**Arrested War: The Third Phase of Mediatization**

In the past two decades we have passed through three phases of media ecology, three phases of mediatization, and each has shaped a different way media have entered into the operations and understandings of war and conflict. The 1990s saw the final stage of broadcast era war. National and satellite television and the press had a lock on what mass audiences witnessed, and governments could exercise relative control of journalists’ access and reporting. By the turn of the millennium, mass internet penetration and the post-9/11 war on terror signalled a second phase, which we called the emergence of Diffused War (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010a). Here, the embedding of digital enabled more of war and its consequences to be recorded, archived, searched and shared – war’s far deeper mediatization. An unprecedented sense of chaos and flux beset both those conducting war and mainstream media organisations used to having a monopoly on its reporting. Content seemed to emerge from nowhere, effects had no causes (Devji, 2005), and uncertainty reigned. This was a wild west moment in which much of the media ecology felt ‘out there’, beyond; the centre could not hold. Fast forward to today and we find Arrested War, a new paradigm in which professional media and military institutions have found ways to arrest the once-chaotic social media dynamics and seek to harness them in the field of war and media through new understandings, strategies and experiments.

The centre has adapted and come back even stronger. The mainstream is the media ecology. User-generated content and its chaotic dynamics ‘out there’ have been absorbed and appropriated. In the 2000s Al-Qaeda established a jihadist media culture outside the mainstream, only dipping into mass television and internet spaces to deposit a video or spectacular act of violence. Today, to the extent they can stay one step ahead of the CIA and moderators, Islamic State rely on Twitter (Al-Lami, 2014; Kingsley, 2014), a mainstream US platform whose affordances Islamic State are happy to work within. The mainstream has enveloped the extreme. It has regained and renewed its powers of gatekeeping, of verification, of defining agendas. Any content that is acclaimed as alternative, oppositional or outside, only acquires significant value when acknowledged and remediated by the mainstream. Virality and spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013), key concepts of phase two of the ‘new media ecology’, are not part of a sustainable, user-generated phenomenon, but are ultimately arrested by the mainstream.

What we are describing is the realignment of the media ecology. The meteorite known as digital hit the media jungle around 2000, destabilizing previous patterns of interdependence between the big media beasts and us little audiences. Some of the big beasts died, but many adapted to the new environmental conditions and came to provide services that enable an even broader mass than the broadcast era. Central to this was news media. News went through a crisis in the mid-2000s (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007). Editors knew that audiences could find compelling raw footage of war on YouTube. Reporters worried that in the competition with immediate user-generated content they would succumb to F3 – reporting that was first, fastest but flawed (Gowing, 2009). High profile journalists told us they might as well now be ‘just another blogger’ (Gillespie et al., 2010, p. 250). Owners were convinced that audience fragmentation and niche filter bubbles would kill business models. A few years on, actors have found strategies to cope with the new conditions.

Mainstream news editors are less concerned about whether they will be out of a job in a year and have returned instead to age-old dilemmas such as how much of conflict to sanitise or whether they are giving terrorists the oxygen of publicity. Mainstream news has re-asserted its centrality and it is surer of its basic functions. When we speak to journalists now, they seem more confident their news coverage offers quality and integrity.

How would we characterise media’s relationship with war now? It is not just that media has enclosed war within its infrastructure. Media arrests war. It stops war escaping – escaping unintelligibility, escaping mainstream coverage, escaping the control of military commanders. To arrest is to seize, or to stop or check. To arrest is also to attract the attention of. Those protagonists we would expect to be operating in hard-to-reach places – such as IS – seek the attention of the most open and popular channels and spaces. They are drawn to the mainstream media ecology because it has re-asserted its function as primary channel of the world’s affairs. We live, now, in a time of Arrested War. War no longer evades the eye of the primary gatekeepers. The dynamics once deemed chaotic are now harnessed.

Although this is a less stable system than in the former broadcast era, in this new normal editors, journalists, conflict protagonists and even audiences expect to be continually adapting their media practices. New technologies, services and infrastructures will be developed that will require perpetual learning and sensitivity to new opportunities or threats. The role of social media in conflict or uprisings is not unprecedented and hard-to-fathom; there are sufficient templates to render any Twitter campaign by Hamas or the IDF instantly intelligible. The data deluge is less threatening; for instance, on its Watching Syria’s War[[1]](#endnote-1) multimedia curation site the *New York Times* simply posts all the images it can verify and all the ones it can’t, and is happy to be transparent with users about what is verifiable and how hard it is for news to fully verify anything. The digital chaos, the “leakage”, is already leaked, hosted and made searchable by the newspaper of record, albeit in a necessarily staged and stylized way. Furthermore, the pervasive proclaimations of the extent and success of revolutions against oppressive regimes by so-called ‘digital activists’ as we entered this decade, using an array of social media platforms, seem overdone. The notion of ‘connective action’ seems problematic (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), for it is truly exercised by those ‘Big Media’ agents with the greatest connectivity: Reuters, the BBC, CNN and other global news organisations. The mainstream (in its democratic and undemocratic forms) has reasserted itself. The shift through the three phases of media ecologies was simply much more compressed: a sudden collapse of a repressive mainstream media by a chaotic new media environment, appropriated in turn by a slightly less repressive mainstream media.

