

WARSCAPES, IMAGE MAKING AND PERFORMANCE; HOW YOUNG COMBATANTS USE DIGITAL VISUAL MEDIA DURING WAR.

Young people in war have always told stories through performance. Myths of power, warriors, saviours and victims. Visual social media allows youth combatants to create and distribute these stories to new audiences with whom they can interact. Narrative is audience driven.



The visual cultures of war are stories, myths and characters, informed and shaped by expectations, knowledge and audience. While those who shared these stories were often news media, the development of digital cultures and the networked images (Niederer 2018) associated with them, have allowed young people in conflict to both create and distribute images. This study explores whether the changes in how young combatants use digital visual media have challenged and reinforced the narratives and myths of war, through this new storytelling device. It is apparent that narrative has been and is audience driven. The growth of digital media means that young people are increasingly interacting with their audiences.

Narrative and Performance



While the story telling devices have changed and developed key narratives remain in performances by young people

- Warrior – this can take many forms including soldier, fighter, defender
- Strength and power – promoting their own (sometimes over others)
- Protector – of each other, their audience, values, animals
- Youth – common inspirations. This is seen not only in constructs of power and warrior, but also in the increasing use of music and dance.
- Reality – with the growth of digital media we also see some young combatants sharing videos of the reality of war. More in line with photojournalists.

These narratives are reinforced by featuring co-stars who play the roles of other characters in the story

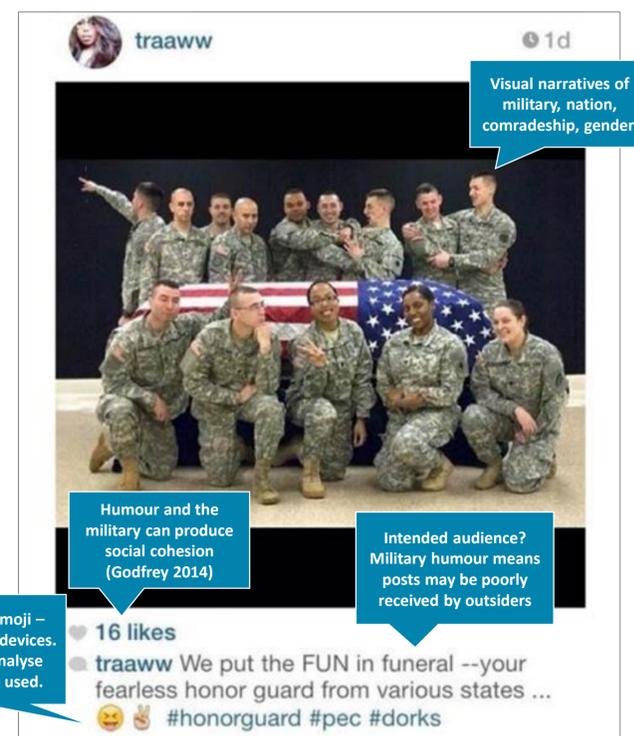
- Fellow combatants
- The enemy – as producers of content they now have more power to write the narrative of the enemy
- Animals – are innocent victims who need protecting

The interaction with audiences means that there has been an evolution in some narratives. Dancing soldiers, once something shared with other soldiers and friends, has become something which can go viral drawing attention to the cause. Now used by official military accounts.

Creators and Publishers – telling your own story



- Previously youth combatants were only able to share their performance and storytelling with a global audience via the news media. They had little control in how their message was produced and published.
- Digital visual media means that they are now the creators, producers and publishers of their self images. Mimics some of the objectives of official Instagram and twitter accounts (see Kohn 2017 for further discussion regarding Israel Defence Forces)
- Can publish images to
 - Recruit
 - Show unity
 - Bring attention to their cause
 - Influence morale



Audiences – being seen by the global becomes connecting with the global

- Hashtags, likes, comments and sharing options allow young combatants to see how their posts and visuals are being received.
- The interaction between combatant and global audience has become multidirectional.
- Young men in Sierra Leone were aware of the global nature of the media and the images it produced (Hoffman 2005;2011). It was a war of 'economy of attention' and the realities of constantly being available to be seen were crucial to understanding the spectacular performance of violence in this conflict.
- ISIS members, encouraged to have social media accounts and gaming accounts

to engage with young people around the world. This was often a recruitment strategy.

- Ukrainian soldiers, amongst others, use TikTok to reach a global audience. They create narratives and posts which enamour the audience to them. Posts are shared, liked and comments from different global locations are left below.
- As interaction in the form of views, likes and shares grows it is possible to weaponize the narrative.