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This project, like the wars it is concerned with, is a hybrid. It is part field research, part theory, part personal recollection, and part public advocacy. This project, also like its wars, would not have been the same without the presence of a social network—a vibrant tapestry of people, places, organizations, and institutions that I’ve interacted with over the course of its development. Although the errors are my own, the project would not have been possible without the support, advice, and review of many. I can acknowledge only a few, but I hope the others will recognize their influence and accept my thanks.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANA</td>
<td>Afghan National Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIC</td>
<td>Commander in chief</td>
</tr>
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<td>COP</td>
<td>Combat outpost</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTM</td>
<td>Directive-type memorandum</td>
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<td>FOB</td>
<td>Forward operating base</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRO</td>
<td>Family readiness officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised explosive device</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISAF</td>
<td>International Security Assistance Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOS</td>
<td>Military occupational specialty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRAP</td>
<td>Mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
<td>Noncommissioned officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJP</td>
<td>Nonjudicial punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OEF</td>
<td>Operation Enduring Freedom, the Afghanistan front in the War on Terror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIF</td>
<td>Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Iraq front in the War on Terror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPSEC</td>
<td>Operational security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAO</td>
<td>Public affairs officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFC</td>
<td>Private first class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POG</td>
<td>Person other than grunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJA</td>
<td>Staff judge advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCMJ</td>
<td>Uniform Code of Military Justice</td>
</tr>
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<td>USO</td>
<td>United Service Organization</td>
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INTRODUCTION

New Faces of War

To cheer me up before his deployment to Helmand Province in Afghanistan, my brother said with an uneasy chuckle, “I guess I better get a Facebook account, huh?” Like most things my big brother says to me, this was sarcastic. He was referring to my research about the way US troops use social media, but also to his own prideful defiance against participating in contemporary social network culture. During his last deployment, to East Hit, Iraq, in 2005, Facebook was just starting out; it wasn’t even public yet.

During that deployment, my brother and I communicated primarily through traditional postal mail. This time, however, in 2014, I didn’t expect to send or receive any handwritten letters, because most US troops have access to Facebook and other social network platforms from the field. Even my brother, a traditional media stalwart, recognized that if he wanted to stay in touch, he better log on. Social media are now part of a service member’s deployment kit.

When I formally began working on this book in 2010, I wasn’t aware of the extent to which deployed personnel interacted with social media; my initial research interests centered on advancements in digital photography. I was taken aback by my brother’s enormous photographic archive capturing his Iraq deployment, which he saved on his laptop’s hard drive. The extent of his digital documentary efforts stood in stark contrast to my father’s handful of black-and-white photos depicting his thirteen-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Around the same time as my brother’s return from Iraq in 2006, and on the heels of the infamous digital photos at Abu Ghraib, both popular and academic sources began paying closer attention to US troops’ snapshots of war. Like those authors, I found myself compelled by service members’ propensity to document war, and I continued to assume that digital photography would be the crux of my research. I even framed a lot of my early interviews with military personnel around the subject of digital photography. But the service members I interviewed did not want to talk about advancements in digital photography, or at least they wanted to talk about them only in relationship to social media. In the words of a lance corporal I interviewed at Okinawa, “It’s Facebook today, ma’am. Facebook is everything.” Until then I never considered the significance of Facebook at the front. I didn’t even have a personal Facebook account. I hadn’t realized
Introduction

how much the communication landscape had changed in terms of social media and internet access since my brother’s 2005–2006 deployment.4

Since 2006, internet access has become much more widely available to US troops on deployment. Today, although some of the most remote outposts in the mountains of Afghanistan do not have access to running water, many of them do have access to “internet cafés,” or as some service members refer to them, “lounges” (see figure 1). They are portable satellite units where US troops can share a set of computers with satellite feeds to communicate back home. Military officials provide the units, which come equipped with a router, up to eight laptops, and phones, to provide service personnel with free internet access and phone calls home.5

US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan gained internet access via cable modem and satellite feed around the same time Facebook emerged as a public sensation. As a result, the majority of our fighting forces adopted the platform as their chief mode of communication with loved ones back home. In fact, during our interviews, many service members described experiences with “pre-Facebook” and “post-Facebook” deployments as qualitatively different, referring to them as two distinct types of deployment.6 For example, an Iowa Army National Guard soldier described the difference between his first 2006 pre-Facebook deployment and his most recent 2010 post-Facebook deployment as follows:

Figure 1. Marines using field internet lounge. Defense Department photo.

