**Towards a Third Image of War: Post-Digital War**

Abstract

To see war as post-digital is to see how digital innovations have already been integrated into how militaries, media and societies wage, resist and understand war. Digital war is already historical. The logics of digital technologies have been integrated into the logics of pre-existing, traditional media *and* into longstanding geopolitical and military logics that drive war. The field of war and media is stuck between two images: continued efforts to document non-digital war and its established questions concerning legitimacy, authority and war’s lessons, and startled claims of novelty, rupture and transformation so total that they inhibit efforts to explain how war is changing. Post-digital war offers a third image, but how to see post-digital war? I propose specific approaches to seeing that can allow us to address its scale, heterogenity and locality as well as the ethics of human and posthuman behaviours; to see more but retain the ability to ask the most important, longstanding questions about why and how war occurs or does not. This is an unashamedly extensionist view of historical, technological and disciplinary change. Post-digital war may not be the term the field arrives at, but it indicates a third image and perspective that prevents war escaping explanation.

Keywords: War, Conflict, Security, Digital Media, Communication

**Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*It would appear* that digital war differs immediately to non-digital war that came before. In non-digital war, the availability of communicative content from a warzone was limited by the difficulties capturing and transporting or transmitting that content to audiences in particular places. War’s mediation was a matter of a journalist travelling to the warzone, or of an air force travelling to a region to drop propaganda leaflets from the skies. The question was how accurate was the partial view. *It would appear*, now, that digital technologies flip this to provide a holistic, abundant view but one of fundamental uncertainty about anything perceived. Digital war promises to eliminate distances of time and space, allowing shifts of perspective that enable new ways of engaging with war as well as new ways of waging it. By following real-time cameraphone footage or through VR headsets distant audiences can feel “in” a war, immersed, seeing-from-the-ground, and those physically in the war can upload data visible to anyone with access to monitor it. However, this sheer abundance or glut of communicative content from warzones makes it difficult for audiences, wherever in the world they have a digital connection, to see and understand war (Powers and O’Loughlin 2015). On the problem of seeing war’s ‘savage’ effects on society and environment, Jairus Grove writes, ‘The world is real but not easily apparent’ (Grove 2019, 17). Interacting with the world through social media platforms lends a ‘nebulous’ quality to social reality, Daniel Marques argues, creating a *semblance* of ‘dark patterns’ (Marques 2019). Certainly, data from warzones and from war’s destructive aftermath *can* emerge and circulate, but the sum total of this an unknowable, heterogeneous set of digital archives of verified and unverified content. Digital war leaves war still characterised by *a problem of appearance*.

Non-digital war; digital war. We faced two unsatisfactory “images” of war and media that leaves us now standing on the edge of a void. These are not literal images; we do not need to see an actual journalist standing by a pile of rubble and bodies for the first image to come to mind, nor flick through multiple cameraphone clips of that and many other piles of rubble and bodies for the second image to come to mind. In the first, war occurs and media might capture some of it. In the second, media is integral to the waging of war. Digital technologies are integral to how military organisations function. In this way we see how technology helps constitute a social entity (Beraldo and Milan 2019). This integration enables the blurring and obscuring of what is happening so that those waging the war can evade responsibility, producing what Ford and Hoskins (2020) call “radical war”, unconstrained and unstoppable. The blur of appearance creates a slipperiness of political accountability.

It is no coincidence that “digital war” as a phenomenon emerged in the 2000s in parallel to theories of the “mediatization of war”, that is, the folding of media production and publishing practices into the very design and conduct of war. It also emerged in parallel to a period of intense globalisation and the blurring of many boundaries in world politics, not least between war and terror and between the battlefield and society. And this “great blurring” coincided with the continuation and even extension of the use of power and violence with impunity. Masses continue to be killed or injured directly by armed conflict or suffer death or injury because of its consequences. War has not gone away at all (Fazal and Poast 2019). We have trouble seeing this.

How we see and think about world politics – including war and peace – is anchored by images. This refers not to images as evidence but images as conceptualisations of how things work. A “balance” of power, the “inside” and “outside” of a state, the state and its military as a “body” moving through space, the civilizational, kin-like “community” of states looking out for each other against barbarians for distant lands – these images of world politics have endured for millennia (O’Loughlin 2017). They endure because they rest upon conceptual metaphors that we intuitively understand because they are grounded in our experiences of our own bodies moving in the world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Those who benefit from the status quo of these images will use them to reinforce that order; geographer Doreen Massey writes, [t]his is not a description of the world as it is so much an image in which the world is being made’ (Massey 2015, 5). These images of the world and its constituent units shape assumptions of what war is and what war looks like. It makes sense that the “great blurring” we see in world politics in the Twenty-First Century should play out in the field of war and media. This is the new image of world politics that “digital war” reflects and embodies.

