

# Expanding a Country's Borders During War: The Internet War Diary

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## ABSTRACT

Citizen journalism has changed the nature of how news is disseminated about local and global events. We conducted an ethnographic study of a particular kind of citizen journalism: the use of war diaries on the Internet. These diaries were targeted to an audience outside of the informants' countries and cultures. We found that people wrote war diaries to reach out to people who were in environments not in a war as a way of sensemaking, for impression management, and to be participants in the social production of news and opinions about the war. We discuss how the use of a "war diary" as a public narrative empowered our informants and how they contributed to the social interpretation of their culture during war. Through the Internet war diary, people can communicate news beyond the physical boundaries of their country providing benefits to producers of the information as well as the consumers.

## ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3 [Computers and Society]: Organizational Impacts – Computer-supported cooperative work

## Keywords

Intercultural collaboration, diary, blogs, media sharing sites

## INTRODUCTION

Citizen journalism, also known as grassroots journalism, has changed the way that people receive news about local and global events. With the advent of Internet applications that enable user-generated content (e.g. blogs, wikis, media sharing sites, micro-blogging) people can broadcast and gain access to information about disruptive events around the globe in near real-time. This ubiquitous user control of information is changing not only how the audience comprehends news but also how the producers of news perceive such information.

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Citizen journalism takes on many forms. It can be used to produce and disseminate news, to organize people into social movements such as "smart mobs" [22], to editorialize, or to summon help such as what occurred during Hurricane Katrina and the recent 2008 earthquake in China. Citizen journalism is distinguished from "official" news channels in two main respects. First, news and information can be posted on the Internet by anyone with an Internet connection and access to software. Second, unlike traditional channels for news broadcast, it is published without editorial filtering.

In this paper we explore citizen journalism from the perspectives of the producers of the content. We will not discuss the broader impact of citizen journalism (see [9] for a discussion) but will instead focus on reasons why individuals utilize this genre when their societies are experiencing extreme disruption.

## The war diary as public narrative

We are interested in exploring citizen journalism as it is used in wartime. One particular kind of citizen journalism is the genre of the war diary. War diaries are not new. For example, the diary of Mary Chestnut [5] provides an interesting portrait of life in the Confederacy during the U.S. civil war. Numerous personal diaries recorded during wartime have been published. Some have been expressly written for publication at a later time and to a wider audience such as General Patton's war memoirs. Others, as in the case of Chestnut's diary or the diary of Anne Frank, were written as personal reflections without the express intention of publication for a wider audience. What is new is that the Internet enables the creation of a new genre: the war diary as a public narrative. Descriptions of events can be published as they unfold, disseminating information to a global audience.

Our goal in this study is to understand the reasons why people communicate to strangers outside of their country and culture during a war using the Internet. Studies of citizen journalism have, to our knowledge, approached this topic from the perspective of understanding the decentralized and lateral networks that comprise the digital culture (e.g. [8, 3]). Research has documented how Internet communications during disasters increase, such as after the

9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. [12] and on how emergency relief efforts are coordinated [25]. Studies have addressed citizen grass-roots communications during emergencies [13, 20] and the London subway bombings [6]. In contrast to these studies our approach is instead directed toward the individual. To our knowledge, we are not aware of research exploring personalized accounts of war targeted outside one's country using the Internet.

### **Extending one's reach through the Internet**

The Internet's capability to connect people globally has been a topic of interest for some time. Many researchers have examined reasons why people communicate beyond their local and national borders. Reasons such as finding friendships, social support and shared interests have been discussed [28] and the Internet has been proposed as a way of extending "real life" across distance [4]. When conditions in the environment constrain people's physical actions (e.g. when people cannot easily travel to meet others) then people can turn to the Internet to interact with others in their local environment. Moreover, they can also extend their reach beyond their physical borders. People from other cultures may provide resources to help people cope with local environmental disruptions, such as giving advice or sharing similar experience. However, the Internet's promise in bridging different cultures is still an open question. Research has shown that there are still cultural barriers to be overcome with distance interaction [19]. Whether through the Internet people can truly overcome boundaries associated with culture and national identity has been long debated [21].

### **RESEARCH SETTING**

The focus of this study is on archival data published on the Internet (text blogs, video blogs, Internet postings, e-mail) that we collected as part of a larger research program [14] studying how people use IT to cope in disrupted environments. We also interviewed the producers of these archival data, who were living in countries at war, which severely disrupted their lives. Our informants lived in Israel during the Israel-Lebanon war of July-August 2006 and our Iraqi informants are still experiencing disruption to their daily lives through the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gulf War which began in March 2003. All informants had access to various technologies e.g. Internet, cellular phones, and e-mail.