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It’s definitely a change from the first [deployment] ’til now. There’s a lot more connection, I mean, it’s—you can even as a unit—AKO can be a real pain. AKO is our military e-mail. And unfortunately to say, it’s much easier to get a hold of a deployed soldier on Facebook than it is on AKO. As sad as it sounds it’s the truth. That’s been a big deal.

The soldier’s comment references improvements in terms of efficiency. But speed and access are not the only ways technological advancements impact communication. The soldier initially makes an ontological distinction, sensing a definite “change” between deployments resulting from “a lot more connection.” But what exactly constitutes connection? Is it speed or access? Is it related to what you disclose or how often you make contact? Digital media scholar Clay Shirky argues, “We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race.” Radical changes in our ability to communicate with one another change society at the most fundamental level—changing the very nature of “connection” or what it means to be connected. Shirky uses a beehive metaphor to illustrate the ways in which new communication technologies like Facebook transform (and are transformed by) social relations, via processes that lead to new and revised social routines, rituals, and communicative habits. He writes, “The tools that a society uses to create and maintain itself are as central to human life as a hive is to bee life. Though the hive is not part of any individual bee, it is part of the colony, both shaped by and shaping the lives of its inhabitants.” My perspective toward communication technologies is similar. Rather than focusing on the technologies themselves, I am more interested in how people interact with those technologies. The goal is to understand how new modes of expression influence processes of human living.

From this perspective, new media do not simply replace old media. Email is not a handwritten letter electrified. Instead, new communication technologies create new forms of interactions and new kinds of relations of power between participants, giving rise to entirely new social functions, subject positions, and conceptions of individual agency. In other words, new technologies are new in the sense that “they do new things. They give us new powers. They create new consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate. They oppress.” New technological advancements are not merely aids to human activity; they are powerful forces that reshape both the form and quality of human relationships. In his theory of technological politics, Langdon Winner uses the example of introducing a robot into an industrial workplace. Not only does the robot increase productivity, it also radically
changes the process of production, redefining what “work” means in that setting. Mapping Winner’s example onto troops in a war zone, the introduction of social media to a theater of war changes not only the process of communicating with the home front but also what it means to be “at war” on a more fundamental level. In other words, if robots change what it’s like to be at work, social media changes what it’s like to be at war. Working from this assumption, several questions arise: How do instantaneous, domesticated (as opposed to professional) communication technologies redefine what it means to be at war for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan? How does the war experience change when a warrior’s social network is portable? And in what ways has war transformed from the mythic account of a lonely soldier suffering through months of desperate isolation?

To answer these questions, I propose using the concept of technological agency, which draws from Winner’s philosophy of technology. Like Winner, I want to move beyond a vocabulary of “use” to imagine technology as a form of life. My point is not that technical systems have independent, fully formed agency, but rather, to quote the title of Winner’s famous essay, that artifacts have politics. A technology’s politics derive from the series of choices embedded in it; the ramifications of those choices far outlive the original design’s intent. Today constant connection and instantaneous contact are so embedded in the technological structure they have become standardized values that inform how, when, why, where, and to whom we communicate.

**Technological Agency**

Broadly speaking, the idea of agency supposes that factors beyond our control enable and constrain our capacity to act in the world. These can be things like environments, institutions, cultural norms, traditions, and so on. Added to those factors are technological opportunities and constraints. It’s important to distinguish technological agency from technological determinism, the idea that technology directly affects human behavior. Instead, technical structures represent one piece within a web of various influences. Michel de Certeau uses the example of a person walking in a cityscape to show how technical structures or other imposed systems do not necessarily determine human behavior. Individuals are creative. They do not always take the prescribed route. They hop over hedges, duck down alleyways, and cut through parks. To use de Certeau’s language, individuals deploy “tactics” within environments “strategized” by government agencies, urban planners, and city developers. De Certeau’s conceptualization of strategies and tactics is not only useful in thinking about troops using social media in a war zone; it is also fitting because of its invocation of mili-
tary vocabulary. However, I want to add more dimension and complexity to the relationship between individual agents and the powers that be. Agency is more complicated than street-level tactics and institutional strategies. So in order to more fully conceptualize agency’s complex relational dynamics, I borrow from Lundberg and Gunn’s discussion of the Ouija board as a way to imagine the varying power circuitries at play. The mysterious movement of a planchette on a Ouija board derives from a confluence of factors—the participants, their histories, their expectations, their physical interactions with each other, the planchette, and the board, as well as the board’s communicative possibilities (letters of the alphabet, numbers 0–9, and the words “yes” and “no”). In other words, the origin of agency is in neither the technology (the board) nor the individual agents (the players), but rather, it emerges in the lived moment through a collision of influences—personal, cultural, technological, political, and social. In this spirit, my interest is with the way US troops interface with social media. Who are they talking to? How, when, where, why, how often, and about what? How do their uses of social media differ from earlier forms of communication like pen-and-paper letter writing? These types of questions shift the domain of study from individual agents or socio-technical structures to practices, making it easier to recognize that individuals’ power to act—their ability to respond, or their “response ability”—is compromised, dynamic, and in relation to a variety of factors including audience, history, tradition, and so on.