But these two images – non-digital war (partially glimpsed but real and with identifiable actors to hold to account), digital war (a blurry and uncertain complex of unknowable actors and events) – are limited. Staring into the void, Merrin declares we face “Incomprehensible War”: ‘All we have are outlines, ideas, and nightmare extrapolations from existing technologies’, he writes, ‘all refracted through our hangover concepts of the 20th century’ (Merrin 2019, no page).

This is not good enough. We cannot accept incomprehensibility.

**Start with *post*-digital war and work backwards**

The limits of the first two images demand we find a third image. That is my aim here. A necessary first step before we begin that task is to acknowledge what Berry and Dieter call the “post-digital”. They write, ‘‘post- digital’ refers to a state in which the disruption brought about by digital information technology has already occurred and, as such, represents a crisis of the cybernetic notion of ‘system’ which neither ‘digital’ nor ‘post- digital’ – two terms ultimately rooted in systems theory – is able to leave behind, nor even adequately describe.' (Berry and Dieter 2015, 7). Put differently, digital is a phase we have already been through but that we lack the tools to describe. This explains why Merrin asserts war’s incomprehensibility. Digital life (including war) works through system dynamics but it exceeds those in qualitatively restructuring experiences of time, space and connectivity. Since the digital “moment” (say, the late 2000s), novelists and other artists have already processed those transformations and the personal and social dilemmas generated, capturing the particular aspirations and anxieties of that period. That leaves us free to position those technologies alongside older ones within a broader “post-digital” infrastructure. This does not mean we have moved beyond the digital, only that we can now begin to chart how it develops in different directions. Cramer writes:

Postcolonialism does not in any way mean an end of colonialism … but, rather, its mutation into new power structures, less obvious but no less pervasive, which have a profound and lasting impact on languages and cultures, and, most significantly, continue to govern geopolitics and global production chains. (Cramer 2015, 15)

This is what we are witnessing in the field of media and war. From a post-digital perspective, we see that the primary institutions in existing power structures have had to adapt. We see some newer actors emerged, such as content verifiers and ‘counter-forensics’ organisations like Bellingcat and Forensic Architecture (Weizman no date), and new forms of journalistic collectives such as solutionsjournalism.org and SRCCON (srccon.org). Traditional institutions that draw on open source intelligence such as the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) have been revitalised as digital data allow new ways to track security threats. New actions become possible by citizens, such as digital leaks or the hacking of wearables. The result is that power structures mutate. Explaining these adaptations is hardly impossible and must be the basis for forming a third image of war.

My argument can be characterised as “extensionist”. This is not because I suggest that the media systems today through which war is waged, legitimised and contested are simply extensions of the broadcast era menu of TV, press and radio. It is because I am certain that the basic questions of war and media are unchanged and to answer them requires accounting for continuities as well as changes. Finding ways to see continuities as well as changes is imperative. For instance, Hoskins (2017) takes up the idea of the “Gutenberg Parenthesis” that suggests that the digital era involves a return to an oral storytelling culture that had been interrupted by several centuries of a written culture (see Sauerberg 2008, Pettitt 2011). Written culture operated through a logic of containment: meaning was contained in texts whose circulation could largely be controlled. Meaning in oral culture in contrast is generated by verbal articulation through network pathways, whether sustained by wandering bards or digital memes. This conceptualisation is one way to identify how media and war operate historically as fields of perception and communication. It provides clues about how and why certain perspectives of war emerge and circulate in different contexts, allowing for hypotheses about how the legitimation, conduct and contestation of war concretely works.

If we begin with an assumption of profound uncertainty and total rupture then we fall into a trap of thinking we must rebuild all of our theories, methods and approaches from scratch because we assume we do not know for sure how anything works – we are uncertain. This is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Digital war could have been seen an extension of non-digital war, not its replacement. But that opportunity was missed. The notion of digital war has already generated pathological anxiety about the blurring and opacity of the waging of war. It has triggered scholars and journalists to construct a second image of war that inhibits seeing war. We need to move beyond that image of digital war and find a new, third image that allows us to approach war actively as a comprehensible and explicable phenomena.

