

John Keane*

The Beautification of War: Digital Communications, Public Indifference, Rebel Journalism, and Civilian Resistance in the Age of Meta Wars**

تجميل الحرب: الاتصالات الرقمية، واللامبالاة العامة، والصحافة المتمرّدة، والمقاومة المدنية في عصر حروب الميتا

Abstract: This public lecture proposes that we have entered the age of destructive *meta wars*. Digital communications technologies are nowadays enabling not only frightening transformations of the modes and weapons of warfare but also, paradoxically, media representations of war by governments, military PR propagandists, breaking news journalists, soldiers, and citizens that “gamify” war, beautify its horrors, and lullaby millions of people into indifference toward wars that are seemingly emptied of blood, cruelty, and genocidal destruction. Especially in the old democracies of the Atlantic region, the new meta wars generate public indifference, and feelings of emotional disconnection. But this public indifference is vulnerable to a counter-trend unique to the age of meta wars: the birth of new media platforms whose rebel journalists digitally expose the terrible realities of these wars, cast doubts on their moral and practical necessity, and teach civilians everywhere that they have the right not to suffer meta wars, even that there is a time coming when war in every form will have to be abolished.

Keywords: Meta Wars; Digital Communications Technologies; Weapons of Warfare; Public Indifference; Citizen Resistance.

الملخص: تجادل هذه المحاضرة بأننا دخلنا عصر حروب الميتا التدميرية. وفي هذا السياق، لا تُتيح تكنولوجيا الاتصالات الرقمية اليوم تحولات مرعبة في أنماط الحروب وأسلحتها فحسب، بل من المفارقة أنها تتيح أيضًا تمثيلات إعلامية للحرب من جانب الحكومات، والإعلام العسكري، وصحافيي الأخبار العاجلة، والجنود، والمواطنين الذين «يلعبون» الحرب، ويُجمّلون أهوالها، ويُلقون ملايين الناس في عالم من اللامبالاة تجاه الحروب التي تبدو خالية من الدماء والقسوة والإبادة المدمّرة. وتولّد حروب الميتا التدميرية الجديدة لامبالاة عامةً وشعورًا بالانفصال العاطفي، لا سيما في الديمقراطيات القديمة في منطقة الأطلسي. ولكن هذه اللامبالاة معرّضة لاتجاهٍ مضادٍ متميّز في عصر حروب الميتا؛ أي ظهور منصات إعلامية جديدة يقوم صحافيّوها المتمردون بكشف الحقائق الرهيبة لهذه الحروب رقميًا، وإثارة الشكوك في ضرورتها الأخلاقية والعملية، ويعلمون المدنيين في كل مكان أنّ لديهم الحق في ألا يُعانوا بسبب حروب الميتا، بل إنّ الوقت سيجيء، وسيتعيّن مَنع الحروب بكلّ أشكالها.

كلمات مفتاحية: حروب الميتا؛ الاتصالات الرقمية؛ أسلحة الحروب؛ لامبالاة عامة؛ مقاومة المواطن.

* Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, Australia.

Email: john.keane@sydney.edu.au

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In times of historical upheaval, single events sometimes gain the status of a paradigm. Without ceasing to be part of history, they begin to function at the same time as a model for understanding other events and even the entire historical process. They reveal the conditions of possibility that mark the horizon of the present, and subsequently become a tool for understanding and explaining the past.

Pawel Mościcki¹

Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and Friends,

Today marks the first anniversary of the outbreak of a terrible war with potentially catastrophic consequences for your country and region and the wider world. It will thus come as no news to you when I say that we are living in an age of multiplying wars and chilling predictions of war; or that millions of people, at various points on our planet, are gripped by feelings that our world is sliding into confusion, lawlessness and violent disorder, and that, if current-day trends continue, a mega-war is coming, and that things are going to end badly. Their gloom and caution are understandable.

Global military spending has been rising for nearly a decade, reaching \$2443 billion in 2023, an increase in real terms that year of 6.8%, the steepest since 2009.² An American president lost in a mental fog approves the bombing of Yemen and the largest US naval battle since the Second World War, the occupation of eastern Syria and combat operations in Iraq, all without the approval of Congress, then asserts that “the United States is not at war anywhere in the world”;³ the same president who urges an Israeli ceasefire while feeding its war machine with weapons that make peace improbable; and simultaneously, on another front, finances an unwinnable war against Russia, authorizes long-range weapons for use against people inside its territory, and refuses to agree to the negotiations that would halt the senseless killing and environmental destruction.

Fears are meanwhile growing that global warming will trigger armed conflicts because of mass exoduses of people fleeing rising waters, crop failures, parched lands, and extreme weather events. The worst displacement crisis on our planet is already happening in Sudan, where a deadly uncivil war backed by outside forces has uprooted the lives of over 11 million people and plunged half the population into hunger. And there are the planned genocides: in Gaza and the West Bank, where Palestinians are suffering unspeakably cruel war crimes; in Syria, where more than 500,000 people have died and half the population forcibly displaced; and in Myanmar, where, following the 2021 coup d’etat, a nasty military government, in open defiance of an International Criminal Court of Justice (ICJ) provisional measures order, terrorizes 600,000 mostly Muslim Rohingya peoples in a hellscape of shelling and pillaging of villages, night raids, communication blackouts, mass arrests, sexual violence, torture, murders, disappearances, restricted access to food, water, shelter, sanitation, and medical care, and the forcible military conscription of men and boy children to fight for the Myanmar army and its allies in nasty frontline battles against the Arakan Army.⁴

It requires little reflection to understand that these are indeed dangerous trends and that we are passing through gloomy times in which old proverbs, sayings, and clichés make a comeback in blogs, columns, and pundits’ postings. War is the rhetoric of our times, we could say. There is a time for peace, and a time for war, we hear. Truth is war’s first casualty. War is death’s feast. Sovereignty must be defended. War is hell. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. War is the statesman’s game. War is capitalism with the gloves off. A great country can have no such thing as a little war. It’s easier to begin a war than to bring it to an end. The quickest way of ending a war is to lose it.

¹ Pawel Mościcki, “Gaza as Paradigm,” *pawelmoscicki*, 6/3/2024, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5f2s5bdk>

² “Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity,” *SIPRI*, 22/4/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ybjvt6fj>

³ “Remarks by President Biden in Statement to the American People,” *The White House*, 24/7/2024, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2jy3czuv>

⁴ “The Intensifying Rohingya Genocide,” *Brouk*, June 2024 accessed at 2/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/6ddt8rr2>

An unfortunate if unintended effect of these oft-quoted, routine dicta is that they “normalize” war. They make it seem that war is an enduring feature of the human condition – that humans are creatures who live in a state of war by nature, that on our tiny planet humans are the only species to organize mutual savagery and the planned elimination of its fellow members using sticks and stones, muskets and rifles, bombs, rockets, and drones; or, in the pithy words of Plato, among humans, only the dead will not witness war. The trouble with these dicta is their faux timelessness. They have a metaphysical quality; they suppose or imply that whatever humans may say or imagine, war is nature doing what nature does (*natura naturans*), that since “man” is the “fighting animal, emotional, passionate, illogical”,⁵ war is ultimately the result of “forces inherent in human nature”;⁶ or, as Elon Musk has said recently: “All creatures fight. . . Animals in the jungle, every single day, every minute are constantly trying to kill each other. We’re not unusual in that respect”.⁷ In such formulations, history goes missing in action, which is unfortunate because history really matters when trying to make sense of the strange novelty and possible future of the meta wars of our age.

Let us pause, for any cursory glance at the past should underscore the elementary point that war is not only a human fabrication – an invention “like any other of the inventions in terms of which we order our lives, such as writing, marriage, cooking our food instead of eating it raw”, as the anthropologist Margaret Mead noted⁸ – but that through time the modes and means of war have undergone significant alterations. Historians typically define war as a mutually recognized conflict between two or more groups as groups, in which each group puts an army, however small, into the field to fight and kill, if possible, some or all the members of the other group’s army. While they often disagree about matters of timings and technologies, they help us realize, for instance, the profound military and political significance of newly invented weapons (the sword, Greek fire, crossbow, the machine gun, chemical weapons, the atomic bomb, drones) and changing modes of imagining and making war. We come to understand how, during the second half of the 19th century, war fought by cavalry and close infantry formations was rendered obsolete by rifles, steel cannon, and bursting shells; and, more chillingly, we are forced to wonder whether nuclear weapons and the so-called “balance of terror” will permanently protect our planet from human self-destruction, or whether, as the British historian of war A J P Taylor once put it: “a deterrent may work ninety-nine times out of a hundred. On the hundredth occasion it produces catastrophe”.⁹

Modes of Communication

History matters in yet another way. A strong sense of the historicity of things helps us appreciate the *novelty* and *strangeness* and *fleetingness* of our present-day conditions. When we are ignorant of the past, we invariably misunderstand the present; awareness of the past helps us grasp the measure of things in the present and prepare workable hopes for the future. Historical awareness indeed matters, as this lecture tries to show by proposing an off-centre, renegade interpretation of the widespread feeling that our world is spinning out of control and hurtling toward military disaster.