The three phases of war and media generate a set of academic concepts to grasp how power and communication function in each. The first, broadcast phase of war and media was accompanied by analysis of agenda-setting and gatekeeping by large national news organisations, studies of news values and media logics, and the sociological study of frontline journalists. The second phase, Diffused War, saw theories of agenda-setting and gatekeeping problematised by non-linear causality (Bousquet, 2009) and networked communication (Barzilai‐Nahon, 2008). Attention to frontline journalists was overtaken by explorations of citizen journalism (Allan and Thorsen), citizen witnessing (Allan, 2013) and every other variation of (what we now see as just) people doing journalism.

For instance, it is telling that in the 2010s social media framed their services as opportunities not just to express how you feel but to report and inform; from 2013, instead of asking ‘What are you doing?’ Twitter asked users to post ‘What’s happening?’ (Burgess, 2015). It was unclear whether news values and media logics would hold together strongly as more of life was mediatized, or whether they would explode as various new devices and communities emerged. In the Diffused War phase we saw a melting pot of new concepts as scholars tried to get a grip on apparently novel and confusing phenomena.

Although Arrested Warfare may seem like a return to an earlier phase with renewed hope in Media Studies for the exhausted trilogy of audiences, institutions and production, instead, the re-establishment of the mainstream requires a more holistic lens that picks out the emergent hybrids, fissures, and other complexities of this media ecology. Traditional phenomena such as agenda-setting and gatekeeping function through more complex practices. For instance, in 2011 we tried to grasp how, on the one hand, Al-Qaeda videos were proliferating in anarchic ways and yet, on the other, ultimately only the same few videos reached mainstream audiences. We described this as networked gatekeeping (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011; cf. Barzilai‐Nahon, 2008; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013): despite the flux and increasing volume of Al Qaeda’s media productions, ultimately much of what reached Western audiences at the time was nonetheless still clearly gatekept by mainstream news editors. The latter determined what of the Arabic was translated and in doing so changed the message for their mainstream audiences.

These phases, and the concepts used within each, are overlapping. In the coming years we will still witness the non-linear agenda-setting of Diffused War (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010a), as images lost or hidden emerge unexpectedly to disrupt established narratives of past and present events. Equally, tendencies can be discerned now about what comes after Arrested War, just as how mainstream media was being ‘renewed’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007) and its re-assertion could be seen to be possible back in 2007 during the middle of news’ crises in Diffused War.

To reiterate, Diffused War referred to a new paradigm of war in which (i) the mediatization of war (ii) made possible more diffuse causal relations between action and effect (iii) creating greater uncertainty for policymakers in the conduct of war. Under conditions of Arrested War, however, the mainstream rather than being challenged by mediatization, instead harnesses it for its own ends. Policy-makers and militaries have renewed confidence in the mainstream’s appropriation of the current media ecology, and enter into closer relationships with it. The British mainstream media were granted more official access to UK troops in Afghanistan than in any previous war in history.

Some will say there never really was a period of Diffused War or uncertainty among generals, editors and news audiences; that pro-military reporting was sustained throughout this period by mainstream press in the US (Bennett et al., 2007) and UK (Robinson et al., 2010), for instance. This is to ignore the fact that a great deal of content did emerge in mainstream media that was intensely “unhelpful” to military protagonists or confusing to journalists and audiences.

Others will reject the idea that margins and micro-ecologies will be mainstreamed and appropriated by a larger culture. Many find political hope in an everyday, an outside, an authentic and unconnected real life; that it is in that outside that new groups and causes can form. Violent actors will equally wish to keep some acts “off the grid.”

But for us, historically, interstitial and insurgent forces have often moved to the social centre or even become the new normal, given time. What is required now is for researchers to delve into the qualitative experience of gatekeepers and insurgents to see how the cycle of margin-to-mainstream functions behind the scenes. Otherwise, it is difficult to be entirely certain whether we are witnessing now a re-assertion of mainstream news’ primacy or the re-assertion of mainstream news’ performance of primacy. We hypothesise that it is both, and it is this duality that drives the cycle.

There is nothing that can escape mainstream media now, nothing that mainstream media has not already foreseen escaping and that it has devised strategies to accommodate (the media ecology premediates itself, in Grusin’s (2004) terms). This means that there are no aspects of war and conflict that can escape the framing and analysis of mainstream media. This seems to make war more controllable by those fighting it, although not necessarily more intelligible and accessible to audiences seeking to be informed about it. But what is certain is that the mainstream has re-asserted its role and function within the latest turn of the media ecology. To illustrate our thesis we next explain the three phases of mediatization and what drives their development, focusing on the British military’s use of media in the recent Afghanistan War. We then present extended analysis of the ongoing Ukraine crisis to examine Arrested War. Finally, in our conclusion we consider how the varying abilities of government, military and media to adapt to the three phases contribute to shifting distributions of power between those elite groups.

