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# Uploading dissonance: *YouTube* and the US occupation of Iraq

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze the use of *YouTube* by the US military for the spreading of messages and information regarding their presence in Iraq, and, at the same time, to examine the presence on the same *YouTube* system of a large number of video clips showing members of the US military engaged in violent, anti-social activities. That these juxtaposing images of coalition forces in Iraq exist on the same video-sharing forum forces us to reconsider traditional notions of how 'propaganda' is produced, distributed and received. In addition, the presence of dissonant material on video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* should lead us to consider the multi-faceted nature of such sites. This article is intended as a first step toward reconsidering the nature of propaganda in an era of online media, open-access video-sharing and simplified production and distribution.

**KEY WORDS** • media • military • propaganda • public diplomacy  
• video-sharing • war • *YouTube*

On 7 March 2007, the United States Defense Department unveiled the latest tool in the propaganda battle over an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq: a channel on the video sharing website *YouTube* with the title 'MNFIRAQ' ('Multi-National Force – Iraq').<sup>1</sup> The channel (which, as of March 2008, had over 400,000 views)<sup>2</sup> hosts a series of short clips shot by US forces in Iraq, and is intended (in the words of the channel hosts) to 'give viewers around the world a "boots on the ground" perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom from those who are fighting it'.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the channel was created in order to present US forces in Iraq in a more positive light through the posting of clips showing troops engaged in a number of pro-social activities. However, the very soldiers featured in the clips posted to the site are no longer able to view themselves in action. On 14 May 2007, the US Defense Department made another announcement regarding *YouTube* and other video-sharing sites such as *Google Video* and *Revver*, namely that US forces serving in Iraq and

Afghanistan would no longer have access to these sites. The justification for the ban was simple: video-sharing sites eat up too much valuable bandwidth.

The bandwidth justification was met with skepticism,<sup>4</sup> and it is perhaps not a coincidence that the creation of the MNFIRAQ channel and the banning of the use of video-sharing sites came within such close proximity to each other. The MNFIRAQ channel could be seen as an effort by the US Defense Department to counterbalance the avalanche of video clips uploaded to *YouTube*, *Google Video* and other sites depicting anti-social – and sometimes illegal – activities engaged in by US and coalition military forces in Iraq. Interestingly, many of the most disturbing clips were shot by military personnel themselves, and not by anti-war activists or Iraqi citizens. It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that restricting access to such sites was also an attempt to stop the posting of damaging material by coalition troops – material that is obvious fodder for already widespread anti-American and anti-coalition sentiment in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond.

With these factors in mind, the purpose of this article is to discuss and analyze the use of *YouTube* by the US military for the spreading of pro-American messages and information regarding their presence in Iraq, and, at the same time, to examine and discuss the presence on the same *YouTube* system of a large number of video clips showing members of the US (and British) military engaged in extremely violent, anti-social activities. That these (sometimes wildly) juxtaposing images of coalition forces in Iraq exist on the same video-sharing forum forces us, I will argue, to reconsider traditional notions of how ‘propaganda’ is produced, distributed and received. In addition, the presence of dissonant material on video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* should lead us to consider the multifaceted nature of such sites: as locations containing a mixture of mainstream, alternative, hegemonic and potentially subversive clips. This article is intended as a discussion document on the nature of military propaganda on *YouTube* in relation to previous literature on public diplomacy, propaganda, the military and video-sharing sites, and as a first step toward reconsidering the nature of propaganda in an era of open-access video-sharing and simplified production and distribution.

### Previous literature

That *YouTube* and other video-sharing sites should be part of the US State Department’s ‘public diplomacy’ plans speaks volumes about how quickly such online fora have entered into the popular, political, and now military consciousnesses. The journal *Foreign Policy* ran an article by Naim (2007) on the ‘*YouTube* Effect’ in which the author noted:

*YouTube* includes videos posted by terrorists, human rights groups, and U.S. soldiers in Iraq. Some are clips of incidents that have political consequences or document important trends, such as global warming, illegal immigration, and corruption. Some videos reveal truths. Others spread disinformation, propaganda, and outright lies. All are part of the *YouTube* effect. (Naim, 2007: 103)

The '*YouTube* effect' on US foreign policy has, according to Figueroa Kupcu and Cohen (2007), now evolved into a fully global public relations and information battle waged in and through various online and offline media:

For the first time since the days of the Barbary pirates, America is doing active battle not with a rival nation, but with a non-state actor (al Qaeda) that lacks a geographical home, is motivated by ideology more than territorial ambition, and whose victories are defined in non-military terms. It is an enemy that uses communication technology, public opinion, and the global 24-hour news cycle to wage its battles. It is, in a very real sense, the first '*YouTube* War' of the twenty-first century.

While terms such as '*the YouTube* effect' and '*YouTube* War' are both sexy and sound-bite friendly, they tend to deflect attention away from the harsh political economic realities of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the horrific numbers of victims of these conflicts whose deaths and injuries are far from 'virtual'. What these rather glib terms do point to, however, is the fact that in an era of instantaneous global online distribution systems and cheap, simple media production, the dominance of traditional, centralized and hierarchical modes of information dissemination, public diplomacy and propaganda can no longer be taken for granted.