We chose these research sites for various reasons. In both countries people experienced a prolonged major disruption to their daily lives. In Israel our informants had to deal with incessant rocket barrages and siren warnings, sometimes moving in and out of shelters 20 times a day. In Iraq, people were threatened by bombs, U.S. military roadblocks were commonplace, insurgents made the environment even more chaotic, electricity was limited, gasoline was scarce, and mandatory curfews were enforced. In Israel people were constantly moving to different locations in the country to keep safe. In Iraq, a number of friends, relatives, and colleagues left the country. In both countries IT was available to our informants. Israel is a

country where technology is widely used and available. Technologies worked consistently despite the disruption. In Iraq, in contrast, information technologies (e.g. the Internet, e-mail, cellular phones) only first became available after the war began. Though not yet widely adopted, all our informants had access to all of these technologies, though at times they did not always work.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Starting in October 2006 we began conducting semi-structured interviews with people who lived in Israel and Iraq during these wars. We conducted telephone interviews in Israel (lasting about one hour) and in Iraq (lasting about two hours). Sometimes, due to loss of reception with Iraqis, we then switched to other communication technologies e.g. Skype™, Instant Messenger (IM), or e-mail. We used e-mail and IM to ask follow up questions.

Our goal was to find people who had access to IT so that we could understand the different ways that people used IT during war. We identified participants through a snowball sampling technique [1]. This technique enabled us to find people who used IT and who spoke English. As with case studies we cannot generalize our results to all members of the population but only to users of IT who are similar to our informants. Our informants had diverse work roles including workers at high-tech firms, academics, translators, journalists, teachers, medical students, etc. Their age and IT experience widely varied: they were for example, parents, grandparents, and students.

In interviews, we asked our informants about technology use during the war and how this use changed compared to before the war. We discovered that many of our informants had written blogs, sent long emails to distribution lists, and had posted to Internet forums. We obtained copies of these archival communications for our data (see Table 1). Some people wrote blogs daily, some wrote multiple blog entries per day, and some only wrote in their blog occasionally. One informant posted cartoons along with her blog. In addition to blogs, seven informants utilized e-mail distribution lists similar to the way in which others used blogs. The recipients of these lists grew dramatically as recipients passed them on to others (with the informants' knowledge). Two informants sent only one e-mail each during the war, while one informant sent 16 in one month.

In Iraq we obtained written and video blog posts from four informants. Blog entries ranged anywhere from a paragraph to a page; the largest had 24 entries. Two informants were part of a video blog series on YouTube.com, which followed the lives of three Iraqis living in Baghdad. The production was organized by a group from New York who worked in conjunction with an all-Iraqi crew who completed the filming and production. In an interview by the producer and lead photographer (an Iraqi college student) they explained why they made the videos:

*...we believe in what we are doing and the message we want to send to people. We find it worth the risk to show the personal stories of the struggles of ordinary Iraqis.*

The videos were unscripted. Our informants were two of the three individuals featured in the videos. They both found out about the opportunity to take part in this series from friends and were urged to apply. They were accepted from a pool of over 100 people. All of the videos were filmed in Baghdad where the camera crew followed each person in their daily life. One of our informants is featured in 17 videos, and the other in 13. As with the written blogs, these videos are public and people can comment on each video. Though from only two informants, the 30 videos provide an in-depth video diary of the war experience.

	Israel			Iraq	
Media	Written Blogs	E-Mail Distr'n Lists	Internet Fora	Written Blogs	Video Blogs
# of Authors	5	7	2	2	2
Range of # Entries	3 to 56	1 to 16	6 to 7	4 to 24	13 to 17
Avg. Entry Length	1 par. to ~ 3 pages	2 to 4 pages	1 to 2 ½ pages	1 par. to 1 page	2 to 4 min.
Date Range	July 15 – Aug. 31, '06	July 13 – Aug. 14, '06	July 13 – Aug. 10, '06	Jan. 05 - Present	Mar. 07 – June 2007

Table 1: Data used in our study.

We analyzed the archives using grounded theory [24]. These archival data allowed us to triangulate with our interview data to better understand and verify phenomena. By focusing on both Israel and Iraq we could compare and contrast the use of these various communication media in different countries in managing the disruption.

## RESULTS: TARGETING A BROADER AUDIENCE

Some informants told us that they began their Internet communications to inform their family and friends that they were safe and that it was easier to send out a mass email or to write in a blog than to send individual emails. On further analysis, however, we discovered that the purpose was much broader. If the purpose had been only to let others know they were safe, we reasoned that the communications would be short and to the point. In fact, our informants used other media to let others inside and outside the war zone know that they were safe: cell phones (e.g. SMS), short emails, and IM (especially after a rocket fell or when they went into a shelter or after traveling to work). But these Internet messages were instead expansive, sometimes spanning several pages and were deeply reflective.