**The three phases of mediatization**

We take ‘mediatization’ as the process by which warfare is increasingly embedded in and penetrated by media, such that to plan, wage, legitimize, assuage, historicize, remember and to imagine war, requires attention to that media and its uses. It is a means of understanding shifting media power *on* and its use *by* a range of actors. This is different to ‘mediation.’ As Stig Hjarvard (2008) states: ‘Mediation describes the concrete act of communication by means of a medium in a specific social context. By contrast, mediatization refers to a more long-lasting process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media’s influence’ (p. 118). War and conflict, and a range of political, cultural and social realms to differing extents, are not simply mediated (relations sustained via media as medium). Rather, they are reliant or dependent upon media and, con­sequently, have been transformed to increasingly follow media logics; they are mediatized.

The process of mediatization is uneven as different actors adjust to, learn from, and employ different media for their own ends. Observing this process of the ebb and flow of media influence and its uses involves tracking the media imaginary of the day that shapes relationships between individuals, groups, and communication technologies. It is this we call the ‘media ecology’. Different and multiple media ecologies vary in constraining and enabling those actors seeking influence within it.

Unfortunately, as Hepp et al (2015) observe, some critics such as Deacon and Stanyer (2014) too easily dismiss perspectives on mediatization as they confuse a ‘media-centred’ approach for one that is ‘media-centric.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Hepp at al draw upon Livingstone (2010) to make this distinction clear: ‘Being ‘media-centric’ is a one-sided approach to understanding the interplay between media, communications, culture, and society, whereas being ‘media-centered’ involves a holistic understanding of the various intersecting social forces at work at the same time as we allow ourselves to have a particular perspective and emphasis on the role of the media in these processes’ (Hepp et al., 2015, p. 3). Critical to our mapping of the mediatization of warfare is the highlighting of these two aspects – the interplay between media, communications, culture, and society, and a holistic understanding of the intersecting social forces at work – through development of the concepts of ‘connectivity’ and ‘ecology’, respectively.

In order to illuminate the shifting role of media and its uses in (re)balancing the power of different elites (in our case government, military, and institutional mainstream media) we require a model of historical change. In our 2010 work *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*, we identified ‘two phases of mediatization’ to illustrate the move from roughly the ‘broadcast era’ (Merrin 2008, 2014) to a second phase of contemporary mediatization. This second phase is defined by the advent of Web 2.0 and a ‘new’ media ecology (cf. McLuhan 1964; Postman 1970; Cottle 2006; Fuller 2007) wherein so-called ‘new’ media defined a particular media imaginary. If a media ecology refers to the ever-adjusting totality of relationships and interdependencies that exist within a contemporary set of media institutions, technologies, practices and environments, then there was a felt experience that those relationships and interdependencies were being qualitatively and quantitatively transformed by new media technologies and the practices that accompanied them. And in our work with Akil Awan on *Media and Radicalisation* (2011) we described this as ‘the current rapidly shifting media sat­urated environment characterised by a set of somewhat paradoxical conditions, of, on the one hand, ‘effects without causes’, in Faisal Devji’s terms (2005), yet, on the other, a profound connectivity through which places, events, people and their actions and inactions, seem increasingly connected’ (p.5). Effects without causes seemed to capture the zeitgeist among policymakers who felt that events such as the attacks of 11 September 2001 or publication of the Abu Ghraib prison photos a few years later seemed inexplicable and unprecedented connectivity entailed a new and threatening horizon of “unknown unknowns”, in the words of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Phase one was defined by a relatively contained media ecology of discrete, mono-directional media, with limited scope for mass audiences to challenge a discernible and dominant Western mainstream media’s representation of warfare. Broadcast War was packaged relatively successfully as limited, and Western government and military interventions were premised upon the relationship between action and effects being predictable and measurable. In the closing stages of the 20th century, much was being claimed about the rising power of (Western) satellite broadcasters in providing a mono-global vision of what Martin Shaw (2005) called ‘the new Western way of war’. However, this period can be characterized as relatively stable for the elites planning, waging and representing war. Scholarly analysis, meanwhile, focused more on representation of war in news content than on the medial exchanges and interactions across mediums, genres and actors.

In contrast, the second phase of mediatization brought the new uncertainties of Diffused War. The connectivity of media of the mainstream and media of the self suddenly immersed citizens and elites, and the conduct and legitimizing of warfare, into digitally networked relations.[[3]](#endnote-3) There was too much content, too many representations, to be able to conduct comprehensive coverage of the relation between media and any ongoing war. This did not stop some scholars from ‘still trying to understand the post-broadcast world through broadcast-era categories’ (Merrin, 2008). Only some recognized the medial and attempted to get a grip on the impact of the new networked dynamics.

Table One, below, develops our earlier model of two phases of mediatization, offering an overview of the nexus of media-political-military relations from Broadcast through Diffused and into an emergent third phase, that of *Arrested* War.

[Insert Table One here]

Through our mapping of phases of mediatization we are not driven by what some critique as an ‘epochalism’, imposing a linearity to the nature of technological, political and cultural change. Indeed, our model of roughly stability-disruption-accommodation may also be identified as a cycle evident in earlier eras of seemingly rapid media innovation and change (Wu, 2011). Furthermore, we acknowledge that our lens being explicitly trained on the nature of warfare in recent and emergent media ecologies does require some degree of speculation.