This is an urgent demand because until we learn to see war as it now is, then citizens and societies cannot understand it, debate it, and hold to account those who wage it. It might be tempting to reject any search for a new image as an act of closure, an attempt to control meaning: why not be open to multiple images? But the function of a society’s image of war – its imaginary, its discourse – is too important politically to leave to chance. A new image *of* war can allow a new relation *to* war. At present, that relation is slipping away as war fades out as a concrete and knowable thing. Ford and Hoskins note this, but by focusing on digital war, or what they call radical war, they cannot move forward towards a new image.

**An example of the post-digital: We need to see permanent campaigns**

Nobody can deny that digital war is happening. It arrived, blended with non-digital war, and the two now evolve together. For example, in an editorial in *Media, War & Conflict* in 2015 I wrote about “the permanent campaign” – the idea that the conduct of militaries is no longer bound by discrete wars and conflicts but, in a digital environment, that conduct is “always-on” and blurs war and not-war by penetrating every domain of society to varying degrees. This is especially the case for information operations. Digital technologies make these operations sufficiently cheap and easy to organise so that more and more states and violent organisations conduct them, relentlessly. Now, to avoid entering that digital “battlespace” would be to cede ground quite recklessly. ‘As media become embedded in more military practices,’ I wrote, ‘so it becomes less feasible to imagine a military *not* conducting information warfare’ (O’Loughlin 2015, 170). The challenge for scholars, journalists and citizens then is to *see it*.

This dilemma has intensified, but it can be broken down. Imagine a military general in a reasonably large nation-state – a midsize power or even a great power. Let us call her General Beholding. Beholding would today demand that her officers charged with leading disinformation campaigns or counter-terrorism operations would develop a multi-lingual, multi-platform, always-on system to track content globally in order to detect who is sending what information from what geolocation. It would enable Beholding to see what kinds of networks enabled that information to circulate up to a viral flurry or slow down and evaporate. Through machine learning the system would constantly increase its ability to detect new network formations that might reveal nodal gatekeepers of information or ready audiences for disinformation. It would learn to detect linguistic evolution. It would learn to detect when an image has been manipulated and trace who did the manipulation. If a clip is posted on Weibo, is picked up on a BBC World Service online news report, is then taken and manipulated synthetically in Taiwan (what in 2019 we called the production of “deepfakes”) and reposted on Facebook – the system would “see” all of that, it would track everyone who engaged with the clip at all stages of its evolution, and it would show this to Beholding’s crack team of cultural anthropologists. They would understand the political contexts and would tell Beholding why that clip is rousing or frightening or insignificant to different groups along the clip’s journey. It would constitute, ultimately, “rolling network coverage” for the Twenty-First Century.

The machine-learning of network and influence patterns, reinforced by meta-data analysis, would soon generate predictive capacity as well as lessons about when to intervene in an image’s journey. This might involve sending an officer to kill the synthetic image-manipulator or deepfaker in Taiwan, flooding Facebook with bots posting on this topic, or Beholding getting her nation’s ambassador to threaten the BBC World Service journalist not to use such images again. The real-time system would provide actionable intelligence. The system would also detect when any other nation-state, group or individual is using these automated systems, hunt out their bots, and produce synthetic manipulations of their leader’s latest speech. It would point to openings for Beholding’s dastardly black-ops wing to break the opposition network’s encryption and post content from their accounts. The system would be accessed via a dashboard of tools from commercial and university partners who would update Beholding’s team with the latest innovations and training. Like the banal bureaucratic process of workers conducting drone warfare, human researchers could go home for tea and be replaced by the nightshift.

With more and more states procuring these services, this leads to a world of intersecting fields of perception and attempted influence. These intersections are patterned by the power structures they exist within and reproduce. In 2013 I wrote of the overseas public opinion monitoring being conducted by states’ public diplomacy operations as ‘a hall of mirrors where each country learns to simulate its own transparency, and construct and manage its domestic public opinion’ (O’Loughlin 2013, 332). By 2019 Tyler Walicek likens such digital space to a ‘*cathedral* full of mirrors’ (Walicek 2019, no page, emphasis added). He describes this cathedral in Borgesian terms:

In the maze of light and color, we see ourselves, refracted endlessly. We see others: everyone at once and no one at all; not anyone real, at least. Not anyone who isn’t a distorted reflection. The clergy’s sermons – ideologies religious and secular – resound through the halls. Their deafening sound elongates and slows with the Doppler effect, permeating the minds of listeners willing and otherwise. (ibid)