Here is the unconventional framing idea I want to explore: in matters of war, we are now living in a strange world unknown to our grandparents and great grandparents, a world immeasurably different

⁵ Sir Norman Angell, *Human Nature and the Peace Problem* (London: Collins, 1925), p. 7.

⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), p. 3.

⁷ “Elon Musk: War, AI, Aliens, Politics, Physics, Video Games, and Humanity | Lex Fridman Podcast #400,” YouTube, 9/11/2023, accessed on 2/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/43ce2b23>

⁸ Margaret Mead, “War Is Only an Invention—Not a Biological Necessity,” in: Roberto J. González, Hugh Gusterson & Gustaaf Houtman, *Militarization: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *War by Timetable: How the First World War Began* (London: Macdonald, 1969), p. 121.

from both the Cold War of the 20th century and recent talk of “Cold War II”.¹⁰ We have entered the age of destructive *meta wars*. These are wars in which digital communications technologies are enabling not only frightening transformations of the modes and weapons of warfare – zero space-time coordination of armies, Hellfire precision-guided, air-to-ground missiles, and sophisticated cyber weapons capable of jamming and seizing control of enemy satellites – but also, paradoxically, media representations of war by governments, military PR propagandists, breaking news journalists, and soldiers and citizens that “gamify” war, beautify its horrors, and lullaby millions of people into nonchalance about wars that are seemingly emptied of blood, cruelty, and genocidal destruction. Especially in the old democracies of the Atlantic region, I want to say, the new meta wars generate *public indifference*, feelings of emotional disconnection and the cold unconcern of people busily preoccupied with their own cluttered lives. But my argument will be that this public indifference is contingent and vulnerable, threatened by a counter-trend unique to the age of meta wars: the birth of new media platforms whose *rebel journalists* digitally expose the terrible realities of these wars, cast doubts on their moral and practical necessity, and teach civilians everywhere that they have the right not to suffer meta wars, even that there is a time coming when war in every form will have to be abolished.

But let me not get ahead of myself. Central to my unorthodox interpretation of the meta wars of our age is the importance of digital communications. My background conjecture is that how texts, sounds, and images are produced and circulated during wartime is of foundational importance in understanding wars past and present. I studied in Toronto, where Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and others taught us that media of communication aren’t just add-on features of any given society, or to be understood as timeless “neutral” channels that convey “information”. They emphasized how different historical modes of communication differently structure people’s bodily senses, their mobility, patterns of cognition, mental horizons, and daily spacetime experiences of the world, even shaping the conduct and interpretation of war.

What is odd is that historical transformations of the mediation of war, let us call them in shorthand, are typically neglected in studies of war. Passing remarks are made, say, about the impact of horsepower or the advent of iron-horse locomotives and artillery loaded on railway wagons, but that’s all. We lack a comprehensive study of war and communication. That is a reason why I would like in this lecture to try to begin sketching a research project, to begin filling the gap by thinking of the history of communication and war in the following way.

In times defined mainly by *oral communication*, news of war and rumours of war were conveyed by word of mouth and written messages carried by foot runners, horses, donkeys, and camels. Information about battles, sieges, victories, and defeats was reported only after the fact. War did not know instant media coverage. With the *advent of literacy*, news from battle fronts was still conveyed at snail’s pace or subsequently reported via the *printed word* in poems, plays, speeches, and books, some of which later came to be regarded as classics. Examples include the inscriptions on Babylonian, Assyrian, and Egyptian monuments, the Homeric poems and the famous Epic of Gilgamesh, originally written (c. 2100–1200 BCE) on clay tablets in cuneiform script in praise of the warrior king of the Mesopotamian city-state Uruk. Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, purportedly written toward the end of the 5th century BCE by a military commander in the previous century and originally treated as a state secret and confined to royal archives, is today remembered and recommended for its treatment of war as an unwanted disruption of cosmic harmony, its appeal to the moral importance of keeping “the people in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril”, and its comparison of war fighting

¹⁰ Aleksandra Ketlerienė, “‘We’re in Cold War Two’ – interview with British historian Niall Ferguson,” *LRT*, 5/10/2024, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2w3jrx73>

with flowing water and proverbs such as “supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”. Thucydides’ early 4th century BCE *History of the Peloponnesian War* is another example of military retrospection, remembered for its observation that in war “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.

Well into modern times, despite the advent of the printing press, written texts about war were very much *ex post* meditations on past battles. Often considered state secrets and their circulation restricted to ruling circles – there was not yet a reading public agitating for freedom of the press – these texts were mainly manuals in the arts of war, of the kind written by Raimondo Montecucoli, who served the Habsburgs throughout the Thirty Years War. Considered a state secret and published only posthumously, his mid-17th century treatises on the art of war made a case for the superiority of standing armies and examined topics such as fortifications and sieges, the arts of march and counter march, and the tactical difficulty of combining infantry with cavalry and artillery, muskets with pikes. The Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz’s *Vom Kriege*, also published posthumously in 1832, fits this pattern. Emphasizing that in an age of popular mobilization, war is a continuation of politics using other means, and that “the direct annihilation of the enemy’s forces...is the overriding principle of war”, it is nowadays considered a classic, even though it is a text hailing from an era marked by the absence of war reporting and the slow-paced delivery of news, as happened, for instance, at the now-famous 1815 Battle of Waterloo, when although there were 56 newspapers published in London, not one of them arranged in advance to relay news from the battlefield. Carried by horses and a rowboat, news of the historic defeat of Bonaparte by Wellington’s army less than 350 kilometres from London took 3 days to reach there – and 40 days to New York and 100 days to reach Sydney by sailing ship.

Mass Broadcasting

Things began to change during the 19th century. Wind-powered packet ships, so named because they carried packets of news-laden mail, began regularly sailing the Atlantic. They were followed by paddle steamers and iron steamships and coal-fired passenger locomotives. As printing presses began rolling out daily newspapers whose stories were spread with the help of trains and ships, followed by the telegraph and early radio broadcasting, *news of war underwent electrification*. Time-space barriers shrivelled, but much to the chagrin of the first war reporters, there were still time delays across vast geographic distances. It was in this context that the mid-19th century witnessed the invention of the profession of what Charles Dickens called the war correspondent (the character Jefferson Brick is a fictional war correspondent of *The New York Rowdy Journal* in *Martin Chuzzlewit*). Figures such as William Howard Russell, a fellow Irishman who reportedly liked to drink hard and chain smoke cigars when on missions, filed remarkable dispatches by telegraph for *The Times* of London from Crimea and the bloody fields of the Indian Rebellion, the American Civil War, and the early 1870s Franco-Prussian War. Although Russell apparently disliked the new-fangled phrase “war correspondent” as much as some military commanders disliked his pioneering coverage of the diseased realities of war, his reports, particularly of the Siege of Sevastopol (1854-1855) and the rout of the British Light Brigade cavalry by Russian forces, earned him a wide readership among a literate public witnessing for the first time in the modern world the horrors of war, up front and almost in real time.

The full electrification and time-space shrinkage of war reportage was to happen only during the 20th century. The beginnings of *mass broadcasting of war* are traceable to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. That conflict was not only the first modern war that resulted in victory for an Asian power at the expense of a European-based army. It was the moment when, for the first time, war journalists collaborating with

Lionel James, who reported for the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London, experimented with radio technology. To overcome the old problem of interference with telegraphed messages by operators at relay stations – reports were often censored, or their contents falsified – he provided these newspapers with news of battles from an offshore steamboat equipped with a jury-rigged radio transmitter mast tower. His opening report from the first “press boat” dedicated to war correspondence was successfully transmitted via the British-controlled, leased territory Weihaiwei and published the next day. “I am at sea on board the *Times* steamer *Haimun*, en route to Chinampo”, he wrote. “The military developments foreshadowed in my previous telegrams should be taking place very soon, as, according to later information, the ice is disappearing fast”.¹¹ James’s first report was filed and published on 15 March 1904, but his breaking news adventure lasted only a month. Confronted by Japanese government suspicions and Russian charges of espionage, James dismantled and abandoned the boat, from which he had sent 10,000 words of copy, and returned to slow-motion reportage.