Crucially though, our holistic approach enables the illumination of some of the shifting relations between and across multiple actors and media, rather than hiving them off into separate decontextualized zones for analysis, as though they existed in isolation. Unfortunately, reductionist medium approaches are common in a number of academic fields, including the study of war and media (see Hoskins 2013 for a critique). Although never absolutely definitive, given the hidden characteristics of some media ecologies (the dark web, for instance) the ecological lens enables a spectrum of actors and their interrelations with and uses of media to be brought into simultaneous gaze. And we now turn this gaze to develop our more speculative, third phase of mediatization, that of Arrested War.

**The third phase**

To underline the point that the three phases of mediatization are overlapping and contested, rather than discrete and fixed, we argued as early as 2007 in *Television and Terror* that mainstream news had already begun the process of ‘renewal’ through its integration of emergent media technologies and forms (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007). The initial efforts by mainstream news to appropriate user generated content or monitor what was happening in other regional or linguistic media ecologies prefigured what is normalized within the third phase of mediatization. Today, in that third phase, we suggest that this process has widened and deepened with a range of military, media, and political actors, who initially struggled to adapt to the new media ecology (phase two) and who have now more fully harnessed its digital potential. For example, William Merrin (forthcoming) identifies ‘#Participative War’ as being marked by the breakdown of broadcast media monopoly and the military control of their own message but also by the military re-appropriation of that same media. After an era in which journalists were embedded with and lived alongside soldiers, now soldiers themselves are embedded-journalists recording their own experiences, accomplishments and feelings (ibid).

For us, phase three of the mediatization of war includes new synergies of mainstream and the military in their appropriation of these developments. For example, the 2012-14 BBC television series *Our War* was billed as ‘The story of the Afghanistan war through the words and pictures of soldiers who fought it’.[[4]](#endnote-4) A key feature of this personal documentary style programming was the use of audiovisual footage captured by headcams. Thus: ‘The makers of ‘Our War: 10 Years in Afghanistan’ claim it will offer viewers, for the first time, the chance to see as close as possible front line action through a soldier’s eyes.’[[5]](#endnote-5) This statement comes from the official announcement of the series, by the UK Government’s Ministry of Defence (MOD). Rather than media of the self being used to counter or challenge the official military version of warfare, here it is deployed to support it. Whereas the second phase of mediatization was marked by a struggle by and between elite actors seeking the containment of so-called amateur media content, today the amateur combat image is more quickly absorbed and utilized as a weapon of propaganda and warfare. We call this process the premediation of the weaponization of media: the more efficient use of media by military at source as a weapon of warfare, rather than only secondary use (framing) of representations already ‘out there’.

Much has been claimed about the power of different media in forging ‘instant history,’ in particular through the visual and global immediacy of conflicts and revolutions from the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, the third phase of mediatization is marked by a much more proactive British Defence Media Operations organization in its production and dissemination of images and video, and particularly from the war in Afghanistan. This may in turn subvert the official operational record of Operation HERRICK (the codename applied to most of the British operations in the recent War in Afghanistan) which would be the basis of future histories of the British involvement in the war. However, given the complexity and volume of Op HERRICK’S digital records, these may well never be released into the public domain, or at least not in the same way as the official records of previous wars (Hoskins 2015). Learning from the seeming digital flux of the second phase of mediatization, the British military has sought to manage the terms of use of digital within its operations in order to restore control and contain the emergence of content that could be used to counter its narrative of the war, now, during the next war, or in a generation’s time.

Another recent example of the elite reclaiming of the new media ecology is the Russian Troll Army. The Kremlin has employed hundreds of workers in state-sponsored ‘troll factories’ to post pro-Putin propaganda across news and social media forums (Gallagher, 2015). Once a story has been posted, the trolls divide into teams of three with one adopting the role of government critic and the other two engaging him in debate from a pro-Kremlin position. The latter also add a supporting graphic or image and a link to content as further reinforcement. Marat Burkhard, the former troll who exposed this digital ‘Ministry of Truth’, described this to a radio station as ‘Villain, picture, link’:

‘So in this way our little threesome traverses the country, stopping at every forum, starting with Kaliningrad and ending in Vladivostok. We create the illusion of actual activity on these forums. We write something, we answer each other. There are keywords, tags, that are needed for search engines. We’re given five keywords – for example ‘defence minister’ or ‘Russian army’. All three of us have to make sure these keywords appear all over the place in our comments.’ (Cited in Gallagher, 2015)

This, for us, epitomizes Merrin’s #Participative War in the third phase of mediatization, with the wholesale elite appropriation of the communicative structures once hastily acclaimed as the engines of revolutions.

It is important to approach media ecology rather as a set of media ecologies, existing simultaneously both in consort and in conflict. A particular violent conflict may be played out within and across multiple media ecologies, with the nature and extent of mediatization characterized by unevenness and a range of contested perceptions of the nature and impact of different media. For example, in her media and ethnographic analysis, Dounia Mahlouly traces the evolution of intersecting and contesting Egyptian media ecologies following the 2011 uprisings, notably between established and emergent media.