The mass or sum of connectivity enabled by digital technologies create phenomena more than the sum of their parts – waves of feeling and anticipation that evade our current ability to measure. Walicek calls such phenomena an ‘illusory dimension woven through the world like lace, visible only at nodes where it phases into our reality, whether through the portal of our screens or in its more subtle societal ramifications’ (ibid). These emergent waves, alongside intentional acts of influence, successful or not, are what military leaders seek an always-on research machine to monitor and act upon. The task is to increase our ways of seeing so that we see more than mere instances or ‘nodes’ where influence ‘phases into’ or becomes manifest in our observable, empirical world. Investigative journalism published weeks or months after an influence operation may bring an operation to light. Defence contracts awarded to technology firms of such magnitude become a matter of public interest and news media report this, such as Microsoft winning the US $10 billion Jedi contract to supply artificial intelligence-based analysis and cloud storage to the US Department of Defense (BBC News 2019). Otherwise, public audiences see none of this waging of warfare.

**How can we begin to see this?**

First, we must all develop a bricolage way of seeing and thinking in order to see this global ecology constituted by both “information disorder” and offline actions (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). By bricolage I mean an openness to the intersecting, hybridising processes through which cultural forms and products emerge, circulate, and further adapt as they are translated, remixed and developed; an openness to an intrinsic *dynamism* and *heterogeneity* in the movement of information and meaning. This makes the world a lot to take in! Arijus et al ask 'what war looks like' when so much footage is stored in online archives (Arijus et al. 2019, 196). They argue such archives are so vast, across multiple platforms and formats, that even with computer-aided identification techniques it is only feasible to produce 'snapshots' (ibid, 196). They suggest both past and ongoing wars feature continuous emergence of visual materials – a 'living archive' (Hoskins 2018, 375). In these stark terms, *war looks like proliferation and fragmentation*. Link analysis between any coded images or users can produce network visualisations that offer some more intelligible, readable picture. But it is not the kind of picture of war that public audiences are used to seeing. Noting another shift in representational format, Galai (2019) explains how the Israeli military shifted in the late 2000s from seeking a legitimating “victory image” through photography to using metric-based infographics of numbers of “terrorists” killed by the Israeli Defense Force. War becomes visible here not as the people-in-front-of-rubble of the first image of war, nor as an unknowable blur of the second image, but as an ostensibly tangible but unorthodox set of numbers, like a video-game high score table, obscuring and restricting access to Gaza at the same time. Hence, a first aspect of a third image of war involves the normalisation of a mode of looking that is open to plural representational formats. This is a matter of cultural norms adapting as new practices of data journalism and new forms of event verification become routinely woven into “news”. Media and data literacies of citizens must advance in parallel to this. Audiences cannot simply turn to their favourite television channel and look for a familiar foreign correspondent standing in front of a bombed-out building and feel they know what is happening in a war.

Second, we must be alert to detecting the logics driving what is seen and what is unseen. In the first image of war, news values determined what received mass attention: dramatic, visually-arresting news involving powerful figures or people suffering of “our” ethnicity or nationality. In the second image of war, those traditional news values began to be processed through media systems in which social media injected further logics of attention-generation. If any image was presented in a format that was share-able and contained emotional content then it would be more likely to circulate (van Dijck and Poell 2013). From a post-digital perspective we see now how those two sets of logics have integrated. Military leaders, journalists and audiences understand the incentive structures, affordances and constraints of this system. Returning to Galai’s example in Israel, social media logics mean it is too risky for the Israeli Defense Force to post images of its own soldiers injured or of targets decimated in Gaza or Lebanon. An infographic is equally sharable but does not carry the same emotional charge as a photograph. Galai uses the metaphor of a visual economy to suggest that the currency of different formats thus acquire different value now in this era. To see war now, and to form its third image, entails understanding these shifting values and how and why actors are responding to those conditions.

But not all logics are shifting. National leaders and many publics still inhabit geopolitical logics based on fear of invasion or attack or the need to occupy others (Grove 2019). Militaries seek ordered grids of quantifiable intelligibility within which to conduct war and fear vortices of unforeseeable and uncontrollable dynamics. They seek to show or hide for strategic advantage (Bousquet 2018, O’Loughlin 2018). Defences are tested and gaps exploited. Logics of militarisation continue to pervade societies too and how this operates in different locations must be explained to be understood or resisted. We witness the continuity of technologies developed for military use on the battlefield becoming used in domestic policing. On 8 July 2016 Dallas police using a teleguided exploding robot to kill a civilian, Micah Johnson, who was firing a gun at police officers (Sidner and Simon 2016). This was the first known example of the use of a robot to kill civilians by US law enforcement in domestic territory. Davis calls this a ‘repatriation of the drone’ (Davis 2019, 1). Tools of digital war become technologies of digital society per se.