As an orienting framework, technological agency neither reduces technologies to what humans designed them to do nor claims agency for the technology itself. To be sure, there are values built into technologies, but they do not determine the uses of those technologies. They do, however, constrain those uses. One Marine described Facebook as “the nucleus of communication.” His point was that Facebook represented a multifaceted communication platform. Just as a nucleus is the core of an atom made of composite parts (protons, neutrons, and electrons), to him, the value of Facebook was the summation of its different features—chatting, posting, messaging, and so on. Over the course of my research, I found that each communication feature correlates to different imagined audiences, with different purposes, goals, and effects. Supposing that human behavior changes to suit new technologies’ forms and processes, the very act of using Facebook generates patterns of activities and expectations that soon become second nature.

This book focuses on those activities as a way to understand the various opportunities and constraints associated with storytelling the self in liquid times. What are some of the implications instantaneous and direct
communication across fronts can have on a service member’s mental and emotional processes and sense making? The personnel featured in this book are telling both a story about the war and a story about themselves and who they are becoming. They also perform that story, using it to feel their way through the current situation. A major influence on their story-telling power is how internet access and the prevalence of social media in Iraq and Afghanistan enable US troops to import civilian norms of casual conversation into a war zone. The central features of social media communication—immediacy, constant contact, and networked audiences—impact existing frames of reference for war. Participation in social media culture facilitates a constant tacking back and forth between war and home, ultimately collapsing important practical and ideological distinctions between the two. Each chapter focuses on specific, ground-level discursive practices such as real-time chatting, posting photos, and making memes, in order to understand how they change what war looks like in this millennium. The idea is that paying attention to concrete utterances reveals the imagined contexts in which service members are operating. And the dominant context for social media communication, even from a war zone, appears to be everyday life in the United States.

Social Media at War
From the perspective of US military personnel in Iraq or Afghanistan, social media platforms allow their social networks to become portable for the first time in the history of modern warfare. This marks a revolutionary change from how we once imagined combat deployment. It used to be the case that deployment to a war zone excused a warrior for being out of touch, unreachable, or generally ignorant to American pop culture. For example, one of my father’s favorite Vietnam anecdotes was that when he left for his deployment, the Beatles were singing “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and when he came home they were singing “Hey Jude.” Today, by contrast, not only are US troops able to stay up-to-date with civilian culture, but they can also participate in our conversations, effectively engaging in a firefight one minute and uploading a hilarious meme video in the next.

Beyond the context of war, the widespread use of personal computers, internet accessibility, and the proliferation of social network sites pose fundamental challenges to the maintenance of dualities between work and leisure. When communication takes place over nonphysical networks, it complicates distinctions between work and home as well as the social roles that go along with them. Applying these ideas to US troops in a theater of war significantly raises the stakes on these types of dilemmas. The service members I spoke with, for example, expressed concern for “the nightmare
reader,” an imagined other who could potentially misinterpret their messages or use their messages against them. According to my interviews, US troops often imagine the nightmare reader as both their mothers and the enemy combatant. This point speaks to the collapsed nature of communication contexts on social media and the increasingly porous boundaries between war and everyday life.

Questions about audience provide a useful starting point to parse the complexities surrounding social media at war. Paying attention to audience brings into focus the multiple dimensions through which professional war fighters simultaneously communicate their personal deployment experiences to public and private audiences. And further, examining these processes reveals how new and revised communication habits shape what it means to be “at war” for both the troops and their social network members.