Mahlouly found a ‘bubble’ effect. The revolutionary activists who first took to social media such as Facebook and Twitter to protest against the Egyptian government led by President Mubarak reached only a restricted audience of followers, namely those who had a similar socioeconomic background and views. Although social media activism provided the youth opposition with a feeling of empowerment, this led them to believe that their interpretation of the revolutionary agenda was commonly understood and shared. Instead, this understanding did not reach beyond their particular media ecology. One commentator describes: ‘The revolutionaries are still living in their own self-created bubble. They only talk to themselves, they rarely talk to the people on the street. They are all cocooned in their own meetings, facebook pages and on twitter. There has been very little attempt to burst this bubble and talk directly to the public’ (Mahlouly, forthcoming). The inflection of a particular media ecology by mostly middle class cyber-activists led, Mahlouly argues, to an ‘alienation of the revolution’; the activists employed secondary accounts of lower class injustices, but failed to connect with or represent them. Thus we quickly enter here the third phase of mediatization with the break-down of the democratising, self-organising and for some the revolutionary prospects promoted in the second.

We can even ask whether much social media content and interaction is just noise and not definitive signals between genuine social actors. Russia’s Troll Army simply amplifies the noise, the distortions – the simulation of authentic debate. In this context, verification of the provenance of content or identity of actors becomes highly problematic. The promise of the citizen-witness as a new historical actor is subverted. The role of wire agencies such as Reuters, AP and AFP during an unfolding conflict event is transforming.[[6]](#endnote-6) Their objective previously was to create content through professional journalism which other news sources bought and re-packaged. Now they verify emerging online content, sifting the data mass produced by citizen-producers, so that those traditional news sources can buy that verified content and blame any mistakes on the wire agencies. In the third phase of mediatization the now-subverted citizen, whether image-uploading eyewitness or Twitter commentator, is one who is more fully integrated into and appropriate by the mainstream; categorized, commodified, processed.

At this juncture, the field of war and media needs analyses that are mainstream-centric, to explain how the mainstream is re-asserting itself. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine demonstrates how this latest transformation is unfolding.

**The** **Ukraine Conflict: Russia’s adjustment to the third phase**

The conflict in Ukraine has triggered a number of claims about Russia’s successful use of media to shape responses to events. These claims centre on the use of mediation – the use of specific mediums to allow certain aspects of the conflict to be visible, and framed in a certain way, by Russia. In our analysis below, we look at the claims that Russia is winning an information war in Ukraine, that it is undermining the notion of reliable information about the Ukraine conflict, and we look at how states are using social media and Merrin’s ‘#Participative War’ to manage perceptions of the conflict. Paradoxically, Russia is deemed to be controlling perceptions of the conflict more effectively by approaching, proactively, multilingual and open social media spaces whilst remediating content from those spaces to retain control of how the conflict is seen within Russia. In this way, chaos is embraced as a way to seize, define and arrest the conflict’s meaning.

First, NATO claim that Russia is applying a model of “hybrid warfare” that blurs several distinctions such as war/peace and physical/virtual:

‘Russia’s information campaign was central to Russia’s operations in Ukraine. The information campaign and related military action by Russia corresponds to the characteristics of a new form of warfare where the lines between peace and war, foreign military force and local self-defence groups are blurred and the main battle space has moved from physical ground to the hearts and minds of the populations in question. Crimea may be considered a test-case for Russia in trying out this new form of warfare where hybrid, asymmetric warfare, combining an intensive information campaign, cyber warfare and the use of highly trained Special Operation Forces, play a key role.’ (NATO STRATCOM, 2014, p. 4)

Consequently, it is believed that Russia is shaping perceptions of the conflict by allowing some aspects of the conflict to proceed in the open. NATO commander, US General Philip M. Breedlove, said on 4 September 2014:

‘[This is] the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of informational warfare, using all these tools to stir up problems that they can then begin to exploit with their military tool – through coercion […] or through, what we see now in Crimea, what we’ve seen in Eastern Ukraine, Russian regular and irregular forces, these *little green men* without badges inside of nations stirring trouble.’ (cited in Dub, 2014, italics added)

The Ukraine conflict has shown the renewed importance of television. Images of ‘little green men’ – Russia-backed troops in Eastern Ukraine – may have originated through cameraphone recordings but these soon reached mainstream media. Moreover, Russia was comfortable with this ‘leaked’ footage appearing in mainstream television news. Following a similar media logic to the UK military’s use of soldier helmetcam footage from Afghanistan in the BBC *Our War* series, the power centre uses participatory footage to create a sense of its own presence for mass audiences.

In Arrested War, news media prevents war escaping intelligibility and remaining “out there” and mysterious. In Ukraine, every spectacle is created to be seen, and to be known to be seen. The spectacles of little green men within Ukraine is brazen, open – an act of provocation. Knowing that the little green men have news value, a particular ‘televisuality’ (Caldwell, 1995), Russia uses the mainstream as a space to project its presence: first phase broadcast-mediation but harnessing third phase participatory media. The identity of the little green men was difficult for professional journalists to verify; neither fully signal or noise, not quite fact yet evident to the eye.