Notwithstanding such spluttering false starts and setbacks, which are normal in the invention and diffusion of new communications technologies, the reshaping of the conduct and public experience of war by the application of radio, and then film and television technologies, became a defining feature of the 20th century. Electronically mediated messaging within the ranks of whole armies was normalized. By conquering illiteracy, distance and time lags, radio paved the way to the mass broadcasting of government propaganda to large audiences captivated by the weirdness of strange voices entering the home, factories and offices, bars and restaurants, and public squares. Radio reached into zones of everyday life untouched by newspapers and print technology. It nurtured popular cultures of profit-driven entertainment and helped to whip up nationalist energies and military sentiments. Just as Franklin D. Roosevelt enchanted mass audiences and prepared them for war by means of his pioneering radio fireside chats, so shortly after his first radio speech in 1925 the thunderous voice of the former journalist and newspaperman Mussolini helped spread the spirit of “each village and school must have a radio” fascist militarism through the airwaves of Italy, the country where radio broadcasting evolved under a totalitarian government to become a source of fascist entertainment, as in the broadcasting from Berlin of the 1936 Olympics, and an instrument of battle, for instance during the invasion of Ethiopia.

Marshall McLuhan accurately remarked that just as the Second World War was a radio war, the Vietnam War was the first *television war*. He noted the historic significance of the way journalists for the first time used portable, battery-powered video tape “portopac” cameras and filed filmed dispatches by jet aircraft overnight to supply television outlets news for the next morning’s broadcasts at home. “We are now in the midst of our first television war”, he wrote in *War and Peace in the Global Village*. “The television war has meant the end of the dichotomy between civilian and military. The public is now participant in every phase of the war, and the main actions of the war are now being fought in the American home itself”.¹² His point was not only that war had been rendered highly visible and its butchery made more emotionally palpable – that war had drawn closer to people’s lives and clawed at their senses as immediately “as the smell of a cigarette”. McLuhan invited us to remember the key historical point: in any age, in matters of war, the reigning forces and relations of communication structure how war is prosecuted, how war is reported, why this or that war is deemed significant, and how it “feels” to victims and witnesses alike. On the battlefield and in the living room, the medium shapes the sent messages – and the public reception of those messages.

McLuhan’s emphasis on the shaping power of communication infrastructures was soon to be confirmed by the advent (during the late 1960s) of satellite broadcasting which he predicted would wipe out time-space

¹¹ “First messages from the Yellow Sea,” *The Times*, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/nhc8s2u5>

¹² Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 134.

differences and promote a sense of “all-at-onceness” among audiences huddled around television sets at various points on our planet. McLuhan did not live to watch *CNN*’s non-stop 1991 Gulf War coverage. The first truly global coverage of war in real time, it was a watershed moment that signalled the end of space-time lags and paved the way for a string of novelties, even making possible, as in Mogadishu in Somalia a year later, live reportage that featured journalists such as Christiane Amanpour armed with lights, cameras and microphones bizarrely greeting the beach landing of US marines in Operation Restore Hope.¹³

Meta Wars

Early satellite war reportage broadcasting relied on analogue technologies that conveyed data as electronic signals of varying frequency or amplitude added to carrier waves of a given frequency. What McLuhan could not have foreseen was the communications revolution to come: the shift to digital technologies that would have transformative effects on the *modus operandi* of armies and their weapons of war and immerse audiences in a strange new world of digitally integrated newspapers, radio, and television, the multiplication of gatekeeper and gate watcher media platforms, a satellite/fibre optic/wi-fi-linked world in which war is mediated by PCs, laptops, smartphones, cameras, podcasts, search engines, audio books, chatbots, video games, livestreamed music, digital marketing, instant messaging, cloud storage, and audio-visual conferencing tools such as Webex, Zoom, and China’s Voov.

Enter the 21st century world of *meta wars*. The dynamics I am about to describe and interpret are “meta” (from Greek meta [μετά], a preposition meaning “after, beyond”) in that wars are undergoing a metamorphosis and plunging us into a new world, a world that our great grandparents would not easily have recognized. For the first time in history, wars depend fundamentally on digital technologies which electronically generate, process, store, and distribute text, sound, and image information in strings of discrete, 0s and 1s binary format state. A quantum computing revolution may be coming – as James der Derian, Stuart Rollo, and other scholars are anticipating – but for the moment, in our age of meta wars, whole armies are regionally and globally connected, coordinated, and commanded using digital technologies.

These technologies – the dynamic routing of ARPANET is the best-known example – were of course born of military-industrial complex funding and efforts to build “hot potato” communications networks of networks that could survive partial destruction, such as by nuclear war. Without the “modernizing”, real-time, speed-of-light streamlining offered by these technologies originally based on packet switching, decentralized networks, remote login, the conjoining of networks of networks using communication protocols, notably TCP/IP, the United States could not nowadays efficiently and effectively command and manage its 800 military bases in over 75 countries. Without digital communications technologies, including its own global navigation system Beidou “Big Dipper”, China’s PLA couldn’t operate its Djibouti military base, experiment with sophisticated cyber weapons capable of mimicking, tricking, and confounding the signal systems of enemy satellites, land a spacecraft on the far side of the Moon, or operate its space station Tiangong (Heavenly Palace). Smaller armies are similarly restructured along digital lines: in major reforms of recent years, for instance, the Ukrainian army dispensed with combat units larger than battalions. Its fighting structures became flatter, its command and intelligence operations more tightly connected digitally.

What is more, in the era of meta wars, as you know well, armies’ weapons systems double as lethal digital tools: long-range hypersonic missiles such as Trident 2, Minuteman 3, sea-launched SM-6s, and Russia’s Avangard; AI machine learning systems like Israel’s Habsora “The Gospel”, Lavender and Where’s Daddy? that sift through data, monitor and identify targets, and operate as “mass assassination

¹³ “Operation Restore Hope Beach Landing, Mogadishu Somalia,” YouTube, 3/1/2014, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ypy2c8cc>

factories”; killer drones dispatched from the armchairs of distant control rooms; precision-guided bombs; digitally guided, state-of-the-art Stinger and Javelin missiles; bombs disguised as booby-trapped wireless communications tools; Saab’s NLAW anti-tank weapons; Apache attack helicopters whose Hellfire missiles are capable of liquidating targets 11 kilometres distant; machine-gun armed Sharp Claws robots, and wifi-operated Mule 200 vehicles stationed by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on China’s high-altitude frontier with India are just some of the best-known examples of the digitization of war’s weapons.

Gamification

McLuhan spoke of the coming of war into our living rooms, but he could not have foreseen another development unique to our age of meta wars: the novel ways digital technologies enable the multimedia 3D public representation of war in which governments and armies and various media platforms draw audiences into war’s battlegrounds. We could say that the “common sense” of war is dramatically transformed. *War comes to have a meta quality in a second sense.* As the Chinese scholar Shi Zhan has pointed out, digitized war undergoes a gamification. It is as if Mark Zuckerberg now designs war reportage; or, looking back, that the meta wars of our age are taking their cue from Neal Stephenson’s science fiction novel *Snow Crash* (1992), in which digitally networked 3D technologies draw socially connected users into what seem to be “realistic” virtual worlds; or perhaps from Ernest Cline’s novel *Ready Player One* (2011), in which individuals inhabit multiple virtual worlds in a single universe dubbed “the OASIS”. For the first time in history, meta wars are coming to have a digitally augmented reality quality. This is true in several senses.