Another factor shaping what it means to be at war in this millennium has been the nature of these wars in particular. The United States has been engaged in a multifronted global war on terrorism that has lasted over a decade. In May 2014, President Barack Obama announced that US forces would withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2016. He said, “Our military will draw down to a normal embassy presence in Kabul, with a security assistance component, just as we’ve done in Iraq.” According to this projection, around ten thousand troops will remain in Afghanistan. Yet the president’s statement did not anticipate reengaging over three thousand more troops in Iraq just a few months later in September. All this is to say that the nonlinear nature of the current security environment has left policy makers scratching their heads. Linear front lines have given way to circular perimeters or mobile patrols. The divisions between front and rear and the associated dangers of each are less distinguishable in places such as Mosul and Fallujah than during the Battle of the Bulge, for example. During an interview, I casually asked a Marine how it’s even possible to identify potential threats in such a complicated environment. He looked at me, paused a moment, then said matter-of-factly, “The bad guys wear sneakers.”

As powerful and as telling as that Marine’s comment may be, it’s even more unsettling that it is a genuine derivative of the administration’s policy. The second Bush administration conceptualized something called the “Greater Middle East,” which ostensibly stretches from North Africa through the Khyber Pass, subsuming (and ignoring) the distinctiveness of South Asia. The assumption, which sounds embarrassingly similar to Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism, is that managing a US military campaign in one Muslim country must be the same as doing it in another.

An additional factor muddying the boundaries of these wars is that new communication technologies have made it so that the war front and the
home front are just a mouse click away. In fact, the meaning of a “front” has changed dramatically in the last ten years. And so it goes with the meaning of “friendship.” Social media platforms like Facebook have made it so that new “friends” are just a mouse click away as well. The relatively rapid semiotic evolution of “friend” and “front” occurred concurrently and in conjunction with one another.

The two stories told in this book, then, are of social media as they are practiced by “boots on the ground” and how these fraught, messy, and undefined social media serve as a metonym for the war itself. As a case in point, the summer of 2014 found Facebook awash with home videos of people dumping buckets of ice water over their heads in support of the ALS Foundation, an organization dedicated to curing Lou Gehrig’s disease. “The Ice Bucket Challenge,” as it came to be known, operated on a dare. Functioning like a remediation of chain mail, participants were to pour ice water over their heads and “publicly” nominate three individuals (via social media) to do the same within twenty-four hours. Not surprisingly, since troops and home-front civilians can share the same digital space, Ice Bucket Challenge videos made in Afghanistan began circulating online.

While my brother was at Camp Leatherneck he received e-mails from command warning troops about participating in this online “charity meme.” His unit’s regional command legal advisor wrote, “If anyone is thinking of doing the ‘Ice Bucket Challenge’ or any similar fundraising scheme here in Afghanistan, you need to talk with SJA first to make sure you don’t run afoul of the ethics rules.” Another e-mail, this time from the assistant general counsel on ethics, warned, “Participation . . . must be carefully vetted with an eye to the applicable authorities.” The difficulty associated with anticipating and prohibiting participation in these types of digital activities and the lack of clarity regarding expectations for appropriate participation show how policy makers, even in 2014, are still trying to negotiate a comprehensive strategy for social media policy. It seems that in the current security environment, both terror and social media represent relatively unclear but decidedly present dangers.

Updating War’s Status
Americans have experienced continuous war for the past 250 years. In my lifetime, which encompasses the last three decades, the United States has had boots on the ground in at least eight military engagements: Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada, Operation Just Cause in Panama, Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq, and Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya. We are
still involved in three of those military engagements. These types of war are political conflicts that use military force.

But we have also endured an ongoing cold war, a state of political tension and economic competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union. And what is more, the contemporary American war culture extends to domestic issues as we wage simultaneous wars on poverty, cancer, drugs, terror, and the middle class. Recently I have even heard of a “Republican war on science” and a “Liberal war on Christmas.” It seems that we have stretched the meaning of “war” to include conventional definitions—an organized armed conflict between political groups—as well as “softer” definitions—a deliberate act meant to transform existing conditions in cultural, political, social, and even medical domains.