It is assumed that Russia exerts influence by mediatizing war this way. An internal report by the US Broadcasting Board of Governors in March 2015 argued that ‘Competitors with anti-U.S. messaging are fomenting an information war - *and winning* - while U.S. international broadcasting is challenged to keep pace with competitors and changes in the media landscape’ (cited in CNBC, 2015). On what basis was it known that Russia was winning? The answer: anecdotal evidence that young Russian elites tend to consume mainstream Russian news (personal correspondence). Equally significant is that US policymakers and the journalists who reported it would refer to communication using a war metaphor in which a winner and loser is necessary. If communication around Ukraine is understood through the war metaphor then without evidence of ‘winning’ it is easy to see how anxiety might develop about losing and being seen to lose.

An additional layer to this dynamic concerns policymakers’ need to project strength and avoid the appearance of weakness. For instance, Peter van Ham argues the European Union, by emphasizing human security and human rights over coherent military strategy, has ‘intentionally made itself vulnerable to the bullying and intimidation of hardnosed competitors who still value the uses of hard power (China, Russia, etc.)’ (cited in House of Lords, 2014, p. 50). While NATO and European Union states struggled to agree a joint response to Ukraine, Russia and Putin were able to act and be seen to act. Even audiences who disagreed with Russia’s actions could bear witness to its capacity to act.

Western policymakers assume that because Russia has resources to try to project certain images and narratives through broadcast media and – as we saw from the Russian Troll Army above – through social media, that those resources are effective. Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs of NATO James Appathurai, told the *Financial Times* in December 2014 that ‘Russia is weaponising information in this crisis…they are reaching deep into our own electorates to affect politics’ (cited in Jones, 2014). In fact, this is evidence of a ‘propaganda panic’ among these Western policymakers, claims public diplomacy scholar Robin Brown:

‘The attraction of ‘propaganda’ is that it appears to stand somewhere outside the normal responsibilities of politics or diplomacy and helps to insulate those in charge from an accusation that they weren’t paying attention or that their policies have failed. The explanation can then be offered that it is the inadequacy of our propaganda/public diplomacy/ information efforts. The additional twist is that the people who have been responsible for the ‘inadequate’ response have been saying all along that their work is totally underfunded and so instead of coming out swinging at their critics gratefully pocket the increased appropriations.’ (2014, no page)

What is at stake here is how military policymakers imagine how influence works. Sarah Maltby has carried out nearly a decade of ethnographic study of UK military communications teams. She argues (2015) they mistakenly presume that by using the media tools of the day, a state’s “influence activity” can create intended effects on audiences waiting and open to narratives, whether Russia’s or the West’s. Maltby returns to findings from the very origins of 20th century political communication to show how misguided current thinking is:

‘Some kinds of communication, on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects’. (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 356)

In other words, influence is unlikely – by Russia or by NATO. The Ukraine crisis has made explicit policymakers’ assumptions about mainstream media’s effects – the return of the hypodermic needle model of influence. This assumes audiences’ minds are directly and predictable influenced by external content – typically, violent video games, pornography or propaganda – in a manner analogous to a body injected by a known chemical agent. Western policymakers and journalists alike see the Ukraine crisis through the first phase of mediatization, of linear influence efforts, and are thrown when Russian strategists have embraced the second and third phases of mediatization. Following the MH17 Malaysian Airlines disaster in Ukraine in 2014, for instance, Julia Ioffe (2014) wrote in *The New Republic* about effects on Russian audiences of receiving Russian news of the event. Here we find the first-phase imaginary; she writes:

‘The result of all this Russian coverage is that Russians’ understanding of what happened is as follows. At best, the crash is an unfortunate accident on the part of the Ukrainian military that the West is trying to pin on Russia, which had nothing to do with it; at worst, it is all part of a nefarious conspiracy to drag Russia into an apocalyptic war with the West. So whereas the West sees the crash as a game-changer, the Russians do not see why a black swan event has to change anything or they want to resist what they see is a provocation. To them, after a few days of watching Russian television, it’s not at all clear what happened nor that their government is somehow responsible for this tragedy.’

Ioffe presents no evidence that Russian audiences understand the event through the framing projected by the news they watched, and decades of research shows Russian viewers are sceptical and ambivalent about state broadcasting (Mickietwicz, 1988, 2008; Roselle, 2006). This rather indicates a particular imaginary that – as Berelson and his colleagues showed in the 1940s and 50s – did not even hold in simpler media ecologies prior to the first phase of mediatization.

We would expect policymakers to promote a communication strategy based on an all-of-media approach, that is, to seek to manage communication across all relevant media ecologies: the mediums, spaces and relationships within each and those news or information sources that cross or bridge media ecologies. Western states appear to have separate broadcast strategies and social media strategies rather than integrated strategies suited for holistic media ecologies.[[7]](#endnote-7) We also would have expected Western states to have developed effective measures of the influence or impact of their communication efforts. The absence of these measures, reflecting mistrust of social science (Pamment, 2012) or an obsession with quantification of processes that may be better understood qualitatively (Nye, 2011), leads to uncertainty and the very ‘propaganda panic’ identified by Brown.