We live in times in which armies train their soldiers to handle the fog and friction of war using battlefield simulator programmes, as the US Marine Corps has done by teaming up with the Prague-based Bohemia Interactive Studio to develop the gaming platform Virtual Battlespace 2, called VBS2. In the age of meta wars, war reporting has also gone digital. A large gaggle of skilled and seasoned journalists and public relations and marketing professionals function as the playwrights of war reporting. Drawing together the online and offline worlds, their job as game creators is to usher audiences into virtual rooms where they “inform” them of the progress of a war. The dramaturgs speak what could be called meta speak. Colonel Natalia Humenyuk, spokeswoman for Operational Command South, tells Ukraine television audiences things like “the counteroffensive in the south of Ukraine is moving forward. The Russian Army is demoralized”. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov chips in: “Our military does not hit social facilities and residential neighbourhoods and does not hit civilians”. There are familiar figures like Biden’s Karine Jean-Pierre and Jake Sullivan, and Mark Regev, an unfunny Melbourne-born spokesman for the Israeli government, who is proudly on record as saying repeatedly that genocide allegations against Israel are “preposterous” and that the current ICJ case against Israel is in effect the “defence of Hamas”, and that “as a democracy we’re keeping civilian casualties to a bare minimum”.¹⁴

And, for the first time in the history of war, AI-generated digital spokespersons deliver mainstream media war reports. Ukraine’s Victoria Shi is the pioneer: a character modelled on a Donetsk-born singer and former contestant on Ukraine’s version of *The Bachelor* reality show, she doubles as a stiff and smooth-talking propagandist who boasts that she is a proponent of “cutting-edge wartime diplomacy”, fluent in 30 languages, and “always looks good in the morning because I do not go out late at night”.¹⁵

In the age of meta wars, these mainstream media performances are laced with war room briefings by stern-faced, uniformed military commanders, commentaries by “accredited” experts, images of smoke-

¹⁴ See: Mark Regev, “Israel seeks to minimize civilian casualties; Hamas does the opposite,” X, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/nntvebe2>

¹⁵ “We Interviewed Ukraine’s New AI-Generated Spokesperson,” YouTube, 3/5/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3hjp2chd>

filled battlegrounds, fighter jets overhead, tanks and troops, wrecked buildings, burning fields, and displaced civilians. Multi-game player dynamics are the norm. Soldiers using fake social media accounts to conceal their whereabouts demonstrate their prowess to publics back home by uploading images and clips of their strikes and manoeuvres to Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok. Government intelligence directorates call upon citizens trapped in battle zones to identify collaborators and to reveal the enemy's whereabouts. Civilians are invited into the game rooms. The Russian government approves the use of popular video games such as Roblox and Minecraft (owned by Microsoft) in which Russian soldiers battle against Ukrainian Nazis and conquer Ukraine territory. Civilians join cyber-armies on Telegram Messenger to feed on-the-spot, battlefield intelligence to their armed forces. Vloggers such as TikTok influencer Rom Carmi¹⁶ provide running text and video commentaries. The stories they tell are copied, posted, re-posted, mashed up, liked, disliked, and circulated by mainstream media platforms elsewhere in the world.

Not to be forgotten are the lone shooter star performers. Almost every day or evening a president of a war-ravaged country who was previously a comedian and television actor, the star of a series called *Servant of the People*, delivers moral appeals for military help to domestic and global audiences. The president's staged performances are carefully tailored to their target audiences. At home, he says things like: "I thank each of our combat brigades, all the soldiers and commanders who are destroying the enemy with all their might and, in particular, using our drone capabilities with precision".¹⁷ When abroad, what is said to the members of the Knesset (Russia is preparing a "final solution" for Ukraine) differs in tone and substance from what is told by video link to parliaments in Athens (Ukraine is one of the Orthodox countries that was Christianized by the Greeks), in Ottawa (where he received several standing ovations during a speech laced with references to Vancouver, the CN Tower in Toronto, and other cities and landmarks), and in New York (where the president rejects Chinese and Brazilian peace plans to end a three-year war by denouncing their diplomats as apologists of colonialism).

Media Spectacles

Notice how until this point of the lecture there's been almost no mention of the blood and guts and mental and environmental sufferings produced by meta wars. It has long been said that war is hell on earth – when war begins, the devil opens hell, runs an ancient English proverb – but a weirdly puzzling feature of meta wars is the way the hellish brutality of battlefield violence is both neutralized and rendered aesthetically attractive to media audiences. My thought is that war becomes an elaborately staged, picturesque tableau designed to transfix audiences and wall them off from war's horrors. Savagery and ghastliness are no more. War becomes bloodless. It undergoes a form of beautification more subtle and more insidious than ever happened in the era of radio, film, and television. In the 1920s, broadcast media was used for the first time by ruling groups to beautify war, as the German literary critic Walter Benjamin spotted. In the age of mechanical reproduction, he commented, war came wrapped in "illusion-promoting spectacles" charged with "aesthetic pleasure". Despite Benjamin's one-sided conviction that fascism was the prime driver of this aestheticization of war – he had little to say about the parallel contributions of Soviet communism – and although in the difficult political circumstances he probably didn't get to watch *Triumph des Willens* (1935), *Olympia* (1938), and other propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl or the Nazis' 1944 documentary "Beautiful Theresienstadt: the Führer Gives Jews a City",¹⁸ he correctly foresaw that electronic media

¹⁶ See his TikTok account: "@barefoot_rom," TikTok, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/pxzb7w7x>

¹⁷ "In July, Our Warriors Have Used More Drones Than the Occupier – Address by the President," *President of Ukraine*, 6/8/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/nkvv9858>

¹⁸ "Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film, 1944," *Perspectives*, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhd6f5x>

could have electrifying effects – that radio and film would be used to adorn war for mass consumption by turning its life-and-death horrors into multimedia entertainment.

The public beautification of war – I speak descriptively, if sarcastically – is among the oddest features of meta wars. These wars are “meta” in the sense of gamification to which I have already alluded. It is as if audiences living outside of war zones are invited to enter and immerse themselves in rooms in which wars are no longer violent, beastly, or soul destroying, entertainment rooms in which nobody has their brains or chests blown out, or is crushed under rubble, left limbless, scarred emotionally for life, or forced to live with broken hearts in ruined ecosystems. Yes, media reports are awash with dazzling images of drones in the sky, tanks advancing across fields, guns fired by ear-muffled soldiers in uniform, clouds of black smoke, and blackened buildings. Yes, there are press conferences, footage of diplomats sitting around flagged tables, war cabinet meetings, official warnings about “terrorism”, and predictions of progress. And, yes, there is non-stop deployment of metonyms, keywords, clichéd phrases. Incursions, evacuations, unconfirmed reports, footholds, confrontations, ground assaults, front lines, power targets,¹⁹ safe zones, abandoned villages, military analysts speaking on the condition of anonymity, intelligence reports, ceasefire negotiations, civilians fleeing fighting, overcrowded shelters, tent camps, and peace talks. But war is no longer death’s feast.

The fighters, victims, and witnesses who experience meta wars first-hand will tell you that they live day and night with war in their hearts and minds and inside their guts, but that is not how war is presented by prime ministers and presidents, politicians, government public relations specialists, and military spokesmen. In their statements, speeches, and press conferences, death and destruction are conspicuous by their absence. In democracies and despotisms alike, governments do more than ensure that “truth” is a casualty of war. They indeed tell lies, bullshit, and peddle calculated silence. In the age of meta wars, states and armies do all they can to frame, slant, block, and airbrush the images, sounds, and stories of war that audiences may find disturbing. Russian-style despotisms and their state-controlled news platforms such as *Vremiya* specialize in crushing and criminalizing their opponents’ messages. Twitter is throttled; Facebook access is subjected to slow downs. There are no angels in metaverse wars. The US and its allies hunted and hounded Julian Assange and forced him to suffer different forms of imprisonment without trial for 14 years because he decoded and circulated the collateral murder video tapes and other disturbing war documents. Video footage of Ukrainian soldiers executing captured Russian soldiers is now hard to find on the Internet. In the big cities and rural villages of Ukraine, almost everyone knows a family that has lost someone in the fighting. Dead flowers from funerals litter roads, and graveyards are filling up, but exact details of the numbers of Ukrainian soldiers daily killed and wounded in action are officially unavailable.

George Orwell was right to warn against war hawk politicians who twist syntax and words and “spray forth the correct opinion as automatically as a machine gun spraying forth bullets”.²⁰ But I doubt whether he could have imagined how in the multimedia age of meta wars there is much more than government censorship and slant and the spraying forth of correct opinions. *War is aestheticized*. Government platforms regularly tout media narratives designed to win public support for war, minimally by portraying war as bloodless. There is war on the language of war, new forms of meta speak in which we hear of “surgical strikes”, “autocrats”, “smart weapons”, “collateral damage”, “civilian casualties”, “humanitarian aid”, “terrorism”, “safe zones”, “ceasefires”, and “special operations”. Military manoeuvres come wrapped in multimedia publicity designed and handled by armed forces public relations professionals. Commanding officers are trained in the arts of avoiding bad publicity and gruesome realities. Government statements,

¹⁹ *matarot otzem*: the total destruction of hospitals, high-rise residences, universities, mosques, and other civilian targets.