### **Propaganda, public diplomacy and the media**

In this article, the term 'propaganda' is used to describe material posted to the MNFIRAQ channel by the US Defense Department. The definition of propaganda provided by Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) will be one of the underpinnings for my use of the term, as it provides a clear framework for separating the material uploaded officially to *YouTube* by the US military, and material uploaded, as far as can be ascertained, unofficially. The authors define propaganda as 'the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992: 7). Key to this definition is the assertion that propagandistic information distribution is part of a *systematic*, carefully premeditated communication strategy designed to achieve specific goals. This definition fits well with the planned, systematic and highly institutionalized communication strategies implemented by large-scale government and/or military organizations, such

as those instigated by the US State Department following the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. The clips uploaded 'unofficially' to the *YouTube* site, on the other hand, are, for the purposes of this article, not considered to be part of such large-scale, structured, institutionalized information campaigns. This is not to say that such clips are not intended to be persuasive or highly emotive, but rather that their ad hoc nature and apparent lack of organizational and/or hierarchical underpinning is what separates them from their official counterparts.

'Propaganda', not unsurprisingly, is a word often rejected by the US military and government, with the phrase 'public diplomacy' used in its place. Smyth (2001), citing a number of US government documents and officials, gives the following official definition(s) of the term:

What [is called] propaganda is described by the U.S. government as 'public diplomacy' with its 'missions' described in the 'Foreign Affairs Reorganization Fact Sheet' being 'to understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences and broaden the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad' (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 1998) through, according to the United States Advisory Commission On Public Diplomacy (October 2000) 'international exchanges, international information programs, media research and polling, and support for nongovernmental organizations'. Evelyn Lieberman (1999) at her confirmation hearing as the first Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, said 'Public Diplomacy, practiced in harmony with traditional diplomacy, will enable us to advance our interest, to protect our security, and to continue to provide the moral basis for our leadership in the world'. (Smyth, 2001: 422)

This definition of 'public diplomacy' is rooted in global transformations in the modes of state information production, distribution and exhibition, as well as a realization by the USA of the need for the concurrent use of 'hard' military power (*realpolitik*) and the forms of 'soft' power (e.g. cultural, diplomatic, economic) described by Nye (1990). In this sense, the decision by the US Defense Department to create a *YouTube* channel is not only practical but logical in that, as Van Ham (2003) notes:

... the theory and practice of public diplomacy are part of a wider discourse that also involves strategic communications and branding. Taken together, these embody a new direction in the evolution of diplomacy that is taking place in a novel technological and political context (Riordan, 2002) ... It [public diplomacy] is a manifestation of the systemic transformation of international relations into a global political process. (Van Ham, 2003: 429–30)

Public diplomacy is the result of a conceptual shift in how the USA conducts international affairs: from the *realpolitik* of gunboat colonialism to what is

called *noopolitik* (Van Ham, 2003: 440). Coined in the late 1990s by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1999), *noopolitik*

... is less about control than 'decontrol' – perhaps deliberate, regulated decontrol – so that state actors can better adapt to the emergence of nonstate actors and learn to work with them through new mechanisms for communication and coordination. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 39, cited in Smyth, 2001: 423)

*Noopolitik* is rooted in the concept of the *noosphere* – loosely defined as the sphere of human thought. Smyth concludes by noting that:

The ultimate goal of 21st century information strategy, this reinvented public diplomacy, this *noopolitik*, (this constructivism operationalised), is to draw target publics into the U.S. web of influence. 'Realpolitik is typically about whose military or economy wins. *Noopolitik* may ultimately be about whose story wins (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 1999, p. 22).' (Smyth, 2001: 440)

With these shifts in mind, the use of *YouTube* by the US military is but one tool in the *noopolitik* of the 21st century. The use of the mainstream media for the purposes of propaganda (or 'public diplomacy') is, of course, nothing new, particularly during times of war (e.g. Altheide and Grimes, 2005; Bennett and Paletz, 1994; Hallin, 1994). In her work on the history of the interrelationship between media, war and propaganda, Andersen (2006) suggests that the connections between war, journalism and popular entertainment (such as films and video games) have reached such a level that the word 'militainment' should be used. For Andersen, propaganda and 'militainment' serve a very clear purpose: to create a socio-political environment in which war becomes an acceptable (and accepted) tool within US-driven geo-politics. As she writes:

War is understood and interpreted, justified and judged through the images and narratives that tell the stories of war. Most civilians experience military conflict through the signs and symbols of its depiction, their impressions not derived from the battles in distant lands but from the manner they are rendered at home. (Andersen, 2006: xvi)

These interpretations and reinterpretations of war are informed by the material presented in the mainstream media: material often saturated with pre-approved, government-sanctioned images of war. The result is a collage of war made up of a series of myths and stories:

The past is mined to shape new narratives able to present current conflicts in the language of old familiar ones. At the intersection of myth and memory, fictional forms mingle with those of non-fiction, as news of war is understood through cultural tropes and media formats. The politics of memory is made manifest by the fragments that are retrieved and those that are repressed, for war could not be carried out if its negative, counter-narratives of death and brutality were starkly

drawn. Because a fundamental aspect of war involves destruction and death, it is at times inevitable that representations of its horrors emerge, such as the photographs from Abu Ghraib. As those uncontrollable, dark images enter the cultural sphere, they will be rhetorically reinterpreted and made culturally acceptable. (Andersen, 2006: xvi)

The rise of the internet and sites such as *YouTube*, *Google Video*, *MySpace* and *Revver* provides organizations such as the US military with the opportunity to find new venues for the creation and re-creation of the stories and myths discussed by Andersen. Importantly, these venues differ from their predecessors (radio, television, print and film) in that alternative, counter-hegemonic messages coexist – on the same sites – as the materials produced by the military:

Instead of the one way flow of information that is seen with TV and newspapers it now becomes multi-directional, allowing multiple senders/receivers in distributed locations, from various backgrounds and cultures to participate. When we look at the 1991, Persian Gulf War, the majority of the information received was via television and was highly dependent on military sources, with Colin Powell becoming well recognized by a large number of Americans (Lewis et al., 1991). Information originating from the Internet gives users the chance to see situations from different points of view and to evaluate and compare the information from different biases. There is also no time bias on the reporting of information; it is posted as it occurs without regard for deadlines and schedules. Information is available whenever the users choose to retrieve it. (Jefferson, 2007: 14–15)

Snow and Taylor (2006: 406) note that in this new information environment, ‘truisms compete with “alternative truths”’ and that for a truth to prevail, it must be seen to be more ‘credible’ than the alternative. To this end, Purcell (2005) has listed the reasons why a military organization might create sites in cyberspace, emphasizing that the mere presence of a website or space is symbolic in and of itself:

For militaries across the globe, justification of their existence, gaining legitimacy in societies, and expressing power, the Internet is a new terrain of contestation. The symbolic presence of a website connotes several things to casual browsers:

- Modernity;
- understanding of modern communications technology;
- openness to communication and transparency.

Whether the military organization intends to project these ideas is irrelevant. The mere presence of a website accomplishes this through the symbolic value inherent in posting a site. (Purcell, 2005: 196)

Other works (Berenger, 2006) have also analyzed the role of ICTs in military conflict and information strategy, but have added thoughts on the drawbacks (from a propaganda perspective) of the use of online, interactive technologies.

Military strategists Kinniburgh and Denning (2006: 9) make note of the fact that the effectiveness of propaganda is very much linked to perceptions of the source, and that online propaganda created by the US military (such as MNFIRAQ) could fall victim to what they call 'in-group/out-group dynamics' in which foreign audiences reject the propaganda out of hand simply because it is created by the USA. And, more importantly for the purposes of the present article, Berenger (2006) makes the crucial point that there is a fundamental difference between online technologies and 'traditional' media outlets when it comes to promoting national interests or ideologies:

The Internet is no respecter of national borders, of time, or, for that matter, un-questioned patriotism or nationalism. Charges can quickly be matched by counter charges; simple assertions can be stripped away by clicking on the next link. Cyberspace is both a vast reservoir of information – useful as well as trivial – and a babbling brook of streaming consciousness. All is there for the world to see and ponder, to ignore or absorb. In short, the new media offer users an unparalleled array of choices to become either passive or active consumers of information. The new media are interactive, and this characteristic may be what sets them apart from their predecessors more than anything else. Anyone with access may express his or her views, often without mediation or editing, on topics raised by Internet sites or weblogs. In contrast, traditional mass media still struggle with the problem of feedback.

This important observation – on the open, multi-faceted, and somewhat unpredictable nature of online media – is an apt point upon which to transition to my discussion on the presentation (official and unofficial) of the conflict in Iraq on *YouTube*.

## **Method**

For this article, a total of 41 videos uploaded to the *YouTube* system were viewed and analyzed: 29 from the MNFIRAQ channel, and 13 from various other *YouTube* channels. The 29 clips from MNFIRAQ represented all videos on that channel (as of August 2007). It is important to note that the 13 non-MNFIRAQ clips discussed and analyzed in this article were selected on the basis of their juxtaposition to the 29 MNFIRAQ videos, and not on the assumption that they were/are representative of 'typical' *YouTube* clips from Iraq. The starting point for this article, therefore, was MNFIRAQ and the clips contained on that channel, and the proposition that those 29 clips forwarded a specific view of the war (as discussed later in this article). These videos were usually viewed twice, and for each video notes were made regarding (1) the primary subject/theme of the clip, (2) upload date, (3) length, (4) number of views, and (5) miscellaneous observations/factors. Then, once the MNFIRAQ

clips were viewed and coded, *YouTube* was searched for alternative views of the conflict in Iraq. The 13 clips studied as juxtapositions, however, were not random or piecemeal selections: just as the clips on MNFIRAQ had varying lengths, upload dates and total number of views, so did the non-MNFIRAQ clips. For example, the MNFIRAQ clips had a viewing spread from just over 1,000,000 (for the most viewed clip) down to 600 (for the least); the non-MNFIRAQ clips had a corresponding spread of 965,000 down to 2000. Similar viewing numbers, lengths and upload dates provided a filtering system whereby it was impossible to simply select the most 'spectacular' or 'unusual' clips. These 13 clips were then viewed and coded using the five factors from the analysis of the *MNFIRAQ* clips.

### ***YouTube*, MNFIRAQ and opposing views of war**

To begin, a few brief words about the formation of *YouTube*. *YouTube.com*, a 'video-sharing' website, was the brainchild of three former employees (Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim) of the PayPal online commerce company.<sup>5</sup> The *YouTube.com* domain name was activated in February 2005, and the first video to be uploaded onto the site was posted on 23 April 2005 by *YouTube* co-founder Jawed Karim.<sup>6</sup> The site was fully operational just before the end of 2005, and, within a matter of months, had become one of the fastest-growing websites in the world. To illustrate the point, by the summer of 2006 (just six months after launch of the site) 60–100 million clips were being viewed daily on *YouTube*, with 65,000 videos being uploaded onto the site every 24 hours.<sup>7</sup> By February 2007, *YouTube.com* was the fifth most visited website in the world, only behind giants *Yahoo.com*, *msn.com*, *Google.com* and *Baidu.com*.<sup>8</sup> In November of 2006, *YouTube.com* was purchased by Google for US \$1.65 billion, netting founders Hurley (US \$345 million), Chen (US \$326 million) and Karim (US \$64 million) enormous financial windfalls. In a relatively short period of time, as Naim (2007) and Figueroa Kupcu and Cohen (2007) have noted, *YouTube* has become much more than just a site for uploading home videos of birthday parties, cute puppies and old television programs. In the USA, for example, political candidates for the 2008 US Presidential race have made extensive use of *YouTube*, illustrating the extent to which the site has extended its influence.<sup>9</sup>

In the following sections I will examine the ways in which the military conflict in Iraq is presented on *YouTube's* MNFIRAQ channel, followed by an examination of a number of videos/clips also to be found on *YouTube* showing the US and British military engaged in activities that contradict the 'clean' war presented by the US Defense Department.<sup>10</sup> These dissonant images

will be the basis for a discussion on how sites such as *YouTube* force us to reconsider traditional notions of 'propaganda', in terms of how it is produced as well as how it is distributed and understood.