A second line of argument that Russia is winning an information war and the West is losing rests upon claims about Russia’s challenge to a politics based on truth. Following the doctrine of Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov (see Pomerantsev, 2014), Russian media aim to show the constructed nature of all news and therefore the contestability of any claim – particularly the claims of the West (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2015). This is part of Russia’s “hybrid war” doctrine.

In the third phase of mediatization, an again-dominant Western mainstream perversely promotes Russian disinformation given its ‘favouring of balance over objectivity’ (Giles 2015: 4). Keir Giles argues:

‘To dismiss the importance of Russian denials because they are implausible is also to under-estimate the concept and power of the direct lie. Given the habit of liberal leaders in democratic nations to attempt always to say something which at least resembles the truth, implausible denials are a ploy which Western media are particularly ill-equipped to respond to and report appropriately.’ (2015: 5)

Thus, how can the West fight a propaganda battle to undermine Russia communications when Russia isn’t even pretending to project truthful rhetoric about what is happening? Modernity was supposed to involve the collective exercise of reason around transparently-gathered facts to make informed decisions – in science, law, and politics. In this view, Russia is not playing by the rules of the Enlightenment.

Academic analysis has shown Russia Today (RT), the transnational multilingual Russian state broadcaster, has a remarkably playful attitude to information (Hutchings, 2014). Below is the brand statement from RT’s political talk show *Breaking the Set*. While even Fox News claims to be ‘fair and balanced’, RT dismisses the possibility that news could be fair or balanced, since all information is framed and biased by the powerful:

‘There are too many rules in our society that only prop up the establishment – an establishment that tries its hardest to divide and conquer the people. ‘**Breaking the Set**’ is a show that cuts through the pre-written narrative that tries to tell you what to think, and what to care about.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

*Breaking the Set* takes a broadcast-era format, the political talk show, and fills it with remediated social media content and ostensible anti-establishment punditry. The BBC documentary maker Adam Curtis describes the strategy of Putin and Surkov:

... the key thing was, that Surkov then let it be known that this was what he was doing, which meant that no one was sure what was real or fake. As one journalist put it: "It is a strategy of power that keeps any opposition constantly confused."

‘A ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it is indefinable. It is exactly what Surkov is alleged to have done in the Ukraine this year. In typical fashion, as the war began, Surkov published a short story about something he called non-linear war. A war where you never know what the enemy are really up to, or even who they are. The underlying aim, Surkov says, is not to win the war, but to use the conflict to create a constant state of destabilized perception, in order to manage and control. (Curtis, 2014)

The appearance on television of ‘little green men’ -- remediated cameraphone images of unknown origin – exemplifies the fulfilment of Surkov’s strategy. A mass audience is placed in a position of uncertainty, a position that makes it difficult to assess the validity of claims made by policymakers on any side. The constantly destabilised perception that RT and Surkov seek to create is difficult to counter in the ‘information war’. Western policymakers fall back upon a liberal tradition of seeking to provide better information or coverage that is somehow less biased in the eyes of Russian or Ukrainian audiences. This plays into the hands of Surkov and RT. It is exactly the kind of thing the West *would* do, and has historically done, and is therefore not to be trusted (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2015). This raises the question of whether the third phase of mediatization is intrinsically more difficult for Western policymakers. That all news is constructed out of professional journalist footage but also footage from innumerable other actors (soldiers, drones, citizens, satellites); that all news is driven by the intersection of mainstream media logics (immediacy, visuality, calibration to power) and social media logics (shareability, recodability); that audiences are aware all news is likely being reported in other languages and news cultures in different ways at any given moment; the sheer transparency of this constructedness and relativity would appear to put the Western liberal model of objectivity and free information flows into renewed crisis. The shift to ‘contextual objectivity’ during the second phase of mediatization pointed to this tendency. Surkov’s information war has only intensified it. And while we are sceptical that Western policymakers or journalists ever exclusively cleaved to values of objectivity and free information flows – the histories of international broadcasting and propaganda are difficult to separate – there is a need to recognise that news and information in a period of Arrested War will be qualitatively different. The imaginary of objective knowledge and free information flows must be replaced by an imaginary of the always-provisional and heterogeneously-constructed nature of both news and information.

A third feature of debates about media and the Ukraine conflict is a return to claims about maps and territory. For all of globalization and the networking of global society, the symbolic and material power of land are at stake in the conflict. As cited earlier, the Russian Troll Army aims to appear in internet forums ‘starting with Kaliningrad and ending with Vladivostok.’ However, the register through which claims are exchanged is different in the third phase of mediatization. On 27 August 2014 Canada’s NATO Twitter account posted a humorous map of the contested region with a map labeling Ukraine as ‘not Russia’:



Figure 1. Canada at NATO tweet, 27 August 2014

The Canada Twitter account added a sarcastic line, ‘Geography can be tough. Here’s a guide for Russian soldiers who keep getting lost and ‘accidentally’ enter Ukraine.’ Within 36 hours, *The Guardian* (2014) reported the post had been retweeted over 25,000 times and it stands at over 42,000 at the time of writing this article. However, the account Russians at NATO responded with another map, this showing Crimea as part of Russia, accompanied by the message ‘Helping our Canadian colleagues to catch up with contemporary geography of Europe’:



Figure 2. Russians at NATO tweet, 28 August 2014

Here we see a diplomatic exchange that would have been impossible prior to the second phase of mediatization. This was a competition of memes[[9]](#endnote-9), of states harnessing virality, humour and the social media logic of shareability to advance political claims about an ongoing conflict. This indicates how “high politics” and statecraft use mainstream media platforms like Twitter, recognizing the risks of dynamics unknowable in advance but, having learnt how to work with those risks, thereby arrest and limit the diffusion of perspectives about the conflict. The debate returns to claims by major international powers through a mass medium.