²⁰ “The Principles of Newspeak,” in: George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), Appendix.

reports, and press kit handouts are given to journalists. The point is to turn war into a spectacle, a tactical shooting stage performance, an Arma 3- or Battlefield 1-type video war game created and directed by the governing authorities. There are daily press conferences, where it is affirmed that there is no censorship beyond what is necessary for military victory and the safety of the troops. But war is inside their words. There are calculated morale boosts and good news from the front. A special place is reserved for men and women of bravery, legends, and heroes, some of them unknown soldiers who have laid down their lives or, like a combat pilot known as the “Ghost of Kyiv”, said to have scaled the peaks of impossibility by singlehandedly downing dozens of enemy planes (raised eyebrows later forced the Ukraine Air Force Command to retract the hype and to urge Ukrainians “NOT to neglect the basic rules of information hygiene”²¹). At every moment, the goal is to disparage the adversary, peddle the conviction that this war is a just war, deny that things are going wrong, publish instant denials, refuse to confirm or comment on operations, throw out the dead bodies when nobody is watching, and bathe bad news in satisfying silence.

Governments are not the sole source of the beautification of war. In the so-named capitalist democracies of our age, for-profit corporations and taxpayer-funded media platforms such as the *BBC*, the *CBC*, and *Deutsche Welle* contribute to the framing of war as a bloodless video game. Researchers examining the *BBC*’s online coverage of the Gaza and West Bank war in the first two months after 7 October, for instance, noted the scarcity of grisly images and how Israeli victims were typically said to have suffered “massacres”, “murders”, and “slaughter” whereas Palestinians were merely “killed” or “dead”. Across the Channel, media anthropologist Celia Chirol, the first person to study French coverage of the aftermath of 7 October, has shown that during one week in mid-January 2024, the most-watched 20 news programmes on taxpayer-funded *TNT* (*Télévision Numérique Terrestre*) devoted only 29 seconds of airtime to Gaza and the fate of Palestinians. *Arrêt Sur Images* (Freeze-Frame) similarly reported that during 30 hours of airtime and 46 news bulletins in a 10-day period (4-15 February 2024), France’s most popular TV channel, *TF1* (un) and *France 2* news broadcasts devoted just 5 minutes to the situation in Gaza.²²

Why do commercial and taxpayer-funded media frame war coverage in this way? Most obviously, they have a habit of bowing down and sucking up to government censors. They buckle because government press conferences and media handouts provide cheap and easily recycled raw material suitable for headlines, as in Israel, where IDF press statements get kid gloves treatment from every mainstream news outlet.²³ Editors also dread government threats of harassment, arrest, and closure. They fear those moments when, for instance, George W. Bush warned media critics of the Iraq invasion that they would be treated as the fellow travellers of terrorism. It had consequences. In its study of the first week of reportage of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that in more than 40 hours of material there were no images of people wounded or killed by gunfire. During the weeks that followed, public awareness of battlefield fatalities sharply declined, thanks to US government prohibitions on journalists filming coffins of dead American soldiers. The upshot was that bad news didn’t happen. Journalists became wartime “churnalists”, foot soldiers of the beautification of war, victims of a new kind of Stockholm syndrome in which journalism becomes the tame and willing public relations instrument of military strategies.

Europe’s largest commercial publisher and media giant Axel Springer SE similarly shields audiences from war’s darkest horrors. Kneeling before German government warnings, it requires all its employees to take an oath of unconditional loyalty to Israel; staff who dare raise questions about its genocidal war

²¹ Ines Eisele, “Fact check: The ‘Ghost of Kyiv’ fighter pilot,” *Deutsche Welle*, 5/4/2022, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yckf2nca>

²² “Gaza war vanishing from French news channels amid fears of media bias,” *RFI*, 7/3/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3t9ve39d>

²³ Sebastian Ben Daniel (John Brown), “How Israeli journalists carry out PR for the army,” *+972 Magazine*, 19/2/2024, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2cdpndw7>

on Palestinians risk being taken in for questioning by senior management and summarily fired, while Springer's flagship publications such as Germany's *Bild* (once described by Axel Springer as his "dog on a chain") regularly celebrate the government's "Israel is Germany's Staatsräson" policy and run headlines like "God bless the IDF". On 10 October 2023, *Bild*'s deputy political editor Filipp Piatov summarized the editorial line: "Germany has ONE main task at this time. Germany must support Israel and cover its back until the Israeli army has achieved its war aims. No matter how long it takes or how hard the war becomes".²⁴ In a memo headed "from Mark" concerning "coverage guidance", *CNN*'s editor-in-chief Mark Thompson similarly told his journalists that although *CNN* would report the background history and human consequences of the Israeli war on Palestinians, "we must continue always to remind our audiences of the immediate cause of *this current conflict*, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of civilians".²⁵ Giant media platforms – Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube – meanwhile indulge the beautification trend by issuing "community guidelines" banning the use of "inappropriate" images of violence and practising what's known as "shadow banning": behind-the-scenes editorial decisions to close email accounts, to remove content linked to government-sensitive keywords, and to airbrush hashtags such as #FreePalestine and #IStandWithPalestine.

The camouflaging of death by non-governmental media happens for other reasons. Constrained by cost-cutting and personnel safety considerations, commercial and public service media platforms have mostly done away with foreign correspondents and no longer place journalists on battlegrounds. Gone are the days of Christiane Amanpour reporting live on the ground in wartime Somalia. Outsourced news is the new normal. In their early Ukraine war coverage, the *BBC* and most other mainstream Western media platforms outsourced news to "embedded" local fixers and influencers, figures such as Orysia Khimiak, former director of a Ukraine PR firm named Reface and contributor to the Kiev-based Projector Institute, whose leading slogan is "Glory to Ukraine. We will win!". It's true that in high-risk war zones, helmeted and flak-jacketed foreign journalists are still seen huddling together into clusterfucks (the word dates from the Vietnam War period). But the result is the same: on terrain of which they have little direct knowledge, dependent upon interpreters because they have little or no grasp of local languages, they resort to hearsay and hype and regurgitate materials issued by local military commanders. Encouraged to join "pool systems", first used in the 1991 Gulf War, they are warned not to report the grisly or ghastly. Media celebrities like *CNN*'s Anderson Cooper parachute in to broadcast hastily selected "human interest" stories befitting of their big name, big salary status. There are unending updates, but depth and context go missing in action. Cross-checking of the stories these embedded journalists despatch – reports based on statements issued by Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) or Ukraine army false flag operations aimed at triggering Western outrage and NATO intervention, for instance – becomes well-nigh impossible. For reasons of career advancement and reputational glory, they acquiesce in HQ "script approval", the practice whereby scripts in the field are checked and approved by senior editors back at base prior to recording.

Sensationalist, audience-hungry, *breaking news journalism* is also heavily responsible for the "war washing" of war. While non-governmental media usually pride themselves on their accuracy and truthfulness, outsourced war reportage often resembles a fairy tale with a breaking news bias. Acutely aware of the need to attract viewers, listeners, and readers, journalists employed by for-profit and public service media suppose that in a media-saturated world of infinite distractions and unending hunger for entertainment and the consumption of novelty, journalism must hunt for "clicks". The more clicks a headlined story

²⁴ "Aus Solidarität mit Israel verzichtet „Bild“ darauf, über palästinensische Opfer in Gaza zu berichten," *UBER MEDIEN*, 20/12/2023, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5cjslx98>

²⁵ "*CNN* staff say network's pro-Israel slant amounts to 'journalistic malpractice'," *The Guardian*, 4/2/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/46z2eh6y>

gets – stories of newborns beheaded and burned in enemy ovens, for instance – the higher the chances of more paid subscriptions, increased advertiser revenues, and company profits. That’s why they preach 800 words and practise the slam dunk headline, short stories which incite excitement and a sense of being “in touch”. Boredom is their enemy; “hookthink” (Rob Wijnberg) is their weapon. Yet they know that attentive audiences can be sickened by violence. That’s why they run “Warning: The following footage contains disturbing images” signs; and why they obey senior editors who tell them that the domestic principle “if it bleeds it leads” doesn’t apply to the terrible blood-and-guts dynamics of faraway wars.