Consistent metaphorical application of “war” to matters social, cultural, and medical, and not necessarily to military conflict, changes its dominant discursive meaning. Broadening a term’s conceptual base can be productive, but what happens when the concept of war is stretched beyond its literal meaning as the ultimate transgression, a political last resort, a brutal and ugly enterprise causing catastrophic loss and immense human tragedy? What happens when war is normalized to the point where it is considered a good thing to go to war? The war on drugs, or poverty, imagines war to be a serious commitment toward accomplishing a specific objective. War becomes a strategy to eradicate an undesirable target, whether communism or Christmas. A war on cancer implies resolute dedication to overcoming an obstacle. In this sense, waging war is a positive problem-solving method. The pervasiveness of “war” in American culture has given it something of an “everyday” quality.

This book argues that social media’s habitual prevalence contributes to our collective attention fatigue and has helped create an abundance of war-as-mundane and an absence of war-as-extraordinary. There is something ideological at stake in the loss of war’s distinction. My goal is to reiterate war as extraordinary, that is, to keep war out of the ordinary.

Studying War
Growing up, I found war to be a compelling and mysterious drama. My grandfather, father, and brother are all combat veterans. In my eyes, the three of them were reluctant heroes, members of a burden-laden boys’ club that I could never be a part of. I wanted to understand the culture they shared. I knew I could never access it by studying war in its mythic sense, or as it existed in the mass media. Homer’s epic poems, Hollywood’s blockbuster films, Ken Burns’s famous documentaries, or Dan Rather’s news reports couldn’t tell me anything about what the men in my family
experienced, even if they could get me close. Instead, I knew that if I wanted to understand how boots on the ground experienced war, I would need to access their daily practices. Short of embedding in Afghanistan myself (a path I nearly took with the help of the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] in 2010), studying war’s contemporary communication culture meant plumbing the symbolic boundaries between two cultures—combat culture and social media culture.

Cultures are made up of ideas realized and materialized in practice. The best way to access “culture” is to pay attention to the recursive practices constituting it. As critical cultural scholar Lawrence Grossberg eloquently describes, it’s about appreciating “the texture of life as it is lived.” Following Grossberg, I take a methodological perspective that represents the growing symbiosis between rhetorical studies and critical cultural studies. These camps tend to adopt a performance lens as an outlook and a method with the common goal of apprehending culture through the perspectives of those who live or have lived it. It involves understanding symbolic, aesthetic, affective, and political realms in light of social fields of meaning. The focus is on concrete, specific instances of expression to address larger, theoretical questions about culture, power, and what it means to be human. An emphasis on practice causes these perspectives to adopt a multisited approach to participant observation. Because I am interested in digital lifeworlds, I had to broaden my outlook on community beyond the traditional anthropological view to include both geographically contained communities as well as those constituted by the circulation of discourse in a variety of mediated forms. Just like any speech community, membership in an online social network community is performative, relying on members’ ability to call up intelligible discourses. In other words, I pay attention to the way troops perform their identities online to gauge which community they are speaking to. Social media communication is not merely about producing texts but also about participating in a common space, community, and conversation. From this perspective, Facebook is significant only insofar as it is currently the most popular social media platform and host to a plethora of different conversations and communities.

Context becomes important when studying new and revised social routines, rituals, and communicative habits, because people tend to establish meaning locally. As a site of study, however, the internet makes siphoning an individual context nearly impossible. The cacophony of voices and discourses swirling through the inherently hybrid space of the net emphasizes the constructed nature of text and context. As anthropologist Vered Amit points out, “In a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts,” a domain of study “has to be laboriously constructed, pulled apart
from all the other possibilities of contextualization. The process of contextualization begins with the types of questions being asked and oftentimes continues throughout the project as initial questions are answered, thrown out, added to, or refined. For example, although the book you are holding examines how US Marines interact with social media, and to what extent those interactions impact their deployment experiences, I did not begin with that line of inquiry. It took several missteps, false starts, happy accidents, and moments of genuine epiphany to finally arrive at that orientation. For over three years I continued to ask questions and assemble fragments, digging, building, and slowly molding the contours of context. Ultimately I settled on the intersection of two primary contexts—war and Facebook.

Through direct interviews and online participation, I examine how US troops interact with social media during their deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the spring of 2010, I began conducting on-base interviews with service members who had recently returned from deployment to learn about their communication norms, habits, and rituals while at war. After an initial set of interviews with the Iowa Army National Guard, I decided to focus exclusively on the US Marines because, of all the branches, it is the unit most frequently deployed to combat environments. Also, our collective imagination holds the Marine Corps to be the most rigid and inflexible institution. For these reasons, I felt the Marine Corps would serve as a useful point of juxtaposition against which to study social media culture. Added to that is the fact that my brother, a US Navy doctor, deploys with Marines, so I also have a personal investment with the Corps.