### **MNFIRAQ: presenting a 'clean' war**

The Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNFIRAQ) *YouTube* channel was put up on 7 March 2007. As of August 2007 there were 4891 channel 'subscribers' (individuals who receive updates whenever new clips are posted to the channel), and the clips uploaded to the channel have been viewed, in total, over 2 million times. The MNFIRAQ channel was created by the US Defense Department, although the channel has links to the 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' site, which is home to the Multi-National Force – Iraq (US plus international coalition allies). On the MNFIRAQ channel homepage, the following rationale is given for the creation of the new channel:

Multi-National Force – Iraq established this YouTube channel to give viewers around the world a 'boots on the ground' perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom from those who are fighting it. Video clips document action as it appeared to personnel on the ground and in the air as it was shot. We will only edit video clips for time, security reasons, and/or overly disturbing or offensive images.

What you will see on this channel in the coming months: – Combat action– Interesting, eye-catching footage – Interaction between Coalition troops and the Iraqi populace. – Teamwork between Coalition and Iraqi troops in the fight against terror. What we will NOT post on this channel: – Profanity – Sexual content – Overly graphic, disturbing or offensive material – Footage that mocks Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces or the citizens of Iraq.

This YouTube channel is brought to you by [www.mnf-iraq.com](http://www.mnf-iraq.com), the official Web site of Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>11</sup>

In Table 1 we see a list of all 29 clips/videos uploaded to the MNFIRAQ channel. The number of 'views' for each video varies, with the most viewed clip (*Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq*) having attracted just over a million views to date, while a number of the clips toward the bottom of the list have been seen only a few thousand times.<sup>12</sup> What is clear from the rationale for the MNFIRAQ site is that the videos uploaded to are intended to give a 'viewer friendly', sanitized version of the US invasion of Iraq. It is interesting to note, for example, that the channel provides what it calls images of 'combat action' and 'eye-catching footage', but without 'profanity' or 'overly graphic, disturbing or offensive' content. In addition, the clips are intended to show 'interaction' between coalition troops and Iraqi citizens. After viewing all of the clips on the MNFIRAQ channel, it became clear that they fall into a number of thematic categories: categories very much in line with not only

**Table 1** Clips uploaded to MNFIRAQ channel (3 August 2007)

Clip title	Upload date	Length	Views
1 Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Iraq	10 March 2007	2:56	1,051,856
2 Baghdad Firefight, March 2007	20 March 2007	1:50	345,216
3 Long Day in Baqubah, 22 March 2007	28 March 2007	1:40	222,695
4 Kidnap Victim Rescued, Baghdad, Jan. 2007	2 April 2007	2:10	218,486
5 Stryker Patrol Leads to Firefight	22 March 2007	2:15	112,936
6 Rounding Up Insurgents, March 2007	1 April 2007	2:16	84,521
7 Night Raid near Baqubah, Iraq	7 March 2007	1:33	75,058
8 AA Attack, Iraq, 2 March 2007	9 March 2007	1:39	74,387
9 Taking Fire in Baqubah	5 April 2007	2:32	59,801
10 Night Attack on Al Qaeda	15 March 2007	0:52	59,071
11 Insurgents Surrender after Gunship Attack, 15 June 2007	21 June 2007	2:07	42,610
12 More Fighting in Baqubah	3 May 2007	1:50	23,157
13 Destroying Rocket Launchers Near Sadr City	7 June 2007	1:12	22,466
14 Soldiers Find Intel in Ramadi	21 March 2007	0:48	18,710
15 Battle on Haifa Street, Baghdad, Part 2	20 April 2007	3:00	16,160
16 Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children	30 March 2007	1:41	15,368
17 Operation Exelen III, 25 Feb. 2007	7 March 2007	1:39	15,277
18 Iraqi Boy Scouts Prepare for Jamboree	17 April 2007	1:43	14,048
19 F16s Bomb IED Factories, April 2007	13 May 2007	0:44	13,971
20 'Soft Knock' Search in Baghdad	23 April 2007	1:22	13,548
21 Destroying Chemical Factories, March 2007	7 July 2007	2:18	11,944
22 Coalition Investigates, then Destroys IED Factory	8 May 2007	1:38	11,842
23 Apache Crews Thwart Rocket Attack on IZ	9 April 2007	1:10	11,700
24 Senior Terrorists Eliminated	24 July 2007	0:55	8,738
25 Patrolling Baqubah, 13 April 2007	30 May 2007	2:53	8,458
26 Baghdad Building Destruction	12 March 2007	1:01	6,760
27 T-Wall Paintings, Baghdad, 11 May 2007	17 May 2007	1:32	3,620
28 IRTN Station Opening, Diyala, 26 March 2007	28 March 2007	3:11	1,353
29 Insurgent Headquarters Discovered, Destroyed	1 August 2007	1:57	657

the rationale for the MNFIRAQ channel, but also with goals in general of propaganda/public diplomacy. The following three thematic categories emerged from my analysis of the clips: (1) street fighting and gun battles; (2) surgical warfare; and (3) 'good deeds' and aiding Iraqi citizens. In the following sections, I will discuss each of these categories in turn, as well as the images and themes of warfare presented in selected clips/videos.

