES

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7. "Bundeswehr-Video empört Amerikaner," *Der Spiegel*, 15 April 2007, <spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,477336,00.html>.
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9. N-TV, a German news-channel, aired both the Krause video and President Köhler's reply on 14 March 2007, <n-tv.de/778377.html>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See <youtube.com/watch?v=6KPFnRcHVVA>.
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18. <myvideo.de/watch/272264>, accessed on 14 April 2007. The video has since been removed.
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29. *Ibid.*
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