In 2011 I conducted a set of ten semistructured interviews with US Marines on base in Okinawa, Japan. After one year to digest all that I had learned, I had many new thoughts, ideas, and clarifying questions, so I conducted another set of interviews with US Marines at Camp Pendleton in California, where I also had the opportunity to observe an educational initiative on social media use. The social media class is a new, mandatory safety course meant to stave off “negligent behavior.” During the particular session I attended, there were around three hundred Marines present, roughly an entire battalion. I recognize that my sample size cannot possibly reflect the entirety of the Corps, or the diversity of deployment experience. Nonetheless, I offer some of the more compelling patterns and themes I noticed over the course of my research. Early on, for example, I recognized a trend that helped me define the parameters of my study.

Older personnel who experienced multiple deployments (spanning 1997 to 2012) tended to flag the years 2007 to 2009 as a critical threshold of change in combat’s communication culture. Evidently, this was the point where internet access became more widely available in the field. This time
frame also coincides with the 2008 introduction of Facebook’s real-time chat feature.\textsuperscript{28} And according to a 2012 US Marine Corps demographics report, two-thirds of the Marines currently deployed are twenty-five years old and under, meaning that most Marines were not eligible to serve until 2006 or after.\textsuperscript{29} Taking all these factors into account, I focused my research on social media use among Marines deployed between 2008 and 2012, because those years mark a critical flashpoint for the use of real-time social media software in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Conducting in-person interviews on active bases offered two key benefits to my research.\textsuperscript{30} First, as I alluded to above, the information I gleaned from the interviews helped me establish a lay of the land by identifying recurrent topics, themes, and ways of speaking about particular subjects. Second, in-person interviews on active bases allowed me to get a sense, in a very real and embodied way, for the military as an institution and as a culture. Appreciating any culture requires close attention to repeatable habits and practices shared by a group. I want to avoid the impression that I offer my sample group as representative of military culture, yet for the sake of readability I often use inclusive labels like “service members,” “deployed personnel,” or “US troops” as comparative signposts to distinguish this generation of warrior from previous generations.

Paying attention to recurring practices illuminates a culture’s “politics of doxa”—the backdrop of shared values and beliefs, or the vaguely held notion of common sense that motivates behavior.\textsuperscript{31} Often, the best way to access a group’s shared practices is to observe them operating locally in their respective social fields. For example, after each interview on base in Okinawa, a designated lieutenant Marine “escort” accompanied me to the next location. We entered barracks and office buildings bustling with junior Marines in camouflage uniforms who immediately stopped what they were doing to snap to attention and salute the lieutenant every time we entered a room. This performance denotes respect for rank. During the interviews, the escort waited outside a closed door. At the forty-five-minute mark he knocked on the door to indicate that we should begin wrapping up our conversation. The length and privacy afforded during these interviews allowed junior Marines to be more open about their experiences. Being on bases in Okinawa, Japan, and Camp Pendleton, California, helped me better appreciate the military’s cultural milieu. Yet military culture represented only one aspect of the critical juncture I was examining—the other was social media culture.

Accessing service members’ participation in social media culture required online fieldwork. I followed the Facebook pages of nine Marines over the course of their deployments, closely reading their wall posts, video
posts, photo posts, and all the accompanying sidebar commentary, making
field notes and taking screen grabs. These methods drew my attention to
circulation patterns and processes of text production. When I first began
online observations, I didn’t know what I was looking for; I simply took it
all in. But as I began to transcribe my interviews from Okinawa and eventu-
ally Pendleton, some of the Facebook activities I was observing (i.e., time
stamps and photo genres) began to take on relevance. Throughout the in-
terpretive process, interview conversations illuminated online observations
and vice versa. Their interdependence is a genuine reflection of how my
methodology unfolded.

Carefully listening to interview responses and paying close attention to
Facebook activities allowed me to explore instances of agency in action, the
moments where individual utterances vibrate against institutional, social,
and technological structures. For example, questions guiding my explora-
tion included: What challenges do military personnel face as they negotiate
institutional and cultural expectations for social media use? How do they
communicate their deployment experiences, if at all, with social network
members? What discourses do they draw from in order to sustain conver-
sations across multiple publics and collective audiences? When, why, how,
and to whom are particular utterances intelligible?