**Conclusion: Realigning ecologies, rebalancing of power**

We end with two questions, one political and one scholarly. The third phase of mediatization involves a re-assertion of the mainstream and power elites in government, military and news media. User-generated content, extremist content, even the dark web, are a data mass for large institution to dip into. However, across the three phases each institution has adapted at different speeds and to different extents (cf. Vaccari, 2008, p. 662). After the stability and certainties of Broadcast War and phase one, Diffused War and the second phase redistributed power from government, militaries and news institutions to citizens-cum-users and non-state security actors in a period of seeming informational chaos and asymmetric conflicts.

In the third phase, Arrested War, Western governments and policy elites are still struggling through phase two; militaries have embraced, slowly, the social media logics of personalization and spreadability. News institutions have adapted most effectively. While the division of labour of news gathering, verification and distribution has shifted between wire and conventional news agencies, the constant competitive pressure to refine news practices daily and even hourly has proven effective; the threat of being ‘just another blogger’ has dissipated as user-generated content is now systematically appropriated. In so doing, the media ecology has widened the perimeter of what is now considered to be mainstream, and this has largely happened because traditional news organisations learned how to use digital. This was exemplified by the *New York Times*’ site Watching Syria’s War but also the practice of live blogging ongoing conflicts, in which content is often presented as provisional and to be confirmed later. In addition, newer media organizations have grown in audience, revenue and prestige to take their place within the same ecology.

If the third phase of mediatization sees those three elite groups differentially out-of-sync with the present, but news organisations are most in-sync, does that redistribute power – of agenda-setting and framing, for instance – towards news media? At the same time, the free-for-all re-established mainstream news cultures in the West seem ill-equipped to filter out disinformation from full-scale (Russian) informational war, which exploits politics based on truth.

For scholars, we ask: What concepts and theory become relevant to explain relations and interdependencies in the period of Arrested War? What emergent hybrids, fissures, and other complexities of this media ecology are observable that might signal the embryonic stages of the fourth phase of mediatization? For now, do we need to return to basic questions of how gatekeeping or framing work? And finally, do we need new concepts to give analytical purchase on the kinds of practices being developed by Russia and full-scale informational war across media ecologies?

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1. See http://projects.nytimes.com/watching-syrias-war [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Deacon and Stanyer’s critique is inevitably reductive as their criticism of uses of ‘mediatization’ is based on a basic word search of a tiny sample of 14 ‘leading’ media and communication journals over 10 years. And as Hepp et al (2015) point out, in their using of a ‘simplified methodology’, ‘not very surprisingly, they find that ‘in the vast majority of cases (81 percent) the word was just mentioned in passing, more casually invoked than defined’ (Deacon and Stanyer, 2014: 1034). In other words, Deacon and Stanyer found what they were looking for. Similarly, it seems very odd that Deacon and Stanyer dismiss our conceptualization of two phases of mediatization by citing from a short editorial which was not even predominantly about mediatization, rather than from the substantive projects and works where we develop this model at length drawing upon over a decade of RCUK funded empirical projects on mediatization and also media ecology (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010a and b, Awan, Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2011, Al-Lami, Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2012, Brown and Hoskins 2010, Hoskins 2015. cf. Hoskins and Tulloch 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See also Andrew Hoskins and John Tulloch (2016) who identify ‘hyperconnectivity’ across established and emergent media as shaping new conflagrations of risk actors, discourses and events, affording twenty-first century risk its uncertain and insecure character. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04fh2r1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bbc-documentary-to-show-helmand-through-soldiers-eyes [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. New verification agencies have also emerged, such as Storyful. See https://storyful.com [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In early 2015, for instance, the British military announced its new unit to use social media to conduct psychological operations (psyops) to undermine the morale of enemies (BBC News, 2015). Named the 77 Brigade, the unit was quickly labelled the “Facebook warriors” (DUN Project, 2015). News of this initiative was repeatedly discussed on television through the weekend of 31 January 2015. BBC News (2015) ‘Army sets up new brigade for ‘information age’’, 31 January. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-31070114 (accessed 20 February 2015). DUN Project (2015) “Sun Tzu for the Digital Era”: New Army brigade to fight conflicts on Facebook and Twitter. 3 February. Available at: http://www.dunproject.org/?p=375 (accessed 4 February 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. http://rt.com/shows/breaking-set-summary/ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Oxford English Dictionary provided the following relevant definition of ‘meme’: An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.’ Retrieved from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/meme [↑](#endnote-ref-9)