The Internet messages were directed to people outside their culture. As one informant described, people within the country knew what was happening in the war. We also found many references in the communications explaining

aspects of our informants' culture which a person outside the culture might not be expected to understand. For example, people explained idiomatic expressions unique to their local culture or described the meaning of words or names in their native language.

The blogs, videos, and Internet forum postings of our informants are publicly accessible. For example, one of our Iraqi informants wrote blogs on Myspace.com. Myspace.com allows people to set various privacy settings restricting access to the general public. Here is a description from one who intentionally made her blog publicly accessible:

*N.B: u can post a comment even if u'r not my friend. My blogs are set on public option.*

In interviews, some even stated they wanted the "world" to know about their situation, thus expressing that they wanted to target an outside audience.

The communications that we analyzed were written in English, i.e. to an international audience. Internet communications targeted within the countries were written in local languages of Hebrew and Arabic.<sup>1</sup> It is important to mention that all our informants were fluent in English. Our Iraqi informants, though fluent in Arabic, did not write blogs in Arabic, nor did they tape their video blogs in Arabic. If Arabic was spoken at any time during a video English subtitles were added. On the main website it explains why the videos were made in English:

*The intention of the filmmakers and subjects was to show the world what Baghdad is truly like. That's why they usually speak English and not Arabic.*

Thus, the communications we have included in this study were intended for a broader audience beyond the local countries and culture. The informants explicitly chose to communicate in English and not their native languages.

Nearly all communications we obtained were of a diary genre. While the blog format leads people to separate entries by date, nearly all of the communications (email, video blogs, Internet fora postings) were written as a detailed relaying of events that happened that day to the individual as one would write in a diary. Sometimes people wrote about mundane things, such as reading a book or going to the gym. But they wrote about these mundane activities in the context of the war, detailing feelings, opinions about the war, descriptions of the area, bombing raids or other significant events, sometimes with philosophical reflections.

## New communication routines

For all but one of our Israeli informants, starting these Internet communications was a completely new endeavor. One Israeli who wrote a cooking blog before the war

<sup>1</sup> There were numerous blogs written in local languages intended for local cultures. However, in this paper we are analyzing those messages targeted to a culture external to the informants.

changed the blog topic to discuss the war after it began. The communications for the Iraqis were also new. As Iraq did not have Internet before the war, we cannot say whether the impetus was the war, Internet adoption, or both.

An example of how people began writing Internet communications can be illustrated by one Israeli informant. Before the war, this person's hobby was to use a computer flight simulation program on the Internet. This program also has a forum where global members contribute messages related to flight simulation topics. When the war broke out, this informant changed his use of this program from a single-user experience to a collaboration and communication medium. He described that playing the game seemed "silly" when the war broke out and he opened a thread on the forum that he called "letter from the war zone" and posted a message every few days. He described:

*Dozens of people responded to my post. I realized that after the war this was very important, to share my feelings, to articulate my feelings....Everyone backed it. Even though it didn't occupy large chunks of time. To write the post took 10 minutes, but I thought about it during the week.*

Other informants explained that Internet writing was a totally new experience for them. Here are some examples:

*It went from zero to total involvement. I didn't have a blog before the war. The way it started, the first few days it became apparent that this wasn't a passing incident. I drew a cartoon and sent it to people. Then I started adding email messages to people. Had a bad day, rockets landed. Eventually I took a web domain that I had, I have a domain that I use for a band, I started posting, eventually I turned it into an everyday thing. It became part of my everyday thing.*

*I never had the slightest urge before to be a blogger. It gave me something to do and something to focus my attention.....I was writing every day when we had intense activity, 2-3 posts per day, when there were 17 sirens. The only way that my friends outside of Israel knew what was going on here. It kind of morphed into something more....*

The blogs and emails were read by large audiences, e.g.:

*By the end of the war I think my email was reaching over 1000 people. I sat at my computer every second day and tried to compose a story. This was an important part of the war.*

*Blogs picked me up and I was suddenly famous, I started writing daily reports of what it was like to be in a shelter, others did that too, that was new for me.*

*Some days there were up to 300 hits. Now that on weekends, Fridays, 50 or 60 people have entered the blog. There is someone out there that is reading it. People know that we're still here.*

When the wars broke out, people could not continue doing the kind of routines in their lives that they were used to. Travel was difficult and risky; people could not easily socialize in person as they did before the war. The act of

composing these external communications became new routines for them often occupying much time, not just in the writing, but also in the planning and thinking about what to write. The informant who posted in the Internet forum was typical in thinking on a regular basis about what to write in his messages. Another informant described that she spent six hours every two days composing an email message to describe her experience in the conflict.