My research practices pull from a variety of techniques, tools, and meth-
ods to understand a mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics,
and technologies. In the words of qualitative internet researcher Christine
Hine, “The key to insight is immersion, not necessarily through being in
a particular field site, but by engaging in relevant practices wherever they
might be found.” I believe that within the limitations conferred by con-
text, this bricolage methodology was the best way to access some of the
details of digitally mediated social behavior across fronts. I hope the reader
will agree.

What Lies Ahead
The scope of this book moves from broad to narrow, beginning with an
overview of military guidelines for social media engagement (chapter 1),
moving to an examination of particular social media practices (chapters 2
through 4), and concluding with a discussion of how those practices reflect
and refract broader cultural narratives about war. I organized the chap-
ters structurally around conventional understandings of public and private
communication. Chapter 2, for example, looks at letters and personal mes-
ges, what we commonly consider to be private modes of communication.
By contrast, chapter 4 examines YouTube videos, a decidedly more pub-
lic form of communication. Bridging the gap is chapter 3, which takes a
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historically private medium, a personal photo album, and considers its digital descendent: the Facebook photo album. Taken together these chapters aim to trace evolving ideas and attitudes about what it means to be “at war,” for both the service members and their social networks.

The first chapter introduces readers to military culture by examining the US Marine Corps Social Media Guidance document. A close reading of the institutional guidelines allows for a deeper appreciation of military culture in its explicitly governed form; that is, the document represents military culture inscribed. This chapter outlines some of the contradictory cultural commitments faced by Marines when they log onto Facebook from the field. For example, hierarchical structures and broadcast models no longer resonate with contemporary society. The age of the mobile network introduces a fundamentally different communication structure with an entirely new production model. Whereas other digital technologies like texting and instant messaging contribute to social interaction, they mostly continue to operate on a familiar one-to-one, interpersonal level of communication. By contrast, social media platforms are a less orderly cacophony of voices enabling users to connect with, articulate, and make visible existing or extended social networks.

The “network” function is an important distinction in social media compared with “new” or “digital” media. Social media offer individuals nearly limitless possibilities on the net: Persons can share, collaborate, follow, and correspond with minimal material restriction—save for their personal privacy preferences or security concerns. In this way, social media are slightly more useful for individuals over organizations, businesses, or governments, because larger institutions are often subject to multiple preferences and stricter security concerns. Though they integrate seamlessly with businesses and organizations, social media offer the greatest number of possibilities to individual users. However, as I demonstrate in chapter 1, increased opportunities are balanced by increased responsibilities. Easier publication of photos, videos, pranks, gaffs, and faux pas has increased the average individual’s media literacy and general awareness of being observed. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes in Liquid Modernity, “Individuals to an increasing extent are made responsible for their lives.” New forms of literacy, revised definitions of privacy, elaborate strategies for identity management, and enhanced self-reflexivity and social responsibility are some of the ways social media have impacted individuals in everyday life.

To be sure, the present moment operates by a new set of values and ideas about what it means to communicate in an era of globally connected, perpetual contact. Some communication researchers have begun to examine the emergent relational practices and “mobile maintenance expectations”
unique to this era. Digital media scholars Jeffrey Hall and Nancy Baym argue, for example, that “while being able to contact others is one of the most liked qualities . . . being continuously available for others’ contact is also one of its disliked qualities.” Hall and Baym describe a tension between the ability to stay in touch through technology and feeling entrapped by technology. My work raises the stakes on emergent social pressures by examining how they operate among US troops in the context of war.

Historically, troops in a war zone were exempt from home-front relational commitments. In previous American conflicts a lack of communication with the home front kept war fighters focused on their immediate well-being, the health and safety of their comrades, and the goal of the mission. My father’s tour in Vietnam, for example, caused him to miss an entire Beatles album—a point he acknowledged with a shoulder shrug. His attention was unapologetically one-dimensional. His focus was on the mission and the safety of himself and the guys next to him. He wasn’t worried about Facebook posts or YouTube clips. The Beatles were just white noise. By contrast, the Marines in this study describe an increased connection across fronts and, with it, a compulsion to remind the home front of their connectedness through mundane exchanges via social media.