As is evident from the viewing figures for the videos on the MNFIRAQ channel, the most popular clips are those showing US (and some coalition) forces engaged in some form of battle, and usually troops taking part in firefights on the streets. In fact, the top three videos on the channel (with a total of over 1.5 million views) are all examples of material showing such 'action'. What distinguishes these clips is that they all show (primarily) US forces engaged in gun battles, but they only show the US troops and not the 'targets' of the fire. If the targets are shown, they are usually in the form of buildings or other inanimate subjects. In this way, the gunfights maintain an air of 'victimlessness', with the human casualties of war not shown. US troops are usually calm and collected, and show few outward signs of panic or fright.

Three clips serve as good examples of the prototypical MNFIRAQ 'gun battle' clip. In *Baghdad Firefight* (no. 2 in Table 1), the video opens with the following on-screen text: 'American and Iraqi Soldiers take and return fire while implementing Fardh Al-Qanoon (Baghdad Security Plan)', and, in this way, the combat is defined for viewers from the start as being instigated by the enemy. In the clip, US and Iraqi forces are fired upon, and the Iraqi members of the group are then shown giving orders to their troops. As the gun battle continues, the soldiers are shown 'engaging with' (shooting at) the enemy in a very calm, collected and orderly manner. Even during the heat of the fighting, orders are spoken, not shouted. At the end of the clip, no 'results' of the battle are shown, with troops merely continuing their fighting. Similarly, in *Long Day in Baqubah* (no. 3), the video opens with the text: 'Soldiers in Baqubah, Iraq, continue their patrol after exchanging fire with insurgents', and soldiers are again shown engaged in a calm, collected gun battle. Toward the end of the clip, the troops leave their positions and enter the streets, where they are greeted by a number of children (one of whom shakes the hand of one of the troops), and where a row of women and children pass by the camera, with the children waving to the camera. Finally, *Battle on Haifa Street* (no. 1), the most watched video on the channel, opens with the following text:

US Soldiers from the 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division alongside Iraqi Soldiers from the 6th Iraqi Army Division engage insurgents from a high-rise in the Haifa Street area during security operations. Operation Tomahawk Strike 11 is one of a series of targeted raids to disrupt illegal militia activity.

Unlike the other clips, the soldiers are somewhat more animated, showing a certain degree of exhilaration (and even happiness) during the shooting. And, the buildings being hit by the fire are also shown, in flames, in the distance. As with all of the other fighting clips, however, no human casualties

(dead or injured) are shown, or even suggested, and the troops at no time show excessive aggression or malice.

The second type of clips are ones I have defined as 'surgical warfare' in which US and coalition troops (usually from aircraft, but also on the ground) seek out and destroy selected targets, but do so with a minimum amount of *visible* human casualties. The best example of this type of clip is *Destroying Rocket Launchers Near Sadr City* (no. 13), in which a 'helicopter destroys insurgent rocket launchers near Sadr City, Baghdad' (clip text). The video, in grainy black and white and without sound, shows a line of rocket launchers destroyed by coalition aircraft. At one point, a rocket is fired from the ground, and the video flashes the text, 'Rocket fires as launcher is hit. (No injuries reported.)' Similarly, *F16s Bomb IED Factories* (no. 19) shows in black and white the destruction of a number of IED ('Improvised Explosive Device') factories, which, after the bombs hit, exploded in dramatic fashion. While this clip does have sound, there is no speaking from either the pilot or central control during the raids, save for one sentence toward the end of the clip in which an unidentified voice says, 'I don't really see anything left of any of the buildings'. Finally, one of the few clips in which casualties were recorded or acknowledged, *Destroying Chemical Factories* (no. 21) gives a relatively detailed account (narrated by a US soldier) of how suspected IED plants were located by coalition forces, followed by black and white aircraft video of a number of houses being destroyed (presumably the factories discussed by the soldier). The clip ends with footage of the destroyed houses/factories, and the following text:

While conducting an operation in Iraq, Coalition Forces destroyed 2 explosive production facilities. During the same operation, Coalition Forces killed 8 terrorists, detained 13 suspects and destroyed: 150 RPG's, 30 rockets, plastic explosives and hundreds of mortar rounds.<sup>13</sup>

A final 'genre' of clip to be found on the MNFIRAQ site is the one in which US and coalition forces are shown taking part in 'good deeds', aiding Iraqi civilians in various ways. These clips are what one might describe as 'feel good' material, uploaded to create the impression that the US military has a good rapport with Iraqi civilians. In the first example, *Kidnap Victim Rescued* (no. 4), and according to the text at the start of the clip, during a routine house search, US forces found a kidnap victim who was a Shi'ite. The clip continues by showing a number of US forces visiting the home of the kidnapped man and the troops informing the family that their relative was located and safe. The large family then explodes with tears of happiness, showering the troops with hugs and kisses. Two other videos, *Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children* (no. 16) and *Iraqi Boy Scouts Prepare for Jamboree* (no. 18), show US forces taking

part in charitable deeds: giving footballs and other gifts to Iraqi children and taking part in preparations for a Boy Scout meeting (again with numerous Iraqi children). Finally, there is a clip that combines elements of battle with a connection to the community. In *'Soft Knock' Search in Baghdad* (no. 20), US troops are shown searching houses for weapons, utilizing what is known as a 'soft knock' strategy in which troops request permission to enter homes in order to search for weapons and other illegal material, as opposed to simply entering at will. The strategy is intended to encourage good relations between citizens and troops, and the clip opens with footage of happy Iraqi children laughing and singing, followed by US troops performing searches. The search in question results (seemingly) in the confiscation of several weapons, with smiling citizens watching the soldiers do their duty. The clip ends with a scene where happy children once again mingle with US troops.