*Wasn't pleasant but it was a routine.... It was very time consuming. Because it was interrupted by missiles, attacks, shelters, listening to news. Probably 5-6 hours I was composing this email...*

One informant posted a daily cartoon concerning the disruption she was experiencing and reported that she spent a great deal of time thinking of an idea for the cartoon:

*It was a normal routine, I knew that I'd get up in the morning, and first of all I'd think of the cartoon, I'd think about getting around the hell we're in, and think of the least tongue and cheek of what to draw..... I've been publishing my daily cartoon - that keeps my head working.*

*It was important to maintain a routine, even if it included an abbreviated work schedule. That routine included my daily correspondence, which I considered a personal obligation to myself...*

With the advent of the war, the daily routines of our informants had changed. de Certeau [7] discusses how the routine aspects of everyday life, such as conversation and cooking, allow people to maintain "a sense of reliability in everyday situations." Everyday reliable actions were no longer available when the war broke out. Many informants had more time on their hands as their workplaces were closed or they could not always travel there. Some informants changed to working online. Our informants developed new routines of communicating regularly using the Internet. The real question however, was why our informants directed their communications outside of their countries and cultures. In the next sections we will discuss some reasons that emerged from our data.

### **Connecting to "normal" worlds**

A common theme found in our interview data was our informants' descriptions that communicating with others through the Internet gave them support during the war. Here are some representative comments from informants:

*I could not get through this without the computer and the contact through the Internet. Writing, drawing cartoons, and constant correspondence with people, is what gives me a boost.*

*I couldn't have gotten through without the Internet. It was calming to know I could communicate with other people to say I'm ok, I'm still here. People used the Internet to offer a lot of support. I never felt so totally tied to the Internet.*

*The fact that I had the Internet made me able to connect to people that I could. I remember thinking that I hope these missiles don't kill the Internet connection. One missile*

*landed quite close to our central Internet provider. I remember thinking that this could mean that I'm disconnected from the world. It was an incredibly important role in maintaining [our sanity] and [giving us a] sense of security. Not just mine.*

Many of our informants described how they longed to have their normal lives again. We found continual references to the idea of reestablishing normalcy in their lives, e.g.:

*I think about my normal life—an early morning trip to Nahariya for a swim, maybe a coffee, some errands, and home again to work. It seems like eons ago.*

*It will be nice to get our normal routines back and carry on doing all the things that normal people do.*

*It's hard to explain but there is a need to keep living our lives as normally as we safely can and not to succumb to anxiety and fear. It keeps us happy and grounds us.*

One Israeli informant explained how she traveled to the south of the country, which was not at war: *"The trip was a way to return some sense of normality, some sense of control over my life"*.

An Iraqi informant described how he and his co-workers, who worked in the green zone in Baghdad (which is under the protection of the U.S. military), attempted to maintain some normal aspects of their life before the war:

*But we try to have fun here, when we finish our work we just gather... or go out together or just stay here... they have a yard here at the office, so sometimes we play football together. We try to live a kind of normal life.*

Some informants reported that an important purpose of their Internet communications was to connect to others in environments that were "normal" outside the war zone:

*We were using the Internet and technology communication to tie ourselves down to other people, to others outside the world of everyday chaos.*

*...it helped a lot to make life more normal. To go back to the way you used to live, and get all the connections back. You don't feel like you're at home with no connections at all. So yeah, it made it feel more normal, like you're living with other people outside Iraq. Living like everyone else.*

Informants were appreciative of the comments to their blogs, e.g.:

*Thank you for the understanding and kind words. Here in the Middle East, there are those who dream about peace of the kind that exists, e.g. between the USA and Canada. I would give my right arm for that kind of co-existence.*

*I would like to thank everybody for understanding my situation and for standing by my side, it's really encouraging:)*

We propose that communicating with others living in "normal" non-war environments helped our informants to conduct *sensemaking*. When people encounter uncertain situations, they often communicate with each other to reduce uncertainty and recover a sense of order [27].

Through sensemaking, people try to make sense of a new situation by aligning what they encounter with what they already understand. In the change from normal environments to war environments actions may make sense in the former and not in the latter. For example, in a very long blog post at the beginning of the war, one informant describes the anguish of traveling with her granddaughter from Tel Aviv to the north, which was being bombed:

*The worst moments of the war were those in which I had the responsibility of R--. How could I have known then what was going to happen? I continually asked myself that question again and again when I was fraught with feelings of guilt for having brought R—home with me.*

It is as if she is asking the readers of her blog to assure her that picking up her granddaughter made sense at the time. In a nonwar environment it is perfectly natural to pick up one's granddaughter for a visit and someone in an environment not at war would understand this.