The second chapter focuses on social interactivity across fronts, the sense of constant connection and immediate contact afforded by social media in Iraq and Afghanistan. The chapter draws out the culture clash described in chapter 1 by comparing Facebook communication to war’s former dominant mode of communication, the handwritten letter. This comparison highlights the ways in which communicative norms, values, and expectations have evolved in recent history. Prevailing communication attitudes about “keeping up” and staying connected promote a particular type of communication, a more phatic or ritualistic style. The quantity, frequency, and immediacy of social network messages create a previously unmatched feeling of closeness or “digital intimacy” between war and home fronts. Although civilians also value “connected presence,” its ubiquity in daily life causes it to go relatively unnoticed at home. For deployed service members, however, Facebook presents the impression of casual civilian conversation, a form of communication previously excluded from the war zone. One of the major issues I introduce in chapter 2 and develop further through examples in subsequent chapters is that the dominantly operating values of social media—constant contact and immediacy—promote a fixation on the “what” of right now, but not the “what” of a war zone.

Today war has a new representational form. Just as television defined Vietnam and the First Gulf War, the internet is defining what we know, see, and remember about Iraq and Afghanistan. And these wars have been
mediated more than any other conflict in history. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the way user-generated content, in the form of photos and videos, alters what “war” looks like in this millennium. In previous American conflicts, professional war reporters and photographers were the sole arbiters of war’s image. Therefore, much of the existing literature on war’s representation evaluates professionally produced texts for their persuasive force or epistemological contribution to civilian, public audiences. But today service members document and disseminate their deployment experiences themselves.

A handful of communication scholars has begun paying attention to the role that “warrior-produced” footage plays in the broader cultural narrative of war. Some argue that videos shot by service members offer more authentic, “raw,” and “unfiltered views” since they appear to “lack prescribed framings and official narratives.” This view celebrates warrior-produced imagery for contributing a necessary dissonance, which serves to “restructure the balance of storytelling power.” However, these arguments assume that the horror of war is synonymous with the reality of war. From this perspective, an authentic experience of war hinges on exposure to violence and bloodshed. As I found in my interviews, even boots on the ground use this representational logic to evaluate their wartime experiences. And sometimes in an effort to legitimize their deployments, they end up perpetuating many of its visual tropes.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore some of the ways US troops directly involved in Iraq and Afghanistan mediate their experiences to each other and their broader social networks and how their meaning-making activities speak to and are spoken through broader, discursive formations of “war.” Rather than focusing on the product of war mediation, these chapters consider their interactions on social media to be localized, discursive practices, or sites of struggle for how military personnel make sense of their wartime experiences. Chapters 3 and 4 emphasize the fact that these activities are not only about producing texts but also about participating in a common space and community.

Chapter 3, for example, looks at US Marines’ digital photo album-making practices. The chapter argues that Facebook’s social, cultural, and aesthetic logics shape war’s visuality on the web. As US troops in a war zone filter their deployment experiences through the collegiate conventions associated with Facebook’s visual culture, a visual discourse emerges that shows a more domesticated, socially inflected, and distinctively youthful representation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At issue is the fact that when troops render their wartime activities suitable for social media, it impacts how they perceive and remember their deployments, and subse-
sequently how their social networks make meaning of their wartime deployments as well.

Chapter 4 considers how troops engage the values of the home front through the creation and dissemination of YouTube videos. On the whole, the videos mark an attempt to convey a voice to a collective civilian audience. Like the Facebook messages in chapter 2, warrior-produced videos, especially ones that participate in popular internet memes, reflect copresence with rather than absence from the home front. Chapter 4 suggests that, as home-front attention to the Global War on Terrorism continues to wane, service members commandeer popular culture conversations to maintain relevance within the existing attention economy. As my brother said, in preparation for war, “I guess I better get a Facebook account, huh?” The tacit rule is that if you want to keep up, you better play the game.

A major theme throughout the book is the nagging question about representation’s role in understanding. If knowledge of war hinges on its representation, then what do these messages and images contribute? The book concludes with a consideration of how the new communication environment is changing what it means to go to war and what it means to be at war in this millennium. Examining the social media habits of personnel on deployment is one way to illustrate war’s evolving realities and might reveal something larger about our collective attitudes toward war. The bottom line is that the narrative for war is changing. War looks and feels a lot different than it used to. Social media contribute to a feeling of routine in an already perpetual war. Today war consists of both firefights and friend requests.