### **Opposing views: presenting a 'dirty' war**

Without a great deal of effort, a number of clips and videos can be located on *YouTube* that show radically different images of the war to those presented on the MNFIRAQ channel. The videos discussed in this section are presented in Table 2, and represent material uploaded to the *YouTube* site that generates the greatest sense of dissonance when combined with the clips on the MNFIRAQ channel. Again, all of these clips were viewed and analyzed. Unlike the material provided by the US Defense Department (via MNFIRAQ), the 'opposing view' clips discussed in this section do not come from one single channel source, but from a variety of sources. What is clear, however, is that the majority of the material was shot by US or coalition troops themselves, thus providing a salient juxtaposition to the clips – also shot by coalition forces – on the officially sanctioned channel.<sup>14</sup> In this section, I will address this 'alternative' view of US/coalition activities in Iraq, and will do so by using the same three thematic categories used before: (1) street fighting and gun battles; (2) surgical warfare; and (3) 'good deeds' and aiding Iraqi citizens.

While the clips of gunfights and street battles shown on MNFIRAQ portrayed bloodless combat conducted by a cool, rational US military, videos found on other *YouTube* channels revealed a much more violent, aggressive and disturbing view of warfare. Two videos are particularly unsettling, and shatter the image cultivated on MNFIRAQ. In the first, *British Troops Beating Young Iraqis on Camera* (no. 3a),<sup>15</sup> Iraqi youths are shown (from a video shot from a rooftop position) throwing stones at British soldiers, after which a number of youths are taken back into a walled compound and violently beaten by British soldiers. The youths in question appear to be in their early teens, with some possibly younger, and were beaten by soldiers using fists, kicks and

**Table 2** Iraq War clips uploaded to various YouTube channels (5 August 2007)

Clip title <sup>16</sup>	Upload date	Length	Views
1a. Humvee Traffic Driving in Baghdad	26 January 2007	2:37	964,233
2a. Iraqi Kids Run for Water	14 September 2006	1:06	793,867
3a. British Troops Beating Young Iraqis on Camera	13 February 2006	2:00	179,191
4a. War Crimes Caught on Video	29 September 2006	3:29	124,031
5a. Witness to a War Crime – US Marines Shoot Unarmed Civilians	26 March 2007	2:36	109,300
6a. Car Destroyed by US Soldiers	10 June 2006	1:20	63,237
7a. Security Operatives Filming Themselves Shooting at Civilians	28 January 2007	2:32	61,149
8a. Iraq – Poor Doggy	4 November 2006	1:15	51,757
9a. Leaked Video of US Troops in Iraq	3 May 2007	2:34	17,635
10a. Apache Kills in Iraq	24 July 2006	3:32	13,028
11a. Soldiers Making Fun of Iraqi Kids	7 February 2007	1:08	4,005
12a. US Troops Flash Bang Iraqi Farmer	2 March 2007	0:19	2,089

batons. In one instance, a young boy was held down by a number of troops while another soldier kicked him in the genitals. What makes the clip particularly disturbing is the fact that the person who shot the film (identified by the British *News of the World* as a Corporal in the British Army)<sup>17</sup> can be heard laughing violently and encouraging his fellow troops as the beatings take place. At several points the ‘narrator’ even makes moaning noises suggesting a pleasure that borders on the sexual. Similarly, in *Witness to a War Crime – US Marines Shoot Unarmed Civilians* (no. 4a), a group of US soldiers open fire on unidentified targets across a street. Unlike the scenes from the MNFIRAQ channel, troops are less than cool and collected during combat, and make a number of comments expressing the pleasure they take in the violent fighting. The following comments were all made on the video by various US soldiers:

‘Dude, look at it! We fucked those people all to shit down there!’

‘I shot that dude in the white car who ran into that building!’ (in a bragging tone)

‘See that car ... I lit that fucker up! He got 30 rounds in that bitch!’

‘Yeah, bitch! You’re fucking done!’ (yelling toward the targets of the gunfire)

‘Oh, my fucking bitch is done, dude!’

The video also shows the target of the US gunfire, including two vehicles that appear to have entered the battle-zone by accident. The troops fire on the two cars, and the passengers are forced to run for their lives while the soldiers continue to fire upon them with automatic weapons.

The implications of the material in the second category of video found on the MNFIRAQ channel ('surgical warfare') – namely that military operations in Iraq are made using extreme precision, and with a minimum of human casualty – were also brought into question by material available on various *YouTube* channels. Two clips, also based upon grainy black and white footage taken from US attack aircraft, provide violent, disturbing images of air warfare that dispel any notions of a 'clean', surgical fight. In *Apache Kills in Iraq* (no. 10a), video footage taken at night shows a US Apache helicopter gunning down three suspected weapons smugglers, and it is noteworthy for two reasons. First, unlike the 'cockpit videos' from the MNFIRAQ channel, this clip shows US forces using high-powered ammunition against humans, not buildings, and with horrific results. When the three men are struck with the 30mm rounds, their bodies explode, with clearly visible body parts being sprayed in all directions (the imaging system used during darkness is thermal, making the resulting scene all the more upsetting). Second, in this video, one of the three victims was wounded before being killed by a second round of fire. When the clearly injured man crawls out from underneath a truck, he is spotted by the Apache pilots who have the following exchange:

'Movement right there ...'