Coded obsession with the shocking and scandalous, blind fixation on the new, hyping things up: these are among the vices of breaking news, profit-seeking churnalism. But mainstream breaking news journalism helps beautify war in a less obvious way. It manufactures *superficiality*. When it comes to war reporting, devils are usually in the details, but detailed investigation takes time, patience, professional skill, and money. The paradox is that within the otherwise intense commercial media coverage of military conflicts, few mainstream journalists bother to investigate how meta wars are ecocidal, makers of junk, spreaders of plastics, poisoners of fields, farms, and forests, and juggernaut destroyers of our planetary ecosystems. These journalists do not tell us what it is like to have a bullet in the back; how a mother feels when reading bedtime stories as bombs fall, or when her child is sickened by scabies or polio or starves to death in her arms; why soldiers swearing profanities force women and girl children at gunpoint to undress and burn their underwear; or why distraught relatives deem it their duty to piece together the remaining body parts of a whole family decimated by an enemy bomb. And breaking news journalists rarely sink their teeth into the political economy of meta wars.

Thumbnail coverage of the most anodyne kind is instead their specialty. “Several NATO countries are now supplying Ukraine with heavier weapons, to enable its army to push back against Russia’s army”, reported *BBC News* on 5 May 2022, ten weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Next day, *The New York Times* added: “Britain will offer an extra 1.3 billion pounds (about \$1.6 billion) in military support and aid to Ukraine”. Journalists who write such lines appear to forget that the words “offer” and “supplying” are euphemisms for the profit-driven “selling” of weapons of mass destruction; or that their reports bolster public silence about state-backed corporations like Moscow’s Rostec, or BAE Systems, Europe’s largest arms contractor, or Raytheon, the world’s biggest guided missile producer, or the global giant of profit-seeking giants, the arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

Then there’s the superficial treatment or outright silence of mainstream commercial journalists about the most historically significant issues raised by any given war. Consider the eastern Mediterranean war that erupted exactly one year ago today. Was the Hamas assault on Israel a limited operation to strike at Israeli military targets and to seize hostages – a small-scale intervention that managed to catch the IDF’s Gaza Brigade so unawares that most of the 1,400 fighters who scaled fences and expected to lose their lives returned alive, hostages in hand? Or was the Hamas operation designed from the outset to spark a regional war, to lure Israel into an unbearably long war it couldn’t possibly win because that outcome would ultimately require the elimination of all Palestinians, Hezbollah, Al-Fajr (the armed wing of Al-Jama‘a al-Islamiya) in Lebanon, and Yemen’s Houthis, the toppling of the Iranian regime, and the full-scale, permanent stationing of the US and its allies in the region?

And more radical questions: Why have mainstream Western media platforms, politicians, and institutions such as universities blindly memorialized 7 October by rhetorically linking today’s anniversary with the words “Hamas”, “terrorism”, “anti-Semitism” and Israel’s sacred “sovereignty” and “right to exist”? Might 7 October have a different and more profound historical significance? Can we speak of a Gaza moment in which a military assault finally exposed to the whole world as never before a colonizer’s brutal contempt

for international law, the hypocrisy of its Western government allies, and their active complicity in the destruction of their cherished “rules-based order” plus the flourishing of lawlessness, unrestrained violence, and US-led might-makes-right geopolitics? Could it be that the mega-destructiveness of meta wars of the Grozny-, Aleppo-, and Gaza-model – the extermination of innocent civilians and their ecological habitats by air-dropped MK 80 series 2,000-pound bombs, for instance – signal the beginning of a new era in which the distinction between nuclear and “conventional” non-nuclear weapons is finally rendered obsolete?

Indifference

Mainstream journalists rarely pose such tough questions let alone provide compelling answers. Their reticence has pathological consequences. It should come as no surprise that *citizen indifference* toward the cruelties and horrors of war is among the most remarkable features of meta wars. It’s true that geographically speaking indifference is unevenly distributed; when the claws and teeth of a meta war sink into people’s skins, their indifference is quickly dissolved by concern laced with fear and anger. It’s true as well that there are contexts, contemporary Israel and the US after 9/11 for instance, wherein mainstream media coverage of meta wars has aroused bellicose passions and loud calls by citizens to wage war on enemies ruthlessly, to the bitter end of total victory. For a variety of reasons, my judgment is that these examples of the passionate mobilization of war-mongering masses are outliers in decline. I may be wrong, but the age of democratic wars, considered by many scholars to have been born of the second half of the 18th century, is coming to an end, most obviously because, functionally speaking, the weapons of war, most of them overkill weapons, render obsolete mass mobilization and universal conscription.

It’s true that the warrior songs are still sung – Aux armes, citoyens; Formez vos bataillons; Marchons, marchons [Shoulder arms, citizens; form your battalions; march, march] – but the figure of the arms bearing citizen is nowadays replaced by audiences whose awareness of destruction and killing is muted by incuriosity, detachment, impassivity. When judged by the old standards of the war-fighting citizen, the citizens of countries such as Germany, France, Canada, and the US who tolerate meta wars might be said to have forfeited their citizenship; ancient Greek thinkers would have called them idiots (ιδιώτης), people selfishly preoccupied with their own lives and unconcerned with public affairs. When it comes to meta wars, the resigned torpor of the indifferent is the opposite of the highly idealized textbook figure known as the informed citizen, a citizen who sits atop the world because they purportedly know everything about everything. And the indifferent person is unlike what I have elsewhere called the wise citizen, a figure curious and caring about the world because they understand that since rulers often get things badly wrong because they don’t know everything about everything, the duty of citizens is to be on the lookout for abuses of power wherever they happen.²⁶

In striking contrast to these images of citizenship, the indifferent person, charmed, calmed, and pacified by media spectacles and the beautification of war and overloaded with other multimedia stories and multiple life commitments in a hyper-digitalized world, withdraws from public life. Philosophically speaking, their indifference is the negation of difference. Indifference means “not different”. It implies “undifferentiated” neutrality or impartiality, disinterest and incuriosity about someone or something, a lack of connection or care about matters such as war and peace, right and wrong, good and evil. The indifferent know there are wars happening, but they choose to ignore their details. With a shrug of the shoulders and frowns on their face, they turn their back on their realities. When the topic of war arises and when public disagreements about wars erupt, they say things like “Whatever”, or ask “Who cares?” or “What am I supposed to do?”, without expecting a reply. As in Alberto Moravia’s classic novel *Gli indifferenti*

²⁶ John Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence* (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 243-245.

[The Time of Indifference] (1929) and Jonathan Glazer’s film *The Zone of Interest* (2023), the indifferent person is practised in the arts of detachment. The indifferent may be well satisfied with life, happy, cheerful, and perfectly polite. They typically have multiple preoccupations such as money, family, friends, sport, work, hobbies, and holidays. They may be bored with life or generally uninquisitive about the world. They curse politicians and have little or no faith in high-level politics; their indifference is oiled by gut convictions that in matters of government, power, and world affairs their views count for zilch. It is as if the indifferent are alive and dead.

In matters of war, we could say that if engaged curiosity is half of life then disengaged indifference is half of death. The indifferent character is benumbed by war. They are certainly not ignorant. Especially when confronted by large-scale cruelty and suffering, indifference requires unconscious and conscious “work on the self”, notes the anthropologist Ghassan Hage.²⁷ Psychoanalytically speaking, it is more than “denial”²⁸, but it is hard to plumb the depths of people’s indifference, or to make generalizations. Is their indifference ultimately a form of strategic avoidance, a calculation rooted in fears of losing their jobs and ruining their own reputations? Do their hearts say yes, but their attention spans say no? Are indifferent people marked by the spirit of “slacktivism” and the belief that in the online identity supermarket “shopping is more important than voting”?²⁹ Do they have “bicameral minds”³⁰ split between conformity to power and self-concern and incapable of meta-reflection on why they are indifferent about meta wars? Are indifferent people “copium” addicts, in the words of Geert Lovink,³¹ who deal with cascading disasters by abandoning politics, killing time, going easy with life, quitting the hustle, ordering takeaways, chilling, and constantly checking their socials?

I don’t know. But what I can say is that although indifferent people catch glimpses of war’s horrors, they’re gripped by feelings of emotional disconnection and cold unconcern. They’re busily preoccupied with their own cluttered lives. Gripped by war fatigue, they say suffering isn’t their thing. They conclude that these wars are not their business, or beyond their control, and that, when all is said and done, nothing can be done about them because wars are the way of a corrupted and greedy world run by rich and powerful elites.