In another blog post example, an informant is explaining an incident about spilling gasoline, which normally would not be of much concern. In the context of a war it can have disastrous consequences. Articulating her experience and adding humor may have helped her make sense of her action and put it in perspective:

*...I decided to go to the gas station at the east edge of town... So, there I am pumping gas... A car pulls up at the next pump. The driver asks me something... As we're talking... suddenly she says to me... "Oh, no, the gas." I look down and there is gasoline everywhere... So, actually at this second, I'm not so worried about the Ketushas [bombs], I'm more worried that the entire gas station is going to blow when I turn on the car. That, and I'm going to return to the office smelling like Eau de Petroleum.*

Comments to our informants' blogs confirmed for them that they were living in exceptional circumstances, e.g.:

*Thank you for these videos. I have been moved by the reality of your lives. I am so very sorry for the pain and difficulties you are living and feel humbled by the reality of your daily existence. It is so important that ordinary people like me witness the reality of how you are living.*

*Thank you for your bravery in making these films. Thank you so much for posting these exceptional videos. I am looking forward to the next ones. I was especially moved and saddened by the turn of events for S---... I wish peace for you all.*

*There are just not enough words to describe the turmoil that is going on in your region right now. I know that it has to be a tremendous strain on you and your family. Being a retired veteran of the U.S. military, I carry both the emotional and physical scars of war and both will be with me for the rest of my life. So, I somewhat know what you are going through.*

This above comment is from a person who had experienced, and who could therefore understand, a war

context. Such comments from others helped our writers construct a context in which their actions made sense.

### **Impression Management: “I’m Just Like You”**

It has been argued that the media shapes people’s perceptions [23]. For example, it has been reported that in the United States, the government and media (i.e. newspapers, news channels, movies, etc.) have created an incorrect image of the Arab Muslim population and people in Iraq by portraying them as “*inferior, threatening, immoral, and dehistoricized*” [17].

Goffman [11] discusses how people tend to create and manage impressions of themselves that they want to make publicly visible. When interacting with others our actions influence people’s impression of us, and thus we conduct ourselves in a certain way in order to manage how we are perceived. Goffman described face-to-face interactions, but others have applied his concept to explain how people present themselves on the Internet [17]. Similarly, our data suggests that our informants were using the Internet to manage their impression. Our informants used the Internet, targeting audiences outside their cultures, to discount the image that the mass media had portrayed of them. Whereas in a face-to-face setting it is often easy for an impression to be “disrupted” when we act out of character [11], blogs and videos allow our informants more control over their image in contrast to other media channels.

Through their Internet messages, our informants communicated that they are no different than everyone else. They discussed typical life events such as driving to work, grabbing a cup of coffee with friends, buying groceries, reading, and watching movies. An example from a blog is:

*... and I stayed home and cleaned. It takes a war for me to get out the rags, mops, and window clean. All that excess energy needed to be expended and the house is actually looking pretty good.*

Impression management was particularly important for our Iraqi informants. Their video blogs convey to those outside their country that there are many similarities between Iraqis and the rest of the world. All four Iraqi informants who kept blogs were university students. They illustrate through videos and commentary how they are dealing with several themes that others in the same age range deal with. By juxtaposing these themes with that of dealing with the disrupted environment, the similarities are better illustrated:

*We tried to erase the pictures that Iraqis, or Muslims in general, we don’t slaughter people. We can do a lot of stuff, we live a normal life. We live like other people in the world, we have ambition, and we have goals... despite living a difficult life. It’s not easy to live a normal life in an abnormal condition.*

The videos, for example, delve into universal themes such as those of dating, relationships and love. Like people all over the world, Iraqis wish to date in search of a life partner. One segment on the issue of relationships includes clips from both of our informants, where they discuss their

perspectives on women and love. During the video they make the claim that “*the majority of young people are dating*,” as each informant discusses his perspectives on the issue. One describes himself as being “*very shy*,” and not yet ready for commitment. Another informant is interrupted by a helicopter flying overhead, as he boldly asserts that he has had pre-marital sex. Our informants are trying to give the impression that Iraqis are also constantly battling situations that others around the globe face only they are in a war environment and must constantly think about safety.

The videos and written blogs discuss everyday events, such as hanging out with friends. Again, this shows that our informants are just like young people anywhere in the world. In another video, one of our informants holds a gathering at his home for a friend who is going to leave Iraq for Amman, Jordan. Here we see our informant and his friends together socializing. They are watching a soccer game on television, talking to one another and telling jokes, and playing the guitar together. The song they are playing is from a popular band known as the Gypsy Kings. In an interview an informant explained his actions:

*...watching football games, trying to go out and hanging out with friends... we were going to friends’ houses. We’d have 4 or 5 guys, we’d smoke hookah, and some of us drank alcohol...*

Our informant expresses that he watches football and hangs out with friends, plays the guitar—activities that people in other parts of the world also do. Rather than focusing on the country at war, the main theme of this video instead is that the informants’ lives are similar to others in the world.