'Roger. He's wounded.'

'Hit him!'

'Roger. I'm hitting the truck.'

'Hit the truck and him. Go forward of it and hit him.'

The shocking brutality of this video was compounded by the fact that one of the three victims was shot with high-powered artillery when lying injured and defenseless on the ground, which would appear to be a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions.<sup>18</sup> In the second video, *War Crimes Caught on Video* (no. 4a), a news story from the British Channel 4 television news program was placed onto *YouTube*. The report contains footage (taken during April of 2004) of the US bombing of Fallujah. In the clip, pilots in an F16 fighter aircraft spot a large group of people (approximately 30) on a street in a built-up urban area. The pilot reports to central command, 'I've got numerous individuals on the road. Do you want me to take those out?', to which the immediate response comes, 'Take them out'. The video then shows the pilot of the aircraft locking the missile guidance system on the group running along the street, followed by a massive explosion in the middle of the crowd as the missile hits. The pilot reacts to the explosion by saying, 'Oh ... dude!'

Finally, as noted earlier, the creators of MNFIRAQ attempted to cultivate the image of a good relationship between US forces and local Iraqi civilians. The clips showing troops in good natured exchanges with Iraqi children and

families have stark counter-images in clips found on other *YouTube* channels. *Iraqi Kids Run for Water* (no. 2a), *Car Destroyed by US Soldiers* (no. 6a) and *Leaked Video of US Troops in Iraq* (no. 9a) give potential viewers a more unsettling view of the US occupation. The first clip, *Iraqi Kids Run for Water*, has been one of the most watched uploads (shot by US forces) on *YouTube*. In it, US soldiers dangle bottles of clean water over the back of a truck, and laugh as Iraqi children run through the streets in an effort to reach them. One young boy, who appears to be six or seven years of age, runs after the truck for a long period, much to the amusement of the soldiers. When the truck begins to pull away, the soldiers throw a bottle onto the road, but it is taken by other children, and the little boy ends up with nothing. In the second video, *Car Destroyed by US Soldiers*, US troops catch people whom they claim have stolen wood.<sup>19</sup> As punishment, members of a tank division gleefully shoot their guns at the car of one of the looters, and then, laughing, run the car over (several times) with their tank, destroying it. The owner of the car informs the journalist who shot the footage that he is a taxi driver, and that the car was his only source of income. In the third video, *Leaked Video of US Troops in Iraq*, a US soldier speaks to a friend about his feelings regarding his time in Afghanistan (the clip appears to have been shot in Afghanistan). In one segment, the soldier is asked about being sent overseas, to which he sarcastically responds in a sweet voice:

You know, it's great because you get to interact with the kids, to help them out a lot, and help other people that are poorer than you. You know, you feel like you are giving something back.

The soldier then ends the sarcastic tone and continues,

Fuck that shit! I don't give a fuck! First week I felt love coming out of my heart helping these kids. The second week? Get the fuck out of here!

The soldier admits that he makes fun of children in Iraq because they cannot understand what he is saying, and the video concludes with a shot of US troops amusing themselves by making a group of young Afghan children (who clearly have no idea of what they are saying in English) repeat the following sentences: 'I ... am ... an ... idiot'; 'We ... beg ... too ... fucking ... much'; 'Fuck ... this ... country'.

### **Discussion: *YouTube* and challenges to orthodoxies**

There is, of course, nothing new about soldiers making their own records of activities (legal or illegal) in various theaters of war. From poetry to charcoal sketches to photographs, there is a long history of troops, for whatever

reasons, attempting to memorialize their actions. A number of factors, however, separate the posting of video clips made by soldiers to sites such as *YouTube* from earlier forms of troop communication. Most obviously, these sophisticated video clips – unlike, for example, the First World War poetry of Wilfred Owen – can be created and then posted almost immediately, with a fair degree of simplicity, to a potential global audience of hundreds of millions.

The volume of footage shot by coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then posted to the *YouTube* site, is substantial. There is no way to accurately measure exactly how many clips exist, but suffice it to say that countless hours can be spent locating and watching such material. It is important to note that the majority of clips posted to *YouTube* do not show soldiers engaged in war crimes, violence or anti-social behavior, but rather taking part in the mundane, day-to-day activities one would associate with military personnel during free time: sitting around in tents, talking with colleagues, eating, singing songs and sending messages to loved ones back home. Other clips, however, are disturbing and occasionally horrific. It is these that would appear to be, at least in part, the reason behind the US military initiating a ban on the use of video-sharing sites.

The specific videos discussed in this article, and the use of *YouTube* (and other video-sharing sites) for the purposes of disseminating propaganda in general, should lead us away from purely techno-deterministic discussions of how sites such as *YouTube* simply facilitate the spread of *more* propaganda or *more* counter-hegemonic material, toward a discussion of how traditional notions of propaganda need to be reconsidered in light of the existence of outlets such as *YouTube*, *Google Video*, *Revver* and *MySpace*, as well as a theorization on the unique nature of *YouTube* as both a site for mainstream media distribution and radical, alternative fare. As my analysis has shown, the material presented of the MNFIRAQ channel on *YouTube* is seen in a different light when combined with the Iraq/Afghanistan clips uploaded to other channels. This is not, however, to propose a 'strong effects' model of media influence in which individuals change their fundamental political, social or cultural beliefs on the basis of a few short video clips. Naturally, all of the clips discussed in this article can be used, and have been used, by pro- and anti-war activists alike to bolster their support for, or opposition to, the occupation. By the same token, however, we cannot assume that all users, in the USA and elsewhere, have fixed, unchanging views of the conflict, and these images can have an impact upon how citizens view not only the occupation of Iraq but war and the military in general.