Rebel Journalism

You may be tempted to ask which is worse, ethically speaking? A people who beatify their government leaders and idolize their armed forces, fanatics who bay for revenge against enemies, blood on their hands, brimming with pride about the systematic use of “field questioning” (torture), the destruction of the enemies’ universities and schools and saying “if you need to kill a million, let it be a million” and other such things recorded in Mehdi Hasan’s documentary *Israel’s Reel Extremism* (August 2024)?³² Or people who don’t care, who knowingly look away, shut their mouths and spinelessly do nothing in the face of genocidal wars and eco-destruction? A people whose indifference implicates them in horrific crimes and who are in this sense as bad, or worse, than people willing to back extreme violence against other people and their planetary habitats?

Again, I do not know whether this question is correctly framed, or how it could plausibly be answered, but for me what is clear is that there is a disturbing affinity between indifference and the media beautification

²⁷ Ghassan Hage, “‘Zone of Interest’ as an Ethnography of Indifference,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (16 May 2024).

²⁸ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

²⁹ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

³⁰ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000).

³¹ Geert Lovink, “Copium compendium,” *Eurozine*, 8/1/2024, accessed on 10/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/59x7zc82>

³² See at: Mehdi Hasan, “Our New Zeteo Documentary,” *Zeteo*, 11/8/2024, accessed on 3/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4jse7wm3>

of war. Bloodless war breeds heartless detachment. That being so, perhaps the more pertinent question is: pressured by meta wars and rumours of yet more wars to come, how durable is this indifference? Granted that people have multiple commitments and that healthy civil societies cultivate a measure of Stoic care about some things and indifference toward others, can indifference toward meta wars withstand widespread feelings that our world is hurtling out of control and that the probability of a major global war is rising?

Since uncertainty about the future is our fate, we can't by definition answer this question, but worth noting is that inside indifference is lurking the possibility of its undoing. The word itself, probably with roots in the Latin *indifferentia* and Middle French *indifference*, carries within it connotations of the *opposite* of impartiality. Indifference is marked by semantic instability, we could say. If indifference is not having a preference between knowingly different options, not preferring something to another, lacking motivation, being unconcerned, unmoved or apathetic, then it is a word which reminds us that indifference has a flipside, that indifference is convertible into its partner opposite: the choice to differentiate apparent sameness, to differ from orthodoxy, to be engaged with care, concern, and compassion for the fate of others.

Here I wish to draw things to a conclusion – and a more hopeful ending – by reflecting on a *third and final sense of the word “meta”*: if “meta” is used as an adjective/prefix to describe the way any given theme or subject is turned into an object of self-reflection, as in meta-theory, a theory about theory, or meta humour, joking about the ways jokes are cracked, then striking is how digitally networked infrastructures of communication in which war is conducted, reported, and gamified enable the growth of new forms of war reporting which trigger *self-reflexive meta-coverage of the realities and ethics of war*.

Energized by the opportunities offered by digital communications networks, the *rebel journalism* I am about to describe is unprecedented in the history of human wars. In the era of meta wars, we all know, multimedia information is simply and cheaply recordable, copyable, and distributable. Since all institutions functionally depend upon flows of digital information, they are vulnerable to leaks of sensitive information done by courageous individuals – that is the Wikileaks principle, the contestation of dominant narratives in the form of secrecy-busting counter-reportage. So long as they have adequate funding, alternative journalism platforms are also easily constructed. They prove that direct challenges to mainstream commercial platforms and government-controlled media outpourings are technically much easier than in earlier times. Cat and mouse contestations are thus commonplace, helped by the fact that digital communication networks have a *distributed* – not centrally controlled – quality. At their core, distributed networks disavow single centres of command and control. They comprise a myriad of connected nodes that enjoy a measure of mutual independence. When for any reason any of these nodes “malfunction” or are “disabled”, for instance by government censors, the whole network continues to function as a distributed network. That also means that information sent through a distributed network by rebel journalists can quite easily bypass a node that is controlled or has been rendered inoperable. In distributed networks, it follows that the power of actors to produce and circulate narratives is never centrally controllable. In contrast to the age of radio and television broadcasting, existing hierarchies of power are always vulnerable to disruption in the form of digital mutinies and media storms.

These familiar features of digital communication help to explain why rebel journalists are capable of contesting and breaking the vice grip of mainstream media platforms, their fetish of breaking news, their censoring effects, and their efforts to beautify war. In place of the “lone star” contrarian, reality checking journalists of the era of newspapers, radio, and television – brave and eccentric “ink in their veins” heroines and heroes such as William Howard Russell, Lionel James, Martha Gellhorn, George Orwell, Dorothy Drain, Ernie Pyle – today's rebel journalists more commonly operate in networked teams of less-well-known, experienced commentators who publish their carefully researched accounts and on-the-ground reports, often

with the help of larger media platforms such as *Al Jazeera*, *Haaretz*, and *The Guardian*. Rebel journalists are a diverse group. In their ranks are experienced journalists (David Hearst, Rami Khouri, Zeina Khodr, Gideon Levy, and Antony Loewenstein are examples), medical professionals, human rights observers, public intellectuals, self-trained investigators and writers, satirists, and the staff of inter-governmental agencies and commissions. They work alone or belong to not-for-profit bodies such as Médecins Sans Frontières, *Middle East Eye*, Oxfam, Wikileaks, the Lancet, +972, Amnesty International, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Antiwar.com, and *Quds News Network*. Their work uses tools such as satellite imagery and social media feeds to unpick the decadent effects of breaking news journalism. Challenging lies and propaganda and stirring things up, pitting their own “truths” against the “truths” of the beauticians of war, they function as gate watchers of the mainstream gatekeepers. In matters of war, these rebel journalists are “semiotic guerillas”, in the words of Umberto Eco. Under difficult conditions, risking their lives (as did Shireen Abu Akleh and Ismail al-Ghoul and hundreds of other rebel journalists) when operating in battle zones, without fat-cat salaries, subject to gunfire, rocket attacks, abduction, torture, and constant internet shutdowns, they set off digital explosions. Refusing the gamification of war, they show and tell things frankly to publics, from the ground up. We could say that they do all they can to ensure that war is mediated more democratically: more openly, less entertainingly, in more plural and frighteningly down-to-earth ways.

Examples of rebel journalism are to be found in most war zones, including in the Arab world, which since the 2011 uprisings has witnessed the emergence of independent magazine-style websites specialized in investigative and data-journalism created by teams of writers, interviewers, academics, photographers, and graphic designers. Examples include “Mada” in Egypt, “Inkyfada” in Tunisia, Lebanon’s “Daraj”, and “Raseef22”, the satirical “not a news site...news is just organised gossip” platform “Alhudoob” in Jordan, and the Women Journalists Committee at the Palestinian Media Assembly. The unfinished war that erupted over a decade ago in Syria arguably reset the compass. In that war-battered country, rebel journalism – not mainstream platforms such as *Fox News*, *Deutsche Welle*, *CBS News*, or the *BBC* – made a real difference in the way war in that country was reported to the wider world. Thanks to the bravery of war crime monitoring bodies such as the Violations Documentation Centre and the search and rescue group known as the White Helmets, volunteers armed only with medical equipment and mobile phones, the world came to have a better sense of the terrifying earthly hell of a meta war. An unfinished war that has forced more than half of the pre-war population of 22 million to flee their homes. Massive “double-tap” aerial bombardments of densely populated areas. Entire neighbourhoods and cultural sites ruined. Barrel bombs. Chemical weapons attacks. Death by starvation in besieged cities. Nearly 7 million people living outside the country as refugees, or as stateless asylum seekers. Half a million deaths, most of them civilians. Tens of thousands tortured in government-run prisons. Beatings with metal rods, plastic pipes and electric cables. Flying carpets (sandwiching victims strapped face-up on foldable boards). Scalding with boiling water. Upside-down hangings with wrists tied behind the back. Amputation of prisoners’ body parts by trainee doctors using no anaesthetic. Genital mutilation. Rape. Slaughterhouse executions.