So, we must see the world through a bricolage lens and action as driven by several logics. We must also see war not as given but *made* and *always-evolving*. But who is doing the making and what is the terrain it is made upon?

Third, then, and in the third image, war and media cannot be treated as solely a matter of humans and redeeming humanity. The first image of war, the non-digital war of the mass communication era of the second half of the Twentieth Century, coincided with concepts of universal values protected through international law so that the legitimate conduct of war stayed within agreed parameters. The responsible citizen would engage with news media to stay informed while humanity moved ever closer to the upholding of human rights in all circumstances. If that conception of humanity was thwarted by events, the second image threw any notion of universal humanity under a bus simply because nobody could be certain who was doing what to whom. In the post-Cold War era there has been a proliferation in the number of campaigns and treaties focusing on the rights of indigenous peoples and children in war or prohibiting torture (Moyn 2010). At the very same time, digital media make these harder to observe and verify. This makes caring for and protecting humanity difficult. Francois Debrix (2019) describes CNN images from Aleppo, Syria, in which a 15 year old’s body parts are visible, and viewers are told this is Sawas’s son, personalising the report to enable human connection. The intention of the news report seemed to be to encapsulate the horrors of Aleppo. An iconic image of daily suffering and inhumanity was the tool for this purpose. However, that horror reveals the tendency of humans to harm each other. The privileging of the human as those who can bring justice and end suffering is challenged by humans’ continued willingness to kill humans. In the third image of war and media there should be no expectation that images have the “power” to make everyone care, because humans usually do not care. Rather, the third image becomes a lens to take seriously the question of under what conditions humans *could* and *might* care for suffering others and what kind of images constitute a credible and verifiable basis for that compassion. In addition, given that humans may not even be the responsible agents in warfare as AI systems are more widely deployed, this is the moment to develop a more differentiated and pragmatic ethics in which human and non-human are considered together.

Fourth, we must see infrastructure. We must account for it and explain how it shapes distributions of power and visibilities. Digital infrastructure is the very condition that makes possible the ability to connect all the new devices appearing in digital war’s lists. Digital infrastructure depends on a number of other technical and material infrastructures which are often used and damaged in war (Hu 2015). The very scale of digital infrastructure makes possible the claims about ubiquity and totality. Yet these infrastructures are themselves objects of inter-state competition driven by geopolitical logics. They are the terrain within which militaries, news media and publics understand and contest the meaning of any war. They afford new possibilities to create safe and interstitial spaces for mediation and peacemaking just as they enable spaces within which new polarising and antagonistic connections are sparked that make war more likely (Maltby et al. 2020).

If we see war driven by human and non-human agency and can account for the infrastructure through which war is produced and how that infrastructure is itself part of geopolitical competition, what through what substance or materiality does war then emerge and how might we see those manifestations as meaningful?

Fifth, the third image of war entails arriving at a meaningful theory of how digital and non-digital relate. The continued struggle in public and academic discourse with terms like “virtual” and “real-world” show the conceptual and ontological problems faced. Certainly, the non-digital world matters a great deal. Conflict around monuments in Europe still marks past violence and potential future eruptions (Kowalski forthcoming, Pshenychnykhh 2019). Landscape still expresses conflict (Galai 2017). Scholars seeking to draw attention to the material and embodied nature of war make lists: ‘the technics and waste of geopolitics [and thus war] connect every space to every other space,’ writes Grove, ‘whether by satellite feed, radioactive isotope, aircraft carrier, unexploded ordinance, sexual trauma, or tragic absence of forced removal’ (Grove 2019, 7). Photojournalism rarely brings rape to audiences despite its continued role in war (Azoulay 2018). Landscapes and kinetic action are monitored and scanned from satellites and remote sensors allowing for measurement of missile trajectories and damaged buildings, but can they identify the unease and terror of violence on the ground?