With these caveats in mind, I would like to offer some thoughts on the results of this study. First and foremost, the efforts of the US Defense

Department via the MNFIRAQ channel fit very neatly into the notions of *noopolitik* and 'public diplomacy' discussed earlier. The clips on the channel are clearly an effort to win the battle for 'hearts and minds' over the Iraq/Afghanistan occupations, but that should come as no surprise, given the US military's history of propaganda and information management. However, while the general content of the MNFIRAQ videos adheres to traditional norms of propaganda – good soldiers, the use of solid military logic, the fighting of a 'just' war, the benevolent occupiers, the bloodless battles – the *site* for the distribution and exhibition of the material, *YouTube*, does not. One of the elements of successful propaganda is the ability to control: control of information placement, timing, context, proximity to counter-images and the like. The decentralized nature of *YouTube*, however, makes such a level of control much more difficult, if not impossible. This is evidenced by the fact that the US military could not even stop its own troops from uploading clips that do substantial damage to the image of coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of those videos, as discussed, offered violent and disturbing alternatives to those officially sanctioned by the Defense Department. In turn, these clips appear side by side with MNFIRAQ clips when searching the *YouTube* system, thus creating what could be called 'propagandistic dissonance': moments when overt propaganda is placed side-by-side with material that renders such propaganda impotent.

This brings us to the actual images (clips/videos) uploaded to *YouTube*. Which clips, one might ask, best 'represent' the 'reality' of the conflict in Iraq? It is, of course, impossible to gauge how representative the 'clean' MNFIRAQ videos are vis-a-vis the 'dirty' alternative videos. What is central is that propaganda, as Andersen (2006) wrote, is the act of creating and recreating myths and stories surrounding military conflict, with the express purpose of making military intervention and conflict acceptable tools for geo-politics for super-powers such as the USA. As such, all of the clips tell certain stories about Iraq. Where the videos differ, however, is that those on the MNFIRAQ channel have been carefully pre-selected in order to forward a view of the occupation that serves the political-economic and military interests of the USA. The clips shot by troops showing abuse, violence and obscenity, on the other hand, while not presented without thought or planning, do not appear to represent a long-term, centralized information strategy constructed to influence public opinion. As such, these shocking videos, one could argue, could have a greater impact, as they reveal a side of military activity that is meant to be hidden from the citizens who both fund the war and vote for the politicians who support it, as well as those who are both directly and indirectly involved.

This is not, despite glib arguments to the contrary, a '*YouTube* War'. Watching someone being shot is not the same as being shot, and an ideological

video is not the same as a territorial invasion. But, in the war over public opinion, video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* and *Google Video* have, it appears, begun to restructure the balance of story-telling power.

## Notes

- 1 <http://youtube.com/profile?user=MNFIRAQ>
- 2 It is important to remember that there are *channel views* and *video views*. The figure given in this case indicates how many times the *channel site* has been viewed, not the number of times the individual videos on the channel have been viewed. Clips on *YouTube* are posted to channels, usually created by individuals or groups. As indicated later in the article, the *videos* on the MNFIRAQ channel, when totaled, have been viewed over two million times.
- 3 <http://youtube.com/profile?user=MNFIRAQ>
- 4 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6657309.stm>; and, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,,-6632144,00.html>
- 5 Other websites that are classified as 'video-sharing' include *Google Video*, *MySpace* and *Revver*.
- 6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9IVRw>
- 7 <http://www.youtube.com/t/about>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>
- 8 Baidu.com is a Chinese-language search engine.
- 9 [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2007/08/08/youtube\\_creates\\_issues\\_debate.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2007/08/08/youtube_creates_issues_debate.html)
- 10 A quick note on the reliability of the videos discussed. Every effort has been made in this study to use video clips that are as complete as possible. A number of clips posted to *YouTube* are re-edited by the channel creators, sometimes in order to support a certain political or ideological position or to mislead the viewer. Due to the number of postings to the site, it is impossible to be sure that the clip used is the full, original version. However, every effort has been made to ensure that this is the case.
- 11 <http://youtube.com/profile?user=MNFIRAQ>
- 12 A note about the 'views' figures used throughout this article: the figures shown here (and elsewhere) are the total number of times the clip in question has been viewed via the MNFIRAQ channel. It is important to remember, however, that clips are often shown on more than one *YouTube* channel simultaneously, with viewing figures generated for each individual channel. In the case of the most viewed clip from MNFIRAQ, *Battle on Haifa Street*, I have found numerous copies of the clip posted to other *YouTube* channels. This means that the number of views for this clip via *all* channels would probably be closer to 1,250,000. In addition, clips are often edited together, with bits and pieces taken from numerous sources. It is impossible, therefore, to give totally accurate figures as to how many times these clips, or parts of them, have been viewed.
- 13 <http://youtube.com/watch?v=pizK4Lkk-CQ>
- 14 One of the clips (no. 6) appears to have been shot by outsourced 'security operatives' working on behalf of the coalition.

- 15 The video is credited on the clip as being from the *British News of the World*, but appears to have been shot by a member of the British military.
- 16 It is important to note that the titles of the clips are created by the person who uploads them. Many of the clips in Table 2 have titles that are not statements of fact ('war crimes'), but opinion.
- 17 <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/02/14/iraq.beatings/index.html>
- 18 From Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions:  
 '... persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.'
- The same article prohibits violence to life and person, particularly murder, cruel treatment or torture, humiliating and degrading treatment. Source: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/comp210.htm>
- 19 This clip was a reproduction of a television report made by US public broadcasters on the occupation, and was not shot by US forces.

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