The Democratization of War

I would like to draw this lecture to a close by pointing to the way this new kind of war journalism has a novel significance, in two ways. Most obviously, in both form and content, rebel journalism *redefines the meaning and practice of journalism*. Journalism (from early 19th century French *journalisme*, from the older Anglo-French *journal*, *jurnale*, a day, a day’s work; from Old French *journal*, daily; from Late Latin *diurnalis*) was in early modern times originally understood as the reporting of daily events through the field of print media such as government gazettes and newspapers. With the advent of radio and television, and the early 20th century founding of J-schools and journalism training programmes, the word journalism underwent

a semantic stretching: journalists were those who collected, edited, and distributed news, commentary, and feature materials through print as well as via radio and television. Thanks to the unfinished digital communications revolution, a similarly profound redefinition and enrichment of the form and content of journalism is happening. In the new definition, journalists are those who investigate, prepare, and communicate daily and in-depth stories to publics via an even wider range of media including digital newspapers, radio, streamed motion pictures, and television, but also through magazines, books, blogs, podcasts, webcasts, and social media and social networking sites.

A product of this transition, rebel journalism has another, deeper significance. It helps to *democratize war*. By this unfamiliar phrase, I don't mean – nonsensically, foolishly, facetiously – that war and its weapons are shared equally among peoples, or that Hobbes' state of war of each armed person against every other armed person should be extended to the whole of our planet, as if democracy promotes something like a macabre reversal of the historic "ballots, not bullets" principle. In previous writings, I have tried to make the case for a radically different understanding of democracy by explaining how democratization involves much more than constructing and defending free and fair elections, written constitutions, the rule of law, and civil liberties. Democratization is a process that runs deeper and has more far-reaching effects. It disturbs prevailing "realities". When its spirit and substance take root in communities of people, democratization renders contingent and refuses all forms of top-down power masquerading as "normal" or "natural" or "necessary". It ruptures reigning narratives, widens mental horizons, and enables people to embark on their own adventures. Democratization makes room for unexpected beginnings. It has a punk quality. "Democracy breeds possibility", the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele once told me. "People's horizons of what is thinkable and doable are stretched, and it is for that reason exciting, infuriating, punctuated by difficult, quarrelsome, ugly and beautiful moments".³³

When seen in this way, the unorthodox phrase democratization of war thus means something counterintuitively different than what you might suppose: put abstractly, the phrase highlights the point that democracies tend to "denature" war. Vibrant democracies sensitize citizens to the complexity and contingency of power relations in which wars irrupt. In matters of war, their citizens are encouraged to question dominant versions of "reality" and to see that "truth" has many faces. With no historical guarantees of success, democracies break down indifference and cast doubts on the "beautility" of war. They expose war's non-necessity and, thus, challenge citizens to consider the possibility of its future prevention and eradication.

How does this "denaturing" of war happen? Most obviously, well-functioning democracies enable public rejections of war's necessity because they functionally depend upon clusters of institutions – parliaments, civil societies, rebel journalism, independent judiciaries, human rights organizations, legal commitments to war crimes tribunals, freethinking poets, writers and musicians – which facilitate citizens' efforts to organize themselves and to speak and act freely in opposition to war and its horrors. Robust democracies also experience normative anguish and shame about the cruelty, death, and destruction that war brings. If democracy, to put things simply, is a set of institutions and a whole way of life structured by non-violent means of equally apportioning and publicly monitoring and restraining power within and among overlapping communities of people who live within eco-settings according to a wide variety of morals, then war, the unwanted burdening and destruction of the bodies and souls of humans and their ecosystems, is anathema to its spirit and substance. Killing others violates the ethical principle of the equality of people and respect for the earthly habitats in which they dwell. But since wars also destroy ecosystems, break human hearts, poison decency, disable bodies, traumatize survivors and pave the way for follow-up

³³ Cited in: John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p. 853.

wars, democracies equally encourage more realistic and pragmatic (consequentialist) public objections to wars. As war becomes ever more savage, democracies stir up citizens' sense that "very few wars are worth fighting" and encourage them to see that "the evils of war are almost always greater than they seem to excited populations at the moment when war breaks out".³⁴ Which is why, finally, wars brazenly launched by so-called democracies in the name of democracy tend to breed citizen resistance fuelled by loud public complaints about the lies, alibis, double standards, ecological risks, and moral decadence of politicians, governments, mainstream journalists, and arms manufacturers.

Rebel war journalism stands at the front lines of this slow-motion democratization trend. It is true that for all their intelligence and bravery, and despite the great violence they suffer, rebel journalists don't and can't stop the killing or bring about peaceful and just endings of meta wars. But this objection about their inefficacy misses my point: despite its apparent failure to halt destructive meta wars, rebel journalism does something different. It does more than problematize meta wars by chipping away at their beautification: rebel journalism keeps alive and nurtures *political hopes for an end to war*.

This observation might seem naïvely utopian but consider for a moment the possibility that rebel journalism rejuvenates, with an unprecedented sense of urgency and unique multimedia tools, older ways of thinking and living that regard war as an eradicable feature of human affairs. Michael Howard's *The Invention of Peace* famously noted that past human societies mostly took war for granted and built expectations of its periodic necessity into their governing arrangements.³⁵ The wings of the human condition were plumed with war's feathers. God was often invoked, as in "by thy sword shalt thou live" (Genesis 27.40) and "Hear, O Israel...let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified, because of them; for the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you" (Deuteronomy 20. 3). Sun Tzu (c. 490 BCE) bathed his account of the arts of war in earthly similes, comparing the rapid movement of armies with the wind and their compactness with a forest: "In raiding and plundering be like fire, in immovability like a mountain. Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt".³⁶ Or war was regarded as a functional necessity of worldly government, as in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), where it is said that "the chief foundations of all states, whether new, old, or mixed, are good laws and good arms" and that a prince "should have no other aim or thought, nor take up any other thing for his study, but war and its organisation and discipline, for that is the only art that is necessary to one who commands".³⁷ For these and other given reasons, fighting others in groups to the bitter end was regarded as inevitable, an unfortunate, or desirable necessity blessed by deities and as natural as sunrises and sunsets, summer and winter, birth and death. War's inescapable necessity was presupposed even when war was regarded "not as a leap into catastrophe but as an apt means of resolving disputes, something to be fought with as little passion as possible and only until one opponent is ready to yield to the other".³⁸

Then during the 18th century, especially in the heartlands of war-ravaged Europe, for the first time, war bred profound doubts about war's necessity and sparked serious interest in the arts of making peace. The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on war and peace – *The State of War (early 1750s) and A Lasting Peace through the Federation of Europe (1756)* – mark the beginning of a long tradition of doubts about whether war was an inevitable misery of the human condition. In scholarly circles and later among diplomats,

³⁴ Bertrand Russell, "The Future of Pacifism," *The American Scholar*, vol. 13 (Winter 1943-1944), pp. 7-13.

³⁵ Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

³⁶ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Routledge, 2015), chapter 7.

³⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), chapters 12, 14.

³⁸ István Bibó, *The Art of Peacemaking: Political Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 66

cross-border institution builders, and citizens' peace movements, war came instead to be regarded as an avoidable disaster, a blood swollen monster, an evil that could be banished from the world by citizen resistance, "enlightened" government and social and political re-organization.

The new rebel journalism embraces these concerns. It honestly exposes war's cruelties. It warns against the potentially suicidal and ecocidal consequences of the shrinking gap between "nuclear" and "conventional" weapons such as hypersonic missiles and vacuum bombs. It reminds us that civilians – children, mothers, the disabled and elderly, not armies or states – are today the real losers of battles. By reporting in undiluted and self-reflexive form the horrors of war, rebel journalism contributes to its "denaturing". It does much more than destroy lies, satirize hubris, rupture silence, sharpen the public visibility of war's awful violence, and issue warnings that escalations of war in the name of total victory risk total extinction. It goes well beyond putting an end to the beautification of war. It is a dream bird promising fresh beginnings.

Rebel journalism invites us to jump over our own shadows, to see that war in all its ghastliness is not just contingent, but abolishable. In its meta commitment to describing, analyzing, and interpreting the rotten realities of meta wars, rebel journalism dares in effect to say the unsayable. It calls on citizens to exercise their right not to suffer meta wars. It says that people everywhere have the power to force the hand of the beauticians of war. It demands that mainstream journalists, corporate merchants of death, and political leaders hellbent on funding and fighting wars must now own up. Rebel journalists sketch the contours of a new democratic hope: that since war in all its ugliness is increasingly absurd, that in growing numbers of cases it is simply not necessary, there is a time coming when, for the sake of the health of our planet, meta wars of every kind will have to be banned.

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