Other themes our informants discuss in both video and written form are religious in nature. Two of our informants are Muslim and two are Christian, and through their dialogue we see how they make it clear that they do not stand for religious intolerance. When asked to identify their religious beliefs, they do in fact identify themselves as being Muslim or Christian, but state they are secular. In one video, two informants discuss how people must understand that Iraq is religiously and ethnically diverse:

*iraq is a mixture of different religions and people here came from different parts of the world and lived in it together peacefully for a hundred of years ago. it just makes me sad to see how this war is affecting everything in iraq even the relations between neighbors and friends...*

Through their dialogue, they are trying to make it clear that Iraq is religiously diverse. The video discusses the sectarian conflict that exists in Iraq, and they emphasize that it is a war between two militias, and not an accurate representation of the Iraqi people. They are using video to portray Iraqis as a peaceful, diverse people who happen to live in an abnormal situation.

### **“CNN got it wrong”**

Values and norms are institutionalized in society, reinforced by the media, according to Castells [3]. We discovered that another reason why our informants targeted

communications to outside their culture was to report the “real” version of events. They wanted to counteract the particular cultural interpretation of events that they felt was being conveyed by “official” media channels such as CNN and Fox News. For example, two informants wrote:

*Around the lunch table today someone suggested that I recommend speaking out, writing, and calling attention to obvious media bias and one-sided reporting. (Anyone watch CNN lately?)*

*United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke of the possibility of dispatching a military stabilizing force to the region while his envoys met with Israeli officials. In Israel, there are few expectations that such a force could succeed. One should not forget that the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, is still deployed, but has played no substantial role in the current conflict.*

Another informant began a daily diary newsletter. She explained that it began as an email to her friends and relatives overseas. It soon reached over 1,000 people and became a public narrative of the war. She described that she wanted to convey a story “based on the news and our personal experiences as a family”. She further explained that she didn’t know how much of the facts are written in the foreign press. Her messages relayed her observations:

*It is one thing to see it on television but quite another to stand in from of people’s homes with gaping holes and their lives exposed to the world. Nobody invited us to see their couch hanging from the ruins, their curtains blowing from a roof that once had windows. It was a sobering experience.*

Other informants expressed that they deliberately tried to provide news of their region to the world. One informant described a demand for his “descriptive war correspondence”:

*I know that I provided news, if not insight, and a look into our lives in Eilon and the immediate region.*

We now describe the case of one informant who became a citizen journalist when the war started. This informant wrote extensive accounts of the war in emails (30+ pages). He started off sending them to 30-40 people outside of his country on a distribution list but then these were passed on and distributed to a much wider audience. His emails were posted on blogs and even translated into Spanish and posted on an Argentinian blog. He received emails from people who read his reports who he did not know. He explained his reasons why he became a journalist:

*The press works under pressure. Articles must be interesting, appeal to a common denominator, comprehended by the “average Joe” and deadlines must be met. Articles can be a few paragraphs or 60 seconds and its time for a commercial.... However reporters have only a few paragraphs or a few minutes. They talk about what the camera sees and that appears out of proportion.*

This informant wrote extensive detailed reports of the war, e.g. describing the conditions of cities. In one account, he toured a city and explained the “ghost town” atmosphere describing the various closed shops, an empty apartment building, the presence of volunteers sleeping in a fancy Carlton hotel, the inside of a shelter, an unarmed security guard, and a few people still purchasing lottery tickets at a coffee shop. In another detailed account he explained what daily life was like in a shelter: volunteers occupy the children’s time with arts and crafts, board games are brought in, shelters are cleaned daily, how food is prepared (TV dinner style), how trash is disposed of, as well as how the interiors appear (recently painted, fumigated, no odors). He explained why he wrote these accounts:

*Umm, it was really a need. I needed to communicate. I also had the feeling that people didn’t know exactly what was happening. In other words, you can follow the newspapers, the radio, and the television, but they didn’t really give an accurate picture... at least not of what was happening with me and to me... to me on a personal level. And I wanted people to know, I also didn’t want people to worry. And if they did worry I wanted it to be accurate, to worry about something that was actual. You know, you can read the newspaper and you hear there’s a terrible event and you might think that that’s happening everywhere, where the truth is that it happened in one place.*

Our Iraqi informants described in interviews that they wanted to show the world what was really happening in their country, and not what the media reported:

*Oh. I wanted for people to know how Iraqi people were living. I wanted for people from different countries and especially from the States to know how Iraqi people were living. Under what circumstances, what were the difficulties we’re facing, and how many people lost their loved ones but still survived...*

They wished to present their own interpretation of the war, to explain issues that are local and important to them that they felt were not properly represented by other media:

*...there is a lot of American exposure in Iraq, there’s Inside Edition, CNN, there are so many like, American shows that are all over the Middle East. I see how the U.S. media conducts news. I see how they try to mislead people...that’s my explanation for what I’ve seen. I’ve seen how it’s not completely true, they don’t show the real image...”*