Sixth and finally, we must acknowledge there will be a scholarly arms race to document all that is changing but we must not forget to account for what becomes meaningful to whom and with what consequence. The second image, digital war, arrived with the claim of a total transformation of the nature of war and that digital war had gone mainstream, becoming a ubiquitous and taken for granted aspects of everyday culture. This claim is often accompanied by a list of digital phenomena that are taken to be new and revolutionary. Merrin presents one such example:

Developments in robotics, A.I., and autonomous weapons systems; in unmanned remote operations, brain-computer interfaces, exo-skeleton and augmentation technologies and enhanced humanity; the sensor, implant and Big Data revolutions; in cyberwar and computer network exploitation, hacking, espionage, exfiltration and malware; in social media manipulation, psyops, troll warfare, information warfare, disinformation warfare and active measures; in participatory war and in Web 2.0 ideational conflict, will – collectively, and in their ongoing interaction – *completely*remake warfare. (Merrin 2019, no page, italics in the original)

Taking these lists beyond the two examples listed here, they display a joyful assertion of what exists and what will exist; An exhortation to acknowledge new artefacts; A humility of listing human beings as one of many entities and actors in the cosmos; If the list ends with an *etcetera* then this suggests to the reader an openness to the existence of *further* new technologies – it marks that not everything has been included, an unfinished accumulation. The semiotician Eco writes:

The list becomes a way of reshuffling the world … to bring out new relationships between distant things, in any case to cast doubt on those accepted by common sense. (Eco 2009, 327)

Eco argues that such lists can be practical lists of things *signified* but also poetic lists that act as *signifiers* themselves. The list can express that the scholar has noticed things that other, more dim-witted or closed-minded analysts have not brought into their explanations. Eco writes, ‘the list would seem to be typical of primitive cultures that still have an imprecise image of the universe’ (Eco 2009, 18). Merrin’s list depicts the field of war and media scholarship as primitive, not having grasped the reality of changed technology.

However, the ubiquity and novelty of these new things are empirical questions that remain far from substantiated. What is important is that lists of *things* are brought into explanations of *processes* that involve both human and non-human and have pre-date digital media: legitimising, othering, radicalising, killing, de-escalating.

What is most important in enabling us to see such post-digital accumulations and complexes is to see all of these as *informational* and as *meaningful*. The shifting logics alter how things become visible and what becomes visible and this occurs through the interplay of digital and non-digital processes. This is exciting but also means a lot of work on empirical description of the continuities and changes in how these processes operate.

**Conclusion: What does that leave us with? The third image**

…all these you see and other strange phantasms again in massive ranks, are the whims of human ingenuity, fantasies, mad, chimerical frenzies. (Marino 1623, cited in Eco 2009, 253)

To be absolutely clear: I do not deny digital war is happening, but the image of digital war that has emerged in the last decade stops us seeing and understanding war. It posits a degree of uncertainty, novelty and incomprehensibility so profound that the only possible response is to surrender our critical faculties and responsibilities as citizens. War becomes a strange phantasm, a site of mad wonder and horror, too nebulous to explain. That is why we need to look at war in a different way.

To see post-digital war is to see through a bricolage perspective, to detect the newer and older logics driving war, to understand war as made and always-evolving, and to see humans not as idealised or always the central or exclusive concern. It means being able to see and conceptualise how digital and non-digital relate, to be able to see how and why different communities arrive at different meanings of war unfolding, and to see infrastructure as the condition and terrain on which war is waged and made sense of – and thus how infrastructure is central to directing that sense-making activity. To see post-digital war is not to take a perspective at the beginning of the new or the end of the old but to be thoroughly in the middle.

And this is why an extensionist view is needed. Logics, interests, and values are slow to change. Questions about the legitimation and contestation of war are slow to change. There is no reason that the basics of our theories should change, they just need to be enriched, cross-fertilised, and account for the full range of phenomena that we see in the third image of war.

Scholars must see the digital through a post-digital lens and recognise we are now in ‘a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical – just as the dot-com age ultimately became historical' (Cramer 2015, 13). A new round of technologically-determinist moral panic has followed the raised profile of synthetic manipulation and actors using new digital technologies in novel ways. It is akin to the “jihadists in Afghan caves with laptops?!” and “our child is one click away from a terrorist?!” panic of the early 2000s. But war is enacted through digital and non-digital mediations and encounters and these must be documented and explained in order to allow public understanding of war and media’s role in it. It is vital we do not succumb to a sense that the world is unseeable or accept that our image of the world must be a blur. It is vital we do not succumb to a sense that *war* is unseeable or accept that our image of *war* must be a blur. This is why we must find a way to move past the current framing provided by digital war.

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