Through both video and written blogs, our Iraqi informants acted as newscasters and commentators, in an attempt to show the world events taking place in Iraq that people do not regularly hear about. Like the Israeli communications, many of these reports of the situation inside their country were done in a highly personal, detailed, diary genre. Comments by readers made it apparent that our authors were showing a side of Iraq not found in traditional media:

*Thank you for sharing your lives. We (in the U.S.) rarely see images of daily life in Iraq and it’s hard for me to*

*picture you all. This gives me a feeling of closeness to you that is hard to define.*

*Yes! We need to see this side of life in Baghdad. We need to get to know the people and their way of life. Keep up your good work.*

*Why haven't any of these videos appeared on any of the nightly news extravaganzas?*

A major theme emphasized by our informants in their written and video blogs dealt with the general difficulties of everyday life in Iraq, e.g. electricity being cut off:

*...it's something that we've been suffering from since the start of war in 2003 and until this very day. the power being out most of the time, let's say 23 hrs a day! and sometimes days pass without having the power for even one minute! our freezer... it's all empty, no ice at all and we cannot keep food for a long time! sometimes i don't find cold water to drink. i come back from college very tired, i can't have a nap bc it's very hot without the A/C.*

Another recurring theme deals with issues of travel. Most of our informants had a horror story about some travel incident, and these are conveyed in the videos and blogs:

*...was in the car on my way home and i heard gun shooting then a car passed by and the man in it said "be careful, u'll see a dead body on the street" and i looked and saw the body of a young man lying on the ground with his blood all over him..... this is the first time in 3 years i see a dead body with HOT blood and i thought that this man was alive walking in the street not knowing what was going to happen to him in only few mins, and now he's dead.... his family is expecting to see him back, but he'll never come home! people were afraid to get any closer to him bc they might get shot too. the police were in the neighboring streets but no one appeared! we went on our way as if we didn't see anything! i wasn't sad or afraid, i had no feelings at all!!!*

Through their Internet writings and videos they are presenting an alternative side of Iraq to a global audience, compared to what traditional media channels such as television present. These informants conveyed the news through their personal stories, as a public narrative of the war as they experienced it. They were able to participate in the production of news and thus in the social production of how the war was perceived outside of their country.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study shows that the perceived boundaries of disaster communities cannot be defined by the physical boundaries of the residents [11]. Our informants have expanded the boundaries of the war by leveraging the Internet to share their war experience with people outside their environment. This communication served several purposes. Our informants were reassured by others (through blog comments and emails) who were living in “normal” nonwar environments. They were able to connect to others globally who shared similar war experiences (e.g. the American war veteran). They could manage the impression of their

cultural image (“we are just like you”) by showing videos or explaining details of how their daily life was similar to others in the world. They also could participate in the production of news by offering eye-witness interpretations of the events. In this way citizen journalists are participants in socially producing the interpretation of the war for people within and outside their country.

## **Empowerment**

We argue that the ability to send communications about the war outside of their society empowered our informants. Many have written of the ability of the Internet to empower people, e.g. people who are marginalized in society [15]. We can add to this discussion by also showing how the Internet empowered people whose physical actions were constrained in their disrupted environments (and perhaps who also felt marginalized). First, people felt empowered knowing that many people—sometimes thousands—were viewing their writings and videos. Receiving comments on their blogs or emails and knowing that others were listening to their voice on the Internet reinforced their sense of presence in the world. They were not just citizens of a small community or country in turmoil but were connected to a larger community beyond their country’s borders [3]. Many of our informants described how contact with others through the Internet, both in terms of broadcasting and receiving comments, helped them cope with the war.

Second, we claim that our informants were able to take action through the Internet. Whereas our informants were severely restricted in travel and thus physically hindered in getting to work or in socializing face-to-face, the Internet enabled them to act. Managing their impression to others outside their country was one way of taking action: through writings and video they showed others in the world that they were similar to them, counteracting the perceptions and stereotypes that they felt that the media were fostering. They explained details of their day-to-day life to show others that they also listened to music, went to the gym, cooked, had friends, were students, workers, parents, etc. Thus, though physically handicapped in travel by the war through the Internet they could reach out beyond their war torn area.

Another way that the Internet empowered people was by enabling people to be citizen journalists reporting alternative views to the official media channels. In some cases they felt that the official channels “got it wrong” and they set out to correct false impressions. In other cases they felt that their detailed accounts as witnesses complemented the media reports. Their production of the news, validated by their direct experience of the war, in their view helped shape how others in the world understood their country and the war. Empowerment thus came from being part of the social production of the news.

## **Social production of culture**

Mass media, as Castells [3] describes, plays a key role in the production of culture. Digital culture is characterized not only by the actual media artifacts or the posting or



exchange of messages, but by the norms, values and expectations that are associated with these communications [8]. Our informants were participants in digital culture through their use of communication media but at the same time in this paper we showed how individuals can foster their own versions of “culture” using the Internet as a medium (for a discussion of postnational Internet culture see [21]). Our informants communicated their local cultures through accounts of their experiences.

The main genre that our informants used to express their culture was the war diary. In this genre, participants wrote about personal details of their lives: e.g. what they ate or what they did that day, while often expressing their feelings or opinions of their situation. Through a diary style of writing about their day or events they conveyed aspects of their everyday life culture (that were similar to others outside of their culture) yet these were juxtaposed with events of the war. For example, a description of riding in a car (a normal event) was then interrupted by the sight of a body. Or, “tanks firing” alongside of a “gorgeous sunset” expressed the surreal nature of a war.

Many cultural norms are tacit and implicit. In explaining their culture to an audience outside of their own culture, our informants needed to articulate these implicit aspects of their culture. For example, there is a scene in one of our informant’s videos where one of his friends is going to leave Iraq. As the friend pulls away in his car, our informant pours a glass of water behind the car as it begins to move. To people outside his culture this may not make sense, but the people featured in the video explain the meaning of this custom: *“In Iraq people believe that the water is something GOOD to be dealing with, so they do as A\* did as Best wishes.”* Thus, they showed a cultural tradition in video form, making visible a tacitly held custom, and through dialogue they explained its meaning in the context of the war.

Citizen journalism is a way for individuals to be participants in the social construction of how others view their world. These informants were able to present images of their lives and thus influence the impressions that others had of their culture and of the war. They could present their stories as alternative sources to official media channels that were not subject to editorial filtering. Thus, they could present an alternative view to the mass media presentation of their country and culture.

### **Extending the boundaries to normal environments**

Writing to people in a “normal” environment not at war provided for some of our informants a sounding board to help them make sense of their abnormal environment. Many informants described how writing helped them cope; one informant described writing as “therapeutic”. In Nardi et al.’s [18] study of blogs, they found that blogs were a means of releasing emotional tension. However, we found that blogs as war diaries served additional purposes to what Nardi et al. found. We argue that for many informants, their communications were a form of sensemaking through

articulating their days’ actions to others who were in countries not at war. Sensemaking is about plausibility and coherence [26]. Events which may not make sense in one’s abnormal environment (the case of the informant traveling with her granddaughter) may be understood as plausible through the action of articulating them to someone in a normal environment. Our informants were faced with events for which most had no precedent, e.g. seeing the effects of bombs. They were trying to understand how they were acting in this unfamiliar environment, questioning whether they did the right thing, reacted in the right way, whether it was OK to feel guilt, etc. Through blogs, emails, and Internet forums, our informants articulated their actions and feelings and described their local environment. This “reasoning through articulation” targeting people who did not share their local experience helped them understand that the actions they took in their environments were plausible.

### **Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication**

Though our study focused on communications across cultures in war environments, several implications from our study can be applied to other environments.

Collaborative technologies that support communication across distance have far reaching effects, especially when we consider the current shift of organizations towards globalization. In global work environments awareness of cultural differences is still a major problem [19]. As organizations continue to spread globally, blogs can be used to ameliorate several issues. First, blogs as communication mediums can help bridge the cultural divide. Members of distributed teams can use the diary genre to discuss work life in their local site to promote a shared understanding of cultural norms and practices, as well as similarities. Second, blogs can be used to create empathy for different work environments. When working from a distance, people may not be aware of the local circumstances their distributed team members are facing. Through both written and video communication, people can reveal to others the daily details and realities of their environment. Third, it has been found that rich communication mediums (e.g. video, audio-conferencing, and face-to-face) are significantly better than text when building trust from a distance [2]. While video blogs may not be widely adopted, text blogs are commonly used. It has become acceptable practice to convey highly personal narratives of one’s life through blogs [18]. Distributed teams can leverage this accepted practice for team members to share personal information so as to learn more about their colleagues. Blog commenting can promote discussion among distributed team members. The combination of blog capabilities along with their developed practices, we argue, makes blogs a rich communication medium which can be used to build trust and share cultural experiences among distributed colleagues.

## CONCLUSION

Historically war diaries have been published long after they were written. There are significant differences between the Internet war diary compared to historical war diaries. First, the Internet war diary is written and published in near real time. People can publish their experiences and events immediately as they occur. In some cases, e.g. the recent 2008 Chinese earthquake, blogs have reported news and experiences before the mass media. Second, Internet diarists can receive comments from others. This is a way to receive support, and to reaffirm that what they are experiencing or how they are acting in this new environment makes sense. Through creating public war diaries people can be participants in the social production of news: they can influence how their culture and the war is being interpreted globally.

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